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Choose Not to Warn: Trigger Warnings and Content Notes from Fan Culture to Feminist Pedagogy

OMG, ACADEMIA IS HAVING THE WARNINGS DEBATE.

A year or so ago, I typed this message into an online chat window. I was talking about the eruption in blog posts, higher education think pieces, and intense Facebook arguments about “trigger warnings” in the classroom — especially classrooms in which gender, race, and sexuality are the focus of discussion — instigated by student-led campaigns to standardize notifications of potentially traumatic content.¹ The potentially chilling effect of syllabus warnings on feminist and queer inquiry led to fears that vulnerable faculty might lose the freedom to teach “complex, potentially disturbing materials” without the risk of censure.² Placed in wider cultural context, trigger warnings became a stand-in for the rise of a student-activist generation whose emphasis on sensitivity seemed to exemplify the neoliberal individualization and depoliticization endemic to contemporary capitalism.³ Meanwhile, other voices from inside and

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1. Colleen Flaherty, “Trigger Unhappy,” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 14, 2014, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/04/14/oberlin-backs-down-trigger-warnings-professors-who-teach-sensitive-material>.
 2. 7 Humanities Professors, “Trigger Warnings Are Flawed,” *Inside Higher Ed*, May 29, 2014, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/05/29/essay-faculty-members-about-why-they-will-not-use-trigger-warnings>.
 3. Jack Halberstam, “You Are Triggering Me! The Neo-Liberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger, and Trauma,” *Bully Bloggers*, July 5, 2014, <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neo-liberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma>.

outside academia were insisting that trigger warnings could provide necessary consideration for students living with everyday trauma, including survivors of endemic racialized, classed, and gendered violence.⁴

In these fast-paced and contentious debates, it has often been the idea of the trigger warning, more than the practice of warning itself, on which the conversation centers. There is a shared standard narrative in which a student's real or imagined articulation of a state of *being triggered* shades into teachers' and students' *fear of triggering someone*, and this fear leads to a demand for future enactments that would cut out any potentially offensive or uncomfortable material. This certainly may sometimes reflect reality.⁵ But when I messaged my friend in that tone of wearied recognition, I was referencing a different, though related, conversation in which similar arguments played out to different conclusions. While the ascendance of trigger-warning discourse is usually traced to feminist bloggers' use of the language of trauma and to the flowering of social justice discourse on Tumblr, such warnings have a distinct history in the networks and communities surrounding fan fiction and fan video. This essay aims to offer some insights from that debate in a form that may prove useful for those contemplating the significance of trigger warnings in feminist academia.

Within the networked publics of both academia and fandom, conversations about warnings, and the personal and organizational policies that get developed as a result of those conversations, are world-making practices. I ask what might happen if we let go of questions around the legitimacy of triggers and traumas and asked instead what it is that requests for warnings are asking for—not on the level of individual experience, but in terms of the physical and discursive spaces that such requests, and the answers to them, create. In contrast to academics'

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4. Julia Serano, "Regarding 'Generation Wars': Some Reflections Upon Reading the Recent Jack Halberstam Essay," *Whipping Girl* (blog), July 13, 2014, <http://juliaserano.blogspot.com/2014/07/regarding-generation-wars-some.html>; Allison Hitt, "Melanie Yergeau, 'Disable All the Things,'" *Digital Rhetoric Collaborative*, June 24, 2014, <http://www.digitalrhetoriccollaborative.org/2014/06/24/melanie-yergeau-disable-all-the-things-kn1>.
 5. Rani Neutill, "My Trigger-warning Disaster: 9 1/2 Weeks, *The Wire* and How Coddled Young Radicals Got Discomfort All Wrong," *Salon*, October 28, 2015, http://www.salon.com/2015/10/28/i_wanted_to_be_a_supporter_of_survivors_on_campus_and_a_good_teacher_i_didnt_realize_just_how_impossible_this_would_be.

