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With my finger on the trigger: writing with dangerous caution

Abstract:

In May this year, the New York Times ran an article by Jennifer Medina about university students' calls for trigger warnings to be attached to course content, including literature, that 'might cause trauma' (Medina 2014, para. 14). In writing about self-injury and reflecting on writing as a process of self-care, I am dealing with potentially triggering content. As a writer, I want to confront my own areas of discomfort, but must I also consider the impact on readers of the content I produce? Lewis et al (2012) caution that while there are some benefits to online Nonsuicidal self-injury communications there are inherent risks. As more of our communication shifts to digital environments, writers dealing with difficult subject matter may need to consider issues like accessibility and the use of trigger warnings as the norm for these modes of distribution. Anna Gibbs (2006) discusses 'that writing entails risk' yet 'to think of writing as dangerous seems counter-intuitive' (157). This paper seeks to navigate the gap between the writer's perspective of a therapeutic approach and the creation of potentially triggering content or alternatively, do I leave the safety on?

Biographical Note:

Belinda Hilton is in the final year of a creative writing PhD at Griffith University Gold Coast. She has a Bachelor of Arts with first class Honours in creative writing, and a Bachelor of Arts with majors in theatre and contemporary arts, both from Griffith University. Her creative work has been presented at *NYWF* 1999, *EWF* 2012 and she was the featured poet for the *Poetry in Film Festival* 2011. Her academic work has been presented at the *Autobiography International Conference* at Södertörn University, in Stockholm Sweden and *Creative Manoeuvres AAWP18* at University of Canberra. She continues to teach in the area of New Communication Technology and her research interests include NSSI, mental health, social media and digital communication, life-writing and therapeutic writing.

Keywords: self-injury, NSSI, mental health, trigger warning, agency, social media, readership

With my finger on the trigger

Who has not registered the effects of a word-incision directly in the body?

(Gibbs 2006, 157)

When I was eighteen years old, I sat down on my bedroom floor, pulled the hem of my shorts up and proceeded to cut the word 'never' into my upper right thigh. I had planned to cut the word 'nothing' but changed my mind after I had cut the first letter. Fifteen years later the word remains etched into my skin, the sting of the associated memory still held in the white lines of the physical scar. Words can be dangerous; though this danger is not always tangible and we can never be sure which word weapons will create the deepest wounds. As Anna Gibbs states 'a few startling words on an unsuspecting body can threaten the very integrity of the self' (2006, 157).

In life we generally rely on social etiquette or selective hearing to defend ourselves from word weapons; however, in online environments, weighted words are assigned a somewhat burdened phrase to warn readers of their potential impending impact - 'trigger warning'. This phrase is used to flag text (or imagery) that might have a negative impact on the audience. The term has entered our offline vernacular. Early in 2014, the New York Times article, *Warning: The literary canon could make students squirm,* reported that some American colleges were faced with requests from students for 'trigger warnings' to be applied to course material that 'might upset them' (Medina 2014, para. 2). Assigning warnings to literature seems counterintuitive to many but, as digital becomes dominant, existing online protocols and etiquette may become the norm in other areas of content creation and distribution.

My awareness of trigger warnings emerged from engaging with online content relating to self-injury. Around the time I inscribed the word 'never' into my skin I started seeking information about why I felt the need to hurt myself physically when I was upset. This was in 1999 and, at the time, mental health was not a widely discussed issue. *beyondblue,* the Australian national initiative to raise awareness of depression and anxiety, was not founded until the following year (beyondblue 2014, para. 1), and it was not until 2006 that the national youth mental health foundation, *headspace* was officially launched (headspace 2013, para. 1). At that time, mental health was not discussed in high schools or universities and, while self-injury (then more commonly referred to as self-mutilation) was entering media and academic discourse overseas, this conversation was not readily accessible to a teenage student living in Queensland, Australia. Internet forums and bulletin boards were the primary resource for finding

information and social support. Fast-forward thirteen years, to when the behaviour re-emerged in my thirties. Awareness of self-injury is increasing, but the behaviour is still stigmatised. Consequently, many who experience self-injury do not talk openly about their experiences or even understand their own behaviour. It was only last year that Non-suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Fifth Edition) as a condition for further study (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 803). The behaviour's intent is noted as an attempt 'to reduce negative emotions' and may be 'conceived of as a deserved self-punishment' (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 804). While there is now a greater awareness of mental illness, self-injury remains a taboo subject and thus many self-injurers continue to use digital environments to seek an understanding of their experiences.

