Literature at the Dawn of Trauma Consciousness

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ABSTRACT

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We are living in the age of the trigger warning—educational cultures that threaten English teachers’ ability to present psychologically upsetting literature to students who may lack the necessary resilience to tolerate highly charged literary encounters with complex issues, such as rape, violence, racism, or political strife. And yet literature is filled with conflict—artistic representations of the precise traumas that certain members of our student populations may not be able to tolerate. In order to safeguard trauma survivors from potential reactivation of traumatic stress, a handful of educational institutions promote the use of trigger warnings. But are trigger warnings effective, and, if they are, what do they teach English teachers about what happens to individuals who have endured trauma and are therefore susceptible to being triggered? The purpose of this research, which consisted of interviews and an intensive focus group with seven veteran English teachers teaching at seven distinct schools throughout the world, was to offer insights and pedagogical awareness to English teachers, so that they can better anticipate, conceptualize, and decide for themselves how to respond to students who get triggered by emotionally complex literature. In addition to the qualitative research methods used with the seven English teacher participants, this study utilizes the work and thinking of trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk in an attempt to illustrate the neurological impacts of trauma through a comprehensive overview of PET scans of trauma survivors studied in van der Kolk’s lab in Brookline, Massachusetts. Each PET scan presents key features of what can happen to the
brains of survivors, and may provide significant clues into what happens among our students when they get psychologically triggered in the classroom. The dissertation concludes with a one-on-one interview with Harvard psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, and offers his insights, wisdom, and conceptualizations for this highly complex and nuanced problem.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures .......................................................................................................................... iv

**PART ONE—AT&T .................................................................................................................... 1**

Chapter I—WHAT HAPPENED ON JULY 21st ..................................................................... 2
  Sharing the Commercial ........................................................................................................ 5
  Introducing Alison .................................................................................................................. 10
  Four Minutes and Forty-seven Seconds .............................................................................. 14
  Kids in the Hall ..................................................................................................................... 15
  Friday, July 23rd ................................................................................................................... 18
  What Ensued ......................................................................................................................... 20
  Epilogue .................................................................................................................................. 23

**PART TWO—READING THE WORLD ................................................................................. 26**

Chapter II—IS LITERATURE A PROBLEM? ........................................................................... 27
  Aristotle and Tragedy ............................................................................................................. 30
  Alison and Aristotle ............................................................................................................. 32
  J. Hillis Miller: The Literary Good ....................................................................................... 34
    The Value of Virtual Reality .............................................................................................. 35
  The Joy of Reading .............................................................................................................. 36
  Literature and Theory of Mind (ToM) ................................................................................... 37
  Literature and Moral Virtue ................................................................................................. 39
  Teaching Literature ............................................................................................................. 40
  Teaching Students to Read with Abandon ......................................................................... 42
  A History of Trauma-Related Pedagogy ............................................................................. 45
  Resistance and Ambivalence ............................................................................................... 47
  Psychoanalytic Perspectives on the Reading Process ......................................................... 49
  Norman Holland: I’ing the Text ........................................................................................... 51
  David Bleich: Subjectivity .................................................................................................... 54
    Bleich: Subjectivity and Literary Meaning Making .......................................................... 55
  The Unconscious: What is It? ............................................................................................. 58
    A Justification and Overview of the Unconscious ............................................................ 58
    Freud’s Iceberg Theory .................................................................................................... 61

Chapter III—IS THE TRIGGER WARNING THE ANSWER? .............................................. 64
  Reading in a Complex World ............................................................................................... 64
  Trigger Warning Advocates ............................................................................................... 67
  Student Support .................................................................................................................... 68
  Opposition to Trigger Warnings ........................................................................................ 70
  The Danger of Not Using the Trigger ............................................................................... 73
  Tracing an Origination Point: How the TW Was Born .................................................... 75
  But Is It the Answer? .......................................................................................................... 77
  A Look Ahead: Bringing in the English Teacher ............................................................... 78
PART THREE—THE EXPERIMENT: Interview Conversations, Focus Group, and Analysis, May 18–July 15, 2017 ......................... 80
Chapter IV—CONVERSATIONS WITH TEACHERS ................................................................. 81
  Some Methodological Considerations ................................................................. 81
  A Brief Note on the Interviews ................................................................. 83
  The Issue of Power ........................................................................... 84
  The Role of Trust ........................................................................... 86
  Some Thoughts on my Participants ................................................................. 87

Chapter V—GETTING TO WORK ......................................................................................... 92
  A Reversal of Fortune ........................................................................ 92
  A Preliminary Background: The Masters Program ......................... 95
  More Method Madness ....................................................................... 98
  Breaking Down the Interview Questions ........................................ 98
  Analysis: Making Sense of the Interviews ........................................ 100
    Discomfort and Confusion ............................................................... 100
    Confusion Abounding .................................................................... 110
  Two Clarity Caveats ......................................................................... 115
  More about Tanya .......................................................................... 118
  Hijacked Classroom and a Will for Separation ............................... 119
  Experiment Phase II: Workshop and Focus Group ......................... 124

Chapter VI—THE FOCUS GROUP ...................................................................................... 125
  Figuring it Out .............................................................................. 125
  Ellerson .......................................................................................... 128
  Introducing the Focus Group ............................................................ 128
  The Workshop ............................................................................... 129
  A Note on Self-Disclosure ................................................................. 134
  Self-Disclosure for the Other—Not the Self ...................................... 135
  Back to the Workshop .................................................................... 135
  What Comes Next? ......................................................................... 139

Chapter VII—THE 45-MINUTE HOUR ............................................................................... 142
  5:20 P.M. ...................................................................................... 144
    Group 1: Dismantling “Trigger Talk” ........................................... 144
    Group 2: Distinguish English Teachers from School Counselors .... 147
  Texts are Texts, Not Triggers ............................................................ 150
  Enough? ...................................................................................... 154

PART FOUR—LES MISERABLES: Cambridge, 1999 ........................................................... 157
Chapter VIII—THE SHAKING ......................................................................................... 158

Chapter IX—TRAUMA AND ITS FACES ........................................................................... 170
  The Missing Piece: Understanding Trauma and its Effects .............. 174
  Trauma on the Brain ....................................................................... 177
  Right Brain ................................................................................... 182
Trauma’s Faces .................................................................184
Relational Trauma ............................................................184
The Trauma of Everyday Life ..............................................187
The Trauma of Existence ....................................................188
Heading into Chapter X: A Look at Traumatic Response ....189

Chapter X—UNDERSTANDING TRAUMATIC RESPONSE ........191
Loss of Self, Diminished Intimacy ......................................192
Numbing ............................................................................194
Turning Away, Dissociating .................................................195
Frozen in Trauma ................................................................197
Trauma and Aloneness/Isolation ..........................................198
Diminished Reflective Functioning .......................................200
RF: A Definition ..................................................................200
Resilience and Being, Striving, Healing ..............................203
Trailing Edge and Leading Edge .........................................204
O Captain, My Captain! ......................................................208

PART FIVE—HAST THOU SEEN THE WHITE WHALE? ENTER
DR. VAN DER KOLK ..........................................................210
Chapter XI—THE WHITE WHALE .......................................211
The Conversation ..................................................................213
What Do We Do When Students Get Triggered? .................220
Is It Intractable? ..................................................................221
The Importance of Stress ....................................................224
The Story of Yana ..............................................................225
The Inevitability of Suffering .................................................229
In the Hands of the Survivor .................................................230

EPILOGUE—LITERATURE AT THE DAWN OF TRAUMA CONSCIOUSNESS..235
So Then What? ....................................................................237

REFERENCES ......................................................................241

Appendix—Interview Questions ............................................250
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1.</td>
<td>Alison Scott’s gluten free artwork</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.</td>
<td>PET Scan of Alison’s heart</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.</td>
<td>Freud’s Tripartite Mind</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.</td>
<td>Freud’s Iceberg Theory</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.</td>
<td>University of Chicago Anti-Trigger Warning Statement</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.</td>
<td>Yerkes-Dodson Law</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.</td>
<td>Aristotle, Emotional Arousal, and Catharsis</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.</td>
<td>Maxine Greene and Awakening</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.</td>
<td>AT&amp;T “It Can Wait,” Boy Riding Bike</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5.</td>
<td>AT&amp;T “It Can Wait,” Car Crash</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6.</td>
<td>AT&amp;T “It Can Wait,” Boy’s Reaction</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7.</td>
<td>Trauma Stats among Students</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.8.</td>
<td>Effects of Trauma</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9.</td>
<td>Right Brain Polarization Due to Trauma</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.10.</td>
<td>PET Scan Imagery, Trauma</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.11.</td>
<td>Re-entering the Classroom</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.12.</td>
<td>The Task</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1.</td>
<td>Kandinsky and Red</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1.</td>
<td>PET Scan Images Highlighting Trauma’s Effect on the Brain</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1.</td>
<td>Ute’s PET Scan</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2.</td>
<td>Stan’s PET Scan</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>Tracking Edge/Leading Edge</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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A. W.
Part One:

*AT&T*
Chapter I

WHAT HAPPENED ON JULY 21ST

The repressed memory is like a noisy intruder being thrown out of the concert hall. You can throw him out, but he will bang on the door and continue to disturb the concert. The analyst opens the door and says, if you promise to behave yourself, you can come back in. -- Theodore Reik

New York City was hot on the afternoon of July 21st, 2015. A Wednesday... I think it was a Wednesday. Memory has a strange way of distorting itself—of twisting the fabric of its identity into puzzle pieces that match and resonate with the particular grooves and contours of a contextualized moment. Barbara Kingsolver (2013) famously observed, “Memory is a complicated thing, a relative truth, but not its twin” (p. 48). Even so, I’m fairly certain that it happened on a Wednesday, and I’m 100% sure that it was hot. How do I know it was hot? Well, my memory tells me it was—that’s for one—but I also know it was hot, because I recently googled the New York City weather for the afternoon of July 21st, 2015. According to the Internet—which never lies—Manhattan rose to a mid-summer, July temperature of 89 degrees. So I was right. It was hot. Really hot. That’s perhaps the only part of the story that still seems indisputable.

On that particular day, at approximately 12:45 in the afternoon, I found myself standing in front of a group of graduate students—English teachers, to be precise—who had come to New York that summer with the purpose of pursuing a masters degree in English Education. So I stood there—actually, I wasn’t exactly standing. I mean, I had been standing at various points during our seven-hour seminar, but at that particular moment I was seated—my butt positioned in a chair at the far perpendicular intersection of two
wooden tables. I was engaged, actually, in a similar act to precisely what I am doing at this very instance: staring at my computer.

Only moments before, a childhood friend of mine, Dan Blaney, who had gone on to become a highly successful ad producer at the New York City ad behemoth, Wieden and Kennedy, had sent me an email. I was prepping for class, which was set to resume at 1 P.M., when Blaney’s email subject flashed across my computer screen:

_Yo son, check this out: my new spot._

Dan was a good friend—a dear friend, really (we’d spent ten summers together at a sleep away camp in Western Massachusetts)—so I clicked through. Usually I don’t. Well, it’s not that I don’t. I do. I mostly do, but sometimes I don’t. We live in a digital age where everybody who knows anybody in any way feels inclined to poke at your precious free time for a moment or two of voluntary exposure to their life and interests. It’s not that I don’t take interest in other people. I do. What type of person would I be if I never took interest? But if I were to click on, like, watch, or retweet every link that flashed across my computer screen, I’d be forever imprisoned in a modern, Sisyphean version of indentured cyber-Hell.

I opened Dan’s email and read:

_Hey buddy. This is the spot I’ve been working on in LA. It’s an AT&T ad—deeper than my usual fair. I’m really proud of it. If you have a few minutes, please watch._

I looked around the room. Of my 15 students, the majority were still at lunch. Two were sitting diagonally from me, eating food and chatting. A few others were mingling about in the hall. I looked back at the link: “if you have a few minutes, please watch.” I had 13 minutes ’til class started. Shrugging my shoulders, I put on a pair of Apple headsets and watched. Here’s a play by play what I saw:

i. _Boy_ sits on an overpass, counting cars.

ii. _Boy_ decides to ride home through suburban Los Angeles’s tree-lined streets.

iii. Cut to shot of _Husband_ at gas station. He fills up and buys a lottery ticket.
iv. Cut to *Mother* and her six-year-old *Daughter*, at home preparing to leave for a party.

v. Cut back to the *Boy* on bike.

vi. Cut back to the *Husband*, now in truck, talking with his wife through Blue Tooth.

vii. Cut to *Mother* and *Daughter*, driving to party.

viii. *Mother* takes her eye off the road and checks cell-phone.

ix. AND THEN IT HAPPENS— the sudden, shocking, climax of the commercial: while the *Mother* reaches for her cell phone, her car swerves into the middle of the road and smashes, head on, into the *Husband* and his pickup truck. The impact is intense, jarring, and dramatic. The cars collide into each other, then lift into the air, and crash upside down.

x. It all happens in 1000dpi HD, slow motion, as the *Boy* looks on.

The commercial ended, and I sat stunned. Dan was right. This wasn't normal advertising.

The AT&T spot was deeper, more meaningful, and higher impact than anything he had previously shown me. Deeper than Arnold Schwarzenegger, dressed as a school girl, playing ping pong versus a randomly selected frat kid. Deeper than Michael Jordan dunking from the foul line. Deeper than..... you get my point. This thing had meaning, purpose beyond its shocking visual architecture. I was impressed.

I was so impressed, in fact, that I made the spontaneous decision that I would show it to my graduate students when they returned from lunch. Why did I think it would be good to show to them? It was a *Drama* class, a course designed for English teachers. English teachers? Yes. The purpose of the class was to help English teachers to utilize dramatic techniques for teaching reading and writing in the English classroom. In the most literal sense, we might take a scene from *Hamlet* and get it on its feet, incorporate blocking, and utilize performance. In more untraditional ways, we might take a short story, such as Raymond Carver's “Cathedral,” break it down, and explore methods for using dramatic techniques in order to better understand, interpret, or interact with the piece—writing and reciting monologues by the various characters, choreographing a dance rendition of one of the key scenes, composing music for one of the settings.

As serendipity would have it, on precisely that day, I had planned to introduce the students to the activity of film trailers—an exercise that involved constructing a short,
2-3 minute film advertisement on a literary work of their choice. I had designed a Keynote introducing themes and techniques necessary for creating the trailer, and was ready to present it. So Dan Blaney’s email came at precisely the right time. Great advertisements and great film trailers share a common feature: each utilizes compression, the act of taking a wide range of potential events and distilling them down to a short, narrative string of cohesive moments. Poetry does this for literature—saying so much through so little.

In order for my students to create intelligently designed and evocative film trailers, they need to become masters of compression. Dan Blaney’s advertisement was the ideal manifestation—a visually stunning, expertly cut, and dramatically powerful example of narrative story-telling within a limited time frame. It was perfect! They were going to love it! It was going to serve as the model for their projects.... Little could I have predicted the way this spontaneous choice would go on to alter the course of my life.

Sharing the Commercial

I struggled for several minutes to get the sound right. Brad Chaffer had brought in an external speaker, and I was trying to navigate the settings on my computer to pair it properly. The commercial needed exceptional sound quality. I didn’t want to play the thing

1I think it’s important to establish up front that I will be using two definitions for the word narrative throughout this dissertation. When it comes to discussions of the film trailers, books from the Western canon (such as Hamlet, Huck Finn, Lolita, the Bell Jar), I will be working in the classical Western tradition of narrative as story with a clear beginning (introduction to characters and circumstances), middle (working through conflict), and end (climax and denouement). My own writing style will assume this stance as well. When I work psychoanalytically, however, and when I discuss the neurology around trauma, I’ll be looking at narrative through a lens that is far more fragmented, disordered, overlapping, and non-sequential. Since psychoanalysis assumes that there is an unconscious, and since trauma often triggers the unconscious and over-rides conscious thought—pulling the survivor back into emotions, feelings, and neurological responses that were originally rooted in the traumatic experience itself—it feels important for this dissertation that both narrative approaches are utilized when appropriate. I will move back and forth between these narrative positions and conceptual lenses throughout the dissertation.
through the tinny speakers of my MacBook. Then there was the issue of the projector. The blue cable was meant to connect with the right input, and the red cable was supposed to be plugged into the..... And then there was the matter of the auxiliary input.

I needed to scroll through the various options and—look, I’m not a tech expert. Had I known about this commercial prior to the beginning of class, I would have made the necessary arrangements. But at present I was scrambling to integrate the brand new curriculum, and that involved technical knowhow..... It took me 5 minutes of screwing up, and some assistance from Brad, and then the thing was ready to go.

I stood up and addressed the group:

Okay, so in preparation for your film trailers, I want to show you the following commercial. I think it’s an incredible example of telling a powerful story using a limited time sequence. I think you’ll find it very powerful.

That’s what I said; I mean, that’s what I remember saying. I don’t know exactly what I said or didn’t say, because nobody was filming or audio-recording the class. But as I sit here reflecting upon that moment, almost two years later, what I remember is that I deliberately chose not to tell the students that I was about to show them a car crash. I don’t remember exactly how I chose not to tell them this—just that I decided to omit the narrative end-result of the commercial sequence. It was a car crash—the surprising, shocking, arresting, painful, dramatic apex of the art-piece. I wanted them to be as stunned and disarmed as I had been—to literally gasp at the moment of impact (which some of them, in fact, did upon seeing it).

You see, what makes the commercial brilliant is that you know full well that you will see a car crash.... the commercial sets you up for it.... you’re anticipating.... you’re waiting for the moment.... what you don’t know is how or when it’s going to occur. The writers and director, in fact, do an incredible job of misleading the viewer, so that you’re actually fairly convinced that it’s the boy on the bike that’s going to get hit. Why else begin the story by focusing on him, and then proceed to feature shots of the 9-year-old riding his bike without
a helmet through the suburban streets of Los Angeles? It’s the boy who’s the target…. But that’s not what happens.

The crash comes on unexpectedly, titanically, vividly, and shockingly, as the mother with her 6-year-old daughter in the backseat reaches for her phone and swerves suddenly into the wrong lane. **CRASH!!!** The pickup truck and the car go flying into the air, glass shattering, vehicles slamming against and then bounding off the pavement—and it all occurs in front of the 9-year-old boy, who happens to be riding his bicycle nearby when the accident occurs. Like us, he looks on in absolute horror, as the automobiles collide and bound, like metallic medicine balls. I wasn’t going to tell my students what happened, because I wanted them to be like the boy….. to look on in amazed shock at the horrifying scene. If you want to teach somebody a lesson, disarm them. Take them into Dante’s Hell. Shock can be a good launching pad for learning.

I have taught English for a long time—18 years at the high school level and 5 at the graduate level. I don’t tell my students what’s going to happen in the texts we read. When Hamlet enters Gertrude’s bedroom in a hot-blooded rage, I don’t tell my 18-year-old seniors that he’s about to kill Polonius. When Stanley comes home from the hospital after the birth of his son, I don’t tell them that he’s about to rape Blanche. When Gloucester’s strapped and bound into a chair by Cornwall and Regan, I don’t tell them he’s about to have his eyes gouged out. I don’t do it.

There are three reasons why I don’t—in fact, there are more than three reasons, but three main reasons come to mind right away: (1) I don’t want to deprive them of the experience of experiencing; in other words, I don’t think it’s my place to take away the potency of their experience by forecasting what is about to happen for them prior to the event. That’s one. (2) I feel indebted to the creator—Sylvia Plath, Shakespeare, Mark Twain, Maya Angelou, Philip Roth, Sophocles…. what right do I have to seize control over an artist’s masterpiece and pay it the disrespect of forecasting future events that were not meant to be forecasted? I am not a literary weather reporter. I see my role in relation to my
students and in relation to the text as one of aesthetic conduit—creating an environment through which members of the class can potentially descend into the emotional vibrancy and contours of each literary moment. For many readers, something compels us to turn the page—to finish the last word on page 25 and to want to turn to the first word on page 26. In my reading life, that’s what I often experience—a feeling of getting pulled into an encounter with future words, based on the magnetism of current words. Just like in life, where we may have some ideas for what will happen tomorrow, next week, next month, in a few years, the act of reading and discovery may be anticipated by certain predictive measures based on past experiences. But the future is something utterly unknowable. In my own biased perspective, I live, in part, to see what’s going to happen. I apply this same paradigm to reading. (3) I could be remarkably wrong, but—and this feels important to me—I think most of my students, most of the time, can handle it. Art often has the effect of shocking and arousing us (Miller, 2002). It has long been my belief that such arousal brings about benefits—teaches us important things about the world, and about ourselves. Has therapeutic value. I realize that the word therapeutic is slippery and has many potential definitions. When I use the term therapeutic in this dissertation—and I will use it often—I am speaking about emotional experiences that are grow promoting and beneficial. During my nearly 20 years teaching literature in the classroom, it has been my core belief that most of the time literature offers therapeutic value to the majority of students in the majority of contexts.

It is my belief that literature, even when it deals with highly charged and controversial contents—such as rape, murder, racial tensions, political strife—does so with more than just the aim of producing scintillation. I believe that an important distinction between art and scintillation, is that while scintillation arouses us with little emotional payoff, art offers intangible therapeutic benefit. Unlike flashing breaking news, which reports that five people have been killed in a tragic gas explosion in Bangkok, or six children have drowned in a flooded basement in Kansas, literary shock offers powerful
insights into the nature of what it means to be human—using the unexpected to compel us into a heightened emotional state, and thereby bringing us closer to catharsis and growth. This is a viewpoint expressed by both Aristotle in the 4th century B.C., and then reinforced by Hillis Miller in 2002. Art has the ability to shake us from our trees, and, in the shaking, we can gain the potential to become reacquainted with the very stems, trunks, and branches that hold us together and root us to the earth.

All this is to say that I wanted the car crash to be a surprise—to shake them from what Maxine Greene (1998) calls the “‘cotton wool’ of habit, of mere routine, of automatism” in order to compel them to “seek alternative ways of being,” because, as Greene states, to “find such openings is to discover new possibilities—often new ways of achieving freedom in the world” (p. 2). And that’s one thing Maxine Greene loved to say about good teaching and good learning. When I took her class in the Spring of 2014, she often said that good education tugged people out of the traditional slumbers of their day-to-day patterns and forced them into what she referred to as an aesthetic, moment-by-moment engagement with the world. Aesthetic engagement is tough to pull off if we know what’s going to happen before it happens. Right?

1:03pm. With the projector plugged into my laptop and the sound connected, I pressed play. The students settled back into their chairs, sounds began to crackle and bleep, and the numbers of the reel began to count down from 10. When the rapidly rotating clock hit 0, the following title displayed on the screen:

AT&T
July 21st, 2015
“It Can Wait” Campaign

I was excited. Virtual popcorn for the soul, pop!
Introducing Alison

Alison Scott got a perfect 1600 on her SAT. I mean, that was a long time ago—10 years approximately—but it’s still something she identifies with. Getting a perfect SAT score is something you carry with you all your life. You mention it at cocktail parties. You bring it up on a first date. You casually slip it into a job interview. “Yeah…. Oh, the SAT? 1600. Perfect. But that was a long time ago.” Scoring a 1600 on that thing is a type of golden ticket: bragging rights for the rest of eternity. Out of 1.67M test takers, 583 people hit that 1600 mark—that’s 0.035% or 3.5 in every 10,000. It’s a small percentage. But for those who hit that magic number—the fortunate infinitesimal—they get to spend the rest of their lives walking around with the knowledge that they beat the shit out of ETS. Not many people get to say that. Alison does. But there’s more to Alison than simply her SAT score. Of course there is. She’d be the first to admit it.

During my time working with Alison—she was one of the students among that group of 2015 masters students in my Teaching of Drama course—I’d get to know her very well. Even *that* isn’t exactly true. I would get to know her well, but not until after the course ended. For reasons that will become obvious shortly, my knowledge of Alison, almost by necessity, would grow into levels I never could have anticipated. During that steaming summer week in July, in which I worked with that group of graduate students seven hours a day between 9 A.M. and 4 P.M., I touched base with Alison on several occasions—brief conversations during breaks in the lesson, a few email exchanges about assignments and contents, during the handful of times she raised her hand and had a question or comment, and then once or twice after class before she got into her car and headed back to New Jersey. Alison lives in central Jersey, about a trafficless hour away from New York City—

2So as to preserve anonymity through this dissertation, all participant names (with the exception of Bessel Van Der Kolk’s) have been disguised using pseudonyms.
with traffic the commute can last up to two and a half hours. Devoted to learning, she
commuted to and from class every day.

In addition to her SAT perfection, which I did not know about until after the course
ended, Alison had other distinguishing features. For one, she wore her hat backwards.
That’s what I remember, but Alison remembers it differently: “I don’t think I have ever
worn a hat backwards in my life haha. I wear it for the sun only and never in doors…. I
certainly consider myself a shy person ... an extroverted introvert ... so that is perhaps what
you were trying to convey there ... memory is interesting :)” (Alison Scott, personal
communication, October 21, 2016). This wasn’t the only memory that we recalled
differently—I think I remember that Alison consistently wore a black, non-descript
baseball hat, which she sometimes turned backwards; and I remember that sometimes she
wore it in class—indoors!—at least at the start of class..... maybe she took it off once the
class started? I can’t remember. But she says she didn’t; reiterated it in a follow-up
conversation a year later: “I have never worn a hat backward in my whole life” (A. Scott,
personal communication, June 19, 2017). She’s gotta be right. I mean, she’s Alison, and I’m
just somebody who worked with her for a week. Who knows Alison better: me or her? And
if my memory was incorrect about this, then what else was it incorrect about? Students
and teachers reside in the same room, endure the same lessons, occupy and participate in
the same learning experiences.... But what we see and what we remember.... There were
other things....

I wouldn’t characterize my teaching style as lectury—I’m sure some of my students
would disagree—but during much of the time that I did stand in front of that class, open my
mouth, and engage in the act of speaking, I noticed that Alison was on her computer—her
body shifted diagonally away from me, her face staring at her screen, and her hands rapidly
typing. “What the Hell is she doing?” I sometimes wondered to myself, insecure that, since I
was a relatively young instructor, I might not grab her attention the way some of my
mentors in the program had. “Maybe she’s taking notes,” one part of me hoped. “Maybe
she’s not interested in what I’m doing or saying?” I really didn’t know. In our current age of digitation and technological advance, many of our students have computers, and since, by definition, the computer screen faces them, while we see only a metallic surface and the back of an illuminated Apple, it’s usually relatively impossible to know exactly what a student is doing when her face is glued to the artificial illumination of an integrated concoction of micro-pixels. In Alison’s case, I hoped for the best, I think—although a vulnerable part of me fidgeted and feared. This is how Alison explains it:

I type notes and make assignments during class. I did that at the AP institute this summer too and the teacher thought I was disengaged until I sent all the stuff to her and then she said I was turning her lectures into pure gold. I was almost never disengaged via my computer in class :) I thought I sent the polaroids and interviews PowerPoints to you and the whole class. I will have to send you those at some point because they are great and working well in my classes. I even made YouTube video explanations of them, using the power points. (A. Scott, October 21, 2016)

I believed her. So I was wrong again. My perception of Alison’s attention to her computer screen was off-base from her actual intention—a misread. I found this out 15 months later. I’m sure there were several times during the week of July 21st where I passionately expostulated into the thin air that occupied Denison Hall 102, and wondered why in the world one of my graduate students was more infatuated with her MacBook than with the curly-haired, wild-eyed, exuberance of ... me. But I didn’t understand. I couldn’t see or imagine what was going on with her.

There’s one other important thing to know about Alison—important in that it’s unusual. English teachers are predominantly right brain. Right? They think creative, they breathe creative, they act creative, they ... you get the point. When you ask most English teachers to perform quantitative analysis—math and such—they look at you with the type of betrayal and repugnance that Luke Skywalker used when Darth Vader lifted his black-

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3 All references to specific classroom names are pseudonyms. I have deliberately disguised the exact location where these events take place. This is true throughout the dissertation.
helmeted lips and pronounced, “Luke, I am your father!” But Alison was different—again, she has that perfect SAT score. You don’t score perfect on the SAT, unless you are uniquely right brain and left brain. At her school in central New Jersey, she teaches AP Literature but also teaches Pre-Calculus. That’s uncommon.

The last thing I want to say about Alison is that she’s funny. Quirky. Idiosyncratic. Clever. She likes drawing things like this:

![Alison Scott’s gluten free artwork](image)

Figure 1.1. Alison Scott’s gluten free artwork

In fact, one of our first exchanges involved a drawing she created in response to a side discussion that emerged in class during the week of July 21st—a conversation about economic inequality in education. Alison emailed me a drawing of a cow, being milked for money by a small group of obese educational bureaucrats. Alison titled it “Comooooodification of Education.” So that was her... clever, right brain/left brain, assiduous, introverted, quick-witted, and funny. At least, these were my first impressions. I’d find out later that there was a lot more.
Four Minutes and Forty-seven Seconds

1:08pm. We watched the commercial: 15 riveted sets of eyes glued to the vanilla projector screen in the back of the room. As lights and colors splashed onto the faces of seasoned teachers looking to build upon their careers and grow as educators, you could feel the energy of the room distill into a common focus, each person, in his or her own way, anticipating the fated trajectory of the spot.

As the Mother reached for her cell phone and took her eyes off of the road, causing her vehicle to swerve over the middle lane and slam directly into the straight-line pick-up truck, two or three students audibly gasped, visibly startled by an event they knew was coming. I taught an intensive writing course at Kenyon College during that same summer, and attended a talk given by David Lynn, the journal’s editor in chief since 1994. One early July afternoon, as we sat in the steeple-topped, sun-flooded chapel that jutted out from the main Kenyon Review offices, Lynn conveyed his definition for what constitutes great literature. Of his three criteria, one has lived with me deeply ever since he uttered it on that late June, breezy evening: “Great literature will surprise you, even if you know what’s about to happen” (Lynn, personal communication, June 30, 2015). And that was us, thunder-struck by an event we knew was destined … caught off guard not by the sequence of events—the what—but shifted from our customary frames of balance by the how—the shocking auditory and visual drama that unfolded before our eyes, when we most least suspected it.

In the aftermath of the crash, while the shards and metallic parts of our own psyches re-equilibrated in the wake of the visual cacophony, I sat with the students and we discussed the commercial. Like myself, many were amazed that so much could be done with so little. It was a commercial, for Christ’s sake! We’ve all seen them—at the Super Bowl, during a TV drama, in-between play at a sporting event. There’s nothing “life-altering” about commercials. Some of them are funny. Some of them are catchy. Many of
them are stupid. Very, very few convey deep emotional impact. But this one had. In its attempt to bring awareness and change behavioral habits within a domain that is costing too many careless drivers their lives or the lives of others, AT&T’s “It Can Wait” commercial was the closest thing I had seen to a commercial spot created at the level of an Oscar-worthy, major motion picture.

We sat together, in a semi-circle, and discussed. I don’t remember what we discussed, to be honest—the nuts and bolts of the conversation. Again, I didn’t recorded any of this, and I never really went back to investigate the conversation deeply with members of the cohort. What I do remember is that there was the feeling of impact in the room—a weighty, serious, reflective mood that had come over us, as we dialogued about the work and its features. Many agreed, I believe, that it would serve as a great model to consider in anticipation for their own ensuing film trailers.

It was just about at that time, as we were transitioning from a discussion about the piece in its own right to the piece in the context of the work we were planning together that I noticed a specific feature of the classroom that had eluded me for perhaps several minutes. I scanned my eyes around the room, listening to members of the cohort, as they digested and processed the commercial, one voice at a time. Something was different. A change had occurred. Alison Scott was gone.

**Kids in the Hall**

I felt like very relieved not to be there anymore. (A. Scott, personal communication, October 26, 2015)

Students leave classrooms. They do so for different reasons. Some skip class. Some ask for permission to go to the bathroom, and then hall-wander, finding pretzel-like, elliptical paths through the school. Some go out to meet up with boyfriends or girlfriends, engage in steamy, adolescent lust behind locker room doors, or under gym bleachers. Some
sell or exchange drugs. Autistic kids, apparently, have a built-in tendency to wander (Arky, n.d.). There are potentially millions of reasons why students choose to take to the halls. I’ve been one of those students myself. In Hebrew school, while the various rabbis told obscure stories about Gandhi, Dina, Ishmael, and Uziel, I took long, drawn-out walks to no particular places. I poked my head into classroom windows and made googly eyes and funny faces to friends stuck in rabbinical prisons. I wasn’t, at times, a perfect angel.

In Alison’s case, however—and I would only find this out later—she wasn’t doing anything wrong. Considered within the context of what I was about to learn, the hallway was a safe space for her. The hallway represented a choice that felt safe—she had left the classroom to preserve her self.

According to Advocates for Youth (2015), safe space is:

- a place where anyone can relax and be fully self-expressed, without fear of being made to feel uncomfortable, intellectually challenged, unwelcome or unsafe on account of biological sex, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, cultural background, age, or physical or mental ability; a place where the rules guard each person’s self-respect and dignity and strongly encourage everyone to agree with others.

On the afternoon that I chose to show the dramatic car crash commercial, Alison needed to leave my classroom in order to feel secure. She left Denison 102 and stood within earshot, down the hall near the connecting corridor to Hollingburry.

When seen through a particular lens, students are hostages. In Redefining the Captive Audience Doctrine, Marcy Strauss (1991) defines students in a classroom as a group of captives. They may not be passengers at 37,000 feet, speeding along a railway track at 110mph, or inmates at Riker’s Island, but students in a classroom lack certain freedoms. They typically are expected to actively participate in what teachers choose. At elementary and high schools, they are often in their desks for the majority of 8 A.M.-3 P.M. days. College is less consuming but nonetheless significant. At Purdue University, a 3-credit course requires 5 hours of classroom participation each week (Purdue University, 2015). At Harvard University, Leah Whittington’s English 131, John Milton: An Introduction to his Life
and Paradise Lost, meets for 30 hours a semester (Harvard, 2015). At Teachers College, Columbia University, a full-time graduate student enrolled in three courses spends 75 hours a semester in class. That’s a lot of time. Of that time, the vast majority is usually teacher-led, teacher-facilitated, and teacher-selected. And since children and adolescents, in particular, typically spend more waking hours in school than in any other place between September and June, school may represent the one place in their lives where they have the least choice over what they do.

Students typically sit in vertical rows, often packed tight to facilitate a large number of bodies within a limited spatial geometry. They are often not allowed to speak until called upon, have to ask permission to go to the bathroom, are required to turn in their cell phones, refrain from side conversations, and stare at either the teacher or their book. On top of that, they spend the vast majority of classroom hours sitting on hard-backed seats that are often uncomfortable. They can’t raise their voices, typically shouldn’t laugh, often can’t eat, definitely can’t sleep, and traditionally only get credit for speaking if they do so in relation to something the teacher wants to talk about. These limitations, of course, vary from student to student, course to course, and program to program. Without going off the deep end, here, I’d argue that being a student in some ways can feel imprisoning—especially when the teacher is bad, which is too regularly the case. Orthodox models for how education should take place position the teacher expert as lord over a clan of compliant minions. Now that I think about it, I’d be hard pressed to think of almost any institutionalized experience where conformity is more heartily rewarded. Education can be a form of officiously sanctioned brainwashing.

So maybe Alison was simply exercising her freedoms by leaving my classroom—embarking upon a brave act of individuality and independence. And yet, when I looked around the room and realized that she had disappeared, my initial gut reaction was to feel confused, unclear, and then … pissed off and disrespected.
You did come out in the hall where I was getting water and said something like ‘are you okay?’ and I said something like ‘I can tell what it’s going to be and I can’t watch it right now.’ Then I waited outside the door to hear the muffled crash. I remember that I really didn’t want to be in the room to hear the crash. (A. Scott, personal communication, October 21, 2016)

I was sitting at home having a glass of wine and watching Netflix. Friday night—coming down off of a 35 hour, one week intensive Drama course. Alison’s graduate program is unique—did I mention this? A summer intensive masters program, it caters to in-service educators who are looking to acquire a degree in English education, while still teaching during the academic year. I coordinated and taught within the program for several years starting in 2014. Because our student body is both national and international, with very few among our cohorts residing in New York, the heart and soul of our work together takes place over a three-week period every July, during which we hold intensive, one-week courses that attempt to cover a semester’s worth of content in five days. Typically, professors hold class sessions between 9 A.M. and 4 P.M., with a one-hour break for lunch. Needless to say, it’s exhausting.

So it was Friday night, and I’d just finished working with the group. 9 P.M., and I was searching for whatever television series would provide the best, superficial comfort to my dog-tired soul. Flipping through options on my Apple TV, I heard a ping chime and then reverberate on my smart phone. You’ve got mail! With red wine securely in hand, still digesting grilled pork chops and roasted Brussels sprouts, I thumbed my Gmail account to see who had written. It was a message from Alison:

Regarding the “It Can Wait,” commercial, I just wanted to explain before I forgot to do so that the commercial was a trigger for me because of my experiences with car crashes. My father was in a terrible car crash when I was in high school.... That person hit a car that flipped over and then the car that flipped over and crushed my father’s car. He is fine now. I didn’t really drive until I was 22 because I had so many fears about driving.
Then I had a bad car accident in October because I fainted while I was driving.... I blacked out as I was steering toward the telephone pole and applying the breaks. I woke up on impact and because of the sound of the crash....