predominant concerns with surveillance, academic freedom, and neoliberal commodification of the self, fans' arguments over triggers and warnings have tended to center questions of pleasure, access, and art, working toward the creation of counterpublic spaces online and offline that attend to the complexities of affect and the interdependence of structural violence, pleasure, and critique. Ramzi Fawaz suggests in this issue that transformative teaching *requires* the triggering of intense affective states, not states of trauma but perhaps states that cannot be fully separated from the traumatizing experiences of some who exist within them. What if the praxis of warning, broadly conceived, can be a method not to avoid such spaces and experiences, but to facilitate them? Fandom's history with warnings is not less contentious than current feminist and queer academic debates, but it does suggest possibilities for creatively appropriating warnings discourse in order to shape the worlds we want to create, whether inside or outside the classroom.

FAN FICTION WARNINGS AS CAUTIONARY ENTICEMENTS

In a BuzzFeed essay contextualizing the academic warnings debate, Ali Vingiano writes that the term *trigger warning* “evolved from clinical psychiatry, moved from LiveJournal fan fiction to Tumblr to mainstream media, and eventually ended up on college syllabi.”⁶ The fan fiction part of this origin story has had little attention in feminist academia's debates, yet its decades-long history of contentious dialogues belies the generational framing often used to describe the demand for warnings. Fan fiction warnings began in the world of slash zines — works of homoerotic fiction about characters from popular culture, which a delighted Joanna Russ described in 1985 as “the only sexual fantasy by women for women that's produced without the control or interposition of censorship by commercial booksellers or the interposition of political intent by writers and editors.”⁷ In this context, warnings functioned as an author-led system of identification, flagging sexually explicit content with keep-out

6. Ali Vingiano, “How the ‘Trigger Warning’ Took Over the Internet,” *BuzzFeed*, May 5, 2014, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/alisonvingiano/how-the-trigger-warning-took-over-the-internet>.

7. Joanna Russ, “Pornography by Women, for Women, with Love,” in her *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans and Perverts: Essays on Sex and Pornography* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1985), 95.

signs allowing the uninterested to avoid the uncomfortable, while also marking the entryway to secret worlds of erotic kinship. In the words of one fan, quoted on the fan oral history wiki *Fanlore*,

When I first found slash fandom, “warnings” were both a signal to other slash fen that there was What We Were Looking For inside those covers, and something to shield us from those manic anti-slash fans going “I READ THIS STORY WHERE SPOCK AND KIRK WERE LOVERS OMG I NEARLY THREW UP!” This was in 1983.⁸

Neither feminist nor trauma-related, and devoid of the as-yet-unconsolidated language of the “trigger,” warnings for slash indexed endemic homophobia, but they were also part of the process by which geographically distant fans built their shared world. Marking a networked community that centered on people whose desires were considered strange and perverse by most, warnings contributed to practices of belonging in which ridicule and misunderstanding from the outside world brought participants in a dispersed network closer together.

Warnings for slash persisted as fan fiction moved online, often in the form of literal “keep out” signs on the front pages of websites—intended to keep erotic writing away from the eyes of an unsuspecting, potentially underaged public as much as to welcome the intrigued.⁹ As barriers to entry fell and fannish creativity proliferated in the 2000s, demands for different kinds of content warning gained prominence. By 2008, when the fan advocacy nonprofit Organization for Transformative Works incorporated in order to create the online fan fiction Archive of Our Own (AO3), warnings were an issue of such importance to the fannish public that they were incorporated into the site’s architecture. AO3’s list of warnings, from which any user posting to the archive must select, stand as a trace of many rounds of fierce and deeply felt debate between some fans who felt that warning for key plot events would ruin their stories’ effects and others unwilling to read without finely grained preparation for what lay ahead.

8. “Warnings,” *Fanlore*, <http://fanlore.org/wiki/Warnings> (accessed February 29, 2016).

9. *Ibid.*

Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Use this if warnings may apply but you don't want to use them.

No Archive Warnings Apply

Use this if AO3 warnings don't apply to your content (in other words, if it contains no graphic depictions of violence, major character death, rape/non-con, or underage sexual activity).