Into the void

I am in the process of attempting to make sense of self-injury through a therapeutic writing approach. By fictionalising my experiences with self-injury, I am consciously choosing to climb down into the fault line and push my personal threshold. The objective of writing this novel is to start an open discussion about self-injury not only with the readership but also with myself. The call for trigger warnings on literary works highlights concerns I am dealing with in navigating this sensitive topic. Will my writing cause harm? David L. Ulin responded to the debate on literary trigger warnings stating: 'when literature and art are sanitized so they no longer push our buttons, they cease to be literature and art' (2014, para. 12). Literature may push buttons, but should literature squeeze the trigger? Self-injury remains a behaviour that draws fault lines. For some readers those fault lines will be fine cracks to be stepped over, for others though, the topic represents a chasm to be crossed. Trigger warnings rather than sanitize literature may instead ask the reader how messy they are willing to get, how far are they prepared to go into the void?

> How do you keep safe when your whole day is as wide and empty as the sky? Anything could happen. I remember feeling that word, heavy and slightly sticky across my pubic bone (Flynn 2007, 76).
>
> The problem started long before that, of course. Problems always start long before you really, really see them. (Flynn 2007, 77)

NSSI is defined, by the International Society for the Study of Self-Injury, as 'the deliberate, self-inflicted destruction of body tissue without suicidal intent and for purposes not socially sanctioned' (ISSS 2007, para. 1). In online discussions of self-injury, images that are graphic in nature, such as photos of bloody wounds or razors, are typical of content that might be flagged by the individual poster as potentially triggering. Text posts that discuss a desire by an individual to harm themselves are also assigned alerts. By adding a trigger warning to online content, self-injurers seeking to discuss their behaviour are also taking a responsibility for the affect their posts may have on their readership and viewers.

For years, I avoided material that would potentially trigger self-injury. Self-injury is itself an act of avoidance – difficult emotions are avoided for more tangible experiences of physical hurt and damage. Michelle Smith states: 'the aim of trigger warnings is to prevent unanticipated exposure to material that might evoke past experiences of trauma' (2014, para. 12), and that 'the suggestion that trigger warnings should apply to literary works that examine difficult, challenging or offensive subjects has provoked derision' (2014, para. 3). While I made a conscious effort to avoid triggers, and managed to abstain from self-injurious behaviour for almost a decade, ultimately the behaviour re-emerged. Trigger warnings had not failed me, but equally had not stopped the behaviour being triggered. Despite this, I am reluctant to see trigger warnings as redundant. Gibbs notes that 'writing activates affects in the reader' (2006, 159); how then do I anticipate and cultivate affect when writing about behaviour that is experienced differently by different individuals? Gibbs states: 'writing may be able to rule out certain readings, certain interpretations on the part of readers, but it can't ultimately specify any single interpretation' (Gibbs 2006, 159).

There is risk involved with writing about my self-injury experiences – I may indecently create a work that is potentially harmful to others. Alternatively, there is the prospect that the process of triggering my personal discomfort ultimately brings about a positive affect for the reader. The purpose of online trigger warnings is to negotiate accidental or incidental exposure and may therefore be seen as practical. Reading a novel on self-injury is unlikely to be an accidental endeavour. There is the potential though for a literary work to create an ongoing triggering engagement, where each chapter may breach another threshold. The handling of self-injury material online may therefore offer insight for writers seeking to navigate the terrain.

#triggerwarning

In 2012, both *Instagram* and *Tumblr* introduced new policies surrounding self-harm blogs and posts. *Instagram* announced that they would not 'allow accounts, images, or hashtags dedicated to glorifying, promoting, or encouraging self-harm' (2012, para. 2), and the platform implemented graphic content notices, which include a link to a support site. *Tumblr* also introduced a content policy against the 'active promotion of self-harm' and began 'posting 'public service announcements' – style language whenever users search for tags that typically go along with pro-self-harm blogs' (2012, para. 5). Both platforms acknowledge the importance of online discussion for many of their users. *Tumblr* stated: 'online dialogue about these acts and conditions is incredibly important' (2012, para. 4). The *Instagram* announcement went even further in outlining the role of the platform:

> It is important to note that this guideline does not extend to accounts created to constructively discuss, or document personal experiences that show any form of self-harm where the intention is recovery or open discussion. While we strongly encourage people to seek help for themselves or loved ones who are suffering, we understand the importance of communication as a form of support, in order to create awareness and to assist in recovery (Instagram 2012, para. 3).