The commercial just brought up a lot of the fears and guilt I have about continuing to drive knowing that I have now fainted while driving.... If I ever faint again while driving though I would lose my license. The commercial just was hard to process at this point in time. (A. Scott, personal communication, July 17, 2014)

So there it was ... an explanation providing the key that had been the mystery behind Alison's sudden departure from my classroom. It also justified to me why I hadn't sought her out and asked directly. As a general principle, I try to respect my students' need for privacy—I also try to give them the benefit of the doubt. If a student repeatedly leaves the classroom, I'm going to say something. But if the behavior is atypical—and Alison at no other time had inexplicably departed—I tend to chalk it up to an anomaly and let them share, if they so choose. With this email, Alison was choosing to fill me in.

In retrospect, I also think she was trying to protect herself. She wanted me to know, but didn't tell me until the course was over. She wanted to share, but over email rather than in person. And I understood this. What was there to understand? She had endured a trauma—two traumas, in fact—both the trauma of learning about her father's near fatal car crash and the trauma that had impacted her directly, when she had fainted at the wheel and crashed into a telephone pole. Suddenly the missing Alison made sense—how could she have sat comfortably in a classroom and watched a dramatic car crash given her personal history with the material? Would we be surprised if one of our students had been raped and needed to escape the classroom during the reading of a rape scene from Beloved? Witnessed murder and not been able to read Crime and Punishment? Experienced incest and resisted Oedipus Rex? Depending upon an individual’s emotional readiness in relation to a traumatic event, he or she may not be psychologically capable of reading, viewing, or listening to artistic content that hits too close and potentially re-triggers the traumatic memory (much more on this later). And do we blame our students for this? Would you
blame somebody for not wanting you to put your finger into an open wound that had not yet healed? There is so much more, it seems, that educators need to learn about trauma and how it impacts students. Before jumping to profound assumptions, educators may want to take the time to consider the specific circumstances of the child. For what it’s worth, our assumptions are usually wrong. As Phillip Roth (2016) says in American Pastoral:

You get them wrong before you meet them, while you’re anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you’re with them; and then you go home to tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them all wrong again. Since the same generally goes for them with you, the whole thing is really a dazzling illusion. ... The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It’s getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That’s how we know we’re alive: we’re wrong. Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride. But if you can do that—well, lucky you. (p. 35)

Oh, one last small thing. This chapter is called What Happened on July 21st. Look back at Alison’s email correspondence to me. Several months later, when I revisited the exchange, I noticed that she sent the thing on Friday, July 17th. I showed the car crash clip three days earlier, on July 14th. But I was originally convinced that it happened on the 21st, because I usually teach this course in the final week of the program, which tends to occur in the fourth week of July. All the while my mind had been telling me.... You see, memory is tricky.

What Ensued

In the months that followed, I engaged in a research study wherein Alison became the main participant. I engaged her in several interviews, each aimed at further understanding complicated, hot-button texts, and how we might, as educators, go about teaching them to our students. There was more to Alison’s story that I would learn through our talks. On October 2, 2015, Alison dropped this on me:
but yeah, I just kinda started, you know, just—it just started getting worse and worse, like, in my experience with sitting there. So yeah, and then, like, you know I have—I forget if I told you, like, I have a heart aneurysm. I don’t remember if I told you that, but, um, like, it started making me think about that as well, which I’ve, like, had a lot of time to process, but it also, um—it grew last year, so, like, those two things happened in the same year, and then, like, have to—I don’t feel like I have to. I didn’t actually have to, but I felt like I had to engage with those ideas, and I couldn’t, um—couldn’t stop myself from thinking about it, which I think I could’ve if I— .... [laughs] it’s like, I think if I had kind of a system for—deciding what level of engagement I would pursue with the aesthetically jarring experience, that I would’ve felt more able to control my thought process at that time. (A. Scott, personal communication, October 2, 2017)

Did you catch that? A heart aneurysm. Last I checked, aneurysms are scary. And they usually don’t occur in people 25 years of age. If an aneurysm bursts, it can be fatal. I had known her during our course, and then we had been speaking for 20 minutes before she mentioned this—almost in passing; almost as though it were an afterthought—“I forget if I told you, like, I have a heart aneurysm. I don’t remember if I told you that, but, um, like....” (A. Scott, personal communication, October 2, 2017). I wanted to show them a commercial featuring a dramatic car crash, because I wanted to teach them about compression and narrative story-telling. Alison was sitting in my class with two near fatal car crashes under her belt, and a rare heart aneurysm that—I would find this out later—had grown by almost an inch over the past year. The aneurysm can have the effect of causing Alison to faint, which had been the cause for her car accident several months before. The rabbit hole is very deep, and I keep falling, and realizing how little I understand the world I thought I knew.

In 2015, while I stood in front of those students preaching about the value of drama, risk-taking, and emotional intensity, I was working and thinking as an artist, as somebody who believed that it was dangerous to modify or tone down drama in the classroom. In some ways, I still see things that way. I try to respect authors and mostly believe that mollifying the power of artistic expression can be a perversion of aesthetic potency—an act of disrespect to the creator. And yet there’s this woman in my class ... and there’s these
memories that she has ... and there's this heart in her body ... and there's this aneurysm along the walls of one of one her chambers. She sent me this scan several months later.

![Figure 1.2. PET Scan of Alison's heart](image)

As I stared at her heart, I began to scratch my head. Was it fair for me to want to shock and dismantle my students, when one of them had suffered two major traumas around the material I was covering? And if Alison had this personal history, then what personal history lived within the secret lives and unknown pasts of the other 14 students in the room? And what about my other students in other courses? And what about all of the students I had ever taught during the course of my 18 years in education?

I like to fancy myself a Robin Williams. Sometimes, in order to awaken the dead poets, I jump on desks, throw chairs across the room, scream in rage while embodying Hamlet, turn the lights on and off wildly while conveying spooky scenes from Edgar Allan Poe. I had always assumed that this was good—that this was exciting, vibrant, and fun for students. Was I wrong? Had using potent emotionality to rocket my students from the slumbers of mechanical learning been safe and healthy for my them, or had I done damage to certain fragilities that lurked clandestine among the silent ruins of unspoken life moments? My being wobbled (B. Fecho, personal communication, October 29, 2016).
Epilogue

A year and a half later, as I considered the events that occurred on July 21st—July 14th, I found myself still wrestling with the issue. At baseline, I’m a humanist—at least I like to think I am. I care about my students, and I want them to feel comfortable and safe in my classroom. I want them to experience English class as a therapeutic, safe space, and I want them to feel like they can open-up to me, within reason, when they feel threatened or overwhelmed. At the same time, I believe in art and value the full-throttle impact of high-intensity, emotionally rich encounters with creative expression.

I’ve sat stunned in theaters, while Willy Loman wrestles with his sanity, Clytemnestra murders her husband, and Angel dies from AIDS. I believe in the transformative potentials embedded in the underbellies that art exposes us to—death of fathers, murderous intent, lascivious lust, ravenous revenge, ire, racial tensions, power struggles, incest, hate, and injustice. It’s been my experience, both as teacher and student, that encounters with such grisly moments, when taught vividly well—not as scintillation, but with courage, wisdom, and scope—can help students grow, expand, gain resilience, and wrestle with important truths about themselves and the world in which they live. Literature isn’t a tabloid. It’s not sensationalism for monetary gain. Many of the texts that reach today’s classrooms have survived time’s weeding out process—are relics that represent the best in what men and women have to offer. So I believe in these—have built a career on them—but that’s me. That’s my experience. Maybe it’s different for others. I understand if some of our students, for myriad personal reasons, can’t tolerate these types of encounters. Almost everybody, I would imagine, has some limit.

For Alison Scott, watching a dramatic recreation of a car crash crossed over the line from optimal stress and felt traumatic (Kohut, 1984). Sitting in the physical safety of a graduate level classroom and watching an AT&T “It Can Wait” commercial delved too specifically into her own, personal history with trauma. For other members of her cohort,
the car crash worked its dramatic effect—alarmed but did not re-traumatize. But that
doesn’t mean, of course, that other types of material might not have triggered them and
sent them into emotional territory that felt too threatening to risk. Alison was courageous
enough to share her personal history with me. For many of our students, we don’t know—we’ll never know. And, in fact, perhaps we shouldn’t. After all, we’re English teachers. We’re
not therapists, and, as one of my mentors and friends, Sheridan Blau, has said to me on
many occasions, “the English classroom should be therapeutic, but not therapy” (S. Blau,
personal communication, May 17, 2016).

So how should we navigate these complex encounters with controversial literary
material within the English classroom? That is the focus of this dissertation: an exploration
of complex literary texts that, when taught in a classroom setting, can trigger or re-awaken
past traumas. Through exploring the literature, researching trauma and trauma triggers,
and engaging in conversations and a focus group with seasoned English educators and one
trauma expert, this dissertation will examine this complex phenomenon and pose both
possibilities and suggestions for how we might think about approaching this highly
imperfect though significantly important domain.

What do we do with these complex texts? How can we teach them, or should certain
texts or moments be shelved? In the pages that follow, I will explore various issues related
to teaching emotionally charged texts to students with psychological fragilities: I will
explore trauma—what creates it and how it gets reactivated; trigger warnings—their costs,
benefits, and how they emerged in education; and stress—how much of it is beneficial, and
at what point does stress become overwhelming or destructive? How can the English
teacher teach complex literary texts in ways that honor both the unfettered energy of the
literary creations as well as protecting the well-being of our students? Aye, there’s the rub!

Since the problem is complex and multi-faceted, I will break it into carefully
considered component parts, examine each in its own right, and then synthesize the pieces
of the puzzle, hopefully facilitating a better understanding of the whole as more than
simply the sum of its parts. **Part II** of the dissertation will look at literature, examining certain key theories on how and why we read. It will also introduce the concept of the *trigger warning* and explore possible explanations for why and how it has come about, as well as ways in which it is posing both opportunities and threats to the manner in which students read and the methods teachers use to teach. **Part III**, the experimental portion of the dissertation, will bring in interview conversations (Kvale & Brickmann, 2009) and a focus group I conducted with a group of professional English teachers, each of whom is also a graduate student in English education at an elite university in the northeast. The conversations and focus group, both of which took place in the late Spring and early Summer of 2017, embody efforts to examine this complex problem of teaching aesthetically jarring literary texts to students with histories of trauma. I am grateful to my participants for their genuine efforts at helping to unscramble this highly complex, potentially intractable mess. I genuinely learned much from all of them, and I hope they took away important learning as well. **Part IV** will examine trauma: the three main forms of trauma (*impact, relational, and trauma of everyday life*), some explanations for how and why trauma occurs, and an overview of how traumatized individuals tend to respond to trauma. **Part V**, the dissertation’s final section, will focus on a conversation I had with world-renowned trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk, whose work and thinking is featured prominently in this investigation. I will conclude this section by exploring some possibilities for how English teachers might better understand and think about the highly nuanced matter of teaching literature to students who have been affected by trauma.

What ensues is my humble attempt at picking apart this riddle: the intractable task of teaching the taboo to the taboo. Both literature and the human psyche are littered with land mines. I’m wondering if it’s possible to blow them up intelligently, while safely running a therapeutic classroom that doesn’t erode into therapy.
PART TWO:

Reading the World
In the months following Alison Scott’s departure from my classroom, I began to think more comprehensively about what it means to share stories with students, as the challenge of teaching literature began to take on a new shape in my mind. During my years as an educator, I had long held strong beliefs about the importance of volatility—shock, drama, aesthetic experience. But I was beginning to wonder whether these personal attachments were perhaps biasing me to unintended negative consequences for some of my students.

I was coming to better understand that the way students absorb and interpret stories is a highly personalized act, often unique to the psychological features of any particular student within any particular contextualized moment. As English teachers, we may want to produce specific effects among our students, but we cannot control the way they interpret or respond to the texts we teach. Regardless of our aims, objectives, proclivities, tastes, and inclinations, in the final analysis, the psychologically specific need system of any student may override any effects we hope to achieve. If Alison Scott had taught me anything—and she would teach me more as my research unfolded—it was that there was much more to the act of teaching literature than I had originally imagined.

There’s something I need to confess here. Maybe you caught it already. The title of this dissertation is *Literature at the Dawn of Trauma Consciousness*... But Alison hadn’t been reading literature when she became triggered and needed to leave the classroom. She had been watching—or had been about to watch—a commercial. Certainly there are
meaningful distinctions between consuming visual stimuli and the act of ingesting words set down on a page. So then is Alison’s story relevant here? What does it highlight that may cross over into the realm of literature and thereby inform literary instruction? I thought a lot about this.

I suspected that there were strong implications, but it took me some time to articulate what those were. And then, while helping my oldest son to ride his bike up to Prospect Park in Brooklyn, it came to me: Alison became triggered even before she saw the commercial. In fact, that day in the classroom, she never even watched it. As she conveyed to me in a subsequent conversation, as soon as she realized that the AT&T spot was about texting and driving, she became triggered, leaving the room before the commercial even started. So Alison was not even triggered by the commercial itself. She was triggered by the knowledge that I was about to play a commercial featuring an event that triggered memories of her own, personal history with car crashes. It certainly could have been the case that Alison would have gotten triggered by the commercial’s content had she stayed to watch it, but the very fact that the triggering took place at even the suggestion of experiencing a fictionalized recreation of a car crash may hold major implications for what may happen with many of our students, when they get triggered.

What Alison’s departure from my classroom highlights, I believe, is the way traumatic experiences, when triggered, have the power to override attempts that English teachers make to connect students with literature. When trauma gets activated or triggered—and I will discuss this in great deal in Chapter IX—the student may not be capable of relating to the literature almost at all. The work of trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk clearly illustrates that when traumatized individuals get triggered, the neural response completely overwhelms the individual, causing the survivor to either shut down or hyper-activate. A typical triggered response features almost complete right brain (emotional, intuitive, visual, spatial, tactual) hemispheric polarization, shutting down the left brain (linguistic, sequential, analytical) almost entirely. Furthermore, triggered traumatic responses often
increase heart rate and respiration, cause the survivor to sweat, shut down speech centers, and hyper-arouse the amygdala, causing the individual to feel as though he or she is right back at the scene of the original trauma, frozen in a Darwinian fight for survival (van der Kolk, 2014). The other most common response to trauma features a total shutting down—an almost paralytic fear that causes the brain centers to deactivate, and the individual to shift into a protective, parasympathetic state—like a bug that senses danger and goes catatonic.

In the hyper-aroused or deactivated mental state that tends to occur when trauma survivors get triggered, an interface gets stimulated that poses remarkable barriers to an individual student’s ability to connect with any kind of learning, literature being the principal one for this investigation. Almost any reading stance promoted by many of the prominent literary scholars of the past century—Dewey, Rosenblatt, Moffett, Greene, Blau, Vinz—require that the student be capable of relating the self to the author’s text in an experiential manner: being emotionally capable of participating in a dyadic or triadic interaction between the student and the author—I use triadic to account for Rosenblatt’s (1938) transactional third space. If a previously traumatized student gets triggered, his or her ability to connect with literature breaks down—in some cases, almost completely. And this seems to be the key component of what happened to Alison Scott that parallels the world of teaching literature. If Alison got triggered in a way that powerfully disrupted her ability to take in a commercial featuring a car crash, then English teachers can surely imagine how their various pedagogical aims around literature may be potently altered or altogether nullified if students get triggered by words, scenes, characters, or conflicts in a text.

For the past century especially, as English education has advanced as a field in its own right, influential thinkers from Rosenblatt and Hillis Miller, to I.A. Richards and Maxine Greene have written extensively on what happens to students when they read literature. Much of this scholarship has served to enhance our understanding of literary instruction,
providing some of the clues that highlight or inform pedagogy. But many of these perspectives on reading literature were conceived relative to an imagined student body capable of psychologically connecting, to varying degrees of course, to texts. If traumatic response overwhelms the individual and causes her to psychologically respond in a manner that powerfully disrupts or almost completely prevents interaction with literature, then perhaps a new system is needed—one capable of conceptualizing how English teachers might think about teaching literature to previously traumatized students, when initial pedagogical aims get dismantled by the activation of student trauma.

But before I get there, I want to revisit various perspectives and scholarly views on what it means to read literature. If the end game, here, is to begin to devise a system for teaching literature to traumatized students when the current system fails, I think it’s important to examine aspects of the current paradigm—the system that has been designed without much specific attention being paid to students with traumatic pasts.

What could a car crash commercial filmed in 2015 teach English teachers about teaching literature? In order to begin to formulate an answer to this question, I decided to go back about 2,500 years and re-read Aristotle’s conception of tragedy. And so it began with Poetics.

Aristotle and Tragedy

A tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in appropriate and pleasurable language; in a dramatic rather than narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions. (Aristotle & Halliwell, 1939, 6.24-28)

Aristotle believed that stories had the power to produce therapeutic effect, and conceptualized the narrative process as one in which the experiencer would move from a psychologically homeostatic state into emotional arousal, and from emotional arousal into catharsis—a purging or cleansing of emotions, through which an audience member could
psychologically “explode.” When Aristotle used the word *narrative*, in this context, he was referring to a storytelling style that adhered to the classical, Western model featuring a beginning (introduction of characters and circumstances), middle (movement through conflict), and end (resolution and denouement).¹ The entire process centered on bearing witness to somebody else’s fictional tragedy.

In the Aristotelian conception of tragedy, drama dealt with serious matters of great importance, aroused pity and fear, and invariably enabled the individual to cathect. A tragedy failed unless it pushed its audience into significant psychological tension—emotional states of intense discomfort. The discomfort an audience member might feel while observing Oedipus’ s ripping out his eyes, or Medea’s slaughtering of her children, was intended to trigger an extreme form of arousal that peaked in emotional climax and subsequently cascaded into resolution. Aristotle identified this arresting, intense conflict (such as Clytemnestra’s slaying her husband or vultures picking at Prometheus’s ribs) as something that involuntarily engaged the viewer in an act of learning—through vicariously experiencing the tragedy of narrative others, audience members could learn what mistakes *not* to make, and thereby learn to live healthier and more productive lives. In this fashion, the Aristotelean conception of tragedy was intrinsically paradoxical, in that it utilized seemingly intractable, horrific clashes of wills in order to promote psychological growth, moral development, and maturation. Intense conflict was essential; without it, the tragedy failed.

But how bad did it need to be? At what point did tragedy become counterproductive, illuminating narrative conflicts that disturbed the viewer without promoting healing? According to Aristotle, the more immense the conflict, the richer the possibility for growth.

¹As a reminder: all mentions of narrative in this dissertation, with the exception of psychoanalytic content, will be framed within the classical Western tradition of narrative. Psychoanalytic content, which I address later in Chapter II, will deviate from the Western canonical succession, in that unconscious motives, aims, wishes, desires, and developmental lines often fuse, overlap, intersect, and compete in ways that are far less classically order, symmetrical, or linear.
Aristotle believed that drama depended upon six intrinsically critical elements: *plot, diction, character, melody, thought, and spectacle*. Of these, plot—which moved the story forward and emotionally connected audience members with characters and circumstances that mirrored potential events within their own lives—was superordinate to the rest. Aristotle urged writers to create horrifying tragic circumstances, akin to rape or murder.

But murder or rape by itself was *insufficiently horrifying*. If the writer truly sought to write tragedy, he needed to create a scenario in which the protagonist raped or murdered the “right” subject. Killing a bitter enemy? That’s heroic! Even splendid. Committing a casual murder? Who cares. The stakes aren’t high enough. Murder, as an act, was wrong, but not wrong *enough*. If a writer truly sought to portray the heinous and ineffable—thereby achieving the rank of “tragedy”—Aristotle believed that the main character needed to murder a member of his or her *own family*. Family ... that sacred institution which Desmond Tutu refers to as “God’s gift to you”—and Aristotle wanted it bloodied and strewn across the stage.

**Alison or Aristotle?**

But Alison Scott had not been able to handle the car crash.... A car crash.... Where does a car crash stack up in comparison with some of the titanic violations endemic to so many literary scenes? Stanley’s striking of Stella, Humbert Humbert’s repeated violations of Lolita, Lear’s walking on stage carrying the dead body of Cordelia? If Alison had needed to excuse herself from the classroom during the AT&T spot, then how would students react to even more visceral and intense literary scenes? How would “Latoya,” a survivor of sexual abuse, remain at her desk during the lactation rape in *Beloved*? How would “Anthony,” whose grandparents were gassed during the Holocaust, handle my three-week unit on *Night*? How would “Jenny” deal with *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, given that her mother suffers from mental illness and is addicted to painkillers? Aristotle wanted it worse and
worse. He believed that the worse it was, the more the reader would learn. But Alison had left during a commercial.... Was Aristotle wrong? Does it depend on the reader? The teacher? The type of trauma the student has suffered? The psychological distance the reader has from his or her own traumatic event (Scheff, 1979)? Does emotional distance and time play a role here, somehow mitigating traumatic effect relative to the survivor's experience? Perhaps “Latoya,” who was raped by her uncle, could handle Beloved better than Alison could handle the commercial, because “Latoya” had had more capacity for processing and coming to terms with the event? Perhaps one’s readiness to deal with a particular literary encounter wasn’t necessarily linear or binomial.... I needed to know more.

In Catharsis in Healing, Ritual, and Drama, Thomas Scheff (1979), Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, discusses his idea that an individual survivor’s relative emotional distance to a personally traumatic event often determines whether an individual is ready to benefit from a literary encounter with a traumatic scene that closely resembles the reader’s actual trauma. Scheff writes: “At aesthetic distance, one is both participant in, and observer of, one’s own distress, so that one can go in and out of it freely” (p. 62). If individuals are capable of aesthetic distance, they may be primed for this type of reading experience. However, many survivors of trauma lack the appropriate psychological distance necessary for beneficial, therapeutic encounters with text. Individuals, like Alison Scott, may be underdistanced, living too close, intra-psychically, to the traumatic occurrence and therefore at risk for being triggered. Underdistanced readers may experience a literary passage, and feel as though their own trauma is happening to them right now. Survivors of trauma may also be overdistanced, a repressed psychological disposition in which “selected emotions, both past and present, have been filtered out of awareness” (p. 63). Scheff describes overdistanted individuals as “completely cognitive” (p. 63). Strictly cognitive engagement with literature is insufficient (Greene, 1988).
In Scheff’s (1979) conceptualization of the problem, *aesthetic distance* is what’s required for readers to therapeutically benefit from encounters with fictional trauma. As English teachers thinking about the interaction between previously traumatized students and literature that presents trauma, we may benefit from a sweet spot, a place where the student is psychologically capable of being vulnerable enough in an encounter with a literary text, without being too vulnerable (*underdistanced*) or not vulnerable at all (*overdistanced*). And yet, as English teachers, we are typically not privy to the private emotional lives of our students, nor should we be! So how can we know? In no short terms, we can’t—unless they write us an email on a Friday evening and share a story about their personal traumatic history, as Alison Scott had. And even then, what do we do with the information? We aren’t therapists, nor should we be. The deeper I get into this, the curiouser and curiouser things become. I feel like Alice, perpetually falling down a rabbit hole I never knew existed in the first place.

I had grown up being taught that literature is good. That’s what all my teachers and my parents had said. Is it? Proponents of trigger warnings seem to raise some serious red flags. And yet, despite what I have learned about psychological trauma, and the way that it can get triggered, I still think literature is good. Very good. And I think, for the most part, for most students and in most contexts, it is a healing art-form with important therapeutic benefits. I wouldn’t be an English teacher if I felt otherwise. So I’m going to spend some time discussing several important perspectives on the value of literature—I think that’s a reasonable place to start—with what’s good—before I take out some intellectual dynamite and blow the whole thing up!

**J. Hillis Miller: Literature’s Good**

Every teacher of literature knows, often to his or her dismay, what strange and unpredictable things happen when students read an assigned work. Each literary work creates or reveals a world, a world furnished with characters
possessed of imaginary bodies, speeches, feelings, and thoughts. These characters dwell surrounded by buildings, streets, a landscape, weather, and so on, in a alternative reality complete with inhabitants rather like ourselves. (Miller, 2002, p. 113)

J. Hillis Miller is a literary critic, academician, and current Emeritus Professor of Literature at the University of California, Irvine. His work and thinking has been heavily influenced by Jacques Derrida, who had a major influence in the field of deconstructionism. In his 2002 book On Literature, Hillis Miller explores many of the psychological benefits endemic to the act of reading literature.

The Value of Virtual Reality

Hillis Miller (2002) believes that reading literature fulfills a need within individuals to escape into virtual realities: “Human beings not only have a propensity to dwell in imaginary worlds. They have a positive need to do so. This need is not in itself unhealthy” (p. 81). Life can be complicated—filled with pressures, obligations, limits, confinements, and controls. Literature, conversely, is seemingly boundless, and can propel readers into alternative ways of experiencing and living in the world. A gifted world builder can invite the reader to imaginatively enter alternative worlds and novel experiences. When reading Huckleberry Finn, for instance, the reader can get mentally transported back to pre-emancipation, rural America. The reader may set off on a raft heading down the Mississippi, visit small 19th century towns, interact with robbers, thieves, and scoundrels, ponder identity, and befriend people of different races and backgrounds. If she reads C.S. Lewis’s The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, she may push past a mass of mothball-infused coats en route to a snow-bound forest, encounters with magical fawns, an evil witch, and gain insights and wisdom from a mystical lion. Fiction, by its very nature, can move the reader into imaginary space, a metaphysical act that can provide relief from the lives we lead, offer new perspective, and expand self-understanding.

According to Hillis Miller (2002), this virtual reality is not only a need but an inevitability:
The need to enter some virtual reality will be satisfied in one way or another—if not by literary works, then by computer games, or by films, or by popular songs in video format. It is difficult to imagine a human culture that would not have story-telling or song in some medium or other, oral, handwritten, printed, cinematic, or digital. (p. 80)

Cuban essayist and memoirist Anais Nin (1934) echoes these sentiments:

You live like this, sheltered, in a delicate world, and you believe you are living. Then you read a book (Lady Chatterley, for instance), or you take a trip, or you talk with [someone], and you discover that you are not living, that you are hibernating. The symptoms of hibernating are easily detectable: first, restlessness. The second symptom (when hibernating becomes dangerous and might degenerate into death): absence of pleasure. That is all. It appears like an innocuous illness. Monotony, boredom, death. Millions live like this (or die like this) without knowing it. They work in offices. They drive a car. They picnic with their families. They raise children. And then some shock treatment takes place, a person, a book, a song, and it awakens them and saves them from death. (p. 7)

The human need for imaginary worlds and virtual realities seems to draw many readers to books. Sure, if the individual in question hyper-indulges his or her need for virtual reality as an overcompensation for their inability to live harmoniously with actual reality, that might be a problem. But many human beings seem to have a need to imaginatively escape, which is one of the reasons why art exists in the first place.

The Joy of Reading

Enchantment matters because one reason that people turn to works of art is to be taken out of themselves, to be pulled into an altered state of consciousness. (Felski, 2008, p. 76)

I recall thousands of personal moments when reading a book, a short story, or a poem has deepened my spirit, elevated my mood, and caused me to experience rapture. One reason why people read literature is because it can be an organic source for joy and pleasure. In her book, Why Literature?: The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching, Cristina Bruns (2011), an instructor at Chapman University, quotes Perloff:
In other words, according to Perloff, the pleasure produced by literary reading will ensure that the decline in this area of study will not continue unabated. And that pleasure seems to be the ultimate good Perloff attributes to literature, according to a statement she made in an interview published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. To explain a key difference between her views on poetry and those of Helen Vendler, the subject of the interview, Perloff said, “I don’t think art makes one a better person, that literature teaches you the meaning of life. But the sheer pleasure of the text— the sheer joy in all the different values of literature, fictive or poetic— these are the greatest things.”

Bruns highlights the intoxicating effects of pleasure that a book can summon within the reader. C.S. Lewis (cited in Bruns, 2011) furthers this idea, claiming that literature produces pleasure and emotional fulfillment because it offers readers a gateway toward emotional and personal expansion:

The nearest I have yet get to an answer is that we seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and selectiveness peculiar to himself.... we want to see with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own. (p. 15)

Lewis believes that literature can help to extend notions of selfhood and self-experience by expanding its reader and helping him to enter into an empathic relationship with the lives and realities of fictional others. As an individual reads *Hamlet*, he may identify with the hardships of the Prince’s struggle. When a student reads *American Pastoral*, she may identify with the disenfranchisement and isolation of Merry.

**Literature and Theory of Mind (ToM)**

The ability to consider the lives, intentions, mental states, beliefs, and cognitive realities of others is a cognitive ability that psychologists refer to as theory of mind (ToM). Professor of English Lisa Zunshine (2006) of the University of Kentucky has written extensively on how ToM relates to reading literature, as the act of engaging with a text asks the reader to read the minds of fictional characters, analyzing and predicting their intentions, thoughts, actions, and beliefs. Zunshine’s more recent work has begun to
speculate on how reading literature may enhance ToM for more expert readers, and how enhanced ToM may hold positive applications for students beyond the scope of the text.

The way that literary engagement enhances ToM has been taken up by Professor of Psychology, Emanuele Castano, and his former graduate student, David Kidd. In their 2013 *Nature* article, “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind,” Castano and Kidd argue that “reading literary fiction led to better performance on tests of affective ToM ... and cognitive ToM ... compared with reading nonfiction ... popular fiction ... or nothing at all .... Specifically, these results show that reading literary fiction temporarily enhances ToM.” Analogous to Zunshine, Kidd and Castano’s findings suggest that engagement with literature—in comparison with popular fiction, non-fiction, or not reading—correlates with enhanced ToM. And since other studies in psychology (Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991) correlate enhanced ToM with enriched empathy and reflective functioning, it may be argued that individuals who read literature gain capacities for understanding the mental processes of other human beings that extend well beyond the text.

Since ToM helps individuals to build psychological bridges and connect with others, it may be the case that reading literature may help individuals to “ease loneliness, to experience a sense of connection with others different from ourselves without the risk of a threat to our own individuality” (Bruns, 2011, p. 15). As readers form emotional connections to characters and literary circumstances, metaphysical bridges may emerge that help to expand the identity of the reader beyond her immediate scope. Through fictionally identifying with and learning to understand characters with differing perspectives, readers may augment their own cognitive and emotional capacities for understanding other people in the world outside of the pages of a book (Kidd & Castano, 2013).
Literature and Moral Virtue

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
(Shakespeare, 1.3, 78-82)

From early Greek Theater, to the Bible, to Aesop’s Fables, Paradise Lost and beyond, much literature has had a long tradition of serving as an imparter of moral virtue. The Greeks believed that drama should teach people how to live productive, moral lives. The Bible, if we study it as a form of literature, often uses didactic stories. Milton (1993) hoped that Paradise Lost would “justify the ways of God to man” (1.26). In On Literature, Hillis Miller (2002) describes the power of books to serve as transmitters of moral virtue.

Virtues, of course, vary from culture to culture and from context to context, but writers at various points in history have utilized the literary form as a conduit for teaching humans about themselves, the world, and about what it means to lead ethical, meaningful lives. A potential implication of this notion is that literature can offer a lens through which individuals may “hold the mirror up to nature ... show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (Shakespeare, 1994, 3.2.22-25). Hester Prynne stands on the scaffold in protection of her daughter, Pearl, and her paramour, Arthur Dimmesdale, while the maddening multitude of late 17th century Massachusetts looks on with scorn and condemnation. Portia enters the courthouse dressed as a man and proceeds to lobby for the value of mercy: “The quality of mercy is not strained;/ It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven/ Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest; /It blesseth him that gives and him that takes” (Shakespeare, 1923, 4.1. 168-171).

Howard Roark argues for the preservation of self-authenticity in a corporate climate that curbs individualism in favor of capitalization. These literary figures, battling the slings and arrows of their own moral crises and societal pressures, can model possibilities for faith, perseverance, and adherence to deeply engrained and personal beliefs, and it is possible that through reading about them and empathically experiencing their lives, readers may
learn important values, morals, and choices—even if what a reader learns is that she sees
the world differently. And since much of literature explores notions of good and evil (*Harry
Potter, The Hobbit, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*), literature can help certain types
of readers more richly explore how they live (Blau, 2003). This clearly reflects my own
bias, but in our fast-paced world, dominated by technology, digital media, and millions of
distractions, literature may represent one of the last best hopes for providing instructional
paradigms for how students might lead virtuous lives.

Teaching Literature

What you are teaching (*when you teach people to read*) is by no means an
innocent skill. (Miller, 2002, p. 115)

If reading literature offers valuable benefits to the reader—such as escape into
virtual worlds, experiential pleasure and joy, and enhanced ToM—then how are English
teachers meant to teach novels, short stories, poems, and plays in ways that facilitate the
types of beneficial effects described above? Of course, there is no one way. Though each
individual teacher may go about teaching literature in a way that adheres to the particular
styles and strengths of the educator, the majority of the scholars I cite in this dissertation
lobby for a method of literary instruction that prioritizes that the student engage in some
form of aesthetic experience with the text itself. Although not the central focus of this
dissertation, a major problem with literary instruction occurs when English teachers teach
literature as information, prioritizing their own interpretations, rather than encouraging
students to formulate their own views and use their own skills to interact with and make
personal meaning of the texts. Scholars such as Louise Rosenblatt, James Moffett, and
Sheridan Blau urge that the student engage in an aesthetic experience of literature.

For competent readers, reading aesthetically may be a normative act that needs no
instruction (Blau, 2003). Hillis Miller (2002) argues that highly skilled readers don’t need
to be taught how to read, since they may already possess the skills and techniques that educators may wish for them. In *The Literature Workshop*, Blau (2003) argues that English teachers who teach literature would benefit from helping students utilize the types of investigatory skills they already possess for unlocking the text and making meaning.

For struggling or resistant readers, the task of facilitating literary engagement becomes more complicated, as some students may not possess the innate or learned abilities to engage aesthetically with texts. And for students with traumatic histories, this problem may be significantly more troublesome, since the very nature of the trauma may prevent the student from connecting with their own experience of the text. As occurred with Alison Scott, trauma survivors who get triggered often shift into neurological responses that pose major impediments to the act of literary engagement (van der Kolk, 2014). As I will demonstrate through PET scans conducted in Bessel van der Kolk’s trauma lab in Boston, Massachusetts, the brains of trauma survivors, when triggered, can shift into a hyper-active or de-activated state that becomes basically impervious to influence.

So while an English teacher may attempt to engage students aesthetically with literature, trauma survivors may not be capable of such participation, unless they feel a level of psychological security that enables them to be vulnerable in relation to the text. But since trauma so often is accompanied by a need to control one’s environment—rather than giving oneself over to aesthetic engagement, which is often unknown or unpredictable—the very notion of teaching literature to traumatized students takes on impediments that are not customary for a non-traumatized population.

All that having been said, an English teacher should not assume that all trauma survivors lack the emotional readiness to tackle potentially triggering literature. As Scheff (1979) indicates in *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual, and Drama*—and as I will demonstrate through several case studies later in the dissertation—a particular student’s psychological distance from a traumatic event may change her ability to aesthetically engage with a piece of literature. Since trauma survivors exist on a continuum, it may be the case that a
survivor at one phase of their recovery may not be able to aesthetically engage with a text, but at another phase may significantly benefit from engagement. And if we accept the premise that literature can be therapeutic—as the bibliotherapists believed (Crothers, 1916)—then we can also understand that the same individual who at one point may be re-traumatized by encountering a literary work may later psychologically benefit from it.

With one part of my thinking situated in trauma survivors and their relative capacities—or lack of capacities—for dealing with highly charged literary texts, I will move now into the next section of this chapter, in which I will explore some of the ways English teachers can foster aesthetic engagement with literature in the classroom. Each of these methods, though I happen to agree with and attempt to use most of them, gets significantly complicated when examined within the context of traumatic experience. They take on new dimensions and offer new problems. But I will present them first as though trauma does not exist, and then later I’ll show how they can get dismantled or challenged, such as they did with Alison Scott during the AT&T spot.

Teaching Students to Read with Abandon

Why, in any case, would anyone want to deprive literature of its amazing power to open alternative worlds, innumerable virtual realities? It seems like a nasty thing to do. (Miller, 2002, p. 124)

In On Literature, Hillis Miller (2002) promotes his belief that optimal engagement with literature results when English teachers encourage students to read with abandon—committing total trust to both the author and the reading experience: “I am advocating, as the first side of the aporia of reading, an innocent, childlike abandonment to the act of reading, without suspicion, reservation, or interrogation” (p. 119). While I acknowledge the implicit bias within Hillis Miller’s perspective, it is also one that I agree with and aim to foster in my own students. When reading Macbeth, for instance, I want my students to be open to an immersive reading experience—one in which they unsheathe their proverbial
daggers, bloody the hands of their imagination, and traverse boundaries and barriers potentially at odds with their own choice-making and decisions. When experiencing the meanderings of Willy Loman’s grandiose, fragmented mind, I want my students to enter into the salesman’s decaying sense of self, explore his reasons for cheating on Linda, and ponder whether his dream is attainable or simply the fervent creation of a deranged imagination.