Graphic Depictions Of Violence

This is for gory, graphic, explicitly described violence. Exactly where to draw the line is your call.

Major Character Death

Please use your best judgment about who counts as a major character.

Rape/Non-Con

Again, this is your call. If you think your content is borderline non-consensual, but you don't feel like using this warning (or you're not sure if you should), you always have the option of using "Choose Not to Use Archive Warnings" instead.

Underage

This is for descriptions or depictions of sexual activity by characters under the age of eighteen. . . . This generally applies to humans; if you are writing porn about space aliens who only live for a month or thousand year-old vampires with sixteen year-old bodies, please just use your best judgment.¹⁰

Although the term "trigger" appears nowhere, it is clear that warnings here are operating on the terrain of trauma and abuse: the issues deemed warning-worthy range from rape, violence, and death to the legally complex "underage," though the prominence of "major character death" is worth noting given the tendency of academic warnings debates to focus on issues of sexual violence. The language highlights writers' own

10. *Archive of Our Own* website FAQ, "Archive Warnings (required)," http://archiveofourown.org/faq/tutorial-posting-a-work-on-a03?language_id=en#p-warnings (accessed February 29, 2016).

judgment, calling attention to amusingly complex situations that fan fiction's embeddedness in science fiction and fantasy are likely to generate. Most significant, though, is the inclusion of a "Choose not to use archive warnings" field, selected as a default for writers who neither choose a particular warning nor state that no warning applies. The capacity to exclude stories selecting this option in a search means that readers who wish to avoid every instance of graphic violence or major character death can do so unless a writer has actively lied about it. Yet this structure equally enables warnings to stand as enticement: one may search by field in order to read about violence, death, and rape as easily as to exclude them from one's fannish experience. Warnings have become part of an infrastructure in which the main goal is to maximize readers' pleasure, whatever the source of that pleasure may be.

AO3's warnings policy may not seem obviously relevant to questions of feminist pedagogy, but I argue that there is much to learn from it. The biggest difference between fannish and pedagogical approaches to warnings is that fandom is for fun. While there are many sites within fan communities where pleasures are critiqued and deconstructed, fannish warning policies have the implicit goal of allowing the most people possible to access the most pleasure, whether they are consuming content by sending money to a zine publisher in the mail or simply by clicking a link. Classrooms are spaces in which we are not primarily concerned with producing pleasure, though we may hope for its appearance from time to time; indeed, students often remark that their experiences in feminist classrooms make it more difficult for them to draw uncomplicated pleasure from popular culture, and teachers generally interpret such assertions as marks of pedagogical success. Yet cautionary enticements are nevertheless a significant part of our pedagogy in feminist, queer, and critical race studies: course titles and syllabi signal what is ahead, and students gravitate to the content that speaks frankly to the things they need to see. The danger of a too-close analogy between fannish and pedagogical warnings culture is that the stakes in education are higher; we do not want students to evade uncomfortable confrontations with power and privilege, and we may have good reasons for not announcing potentially controversial aspects of our courses in descriptions or catalogues. But taking on some aspects of the finely grained layout of expectations that fans' warning frameworks have developed (including the availability of the choice not to warn, with all its

implications) may highlight both the cautions and the enticements of critical study in sensitive, necessary fields.

FAN VIDEO WARNINGS AS REMEDIATION TO THE VIOLENCE OF POPULAR CULTURE

More immediate connections to classroom settings, where the use of still and moving images has instigated much discussion of warnings, can be found in the history of warning debates surrounding fan video. Fan “vidding” is the practice of re-editing clips from film and television to music in order to make new creative works; fan vids that were historically shared on VHS and mailed in the same networks as slash zines are now circulated via streaming sites and social media.¹¹ Vidders often share their work at convention vid shows, where vids are screened in darkened rooms and granted an intensity of attention it is difficult to attain in the crowded ecology of online video. In a multi-fandom vid show, any visual content at all can appear on screen, organized in chunks of approximately three minutes; it is easy to see why some kind of forewarning for disturbing content would be called for. Arguments over vid warnings have existed for well over a decade, as the discussion of a 1999 example during a 2015 vidding convention demonstrates.¹² In 2010, discussion came to a head when some fans requested the implementation of a system similar to that used by the AO3 for the annual vidding convention VividCon. The proposal for warnings met with angry resistance, leading to an intense and divisive dispute. Arguments against warnings focused on artistic freedom and a fear of censorship; would vids that had warnings attached be deemed “dangerous” and go unwatched? Would vids lose their power to surprise and move an audience if all the details were mapped out in advance? Is the job of art not to make people uncomfortable, to challenge them, not just to make them feel warm and fuzzy?¹³ In an extended post laying out arguments in favor of adopting