The language of these statements outlines that online platforms seek to differentiate between glorification and constructive discussion, and they highlight the importance of communication. Due to the stigma surrounding self-injury and the fear of negative reactions, many self-injurers are online seeking alternative modes of support. Adler and Adler note that self-injurers began to discuss the behaviour and interact with one another online in the early 2000s (2012, 60). Boyd, Ryan & Leavitt write that online communities allow self-injurers 'to receive advice from those who have gone through similar experiences' (2010, 11), and that 'the Internet allows those in recovery to do so in their own homes without facing the social stigma typically associated with self-harm' (2010, 12).

Given the popularity and commonality of social media, digital devices and the evolving e-health movement, the Internet's role, as a medium of communication, support and information for self-injurers, will likely continue. Negotiations between the need for safe online support spaces and digital expressive outlets, and the need to manage or limit misinformation and

triggering content, will be ongoing. Improved web search engines and hashtags mean self-injury related content is easier to seek out and find, for better or for worse. There has been increased research into how helpful or harmful accessing self-injury related content online can be for those who self-injure, as well as those at risk of self-injury. Because self-injury can be 'associated with a sense of urgency and craving' (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 804), the ready accessibility of the Internet, and the continuous availability of self-injury related discussion, holds both positive and negative connotations. Lewis et al state:

> In a content analysis of personal NSSI websites, several individuals reported on their websites that they experienced NSSI urges and even self-injured pursuant to seeing NSSI imagery or reading graphic NSSI descriptions. (2012, 3)

Lewis et al note that many sites post trigger warnings on material that may lead to urges or indeed the act of self-injury (2012, 3). A trigger warning may not deter someone from viewing self-injury content or, depending on the platform, may be ineffective in preventing exposure to the material; for example, hashtags that display underneath a post in a scrolling feed, such as on *Tumblr* or *Instagram*. However, trigger warnings do acknowledge that the material might be problematic for some. The concern is that while seeking support online self-injurers may instead experience further triggers by engaging with self-injury content. In light of knowing that my readership is likely to experience triggers, what precautions should I take in creating my self-injury narrative?

Creative writing, like social media is a cost effective and readily available forum for therapeutic personal expression. There is a supporting body of research exploring the benefits of therapeutic writing, including perspectives from within the creative writing discipline as well as the health sciences. While therapeutic writing pushes readers and writers towards positive thresholds, there is a difference between 'pushing the buttons' of readers and potentially triggering harm.

Finding the thresholds

In *Sparkling vampires: Valorizing self-harming behaviour in Stephanie Meyer's Twilight series,* Lydia Kokkola discusses the representations of self-harm in young adult literature. My

work does not specifically target a young adult audience but given that self-injury 'most often starts in the early teen years' (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 804), teenagers, and/or individuals who are accessing the work seeking information and explanations, are likely to be part of the future readership. Kokkola outlines that there are certain expectations as to how the issue of self-harm is approached when writing for this audience: 'firstly, the narrative is expected to end on a note of optimism, suggesting that the self-harming individual will recover' (Kokkola 2011, 36). Many of the self-harm memoirs I have read do have a recovery arc as they have been written after a period of self-injury absence. My narrative takes place after what might be considered a self-injury 'relapse', so a recovery arc, typified by an absence of self-injury, is not my objective. Discussing the notion of recovery, Neilsen and Murphy state: 'symptoms of disability can persist, but a person can have a much stronger sense of self or empowerment – that is still recovery' (2008, para. 8). This ideal of personalised empowerment is something I hope to bring about in the reader, as well as in myself, and is integral of my narrative construction.

When I returned to the behaviour, after many years of abstinence, I struggled with a sense of failure. While I had not self-injured for a decade, I had been in and out of therapy and on and off medication. A relapse of self-injury felt like a step backwards. Caroline Kettlewell writes in her memoir, *Skin Game*, 'stopping, however, was not at all the same as ending the desire' (1999, 177). Recovery is a lengthy and ongoing process as opposed to a miraculous end goal where everything is in the past. The absence of self-injury does not equal a return to healthy thinking. The development of self-care processes and more productive coping mechanisms are a *continuing effort* for self-injurers, but this effort is something that they may have the capacity and authority to face. Rather than suggest that 'recovery' equates to being self-injury free, it is important to highlight that a self-injurer can be empowered to make other choices and cope without the physical coping mechanism. It has become essential for me to develop agency in my ability to confront difficult feelings, this includes the notion that I can choose my reactions when faced with 'unhappiness'. Confronting or tolerating difficult feelings is not easy or pleasant. Doing so requires resilience and practice. As Kettlewell states: 'choosing not to cut meant that instead I have had to sit there with the awful agony of unhappiness when it comes […] and gut it through' (1999, 178). Trigger warnings may act to remind readers/viewers that the material may be difficult, but the warning stops before indicating the material should be avoided.