In a previous section, I discussed literature and the virtues many texts aim to teach. But it is also true that some literature decenters our moral compass and asks us to navigate ethical ambiguity and moral choice-making that may compete or clash with our own codes and patterns of thought. Humbert Humbert seduces us with his lyrical, erotic prose. Jack Kerouac takes us on the road to drug use and sexual soirees with Sal and Dean. Part of reading with abandon asks that the reader allow herself to connect with the text, irrespective of how the reader’s own moral compass aligns or clashes with that of the main characters and events. If a reader assumes a moral high ground or moral distance in relation to a text, he may distance himself too much from the narrative and fail to transact more fully with the work of literature.

Reading with abandon encourages the type of transactional relationship that Rosenblatt speaks to Literature as Exploration (1938) and The Reader, the Text, the Poem (1978):

Through the medium of words, the text brings into the reader’s consciousness certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes. The special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that these words have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text. (Rosenblatt, 1938, pp. 30-31)

When readers read with abandon:
each literary work opens up a singular world, attainable in no other way than by reading that work, then reading should be a matter of giving one’s whole mind, heart, feelings, and imagination, without reservation, to recreating that world within oneself, on the basis of words. (p. 118)

Perhaps some of what is required for reading with abandon asks that the reader forfeit part of the self in an act of sacrifice to the text and its author. Kant, writing in the late 18th century, coined the term Schwarmere, which he defined as a revelry or rapture of experience only achievable when an individual makes himself completely vulnerable to the world of the text. In Kant’s view, Schwarmere occurred when the individual reader suspended disbelief and engaged in what Michael Deguy refers to as an absolute “love affair” (cited in Hillis Miller, 2002, p. 120) with the text. For an individual reader to read literature in this fashion, she may need to relinquish control and surrender to the will of the author and her words.

In no other way than by reading that work, then reading should be a matter of giving one’s whole mind, heart, feelings, and imagination, without reservation, to recreating that world within oneself, on the basis of words. (p. 118)

A reader may need bravery, as any given text can, at any moment, present issues of race, gender inequality, perversion, oppression, or any other host of potentially psychologically challenging themes, scenes, or conflicts. Indeed, sometimes literature leads the reader into a vortex of violence, something that Nietzsche saw as a: “drama of sacrificial violence ... essential to all art” (p. 146). This type of literary engagement seems to require that the individual give herself over completely to the text, engaging in a psychological surrender of the self to the book. Hillis Miller describes a reader who is able to surrender to the text as a “monster of courage and curiosity, also something supple, cunning, cautious, a born adventurer and discoverer” (p.122).

In their 2014 book, Stay Illusion! The Hamlet Doctrine, philosopher Simon Critchley and psychoanalyst Jamieson Webster similarly urge the reader to approach the reading experience with an untamed, reckless, and risky emotional openness:
Rashness is one of the properties of illness – outlaws that we are– and it is rashness that we need in reading Shakespeare.... Illness, in its kingly sublimity, sweeps all that aside and leaves nothing but Shakespeare and oneself. (p. 4)

Reckless, irrational, brash vulnerability of self can shift students from the day-to-day social mores of everyday living and psychologically situate the reader for engagement with literature that is less defensive and more open. Rather than reading with resistance or a cautiousness, Critchley and Webster, like Hillis Miller, ask that the reader give herself over to the text, even if the work may contain potentially unsettling and arousing elements that psychological threaten or shake up the reader.

For some students, these encounters will be thrilling, enlivening, intense, and vivifying. For other students in other contexts, like Alison Scott watching the AT&T commercial—or a million other students that we might imagine—the power of certain encounters with art can feel too visceral or too personal (Scheff, 1979). In these cases, students may need to shield or protect themselves from full engagement. What do we do in these scenarios? Do English teachers push their agendas and force their students beyond what the student, him or herself, feels comfortable experiencing? Or do teachers let go of their agendas and back off when students seem incapable of handling volatile texts? Or do teachers do something in between: hope their students read with “abandon,” but also stay sensitive to the fact that some students may have neither the will nor ability to do so? These questions seem central to the trigger warning debate, and will be digested much more comprehensively at a later point in the dissertation.

**A History of Trauma-Related Pedagogy**

Although the issue of trigger warnings is fairly recent, and very few scholarly texts deal with it in the literature, there is a rich history of thought related to pedagogy and trauma. Before I move into psychoanalytic perspectives on the reading process, I’d like to take a bit of time to recognize certain key contributors within this tradition and to situate
my own dissertation within a realm of scholarly research that looks at the relationship between teaching and trauma.

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tendency of traumatized individuals to seek out and re-experience their traumas as a repetition compulsion. Although in some ways the compulsion to repeat the trauma is psychologically unhealthy and unadvisable, on another level the will to repeat also signifies a will to master and learn from the adverse event.

The type of difficult knowledge that Pitt and Britzman (2004) refer to in “Speculation on Qualities of Difficult Knowledge in Teaching and Learning: An Experiment in Psychoanalytic Research” often necessitates a “breakdown of the senses” (p. 354) in which “helplessness comes to the fore, and knowledge is felt as a force without being secured by meaning and understanding” (p. 354). Trauma teaches. Its lessons may not be comfortable, and, as individuals, we may resist its wisdom in an act of self-preservation, but in a way that Mark Epstein discusses in The Trauma of Everyday Life (2014) and in Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart (1998), the lessons embedded in trauma, though they appear to destroy us initially, may also heighten our awareness, build our resilience, and positively shape us over time. In this way, trauma, though it tends to always seem to arrive at an “untimely time” (Pitt & Britzman, 2004, p. 353), is also always present, and deeply embedded into the fabric of human experience. As Epstein (2014) relates in the Trauma of Everyday Life, death, illness, and loss are inevitable for each of us. Citing the Buddha, Epstein describes trauma as a basic reality of life—something that is present all the time.

Resistance and Ambivalence

Conceptualizing the experience of learning through theories of trauma, we ask: What makes knowledge difficult in teaching and learning and how can these difficulties be narrated and learned from? (Britzman & Pitt, 2004, p. 354)

Britzman and Pitt’s (2004) work evokes an interesting conundrum in regards to my research and thinking in relation to the trigger warning. A reasonable criticism of the trigger warning is that it may encourage students to opt out of, resist, or prevent themselves from learning or encountering what appears too dangerous, threatening, or
psychologically dismantling. In “Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable,” American literary critic and current Woodruff Professor of Comparative Literature and French at Emory University, Shoshana Felman (1982) writes, “Psychoanalysis is thus a pedagogical experience: as a process which gives access to new knowledge hitherto denied to consciousness” (p. 27). In citing Lacan, Felman continues that the unconscious is “knowledge which can’t tolerate one’s knowing that one knows” (p. 28).

The student who requests a trigger warning—or the teacher that uses one—likely already knows what he or she fears re-knowing or re-experiencing. As we see in *Oedipus, On the Waterfront, Death of a Salesman,* and *King Lear,* often intensely rejected knowledges prove themselves more true through fierce denial, something a former writing teacher of mine, Allan Savage, referred to as a negative revelatory moment. The more you don’t want to know it, the more you know it’s true.

The type of ambivalence we see around trigger warnings—an acknowledgment and a denial of an issue—a curiosity and a rejection of a theme—feels analogous to what Heinz Kohut (1971), father of self-psychology, referred to as the trailing edge and leading edge transferential components of traumatic response (I will discuss this in much greater detail in Chapter X). In a basic sense, trauma survivors often possess two seemingly diametric reactions to trauma, both wanting to avoid it (trailing edge) and master it (leading edge)—there is analogous content in Freud’s notion of the repetition compulsion.

When considered in relation to the trigger warning, it is a curious dynamic. On the one hand, the trigger warning attempts to shield or protect the student from perceived harm. In another way, it draws added attention and magnifies the very thing it ostensibly proposes to shield. For Alison Scott, in the context of the AT&T commercial and her decision to leave the room and then later write me an email explaining how the spot was a trigger for her—what was learned or revealed from her not participating in the viewing of the commercial, and what could have been learned had she participated? What was gained and lost due to her choice? For her and for me? Could the reengagement with an alternate
form of her car crash have been educative for her, or was she not sufficiently distanced emotionally from the event (Scheff, 1979)? Britzman and Pitt, Epstein, and Felman explain the ways that trauma can in fact foster learning. Does the trigger warning prevent trauma from serving as a teaching tool by assuming it won’t? As Shoshana Felman (1991) asks:

Is there a relation between crisis and the very enterprise of education? To put the question even more audaciously and sharply: Is there a relation between trauma and pedagogy? In a post-traumatic century, a century that has survived unthinkable historical catastrophes, is there anything that we have learned or that we should learn about education, that we did not know before? Can trauma instruct pedagogy, and can pedagogy shed light on the mystery of trauma? (p. 13)

I’m not sure that any of these very valuable questions possess perfect answers. But I do believe they all deserve a great deal of discussion. Since so many of these scholars argue for the value of trauma as an educative tool, when considered in relation to these thinkers, the trigger warning seems particularly problematic, which doesn’t necessarily mean, of course, that it is.

**Psychoanalytic Perspectives on the Reading Process**

As I will discuss shortly, the trigger warning was originally designed to protect students with psychological fragility from potentially overwhelming or destabilizing impacts that can occur when a literary work arouses themes or experiences that too closely resemble or trigger their own traumatic pasts. By providing a warning that forecasts a student’s potential encounter with complex, psychologically triggering themes, the trigger warning aims to engender a reading experience that feels psychologically safe and manageable for the student. An embedded assumption is that providing a trigger warning prepares previously traumatized students by providing an opportunity for survivors to utilize defensive psychological strategies to cope better during engagement. It also
provides students with an opt out, if the student suspects that he or she will not be able to handle the contents of the literature.

As I will address in depth in Chapter IX, the features of trauma are often pervasive, shuttling into many domains of a survivor’s life. Traumatized individuals carry abuse onto the subway, transport neglect into restaurants, sexuality harassment to weddings, funerals, amusement parks, churches, and coffee shops. When an individual breaks an arm, you know it. He wears a cast. Last spring I tore my calf. I couldn’t hide it. I showed up to teach a group of graduate students wearing a walking boot and sporting crutches. But unlike physical wounds, which often evidence themselves visibly, psychological hurts usually do a good job of concealing themselves, often living in psychologically sequestered regions of the mind and body. Some of these psychological wounds are fresh: Timothy’s mother screamed at him, calling him “a no good, stupid loser”; Cindy found out that Bobby was cheating on her with her best friend. These psychological traumas may be fresh on the minds of survivors. But certain types of trauma get buried and can be shielded and repressed, even from conscious memory. This may be especially true of childhood traumas (van der Kolk, 2014).

Whether traumatic experience is conscious or unconscious, it can be psychologically triggered by suggestion. I remember a particular friend, Daniel, telling me about a time he was helping his coworkers (two male teachers) carry a dresser into a bedroom. As they carried the chest of drawers into the room, my friend suddenly heard the door slam shut. Unsolicited, he began to feel panicky. His heart rate accelerated and he became hyper-vigilant. Suddenly, he felt like he was in tremendous danger. Several days later, while Daniel and I sat and chatted about what had occurred, he suddenly made the connection to the fact that he had spent much of his childhood being beaten in his bedroom by his brother and father. The symbol of being shut up in a room with two adult men triggered this repressed memory.
And we can understand how these types of involuntary associations may get activated when our students read literary works that either directly or indirectly remind them of their own traumas. A student whose father suffers from mental illness may get triggered when he reads *Death of a Salesman*. A young woman who has struggled with depression and suicidal ideation may become upset when she reads *The Bell Jar*. Like Newton’s Third Law of Physics, traumatic memories, whether latent or fully known to the mind, are reactive mechanisms that can be incited into action—and these responses are often involuntary. And since literature, by its very nature, is meant to arouse and incite the reader (Aristotle & Halliwell, 1939), the unconscious, almost by definition, becomes a socket susceptible to the electrifying prongs of highly charged literary moments.

Since literature can influence psychological realities, alter moods, and trigger buried trauma, it feels important to better understand psychoanalytic theories reflecting how the mind can react while an individual reads triggering content. Theorists posit varying interpretations for how this mechanism works. I will present the work of Norman Holland and David Bleich, as well as providing an overview of Freud’s conceptualization of the unconscious.

**Norman Holland: I’ing the Text**

What is the relation, in our seeing this movie, between what we three shared in seeing *The Story of O* and what was quite individual and unique to each one of us? (Holland, 1992, p. 5)

New York native Norman Holland is a literary critic and Marston-Milbauer Eminent Scholar Emeritus at the University of Florida. His scholarship focuses on psychoanalytic criticism and psychoanalytic applications in literary study. His 1994 book *The Critical I*, argues that readers play a prominent role in establishing meaning-making for the texts they encounter. Holland claims that the psychological identities and need systems embedded in readers play a prominent role in coloring, shaping, and molding the words
they read, an unconscious act of construction that Holland refers to as *I*’ing. Holland believes that readers “I” the texts that they encounter, shaping them in relation to semi-predictable patterns that emerge from deeply embedded self-psychic structures:

> Today psychologists of perception say the way we see and hear is like a dialogue. The world does not simply shove itself through our senses into our minds in a stimulus-response way. Rather, we propose hypotheses to reality, and reality *disposes* of them. We perceive by trying out constructions on the world. The world confirms and rewards these hypotheses or gives back nothing, chaos, or painful correction. In other words, the mere seeing or hearing something, to say nothing of interpreting a character or theme, proceeds by feedback. (p. 26)

Countering the idea that texts hold their own intrinsic meanings, Holland argues that the unique psychological features of identity (one’s mental and emotional matrix) plays a prominent role in determining how a reader experiences a text.

This matrix self—the construction of a historically conditioned person—not only responds to but actually builds “realities” *into* texts that we encounter. To illustrate his point, Holland (1994) tells the story of the 1961 pornographic film, *The Story of O*, which he and two fellow grad students attended. Objectively, the film tells the story of a beautiful Parisian fashion photographer named O, who is trained to be available for oral, vaginal, and anal intercourse to all members of a secret society. Yet, though the “plot” was fairly linear, Holland was struck by the way he and his friends left the theater with three distinctly individual interpretations of the film—a fact that stunned Holland: “Surely, if any text should determine a response, a pornographic one should. But it doesn’t. Their three responses have some things in common yet remain, finally, individual” (p. xii). I will explain how each student interpreted the film.

Agnes, a pronounced feminist, “chose” to see the porn as a film about control—about the male subordination of the female and objectification as object of sex. Agnes wondered how location or place determines rules: “Place controls you, and escape from that place means freedom” (Holland, 2004, p. 9). Norm (the author) experienced the film as an
"intellectual puzzle" (p. 12). He became interested in understanding the rules of world set down in the film: “By interpreting, Norm would learn ‘the rules of the game, the rules of this world.’ That suggests to me now, thinking about Norm then, that he was hoping by his puzzling to find the rules of the much bigger, realer world you and Norm and O and I inhabit” (p. 13). Ted, the third and final viewer, experienced the Story of O as a narrative about dominance patterns that we learn in childhood:

I felt as though I was actually seeing the fantasies which underlie submission in women and aggression in men. We can't help it because that’s a part of our lives, because that’s the way men and women are brought up to be. And I thought it was fascinating that we were actually seeing the fantasies associated with these attitudes. I think they were all of our fantasies. (p. 16)

Ted believes that we learn that aggression is a trait of manliness, while submissiveness is feminine. He states: "We can't help it because that’s part of our lives ... they were all our fantasies” (p. 16).

The extent to which Holland (1994) and his friends “I’d” the pornographic film may hold major implications for how students interpret literature. A female student who has been judged for her sexual choices may identify with society’s brutal judgment of Hester Prynne, whereas a man who has been cheated on may see her as a villain. A cerebral, careful thinker may find Hamlet to be methodical, whereas a decisive, efficient man of action may find him to be whiny and ineffectual. I have heard both perspectives from students. Of course, other interpretations of Hamlet’s character exist, and many of these may be based on the particular psychological features of the reader.

An interesting feature of Holland’s (1994) work is his belief that in the act of interpreting, human beings possess a powerful tendency and indeed a deeply embedded psychological need to imagine that their individual understanding of a text is not unique to their own perception but rather a phenomenon shared globally by all or most others. As with the AT&T commercial, I assumed my students would experience it as a powerfully rich example of narrative story-telling. Alison may have felt that others were triggered by it. She
relayed to me her embarrassment that several of her classmates noticed that she left the room. However, several months later, I asked members of her cohort if they recalled whether anything unusual had taken place during our viewing of the commercial, and not a single student mentioned her departure. The mistaken tendency to overgeneralize our own mind and thinking to the mind and thinking of others is a feature of l’ing.

David Bleich: Subjectivity

“There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”
— Shakespeare, 1994, 2.2.241-242

Bleich (1978) and his subjective paradigm offer a similar perspective to Holland. A professor of English at the University of Rochester, David Bleich focuses primarily on language and literature in society, the exploration of language use, the function of literary and other symbolic texts in society, and the history and philosophy of language research and teaching. His 1978 book, Subjective Criticism, argues for psychological subjectivism rather than objective paradigms. Bleich’s focus on the highly personalized and subjective nature of reading feels germane to this dissertation.

According to Bleich (1978), reality is invented. Individuals in society adopt paradigms. Paradigms are shared mental states—conceptual frameworks: “The implication of this thought is that for all practical purposes, reality is invented and not observed or discovered by humans” (p. 11). These paradigms shift in accordance with the needs and cultural norms of society. In discussing these paradigm shifts, Bleich is careful to illustrate that these changes are not what Kuhn refers to as movements towards a “truth,” but rather movements away from previously adopted or accepted understanding. In referencing Kuhn, Bleich explains that we develop new paradigms “only to meet the epistemological needs of the present or of any age that creates such a paradigm” (p. 12). Bleich insists on the Freudian construct that human helplessness and corruption create the
fictional belief that truth is something that we can attain—what Marx referred to as the opiate of the masses. Bleich asserts, “The notion of objective truth has the same epistemological status as God: it is an invented frame of reference aimed at maintaining prevailing social practices” (p. 15).

Bleich’s (1978) insistence on personally derived, subjective reality is analogous to Heinz Kohut’s (the father of self-psychology) belief in emotionally created world views. Kohut’s basic principle is that “reality” has no identity as a shared, objective truth. The idiosyncratic features of a self-created world is intrinsically rooted in an individual’s psychological need system, wants, desires, fears, and complex motivations. There is no shared objective reality. Bleich writes, an individual’s “subjectivity actually controls what is or is not a fact. The (individual’s) psychological homeostasis defines the degree of fact and fantasy” (p. 30). As Hamlet states to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so” (Shakespeare, 2.2.239-240).

**Bleich: Subjectivity and Literary Meaning Making**

Bleich’s (1978) notion of subjectivism directly relates to the discussion of how students interpret literature. Bleich suggests that all literary interpretation is self-determined irrespective of what an author intends—insofar as authorial choices are ever fully intentional: “It would appear to be only common sense to begin thinking that a verbal configuration such as a poem or a story already had meaning in it, in contrast to a piece of music or sculpture, which do not seem to be semantic language systems” (p. 214). Bleich upholds that reader interpretations are largely based in moral constructions and psychological needs, most of which have been shaped and determined by the particular idiosyncratic and highly personalized features of the individual’s life and conditioning: “Each of our reading experiences would bring up a different perceptual and motivational configuration” (p. 219).
I would argue that this gets particularly complicated when it comes to human trauma. Since a traumatized individual who comes into contact with a particularly triggering literary moment may shift powerfully and involuntarily into a parasympathetic or sympathetic neurological response, the text—beyond its power to trigger response—may hold very little influence over the student. As I will describe in great detail in Chapter IX, once a trauma survivor gets psychologically triggered, the brain shifts into a traumatized state that is often relatively impermeable to influence. Many of you may have had the experience of trying to console somebody who is in traumatic shock. In that heightened state of arousal or de-activation, the individual becomes impervious to suggestion. Like Alison Scott, who became triggered and marched out of my classroom, psychological triggers often take on a life of their own.

Alison’s response, like all of our responses, was subjective, as was the response of a student named Emily, who was in an American literature class with me 15 years ago. I will never forget this moment. We were reading “To Build a Fire.” The man was freezing to death and began to yell at the dog, approaching him and thrashing with wild arms. Emily’s hand suddenly shot up. She looked deeply troubled. Her body was crouched forward, and her face was strained. I called on her.

“But ... but, I feel so bad for that poor dog. It’s owner is so mean to abuse it like that.”

Her words stung me. I knew Emily. I had taught her for two years. I knew that she came from a troubled home life and that her parents held high expectations, were controlling, and could be abusive. I’d spoken about her specific circumstances with the school psychologist.

In this moment, when Emily spoke about the dog in Jack London’s story, I could not help but feel that she was, in fact, talking about herself and referencing her relationship to her parents, the abusers. Can I be sure of this? No. Did I ever ask her specifically or follow up? I didn’t. But there was something about the way that she said it—the horror and sadness in her voice. It was her subjective feeling and interpretation of the scene. It seemed
to carry into her personal life and her personal problems. To this day, that moment has always stuck with me as a form of personal confession. If I'm right—and I suspect I was—I think the moment was completely unconscious to her. I don't think Emily had any awareness of what she may have been confessing to me about her home life.

Because individual readers may subjectively interpret literature according to the psychological needs that present themselves, either consciously or unconsciously, Bleich (1978) sees reading literature as a type of Rorschach test. Elements of the story may be concretely defined, but openings in interpretation, and students’ individual needs and emotional circumstances, often do much to fill in gaps in perception.

What an author intends, insofar as authors have prescribed intents, may be far less influential—or even subordinate—to a student’s immediate, Maslowian needs. Take the AT&T commercial. The corporation intended it as a campaign aimed at preventing people from texting and driving. That’s not what Alison got out of it. For her, it was a horrific reminder of two near-death experiences. That’s not what I got out of it. For me, it was an opportunity to teach narrative story-telling and concision. It’s subjective. Individual students bring deeply embedded psychological selves to literature, and much of these may be unconscious. What a mess!

Since literary meaning-making may get “I'd” (Holland) or be “subjectively” (Bleich) created by each of our students in any particular contextualized manner, English teachers might benefit from recognizing that their initial aims, hopes, and plans for how their students “should” experience literature will likely never align precisely with what happens within any particular student in any particular context. I even find that, depending on the specific circumstances that are shaping my mood at any particular moment, texts that I teach get inflected or subjectively shifted by my own emotions and present thoughts. Teachers cannot write teacher objectives and teacher aims on a chalkboard and simply assume that students will take in their predetermined plans. Psychology is far more complex and layered than that. It doesn't work in binaries. And the unconscious ... the
unconscious has reasons that reason knows not. It is vast, highly coordinated, mysterious, and subtle—and often powerfully susceptible to suggestion. Since the meditative and hypnotic features of literature so often play on the unconscious, I believe that English teachers would benefit from understanding what it is and how it operates—if that’s even possible! To this end, I will turn to Freud for a little help.

The Unconscious: What is It?

In presenting psychoanalytic perspectives on the act of reading literature, I have failed to account for the construct within psychoanalytic theory that perhaps most defines psychoanalytic thought—the unconscious. Since so many of Holland’s, Bleich’s, Bruns’s, and countless others’ ideas are predicated on a dynamic understanding of the unconscious, it seems prudent that I provide some definitional space around this core tenet of psychoanalytic theory.

A Justification and Overview of the Unconscious

At any given moment consciousness includes only a small content, so that the greater part of what we call conscious knowledge must in any case be for very considerable periods of time in a state of latency, that is to say, of being psychically unconscious. (Freud & Gay, 1989, p. 574)

No discussion of the unconscious seems appropriate without beginning with the thinker who is almost universally credited with coining the term, Austrian psychiatrist and founding father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. Freud (1856-1939), espoused a tripartite model for the mind, divided into three interrelated yet distinct domains: the id, ego, and superego. Freud equated the id with the sexual and aggressive impulses rooted in our basic biological nature. A Darwinian byproduct of evolution, the id self, dispossessed of morality or ethical checks and balances, seeks to acquire, at all costs, its sexual aims. Aggression is unchecked. Physical harm, rage, assault, even murder get sanctioned without recourse. The id self promotes the genetic furtherance of the species and does not heed
society’s norms, regulations, normative expectations, etc. The id is amoral, exclusively invested in achieving its primitive aims.

But since a world cannot function with over seven billion ids battling unchecked, Freud theorized that minds must also equip themselves with a governing body, which he referred to as the superego. The superego, the judicial counsel of the mind, gets taxed with the duty of curbing impulsive wants, favoring the greater, ethical good of a civilized society over the appetitive recklessness of the id. While the id will rape and pillage in order to satisfy pressing sexual satisfaction, the superego intervenes, sets rules, and curbs the id’s unbridled energy. Rape, groping, and other forms of instantaneous pleasure seeking get re-directed into more societally acceptable and socially sanctioned expressions of desire. The caveman and his club give way to the gentleman who asks the woman out on a date, courts her, declares his passion, and, invariably, seduces her into bed—only after a societally sanctioned process of wooing and enchanting.

In 1762, roughly 150 years before Freud wrote a series of essays justifying the existence of the unconscious, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau coined the principle of le contrat social. Rousseau’s theory proposed that individuals possess latent murderous instincts incompatible with proper functioning in an ordered society (an id, if you will). Individuals are aware enough to recognize their own murderous instincts, as well as to acknowledge that others in a society possess analogous capacities for human cruelty and anarchic intent. This recognition of the potential for absolute and utter societal cacophony and horror urges most individuals in a society to check their own capacity for evil and to live under the umbrella of a social contract wherein members of society inhibit their unremitting violent tendencies to ensure the maintenance of the greater good. The contrat social is analogous to Freud’s concept of the superego.

The ego represents the third domain within Freud’s conceptualization of the tripartite mind. The ego’s job is to manage the impulses of the id, while also regulating the controls of the superego. If the id’s will becomes too strong (sexual or violent opulence), or
the superego’s control too severe (oppressive regimes), the individual fails to achieve homeostatic, harmonic self-balance. Balance was critical to Freud’s conception of a healthy, integrated individual. Freud believed that balance, measure, and equilibrium among these three domains of the mind are essential in a psychologically healthy individual. Since most individuals within a society do not walk around consciously working on the balance among three psychic forces, Freud believed that much of this mental activity gets conducted out of the realm of consciousness. The managerial self, hailing the taxi, crossing the street, buying an apple at the local deli, may be largely unaware of the vast complexity of psychic forces operating below conscious awareness. As a species that entered the evolutionary arms race 200,000 years ago, human beings are complex creatures with complex pasts and dynamic life experiences. We all have had parents whom we have either known or not known. We have been breast-fed, or not. Experienced love and rejection. Been injured, both psychologically and physically. Won. Lost. Destroyed. Created. And since psychoanalysts posit that the sum total of our life experiences journey with us as we move along through the continuum of life, human beings cannot possibly consider or account for each of the dynamic processes, memories, thoughts, ideas, and experiences within their minds. It is for this reason, according to Freud, that an unconscious must exist, as a type of grand, potentially unremembered memory chest or warehouse for our life’s experiences. The unconscious often drives the car.
Freud's Iceberg Theory

As Freud advanced his conceptualization of the unconscious, he formulated the metaphor of a giant iceberg—a certain portion of it above water, and a larger, much more expansive substructure immersed below the ocean surface. As we can see from the image above, Freud (1954) believed that the conscious mind embodied the part of the iceberg that floats above the water's surface. This part of the mind encapsulates and contains life events, circumstances, and experiences that are readily available for our mind's consumption and awareness. These are the things we know we know: “At any given moment consciousness includes only a small content, so that the greater part of what we call conscious knowledge must in any case be for very considerable periods of time in a state of latency, that is to say, of being psychically unconscious” (p. 168).

Referring to Figure 2.2, as we move just below the water's surface, no longer above water but still able to see and recognize the water's surface division from the sky, we enter the preconscious, a mental domain Freud believed contained memories, experiences, ideas, and thoughts that, while not immediately conscious, can be readily recalled and experienced within consciousness. Preconscious psychological material might include: what you did last summer, how you felt when your last girlfriend broke up with you, the smell of your mother's rose garden, etc. As an individual emerging from a swimming pool into the bright summer air, the preconscious can easily become conscious.

Deeper down in the iceberg dwelt the unconscious, a territory of the mind far below the preconscious and therefore outside of immediate awareness. Regulated by an ego that attempts to balance the battling wills of the id and superego, Freud believed that the
unconscious held the grand sum of all psychic materials acquired through the vast coordination and historical reverberations of our life in total: the taste of a mother’s nipple, the sight of a father’s raised eyebrow in early childhood, the opacity of the second-floor windows at the Louvre, the hum of the light above our camp bunk bed. Freud believed that the unconscious housed the memories our conscious lost or pushed away, which would include both the positive experiences that will individual’s lives forward, and the negative, traumatic events that can arrest a life, stunt development, and interfere with our growth or feelings of safety and well-being in the world.

Though the image of an iceberg may suggest otherwise, the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious are not static domains. In On Metapsychology Volume II, Freud (1991) writes that both the preconscious and the unconscious can undergo “transformation or translation into something conscious” (p. 167). He continues: “We know for certain that they have abundant points of contact with conscious mental processes; with the help of a certain amount of work they can be transformed into, or replaced by, conscious mental processes” (p. 169). Preconscious and unconscious material, if activated or ‘triggered,’ can become conscious. Even if it does not become fully conscious, preconscious and unconscious material can impact us when incited, causing tangible anxiety, heavy breathing, bodily discomfort, psychological panic, shame, guilt, fear, and other states of arousal. This point seems particularly important for our discussion of trigger warnings. When Alison Scott came to class on July 14th, she may not have been thinking consciously about her car crash from the previous year. She may have been consciously thinking about the material we were covering for the course, or about her grade, or about her friends in the class, etc. But the memory of the event was there, dwelling in her preconscious and unconscious mind, ready to be triggered and to spring into her conscious awareness.

When I pressed play on the commercial and Alison realized that the AT&T spot was about to play scenes that might too directly trigger feelings, thoughts, and memories that
were too threatening for her, she hit the eject button and fled to what she perceived would be safer space.

The trigger warning is interesting—and potentially quite problematic—because it is a conscious act aimed at providing feelings of safety and security for emotional contents that are often unconscious in trauma survivors. An educator who uses trigger warnings in some ways is hoping that by warning the conscious part of the traumatized individual, the student may be better able to protect his or her unconscious self from assuming control and careening the student into emotional feelings, thoughts, and fears that exceed optimal stress and become re-traumatizing. When I discuss trauma and its impacts in Chapters V and IX, I am going to argue that trigger warnings may do far less than advocates think to mollify intensely painful and overwhelming feelings that result from trauma. As I will show by referencing research that includes PET Scans conducted by Bessel van der Kolk’s research team at the Trauma Center in Brookline, Massachusetts, trauma may have a mind of its own and may easily overpower conscious attempts that educators make at safeguarding it. Trauma changes the brain (van der Kolk, 2014). It is powerful—not easily dissuaded. Even if I had given Alison Scott a trigger warning and she had decided to stay in the classroom, she still may have been triggered. While trigger warnings may help educators feel they are protecting psychologically fragile students from harm, the unconscious more often than not has its way and may rush through a trigger warning, like Niagara Falls through a sieve.
Chapter III

IS THE TRIGGER WARNING THE ANSWER?

Perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. (Rilke, 2016)

Reading in a Complex World

“Life is a complex text” (S. Blau, personal communication, October 17, 2014).

The world around us can be problematic, hurtful, dangerous, and, at times, cruel. Though some educators may hope to shield students (or themselves) from the slings and arrows of day-to-day experience, inconvenient aspects of human identity persevere. Like Al Gore’s carbon dioxide particles floating up into the atmosphere and destroying our ozone layer, multifarious malefic features of humanity creep undetected amid the day-to-day comings and goings of a seemingly civilized society. Cars honk. Elbows nudge ribs along rattling subway cars, and latent micro-aggressions sneer, snicker, and dart along the dotted streets and avenues of urban America. Yet, true to Rousseau’s mid-18th century conception of social contracts, most human beings most of the time keep Thomas Hobbes’s leviathan at bay—repressing, suppressing, or choosing blithe ignorance over the lascivious underpinnings of darker nature. But that’s in life. Art is often different. Aristotle wanted blood, because he suspected, I imagine, that blood would teach us something important about human identity and choice-making. The pages of literature, for better or for worse, are often drenched in blood.
And yet human beings, for all sorts of protective, defensive reasons, at times prefer the comforts of partial blindness to the inconvenience of staring into the traumatic. Like Oedipus, who gouges out his own eyes in an effort to avoid what he does not want to see, it is not uncommon for people to resist aspects of reality that feel too threatening. And it’s understandable. Embracing some of the ugly aspects of human nature may necessitate a willingness to consider uncomfortable realities. Like Dante, who willingly journeys into the underworld, individuals who choose to reckon with some of the ugly aspects of human existence must, at times, shuffle off their own resistances and progress with bravery and strength: “Through me you go into a city of weeping; through me you go into eternal pain; through me you go amongst the lost people” (Aligheri & Ciardi, 2001, 2.1-3).

But seeing, though it can be quite painful, can also help expand us as humans and encourage growth. The pains associated with the act of seeing and knowing can also help us gain strategies that augment patience, enhance critical thinking, and help to build resilience. As Plato argues in the cave allegory, enlightenment may necessitate some painful encounters with what human beings do not wish to see. And though real-life encounters with life’s dark perversities are sometimes too damaging or dangerous to bear, engaging with dark forces through literature may present a more indirect and therefore more seemingly safe opportunity for individuals to reckon with psychologically upsetting content (Bruns, 2011). Of the various artistic modalities, reading offers us a medium through which the shadows of human shame, atrocity, remorse, and despair can sometimes be explored with less severe consequences to self-integrity than we might find in non-fictional encounters with horror, shame, and trauma.

But in 2017, the question of how much should be seen, how much blood should be strewn across the stage, and how well teachers should or should not prepare students for difficult encounters with complex texts exists at an essential vortex of educational politics. English teachers teach literature. Many aim to arouse the minds and spirits of their students, utilizing the power of words, characters, and conflict to startle, shock, and
aesthetically move the spirits of blithe minds, seeking expansion, knowledge, and artistic experience. They ... they ... not so fast. Things have become more complicated.

In recent years, an unanticipated guest has walked onto the stage of the liberal, seemingly student-centered educational landscape of many of America’s elite learning communities (Oberlin, UC Santa Barbara, Drexel, among others). Like Blanche, who shows up unannounced at the doors of Stanley and Stella’s apartment dwelling in the heat of a New Orleans summer, a complex, psychologically disturbing visitor has arrived on the scene of higher education and has done much to make its multifarious presence known in a plethora of classrooms all across the United States. It’s not clear who wrote this character into the script or how, exactly, she got cast for the show. But this reptilian force—ostensibly designed to protect the perceived psychological fragilities of our students—is creating a wake of powerful ripples that modify, shift, and challenge the waters of literary instruction in the classroom.

I am talking, of course, about the trigger warning, an ostensibly protective mechanism that proposes, at its best, to safeguard students with traumatic pasts from the slings and arrows of potential engagement with dramatic literary content—most notably: violence, sexual abuse, and perversions of power (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). At least, that’s how the trigger warning started. More recently, however, its scope has expanded to include minority identities, race relations, gender inequality, and politics:

Whatever their original purpose may have been, trigger warnings are now used to mark discussions of racism, sexism, and U.S. imperialism. The logic of this more expansive use is straightforward: Any threat to one’s core identity, especially if that identity is marginalized, is a potential trigger that creates an unsafe space. (Levinovitz, 2016)

And though this research concentrates on the English classroom, trigger warning culture extends well beyond literature and impacts domains as far-ranging as history, governance, law, anthropology, and even the medical sciences.
In a 2016 interview with NPR, Hassan Jeffries, an associate professor of history at Ohio State, explained how, in the age of the trigger warning, he begins each course: “This is hard history. It’s hard to talk about, hard to absorb. It’s filled with trauma, sexual violence, racial violence, visual images of murder and chaos. You may walk into my classroom and see an image of a lynching that was put on a postcard. This is America” (Kamenetz, 2016). Basically, today’s professor who presents material that is potentially alarming, upsetting, or psychologically complex may feel compelled to forewarn students prior to engaging with content. Some professors see great value in the trigger warning and espouse the practice; others oppose it. Both sides present strong arguments.

**Trigger Warning Advocates**

I vividly remember switching on Monsters Inc, thinking it would entertain my two-year-old nephew. As the shadow of the monster loomed over a sleeping child, my nephew sat rooted to the spot, wide-eyed, barely breathing. I switched off the film and scrambled around for another form of amusement more appropriate for toddlers. Together, we exhaled. (Gust, 2016)

For advocates of the practice, trigger warnings seem to represent an attempt at augmenting classroom safety, strengthening engagement, and providing better comfort and security for students with traumatic pasts or marginalized voices. As Kate Manne (2015), an assistant professor of Philosophy at Cornell University, stated recently in her *New York Times* article, “Why I Use Trigger Warnings”:

Increasingly, professors like me simply give students notice in their syllabuses, or before certain reading assignments. The point is not to enable—let alone encourage—students to skip these readings or our subsequent class discussion (both of which are mandatory in my courses, absent a formal exemption). Rather, it is to allow those who are sensitive to these subjects to prepare themselves for reading about them, and better manage their reactions. The evidence suggests that at least some of the students in any given class of mine are likely to have suffered some sort of trauma, whether from sexual assault or another type of abuse or violence. So I think the benefits of trigger warnings can be significant.
Contrary to certain theorists who believe that trigger warnings coddle youths and encourage avoidance (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015), Manne (2015) explains her belief that TW’s facilitate engagement and enable heightened participation through “enabling everyone’s rational engagement.” Manne is not alone in her argument. Among the seven participants I conversed with during this study, approximately half expressed views that mirrored Manne’s argument, claiming that trigger warnings (i) present little downside to literary experience in the classroom, and (ii) serve as entrance points for engagement, rather than opportunities to opt out of participation.

