

On Trigger Warnings, Part III: Disability and Accommodation

written by M./Maybe Henry Milks | April 18, 2014



As the debate on trigger warnings in the academy rages across the internet, I wondered how it is finding form in literary and artistic spaces—so I invited six writers/artists and educators with varying personal investments in the discussion to participate in an email roundtable. Over a period of about a week, our discussion confronted issues related to pedagogy, censorship, accessibility, and generational tensions. This is the final of three parts. [[Part I](#); [Part II](#).] —Megan Milks

THE PARTICIPANTS

CAConrad is the author of six books including *ECODEVIANCE: (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness* (Wave Books, 2014), *A BEAUTIFUL MARSUPIAL AFTERNOON* (WAVE Books, 2012) and *The Book of Frank* (WAVE Books, 2010). A 2014 Lannan Fellow, a 2013 MacDowell Fellow, and a 2011 Pew Fellow, he also conducts workshops on (Soma)tomic poetry and Eco-poetics. Visit him online at <http://CAConrad.blogspot.com>.

Jos Charles is a white genderqueer writer and founding-editor at [THEM](#) — a trans* literary journal. They have poetry published (and/or have publications forthcoming) with [BLOOM](#), Denver Quarterly, [Radioactive Moat](#), Metazen, as well as variously online. Jos is a founder and co-managing editor of [Sol&Res](#). Their writing has also been featured on *Huffington Post*, *BitchMedia*, *HTMLGIANT*, *Fanzine*, *The Quietus*, interviews with GLAAD, and other pieces forthcoming.

Andrea Lawlor, a recent graduate of UMass Amherst's MFA program, teaches writing at Mount Holyoke College, edits fiction for *Fence*, and has been awarded fellowships by Lambda Literary and Radar Labs. Lawlor's writing has appeared in *Mutha*, *The Millions*, *jubilat*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Faggot Dinosaur*, *OCHO 31*, *MiPOesias*, and *Encyclopedia, Vol. II*.

Sarah Schulman's most recent books are *The Gentrification Of The Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (University of California Press) and *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International* (Duke University Press).

Aishah Shahidah Simmons is an award-winning Black feminist lesbian documentary filmmaker, writer, international lecturer, and activist. She is an [Associate Editor](#) of the online publication [The Feminist Wire](#). An incest and rape survivor, she produced, wrote, and directed the internationally acclaimed Ford Foundation-funded documentary film [NO! The Rape Documentary](#). Most recently, she authored the foreword to the anthology [Dear Sister: Letters from Survivors of Sexual Violence](#) (Lisa Factora-Borchers, editor, AK Press 2014). Presently, she teaches under/graduate courses in Women's Studies and LGBT Studies at Temple University.

Anna Joy Springer is a prose writer and visual artist who makes grotesques – creating hybrid texts that combine sacred and profane elements to evoke intensely embodied conceptual-emotional experiences in readers. Formerly a singer in the Bay Area bands, Blatz, The Gr’ups, and Cypher in the Snow, Anna Joy has toured the United States and Europe being a wild feminist punk performer, and she has also toured with the all-women spoken word extravaganza, Sister Spit. She is author of the illustrated novella *The Birdwisher* (Birds of Lace) and *The Vicious Red Relic, Love* (Jaded Ibis). She now teaches writing at UC San Diego.

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MEGAN MILKS: [An editorial published \[recently\] in the LA Times](#) argues against UC-Santa Barbara students’ resolution for mandatory trigger warnings, reasoning: “Trigger warnings are part of a campus culture that is increasingly overprotective and hypersensitive in its efforts to ensure that no student is ever offended or made to feel uncomfortable.”

While I’m not sure I would support any kind of mandatory policy on using trigger warnings in courses, what troubles me about this editorial and many other media reports I’ve seen on these issues is a level of condescension towards students based on how “overprotected” they are, or mocking their entitlement to that kind of “over”protection. This kind of response is troubling to me because it does not recognize the ways in which students are working to collaborate and powershare in their education—which seems pretty awesome, and one of the goals of a critical pedagogy.

On the other hand, I can see how it’s tied to anxieties within the academy surrounding students becoming consumers, etc. as well as so many recent threats to academic freedom—for example, [legislators cutting the budgets of colleges teaching LGBTQ-related content](#) (in South Carolina), [the canceling of a class on the basis of a student’s accusation of pro-Palestinian bias](#) (at Columbia College in Chicago). As many of you have articulated, the debate on trigger warnings in the academy hits on much larger issues related to academic freedom and artistic censorship, and most of the pushback has been based on that kind of framing.

But what happens when we frame trigger warnings as a disability issue, and their usage as a form of accommodation and/or an accessibility tool? How might that protect both students and educators? What other problems does it bring up?