Kokkola's article outlines that while readers may 'be seeking solace and guidance along the road to recovery' (2011, 36), 'readers may also have their behaviour triggered by reading the fairly graphic descriptions of acts of self-harming' (2011, 38). She observes that readers of self-harm content are seeking an explanation for an unfamiliar behaviour, but one that will 'discourage copycat behaviour' (2011, 36). When writing about acts of self-injury within my novel, I must consider which details are necessary to convey the story while remaining focused on the intent of self-care and authenticity within the work. Descriptions that involve methods, tools or positive outcomes may encourage the act in a vulnerable readership, but skimming over the act may seem prudish and detract from the emotional depth of the work. Self-injury scenes then must focus on the internal experience of thinking, as opposed to sensationalised descriptions of the act itself.

Kokkola observes that narratives dealing with self-harm 'attempt an extraordinarily difficult task' (2011, 39). She writes:

> On the one hand they attempt to remove the stigma surrounding self-harming behaviour and make it comprehensible to both suffers and those who do not engage in such practices. On the other hand, they dare not risk presenting self-harming as a viable solution to an emotional problem. In negotiating this difficult balance, the literary qualities tend to suffer (Kokkola 2011, 39).

Her concern regarding literary quality is valid. The choice to fictionalise my self-injury experience is in part an attempt to create some distance between myself and the material, which will help me focus on writing an engaging story, first and foremost. Attempting to make sense of my experiences under the banner of creative non-fiction, a genre that comes with additional complications, is a task I am not yet willing to navigate. The objective of this novel is to start an open discussion, not only with the readership, but also with myself regarding self-injury. Once I have managed to navigate the gap between the internalised experience and outward healthy expression, I then can further explore a non-fiction life-writing approach.

When it comes to confronting my readership with potentially triggering content, I am attempting to be considerate, without being condescending. As Stephen King states in his memoir, *On Writing,* 'you can't please all the readers all of the time; you can't please even

some of the readers all of the time, but you really ought to try to please at least some of the readers some of the time' (2000, 156).

In writing a self-injury narrative the word 'please' could easily be replaced with the world 'help' – you cannot help all the readers, but you ought to try to help some. Equally, the statement could be made that you will not harm all your readers, but you might harm some. The addition of a trigger warning may be helpful in preparing some readers for the material they are engaging with. Other readers may benefit from the careful consideration of the approach taken in handling difficult content.

Despite any consideration of content creation or labelling of text as 'triggering', the fact remains that self-injurers face daily triggers outside the realm of digital communication and literature. Online content and literature both provide the reader/viewer with an aspect of choice regarding the exposure to triggering material. In highlighting that choice to the reader, perhaps through a trigger warning, a process of agency to make a choice may be activated. Confronting or tolerating difficult feelings is not easy or pleasant. Doing so requires resilience and practice. This is where the gap is closed between writer and reader as each is undergoing a process of confrontation; and while response to a literary work may not be as instantaneous as in an online environment, there is still an acknowledgement of a shared exchange.

Staring down the barrel

> We're always looking for the logical explanation, the smoking gun, the inscrutably sagacious detective who will reveal all in the final chapter – but some things are too complex to suffer reduction to a simple equation of why/because […] Maybe what drove me to cut doesn't have any cause I can name (Kettlewell 1999, 60).

The agency of exposure is addressed by Rhiannon Cosslett in her article, *Why I don't agree with trigger warnings*. Cosslett discusses her experiences with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), noting that she accepts the choices of others but, in her response to trauma, 'I didn't want to be a delicate little flower who could be brought to tears by a paragraph' (2013, para. 7). She writes that 'triggers can spring from anywhere' (Cosslett 2013, para. 8) and, consequently, 'all of us, at one point or another, make a choice regarding what we will and will

not expose ourselves to' (Cosslett 2013, para. 9). Perhaps then it is not the writer's role to make decisions on behalf of the reader regarding their exposure to triggers, because to do so would compromise the potential empowerment of the reader who chooses to test their boundaries through experience. There are 'some survivors who are trying to open their boxes, and a trigger warning can serve as an admonition to stay in our shells. I wanted out of mine' (Cosslett 2013, para. 11).

My aim, in writing about my self-injury, is to shift, from avoidance, to confrontation and acceptance. It is to build my sense of self-worth and agency, as an individual, with or without self-injury. Through this process, I may be hit by word weapons, the safety may be off, but it is only by entering the line of fire that I will truly uncover my own resilience. In doing so, perhaps I can show my readers that they too have this authority.

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