Colleen Lutz Clemens (2016), an associate professor of non-Western literatures at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania, writes:

When I put a trigger warning on my syllabus, I do not see the act as coddling. Rather, I see it as an act of nurturing. We cannot know all that our students carry with them into our classrooms. This awareness compels me to ensure that my students can feel safe in my classroom. I still expect them to be challenged rigorously by the texts I teach. My trigger warning is not a pass for lack of engagement. Instead, it is an escape route if a student starts to panic or have an emotional response that would make it hard for her to concentrate or remain in class safely.

Clemens’s belief that trigger warnings represent an act of nurturing parallels a belief among some professors that trigger warnings responsibly scaffold caring, therapeutically inflected pedagogy.

**Student Support**

This spring, I was in a seminar that dealt with gender, sexuality and disability. Some of the course reading touched on disturbing subjects, including sexual violence and child abuse. The instructor told us that we could reach out to her if we had difficulty with the class materials, and that she’d do everything she could to make it easier for us to participate. She included a statement to this effect on the syllabus and repeated it briefly at the beginning of each class. Nobody sought to “retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own,” as Dean Ellison put it in the letter, nor did these measures hinder discussion or disagreement, both of which were abundant.” (Downes, 2016)
Trigger warnings have gained tremendous support among a significant portion of college students. In September of 2016, more than 150 professors at the University of Chicago wrote to students, urging them to "speak up loudly and fearlessly" with requests for trigger warnings (Reilly, 2016). Many of these students—both at the University of Chicago and elsewhere—have advocated aggressively for the mandatory use of trigger warnings in college classes. Conner Gordon, a current political science major, sees the trigger warnings as a tool that enhance examination of complex and challenging topics, such as “genocide, ethnic cleansing, wartime rape and other forms of systematic violence” (Gordon et al., 2015). Contrary to those who see warnings as inhibitory gestures made by infantilizing professor, Gordon believes that professors who provide trigger warnings participate in a thoughtful gesture that helps to buttress psychological stability and prepare students for intelligent, mature discourse in the classroom. Gordon recalls a specific scenario where one of his professors used a trigger warning to forecast complex material in one of his courses. He writes that the professor's warning “wasn’t an effort to silence the topics or distract from their discomfort. In communicating their emotional gravity, our professor was simply trying to prepare us, encouraging us to keep tabs on our mental well-being as we proceeded through each difficult discussion.”

Analogous to Manne, Gordon believes that professors who give trigger warnings improve classroom discourse, setting the stage for richer and more significant classroom conversations and encouraging marginalized students to (i) voice their views, and (ii) actively contribute rather than remaining silent: “Such warnings can ultimately spark better critical discussion within the classroom, not silence it” (Gordon et al., 2015).

At American University, President of American’s Student Government, Devontae Torriente, recently lobbied to make trigger warnings mandatory for all college courses. In a widely publicized video campaign, Torriente claimed: “The fact of the matter is, trigger warnings are necessary in order to make our academic spaces accessible to all students, especially those who have experienced trauma” (as cited in Flaherty, 2016).
Several other student groups and student advocates have urged for augmented use of trigger warnings on campus. In response to reading Ovid’s version of the *Rape of Persephone* in an ancient literature course, four undergraduate students at Columbia University recently pressed the school’s administration to implement trigger warnings for the text:

> The Greek myth has been recounted for thousands of years in hundreds of languages, scores of countries and countless works of art. It’s considered a cultural touchstone for Western civilization: a parable about power, lust and grief. Now, however, it could be getting a treatment it’s never had before: a trigger warning. (Miller, 2015)

Whether initiated by professors or spawned by members of the student body, the trigger warning practice is modifying the way we think about education and scaffold entry points into complex classroom material. As we have seen, a prominent voice within academia lobbies hard in favor of the practice. But this is only half the story—an incomplete narrative. Below I will explore the flip side of the coin, exploring some voices that oppose the use and implementation of trigger warnings.

**Opposition to Trigger Warnings**

Something strange is happening at America’s colleges and universities. A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense. Last December, Jeannie Suk wrote in an online article for *The New Yorker* about law students asking her fellow professors at Harvard not to teach rape law—or, in one case, even use the word *violate* (as in “that violates the law”) lest it cause students distress. (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015)

In perhaps the most publicly bold dismissal of trigger warnings, the University of Chicago sent out a letter from its Dean of Students in August of 2016; the letter clearly delineated that it does not support the use of trigger warnings.
Dean Ellison’s letter is a dramatic example of the type of anti-trigger warning virulence adopted by professors, students, and institutions who see TW’s as a threat or impediment to learning. Whereas advocates for trigger warnings may believe that trigger warnings help foster better engagement and heightened psychological security, several opponents believe that TW’s—and educational cultures that promote them—pose problems that are far more complex, nuanced, and problematic than some may initially realize. Shakespeare instructs us that great art holds the “mirror up to nature” (Shakespeare, 1603, 3.2.22), but is it possible to represent reality in a way that is impactful and aesthetically rich if we interfere with arousal—forecasting scenes of sexual violence, racial discrimination, and power imbalance—and, in the process, mitigating the force of shock, discovery, and elements of surprise?
Some opponents to the trigger warning believe that literature, in its organic form, aims to entice the imagination into an illusionary interplay with conflict and the taboo (Miller 2002), engaging the mind and spirit in an adult form of play with transitional objects (Bruns, 2011; Winnicott, 1971). Opposition to trigger warnings may argue that since literature relies on an artistic interplay with itself, conscientious attempts at enhancing safety and security while reading texts may be causing unintended negative consequences that dumb-down, interfere with, modify, or even nullify the full-bodied, aesthetic engagement individuals can have with words and narrative.

Certain scholars identify a plethora of negative consequences that may arise when educators use trigger warnings. For trigger warning opponents, TW’s may:

1. Encourage students to avoid intense literary moments that they may perceive as too powerful or emotionally charged.
2. Deprive students from experiencing several of the critical, aesthetic, and transformative moments in a text.
3. Foster a culture where student fragility is promoted over the development of resilience.
4. Depress artistic freedom by arbitrarily sanctioning what is and what is not appropriate for class discussion and student experience.
5. Handicap English teachers by censoring or casting certain literary moments as taboo.
6. Draw too much attention to controversial literary scenes, thereby offsetting the natural balance and order of the text.

Each of these potential outcomes—and others I have not discussed yet—may pose very real threats to the way English teachers approach literary pedagogy in the classroom. As Alan Levinovitz argues in his 2016 Atlantic article, “How Trigger Warnings Silence Religious Students”: “Modern, secular, liberal education is supposed to combine a Socratic ideal of the examined life with a Millian marketplace of ideas. It is boot camp, not a hotel.”
Can a rigorous, scholarly boot camp exist if students are over-protected? It is understandable why an educator who believes in the power and importance of full-throated literary engagement and trusts his own ability to present complex and challenging material to students might balk at the suggestion that students are safer and better off when instructors forewarn dramatic content (analogous to what some might term a ‘spoiler’ in a different context). After all, many scholars believe that part of literature’s power lies in its ability to shock, dismantle, rattle, and lead us into undiscovered countries—much of which can be altered if we know exactly where the text is going. Imagine watching a Hitchcock movie and knowing what awaits around the bend. Or reading *Death of a Salesman* and knowing that Willy Loman is going to kill himself. As Ingmar Bergman states, “I don’t want to produce a work of art that the public can sit and suck aesthetically.... I want to give them a blow in the small of the back, to scorch their indifference, to startle them out of their complacency” (as quoted in Vermilye. 2007, p. 13).

Antagonists to the trigger warning practice have a right to execute approaches to literature that don’t include forewarnings, right? I mean, they shouldn’t have to provide trigger warnings just because students want them. Correct? It’s not so clear that this is the case.

**The Danger of Not Using the Trigger**

At some of America’s premier schools (Columbia, Yale, Oberlin, etc.), instructors who have pushed boundaries and chosen not to trigger alert complex or controversial topics have come under the scrutiny of administrators and bureaucratic figures who, whether for legitimate or paranoid reasons, fear that students who feel violated or re-traumatized by “irresponsible” teaching practices may lambaste the school’s reputation through social media, hold protests on campus, or even litigate. Often choosing the placidity ensured by heeding student demands over the potential warfare incumbent should they deny, many highly ranked American institutions (Oberlin, the University of California, Santa Barbara,
Drexel, etc.) are endorsing cultures where faculty members feel pressured to use trigger warnings in exchange for job security. At Drexel University outside of Philadelphia, the administration states that “professors who don’t use trigger warnings will be investigated” (Piper, 2016). The language is unambiguous: “It is expected that instructors will offer appropriate warning and accommodation regarding the introduction of explicit and triggering materials used” (Piper, 2016).

Trying to educate in trigger-sensitive environments can pose catch-22 conflicts for professors who intrinsically believe that shocking, triggering, dismantling, or engaging students in meaningfully stressful encounters with controversial or provocative content is endemic to the act of educating. “Edward Schlosser,” a professor at a midsize state school, recently pseudonymously published an article in Vox magazine titled, “I’m a Liberal Professor, and My Liberal Students Terrify Me.” The 2016 article discusses how trigger warnings have negatively transformed teaching experiences for university educators. Below, Schlosser spells out the recent shift in educational politics that has occurred during his nine years teaching at the college level:

I have intentionally adjusted my teaching materials as the political winds have shifted. (I also make sure all my remotely offensive or challenging opinions, such as this article, are expressed either anonymously or pseudonymously). Most of my colleagues who still have jobs have done the same. We’ve seen bad things happen to too many good teachers—adjuncts getting axed because their evaluations dipped below a 3.0, grad students being removed from classes after a single student complaint, and so on.

And Schlosser is not alone. What choices do professors have if administrators are restricting or forbidding them from utilizing many of the essential elements of shock and controversy that potentially most define or encapsulate their teaching styles?

As a means of protecting professors susceptible to these university pressures, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP, 2014) came out with a statement suggesting that forcing professors to use trigger warnings represents a threat to academic freedom: “Institutional requirements or even suggestions that faculty use trigger warnings
interfere with faculty academic freedom in the choice of course materials and teaching methods” (AAUP 2014). The AAUP clarifies that teachers should have the right to determine whether certain material may warrant alerts to the student body, but takes a stand against administrative requirements that dictate mandatory trigger warning usage, claiming that administration regulation “constitutes interference with academic freedom.” The AAUP further claims that university professors should have the right to judge whether content potentially threatens student well-being: “Faculty judgment is a legitimate exercise of autonomy.” The AAUP’s effort at protecting professors’ rights may be noble, but is it enough?

**Tracing an Origination Point: How the TW Was Born**

Most current college students grew up in the shadow of September 11, with the specter of large-scale terrorism always looming and with a steady stream of soldiers returning home to grapple with their demons. It is no wonder that they feel that they, too, deserve security, even in the precarious and flimsy form of trigger warnings and safe spaces, (Heer, 2015)

Some professors favor trigger warnings. Some oppose them. Certain students hold campaigns lobbying for them. Others want to learn, unfettered. That trigger warnings having taken a prominent seat in classrooms across America is undeniable. What is perhaps less clear is how and why they have come about in the first place. Australian writer and multi-disciplinary artist Jonno Revache (2017) traces the emergence of trigger warnings back to 1960, when people began to become more aware of the complications and complexities among war vets suffering from PTSD.

Trigger Warnings were introduced into our public consciousness initially around the year 1960. This was apparently when we got a grasp on the complexities of PTSD, and when our cultural understanding of PTSD stemmed mainly from the experiences of mentally ill war veterans, who came back from combat experiencing dissociation, “shell-shock,” flashbacks, as well as severe depression and anxiety.
Jeet Heer (2015), a writer for the *New Republic*, elaborates on the relationship between trigger warnings and societal awareness of PTSD: "The explosion of trigger warnings and the growth of safe spaces is best understood as a consequence of the expanded social and cultural role that PTSD has assumed in our society. The concept of PTSD rests on the importance of buried memories—memory traces—which can be reignited as flashbacks." In addition to what he has to say about their link to PTSD, Heer sees trigger warnings as echoing the "larger jitteriness" that has marked American culture for decades, perhaps reaching a peak on September 11th of 2001. The fact that today's college students grew up in the terrorist wake of 9/11 may help explain why many of them may feel entitled to heightened protective measures.

This "larger jitteriness," which compels a heightened wish for protection, is something attorney Greg Lukianoff and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2015) take up in their influential *Atlantic* article, "The Coddling of the American Mind." The authors link the emergence of the trigger warnings to two generational phenomena: (1) a shift in parent-child relationships, and (2) the emergence of social media. On the former, the authors explain:

> Childhood itself has changed greatly during the past generations. Many Baby Boomers and Gen Xers can remember riding their bicycles around their hometowns, unchaperoned by adults, by the time they were 8 or 9 years old. As crime rates began to rise in the ’60s and continued to climb through the ’90s, Baby Boomer parents began to feel more protective of their children. Kidnappings began to increase in the ’80s. The issue of security was not concentrated solely in the home—school safety became a public debate as well, with "dangerous play structures ... removed from playgrounds" and "peanut butter banned from school lunches" (Lukianoff & Haidt 2015). Then Columbine, the first school related gun massacre in US history, occurred in 1999, leading to zero tolerance policies for campus bullying. According to Lukainoff and Haidt, Millennials received a "consistent message from adults: 'life is dangerous, but adults will do everything
in their power to protect you from harm.” This learned need for overprotectiveness has translated into classroom settings where students feel entitled to enhanced levels of protection.

As a result, in a single generation, some of the authoritative and hard-nosed educational practices admired by Baby Boomers and Gen Xers gave way to Deweyan, Montessorian models, where a perception of child psychological fragility became superordinate to tough-minded, pull-up-your-bootstraps, hard-knocks approaches to teaching that might build strength and resilience.

And then, by 2000, social media appeared. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, etc. suddenly created platforms for disenfranchised voices to leap out from obscurity and reach a seemingly infinite cyber-audience. Millennials seized the opportunity, waging online crusades against perceived injustices, real or imagined: “Facebook was founded in 2004, and since 2006 it has allowed children as young as 13 to join. This means that the first wave of students who spent all their teen years using Facebook reached college in 2011” (Lukianoff & Haidt 2015). 2011 ... just about the time the trigger warning conversation began to take shape on US campuses.

**But Is It the Answer?**

That trigger warnings are being utilized as an “answer” to the question of student psychological fragility seems undeniable. They are out there—being featured on classroom syllabi, issuing from the mouths of incumbent educators. But are they the answer? Do they protect students with psychological fragility from the potential emotional discomforts endemic to traumatic response?

In the next section of this dissertation, I will move into a deeper exploration of trauma. First, I will convey a personal story about a traumatic experience that impacted my own life in the winter of 1999. Next, I will examine various types of trauma, with special
attention to 9i) impact trauma, 9ii) relational trauma, and 9iii) the trauma of everyday life. Finally, I will more deeply investigate what trauma does to the brain, utilizing PET Scans and patient narratives from Dr. Bessel van der Kolk’s Trauma Center in Boston, Massachusetts.

The problem with trigger warnings, in my opinion, is that they aim to provide a convenient solution to a problem they don’t fully understand—like a band-aid on a gushing wound. Before English teachers insist upon arbitrary remedies, they may benefit from better identifying and comprehending the vast scale of the issue at hand. Trauma is complicated ... very complicated. Before educators rally around a potentially arbitrary remedy to an encyclopedically complex wound, I think teachers may owe it to their students to better understand the nature and complexity of the wound itself.

A Look Ahead: Bringing in the English Teachers

In the subsequent section, the experimental portion of the dissertation, I will introduce you to the seven graduate student participants who were generous enough to donate their time and energies to this project. After having engaged to a considerable degree with the literature related to reading, teaching of literature, and trigger warnings, I wanted to deepen my understanding and awareness of this complicated intersection of thought by sitting down with in-service English teachers and engaging in what, to me, felt like important conversations about this highly nuanced and complex subject matter. After all, I knew what I knew—or what I thought I knew. I knew how the literature had impacted, deepened, and confounded my thinking. But what I didn’t know was how other English teachers—perhaps ones who had never thought with particular depth or interest about this topic—might feel about the way trigger warnings and the cultural bubble surrounding them might be impacting or subtly—or not so subtly—governing their teaching of literature practices.
Although these teachers represented only a small number among the hundreds of thousands of English teachers in the United States, I was grateful for the potential ways in which my conversations with them shifted the insights I’d gained through a manic, frenzied engagement between my mind and the two-dimensional hemisphere of black words on a white page, to the type of vivid, organic exploration only made possible through human contact and interaction. I was curious to hear about what this particular group of English teachers—and therefore, perhaps a wider body of English teachers—might perceive about the relationship between teaching literature and accounting for student trauma. Among the seven of them, they offered a rich resource of perspectives.

As I will explain in much more depth in the subsequent chapter, I knew each of these teachers fairly well in advance of the study, having been the coordinator and an instructor in their graduate program. This advanced knowledge certainly may have biased the discourse on both sides, as in ways that I cannot even adequately communicate, their availability, responsiveness, and responses to my questions were surely at least in part shaped by the inherent power dynamic that existed between us (I will talk more about the problems of this power hierarchy in the following chapter). It also is likely the case that my prior knowledge of them as students and people—as well as their prior knowledge of me as both their program coordinator and instructor—played a role in shaping their responses (I will also address this dynamic in Chapter IV).

All that having been said, they often surprised, challenged, and deeply impacted my own thinking about this very real problem in education, and offered perspectives and views I could never have acquired through book learning. I am hopeful that, in the pages to come, I’ll be able to bring both these conversations and each participant partially to life for you—moving this intractable conflict out of the narrow confines of my own skull and landing it in the collective unconscious of seven other minds. Maybe working together we can figure this all out. Or at least figure it out better. It’d be inauthentic if I suggested that any of this could be adequately solved.
PART THREE:

The Experiment
Interview Conversations, Focus Group, and Analysis
May 18 – July 15, 2017
Chapter IV
CONVERSATIONS WITH TEACHERS

Some Methodological Considerations

*Enter:* the experiment. As I shift to Part III of the dissertation and begin to present contents from the interview conversations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), workshop, and focus group (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2010) I conducted with seven English teachers in the Spring and Summer of 2017, I’d like to take a moment to address some important methodological considerations that factored into my thinking along the way. In considering how I might gain important insights into the highly complex, challenging, and multi-faceted vortex tying together literature, trigger warnings, psychoanalysis, and pedagogy, it became evident to me that no one single approach or technique would suffice. Any choice that I made would, by virtue of reality, preclude or negate other choices. I felt a bit like Robert Frost in a yellow wood. And yet I strongly suspected that there were many possible ways of looking at this problem. The more I thought about it, the more I came to realize that taking several approaches and conceptualizing the issue through multiple lenses might best attend to the array of possible ways of looking at this issue. At the same time, I knew I wouldn’t get it all. That’s part of the humility of research—hunting for knowledge often only deepens our questions. At the same time, I did believe that by integrating a number of different techniques for examining this problem, I’d be able to arrive at better thinking and heightened awareness. As Richardson and St. Pierre convey in their classic work *Writing a
Method of Inquiry (2005), “a postmodern position does allow us to know ‘something’ without claiming to know everything” (p. 961).

The multi-faceted approach I took embraced each of the following methodological practices:

1) Interview conversations with seven English teachers, each with a minimum of 5 years of lead classroom experience, conducted between May 18 and July 13, 2017.

2) Presentation of a one hour, psychoeducation workshop in trauma to all participants, carried out on July 15, 2017.

3) Facilitation of a two-hour focus group with all participants, conducted July 15, 2017.

4) Careful consideration of PET Scan analyses of trauma survivors from Bessel van der Kolk's Trauma Center in Brookline, MA. I studied these PET Scans in van der Kolk's book, The Body Keeps the Score, and they became essential for my conceptualization of this problem.

5) Metacognitive considerations of personal encounters with trauma.

6) And, finally, an interview with Dr. Bessel van der Kolk himself, which I conducted on August 11th of 2017.

Laurel Richardson has a term for this type of inquiry-based research: crystallization:

In traditionally staged research, we valorize “triangulation”.... In triangulation, a research deploys different methods— interviews, census data, documents, and the like— to “validate” findings. These methods, however, carry the same domain assumptions, including the assumption that there is a “fixed point” or an “object” that can be triangulated. But in CAP ethnographies, researchers draw from literary, artistic, and scientific genres, often breaking the boundaries of those genres as well. In what I think of as a postmodern deconstruction of triangulation, CAP text recognizes that there are far more than “three sides” by which to approach the world. We do not triangulate; we crystallize. (p. 963).

Richardson goes on to explain that the crystal “combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angels of
approach. Crystals grow, change, and are altered, but they are not amorphous” (p. 963). She refers to the prism-like properties of crystals, and claims that, in research, what we see “depends upon our angle of repose” (p. 963).

Richardson’s conceptualization of research and writing about research spoke to my own awareness of the complexities and unknowability of much of what I was studying. The issue of teaching highly charged literary texts to students with histories of trauma takes on a different meaning, whether it’s perceived through interview conversations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), focus groups (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2010), PET Scan analysis (van der Kolk, 2014), or self-reflection on personal trauma. Each lens moves along a distinct edge of the crystal, requires different types of knowledges, and moves towards different possibilities and potential framings. The remainder of this dissertation will move through these various approaches and lenses. In this and the following chapter, I will discuss the contents from the interviews. Chapters VI and VII will hone in on the workshop and focus group. Chapter VIII will recount a story related to a personal trauma. Chapters IX and X will begin to unpack what can happen to survivors of trauma (these sections include the analyses of PET Scans). Finally, Chapter XI resumes the interview format, this time with world-renowned trauma expert, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk.

**A Brief Note on the Interviews**

As I mentioned previously, the interviews with English teachers were semi-structured in nature and closely adhered to Kvale’s original notion of interviews as conversations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). According to Kvale and Brinkmann:

The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to
uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanation. Interview research may to some appear a simple and straightforward task…. [But] (r)esearch interviewing involves a cultivation of conversational skills that most adult human beings already possess by virtue of being able to ask questions. (p. 1)

Given that I had known the educators prior to the study, had taught all of them, and had previously embedded relationships, dynamics, and experiences with them that were likely playing out in immeasurable ways during the discussions, the idea of interview as conversation felt like the most natural fit for the study. Kvale and Brinkmann explain: “The research interview is based on the conversations of daily life and is a professional conversation; it is an inter-view, where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee” (p. 2).

One last point to explain in regard to the concept of interview as conversation: When many people think about the word “conversation,” they imagine a back-and-forth discourse in which both parties contribute and share ideas about a particular issue or theme. This is not what Kvale intended by the interview as conversation:

This rather straightforward questioning contrasts with the reciprocity of everyday conversations. The interviewer is cast in a power position and sets the stage by determining the topic of the interchange; it is the interviewer who asks and the interviewee who answers. The researcher does not contribute with his position on the issue, nor does the pupil ask the interviewer about his view. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 4)

This formulation applies to the interviews I conducted.

The Issue of Power

It may be concluded that a research interview is not an open and dominance free dialogue between egalitarian parties, but a specific hierarchical and instrumental form of conversation, where the interviewer sets the stage and scripts in accord with his or her research interests. (Kvale, 2006, p. 485)

Judith Butler (1995) writes:

For if the subject is constituted by power, that power does not cease at the moment the subject is constituted, for that subject is never fully constituted, but is subjected and produced time and again. That subject is neither a ground
nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process, one which gets detoured and stalled through other mechanisms of power, but which is power's own possibility of being reworked. It is not enough to say that the subject is invariably engaged in a political field; that phenomenological phrasing misses the point that the subject is an accomplishment regulated and produced in advance. And is as such fully political; indeed, perhaps most political as the point in which it is claimed to be prior to politics itself. To perform this kind of Foucaultian critique of the subject is not to do away with the subject or to pronounce it's death, but merely to claim that certain versions of the subject are politically insidious. (p. 154)

We need look no further than Milgram and Zimbardo to argue that any researcher/participant dyad assumes certain relations of power. In her article, “Dual Relationships in Qualitative Research,” Beth Bordeau (2000) discusses the “power differential that opens the possibility for abuse of participants by researchers” (p. 1). Meara and Schmidt (1991) identify power as the “most salient issue when looking at questionable relationships between researchers and participants” (p. 2). LaRossa, Bennett, and Gellas (1981) give attention to subject compliance, the tendency of participants to give the researcher what they believe the investigator wants to hear. LaRossa et al. refer to this as the “relative powerlessness of the subject vis-à-vis the researcher” (p. 306).

The issue of power imbalance may be particularly pronounced when participants are hierarchically subordinate—as they were here—to the interviewer. Given my roles both as Coordinator of their graduate program and as Instructor within this same program, I, almost by necessity, served in a hierarchically dominant position in relation to the participants. I cannot help but wonder how my position as their program Coordinator may have influenced their responses.

The notion that power dynamics and power differentials impact participant-interviewer engagement is addressed in the literature. Kvale (2006) writes:

The power dynamics in interviews, and potential oppressive use of interview-produced knowledge, tend to be left out in literature on qualitative research. There are some exceptions, such as Scheurich's (1995) postmodern critique of a liberal humanist understanding of research interviews as jointly constructed conversations, where he analyzes their complex dominance-and-resistance play of power. Briggs (2002) has scrutinized the asymmetries of
power that emerge in interview situations, investing interviewers with control over what is said and how it is said, and the subsequent circulation of interview knowledge. (p. 483)

Among classical power dynamics possible within an interview context, Kvale highlights the following:

1) The interviewer rules the interview.
2) The interview is a one-way dialogue.
3) The interview is an instrumental dialogue.
4) The interview may be a manipulative dialogue.
5) The interviewer’s monopoly on interpretation.

My awareness of these dynamics compelled me to remain reasonably neutral during the interviews, but on some unconscious level I cannot account for my motives, nor could I control for my participants’ motives during the discourse. As interviewer, I encouraged them to be honest and authentic with their responses, but in the course of qualitative research, a certain amount of influence on the part of the investigator is inevitable and must be acknowledged.

**The Role of Trust**

Though my power as their Coordinator and former Instructor was certainly a force at play during the interviews (Kvale, 2006), I would also argue that the interview discourse may have benefited from a pre-existing dynamic trust that promoted open engagement and relatively genuine responses. Our previously established rapport may have helped participants to more comfortably consider questions. As Kvale (2006) states:

Creating trust through a personal relationship here serves as a means to efficiently obtain a disclosure of the interview subjects’ world. The interviewer may, with a charming, gentle, and client centered manner, create a close personal encounter where the subjects unveil their private worlds. (p. 482)
Though trust does not erase power dynamics, it may help participants to share more freely and feel more natural responding to questions.

Some Thought on my Participants

You see us as you want to see us—in the simplest terms, in the most convenient definitions. But what we found out is that each one of us is a brain ... and an athlete ... and a basket case ... a princess ... and a criminal. Does that answer your question? (John Hughes, The Breakfast Club)

Long after I’d conversed with them—long after we’d met in Ellerson, sat around an oaken table better suited for Sir Lancelot and the royal court—long after I’d led them through an orientation, taught them in one or more graduate courses—long before any of that ... when the dust from the research had settled, and I had gone about, as best I could, to decode, demystify, and make sense of their various thoughts, feelings, and ideas about the relationship between teaching literature and student trauma, I sent each of them a relatively straightforward question. Nothing major. Just a query.

It was an afterthought question, really—one that seemed to hold little relevance to the investigation at hand. When compared to the types of questions they had spent hours thinking through and answering during the formal data collection portion of the study, this one seemed rather trivial—except that it wasn’t. And by the time I sent it out to them, I knew that the question actually held massive implications, in the sense that how they responded to it would immediately re-gift them control over the personal way they wanted to be represented in my work. This is what I sent them:

Hey. I’m working on editing a section in the dissertation in which I introduce you. What’s some fun stuff about you that would be interesting for me to relay?

Simple, right? Although it wasn’t. Not by a long shot. As I mentioned, this question came at the very end of several years of knowing and forming opinions about each of them. And as with potentially all human interactions, I’d likely unconsciously made spontaneous
judgments that were probably deeply flawed. As Philip Roth (1997) famously writes in *American Pastoral*:

You fight your superficiality, your shallowness, so as to try to come at people without unreal expectations, without an overload of bias or hope or arrogance, as untanklike as you can be, sans cannon and machine guns and steel plating half a foot thick; you come at them unmenacingly on your own ten toes instead of tearing up the turf with your caterpillar treads, take them on with an open mind, as equals, man to man, as we used to say, and yet you never fail to get them wrong. You might as well have the brain of a tank. You get them wrong before you meet them, while you’re anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you’re with them; and then you go home to tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them all wrong again. Since the same generally goes for them with you, the whole thing is really a dazzling illusion. [...] The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It’s getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That’s how we know we’re alive: we’re wrong. Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride. But if you can do that—well, lucky you. (p. 35)

For years, I’d gotten them all wrong. When I initially interviewed them for their Masters program, I’d gotten them wrong. When I’d led them through orientation for that same program, I’d gotten them wrong. When they’d taken the required online course I taught in the Spring, I’d gotten them wrong, and when they’d signed up for my Drama course—the same one that Alison Scott had walked out of in the summer of 2015—I’d gotten them wrong again. And they had probably gotten me wrong, too—made all sorts of assumptions and attributions about me—some predicated on the power differential embedded in our relationship. Some based on more subtle things—the way I smiled or didn’t—the time I took or didn’t take to think through some of their questions. The whole thing was a mess in ways. Like many human interactions, our “knowledge” of each other consisted of a sequence of exchanges between individuals working through various motives, basing so much on senses and intuitions none of us understood or could account for. [...] In the end, who do we really know?
And now that they had agreed to be participants in my research, I was poised, yet again, to miscast, misrepresent, and mis-know all of them all over again. And the same was likely true for them with me. There were seven of them in all: Kelvin, Casey, Alaina, Jacob, Tanya, Laura, and Sarah. Does it matter how I say it? Casey, Jacob, Sarah, Laura, Tanya, Kelvin, and Alaina.¹ Order doesn’t matter. On some level, it’s all make-believe anyway. Those aren’t their real names—being a part of a study often necessitates that the researcher conceal the identities of participants, obscure certain key facts and sequences.

It is self-evident that narrative researchers have an ethical duty to protect the privacy and dignity of those whose lives we study to contribute to knowledge in our scholarly fields. But, in the particularities of practice, this self-evident principle is fraught with dilemmas of choice that attend ethics in all relationships. (Josselson, 2007)

Does it make it any more true or false? I’m not sure.

What I do know is that by asking them to tell me something fun about themselves, I was giving them the right to shut me up and give over the reins of representation to them. There’s a fine line, you see, between researcher and colonizer (Bordeau, 2000). In the final equation, they weren’t writing the dissertation—I was. In some enactment of the type of power differentials that Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) discuss in their book InterViews, I was using their time, their words, their qualitative data, and twisting it all into an academic jigsaw puzzle that invariably served to fulfill my research aims.

To the extent that it is possible, I have made real attempts to convey and express their ideas. But the game of relaying other people’s minds is a game of fiction, perhaps better suited to the novel form. I am well aware of what Dr. Janet Miller taught me about the crisis in representation,² Brautigan’s and Barthelme’s postmodern turn of the screw, in

¹I want to once again remind the reader that I am using pseudonyms for all participants in this study, with the exception of Bessel Van der Kolk, who agreed to be identified as himself.

²Brautigan and Barthelme’s crisis in representation, which they coined in 1986, refers to the implicit problems that arise when researchers speak for their participants. It came about as a response to the type of colonizing, often white-male assumptions intrinsic to much arm-chair
which researchers never represent any universally agreed upon reality, but rather are always subject to the embedded imperfections and biases endemic to the subjective nature of perception. In some ways, as researcher I was Prospero, standing on my own private island, wagging around the fretted pages of a magic book. I’m hoping that I have done more than this.

By asking them this simple ‘add-on’ question at the end of our work together, I was putting the pen in their hands and giving them the reins of the study. I did not alter or omit one word from their responses. Five of the seven answered. Here’s what they said:

**Sarah:** Hey! That’s fun. I love playing the guitar and writing songs (which would potentially be best described unabashedly as acoustic lady folk). I oil paint and love wheel throwing, as in pottery. I love Broadway and everything about it. I enjoy Zumba dancing twice a week despite my lack of rhythm. I love everything Margaret Atwood and everything Alanis Morissette. The best part of my day is working on poetry and song writing with my creative writing kids, and the best part of the school year is watching them perform. I recently took them to perform at what I thought was a poetry open mic but turned out to be bar with large shirtless drunk men (you may not want to include that part). How’s that? (Sarah Pelham, personal communication, October 15, 2017)

**Kelvin:** Well, I don’t know if I do fun without noting the tinge or ache of heartbreak and sadness. So here goes…. In 2012, I rode my bike across the country—4,200 miles—in an anti-bullying campaign, after a series of bullycides were occurring across the nation. I rode my bike right back to the steps of the school in August where my students greeted me. That September, I gave a lecture about my bike ride and bullying in September of that year. Not all advocacy works. In December of the same year, one of my students, committed suicide on Christmas Eve. I had spoken about various forms of “self-bullying” (or non-suicidal self injury) in my presentation. My student Michael caught me on the stairs and said, “Great talk, Mr. Gregory!” with his typical winning charm. I taught Michael every day for four months before he took his life. For the rest of the year, I taught in the wake of his death, as students were excused to see the school psychologist take part in group therapy. I also allowed students to eat in class whenever they asked. I dropped any work from the curriculum that had to do with death. Last, for the annual Coffeehouse, which featured anthropology research. Any time researchers speak for others, they selectively choose data, and often use these data to prove what they already believe. Though it is impossible to represent others in any way that is remotely unbiased or somehow self-determined, I do want to offer that I am aware of these dynamics, and know that they certainly played themselves out in this dissertation, regardless of my own meta-cognitive attempts at mollifying these effects.
performance and poetry, dance and film, I worked to coach students to produce philosophical sketch comedy. From start to finish. Just some laughter therapy.... (Kelvin O’Grady, personal communication, October 15, 2017)

Jacob: Fun things: I have helped direct/produce 7 high school plays, I once played (very amateurishly) the mandolin in an Irish folk music group called The Boys from Ballykill Ferret, I played Macbeth (terribly) as an 8th grader. I have been teaching English for 20 years. I am married with 3 kids. I love Premier League Football (but am deeply confused about what club to support). I have seen all but eight of Shakespeare’s plays. I love carpentry, woodworking. I have made my own furniture. I have gutted and rebuilt a house. I have helped to build a cabin in the woods. I used to be able to speak Lakota. I used to be able to read Greek. How am I doing? (Jacob Tenure, personal communication, October 17, 2017)

Tanya: Hey there! Here’s a bundle of details: sometimes vegetarian, yoga enthusiast, prefers IPA beer, unapologetic feminist, speaks conversational Polish, lapsed Catholic. Is that the kind of stuff you’re looking for? Or do you want a quirky/formative anecdote from my youth? (Tanya Leicester, personal communication, October 17, 2017)

Casey: Hi!! Well, I’m the second of five kids and a proud redhead. Stuff like that? Or more academic? Favorite books are governess tales like Jane Eyre and Agnes Grey. I like to run races with my dad. I have lived in NYC, Boston, and DC and Boca during my twenties. My favorite candy is a Heath Bar. (Casey Edison, personal communication, October 17, 2017)

You can choose to take from those statements what you will. I am, after all, on the verge, potentially, of forever shaping them in your imagination. Whatever I proceed to write about the work we did together, the insights they came up with, their certainties and uncertainties, knowledges and big questions, invariably are destined to slide into the bindings of this research study.

They will forever be my companions along this long and winding road. As much as they were participants in my study, they are also friends, and I continue to be in touch with basically all of them. Without further ado, here’s our work together—what it was and how it came to be.
Chapter V
GETTING TO WORK

A Reversal of Fortune

Julia Martin, the school’s guidance counselor, sits in her second floor office. It’s 9 A.M., and she’s just placed her lips to the first taste of morning coffee. “Ahhh,” the bold, aromatic richness of organic, fair trade ground beans slides easily over her tongue and down her throat. It’s been a long week—a depressive teenager hinting at suicide. “Is he testing her, or is this the real deal?” An Upper East Side mother who can’t understand why she needs to back off. “I’m paying $45,000 a year. I have a right to know what my daughter talks about in her sessions.” Are you doing enough to help my child.... The words play like a broken record in Julia’s mind. “Maybe if you were better parents, they wouldn’t need therapy.” God, she wishes she could say it.