JOS CHARLES: To address the [question of disability], absolutely, mental ability is an ability issue; mental access is an accessibility issue. Regardless of if trigger warnings are de facto the way to do things, they are at least *one way* to account for folks with PTSD, autism, panic ‘disorder’, social anxiety, etc. In other words, to not account for them in *some way* is to deny institutional access (to the academy, to formal education, to poetry, to language, etc) to a group of underprivileged folks based on their perceived mental status—a status that largely depends on and is defined by these institutions. It’s hard not to see being denied the ability to attend a poetry reading, read at a poetry reading, particularly when tied to the

academy, however small this might seem, as being part of a broader pathologizing, denying of health care, theorizing, and institutionalizing of people with mental health issues (by those without them). Although I don't think anyone has expressed such a point of view in this conversation, that's what the 'well just don't attend poetry readings / classes or suck it up' mentality fosters.

SARAH SCHULMAN: One thing I am learning from this discussion is that there are at least three distinct realms of discourse (experience, action, understanding) with some overlap. There are:

1. Perpetrators. People who feel either A. compelled or B. entitled (based on whether they are deprived or privileged) to violate, control and destroy other people.
2. Victims/Survivors. The objects of their actions, who experience Trauma as a consequence of being violated, controlled and severely undermined.
3. People who victims/survivors act out their pain on, in the present, but who did not cause the pain. And we understand that the mechanism for this process of projection, is Triggering.

Of course there is a similarity between #3 and #1A. People whose trauma is imposed by others, but who have not been able to resolve it to the point where they can fully differentiate between the past and the present, can themselves cause a lot of pain and destruction. Enough, in fact, to negatively change new lives for the worse.

So, the question is, are Trigger Warnings part of the Victim/Survivor resolving their pain, and coming into awareness that being reminded of the past, does not mean one is being endangered in the present?

OR

Are Trigger Warnings part of the cycle of Control, where unresolved trauma should be recirculated in attempts to control other people, in order to feel safe, even though the danger is a projection from the past?

And Jos adds the question of projections of fear that is rooted in the biological that is not a result of trauma. Which others suggest could be under a disability category and subject to a different kind of discussion.

I have just written a 4,000 word piece on HIV Criminalization in Canada, where people with HIV are being jailed for nondisclosure to sexual partners, even if they used a condom and no one was infected. The government that once advocated "safe sex" which emphasized mutual responsibility and communication between partners, has now removed responsibility from negatives and replaced it with the concept that they have been criminally wronged. They have capitalized on the triggering or anxiety and fear of HIV, and guilt over possibly having participated in unprotected or anonymous sex, or simply sex at all – to victimize HIV positive people.

In my view the goal of being a conscious and ethical person is to treat

others as they deserve to be treated. This means striving for full awareness that feeling endangered may not mean that one is in danger, but can, in fact, make one very dangerous to others. Treating people in the present based on experiences in the past that they did not cause, is the definition of injustice. And yet this happens because of understandable but unconscious reasons. The goal, then, is not to continue the cycle of unjustified control, but instead to create a social standard and social responsibility that emphasizes awareness.

The transformation into a conscious, accountable and healing culture requires all of us to have an openness about differentiating real danger and projected danger. If we discuss this with each other with casual grace, it will cease to be viewed as stigmatizing and become a common sense practice.

ANDREA LAWLOR: Sarah, I'm not sure I understand what you mean when you say you've "learned" that there are "at least three distinct realms of discourse (experience, action, understanding)," so forgive me if I've misunderstood something important. What I'd like to talk about—and respectfully take issue with—is your formulation and description of the three types of actors ("perpetrators," "victims/survivors," and "people who victims/survivors act out their pain on, in the present who did not cause their pain").

First off, I notice, with disappointment, that you've identified categories #1 and #3 as "people" and category #2 as "objects." This to me is strangely disrespectful at best, and at worst, a reinscription of a victim-blaming culture on the body of the survivor. Survivors are people, not objects. This is a reason to say "survivor" and not "victim" – we acknowledge and respect the agency of the person.

Second, I'm confused by your implied assertion that these categories are discrete. What we know of the cycle of violence is that perpetrators were often violated themselves, for one thing. If I accepted these categories as useful I'd have to insist on their permeability. I certainly wouldn't insist that perpetrators are "survivors," a word historically claimed as a political identity by people who've been sexually assaulted, which does imply some sense of agency and self-knowledge—a breaking out of the cycle.

Third, I wonder why you insist on centering the experience of your third category. What is at stake for you in focusing NOT on people recovering from trauma but instead on people whom you distinguish from them, and thus I must read as NOT "victims/survivors." Perhaps I should ask why you see the third category as so distinct. It seems to me you're actually talking about the cycle of violence—people with a history of trauma (perpetrator/victims) hurting other people (victims/survivors). What do we gain from positing these "outside" people, this third category? It seems to me that the effect of this breakdown is to keep people separate, rather than to open up possibilities for solidarity and healing.

Fourth, I was very surprised to see the connection you made between criminalization of people with HIV in Canada and some survivors' desire for trigger warnings. I don't think anyone here has advocated for a legislative action around "trigger warnings," and survivors (even organized survivors)

hardly have the institutional power of a national government. This is a false analogy. If anything, I think your centering of your third category creates an image of survivors as "Typhoid Marys" (yes, I know her history but I mean this as an idea circulating in the culture, not a fact) spreading trauma about like a contagion. As with the historical Mary Mallon, it's a little more complicated. To be blunt: I see people living with trauma as having much more in common with—and common cause with—people living with other chronic conditions, like HIV.