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11. Francesca Coppa, “An Editing Room of One’s Own: Vidding as Women’s Work,” *Camera Obscura* 77 (2011): 123-30.
 12. “History of Escapade: The Digital Transition,” Vid show and presentation at VividCon 2015 (August 12, 2015).
 13. Given the hostility that some of these discussions entailed and the fact that they took place within online fora where participants’ sense of themselves as participating in public, archived discourse varies widely, I have chosen not to directly quote participants’ assertions of these arguments.

a warnings policy, fan creator thingswithwings challenged the prevailing discourse of art:

When artistic freedom is framed as the freedom to make people feel *uncomfortable*, it sounds really cool until you remember that the word *uncomfortable* also covers up for words like *triggered* and *flashbacks* and *panicked* and *freaked out* and *upset* and *in a state of terror/anger/depression for days afterwards*. Until you remember that maybe some people were *uncomfortable* already. . . . Art can certainly disturb in powerful and even useful ways, but when we talk about that we don't mean that it ought to trigger PTSD flashbacks or migraines — that is an aesthetic or political kind of disturbance.¹⁴

On the part of people arguing for warnings, this debate was the first time I saw the discourse of triggers become dominant in fan networks. The need for warnings was framed in terms of accessibility: in the same way that dedicated seating for people with mobility impairments would allow more people to appreciate the vidshows, listing vids containing common triggers — whether seizure-inducing strobe lights or graphic images of sexual violence — would let people know what was coming and give them time to prepare themselves, whether by leaving the room, closing their eyes for the duration of the vid song, or simply taking a deep breath. Thingswithwings insists that what a vidder (or a teacher) might categorize as necessary artistic (or pedagogical) discomfort may be experienced in radically different ways by different bodies in a room.

This is not an argument about whether or not vidders should make vids with violent images in them, or about whether vidders should use effects that can provoke migraines or seizures. This is not an argument about policing content. . . . The point of a warnings system is to give people enough information to allow them to make their own informed choices. . . . Would such a system make the con 100% safe for all who attended? Certainly not. But, . . . people who have

Extended discussion can be found at the fan culture oral history wiki *Fanlore*. “Vividcon/Vividcon 2010,” *Fanlore*, http://fanlore.org/wiki/Vividcon/Vividcon_2010 (accessed February 29, 2016).

14. “Some Things to Think About in This vvc Discussion,” posted by thingswithwings, *Hypothetically Speaking* (blog), July 3, 2010, <http://thingswithwings.dreamwidth.org/112589.html>.

triggers have said that warnings would be helpful for them. At that point, debate over whether or not warnings would be useful are ridiculous — people have said, *this would be useful for me*.¹⁵

When discussed in these terms, trigger warnings become a utopian practice of care — what Davina Cooper calls an everyday utopia, which seeks to practice everyday life in a manner that can bring about “new forms of normalization, desire, and subjectivity.”¹⁶ Trigger warning discourse in this sense suggests that, if we cannot create a world without structural violence, we can reshape the world we have such that it does not constantly reproduce these things: we can try to create and inhabit a world that allows for aesthetic and political disturbance without retraumatizing survivors.