But today, Julia Martin gets to sip her morning coffee. Her first session isn’t until 9:30 A.M., so she has the 30-minute luxury of logging on to her desktop, checking and responding to a few casual emails, and even taking a couple minutes to guiltily scroll through her Facebook feed and “like” some of her friends’ posts. Maya recently had her second baby. “What a cutie!” Julia raises the cup to her lips again and relaxes the throat, as the bold, warm taste of Perk’s finely ground slides down her esophagus and settles into her stomach.

Suddenly, and without warning, a herd of frantic English teachers come storming into her office. They don’t knock. They ambuscade. And the sudden, un-forewarned interruption
shocks Julia, causing her bum to jump out of her seat, her pupils to dilate, and her heart to race.

“What’s going on?”

Mr. Pepperdine, Dr. Winslow, Mrs. Liverwurt, and Allan Foster, a student teacher who is getting his masters at New York University, stand erect, in a horizontal line, gazing at her.

“What’s the matter?” Martin repeats. “It’s King Lear.”

Julia’s head shifts back in confusion.

“Act 3 scene 5, where Lear, the Fool, Edgar, Kent, and Gloucester congregate in the hovel.”

“What about it?” Julia is shaking her head in confusion.

“We need you to explain it to us RIGHT NOW!?”

She pauses for a moment, trying to take it all in. “Explain what?”

“The hovel scene. Haven’t you been listening?! Tell us how to make sense of the text!”

Julia looks from one face to the next, examining the psychological tension brought forward from her English Department.

“You want me to analyze King Lear for you?”

“Not the whole play—but the hovel scene. Please, you must hurry. This is urgent.”

Julia scratches her head and sits dumbfounded.

“But I’m not an—”

“Please! We don’t have time for vacillation. This is critical! We need an analysis NOW!!!”

“But I’ve never read the play. The last time I read Shakespeare I was 17, and I didn’t understand it then.”

Dr. Winslow’s mouth opens, aghast. Mrs. Liverwurt shakes her head, confounded. Even young Allan Foster seems perplexed.

“But aren’t you the school counselor?” this comes from Mr. Pepperdine. “Yes.”

“Then analyze the scene. NOW! Immediately!”
“But that’s not part of my job description! I don’t understand what’s going on!”

Dr. Winslow places a copy of Lear on Julia Martin’s desk. She looks at it, dumbfounded, as members of the English Department stare at her expectantly.

*   *   *

Sound crazy? Farcical? Theater of the absurd? It is—intentionally so. But if you think about it, it’s not so different from what certain institutions are asking of English teachers. Expecting a school psychologist to spontaneously decode King Lear is about as unreasonable as asking an English teacher to understand and account for the mental health needs of a traumatized student.

Why am I bringing this up? When I began to engage in interview conversations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with English teachers about their feelings about trigger warnings, many expressed incredible discomfort with the new educational world order, in which some of them were being asked to spontaneously serve in the role of mental health professionals when they had originally been hired to teach English.

As trigger warnings have progressively gained popularity, and as more and more educational bureaucracies have strong-armed teachers into using them—at Drexel University, the school has a policy: “Professors who don’t use trigger warnings will be investigated” (Piper, 2016)—many teachers are feeling more and more pressure to assume responsibility for student psychological needs that extend well beyond the parameters of classroom content.

As I set out to engage in conversations with English teachers, I was amazed at how the feel of almost every interview conversation changed when I began to ask questions related to trigger warnings, trauma, and mental health. Most of them transformed suddenly, from highly accomplished, veteran English teachers into confused, disfluent, wordless neophytes—at a loss for piecing together the remarkably challenging task of understanding how teaching literature interacts with personal trauma. This confusion was particularly interesting to me. I will discuss it in greater detail later in the chapter. Without
saying too much more, I think it is safe to say that at least part of my interest in their confusion relates to the ways in which I, too, have felt perplexed and baffled by the discussion of literature, trigger warnings, and trauma. Going back to Freud’s iceberg theory, I’d argue that working within a domain that felt natural for them (literature and pedagogy), they were able to bank on conscious responses that felt ordered, clear, and self-sanctioned. But when I brought up trigger warnings and trauma, they, ironically, may have been unconsciously triggered, and therefore subject to perplexing responses that they, themselves, did not even know how to handle or make sense of. There is something about discussing trigger warnings and trauma that leaves most people I talk to at least partially mystified.

A Preliminary Background: The Masters Program

As I mentioned, my choice of seven participants was far from arbitrary. This was not a random sampling of U.S. English teachers. At the time that I engaged them in my research, each participant was a graduate student in English Education at an elite university in the northeast. Our work together consisted in total of two distinct meetings: the first, a 45-minute interview conversation that I conducted either in person or through video conference during the late spring and early summer of 2017; the second, a 3-hour focus group, in which I arranged for all seven participants to meet together with me in a conference room at the university on July 15, 2017. The initial conversation was designed to pull together a background on each participant, to discuss proclivities and pedagogical approaches for teaching literature, and finally to examine how trigger warnings, student trauma, and mental illness pose challenges to teaching literature in the classroom. I will discuss the specifics of the focus group in detail in Chapters VI and VII.

Each participant had been or was currently a student in a summer intensive graduate program designed for in-service English teachers seeking professional certification. The
program hosts 45-50 students each summer and is divided into three cohorts of approximately 15 students. It runs for three successive summers during three weeks each July and is buttressed by two online courses (one between year 1 and year 2, and one between year 2 and year 3). The program utilizes a cohort model, in which students go through all of their courses with the same group of students. It attracts English teachers from all over the world (Texas, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, Florida, Costa Rica, Massachusetts, and California, to name some). Since it is a residency program and courses run for seven hours each day, the students typically get to know both each other and their instructors deeply. Some of our students have described it as a rigorous form of summer camp for English teachers.

Since I taught two required courses in the program—a Seminar as well as a Drama course (the one Alison Scott had walked out of)—I knew the participants beyond the casual conferral of being the program’s head. I had taught all of them at least one course. I had had two of my participants (Alaina and Jacob) for two courses.

During recruitment for the study, I chose to keep the topic of the research vague. The consent form for the study conveyed that I was researching methodologies for teaching complex literary texts. I’m not certain what they imagined I was researching. Some conveyed that they thought I might be examining aesthetic education. Others thought drama. I did know how several of them thought about trigger warnings. That spring, Casey, Tanya, Laura, and Sarah had been enrolled in my online seminar course, in which we examined various pedagogical approaches for teaching writing and reading. During the reading portion of the course, I had devoted a week to the TW topic. I’d given them three articles—one in favor of TW’s, one opposed, and one somewhere in-between. I’d asked them to use the articles to form and write about where they stood on the matter. Prior to entrance into the study, Casey and Sarah had written in vehement opposition to the practice. Tanya had expressed ambivalence, and Laura had supported them.
With Kelvin, Jacob, and Alaina, although we had never directly discussed trigger warnings leading into the study, I knew them well enough (I thought!) to reasonably predict where they stood in regard to trigger warnings. I anticipated that all three opposed the practice. I was wrong. Once the conversation began, Alaina, who I conversed with first in May of 2017, expressed her belief that trigger warnings were beneficial. She relayed that trigger warnings exist “because we can never predict the emotional reaction a child—or even an adult—could have to a work of literature or to art.” She continued: “I think trigger warnings exist to also foster conversation ... trigger warnings can allow students to access difficult material. A way in, rather than a way out” (Alaina Granford, personal communication, May 18, 2017).

Her response genuinely surprised me. Of almost any teacher I have ever known, Alaina is one of the most courageous, daring, avant-garde and adventurous. Born in Athens, she attended elementary school in Casablanca. After graduating from Wellesley College, she took a job teaching English among Boston’s inner city youth—a troubled population, many of whom were in and out of juvenile court. And then, because that wasn’t intense enough, she decided to take a position teaching English at the American School in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. She went to a nation where women are not allowed to drive, are urged to cover their heads and faces in public, and she taught Saudis and American expats Hamlet, The Scarlet Letter, and Huck Finn atop desert sands and under Arabian stars.

If there was anybody among the group I thought would vehemently oppose trigger warnings, it was the bold, courageous, and audacious Alaina. And yet I was wrong. She believed in them. Used them. Thought they were a necessary tool in the English classroom. Sitting in my backyard, where I conversed with her that early spring evening in the middle of May, I remember feeling the need to constrain my astonishment, as she began to pontificate over the values of trigger warnings. It was not the last time during the study that one of the participants would completely shock me and force me to reconsider my own assumptions.
More Method Madness

Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t.
— William Shakespeare, Hamlet

I planned for the initial one-on-one interview conversations to run approximately 45 minutes; in actuality, they ranged from 38 to 50 minutes. I ran a relatively identical question sequence with each participant, deviating slightly depending on the specific nature of each one’s answers. Some responses prompted me to ask follow-up questions. Some didn’t. As I mentioned previously when discussing Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), I did not share my own perspectives on the questions I asked.

In an effort to remain as neutral as possible, I informed the participants at the top of the interview that I would refrain from sharing my view. When participants expressed views that aligned with my own, I did not encourage them. When they expressed views that opposed mine, I did not challenge them. To the extent that it was possible given the parameters of qualitative research, I wanted them to experience freedom of thought within the confines of the conversation. I think in some ways this occurred, and in others it did not.

Breaking Down the Interview Questions

The initial 45-minute conversation centered around approximately 22 questions, roughly divided into the following subgroups:

Questions 1-5 intended to:

a) elicit a background on each teacher's experience in the field
b) develop an understanding of each teacher’s pedagogical approach around literature
c) establish a baseline for how each teacher practices literary instruction in a classroom setting.
Examples from Questions 1-5 include:

1. How long have you been teaching and in what contexts?
2. How would you describe your methodology for teaching literature?
3. Is aesthetic experience important to your teaching of literature practices?

Questions 6-15 home-in more deliberately on trigger warnings. These questions aimed to determine:

a) where each participant stands in the trigger warning debate
b) whether and how they use them in the classroom setting
c) whether there is bureaucratic or social pressure at their schools to implement them.

Questions 16-22 aim to establish what, if anything, participants know about trauma:

a) how trauma affects students
b) how it gets activated
c) how pervasive it is
d) what happens to the brains of traumatized students when they get triggered by literature.¹

In my imagination, I designed the conversation so that it would begin with the familiar and move progressively deeper into complexity, ambiguity, and the unknown—emotionally surprising content that might shake the participants out of their comfort zones and stimulate unconscious. In general, it was fascinating to experience the profound shift that took place among almost every participant, as he or she moved from ease of expression and knowledge (related to the first batch of questions) into progressively more confusion and ambivalence.

When participants answered questions related to their foundations as English teachers—pedagogical intentions for teaching literature, for instance—almost every

¹A complete list of conversation questions is available in the Appendix.
participant responded with ease, fluidity, and heart knowledge of the domain in question. I think these were conscious responses readily available to each participant. Yet by the time participants were answering questions related to trauma and neurology (Questions 16-22), almost every response became stilted, fragmented, awkward, or unintelligible. Since participants were English teachers and not psychotherapists, social workers, or school counselors, the chasm makes perfect sense, and I believe illustrates several key problems that I will home in on more specifically and expansively, as I move through a close analysis of participant responses.

Analysis: Making Sense of the Conversations

Discomfort and Confusion

Both during the interviews themselves, and then, even more remarkably, when I sat down to make sense of the conversations in mid-July, I could not help but notice the incredible discomfort many of the participants seemed to experience when I asked them to weigh in on student trauma and brain neurology.

Kelvin O’Grady is a doctoral student with over 15 years of teaching experience in the classroom. He began his career as a substitute teacher for over 20 different schools in New York City, teaching all subjects, grades K-12. Following a year and a half as a substitute, Kelvin got a job teaching English at a Christian private school in Manhattan, where he stayed for over a decade. He has a masters from Middlebury’s prestigious Bread Loaf program and also has extensive training in the Harkness method.

If you asked him about Plato, Shakespeare, Sylvia Plath, or Maya Angelou, he could speak for three hours—probably longer. Kelvin is remarkably eloquent. I distinctly remember the first time I met him, in early July of 2014, when he arrived for orientation. Sitting among a group of fellow graduate students, Kelvin introduced himself, talked about his background, and then launched into a mini-discourse centered around his teaching
practices, philosophical beliefs of the classroom, and educational design principles. I felt like I wanted to take notes. He is a remarkably gifted thinker and orator, even by Ivy League graduate level standards. Kelvin has the type of mind that you follow with wonder, like Rimsky-Korsakov’s bumblebee, knowing there’s a good chance that he’ll say something you hadn’t quite articulated as well.

The first 13 minutes of our initial conversation felt fluid. He economically sped through a background of his teaching life. Because, I think, these answers were readily available to his conscious mind, he beautifully articulated how he teaches literature, where shock, arousal, and aesthetic experience factor into his approach, and when, if ever, he uses drama in the English classroom. But at 13 minutes, I asked him, “How do you feel about trigger warnings?” and then the tone of the conversation shifted.

“For high school or college?”

I told him that he could answer for either.

Kelvin relayed that he grew up in a culture where trigger warnings did not exist. Like many of us, Kelvin went through high school and college in a world where teachers made choices and students followed. During Kelvin’s adolescent and young adult life, which occurred during the ’80s and early ’90s, the type of two-way classroom politics that have surfaced in the past decade did not exist. For the most part, teachers led and students followed. As with many of us who graduated from college in the ’90s, the trigger warning was a recent actor on the stage of classroom experience.

“I haven’t practiced them yet, but I probably should have,” Kelvin stated, breaking into laughter.

I probably should have.... This seemed like an interesting moment to linger on. From a psychoanalytic perspective, what was “I probably should have” relaying about Kelvin’s thinking that wasn’t 100% overt or intentional? On the one hand, he felt comfortable enough to say he didn’t use them. On the other hand, was he expressing guilt, or perhaps
feeling shameful and compelled to admit that he was violating expected practices? Did he think I use them? Or was “I probably should have” his way of covering his bases?

Given their tie-in to human trauma, trigger warnings are a polarizing issue in today’s educational climate. If Kelvin publicly states that he doesn’t use them, does he fear that he potentially gets lumped in with the other witches of our profession who “damage” students by traumatizing them with books? I wonder: Kelvin knows me pretty well, but does he know me well enough to trust me completely with what he can and cannot relay? Later in this conversation, his fears about being fully transparent become more overt. But at this early stage in the interview, where he is potentially still feeling me out ... who knows exactly what he is thinking? This type of awkwardness seems quite common among educators when it comes to what they say or do not say about trigger warnings. Given the current trigger-vigilant, politically correct climate on ostensibly ‘progressive’ campuses, many English teachers feel that anything they say ‘can and will be used against them in the court of....’ I think Kelvin was covering his bases. Maybe I’m wrong.

I pressed Kelvin to explain why he felt like he ‘should have’ used them. He hesitated for a moment, and then responded by telling me the story of a past student who tragically committed suicide over Christmas break. Kelvin shared with me what occurred in the aftermath of the event: “I became extremely sensitive to the content that would raise those issues, and I started editing my English class.” Editing his class ... Kelvin told me that he stopped teaching Jane Eyre “because there was a death scene.... I avoided poems that had anything to do with death.... I started teaching more light-hearted works that were upbeat.” If you remember, Kelvin told a different version of this same story when I prompted him to tell me something “fun” about himself. It seemed like the event had made a deep impact on his life. Or maybe he was bringing it up because we were talking about trigger warnings.

While Kelvin told me about the modifications he had made to his teaching curriculum following his student’s suicide, I noted my own concern with how he had chosen to handle the event. While I understood his empathic response, another part of me fought against it:
there’s a reality that we cannot deny—people die. They died yesterday. They’ll die today. And they’re gonna die tomorrow. We, too, will die. The fact that death is inevitable does not make it any easier to stomach, but it still felt extreme to me that he would remove all literary texts alluding to death from his curriculum—especially since almost any canonical work is going to feature some form of death in some context. Removing potentially triggering content also presupposes that the curriculum will do harm rather than good. Perhaps the kids would have benefited from talking about the suicide? In any case, Kelvin was policing himself and seemed to feel compelled to do so. I also sensed some ambivalence around this, which became sparkingly clear in his next statement.

As Kelvin continued to discuss trigger warnings, he began to open up, and I sensed that he was on the verge of speaking about trigger warnings in a way he had previously refrained from doing. But, before opening up, he prefaced himself by saying, “Oh, um, God—I feel like I’m going to get into trouble, even by talking about something in opposition to trigger warnings.” *I feel like I’m going to get into trouble*.... Another pregnant moment potentially revealing a window into his unconscious. As somebody who had read ‘everything and anything’ all his life (his own admission), did he have an issue with the type of censorship or molly-coddling (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015) that trigger warnings can lead to in a classroom?

Kelvin was audibly uncomfortable, as he continued: “How do I feel about trigger warnings? Ha ha ha (he literally started laughing out loud, and it seemed like it was out of discomfort) ... I don’t think I should censor material because of it ... in high school....” But then he stopped himself again, refraining from saying what was on his mind. Perhaps he feared there could be consequences attached to his honesty. In his unconscious, did he wonder whether I was going to tell on him? Report him to his bureaucracy? He quickly shifted and wrapped it all up by reverting to an ignorant stance, which I know he does not have: “I don’t know. I’m not sure. Sorry.” I suspected that Kelvin was holding back.
Unconsciously, people often feel safer going along with expected norms rather than rebelling. Was there a rebel in Kelvin that he was debating sharing with me?

Probing further, I asked him why he thought trigger warnings existed. “Oy ... oyoyoy ... ah, ok, can I just speak freely?”

Can I just speak freely? Kelvin is about 10 years older than me, but, like a child, was asking for my permission. Plus, I’d already told him he should speak as freely or openly as he wished. He’d signed the consent form. He knew he would be anonymous. Unrecognizable. That had all been laid out as part of the parameters for the study. He had known me for a few years. We were friends, colleagues, doctoral classmates. When Trump had been elected in the fall of 2016, he had unflinchingly launched into a tirade, forecasting the evils that would befall America. No hold up. No checking in. Just down-the-line fastballs of anger, remorse, and fear. But here he was hesitating. He was seeking my permission to discourse honestly. Had the conversation around trigger warnings trumped Trump?!

I gave Kelvin assurance, reminding him that he would be unidentifiable in the research. Seemingly comforted by my granting him a green light he had been unwilling to grant himself, Kelvin launched into a much more complete, reasonable argument against the use of trigger warnings in the English classroom:

My opinion is in formation. My feeling is that trigger warnings emerged from a culture of victimization in the past 15 years.... victim culture has, as an accompaniment to it, a sensitivity to the student in place and time. And trigger warnings have emerged out of that..... To what extent are we coddling or over-parenting the classroom, versus sort of allowing space for the emotional content to exist when you deliver a work of literature?

What had been a jumble of uncertain ideas only moments earlier suddenly became a fully formed, comprehensive, and well-articulated response. This did not sound like a new idea. I think Kelvin had it all along but was concealing it from me, because he didn’t know whether he felt comfortable sharing it. Over the course of the moments leading up to his response, he seemed to have determined that he felt “safe”—that I did not have any intention of revealing him or going to war with him over his resistance. I suspect that Kelvin decided to
share with me what he really thought: that trigger warnings encourage a culture of victimization and run the danger of over-parenting or coddling students in the classroom—consistent with the arguments of Lukianoff and Haidt (2015).

I understood this perspective—had initially completely bought into it myself—but I wanted to know whether Kelvin believed there was anything about TW’s that might be legitimate or valuable given certain contexts or certain student traumatic histories. While reading Bessel Van der Kolk and Robert Stolorow (whom I will discuss in Chapters VIII to XI), my own views on trigger warnings had expanded. I had realized that students with highly complex trauma histories—like Alison Scott—may actually need special considerations. And so I presented this question to Kelvin: “What portion of trigger warnings are legitimately needed verses coddling?”

“You know, I grew up reading everything.....,” he began, and then paused for a solid 10 seconds. The pause did not feel unweighted. From a psychoanalytic perspective, a participant’s pauses and disfluencies during an interview can be deeply revealing:

We paid special attention to verbal disfluencies (e.g. “umms”, “ahhs”), pauses, questioning, and talk repairs. Sigmund Freud might have us think that such disfluencies categorically reveal unconscious desires or secrets. However, modern linguistic research suggests that disfluencies are just as likely to cue emotional arousal, stress, anxiety, embarrassment, deception, or added cognitive load—such as talking about something very complicated or never considered before (Erard, 2007). These talk junctures may instead indicate resistance, change, and flickers of transformation. (Tracy, 2012, p. 178)

So was Kelvin having a hard time suppressing his beliefs? Was this all new to him? Or was it arousing in a way that he had a hard time handling? I wondered whether this was making him angry, or whether he worried that something he was about to say would get him in trouble. Kelvin then suddenly backed off from his hesitation and stated assertively that these types of issues should be handled by the guidance counselor: “I would not want to be solely responsible as the adjudicator.... It should be legitimate as a psychiatric trigger, and not just an emotional trigger.”
I did not tell him so at the time, but I found myself deeply agreeing with what he said. An emotional trigger is good. As I discussed in Chapter II, scores of prominent scholars promote aesthetic engagement in the English classroom. Emotional responses are part of the transactional theories of Louise Rosenblatt, part of the transitional object conceptualizations of Cristina Bruns and Donald Winnicott, and part of the aesthetic experiences promoted by Maxine Greene. If *Beloved*, *Othello*, and *The Diary of Anne Frank* don’t trigger the emotions of our students, then are we screwing up as teachers?!

Emotional responses to literature can build attunement, enhance engagement, and augment the ‘I give a shit’ factor in the classroom (Rosenblatt, 1938). Furthermore, they can build resilience and strengthen our students—something that proponents of trigger warnings may be overlooking.

If Kelvin believed that trigger warnings had value, then he was lobbying for them in the context of *psychiatric triggers*—the type of involuntary, neurological reactions that Van der Kolk (2014) writes about extensively in *The Body Keeps Score* (to be discussed in Chapter IX). Overwhelming emotional responses—like Alison Scott’s response to the AT&T car crash commercial—are psychiatric triggers. Not coddling.

If emotional triggers foster engagement and help to build resilience, *psychiatric triggers* are all-consuming, hyper-arousing, and go beyond the type of stress threshold that feels productive within a classroom. As I will illustrate through Bessel van der Kolk’s PET scans in Chapter IX, psychiatric triggers often distance individuals from themselves, cause isolation, de-personalization, numbing, freeze-fractured psychological arrest, dissociation, etc.

During our conversation, Kelvin seemed to believe that an important difference existed between emotional and psychiatric triggers, so I questioned him further. “*What’s your definition of trauma?*” Trauma was, after all, what we were indirectly talking about, and what the trigger warning is supposed to protect against.
The disfluencies and pauses re-emerged. It took Kelvin 13 seconds to begin to answer the question. And then, even when he began, he quickly qualified his response by reminding me that he was answering the question “as an English teacher,” rather than as a mental health professional. This felt important. He seemed to feel the need to clarify that he is not an expert on trauma, nor should he be. Individuals usually don’t explicitly become English teachers to explore and better understand traumatic experience. That’s traditionally a domain for psychologists and psychiatrists. And even though Kelvin had had experience working with anti-bullying and anti-violence programs in schools, he knew he was doing his best to address questions that were far afield from his immediate expertise. Had I asked him a question about Dante’s Inferno, for instance, I don’t think he would have been nearly so disfluent.

Kelvin defined trauma as anything that features self-attack, abuse of alcohol or drugs. Cutting. Trauma is something that continues “living in the body and living on the body.” He then stopped suddenly, looked at me through our video conference screen, and said, “Adam, these are really hard questions!” And he’s right. They are very hard. So hard, in fact, that I deemed them worthy of a dissertation. In every way that Kelvin had been disfluent, ambivalent, and stymied, I had been, too. I will say that, from my standpoint, interviewing Kelvin was helping me to wade through the intense ambiguities and intractable mire. We pressed further into the heart of darkness.

We were a little more than half an hour into the interview conversation when I asked him, “What do you think happens to a student with a trauma history when he or she is triggered in an English classroom?”

Kelvin didn’t respond for 35 seconds. 35 seconds…. The world record for the 100-meter dash is a quarter that length. NBA players get 24 seconds per possession to take a shot. The Earth revolves around the Sun more than 1000 kilometers in that time period. In fact, here is a brief list of things you can do in 30 seconds:

1. Order a meal
2. Add a few songs to Spotify
3. Gift someone an album
4. Donate to charity
5. Play hide and seek with a child
6. Empty the trash
7. Pay a bill

You get the point. Thirty-five seconds is a long time to wait in silence. But that's what I did. As Kelvin struggled to stitch together a verbal response that felt cohesive enough, I waited—computer on lap, butt on leather sofa, earbuds in ears. Kelvin initiated and then abandoned several potential responses. This was the most I had seen him struggle to come up with an answer. His words came at me in piecemeal, half-baked, and incomplete utterances. All in all, it took Kelvin almost 4 minutes of searching through this question, before finally stating that he felt that this was a question “for a study”—which we were, in fact, engaged in. I interpreted his implication to mean that the question demanded more thorough inquiry and investigation than this interview alone could account for. He did conclude with some degree of clarity, utilizing some psychoanalytic jargon to explain what might happen to a ‘triggered student’.

The problem, here, is that students are not self-aware creatures, so there is a lot of transference and projection, so students might pick a fight with me when they’re really triggered about something else.

The idea that students—not just students, but in fact many people—might not be self-aware or self-reflexive enough to recognize or understand their own triggers seems very important. As I will discuss in Chapter IX, when people get triggered, they often ramp into unconscious, defensive, and involuntary emotional and neurological behavior and feelings that they don’t understand. The fact that Kelvin recognized that felt important to me, but it also highlighted a key concern: if triggered students don’t know what they’re feeling when they get triggered, and teachers don’t know how to handle students when they’re triggered,
then education legitimately faces a circumstance where the blind are leading the blind. And yet this cacophonous entropy may be where things currently stand in many higher ed classrooms nationally.

Kelvin and I were about 40 minutes into the interview. I had one more question. Based on his previous responses, I wondered whether this would knock him for a loop. I asked him anyway. "Any idea about what happens to the brain of somebody who has suffered trauma and gets triggered?"

"Oyoyoy!" Kelvin burst into hearty laughter. "Why are you asking a non-qualified person to analyze this!? Um.... Um...."

Unlike the trigger warning question, which he had shied away from answering before providing me with quite a detailed and eloquent response, Kelvin genuinely seemed to struggle to answer this question. I thought this was reasonable. He’s an English teacher—not a trauma expert. Of the seven participants I conversed with, not one was able to provide a thorough, well-informed response to the question of how trauma impacts the brain. And none should have been able to! Below are sample participant responses to this question:

**Casey:** Um, oh, interesting! Only from college psychology ... but I don’t know very much physiologically.

**Alex:** I wouldn’t say that I could discuss the biochemistry of that.

**Karen:** Um, what happens to the brain ... um.... I guess I don’t really have too much knowledge of what happens to the brain—I mean, I know that the trigger can like ... can sort of put us back in the ... the emotional state of the original trauma—I mean, I guess I would assume that. I don’t know that.

Two of the participants mentioned specific brain regions that might get activated (the amygdala) or de-activated (Broca’s region). Otherwise, almost every response was tethered to significant confusion, embarrassment, or total lack of knowledge.

In the same way that my fictional tale of Julia Martin (school guidance counselor) felt farcical and theater of the absurd when she was expected to decode a scene from *King Lear,*
it is my belief that English teachers should not be expected to serve as therapists for
individual students with trauma histories. But in today’s hyper-vigilant educational
climate, this is often what they are being asked to do, as the boundaries between
therapeutic classrooms\(^2\) and individual therapy are too often getting problematically
blurred. As I will discuss in Chapter VII, the teachers felt strongly that clearer lines and
limits need to be established, as many English teachers are being asked to understand and
account for psychological issues far more complex than what they bargained for.

**Confusion Abounding**

'Tis the times’ plague, when madmen lead the blind.
— Shakespeare, 2002

The confusion, disfluencies, pauses, and ambiguity (Tracy, 2012) that I witnessed
during my conversation with Kelvin were played out, to a greater or lesser degree, in each
of the seven conversations. As interviewer and therefore master of the discourse (Kvale &
Brinkmann, 2009), I’d be lying if I said that I hadn’t anticipated some of this. But the extent
to which it occurred greatly exceeded my expectations. Of the approximately 22 questions I
asked each teacher, 4 questions, in particular, ‘triggered’ incomplete, fragmented,
ambivalent, or disoriented responses among almost every participant. The questions were:

1) *How do you feel about trigger warnings?* (question number 6 in the conversation)
2) *What is your definition of trauma?* (question 17)
3) *What percentage, approximately, of your students do you think have been
   traumatized?* (question 19)
4) *Any ideas or knowledge about what happens to the brain of people who have
   suffered trauma?* (question 25)

Admittedly, when I came up with these questions, I had a sense that they might stymie
some of my participants. They are jarring questions, and I actually wondered whether they

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\(^2\)Recall that I am defining therapeutic as growth-promoting and resilience-building.
would trigger unconscious responses. As I mentioned, my interest in the fragmented nature of their responses certainly may be influenced by my own perplexities, questions, and confusions surrounding these issues.

Though English teachers read literature that deals with trauma, questions about the specific nature of trauma and neurology typically belong to the field of mental health. So in some ways, I was trying to surprise them. But it was more than that. I was also trying to illustrate how unfair this entire topic is. As I mentioned near the introduction to this chapter, English teachers are now being asked to serve in the role of mental health professionals. Is this a fair expectation? Why are English teachers being asked to play the role that therapists play?

During the time I had known them prior to the study, the teachers I interviewed did not tend to stumble upon words or lack for answers. And they were not neophytes—first- or second-year teachers struggling to piece together the complicated architecture of mapping curricular aims to pedagogical motives and classroom management. This group of seasoned professionals held approximately 70 years of teaching experience among them. Some were department heads at elite private schools. Some had given major presentations at prestigious national conferences. And any of them, I would argue, could have skillfully and effectively worked with any number of student groups in any number of academic contexts. And yet, when I asked them the above four questions, these sophist bards of literary lore suddenly dissolved into awkward, tenuous, elusive amateurs, held hostage by questions that dragged them into professional concerns they did not feel competent to address.

Remember Jacob? Jacob grew up in South Dakota. He's the one who played the role of Macbeth in his eighth grade play. Jacob has been teaching English for 20 years and is currently the chair of his boarding school's English Department. He loves Premier League Football, but is "deeply confused about what club to support." For my Drama course, Jacob rehearsed and performed a scene from Twelfth Night. He is a deep lover of language, a
wonderful conversationalist, and an earnest, determined soul. Like Kelvin—and, in fact, like many of the participants, he typically speaks with great eloquence and rarely stumbles upon his ideas.

While exploring whether he believed he had worked with traumatized students who needed trigger warnings—literally needed, rather than simply wanted them—Jacob explained that while he could easily imagine that there might be students with trauma histories that made them contextually incapable of dealing with a particular text (like Beloved, for instance, which deals with rape), he next stated, “But I don’t know how to identify them, and sort them out from students who” don’t have psychiatric triggers.

So Jacob was acknowledging that there were likely to be trauma survivors in his classroom. But when I asked him directly, “To your knowledge, have you ever worked with a traumatized student?”—which I did about 30 minutes into the conversation—Jacob’s response startled me. He responded that he doesn’t believe he has ever worked directly with a student with a significant traumatic history. He did state that he believes he has worked with students whose emotions are not “as healthy as we’d like them to be.”

Jacob has been teaching for 20 years. Let’s assume that every year Jacob teaches four or five courses, each including roughly 20 students. That means that on a yearly basis, Jacob is responsible for 80-100 students. Over 20 years, we’re talking about 1,600-2,000 adolescents. Bessel van der Kolk (2014) cites trauma statistics for the U.S. population. I will discuss these in more depth in Chapter IX. If we use van der Kolk’s statistics as a reference point, we can deduce that 500-800 of Jacob’s students would have experienced some form of impact trauma (rape, child abuse, alcoholic relatives, etc.)—and that does not even account for more subtle, pervasive forms of trauma, such as relational trauma and the trauma of everyday life (also to be discussed in Chapter IX). And Jacob, here, is stating that he isn’t certain that he’s ever taught anybody with a significant trauma history. In the Body Keeps the Score, Van der Kolk relays that “experts” used to believe that 1 in 1.1M people experienced incest—a gross under-representation. Recent statistics now indicate that 15%
of Americans suffer from some form of sexual violation in their families; and that statistic does not even account for what happens outside the family.

I followed up Jacob’s response with the following question: “What percentage of your students over the years have been traumatized?” Recall, only two minutes earlier he had stated his belief that he had never worked with a significantly traumatized individual. The lack of cohesion in Jacob’s response, again, stunned me. The same person who had moments before told me that he had never taught a traumatized student speculated that perhaps “70-80%” of his students had suffered some form of trauma. He then added that it depended on “how we define trauma.”

What did these ambiguities and inconsistencies say about Jacob? Was the discussion of trauma brand new for him? Was it so arousing that he felt overloaded and therefore incapable of giving consistent responses (Tracy, 2012)? Did he have his own trauma that was somehow getting unconsciously triggered and interfering with the discourse?3

This type of contradictory ambivalence was prevalent during so many moments, within so many of the conversations. Alaina Granford, for instance—the bold, charismatic, yogi zealot who’d spent five years teaching in Saudi Arabia—claimed during our initial conversation that she uses and believes in trigger warnings. Remember: she sat in my backyard and extolled trigger warnings, because they “foster conversation ... allow students to access difficult material. A way in, rather than a way out.” On four or five occasions during the conversation, she extolled the value of trigger warnings, ardently lobbying for them.

And yet a month later, after I had completed the research—actually, the evening following the focus group—Alaina wrote me a completely unsolicited email in which she stated:

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3I did not ask any of my participants about anything related to their own traumas. I saw that as a violation of their privacy. But I did wonder how any of their own traumatic psychological content might be getting unconsciously activated and thereby participating in the discourse.
Will I offer up trigger warnings to my students regardless of what I know or don't know about their experiences? Will I seek to adapt my teaching techniques to demonstrate a more "aware" and sensitive mindset to those students of mine who may be suffering beneath the surface?

Honestly?

No.

I won't provide my students with trigger warnings. Even though I have been very stirred by your study and the information you've provided me with and my recent experiences in teaching students here in NYC who have reacted to material in my classroom as a result of past traumas, I will continue to teach difficult and sensitive material to my students. (Alaina Granford, personal communication, July 15, 2017)

I started laughing when I read her email. Not only did this blatantly contradict what she had repeatedly stated in our initial interview conversation (that she believed in and practiced trigger warnings), but it also somehow erroneously assumed that the purpose of my research was to make a strong case for the use of trigger warnings. As I believe I have conveyed multiple times already in this dissertation, I don't use trigger warnings in the classroom. I think there are other, “better” ways to offer students a feeling of safety, while not compromising the jarring impact of aesthetic interactions with text. But Alaina had determined that my research directly lobbied for TW’s. I do not fault her for her assumption—I can understand why she came to this conclusion. I think, more than anything else, that it highlights how pervasive the confusion among educators is regarding this collision of realities that has turned a large number of classrooms upside down in recent years.

Other instances of confusion and ambivalence reigned. Tanya Leicester is an elementary school teacher who has taught in New Jersey for the past seven years. She typically carries herself in a fun, light-hearted manner. Often worries, but doesn't want to upset others with her concerns. Tanya self-describes herself as being a “sometimes vegetarian, yoga enthusiast (who) prefers IPA beer” (Tanya Leicester, personal
communication, October 17, 2017). She’s an “unapologetic feminist [who] speaks conversational Polish.” She confesses (no pun intended) that she is a “lapsed Catholic.” I always enjoyed my conversations with Tanya, finding her soulful, upbeat, and curious. Among the participant group, she had a personal investment in psychology. Over the years, we had some great discussions about the relationship between literature and psychotherapy.

When I asked Tanya how she felt about trigger warnings, she responded by saying:

Yeah, like, ah, I’m still so ambivalent about them, um…. Because I feel like there is this element of like, just kind of like the whole millennial thing of like cherishing being shocked or outraged and like a little bit tired and annoying.

But no sooner had these words come out, then she quickly shifted, qualifying her statement by acknowledging that she is an emotional person who recognizes that people do have complex psychological histories. She relayed that she can understand that, at times, certain students get overwhelmed, and may indeed realistically be incapable of handling a text at a given moment. She also acknowledges that she herself gets triggered at times, has had to excuse herself to go to the bathroom during particularly intense literary experiences during her graduate work, and sometimes “needs to take some deep breaths.”

**Two Clarity Caveats**

Although I have been highlighting much of the ambivalence and confusion that resulted from several of my conversation questions, I do want to point out that two participants, Laura Benison and Tanya Leicester, did seem more comfortable than the rest when fielding questions related to trauma. Laura works at a therapeutic boarding school in Central America. One hundred percent of her students have failed at traditional schools and come to her boarding school seeking rehabilitation prior to returning to more mainstream schooling. Laura’s school, which focuses on wilderness therapy, services a student population suffering from substance abuse, ADHD, ADD, executive functioning difficulties,
slow-processing speed, depression, anxiety, dyslexia, dysgraphia, etc. As part of their rehab, each of Laura’s students gets assigned a therapist. Each also engages in some form of group therapy. I think it is reasonable to say that trauma, recovery, and emotional stress are far more closely tied into the vocabulary and culture of her school than they are at traditional educational institutions. As a general rule, Laura fielded my questions—whether they dealt with literature and pedagogy, or triggered warnings, trauma, and stress—with relative equanimity and consistency.