I *would* like us to think about Megan's provocation to at least consider trigger warnings as a disability issue—if we accept that trauma is real, why **WOULDN'T** we want to accommodate the needs of those living with trauma, when possible?

SARAH SCHULMAN: In my view, if a violated person acts out by hurting others, they are not really "survivors." So, I used both terms. In my book *TIES THAT BIND: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences*, I actively use the word "victim" to define people on the receiving end of familial homophobia and provide a long explanation – so I don't have the same ideology about that word that you do.

I am not calling people "objects" in a dehumanizing way. I'm saying that if you act out on me, I am the object of your misplaced rage. It's a grammatical term.

Regarding the circular system, we are expressing similar perceptions, but with different words.

Maybe this will clarify:

Trigger warnings, like hate speech legislation, HIV criminalization (which is a speech-based event, in which people are incarcerated for not disclosing their HIV status to sex partners), or forms of shunning: refusing to communicate, excluding people from conversation, censorship, all these restraints on speech etc- these are large and small actions in public and private space that are united on a continuum of one person controlling another from a place of anxiety. Some of these are institutionalized, rooted in policy and law and some are destructive but socially condoned cultural practices. They share the ideology that group A is being harmed by group B's speech. That group B's speech is more than group A can take. And therefore group A should not have to hear it.

The specific argument about trigger warnings is that what exempts people from free exchange and expression of ideas, is that they have had traumatic experiences that are reawakened in unbearable ways by hearing these words. And somehow, classrooms, books, films, and conversation are the arenas where these exemptions are demanded, even though these are not the realms in which trauma usually originates. Most trauma that transcends normative uncomfortable or difficult experience is physical, or the observation of physical violation. In cases where it is psychologically rooted, there is often an element of fear of physical violence.

Therefore the attempt to control what other people say, and whether or not it can be heard- is misplaced, because conversation, exchange and confrontation with ideas produces awareness. Hearing ideas and engaging ideas helps articulate exactly what we are afraid of, the roots of those fears, and whether or not they are actual in the present, or simply consequences of the past. Differentiating between these two is essential to leading a just life. Israel/Palestine is a prime example of past anxieties being played out in an attempt to control, based in historic experiences, now being justified to hurt people who have nothing to do with the original pain. The goal is healing instead of reaction. And controlling who is allowed to speak (ie who is going to be heard) is not a mode of healing. It's an anxious reaction that restricts information.

Awareness is actually the antidote to anxiety, not the cause.

ANNA JOY SPRINGER: One response [to the question of disability] is: If I live with trauma and someone in my audience lives with trauma, is there a way to meet both of our needs, and if not, when is it responsible to accommodate my own needs versus theirs? I work with lots of students whose terror may be activated in my presence. Some of these people may have developmental trauma disorder, and some may be veterans, religious devotees, social conservatives, refugees or the children of refugees. Is there a basic stance that can attempt to address even contradictory or unpredictable needs, and to what extent is my attempt to manage everyone's needs another manifestation of my own "disorder"?

Another, maybe more practical response is: If PTSD and DTD activists (and others currently diagnosed with, for lack of a better way to get treatment, other "disorders") are able to get their symptoms and manifestations recognized as a "disability" rather than a "disorder," the experts at disability offices will educate us on how best to meet their special, sometimes highly individual needs. Right now this office requires that students with disabilities bring their diagnosis to a person who can help them get their personal needs met while they earn their degree. Some of these students require assistants and some require more time for tests and assignments, while others may need to have a seat near the door if they have digestive issues. Some students with symptoms that seem to fit a particular officially designated disability do not choose to get institutional treatment for it through the university. When I receive a note from the disability office, I do not learn the student's diagnosis. I instead get instructions on what sort of accommodations will allow the student to handle the rigors of the class.

Since PTSD is recognized as a true "disorder" by the most recent DSM, but DTD is not yet recognized as a disorder (and these categories seem still to be divided by gender, unfortunately), I suspect offices of disabilities will need to look into best practices for addressing the needs of students with PTSD, especially as there may be more veterans pursuing degrees if they return from war zones. I am very curious about whether these best practices will include requests for instructors to include trigger warnings in their syllabi or before lectures. It's possible that some people with PTSD may have other sorts of accommodation needs based on their own particular symptoms and

triggers.

CACONRAD: I have been thinking about PTSD as a disability. I'll bring up class again. Who can afford to get their needs met with proper attention? Who is simply being doped up by the doctor because there's not enough money for their time? I'm not saying this is an answer, I'm saying class should be an additional consideration. I've been successful in treating my own PTSD with various alternative, inexpensive healing practices, from co-counseling to Reiki, and the amazing TRE (Trauma Releasing Exercises). In the end whether we consider PTSD a disability or not I'm not seeing how trigger warnings is the answer.

For me it is the permission of poetry that makes it useful. To police the language of a poet or the atmosphere a poet creates is to negate that usefulness. Also it seems that some use the tool of policing to self-medicate the hopelessness of not being able to impact the president, the generals, and their bosses on Wall Street.