Fan videos are drawn directly from popular media, but they make something different with the pieces of culture they take to heart. Warnings offer a way to navigate the contradictory inflections of different fans’ worlds, allowing creators and consumers to walk a line between reproducing popular culture’s commonplace images of, for example, violent misogyny, and reproducing that misogynistic violence itself. They can serve a similar role for the classroom spaces where we look at the quotidian structural violences reproduced in and through media in order to see them for what they are. As we seek to create spaces of productive discomfort for students who must learn to perceive familiar worlds without the comforting distortions of structural privilege, we cannot forget about the students — and the teachers — who are “uncomfortable already.” When discomfort is a given (or has been chosen, given the implications of an initial caution or enticement), trigger warnings become what Sara Ahmed calls “a partial and necessarily inadequate measure to enable some people to stay in the room so that ‘difficult issues’ can be discussed.”¹⁷ The nature of those “difficult issues” — of what becomes recognizable as trauma — is itself a marker of the politicized landscape in which discussions about content and representation take place. That the debate about trigger warnings in academia has

15. Ibid. (Italics in original).

16. Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 4.

17. Sara Ahmed, “Against Students,” *The New Inquiry*, June 29, 2015, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/against-students>.

tended to revolve around sexual content in queer and feminist contexts — rather than, say, the circulation of images of Black people’s deaths at the hands of police, for which trigger warnings are also often demanded and used — might tell us more about the gendered and sexual cultures of campus life than about trigger warnings themselves. In a context where university administration promotes an understanding of sexuality organized through the legal discourses of liability, compliance, and mandated reporting embedded in Title IX, warnings can appear as one more prophylactic against institutional vulnerability. Yet the practice of demanding and offering them is also a reminder of the inevitable, complex, embodied vulnerabilities within the classroom spaces that Jennifer Doyle describes as “the university’s soft flesh.”¹⁸

Five years after the battle lines in favor of or against warnings were drawn, VividCon’s staunch anti-warnings stance has shifted; a standardized warning system was initiated for the convention in 2015. Yet any warning measure does remain partial and necessarily inadequate. The utopia, as utopias have a tendency to do, fails some of its constituents. Trigger warnings as an accessibility measure, an effort toward universal design, share universal design’s constitutive failure: there is simply no way that it can work for everyone at the same time.¹⁹ Not all triggers can be warned for; not everyone wants their triggers warned for; some are unconcerned if their world building does not meet the needs of everyone who might wish to enter; and the rhetorical violence of some of the more extreme contributions to fannish and academic debates alike can itself function as a trigger.

POLICY AS PRAXIS

The idea that we could recognize and warn for every possible trigger, that a policy could account for every conceivable eventuality, recalls another framing of utopia: what David Graeber calls “the utopia of rules” in the title of his recent book on bureaucracy.²⁰ The prospect of a magical set

18. Jennifer Doyle, *Campus Sex, Campus Security* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2015), 112.

19. M. W. Bychowski. “Disability’s Digital Pharmacy: On Accessible Writing,” *Things Transform*, September 30, 2015, <http://www.thingstransform.com/2015/09/disabilitys-digital-pharmacy-on.html>.

20. David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (London: Melville House, 2015).

of rules that would somehow obviate the need for ongoing participation in the conflicts that make worlds is obviously false and terrifying—yet it is also seductive. Fannish warnings policies offer some examples of the utopia of rules that let us read that concept more generously. I want to finish by highlighting two explicitly feminist and queer examples, which are the models I try to build from in my own pedagogy. This policy making functions as a kind of institutionalization from below: where the people who make the rules are the same ones who follow them and break them when necessary.

In 2011, I had a hand in writing the warnings policy for a feminist fan video screening event I co-organized at WisCon, a Madison-based feminist science fiction convention. In the aftermath of the VividCon warning debates, we sought to clarify the distinction between censorship and warning for an audience whose familiarity with the discourse of triggers was likely to vary. In particular, we specified a distinction between “general violence” and “explicit/intense/gory/sexual” violence that proved difficult to draw.²¹ Relatively few vids showed rape or murder, but we soon realized that a warning for “institutional violence,” often qualified as “racialized,” was sorely needed. As I wrote warnings for the videos I had selected, I realized that some kind of warning was almost always necessary according to the terms of our policy. The temptation to self-censor that I felt let me recognize some elements of truth in the antiwarning perspective. I did not change my presentation, though, and the event faced no censure.