Laura is not a licensed psychologist, but she practices pedagogy at a school that requires teachers to be versed in the language of both English and therapy. It is also worth noting that she has conducted her own fairly comprehensive research on trigger warnings, interviewing her own students and running a focus group in which she explored the relative value of trigger warnings in the English classroom. From my conversations with Laura, I became aware that she had read a substantial amount both in favor and in opposition to trigger warning use. Though she admitted that she still wrestled with exactly how she felt about TW’s, she did say that she uses them and sees them as something that “can’t really do much harm.”

Tanya was the other participant who handled several of my trauma questions with an ease that contrasted sharply with the uncertainty of most of the other participants. When I asked Tanya whether she knew what happened to the brain of a traumatized person—the question that most offset the other teachers—she responded with surprising clarity: “Somehow it alters you and your brain waves, and your identity, and your sense of self, in a way that changes your worldview, changes the way you feel about yourself, changes all your relationships.” I cannot play you her voice, so that you can hear her tone, but Tanya’s response was even, thoughtful, and possessed of a heart knowledge most of the other

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4Laura conducted this research as her final project for my Seminar course in her graduate program.
participants lacked. Remember Kelvin, who broke into “Oyoyo!” followed by hearty laughter, followed by “Why are you asking a non-qualified person to analyze this!?” or Jacob Tenure, who took almost 3 minutes to answer one of the questions. When I asked Tanya what happens to the brain of a traumatized person, her gaze shifted slightly to the side, as if to summon some previously considered knowledge. She then began to shake her head up and down and delivered the answer you just read.

When I asked Tanya what happens to an individual with a trauma history when they get triggered, she again was able to reply clarity:

I think just automatically fight, flight, fight, flight or freeze response—you know, prefrontal cortex shuts down and the amygdala kind of takes over. They might not really be hearing or processing things rationally at all; they’re just kind of in a purely self-protective state. So then you’re not really absorbing anything, you’re not learning anything. You’re just like ‘I need to, um, yeah, whatever’ … Self-protective. And self-protection is probably a huge impediment to learning because you can’t really let go of yourself and lose yourself if you’re, you know, being self-protective.

Her responses lacked the disfluencies that Tracy (2012) discusses. Tanya knew that trauma alters the brain. She mentioned meditation as a therapeutic practice that teachers can use to help calm trauma survivors. She referred to it as a “bicep curl for your brain.” It was fairly clear to me that Tanya was not coming up with these responses on the spot. She had thought about this before and, unlike Kelvin, did not seem concerned with how I might judge or assess her answers. And then, in the course of the conversation, she mentioned a book. It didn’t come to her right away, “something about the body.” “The Body Keeps the Score?” I asked, “by van der Kolk?” “Yes! That’s the one!” Tanya had read it. So she knew this language.

More about Tanya

There was more to the Tanya story. When Tanya initially applied to our program, she wrote one of the most compelling application essays I read while I was Coordinator. The
prompt was: *Why did you become an English teacher and why are you choosing to apply to our program?* Unlike many standard responses, Tanya started her essay by describing her personal history with an abusive ex-husband. Her essay actually begins with her in her car, fleeing from that abusive marriage and beginning a new life for herself. I am including an excerpt from that piece below:

> On January 5th 2012, I hit the reset button on my life.

> I went to bed the evening before feeling certain that I would leave my husband. I was tiring of his violent outbursts and felt increasingly unsafe in our home. We had been a couple since our junior year, married for just over three. During our brief marriage, my whole being—mind, body, and soul—became anesthetized. Somehow, I had come to exist only within the margins of my husband’s life, and I failed to be present in the center of my own. What I didn’t realize at the time was that I was stuck in a virulent cycle of domestic abuse.

> I was the proverbial frog in the pot of boiling water—I had lost all perspective as I simmered on the stove.

> The next morning, after my husband left for work, I loaded my Toyota Camry with a packed suitcase and my document filing box. I drove to my parents’ home in Connecticut, swearing that I would never cross the Mason Dixon line again. (Tanya Leicester, March 12, 2016)

So Tanya’s knowledge of trauma, emotional triggers, recovery, and healing was not simply academic. Like many of us, I would imagine, she has endured a personal trauma that necessitated a type of reckoning, a coming to awareness, a healing, a recovery, a learning, etc. I wondered whether Tanya’s personal experience with trauma may better serve her as an educator when a student in her classroom gets triggered or needs additional support. She seems to have done the work to learn, overcome, and get to a better place of self-possession, courage, and fortitude.

> Perhaps Tanya’s bout with domestic abuse had humanized her in a way that perhaps makes her a better, more patient, more considerate, and more empathic educator. I am not, of course, lobbying for trauma as a prerequisite to becoming a good teacher. I am also aware that large numbers of trauma survivors have a negative tendency either to repeat
their traumas (van der Kolk, & van der Hart, 1989)—what Freud referred to as repetition compulsion—or themselves become perpetrators of traumatizing acts. I am, however, suggesting that anybody who has endured trauma (and we know there are many of us out there) can learn to better understand the fragilities and sufferings of others. And, in some cases, our students can certainly benefit from our own reckoning.

**Hijacked Classroom and a Will for Separation**

The conversations among my seven participants highlighted more than simply confusion or clarity. There was something else I heard. It was repeated in several of the interviews and then appeared again during the focus group discussion. Some of these teachers seemed mad. They seemed angry that somehow their roles as English teachers had become conflated with the role traditionally occupied by a mental health professional—frustrated and aggravated by the kid gloves they now felt they needed to use when teaching some of the masterful works of the literary tradition (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). In their own words, these teachers had not produced the traumas they felt obliged to protect and service in their classrooms. They had nothing to do with these complex pasts. They wanted to teach *Romeo and Juliet*, not worry about triggering teen suicide. They wanted to analyze *Things Fall Apart*, not mediate racial tensions. They wanted to dramatize *Street Car Named Desire*, not worry about students’ histories of sexual molestation and rape.

Kelvin, in particular, was adamant that he was an English teacher, *not a therapist*. He repeatedly emphasized his belief that complex psychological issues should be handled as the purview of the school’s guidance department. And I wondered whether some of the disfluency and hesitations were concealing hyper-aroused or loaded feelings that he had not felt comfortable divulging (Tracy, 2012). Recall that when I asked him what percentage of student requests for trigger warnings were legitimate, versus a millennial form of
coddling, Kelvin started responding by saying, “You know, I grew up reading everything.” But then he had paused for a solid 10 seconds. And when he spoke again, he told me he thought this type of stuff needed to be handled by the school’s guidance department. In fact, *six times* throughout the conversation he overtly stated that psychiatric trauma was for a school’s guidance department.

Kelvin continued, “It should be legitimate as a psychiatric trigger, and not just an emotional trigger…. If your grandfather died 10 years ago, and we’re reading a story about the death of a dog, then…. I don’t know.” I could sense Kelvin’s frustration. Also some humor and mocking scorn, perhaps. He didn’t buy it. Of course, there are students who deserve and may require our added empathy and awareness—students like Alison Scott, who have real circumstances that can get triggered through engagement with certain types of literature. I don’t think Kelvin would deny this. But then there’s the other side of this—the precious, hyper-sensitive, millennial preciousness that Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) write about in their *Atlantic* article. The type of students that Edward Schlosser describes in his 2015 *Vox* article, “I’m a Liberal Professor, and My Liberal Students Terrify Me”:

The student-teacher dynamic has been re-envisioned along a line that’s simultaneously consumerist and hyper-protective, giving each and every student the ability to claim Grievous Harm in nearly any circumstance, after any affront, and to a teacher’s formal ability to respond to these claims is limited at best.

When I asked Kelvin to explain the origins of this hyper-protective environment, he responded by saying:

My feeling is that trigger warnings emerged from a culture of victimization in the past 15 years…. victim culture has, as an accompaniment to it, a sensitivity to the student in place and time. And trigger warnings have emerged out of that … to what extent are we coddling or over-parenting the classroom, verses sort of allowing space for the emotional content to exist when you deliver a work of literature?

Jacob Tenure was concerned about how trigger warnings were modifying the cultural dynamics in the classroom.
I am worried about getting to a point where.... Where students get to say I ... I have a right not to be disturbed in any way, or challenged in any way, emotionally.... Because it seems to me that that just closes down a lot of things that could be good, even for that student.... And I think that there’s emotional resilience that literature is very very good at helping us gain..... Or even just talking through difficult stories helps people gain a kind of emotional resilience. And so I do worry about our empowering students to avoid gaining that resilience.... I would not want to work in an environment where trigger warnings are kind of like sacred cows that can’t be questioned.

So beyond simply the threat that trigger warnings can create for teachers—often forcing them to navigate a thin red politico-academic line—Jacob was worried about how trigger warnings, and cultures that promote them, might be damaging students by depriving them of opportunities for building resilience and fortifying themselves, a perspective that Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) aggressively lobby for as well.

Sarah Pelham, a veteran educator who currently teaches high schoolers in Florida, was perhaps my most virulent anti-trigger warning objectionist: “You’re in this class to be uncomfortable ... living on the edge of their brain ... dealing with ideas that shake them up in some ways ... broken out of their own personal world.” This statement reminded me of something Professor Janet Miller said to our Narrative Research class at Teachers College: “Classrooms aren’t safe spaces. They’re dangerous spaces” (January 28, 2015). Sarah continued to explain her belief that the English classroom should be a place that creates “emotional loudness.” As Sarah continued to rail against the use of trigger warnings in the classroom, she made a profound point that I think needs to be explored more deeply among students, educators, and bureaucrats, when considering the type of curricula students get exposed to in the classroom: “I feel strongly that we are confusing comfort with safety.... I want my students to be safe. I don’t want them to be comfortable.” This reminded me of what Kelvin said about emotional triggers, which build strength and resilience, versus psychiatric triggers, which debilitate and threaten beyond what is healthy or reasonable. In Chapter IX, I will discuss optimal stress versus traumatic stress (Kohut, 1971).
It is my belief that for English teachers, and, in fact, any teachers, to do their jobs, they need to be able to push their students. In my worldview on teaching and education, this seems relatively undeniable. In the gym, athletes rip muscle fibers in order for tissue to grow stronger. Plants that live on the borderline connecting safe and hazardous terrain tend to thrive. Successful people tend to weather rejection. Stress does not seem optional—it is necessary (this is something that Bessel van der Kolk took up with me during his interview in Chapter XI). That being said, how hard and through what means we stress our students is certainly a question for debate. But if English teachers play it too safe with students and fail to push them for fear of damaging, fragmenting, or re-traumatizing them, are we diluting the teaching practice by disarming one of our best weapons?

Sarah’s concern, which Kelvin, Jacob, and many prominent scholars address, is that an educator’s will to defend or inoculate students from any of the myriad troubling downside potentials of what can occur when a student gets triggered must not override the far more common and valuable benefits that literary engagement has in the majority of circumstances. It is my belief that if we acknowledge that there may be some students in our classrooms that deserve and require special attention, given their personal traumatic histories, we must at the same time recognize that most students, most of the time, can handle—and likely will benefit from—psychological engagement with complex, emotionally intense literature.

Some kids break bones while playing at playgrounds. But most don’t. Furthermore, a park that is built so safe that no kid can injure himself likely poses an even greater risk to development. The Yerkes-Dodson Law maps the relationship between stress and performance. According to the law, individuals perform best when stressed within a certain range. Too little stress leads to limited performance, while too much stress overwhelms the individual and causes her to buckle.
As the diagram indicates, under-stimulated individuals under-perform. But as stress levels increase, individuals can move into a zone of optimal performance. Yet this, too, modifies, when more stress is added. When too much stress is placed on individuals, they cascade into excess anxiety and then become overwhelmed, distressed, and downright dysfunctional. It is worth noting that the range for tolerance of stress is specific for each student within the Yerkes-Dodson Law. We might imagine that, for previously traumatized students, the threshold after which performance breaks down may be far lower (van der Kolk, 2014).

Of course, there is no such thing as universal optimal stress. What works well for one student in one context may be too much or too little for another in a different context. The same is true, of course, for any particular group of students. Every classroom is its own organism, with its own culture, rule set, strengths, and weaknesses. A responsibility of the educator is to navigate the complexities and idiosyncratic features of his or her group, knowing that effective and ineffective moves may change even on a day-to-day basis.

That stress is an inevitable feature of any classroom seems undeniable to me. Without it, learning suffers. But how much stress, in what form, and through what means are important conversations I believe need to be taken up in depth. And this is what I did with my seven participants in the final phase of our work together.
Experiment Phase II: Workshop and Focus Group

On Saturday, July 15, 2017, I organized a focus group with my seven participants. During our three hours together, I presented them with a seminar in which I first diagramed theories and perspectives related to the value of literature (similar to what I presented in Chapter II of this dissertation). I then gave them an overview of trauma (analogous to what I will present in Chapters IX and X of this dissertation) and explained how it affects victims, both emotionally and neurologically. I then divided them into two groups (a four-person group and a three-person group) and asked them to work together to construct a model for how English educators might go about teaching complex, emotionally charged literary texts to a group of students, some of who may possess psychiatric triggers due to previous trauma.

In the following chapter, I’ll explain in more detail both the focus group and the ideas that these seven graduate students came up with as they worked together to do the seemingly impossible: give art its full-throttle representation, while at the same time attempting to ensure sufficient safety for the lurking traumas that await, raven-like, at the chamber doors of student experience.
Chapter VI

THE FOCUS GROUP

Figuring It Out

It’s important to consider that each child may have experienced trauma, which is different from treating all students as if they’re traumatized. (Sarah Pelham, personal communication, July 15th, 2017)

On July 15th, almost exactly two years removed from the original event that set this research into motion, I invited my seven participants to convene collectively for a three-hour focus group to be held at their university. Both in design and then in actuality, the initial interview conversations had served as a baseline—a preliminary opportunity for both me and my participants to gauge how they thought about working with literature in the context of student trauma. As I relayed in the previous chapter, one of the truly surprising findings of the initial conversations was how little most of the participants had known about trauma, its mechanisms, what happens to students when they get triggered, and how trauma impacts the brain. Given that the interviews may have planted these seeds for thought in the minds of each participants, and potentially moved them to think more about this highly complex and nuanced arena, I wondered whether bringing them together for a focus group and allowing them to work and think together—with more time and resources—might sharpen the focus on the problem and help both them and therefore me to gain insights that had eluded them when they were blind-sided by one-on-one questions.

Focus groups share many common features with less structured interviews, but there is more to them than merely collecting similar data from many participants at once. A focus group is a group discussion on a particular topic organised for research purposes. This discussion is guided, monitored and recorded by a researcher (sometimes called a moderator or facilitator).

(p. 293)

Since many of the participants knew each other already, and since even the ones who did not know each other directly were all current or past members of the same graduate program, I hoped their pre-established, collaborative group dynamics would foster healthful, generative conversations. As Gill et al. state: “pre-existing groups may be easier to recruit, have shared experiences and enjoy a comfort and familiarity which facilitates discussion or the ability to challenge each other comfortably” (p. 293).

Gill et al. (2008) claim that the focus group, which originated in practice in the 1940s in the “work of the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University” is a useful tool to “clarify, extend, qualify or challenge data collected through other methods” (p. 293). I was deeply curious how giving them an opportunity to work together and think for a second time about teaching literature to students with trauma might bring about as yet unexplored or reify previously partially conceived ideas. Given the highly complex and, at times, quite confounding nature of this particular problem, I believe multiple exposures to the core problem may greatly help tease out deeper and alternative ways of looking at the issue. I know during my own investigation into this area, I tend to see more, think more, and come away with both more certainty and more questions each time I attack it.

Given that the interviews had revealed so much confusion among participants in regard to the subject of trauma, its nature, and its ramifications, I determined that I would begin the focus group by offering a workshop in which I provided some psychoeducation around traumatic experience. If I was going to ask them to work together to build a model for teaching literature to classrooms peopled with trauma survivors, I decided it was important to provide them with a deeper understanding of trauma and its effects. During
this chapter and the one that follows, I will explain both the workshop I conducted and the subsequent focus group.

**Ellerson**

On a perfectly summery Saturday afternoon that had as little to do with trauma as anything I can potentially imagine, the group of participants convened on the third floor of Ellerson—a room directly across the hall from the English Education office, which had served as a secondary home for all of us over the course of several long years of study. My seven participants, each of whom had contributed to the study in relative isolation and separateness, suddenly became unmistakably visible and known to each other, sitting across a rectangular wooden table, acquainting and re-acquainting.

Sarah, Casey, Tanya, and Laura were enrolled in their second summer of the program. Jacob was in his final year. Alaina had graduated the previous summer, and Kelvin had transferred out into the doctoral program following his first summer. While most of their peers were wandering the streets of Manhattan, lying prostrate at the beach, or grabbing a much needed beer, my participants were generous enough to donate several hours of their life on a precious Saturday afternoon. There are many exciting things to do on any particular summer day. Of these, I’d imagine engaging in a group discussion about student trauma was not high on the list.

As with the initial interview conversation, I’d concealed the specific nature of our meeting. From the conversations and consent forms, perhaps they suspected that we were going to talk about trigger warnings. Other than that, I’m not entirely sure what they might have been thinking. In my typically neurotic/responsible manner, I arrived an hour and a half early to set up the necessary equipment, make sure the projector was working, and review my focus group notes. As a small gesture of gratefulness for their time, I provided
orange juice, bottled water, and coffee—small recompense for their relatively considerable sacrifice. They began to shuffle in at 3 P.M.

**Introducing the Focus Group**

The day’s focal question: *Can English teachers honor both the full-scale, emotional intensity of complex literature, while at the same time ensuring sufficient psychological security for any members among a student population who live with histories of trauma?* It was a question explored richly in the literature by Felman and Laub (1991), Britzman and Pitt (2004), but for many of my participants, my study seemed to represent the first time they had grappled seriously with this question. A few of them had confessed to me during the initial interview conversations that this was their first time thinking about this problem.

As previously mentioned, in order that they might be better prepared to assume the task of tackling this complex problem, I decided to conduct a preliminary, one-hour workshop in which I would provide an overview of the relevant literature I had encountered during my research. I divided the workshop into three sections: 20 minutes on perspectives on reading and teaching literature (Chapter II of the dissertation), 10 minutes highlighting both my experience with Alison Scott (Chapter I of the dissertation), and a personal experience I had with trauma (to be discussed in Chapter VIII), and 30 minutes devoted to providing some psycho-education around types of trauma, traumatic response, and PET scans for survivors. If I was going to ask them to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, then I thought it was appropriate to help them dig through the complexities of the desert sands sifting at their feet.
**The Workshop**

I began the workshop at 3:30 P.M. The story of the Keynote slides I presented mapped thematically and content-wise with Chapters II, VIII, IX, and X of this dissertation. I started with theoretical justifications and explanations for reading and teaching literature. As you may recall from Chapter II, these theorists ranged from Kidd and Castano (*theory of mind*), to Aristotle (*emotional arousal and catharsis*), to Anais Nin (*literature’s capacity to wake us from the dead*), to Maxine Greene (*aesthetic experience*), J. Hillis-Miller (*reading with abandon*), and Cristina Bruns (*reading as an adult form of play with transitional objects*). Below please find examples of the slides I featured:

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**KIDD AND CASTANO (2013)**

- In a 2013 study that was published in *Science*, David Kidd and Emmanuel Castano demonstrated their findings that exposure to literature positively correlates with ToM (*theory of mind*).

- “Reading literary fiction led to better performances on tests of affective ToM…. and cognitive ToM…. compared with reading nonfiction…. popular fiction….. or nothing at all….. Specifically, these results show that reading literary fiction temporary enhances ToM” (Kidd and Castano, 2013).

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Figure 6.1. Kidd and Castano and ToM (2013)
The literature on reading literature fell easily into the hearts and minds of my participants. Not a surprise. After all, this was not their undiscovered country. With the exception of some psychoanalytic theories on the reading process I presented—Norman Holland (I’ing) and David Bleich (subjective criticism)—almost every participant had been exposed to each
of these positions, or an analogous form of them, during their graduate work. Similar to a group of psychoanalysts who attend a lecture on Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, or Alfred Adler, when it came to thinking about literature, these participants were in their element.

I then shifted gears and, for the next ten minutes, told them about what happened with Alison Scott\(^1\) two years prior when I aired the “It Can Wait” AT&T commercial in my Drama course. I explained how Alison had needed to leave the room prior to viewing the spot. I then provided a viewing of the commercial to the participants—I didn’t give a trigger warning. Here are a few images from that commercial:

![Figure 6.4. AT&T “It Can Wait,” Boy Riding Bike](image)

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\(^1\)Reminder that Alison Scott and all participant names are pseudonyms. Only Bessel Van der Kolk is self-identified as a participant.
I had tested the audio in advance to make sure that it was crisp, clear, and vivid. The visual component of the commercial is stunning, but the audio is equally intense and powerful. Hearing the cars suddenly smash into each other, the metal crunching, the glass shattering and scattering along the street…. Each of these elements heightens the viewer’s aesthetic experience of the narrative mini-film (recall, it is almost 4 minutes in length).

As often happens when I screen this for students, almost all of the participants sat visibly stunned in the aftermath of the viewing. Since I, personally, have seen the commercial dozens of times, I wanted to stand back and observe the participants as they
watched it. Laura, Sarah, and Jacob seemed transfixed. Kelvin was leaning back slightly, preparing himself for impact. Tanya’s face was tense. Her teeth clenched. When the vehicles collided suddenly (see Figure 6.5 above), several participants gasped audibly, and then again held their breath while both the car and the pickup truck bounded off each other like rubber balls and tumbled to opposite ends of the suburban Los Angeles street. Like the young boy who looks on in astonishment (Figure 6.6), the English teachers took in the dramatic spectacle with amazed, visceral horror. Perhaps Aristotle was right after all about tragedy’s ability to teach…. They were watching trauma.

* * * *

When the commercial ended, I gave the group a few moments to gather themselves. Several of them shook their heads and exhaled audibly. They also spontaneously began to check in with each other, perhaps making sure each was okay in the aftermath of the powerful imagery.

We talked more about Alison. I was careful to conceal her identity—most had never met her, and only Kelvin and Alaina would have overlapped with her in the program—though they were in a different cohort. I shared the email that Alison had written to me on the evening following the final day of our one-week intensive course and explained why the commercial had been a trigger for her. I had not spoken with the participants about Alison during our initial interview conversation. I explained to them how Alison had become the central subject for my research. I shared some of the contents of interview conversations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) I had had with her spanning the previous two years. I shared with them Alison’s history of traumatic car crashes, as well as the reality of Alison’s heart aneurysm, and explained my belief that knowing the complex psychological past of a particular student can deepen how educators think about teaching complex emotional topics in the classroom.

But I thought it was somehow presumptuous—and perhaps deceptively dishonest—to speak about Alison as though she and her trauma were really the reason I had begun this
investigation in the first place. Sure, the incident with Alison had triggered my research, but of course I had my own selfish and personal reasons for wanting to delve into this content, and this truthfully had little to do with Alison. As my sponsor, Dr. Ruth Vinz, likes to remind me: “Research is me-search” (R. Vinz, personal communication, October 30, 2015). Though it may have useful ramifications that are far-reaching for the field of English education, this work, invariably, is about me.

For the next few minutes, I veered away from other people’s stories and told my participants a personal story about a trauma that impacted my life. I recounted a personal brush with tragedy that had left me stunned and made me reconsider everything I had ever thought or known about the world. I will share this story with you in Chapter VIII: The Shaking. As I spoke, it was hard not to feel like they were listening intently. I’d never opened up to them like this before.

A Note on Self-Disclosure

To share your weakness is to make yourself vulnerable; to make yourself vulnerable is to show your strength. (Cris Jami)

The past 25 years have highlighted a growing trend in modern psychoanalysis, whereby analysts selectively choose moments to self-disclose. The traditional Freudian model presented the therapist as a neutral, blank slate. Self-disclosure was widely discouraged. But in the past quarter century, some psychoanalysts have become more open to disclosing stories about themselves they believe may help their clients feel more comfortable, safe, and understood. According to Bridges (2001):

When psychologically attuned and patient centered, intentional disclosure opens space for deep therapeutic engagement between therapist and patient. It heightens self-perception, affective experience, and relational connection. (p. 21)

The key features here are attunement, patient-centeredness, and intentionality.
Self-Disclosure for the Other—Not the Self

Let me make one final point about self-disclosure. In the psychoanalytic tradition, self-disclosure is not performed for the purpose of processing one’s own life at the expense of the other (Bridges 2001), and thereby perverting and inverting the intended nature of the therapeutic discourse. It is premeditated upon, designed, and then utilized as a means of demonstrating that the authority figure is not afraid of showing that he or she has vulnerabilities and is susceptible to many of the same emotions, liabilities, and realities of the person he or she serves.

By sharing my traumatic story with the participants, I hoped to provide a tangible example of trauma—bring trauma into the room in a way that extended beyond the academic arena of books, articles, and theory. I hoped to dismantle the idea that trauma is “unacceptable,” foreign, or taboo, and hopefully dispel any negative judgments or stereotypes they currently had about trauma survivors. Since I was going to ask them, shortly thereafter, to develop a method for teaching literature to students who may possess complicated trauma histories, I hoped my shared personal story might trigger empathy and in intangible ways facilitate the work.

Back to the Workshop

Following my story of personal trauma, I don’t know whether the participants thought I was over-sharing or felt more connected to me and my life—or both. None of them brought anything up at the time, nor have they at any subsequent point. In any case, I hoped that my self-disclosure would help move the conversation down from the safe towers of academia into a more visceral, humane investigation of how trauma can impact real human beings in real contexts. I wanted them to know that this was more than just articles, books, and data to me. And I hoped, in a way, that it was more than that for them,
too. It may be my bias, but I believe we all have something to learn from understanding trauma better.

Following my self-disclosure, I spent the final portion of the workshop presenting participants with a fairly comprehensive, though admittedly time-limited, overview of what trauma is, how it impacts survivors emotionally, what it does to the brain, and how it can get triggered in the classroom. I will cover this content in depth in Chapters IX and X. Here are some example of the slides I shared with them:

### Figure 6.7. Trauma Stats among Students

- **75M Students in the United States**
  - 15M US students have been sexually molested as a child
  - 18.75M students have been beaten by a parent to the point of leaving a mark.
  - 18.75M students have grown up with alcoholic relatives.
  - 9.38M students have witnessed their mother being beaten or hit.

### Figure 6.8. Effects of Trauma

- Loss of self
- Diminished intimacy
- Numbing
- Turning away/dissociation
- Freezing
- Aloneness/Isolation
- Diminished Reflective Functioning
This content was new territory for my participants. Based on what they had relayed during their initial interview conversation, there was no reason to believe that any of them had delved into this level of depth when thinking through or processing what trauma means, what it does to people, and how it impacts the brain.

Since I was about to ask them to work together to come up with methods for teaching literature to a student population with trauma histories, I wanted to provide some psychoeducation around trauma that might further their conceptualization of the problem.
I also wondered how learning about mechanisms of trauma might impact decisions and teaching practices they implemented in their own classrooms. It is my own bias—and one of the conclusions of this dissertation—that presenting educators with some insight into how trauma impacts the brain and impacts the self can be transformative toward beginning to help educators reconsider their teaching practices. I acknowledge the assumption here.

But if English teachers are being expected to protect students in their classrooms with trauma histories (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015), then I believe they should know something about the psychological mechanisms and effects of trauma. Simply giving trigger warnings—or not giving them—is not enough. With the rise in trauma consciousness that has inserted itself into the public discourse in recent years (van der Kolk, 2014), a new series of considerations are presenting themselves in the classroom. According to Kingkade (2016), we are seeing a significant increase in the number of students seeking therapy:

An increasing number of college students are seeking help for mental health issues, at a rate outpacing the growth in enrollment by five-fold, a new report shows. Data collected at 139 college and university counseling centers, from 2009-2010 through 2014-2015, reflects “slow but consistent” growth in students reporting depression, anxiety and social anxiety. And 20 percent of students seeking mental health treatment, the report found, are taking up about half of all campus counseling center appointments.

Given our current climate, English teachers may significantly benefit from gaining some level of expertise around this issue.

This may seem intimidating, but the convenient thing about van der Kolk’s research—and the great clarity with which he writes—is that a teacher does not have to be a mental health professional or an expert in brain physiology to connect the dots he lays out. As is sometimes true—though sadly not true often enough—van der Kolk is the type of writer and thinker who possesses the innate ability to relay complex ideas in a manner that is palatable, cogent, and digestible. His writing is actually quite literary. It seemed to me that my participants were able to understand—or understand “well enough”—the contents I relayed to them. I did offer time for questions prior to concluding. Only Kelvin raised his
hand. He wanted to know whether the student trauma statistics I presented were *overlapping* or *discrete* data points.\(^2\) I explained that they were overlapping.

**What Comes Next?**

Having concluded the content portion of the workshop, I pulled back the lens and attempted to situate participants' present thinking within the context of their work with their own students in their own classroom. I encouraged them to imaginatively “re-enter” their classrooms, while showing them the following image as a suggestive guide.

![Figure 6.11. Re-entering the Classroom](image)

Having worked through the following events:

- explored some rationales and theories for reading literature
- shared the story of Alison Scott
- showed the car crash commercial

\(^2\) Discrete data points do not converge. They represent isolated, independent events. Overlapping data converge. Translated for the purposes of this work, Kelvin wanted to verify that some of the students in each trauma category may be represented more than once in several categories. For instance, a student who gets sexually molested as a child may also be beaten by a parent.
• shared my own story of personal trauma
• presented some of Van der Kolk’s theories on trauma and its impact the brain and the self

I next presented them with the following scenario:

**YOUR TASK**

- I want you to imagine that we are all English faculty at the same high school. We teach juniors and seniors, ages 16-18. Below are the major texts we are required to cover this year: *Hamlet* (Shakespeare), *Lolita* (Nabokov), *Inferno* (Dante), *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Frank), and *The Plague* (Camus).

- We are responsible for **100 students**. Based on our previous statistical estimations: **20** were molested as children, **25** were beaten as children, **25** grew up with alcoholic relatives, **13** witnessed their mothers being beaten.

- Knowing what we know about literature, and knowing what we know about trauma, how can we design a method for teaching these texts to our students that will ensure the most visceral, genuine emotional response, while at the same time ensuring greatest protection and security for our traumatized students.

- You have **45 minutes** to design and then present your method.

Figure 6.12. The Task

This was their **task**: to use the information I had provided to them during the workshop, in conjunction with insights they may have gleaned during their conversations, in conjunction with their 70+ years of combined teaching experience, to see whether they could formulate a methodology for teaching a curriculum’s worth of complex, emotionally charged literature to 100 students, a significant percentage of whom had endured various forms of psychological trauma.

I divided them into two groups (a 3-person group featuring Laura, Casey, and Jacob, and a 4-person group featuring Sarah, Alaina, Kelvin, and Tanya) and gave them 45 minutes to put together a plan of action. I instructed them to work collaboratively, come up with a method, and then be prepared to present their group’s ideas to the full group. In complete
disclosure, I suspected that this was a form of mission impossible (*cue music!*), but I wanted to see what they would come up with, and then determine what the field of English education might be able to learn, if anything, from their work.

For 45 minutes, I left them alone to their thinking and discussions, taking a much needed breather while the clock ticked.
Chapter VII

THE 45-MINUTE HOUR

As traditional research demarcations collapse and new questions and issues arise (as evidenced by the evolution of the *Handbook of Qualitative Inquiry* across four volumes), focus groups offer a particularly fruitful method for “thinking though” qualitative research today. (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2010)

In some ways, 45 minutes is a ridiculously short amount of time to give anybody for anything. Expecting a group of English teachers to work in focus groups to resolve one of the great mysteries of contemporary pedagogy in three-quarters of an hour is an unfair expectation, and I knew this. But I want to complicate the matter further, before revealing what participants came up with. First off, this group of talented, motivated, and extraordinary educators had given up a beautifully clear, mid-July afternoon. Yes, some of them were off for the summer—and for teachers who are off from work, a Saturday is relatively similar to a Tuesday, a Wednesday, etc. But five of the seven group members were actively involved in the three-week summer session, during which they engage in classroom work between 9 A.M. and 4 P.M. every week day, and then have substantive homework and preparation during the evening. For these five students, Saturdays and Sundays are their only rest days. I was deeply grateful for their time and participation in the focus group and did not think it fair to overtax them for my purposes. With my initial workshop, their method-building task, sharing out, and then doing a final process recap, I had already asked for approximately three hours of their afternoon. Anything more felt presumptuous.
But I believe there’s more to be understood. A few years ago, while helping a student enrolled in an Art History course, I consulted a friend of mine, Bryan Savitz, who is an artist and the Director of Operations at the 303 Gallery in New York City. Bryan is deeply familiar with both the business and creative side of the art industry. I contacted Bryan because my student was writing a paper, and the professor had asked the class to determine whether it is “reasonable” that a painting, such as Picasso’s *Nude, Green Leaves and Bust*—which he painted in a single day in March of 1932—should sell for $106.5M, which it did at auction in 2010. Here is what Bryan said:

Art is the accumulation of learned experience and practice of that particular artist. So if something is painted in ‘one day’ is actually been painted for the cumulative years of that particular artist’s experience. Meaning: one painting is possible because there were presumably many others before it which led to that particular aesthetic revelation/inspiration…. Picasso was a greatly talented and unique individual who completely changed the way we look at the world and how the possibilities of how that world are filtered and re-represented. (Bryan Savitz, personal communication, May 5, 2015)

Though the medium is distinct—pedagogy versus painting—the principle seemed applicable to both. These seven individuals were not starting from scratch. Yes, they had 45 minutes to build a methodological design aimed at solving the seemingly intractable, but the 45 minutes had been informed, bolstered, and magnified by remarkable training, years of classroom teaching and preparation, and, for many of them, specific thinking around this very issue. When a professional basketball player steps onto the court, he has 48 minutes to showcase what he has learned and perfected during every other game and every other practice along the way. I was confident that these teachers would rise to the occasion.

At 5:15 P.M., 45 minutes after they had divided into their respective groups and initiated their work, I checked in with them. They told me they were close to being ready and requested a little more time. I gave them 5 minutes. What the Hell?! Some games go into overtime.
5:20 P.M.

They were ready to present their ideas—or, at least, they were as ready as anybody under these circumstances could have been. As the groups set out to share their thinking, I took note of several prominent features and topics of focus between the two groups. I will use the section that follows to elaborate on these.

**Group 1: Dismantle “Trigger Talk”**

Group 1, consisting of Casey, Jacob, and Laura, spoke first. They were quick to point out the significant discomfort they felt with language related to trigger warnings and expressed a will to de-emphasize and reframe the terminology educators typically use when dealing with this topic. Jacob, ever the adjudicator, suggested that Laura start things off. Benison, who, if you remember, teaches at a therapeutic boarding school in Costa Rica, came out and stated both her and her group’s discomfort with trigger warning language: “We all agreed that trigger warning language was an issue for us. We wanted to address all of the students in the class, even those who had not been identified as trauma survivors.” She stated her and her group’s belief that trigger warning language can lead to polarization in the classroom, an educational climate that unfairly prioritizes the needs of traumatized students. It’s not that she didn’t feel strongly about being sensitive to student needs. They all did, but “we wanted to look at a way to encourage sensitivity in the classroom without necessarily drawing a lot of extra attention to potential traumas.”

Recall that Laura’s boarding school offers intervention for adolescents who can’t make it in traditional school settings. She spoke about her school’s belief in *supportive immersion*, an educational paradigm in which teachers push students to learn “outside of their comfort zone,” but with a support system there to “help them feel safe in taking those risks.” In our initial conversation, she had expressed fairly strongly that she was a supporter of trigger warnings, but she also saw danger in the ways that over-indulging
needs around student trauma can quickly turn the classroom upside down, catering to student fragility rather than anchoring the classroom in core content and learning aims.

Casey jumped in next, elaborating on Benison’s views and also drawing some clear boundaries in terms of what the teacher’s role in the classroom ought to be:

We would acknowledge that there is a line for us in terms of who we are—of course we’re people—but there’s a professional line, too. And so, we’re not coming at this from a ‘how do you feel all the time perspective, as a counselor might, right? This professional line that Casey alluded to was something that members of Group 2 asserted vehemently when they spoke. Casey and her group wanted to be kind, sensitive, and available to students, but also felt a need to create clear parameters around the distinction between being an English teacher and being a therapist: “We’re going to proceed from the premise of this is literature. Here are the texts. And then we’ll transfer the feelings or experiences there, if necessary, to our personal lives.” Casey did not say this overtly during the focus group—I will admit that this is purely speculative—but something about the tone of her voice suggested to me that she was a little bit pissed off. She communicated that trigger warnings are offsetting the balance in the classroom, drawing too much attention to traumatic experiences and creating potential divides among students.

And there was another divide at play that seemed to be getting under Casey’s skin. As she continued to talk, she relayed her concern that hyper-attunement to trigger warnings downplays other very important emotions, moods, and responses that literature can evoke: “We want to make sure that we don’t diminish the other aspect of feelings. You can be happy, right? You can be joyful.” As I discussed in Chapter II, scholars such as Hillis Miller, Michael Deguy, Cristina Bruns, Felski—among many, many others—explain the immense benefits of engagement with literature.

In the age of the trigger warning, how English teachers frame texts can significantly color the way people proceed to see and experience them. When you ask people to think
red, and then show them a painting featuring a wide range of colors, they often will focus on red, giving it unnatural weight and importance. Such is the power of suggestion.

Figure 7.1. Kandinsky and Red

Did your eye go to the red areas of Kandinsky’s painting?

The same could be true for a piece of literature. Take *Streetcar Named Desire*. If an English teacher gives trigger warnings forecasting scenes of domestic violence and rape, the students may over-attend to these moments in the text and miss so many other important moments, themes, and passages in the writing. Group 1 was trying to tone down the trigger warning language that English teachers use when going into texts for fear that overly indulging the fears or fragilities among students would in fact heighten, rather than protect against, student trauma. Even if English teachers give trigger warnings with the intent of protecting students and fostering emotional safety, they may, in fact, unwittingly produce the specific deleterious effects they seek to protect against.

Both in our initial conversation and during the focus group, Casey ardently expressed her belief that literature is good, safe, valuable, and important for growth, development, and healing (what I’ve referred to in this dissertation as *therapeutic*). She then told the story of a professional development workshop she attended in Florida:

I went to a professional development last year in Florida—I’m blanking on her name—I think her name was Joy. But she had this whole joy factor presentation about all the positive things that literature can bring. So I think in
part of reframing our language related to trigger warnings—we don’t necessarily want to use that term.

As with so many polarizing issues that have gained attention in the media, trigger warnings and the terminology around them often carry a myriad of associative ripple effects that take on a life of their own—at times fostering hyperbolic fears, anxieties, and concerns—many of which may be unfounded or, at least, out of balance. Fears and anxieties in any context often have the tendency to create overgeneralizations and exaggerations. So while the motivation behind trigger warnings may be well-intended, the effects can be problematic. As Jacob stated toward the end of his group’s discussion, triggers warning are like an “emotional bomb.”

Like over-protective parents who fear for the safety of their children, hyper-sensitive and intensely-cautious educational communities can be destructive, especially when they foster a community of fear and paranoia. In the age of the trigger warning, many of the participants felt strongly that now, more than ever, English educators needed to create brave space for growth, sharing, risk-taking, and student expansion (Arao & Clemens, 2013). They believed it was possible to achieve the intended effect of trigger warnings without actually using them (something I have long believed).

Jacob concluded his group’s presentation with the following, eloquent overview:

I think all three of us are trying to have it both ways in some ways. I think we’re trying to be more sensitive and to empower students to not be further traumatized in our classrooms, but at the same time we’re trying to avoid creating an environment where we’re encouraging students to not grow or to avoid things unnecessarily. And I think that’s pretty tough.

Group 2: Distinguish English Teachers from School Counselors

It’s important to consider that each child may have experienced trauma, which is different from treating all students as if they’re traumatized. (Sarah Pelham, personal communication, July 15, 2017)

Group 2 (Sarah, Tanya, Kelvin, and Alaina) was up next. If the central message from Group 1 had been aimed at modifying the language around trigger warnings, Group 2 was
deeply invested in re-clarifying the role of English teachers—reminding the world that they are not therapists. In an effort to drive home this reality, Group 2 spoke vehemently about the importance of separating the role of the English teacher from those duties typically adopted by school counselors, social workers, and psychologists.

Kelvin, who had been adamant about this separation of responsibilities in our initial conversation—he mentioned it 6 times—spoke passionately about how important it was to acknowledge that English teachers, though they may use literature in a manner that is therapeutic, should not be expected to provide the same services as a mental health professional. He led off his group’s discussion by presenting the “structural considerations” of an English teacher’s role in relation to literature, trigger warnings, and trauma:

We make the assumption that students have some experience of trauma. Teachers are then on the frontline and, in a way, we may be the first responders—we may get that information. And so, I just wanted to structurally understand how both the text and the teacher are in a kind of network of participation that the student and the student’s trauma might become a part of. So if they have exercises like journaling and response, we may be, in fact, someone who receives that information. So then, um, we think about that as one point, and then we also think about the administration’s responsibility. So if the teacher is on the front lines, the teacher has to go to the administration, and then there should be something set in place between the administration from let’s say the principal’s office to say, the, you know, social services or the guidance counselor’s office, that’s established and set in place to deal with real trauma, so that we’re not disregarding that. So then there’s just two quick ideas. One is, we want to be responsive to the student’s needs, but we also have a responsibility to the curriculum.

In the group’s process notes, which Group 2 created during their 45-minute preparatory session, Alaina included the following protocol, piggy-backing off of the structural considerations that Kelvin discussed:

**ACTION STEPS:**
- When we know about a student who suffers from trauma, we seek professional support! Consult with social worker or counsellor who has an established professional relationship with the student
- Do not attempt to “help” this student on your own (even if you know their history)

(Group 2 session notes, 2017)
I certainly cannot speak for all English teachers, but it can be very tempting to get enmeshed with a student’s psychological needs. This may be particularly true when it comes to trauma and a positive wish to help a student in need. I will confess that learning about Alison Scott’s car crash and heart aneurism had the immediate effect of making me feel closer to her.

But Group 2 was arguing strongly for a separation of these roles: “Do not attempt to ‘help’ this student on your own (even if you know their history)” (Group 2 session notes, 2017). As I will diagram more comprehensively in the following chapter, traumatic response is quite intense, triggering a host of emotional and even neurological effects. Trauma survivors who get triggered often need much more extensive care than English teachers can offer. Alaina Granford wrote to me later that same evening, reflecting on the workshop and focus group:

I have to admit ... somewhat ashamedly, but also with a great deal of confidence... I pride myself on being a "cool teacher." The kind of teacher that kids, both boys and girls, come to when they have an issue. It’s honestly something I truly pride myself on. I gain students’ trust very easily. I genuinely love teenagers and talking with them honestly and hearing about them and their lives. Maybe it is my mother’s guidance counsellor genes in me but I have always enjoyed chatting with my students about their lives and their feelings. I feel like as an English teacher I am in a unique position to guide and counsel students about personal ideas and aspects of humanity (what else is literature anyway other than an examination or study of our collective humanity?) while also remaining within the safe professional bubble of a school setting.

But words like "rape" or "abuse" or "violence" in the context of children scare me. They are outside of my comfort zone. As an educator as well as woman. I have no way to connect with those experiences on a personal level. I have read books and watched movies and television shows that explore those themes and though they disturb me they do not "trigger" anything within me since I have never experienced them personally. (Alaina Granford, personal communication, July 15, 2017)

Group 2 was recognizing, and I’d say “correctly,” that trauma moves beyond the purview of the English teacher. In a discussion I had with Sheridan Blau, he presented me with the following statement: “The idea and cliché that teaching is not therapy is often uttered by
veteran teachers and school supervisors as commonplace wisdom to be communicated to new teachers and most especially to young English teachers” (Sheridan Blau, personal communication, June 6, 2017). Group 2 urged that, though the will to help may be strong, the English teacher who receives the trauma must then relay the student’s need to upper administration, which should have measures in place (guidance counselors, school psychologists, etc.) to treat the situation. They believed strongly that English teachers are not therapists and were uncomfortable with the modified expectations of the trigger warning age, in which the traditional boundaries and scope of the English teacher’s role are at times extended into realms of mental health.

**Texts are Texts, Not Triggers**

It’s detrimental to teach texts first as sources of anxiety. (Sarah Pelham, personal communication, July 15, 2017)

For as long as I’ve know Sarah Pelham, she’s been a fighter. Tough. Strong-willed. Opinionated. And fiercely smart. As her group members discussed the importance of separating the role of the English teacher from that of the therapist, I could see that something was brewing in her. She didn’t buy this. Any of it. Of the seven of them, she had been the least political in our initial conversation. She was by far the most anti-trigger warning person I conversed with. Even Casey, who initially wrote sarcastically about them during our online course in the Spring of 2017, had turned a small corner during the conversation, expressed some understanding of why they might exist—even if only to come across as politically correct. But Sarah ... not a shred of remorse!

During our initial conversation, Sarah had conveyed, “You’re in this class to be uncomfortable ... to live on the edge of your brain ... to deal with ideas that shake you up ... to break out of your own personal world” (Sarah Pelham, personal communication, June 9, 2017). When I’d asked her how she felt about trigger warnings, she responded, “I feel very
opposed to trigger warnings. I don’t like the idea of trigger warnings.” She continued: “I feel strongly that we are confusing safety and comfort.... I want my students to be safe. I don’t want them to be comfortable.” She had explained that she didn’t want to teach in a classroom where her students “only encounter material that makes them feel comfortable,” and took issue with the idea that the trigger warning “sets up a scenario in which everything is a landmine—everything is approached with a sense of anxiety.”

As her group had been reasoning their way into various potential solutions for this mother of all problems, Sarah had been uncharacteristically quiet. It was only a matter of time before she decided to assert herself. Sure enough, that moment came. As the group began to wrap up its discussion around the separation they deemed important between English teachers and student trauma, Sarah suddenly perked up, her wild, brown, curly hair suddenly lifting up—she was ready to roar. “It’s detrimental to teach texts first as sources of anxiety above all else.... And I don’t want to do that in the classroom.” Analogous to what members of Group 1 had said, when they brought up their belief in the importance of dismantling the language around trigger warnings, Sarah firmly insisted that texts are treated, first and foremost, as texts. She conveyed that we needed to now re-invert the inversion. Take the reins back, and clarify that the text is not first and foremost a dangerous, triggering object, but rather “treating it as a text and an aesthetic object, but not only as that, as if nothing else exists.”

Sarah went on to say that she believed teachers would benefit from educating themselves around the literature that they teach. For instance, if a text contains deeply troubling material—such as rape, excessive violence—the English teacher would benefit from educating herself around the potential issues that could come up among students. This way, if students were triggered, the teacher would be more prepared to handle it. But still, Sarah believed, the potential psychological harm that a piece of literature could trigger in a student was powerfully secondary to the value of the text as a therapeutic experience for students.
In Chapter IV, I spoke about power dynamics embedded in the research process (Bordeau, 2000; Kvale, 2006; LaRossa et al., 1981; Meara & Schmidt, 1991). The power differential implicitly embedded into researcher/participant discourse often engenders performativity in the interviewee (Butler, 2015; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2010). As Butler (2006) discusses, human beings form their identities within contexts they do not create, and at times must reject those contextual norms in order to develop. In no ways that I blame either myself or them for, we had all been performing for each other. For me, I had been playing the roles of good academic coordinator, responsible researcher, nurturing interviewer. For them, they had been dutiful students, receptive participants, eager helpers. Since each of us, in his or her own right, adored literature and likely felt some degree of threat by the notion that a traumatized student—and the politics around trigger warnings—could take away or threaten some of the engagements with literature that each of us deemed most valuable and enlivening—there was also perhaps anger about all of this dwelling, contained, at the base of each interview conversation. In ways that were perhaps not clear to any of us—as we attempted to better understand trauma and give it its proper place in the classroom—we were likely repressing or holding back parts of ourselves that wanted to say, “Fuck it! I’m gonna teach the literature I want to teach, and if students can’t deal with that, then it’s their fucking issue!” For every part of each of us that wanted to remain on board and dutiful to the research—for whatever prizes or concessions we hoped to earn—another part of us likely just wished it could be truly transparent and honest.

With Sarah’s speech, this performative glaze that so often subtly assumes dominion over groups seemed to suddenly dissolve, as several members among both parties nodded their heads and seemed comforted and justified by her ability to articulate something I suspect many of them believed and perhaps had been unable or unwilling to state themselves. As I recently mentioned, the age of the trigger warning has inverted the popular perception of literature as something good, healthy, and therapeutic, and cast a string of hazardous associations around the act of reading highly charged texts. In Sarah’s
words, what I sensed was something analogous to Brutus’s plea to the people of Rome: “Not that I loved Rome less, but that I loved Caesar more” (Shakespeare, 2011, 3.2.23-24).

Ironically, this sentiment seemed to trigger relief and universal sentiment among her fellow teachers. These, after all, were individuals who had dedicated over 70 years, collectively, to the act of teaching literature. During the initial conversations, many of them had expressed their deep love for reading. Sitting in my backyard, Alaina had told me that both of her parents were teachers. She had explained to me that her mother and father had “spent almost every day reading, drinking wine and beer” (Alaina Granford, personal communication, May 18, 2017). She had told that “all of their friends had houses covered in books,” and then explained her childhood belief that “books are the source of all information” and provide “comfort and connection.” Kelvin had relayed in our initial conversation that he “grew up reading everything” (Kelvin O’Grady, personal communication, June 16, 2017).

So there was something personal about this for this group of English teachers. Some unfair threat that, though important, was also distorting or unfairly damaging something that had been their life blood. Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more.... As perhaps the voice of the collective unconscious of the group, Sarah was standing up for literature. Texts may possess scenes or circumstances that upset, alarm, or trigger us, but literature, by and large—and especially the type of literature that has been canonically situated in our curriculum—is not typically hazardous. No meaningful study has ever been done suggesting that literary fiction harms mental health.

If trigger warnings were going to push against the academic freedoms of educators, then this group of teachers was going to push back, galvanized, perhaps, by the belief that being too careful about teaching texts such as Metamorphosis, Inferno, The Bell Jar comes at too high a price tag. As the groups presented their ideas, it became clear to me that while trigger warnings were aiming to protect students, my participants were aiming to protect literature. As Tanya said during the presentation: “We want to be responsive to the
student’s needs, but we also have a responsibility to the curriculum.” Kelvin followed up her thought by adding that they weren’t prepared to start throwing out books “like *Huck Finn*, like *Lolita*, like *The Bluest Eye*” because they contained themes that might trigger certain students. In an English classroom, a certain amount of triggering may be inevitable, and may, in fact, affirm that learning and teaching are taking place. If particular students in particular contexts are unable to handle parts of the curriculum, then (1) the school should have some procedures in place to help traumatized students, and (2) students, themselves, should also take responsibility, acquire some knowledge of how and why they get triggered (if possible), and learn to manage themselves when curricular demands overwhelm them.

**Enough?**

“atelophobia: fear of imperfection, defects.”
Dictionary.com

When the fight was over … when the dust from the various group presentations had settled … when the contents of the focus group had first attacked them, and then participants had fought back, standing up for the value of literature, a new mood settled over the seven teachers—one of reflection. After sitting in silence for a few moments following the conclusion of Group 2’s manifesto, I asked the seven of them: “How satisfied are you with the solution that you came up with?”

They thought for a moment, and then began. Sarah admitted, “I’m not very satisfied.” She acknowledged that she had learned a lot from talking with her group members, and tried to come up with the best solution she could, but still didn’t feel “very satisfied with it.” Tanya agreed. Kelvin was not entirely satisfied either, although he did emphasize that he trusted teacher judgment over government officials, who likely have little experience with the classroom and yet too frequently employ policy—“I don’t want a reductive governmental methodology!”
Jacob explained that “this process has helped me to recognize that ... our solution is only a partial [answer] ... an okay compromise.” Casey, quoting Frost, called it a “momentary stay against confusion.” Laura said it was helpful to have the discussion, but emphasized that the world is a complex place, that emotions and human psychology are highly nuanced, and that, to paraphrase one of her favorite articles, “The Illusion of Safety, the Safety of Illusions,” “Sometimes there is not enough help in the world” (Gay, 2012). Laura then added a statement that I thought beautifully spoke to the inherent paradox at our fingertips—“We are not going to solve the problems that are the reasons for why we are sitting in this room having this discussion.”

And she was right, of course. As participants working together to discover a method for how English educators might teach emotionally charged literature to students with trauma histories, it was important for us to take a step back and realize that trauma often has an origination point separate from the classroom. Like the oncologist who discovers that his patient has stage 4 breast cancer, the ER doc who attempts to treat a survivor of a gunshot, or a foreign aid worker who volunteers to rebuild schools in Haiti, the English teacher does not create the trauma he or she is attempting to navigate. And this seems important, because a certain degree of forgiveness and modified expectations needs to exist on all sides—both in terms of what students can realistically expect from their teachers, and in terms of what English educators can legitimately expect from themselves.

Like the seven English teachers who sat in Ellerson for several hours on that hot mid-summer afternoon, many English teachers throughout the world are trying to game-plan for solid solutions to problems that are oftentimes impossible to solve. Certainly there are sadistic teachers and professors at all levels of education who consciously or unconsciously derive pleasure from sending their students into psychological states that are abusive or re-traumatizing. But I have to believe that, more often that not, teachers do the best they can with what they have to work with. As the participants frequently discussed, both in their one-on-one conversations and during the focus group, education, like life, is a messy
business. No matter what anybody does to safeguard an English classroom, individuals will get triggered, students will get upset, imperfection will reign! Trauma will find a way.

**Part Four: A Look Ahead**

As I move into Part Four of this dissertation, I’ll begin by providing some explanations for some of the problems that I’ve presented thus far, but deliberately left unanswered. In Chapters VIII-X, I’ll begin to look more directly at the complex force that is trauma. I’ll start with a personal story about a trauma that impact my own life. It is not the worst thing that has ever happened to me. I thought that sharing that experience (which you do not know and will not know) would push the boundaries too far and unsettle the reader in a way that might be counterproductive to the investigation at hand. We all are entitled to our secrets. What I will share in Chapter VIII is something tragic that happened to a dear friend, and deeply affected me in the process. I’ll relay how his experience—and therefore my experience of his experience—temporarily shattered my own life.

In Chapters IX and X, I’ll use Bessel van der Kolk’s work—along with the work of Robert Stolorow, Beatrice Beebe, and others—to begin to unpack what trauma is, how trauma works, how it gets triggered, and what it does to the brain and the being of the survivor.

But before I do that, I’m going to take you with me to wintry Cambridge in 1999, and a time in my life where the world just couldn’t stop shaking.
PART FOUR:

LES MISERABLES
Cambridge, 1999
Chapter VIII

THE SHAKING

From the thunder, and the storm—And the cloud that took the form (When the rest of Heaven was blue) Of a demon in my view— (Edgar Allan Poe)

Heidegger makes a sharp distinction between fear and anxiety, similar in some ways to Freud’s. Whereas, according to Heidegger, that in the face of which one fears is a definite ‘entity within-the-world’... that in the face of which one is anxious is ‘completely indefinite... is nothing and nowhere.’ (Stolorow, 2007, p. 34)

In the winter of 1999, a year before Christ’s supposed second coming, and two years removed from my own college graduation, I spent too much of my time shaking. I shook in the morning when I awoke. I trembled in the afternoon over coffee, and I fidgeted, quivered, and shuddered in the evening. Now, don’t get me wrong, the act of shaking—when induced by appropriate stimuli—is entirely normal: February 15th, and you decide to take off your clothes and jump into the ocean with your friends—that’ll make you shake! A Steven King horror film—or Alfred Hitchcock, even better—can send shivers down your spine. When people are hungry, low on energy, fatigued... jitteriness can set in then, too. But the shaking that I was experiencing—a relatively uncontrollable, manic wave of emotional freneticism—wasn’t normal. And it was made worse in my own mind by virtue of the fact that the shock vibrations that rippled through me didn’t seem to be particularly contextualized. As Robert Stolorow writes in *Trauma and the Human Experience*, the cause of my shaking seemed to derive from something “completely indefinite” (Heidegger as quoted in Stolorow, 2007, p. 34).
I shook on the red line, as my train crossed over from Cambridge into downtown Boston. I shook at the dinner table, while I sat opposite my father and talked about my career. I woke up from restless sleep, and walked to the kitchen to get water—shaking. Shaking accompanied me everywhere, like a constantly disruptive, strange bedfellow.

From what I could understand, the shaking made no sense. Or maybe it made some sense, but ... why so much of it and why so persistent? I mean, there were reasons, I suppose, for why some strange visitor kept knocking at the chamber door of my soul. Some of it seemed linked, perhaps, to a fork that I had arrived at in my own life.

Twenty-four years old, I had graduated college and spent the first two years of post-collegiate life auditioning for the stage. I’d had some success—landing roles in the Big Apple. During the spring of my senior year at Harvard, when it suddenly dawned on me that graduation was, in fact, a real thing, I began to toy with the notion that I needed to definitively come up with a plan for what I “wanted to do with the rest of my life.” In some vague, indeterminate way that, in retrospect, felt more like a hunch than a mature, fully-hatched plan of action, I decided that I would move to New York City and pursue a passion that had consumed the better part of my life for the previous seven years.

Since my sophomore year in high school, music and theater had been two things that had unexpectedly called to me, and I had had good success pursuing the calling. From the age of 15, I had landed all the lead roles in my high school musicals, and then, when college rolled around and I attended Harvard in the fall of 1993, I’d auditioned and become one of three auditionees (73 had tried out) to land a spot in Harvard’s oldest and most prestigious a cappella singing group, the Harvard Krokodiloes.¹

I’d sung for three years in the Krokodiloes, winning many of the key solos, and landing prominent recordings on our two compacts discs. At the same time, I’d landed

¹The Krokodiloes are named after the three crocodiles shot and killed by Teddy Roosevelt, which hung on the wall of the bar area on the second floor of the old Hasty Pudding Club at 12 Holyoke Street in Cambridge.
leading roles in Harvard’s theatrical trifecta: West Side Story, the Gilbert and Sullivan Players, and the famed Hasty Pudding Theatricals, the latter of which casts 14 undergraduates males for an all-original, student-written and student-produced, high-budget stage production. Half the actors play men and half play women. At age 18, I played Libby T. Belle, the all-American ingénue, who had the distinction of singing the show’s torch song. For two and a half months—eight weeks in Cambridge, one week in New York City, and one week in Bermuda—I’d donned a pair of red, high heel shoes, a body-suit filled with sand-bags for boobs and a corset to tuck in my stomach and accentuate my curves. With a large blonde, buffoon wig that sported a red bow, and a red, white, and blue Wonder Woman outfit, I pranced around the stage for 60 odd performances, doing my best patriotic damsel in distress.

And then, in the late August of that same year, with formal academic life seemingly perched to forever fade in the rear-view mirror of my youth, my friend and I loaded a U-Haul truck full of dressers, bookcases, clothing, CDs, halogen lamps, posters, and whatever other post-collegiate items 22-year-olds imagine will artfully decorate the inner confines of an 800 square foot convertible two bedroom apartment on 101st and Broadway, and set out for New York. The Big Apple= Boston, Massachusetts on steroids.

My roommate was an old family friend with whom I had never been particularly close. Sometimes we took jogs together. Sometimes we shared meals. Often we did our own thing. He got a job at a pharmaceutical consulting firm in Midtown, and I hit the streets, auditioning for parts.

For the next two years, I worked the Broadway circuit. By relative standards, I had success. Six months out of college, I landed the National Tour of Rent, starring Neil Patrick Harris, who at the time was making a comeback from his Doogie Howser, childhood stardom. From January through June, the tour took me in and out of many of the major cities of the United States. We were rock stars, packing 3,000-5,000 seat theaters nightly,
making radio and television appearances, and performing national anthems at major sporting events.

I decided to leave the tour after six months, figuring I had a major show under my belt and things would only get easier. I got back from tour and re-entered the audition scene, landing lead roles in several prominent regional productions of shows such as *Grease*, *Children of Eden*, and *Forever Plaid*. But in the summer of 1999, while playing the role of Danny Zuko in Brunswick, Maine, I had one of those lucid, revelatory moments that change the course of one’s life. Twenty-four years old at the time, donning a leather jacket and sporting greased up black hair, I recall sitting backstage with a 42-year-old gentleman named Ryan Clarkson. Ryan was our Vince Fontaine, the MC of the school dance. For anybody not intimately familiar with *Grease*, Vince Fontaine walks on the stage two hours into the show, makes some big announcements about the high school dance, and then hosts a talent competition. Within ten minutes, he’s off the stage, and we don’t see him again until the final curtain.

It was a Friday evening, and I sat backstage with Ryan. It was our final weekend following an eight-week run, and I was anticipating my return to New York City the following Monday. Ryan was adjusting his wig. I sat and looked at him, staring as he stared at himself in the mirror. The bulbs surrounding the rectangular mirror glistened against his skin, shimmering off of his base-caked face. From my vantage point, I could see several dermatological imperfections that would have been invisible from the audience. For whatever reasons that are not always easy to understand or trace in the moment, I extrapolated a potential future, imagining my own 42-year-old self, dressed up as Vince Fontaine, putting on makeup backstage, getting paid $550 a week to do a ten-minute cameo in a regional theater’s production of *Grease* in Brunswick, Maine. No offense to Ryan Clarkson—who was a wonderful human being and I’m sure still is—but the thought horrified me. It was enough to seize control over my mind and irrevocably change it. I wanted a life that built like a pyramid, starting with a firm base that grew vertically and
augmented with time. Acting was not this. Theater was an industry based in flashes and pans. Highs and lows. Comings and goings. As Steve Perry famously sings in Journey’s 1983 hit, “Faithfully”:

They say that the road  
Ain’t no place to start a family  
Right down the line  
It’s been you and me  
And lovin’ a music man  
Ain’t always what it’s supposed to be….

Circus life  
Under the big top world  
We all need the clowns  
To make us smile  
Through space and time  
Always another show  
Wondering where I am  
Lost without you.  
(Cain, 1983)

Suddenly it dawned on me that no matter how successful I became as an actor and a performer, it might always be just another city, another hotel room, another concert hall…. and endless line of scintillating but then quickly fading moments.

I didn’t want a sequence of stops and starts that culminated in a strange wig, a flashy bright-blue jacket, a microphone, and some strange MC voice billowing out to a paid audience of retired geriatrics. Fear seized my brain, and I decided almost at that moment to hang up my dancing shoes, drop the mic, and walk down another road in Robert Frost’s yellow wood.

When I returned to New York, I packed my bags, got back in a U-Haul, told my roommate I was leaving the Big Apple, and headed home to Boston. I decided—and, really, I had no business deciding anything at that moment—that I would move back in with my parents, take pre-med classes in Harvard’s post-baccalaureate program, and fulfill the wish my father had been hammering into my head since early childhood: become a doctor. The
decision could not have been any hastier, nor any more impulsive. It was a complete disaster waiting to happen. And I lied to myself: trying to convince somebody named “Adam” that it was the logical decision. Denial was not just some river in Egypt!

It started off reasonably enough. I got a job as a research assistant in a prestigious psychiatric group at Mass General. The doctors—many of whom were world famous in the field—were researching various approaches for treating major depressive disorder (MDD), a form of depression that tends to be treatment-resistant. Some of our participants had been living with perseverative depression for decades. It was very intense. The hollow, pained look in their eyes. The traumatic histories of heartbreak and sorrow. I remember drawing blood from a woman who alerted me that she had Hepatitis C while I was sticking the needle into her forearm and searching for a vein. Uncomfortably, I prodded around with the needle, trying to locate the main bloodstream, and then her eyes glazed over and began to roll into the back of her head. Suddenly, she leaned forward involuntarily and collapsed onto me, fainting. As her body tumbled onto mine, I tried to hoist her up onto the table, all the while ensuring that the penetrated needle didn’t clumsily slide out from her arm and accidentally stick me, thereby infecting me with Hep B. Scenes like this were common in the clinic.

At Harvard, I enrolled in molecular biology and the first semester of inorganic chemistry. I got A’s. By December, I realized how awkward it was to live with my parents—“you can’t go home again” (Wolfe, 1940)—and decided to move out on my own again. Within a few weeks, I’d found a room on the first floor of a colonial with three girls (one of whom worked with me at MGH). It was the ground level of a yellow, stand-alone house on Douglass Street. I didn’t know any of the girls well, but the house was situated almost perfectly between Harvard and Mass General. As an added benefit, it was less than a stone’s throw from Carberry’s Bakery, which I quickly discovered had some of the best baked goods and sandwiches I had ever eaten. Free at last?!
Second semester. March. A drizzly Tuesday night. I had just returned from a lecture on thermodynamics and Hess’s Law. An albacore tuna fish sandwich from Au Bon Pain sat, temptingly, next to my Chemistry book. Sitting on my bedspread, I looked over the evening’s notes and tried to wrap my mind around coffee-cup calorimetry, molality, and freezing point depression. Jeff Buckley’s “Grace” played Lilac Wine through metallic speakers that were doing their best to proliferate mellifluous particles into an otherwise empirical headspace.

*The phone rang.*

I’m studying.

It rang again. When nobody picked it up, I realized that I should. It was Adam Hartman, my college roommate. “What’s up, Harty?”

“Can you talk for a minute?”

There’s something about the human voice that has the ability to tell us stories before they’re told. Something bad had happened. I knew it. The tender, timid, even quality of his voice cued me.

“What happened?”

“Jeff tried to kill himself.”

I knew exactly who he was talking about. My body went numb. Cold. Stone. Nothing. Involuntarily, my feet began to stumble backwards. My back connected with the wall, and I collapsed to the ground. I do not remember my own ass hitting the wood below.

“Are you there?” “Yes,” I said.

“His father found him hanging in the garage this morning.”

I could feel my heart suddenly pounding against my chest. “What the fuck?”

Hartman didn’t say anything. “Is he—what’s going on?”

“He survived. Are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here. What happened?”
“He’s alive, but his brain was without oxygen—for a long time. They think he has permanent brain damage.”

“What? What does that mean?”

“He's in a coma. They don’t know whether he’ll come out of it. Doctors are...”

I don’t remember when or how Hartman and I stopped talking. The shaking had been there for several weeks leading up to that phone call. I had felt unsteady, uncertain, and confused about my future. I had begun to admit that this whole medical career felt like putting on a gigantic suit that had been tailored for my imagination. Walking around Cambridge and downtown Boston, I’d dissociated from my real self—but it wasn’t until that call from Adam Hartman that the shaking really began in earnest.

The following morning, I woke after a night of very little sleep. I got dressed, had a memoryless breakfast, and boarded the red line for Mass General. Getting off at Charles/MGH, I walked down Cambridge Street en route to the clinic. As a research assistant, part of my responsibilities included screening incoming callers for potential studies. I had a script that I was meant to adhere to. That morning, I was scheduled to screen patients from 9 A.M. to 12 P.M.

In the irony of all ironies, a portion of the interview included questions related to suicidality, suicidal ideation, suicidal tendencies, past attempts, future plans, etc. I gritted my soul and attempted to conduct interviews, and then ... I couldn’t handle it. Agitated and uneven, I rose from my desk and marched with desperation toward Maurizio Fava’s office. Dr. Fava was the head of the clinic—a kind, highly intelligent, empathic Italian clinician, who had made major breakthroughs in the area of depression and psychopharmacopia. He was preparing a paper, but stopped his work when I entered. He could tell that I needed to talk.

I told Dr. Fava what had happened with my friend. He immediately snapped out of employer role and intuitively assumed the role of therapist, encouraging me to take a seat and beginning to help me to process the trauma. Aware of my background in literature,
Dr. Fava began to reference a Kafka poem that he felt was pertinent to the moment. I still remember it:

For we are like tree trunks in the snow. In appearance they lie smoothly and a little push should be enough to set them rolling. No, it can’t be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance.

(Kafka, 1913)

Fava was helping me digest the moment—using literature as a way in. He was, in fact, practicing an impromptu form of bibliotherapy (Crothers, 1916), helping me realize that my fixed perception of life’s permanency and safety was an illusion being shattered by my dear friend’s tragedy. He wanted me to understand that, although I was rocking with the wind, unable to stomach and accept the extravagant, unsettling reality of the turbulent chaos, invariably, with time, I would find myself resettled and understand that life is also deeply rooted—unstable and stable—that this moment would help me reach a new equilibrium, and give me a heightened, perhaps more sensitive and integrated perspective ... with time. But in that moment, with the recent blush of my dear friend’s suicide attempt shuddering in my mind, I was good for nothing. I was, for lack of better words, a complete mess—Fava’s sagacious bibliotherapeutic interlude fell on trembling ears, and slid to the ground. He kindly told me to take the rest of the day off, and encouraged me to return to work when I felt capable.

Thanking him for understanding, I left Maurizio’s office and headed down the hall, past the team of doctors and researchers. Doing my best to avoid eye-contact or reveal any of the clamoring, cacophonous feelings raging in my soul, I entered the 5th floor elevator, pressed “G” for the ground floor, and allowed the mechanical rectangle to pull me downstairs. As the doors opened and I walked past the security guard at the front desk, I think I knew, even then, that my career as a medical doctor was over before it began.

With Jeffrey Salazar’s suicide attempt, my own titanic uncertainty about the future course of my life thrust one definite kernel of understanding into my mind’s eye, and I was forced to admit to myself what my pre-traumatized self was not courageous enough to
realize: I didn’t want to work in a hospital. I didn’t want to follow my father’s footsteps. I was lost, and doctoring was not the solution for my life. If I had kept at this façade—kept living out somebody else’s dream—maybe I’d have ended up like Salazar, hanging in some garage.

I walked out from the main entrance of the Massachusetts General Hospital research clinic and headed, of all places, to the Angora Café, which stood across Cambridge Street, not far down the block. Not knowing what else to do, I decided that I needed ice cream.

“Vanilla, please, with grape nuts, blueberries, and chocolate chips.”

Angora had one of those mix in machines, where you chose a flavor—chocolate or vanilla—and then watched while they proceeded to pour in the specific toppings you request (up to three for $4.99).

One of my best friends from college was in a coma, lying on some hospital bed in Braintree. My short-term career as a medical doctor was crashing like a stack of bricks in Jericho. I had no future to speak of—no past that felt real—and I was filling my stomach with four dollars and ninety-nine cents worth of lactose infused carbohydrates and fats.

In “A Small, Good Thing” by Raymond Carver (1989), a mother and father lose their eight-year-old boy, after he tragically gets hit by a car on his way to school. Through an unexpected sequence of events, the parents end up in a baker’s shop very early one morning. Discovering their story of loss, the baker feeds them:

They ate rolls and drank coffee. Ann was suddenly hungry, and the rolls were warn and sweet. She ate three of them, which pleased the baker. Then he began to talk. They listened carefully. Although they were tired and in anguish, they listened to what the baker had to say. They nodded when the baker began to speak of loneliness, and of the sense of doubt and limitation that had come to him in his middle years. He told them what it was like to be childless all these years. To repeat the days with the ovens endlessly full and endlessly empty. The party food, the celebrations he’d worked over. Icing knuckle-deep. The tiny wedding couples stuck into cakes. Hundreds of them, no, thousands by now. Birthdays. Just imagine all those candles burning. He had a necessary trade. He was a baker. He was glad he wasn’t a florist. It was better to be feeding people. This was a better smell anytime than flowers. (p. 332)
In Carver’s story, the food works. The parents, who have been deeply grieving the loss of their son, take a momentary respite, allowing the sweet, delicate, and warm texture of the baker’s breads to ease their suffering minds and comfort their hearts’ anguish. The profound suffering brought on by the loss of their child temporarily lifts, as they realize that, in their grieving, they have forgotten to do one of the essential acts that maintains, nurtures, and sustains us throughout life: eat food. Eating is small, good thing.

But for me, it wasn’t. On the afternoon following my discovery of Jeffrey Salazar’s suicide attempt, the vanilla chocolate berry grape nut concoction did little to soothe my fighting soul. I wonder whether I even tasted it. Sitting on a metal chair at the Angora Cafe, watching doctors dart from hospital to hospital, my hands trembled, my knees-knocked, and I numbly lifted a plastic spoon to chattering lips.

I began to reflect on memories of Salazar—the two of us on the beach in Manchester: throwing Frisbees, diving into the ocean, ogling at bikinis. Twenty-four-year-old Harvard graduates aren’t supposed to end up hanging from nooses in their parents’ garage. I had visited him in New York only a few weeks earlier. He’d been depressed. Our mutual friends had told me, “He won’t get out of bed. Won’t you come by and talk to him. He loves you.” I’d sat next to him while he lay there, and we’d spoken—some heavy stuff. Some light stuff. I could still make him chuckle—a good sign! When I’d departed that afternoon, leaving my fair-skinned buddy supine, nestled under a winter comforter, I genuinely believed that he would get through the battle with depression and come out alright on the other side. That’s what people generally do. They generally tell themselves that hope will find a way.

And what is suicide, really, other than the ultimate decision that life should be over because hope has gone? If any hope exists—and I mean any—even a sliver—we carry on, because even a smidgeon of a part of us believes that though we are at bottom, better things await—“nothing almost sees miracles, but misery” (Shakespeare, 1980, II.ii.167-168). And so, though I felt awful about leaving one of my best friends during his time of greatest distress, I also truthfully suspected that he’d recover with time, and that
we’d once again head out to Singing Beach in Manchester, climb the dunes, chuck the Frisbee, kick back, and talk about life. He’d stop swaying, like Kafka’s tree. The guy was 24-years-old ... like me ... like me.
I remember asking him once: “What would you call this patient—schizophrenic or schizoaffective?” He paused and stroked his chin, apparently in deep thought. “I think I’d call him Michael McIntyre,” he replied. (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 26)

It is an event within one’s life characterized by intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the force of its aftereffects. (Britzman & Pitt, 2004)

During the months that followed Jeff Salazar’s suicide attempt, I was good for just about nothing. Once a straight A student in my post-baccalaureate Harvard courses, I struggled mightily to keep up with classes. In Chem II, I scored a C minus on our second to last exam of the semester. I wrote to my professor at the time, Dr. Jim Davis, explained my circumstances, and expressed that I thought it was better if I simply dropped the course. I had known Dr. Davis since my undergraduate days—a warm-spirited, big-bellied, kind-hearted man, who legitimately went out of his way to learn almost every name of every student he taught, including the majority of the 600 people enrolled in Chem II. Coincidentally, Dr. Davis had been cast as Doc, the drug-store attendant, during my undergraduate performance as Tony in West Side Story. So we had a history.