My last example comes from the policy for Kink Bingo, a sex-positive fan creative challenge centering marginalized desires and practices, which ran from 2008–2015. Here the term “warning” has been dropped altogether for its overtone of policing and reminders of the era of warning for same-sex desire. The policy begins with an openness to contradiction, seeking to “make space for people to indicate some types of potentially triggering content while maintaining... a safer space for people who have had their kinks denigrated and for people who are not comfortable providing content notes.” It continues:

21. “Warnings Information Post,” posted by alexbayleaf, *WisCon Vid Party* (blog) May 18, 2011, <http://wiscon-vidparty.dreamwidth.org/33361.html>.

Please don't use the word "warnings" to refer to these content notes.

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Option 1: If you prefer to include content notes

Indicate in the content notes line whether this fanwork includes any of:

- people under the age of 18 human years (or equivalent) in sexual or kinky situations
- nonconsensual or dubiously consensual sex or kink
- incest
- self-harm or suicide

If your fanwork contains none of those things, please say that with something like "content notes: none" or "no standard notes apply;" don't leave the space blank!

...

Option 2: If you prefer not to include content notes

Fill in the content notes line "choose not to use content notes."²²

Kink Bingo's content notes cover much of the same ground as the trigger-warning policies I have been discussing, but they purposefully eradicate the emotive language of "warning." Adherence to the policy depended on individual participants, creating extra labor for the moderators who maintained consistency, but the policy's flexibility insisted on keeping the space open for exploration of dangerous desires. After all, to invite content notes for depictions of underage sex or ambiguous consent is to explicitly state that such representations are welcomed, giving permission to creators who might otherwise be uncertain of the reception of controversial content.²³ The simple act of replacing a "warning" with a "note" changes the terms of the discussion, moving away from

22. "Posting Guidelines and Template," posted by kink bingo mods, *Kink Bingo* (blog) June 30, 2012, <http://kink-bingo.dreamwidth.org/479833.html#cutid4>.

23. thingswithwings, personal communication, February 29, 2016.

the idea that warnings can be given for a set of triggers predetermined in advance and focusing instead on what is needed to facilitate open engagement with challenging material.

As a participant in fandom for longer than I have been teaching, fannish world-making practices have always been at the back of my mind in creating syllabi—although it is only with the advent of academia’s warnings debates that I have become aware of this. My personal warnings policies have evolved over time, moving from a summary acknowledgment of the necessity of discomfort to a careful distinction between “discomfort” and “triggering,” which goes along with a content note policy modeled on a combination of WisCon and Kink Bingo.²⁴ I find the act of articulating and explaining my content policy in class, opening up my reasoning to student responses, to be the most useful aspect of the practice. Students also have a range of fiercely held opinions on warnings practice, after all, and even their indifference can be educational. Fannish successes in creating policy models that include space for *not* warning are worth remembering in this context: many teachers already include statements that effectively define their classrooms as “choose not to warn” spaces.

Much debate and anger about warnings in academia has come from a sense that warnings are being imposed from without, whether by organized students or administrative officials demanding that warnings be put in place according to some universal standard. Such an insistence leads scholars and teachers to feel that our autonomy is removed, our reasons for using particular content coming under the bad-faith scrutiny of conservative legislators or of students unwilling to countenance political articulations that challenge their own. Yet, as I hope the examples given here can show, trigger warnings and content notes need not be understood this way. The demand to think through warnings policy can be understood (even if it is not intended) as an invitation to open space rather than to close things down. Warnings discourse can be part of the ways we mindfully construct the landscapes of our classrooms, the worlds we build when we craft a semester-long process of

24. Alexis Lothian. “Accessibility and Discussion,” *Introduction to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, <http://lgbt20osp16.queergeektheory.org/policies/accessibility-content-and-discussion> (accessed February 29, 2016).

ideal intellectual development— knowing as we do that nothing is going to work out quite the way we have imagined once it comes into practice.

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