Davis had known Salazar, as well, having taught him in both Chem 5 and Chem 7, when Salazar had been a premed undergraduate. He therefore understood the gravity with which Salazar’s suicide attempt had rocked me. Nonetheless, Davis urged me to complete the course, offering to give me extra help outside of office hours. Initially I fought, but
invariably took him up on his offer and went to see Davis for a few sessions leading up to the final. It was a gigantic blur.

Dr. Davis was a fantastic teacher—a student favorite. Warm. Considerate. Even-tempered. Clear. He had a knack for making science—even Chemistry—feel personal. But I couldn’t understand a word of it. Embarrassingly, I asked him several times to repeat concepts and explanations that, in a surer state of mind, I would have easily comprehended. But nothing seeped in. While his voice discoursed over titrations, molality, and Van Hoff’t factors, I experienced nothing but waves of panic, anxiety, and a perpetual fear that I would faint or fall apart in front of him. In retrospect, I was having what one might consider to be a prolonged, seemingly endless panic attack. At a certain point during our sessions, I started lying to Dr. Davis, telling him that I understood the things he was teaching me. In part I did so to protect myself against the severe embarrassment of feeling like an “A” student who had completely fallen apart and was thinking at the level of an amoeba. But another part of me simply felt bad for him and didn’t want him to think that he was failing at getting through to me.

In late May, I reluctantly showed up for the three-hour final, quite literally spent the first thirty minutes staring numbly into an abyss, and then attempted to gather my wits and complete some of it—then basically gave up and handed it in. At best, I correctly answered 65 or 70%.

Two weeks later, Dr. Davis sent me a personal email telling me that I had gotten an A minus in the course. It was a lie. You can’t fake Chemistry. Statistically, I probably deserved a C+ or at best a B-, but Davis was clearly taking pity on me, and understanding that my traumatized mind had hijacked my previous exemplary abilities in the course.

Despite Dr. Davis’s merciful, empathic gift and humanistic understanding, I decided not to enroll in that summer’s post-bacc courses. In retrospect, I think I had PTSD.

*   *   *   *

171
I started this dissertation by telling the story of Alison Scott, conveying the scenario that compelled her to put in a request for a trigger warning, and then detailing my initial dismissive reaction to her position. I taught Alison 16 years after my own bought with PTSD. I had forgotten what it felt like to be held within the grip of a traumatic memory. I had forgotten my own shaking.

Had I been in a literature course in the wake of Salazar’s suicide attempt, and been asked to read the scene where Ophelia drowns herself, Willy Loman runs his car into a wall, or Sylvia Plath writes about her suicidal relationship with her Daddy, I may not have been able to handle it. Despite my current firm belief in the therapeutic potentiality of literature to bring about empathy (Kid & Castano, 2013; M. Steele, personal communication, February 21, 2017) and help us heal (Crothers, 1916), I don’t know whether I could have stomached intense emotional encounters with literature in the immediate wake of Salazar. How could I have engaged with Hamlet’s “too, too sullied flesh” (Shakespeare, 2005, I.i.129), when I couldn’t even stare at a thermodynamics problem?

And yet, time often has the ability to heal us (Epstein, 2014)—hopefully!—but it also has the capacity for helping us forget. By the time I read Alison’s email on that balmy summer evening in 2015, I was miles and miles removed from my own teetering emotional walk along shattering glass. Trauma, though it had been my emotional bedfellow in the winter of 1999, had become an intellectual concept by 2015—the ex-girlfriend whose previous torment seemed, at present, like an old memory I could easily compartmentalize and even laugh about. And so I—probably in large part in order to defend against my own shameful recollections—initially read Alison’s message with a prideful dismissiveness that failed to give understanding or empathy to either Alison’s circumstances or my own. I saw her, admittedly, as hyper-sensitive, and embodying what my colleague at the time referred to as a form of “spoiled tyranny” (G. Grene, personal communication, October 15, 2015). What kind of students had the temerity to suggest that teachers were not allowed to teach emotionally charged content? My colleague continued: “Can you imagine in your right
mind telling the teacher he or she is not allowed to stretch you? They may well need counseling, too, but my suggested initial therapy would be a huge kick in the hole” (G. Grene, personal communication, October 15, 2015).

And this is pretty much how I felt about trigger warnings for a long time—the precious, self-indulgent, somewhat arbitrary, masquerading need of a group of millennial, coddled youths (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). My views somewhat persisted through the Fall semester of 2015, even after I conversed with Alison Scott, became acquainted with her side of the story, and more fully understood her position. I proceeded to write a paper called “Trigger Warnings are Ridiculous—Except When They’re Not.” In that paper, I highlighted the dangers of trigger warning—many of which I have diagramed already in this dissertation. In the end, I found myself siding with Alison Scott’s individual story, but nonetheless still believed that trigger warnings, as a general practice, played into a pedagogy that promotes fear, discourages emotional risk-taking, and inhibits growth. I still felt this way when I published an article in Changing English on the negative relationship between proponents of trigger warnings and reflective functioning (Fonagy et al., 1991), “Reflecting On Functioning in Trigger Happy America” (Wolfsdorf, 2017).

And then, in the Spring of 2017, while sitting aboard—of all things!—the Norwegian Breakaway, a behemoth, flashing, bells and whistles, family-friendly cruise ship that sails round-trip from New York City to Bermuda—my understanding of trigger warnings changed in a way I could not have predicted. On the only rainy afternoon of our seven-day excursion to paradise, a day after the Breakaway had sailed out from Bermuda’s Saint George’s cruise terminal and floated, temporarily suspended, somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic, I abandoned my wife and two small children for a few hours, found a covered, reclining beach chair situated near the adult pool, and began to read—of all things!—Bessel van der Kolk’s book, The Body Keeps The Score, a psychiatrist’s opus on what happens neurologically and emotionally to individuals who have endured trauma.
While international pool staff sauntered up and down the slippery deck, mopping the floor, laying down towels, and peddling brightly colored beverages, I withstood the tipsy rocking of the 5,000-passenger vessel, fixed my eyes on Bessel’s research, and studied what can happen to the brain when individuals have endured rape, witnessed murder, been in car crashes, returned from war, suffered abuse—some of the specific trauma types that trigger warnings are ostensibly designed to protect for.

As the Breakaway burned through the ocean at 20 nautical miles per hour, I unexpectedly found a piece to a mental puzzle I was not even aware I was building. Under the textual tutelage of van der Kolk, my vision of the trigger warning phenomenon surprisingly began to modify, like a Sphinx appearing unexpectedly from the desert sands of negative space.


The Missing Piece: Understanding Trauma and its Effects

If we’re not suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, we’re suffering from pre-traumatic stress disorder. (Epstein, 2013)

Though it is comforting to believe otherwise, trauma is very common. Due to the combinatory forces of entropy—the universe’s natural tendency toward chaos—and the inevitability of aggression (one of the endemic characteristics of evolutionary Darwinism), trauma is a very real force that can visit unexpectedly, like Wilson showing up unannounced at Gatsby’s swimming pool. In The Body Keeps The Score, Bessel van der Kolk—Harvard psychiatrist, founder and director of the National Complex Trauma Treatment Network, and one of the world’s leading experts on both understanding and treating trauma survivors—accounts for the prevalence of trauma in the United States:
Research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has shown that one in five Americans was sexually molested as a child; one in four was beaten by a parent to the point of a mark being left on their body; and one in three couples engages in physical violence. A quarter of us grew up with alcoholic relatives, and one out of eight witnessed their mother being beaten or hit. (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 1)

When I first read these statistics, sitting atop that giant cruise ship, I was surprised—not shocked, but surprised. Roughly translated, these figures suggest that of the approximately 326 million people currently living in the U.S., 65M were sexually molested as children, 81.5M were beaten by a parent to the point of leaving marks. Furthermore, 20M couples engage in physical violence—as of 2015, there were 60.5M married couples in the U.S. (Statista, 2017)—81.5M grew up with alcoholic relatives, and almost 41M witnessed their mother’s being beaten or hit.

There are approximately 75M students enrolled, pre-K through college, in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2017). When the above statistical percentages are extrapolated for students nationwide, we can conclude that:

- 15M US students have been sexually molested as a child
- 18.75M students have been beaten by a parent to the point of leaving a mark.
- 18.75M students have grown up with alcoholic relatives.
- 9.38M students have witnessed their mother being beaten or hit.

Clearly, these figures are approximations; they are derived calculations based on firmer statistics—and they do not account for any potential overlaps. For instance, some students who have been raped may also have been physically beaten, etc. Nonetheless, the point should be clear: our classrooms are likely filled with survivors of trauma—both students and teachers. But trauma, like many psychological forces, does not necessarily leave its mark in any detectable way. Unlike gender and race, which are often—though not always—visibly identifiable, trauma can lurk dormant behind Prada purses, hairspray, cocky attitudes, avoidance, dilapidated trousers, and untied shoelaces. And since trauma can be experienced but not necessarily digested emotionally, its marks often get swept under the
proverbial rug of human experience, left in the wake of days, months, or even years. As Shakespeare says in *Macbeth*, "There is not art to find the mind's construction in the face" (Shakespeare, 2007, I.iv.13-14). The impacts of trauma can live with us, waiting to be triggered.

That trauma exists and affects a considerable percentage of our student population seems fairly undeniable; less clear and less predictable is how various individuals will react and respond to the traumas they’ve endured. Responses to trauma, like personality, can be highly contextualized, person-specific, and unpredictable—even within the same survivor. Some, like Yana, a young woman in my Shakespeare course who suddenly and tragically lost her father and yet was able to read, digest, and deeply explore *Hamlet*—a play centered around loss of fathers—have unusual resilience and push through subject material that triggers or directly overlaps with their personal traumatic histories. Others, like Alison Scott, anticipate something that may uncomfortably hit home—such as the AT&T car crash commercial—and bow out, incapable of handling the traumatic impact of re-experiencing closely related events. As I will discuss, we must not judge or prioritize either response. As van der Kolk (2014) writes:

> Long after a traumatic experience is over, it may be reactivated at the slightest hint of danger and mobilize disturbed brain circuits and secrete massive amounts of stress hormones. This precipitates unpleasant emotions, intense physical sensations, and impulsive and aggressive actions. These posttraumatic reactions feel incomprehensible and overwhelming. (p. 2)

In the case of Yana, she was able to experience a text that closely mirrored her own traumatic experience. In the case of Alison, she could not. Are we to say that Yana is resilient while Alison is fragile? That Yana is “fit” for school while Alison isn’t? That doesn’t feel fair or reasonable. Both women suffered intensely personal and troubling experiences, and both, perhaps, were triggered in different ways, as they sat in the classroom and became exposed to material that directly overlapped with their own psychological histories and personal stories.
Rather than casting aspersions or making judgmental claims, I think it makes more sense to recognize and understand that trauma is a complex force, one that, as we are learning, regularly attends our classrooms—“reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope” (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 2). And since the trigger warning, by definition, aims to protect and secure the psychological fragility of students who have suffered traumatic experiences, I think it is crucially important that educators begin to better understand what trauma is, how it can affect people, and, ultimately, how they can better recognize and handle it when it gets triggered.

This is meant as no great offense to the trigger warning, which, when utilized, may nobly attempt to help people who may in fact need extra consideration and care in the classroom. The problem, as I see it, is that, even when utilized conscientiously and with a mind toward student benefit, employers of trigger warnings may be doing little to offset the potential impact of trauma. As van der Kolk and others have illustrated, trauma and its impacts can be pervasive, psychologically complex, and often neurological. Giving a trigger warning to safeguard survivors of trauma may be analogous to thinking a beaver can build a dam capable of withstanding Niagara Falls—a cautious though potentially ineffective solution to a highly sophisticated and potentially intractable problem. In the section that follows, I’ll begin to explain the neurological impacts of trauma. It was this understanding that permanently altered my own brain and helped me reconceptualize trauma and its consequences in ways I had never considered.

**Trauma on the Brain**

Research from these new disciplines has revealed that trauma produces actual physiological changes, including a recalibration of the brain’s alarm system, an increase in stress hormone activity, and alterations in the system that filters relevant information from relevant. (Van der Kolk, 2014, pp. 2-3)

Trauma’s impact on the brain is not widely understood (Van der Kolk, 2014). Prior to positron emission tomography (PET)—as part of the rapid psychopharmacological
revolution of the 1980s and ’90s—neuroscientists attempted to study the brain by examining chemicals such as serotonin and norepinephrine. These neurotransmitters, though they have a profound impact on brain chemistry and mood, are not the brain, itself; they are chemical particles that impact brain functioning and affect mood. As van der Kolk describes, “The early technology of measuring brain chemicals like serotonin or norepinephrine had enabled scientists to look at what fueled neural activity, which is a bit like trying to understand a car’s engine by studying gasoline” (pp. 39-40). Neuroimaging, the technology behind PET, made it “possible to see inside the engine” (p. 40). A major breakthrough in brain study occurred when scientists developed the technology, in the form of an MRI machine, to examine the brain itself.

Doctors conduct PET scans in order to determine whether there are diseases in the body. The scan utilizes a dye that has radioactive tracers. These tracers get injected into the patient’s arm, where they get absorbed by organs and tissues. The PET scan highlights these tracers and allows doctors to see how organs and tissues are functioning. PET scans can measure blood flow, oxygen use, glucose metabolism, etc. Since van der Kolk’s work focuses on the brain, he and his research team at the Trauma Center in Brookline, Massachusetts, conduct PET scans to examine what areas of an individual’s neurocircuitry get activated when trauma survivors reflect upon or recall traumatic experiences.

Prior to the PET scan, van der Kolk has his patients work with a member of his research team to create a script that will psychologically recreate the conditions during which the trauma took place. For somebody like Yana, a script might read like this:

You are 17 years old, and you are standing in the kitchen talking with your mother. The two of you are discussing what time you plan to go to the beach the next day, when suddenly the house telephone rings. You and your mother look at each other, and then she decides to pick it up. You watch, as your mother listens to the other end of the phone. You see her face become increasingly serious, and you know something bad has happened. She suddenly puts her hand on the kitchen counter, and her body collapses into a chair. She begins to sob heavily, her entire body shaking. You rush over to her and seek to
give comfort but she seems out of reach. She suddenly turns to you, her eyes clouded with tears, and tells you that your father has died.

During PET scans, van der Kolk has observed profound physiological changes, while trauma survivors re-experience oral scripts that reactivate their traumatic memories. For one of his patients, a woman named Martha who lost both her daughter and her in-utero child in a tragic car accident, van der Kolk (2014) noted that as soon as the woman heard the tape, her heart started racing, her muscles tightened, and her blood pressure increased. In fact, van der Kolk believes that trauma survivors who experience a recreation of their trauma get activated to a physiological and psychological experience almost neurologically identical to the original experiential state they suffered when the original trauma occurred.

Bessel van der Kolk’s research team at the Trauma Center worked with his mathematicians and statisticians to create composite brain images that compared the brains of his patients when they were re-experiencing the traumatic memory to brain images in neutral. The results were astounding.

Figure 9.1. PET Scan Images Highlighting Trauma’s Effect on the Brain

The above images, taken by van der Kolk’s research team, come from Martha’s PET scan. I will start with Image A. The radiotracer contained radioactive oxygen. As we may remember from high school biology, oxygen is the diatomic molecule necessary for cellular
respiration, the process by which glucose gets converted into adenosine tri-phosphate (ATP). In basic terms, cellular respiration converts food energy into usable energy for the body. What we see in Image A is a hyper-concentration of oxygen in the right limbic area of the brain. Why is this significant?

Hyper-concentration of oxygen in a brain region indicates that hyper-active neurological activity is occurring in that region. Basically, that part of the brain has been activated and needs excessive amounts of oxygen present in order to produce enough energy to sustain neurological activity. And why the right limbic area? The right limbic area is an emotional region of the brain. More specifically, there is a region in the right limbic system called the amygdala. Human beings rely on the amygdala to “warn us of impending danger and to activate the body’s stress response” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 42). Martha’s brain, flooded with memories of her traumatic experience, suddenly ramped into fight or flight mode, sending excess oxygen to the right limbic area and warning her of impending trauma—even though it was simply a script being read to her from an event that happened 13 years earlier. Rather than her brain being able to experience the memory as a horrible episode from the past, her physiological response, rapid breathing and accelerated heart rate, sweating, activated right limbic response signaled that she was reliving the traumatic moment in the present tense. Perhaps Alison Scott, sitting in my Drama classroom in July of 2015 was catapulted directly back to the previous fall, when she had fainted at the wheel and ended up smashing into a telephone pole on the side of the road. This is one thing that many researchers indicate about survivors of trauma—part of their neurological reality is freeze-fractured in the past. When the previously traumatized get triggered, survivors can neurologically respond as though they are right back at the scene of the trauma.

What else did Martha’s neuroimaging show? Observe Image C: “Our most surprising finding was a white spot in the left frontal lobe of the cortex, in a region called Broca’s area” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 45). Bessel’s team found that a change in color in the region
signified a significant decrease in activity for this brain region. Stroke victims often suffer similar diminished brain inactivity in Broca's region, one of our most important speech centers: “Without a functioning Broca’s area, you cannot put your thoughts and feelings into words. Our scans showed that Broca’s area went offline whenever a flashback was triggered” (p. 43). We see a literary illustration of this in *Macbeth*, after Duncan's body is discovered: “Oh horror! horror! horror! Tongue nor heart cannot conceive nor name thee!... Confusion now hath made thee a masterpiece!” (Shakespeare, 2007, II.iii.72-75). Bessel goes on to say that all trauma is *preverbal*. Traumatized individuals can howl in pain, call for their mothers, refuse to speak, and lose their tongues. Becoming mute is a normal response to powerfully overwhelming psychological experiences. This may explain why trauma survivors, many years or even decades after suffering a traumatic event, have a difficult time finding words for what has happened to them. Even when people eventually do find words to relay their traumatic histories, their representations are often superficial or unsatisfyingly ambivalent or incomplete—what van der Kolk (2014) refers to as their “cover story” (p. 43), since it offers some explanation or account of what occurred, but falls short of conveying the full-throated traumatic extent of the experience. The failure of words that results from traumatic experience often leads to “haunting images ... nightmares and flashbacks” (p. 44). This is what we see in *Image B*, a lighting up of Brodmann’s area 19, a region within the visual cortex. Typically, Brodmann's area captures images when they occur, but then diffuses them to different regions of the brain. But for Martha, her Brodmann's area became activated as it had 13 years ago, indicating that a functional part of her brain remains arrested in the past at the scene of the accident—the trauma continues.
Right Brain

Another powerful feature of van der Kolk’s (2014) PET scan images relates to hemispheric polarization. In non-traumatic human experience, under normal conditions, both sides of the brain get activated and respond to stimuli. However, among survivors triggered by reminders of their traumatic memories, right brain dominance is what shows up on PET scans: “The scans also revealed that during flashbacks, our subjects’ brains lit up only on the right side” (p. 44). As a reminder, left-brainers are typically rational and logical, while right brainers usually demonstrate more intuitive and artistic traits. The scans clearly demonstrate that images of past trauma activate the right hemisphere and deactivate the left.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Left Brain</th>
<th>Right Brain</th>
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<tr>
<td>linguistic</td>
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Bessel notes that “while the left half of the brain does all the talking, the right half of the brain carries the music of experience” (p. 44). The right brain develops first in utero, and it carries non-verbal communication between mother and developing infant.

Furthermore, the two brain hemispheres process memories differently. While the left brain recalls facts, statistics, and vocabulary for events, the right brain houses sensory memories, such as touch, smell, sound, and other emotionally evocative inputs. What the right brain recalls “feels like intuitive truth—the way things are” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 45). Though different from each other, under normal circumstances the two sides of the brain work in coordination with each other, communicating, and operating smoothly. But among trauma survivors engaged in the act of re-experiencing their traumas, the link between the two sides of the brain is cut off, rendering the individual disabled.
Without sequencing we can’t identify cause and effect, grasp the long-term effects of our actions, or create coherent plans for the future. People who are very upset sometimes say they are ‘losing their minds.’ In technical terms, they are experiencing the loss of executive functioning. (p. 45)

When previously traumatized people get triggered, their brains interpret reality as if the past trauma is still happening in the present. Since the left brain deactivates, they are often not aware that they are reenacting or re-experiencing the past. Once the emotional storm passes, it is common that they look to blame others for what has occurred (van der Kolk, 2014). It is not uncommon for people to misattribute their anger, fear, or anxiety while they are in a hypervigilant state, but most people possess the ability to reset and account for misattribution once the overwhelming feelings subside. Among traumatized individuals, however, “trauma interferes with this kind of awareness” (p. 45).

In a basic sense, van der Kolk (2014) claims that traumatized individuals who get triggered and thereby experience something analogous to their initial traumatic event may become suspended in a fight-or-flight reality, in which their body kicks into a sympathetic, neuronal response, pulling the individual out of homeostasis and into what van der Kolk refers to as an “alarm system” (p. 45). The alarm system accelerates heart rate, heightens blood pressure, and floods the individual with adrenaline. Under baseline homeostatic conditions, most individuals react to threat with a temporary burst of these physiological, neuro-chemical responses; but trauma survivors turn on the sympathetic networks, and they don’t shut off—“the stress hormones of traumatized people, in contrast, take much longer to return to baseline and spike quickly and disproportionately in response to mildly stressful stimuli” (p. 46). Consistently elevated stress hormones produce attentional issues, sleep disorders, and irritability.

When Alison Scott realized that I was about to show a car crash commercial, her body may have involuntarily revved into fight-or-flight mode, her stress hormones may have kicked in, her right brain may have turned on, her left brain may have been deactivated, and her Broca’s area may have gone offline, incapable of formulating words, thinking, or
speaking logically. Though surrounded by close friends whom she had studied with for three years, and though within the comforts and relative security of a rectangular classroom in an elite university, Alison may have shuttled right back to the road where her accident took place, losing consciousness, forgetting how to slam on the breaks, and smashing into a telephone pole on a busy, interstate thruway. For her, my AT&T pedagogical moment, well-intended, I believe, and designed for the purpose of instruction and edification, may have lined up too directly with a traumatic event that Alison was not yet able to process, confront, or cope with. And so she did what many traumatized individuals do when hit too hard by overwhelming reminders of undigested traumatic experience—she got up and walked away. Alison didn’t want her car crash to be featured in my classroom that day. Knowing what I have just discussed about trauma, can we blame her?

**Trauma’s Faces**

It occurred to me that there was no difference between men, in intelligence or race, so profound as the difference between the sick and the well. (Fitzgerald, 2013)

It is not just that the traumatized ones and the normal live in different worlds; it is that these discrepant worlds are felt to be essentially and ineradically incommensurable. (Stolorow, 2007, p. 15)

**Relational Trauma**

Much of van der Kolk’s work focuses on impact trauma—dramatic events that trigger intense psychological reactions: car crashes, witnesses to murder, experiencers of rape or victimization due to sexual abuse, child abuse, etc. But trauma has many faces, and though high impact traumatic experiences often lead to PTSD or other similarly destabilizing responses, there are other, more subtle forms of trauma that can also have profound psychological impacts on individuals, though with perhaps less clear originating identifiers.
One such trauma form is often referred to as *relational trauma*, which can result from chronic mis-attunements with parents, caregivers, and family members—or even from discordant connections with close friends, authority figures, etc.

Beatrice Beebe, a clinical professor of medical psychology at Columbia University and a faculty member at the Columbia Psychoanalytic Center, has spent much of her career looking at the mother-infant dyad and analyzing the social transmission of maternal psychopathology and the origins of infant insecure attachment. Beebe’s work, highlighted through frame-by-frame film analysis of micro-expressions and mis-attunements between mothers and children, examines how non-verbal communication can confuse, upset, or even emotionally paralyze developing infants, who interact with and depend upon their mothers for an essential understanding of the world. According to Beebe, infants take cues from their primary caregivers and build relational foundations with the world based on how their caregivers mirror or fail to mirror their own intuitions, feelings, impulses, and thoughts.

Our basic proposal is that early interaction structures provide an important basis for organization of infant experience and emerging self- and object representations. Interaction structures are characteristic patterns of mutual regulations in which both infant and caretaker influence each other. The infant comes to recognize, remember, and expect these recurring interaction structures. (Beebe & Lachmann, 1994, p. 83)

When attunement is “good-enough” (Winnicott, 1971), infants can develop secure attachments; secure attachment is a strong predictor of enhanced social adjustment, school performance, academic achievement, relationship success, and fewer psychiatric issues (Steele & Steele, 1991; Van IJzendoorn, 1995). When attunement fails or is grossly interfered with by parental emotional histories or psychopathology, infants can become traumatized unwittingly, and this early relational trauma can become a persistent lens through which the developing child experiences and interacts with the world. Stolorow (2007) writes:
Developmental trauma originates within a formative intersubjective context whose central feature is malattunement to painful effect—a breakdown of the child-caregiver system of mutual regulation. This leads to the child’s loss of affect-integrating capacity and thereby to an unbearable, overwhelmed, disorganized state. (p. 3)

Unlike impact trauma, which often has a clear origination point, relational trauma is typically inherited unconsciously, slowly, and over long stretches of time. These recurrent mis-attunements can seep into the brain like meat that does not know it is being marinated. By the time our students reach our classrooms, these relational traumas may have infused their beings, and they may find themselves encased in a psychological bubble that distorts or, at the very least, colors the way they interact with teachers, curriculum, their classmates, and, certainly, literary material that triggers or reminds them of their inherited psychological constructs: “A second consequence of developmental trauma is a severe constriction and narrowing of the horizons of emotional experiencing” (p. 4).

Since relational trauma is far less context-specific, it may take on a more overarching pattern within the individual’s mind and experience, making it very tricky to protect or defend against. Fritz Perls (1992), the founding father of Gestalt Therapy, describes these psychologically created representations as maya worlds—illusory, conditioned mental constructs that individuals create in order to cope with and interact with the world. For traumatized individuals, the maya world can serve as an unconscious cocoon through which life is interpreted, imagined, and experienced. And since the maya world typically presents itself to the individual with a perception of reality that is compelling, as, indeed, all of our realities may seem like the “true thing,” it can be impossible to properly protect or defend the lens that individuals assume as they interact with the world around them. If relational trauma has been adverse or damaging enough, the mental constructs can become deeply embedded in the psychological DNA, far below conscious awareness, and therefore very difficult, if not impossible, to inoculate for or defend. Creating effective trigger warnings for traumas that have been inherited relationally may be analogous to trying to
dry off a person while they’re taking a shower. The garden of the unconscious mind can sprout imaginary flowers that need little soil for growth.

The Trauma of Everyday Life

In demonstrating this, the Buddha was making an important example for the ages. For almost no one is exempt from trauma. While some people have it in a much more pronounced way than others, the unpredictable and unstable nature of things makes life inherently traumatic. (Epstein, 2014)

And if relational trauma is hard to adequately account for, then what do we make of trauma that has no specific origins, trauma that arises from the long-term, cumulative corrosive effects of everyday life? The trauma of everyday life espouses the idea that simply dealing with the stress-inducing rigors and Darwinian realities of being alive can wear people down and produce a net-traumatic result. Packed New York City subway cars. Low wages. Angry bosses. Competitive classmates. Closed-minded politicians. Racial slurs. Sexism. Politics. Impossible supervisors. Each of these big-small, miniscule-recurrent psychological toxins can accumulate, like water over rock, wearing down and slowly eating away at resilience factors, invariably leaving the individual in a compromised self state—traumatized by the extrinsic life pressures that can overwhelm an individual’s selfhood.

For those among our students who have been subtly devastated by the cumulative traumatic effects of being a human being in a complex world—subtle slights, micro-aggressions, misinterpreted glances, even body language and intonation can be triggering—many noble attempts at fostering a healthy, positive classroom environment can be rendered futile. If the lens through which the individual experiences the world has been powerfully corrupted by intangible, metaphysical factors, he or she may be incapable of transcending the demons of his or her psychological cocoon. And thus, despite best attempts at fostering brave classrooms spaces, growth-promoting pedagogy, and benevolence, victims to the trauma of everyday life may have great difficulty adopting a positive self-relationship with the classroom, the teacher, or the intended dynamics. If the
maya world has been psychologically constructed by too much negativity and pain, the individual in question may self-isolate within a womb of fragility, skepticism, and despair. How does a trigger warning penetrate or create a more digestible, palatable classroom world for this student? I am tempted to say, it doesn’t.

The Trauma of Existence

Understand the suffering of worldly existence. (Gautama Buddha)

I began this chapter by highlighting the belief that trauma is far more common than we might imagine (van der Kolk, 2014). I presented the following derived statistics:

- 15M US students have been sexually molested as a child
- 18.75M students have been beaten by a parent to the point of leaving a mark.
- 18.75M students have grown up with alcoholic relatives.
- 9.38M students have witnessed their mother being beaten or hit.

And these figures only account for certain impact traumas. If we factor in relational trauma and the trauma of everyday experience, we might imagine that these statistics rise significantly. Three million adolescents in the United States suffer from depression (approximately 12% of the adolescent population); a similar percentage suffer from anxiety disorders (NIMH, 2017).

What do we make of these figures? What do we make of the prevalence of trauma? Of the very real possibility that perhaps a significantly higher percentage of our student populations than teachers might originally believe have suffered or are suffering from palpable traumatic experiences that impact their lives regularly? In his book Trauma and Human Experience, Robert D. Stolorow (2007)—echoing Britzman and Pitt (2004), Felman (1982), and Epstein (2014)—argues that trauma is intrinsically embedded into the teleological and existential fabric of life—not a superfluous, inconvenient occurrence of life, but rather an essential, inevitable component of it—something that almost all human beings have faced, do face, or will face. Such a reality compels NYU psychiatrist Mark
Epstein (2013) to state, “If we’re not suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, we’re suffering from pre-traumatic stress disorder.” Stolorow and Atwood (1992) cite Heidegger’s *existential analytic*, which demonstrates the philosopher’s belief that emotional trauma is built into the natural architecture of the human experience—trauma therefore exposes “the unbearable embeddedness of being” (p. 22).

So it’s there. It’s not only in the Edgar Allan Poe poem; it’s also inside Toby, swirling through Charlotte, poking about in the neurons and repressed memories of Dmitry, and prodding, agitating, and instigating Tanya. Like Thomas Hobbes’s leviathan, trauma may need only a little provocation to rear its ugly head and quickly usher in a herd of dismantled elephants.

So what can we do with it? How can teachers better understand trauma? And, if it gets triggered, what can educators do and *not* do to handle it in ways that are appropriate enough, given their limitations as English teachers? It is my belief that teachers can be therapeutic, but should not attempt to play the role of the therapist.

I have spent the better part of this chapter exposing you to various types of trauma, and explaining—with the help of Bessel van der Kolk’s research—how trauma can get triggered, and, when it does, what can happen to survivors. Since my research focuses on the interface between literature and student trauma, building this awareness feels particularly important.

**Heading into Chapter X: A Look at Traumatic Response**

As I move into Chapter X, I am going to introduce more of the work of Bessel van der Kolk. Specifically, I am going to relay what can happen to trauma survivors when they get triggered. Understanding traumatic response may help English teachers better empathize with and comprehend what their students go through when literature interfaces
with traumatic experiences. And since the end game for all of this is really teacher education and heightened awareness, I think the more we know, the better for everyone.
Chapter X

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMATIC RESPONSE

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek. That was a long time ago, but it’s wrong what they say about the past, I’ve learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years. (Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*)

In Chapter IX, I discussed some of the forms of trauma, with a specific focus on *impact*, *relational*, and the *trauma of everyday life*. There are, of course, many other types of trauma to discuss, but I am bound by the limits of space and time; additionally, I feel compelled to remind the reader that while this dissertation takes a close look at trauma, it is not a dissertation about trauma—but rather a study that examines trauma within the context of teaching literature. My end game, here, is to help build a heightened understanding of potential practices for utilizing aesthetically charged literary texts, knowing that traumatized students reside in the classroom.

As I press forward into Chapter X, I’ll move away from classification, and begin to closely examine how the various forms of trauma discussed can impact those who have been victimized. If you remember from the interview conversations with teachers in Chapter V, the question of what happens to survivors when they get triggered elicited particularly incomplete, fragmented, and disfluent responses. Since it’s likely the case that students will get triggered in our classrooms, I think it is important for English teachers to better understand what trauma can do to survivors when it gets reactivated. Although it is
true that any individual who endures a trauma—or multiple traumas—may respond or react in idiosyncratic, self-determined ways, the literature indicates that certain trends or response patterns occur with some degree of consistency. To this end, I am going to describe some fairly predictable patterns of response, since many of these reaction archetypes may mirror responses to trauma that English teachers observe among their own students.

**Loss of Self, Diminished Intimacy**

In the wake of traumatic events, trauma survivors often *lose a sense of self* and struggle to maintain intimate relationships (van der Kolk, 2014). Overwhelmed by the sheer gravity of the traumatic experience, the self can become shattered, in a Kohutian sense, incapable of pulling itself together or coming to terms with the loss of innocence that can result from trauma’s destabilizing impact. In *Trauma and Human Existence*, Stolorow (2007) describes the loss of innocence that often accompanies trauma: “The essence of emotional trauma ... [is] a catastrophic loss of innocence that permanently alters one’s sense of being in the world” (p. 26). Traumatized individuals often shatter, unable to stitch together or integrate pre-traumatic and post-traumatic views on reality. In the wake of the event, when the individual is consumed by the intensity of her emotional response, she may find herself in a dream-like state, psychologically cocooned within an emotional reality she finds incompatible with the world she knew and believed in. As Hamlet expresses, following his father’s death:

> I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises, and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air—look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire—why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. (Shakespeare, 1968, 2.2.280-286)
In the wake of trauma, that which was once good, wholesome, pure, and meaningful can buckle, break down, dissolve, and appear false and meaningless.

Consider the story of Robert Stolorow, psychoanalyst and philosopher, who lost his wife to cancer. Stolorow woke up one morning to find his dead wife sprawled out across the bed next to him. Several months after his wife’s death, he was invited to attend a holiday party held by a group of his close friends. Although the event was peopled by many individuals near and dear to Stolorow, he described feeling an intense sense of isolationism, alien to the friends and colleagues he had known throughout his career. Such responses to trauma are common.

In the wake of Jeff Salazar’s suicide attempt, I felt similarly disconnected and alone. When I walked into Mass General Hospital the following day, I felt like I was having an outer body experience. Traumatized individuals often feel that the world they have known is a lie and struggle mightily to piece together a new understanding of life: “Trauma exposes the inescapable contingency of existence On a universe that is random and unpredictable and in which No safety or continuity of being can be assured” (Stolorow, 2007, p. 26). I’d imagine that in the wake of Alison Scott’s car crash, she must have felt hypervigilant, convinced that around every corner lay a potential chance encounter with fatality. Perhaps the teacher participants had know their own traumas. I never asked them.

Like Edgar from King Lear, who scuttles from tree to tree in the British countryside, victims of trauma hear themselves proclaimed and seek any port in a violent storm. This adjusted vision of the world can feel surreal and psychologically indigestible to the victim, as the “traumatized person cannot help but perceive aspects of existence that lie well outside the absolutized horizon of normal everydayness” (Stolorow, 2007, p. 27).

Dr. van der Kolk (2014) describes this phenomenon as a loss of self, one that typically is accompanied by a failure to maintain relationships of intimacy. Bessel tells the story of one of his patients, a war veteran named Tom, who lost several platoon members and his best friend in battle during the Vietnam War:
Tom told me how he looked on in helpless horror as all the members of his platoon were killed or wounded in a matter of seconds. He would never get one image out of his mind: the back of Alex's head as he lay facedown in a rice paddy, his feet in the air. Tom wept as he recalled “He was the only real friend I ever had.” (p. 12)

Bessel attributes a significant feature of this response to shame—the shame he felt for surviving, for deserving the trauma (as in the case of children who are beaten by their parents, or women who get raped or sexually assaulted). Victims of trauma often feel disproportionately and unfairly responsible for what has happened to them: “deep down many traumatized people are even more haunted by the shame they feel about what they themselves did or did not do under the circumstances” (p. 13). Shame can have the effect of compelling the self to retreat and become even more isolated. In a Kohutian sense, the self may pull back from reality and dwell in isolation and humiliation. When Alison Scott relayed the sequence of her car crash to me during one of our interview conversations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), shame was a prominent theme in her discourse. Certainly, when my friend tried to kill himself, I felt guilt and shame for living—for not being brain-dead.

**Numbing**

I've become so numb, I can't feel you there. (Linkin Park, 2003)

The loss of self that Van der Kolk (2014) describes among trauma victims can invariably produce a sense of *numbing*. Incapable of handling the negative emotions associated with traumatic experience, trauma survivors often shut down and adopt an indifferent, anaesthetized state—an emotional force-field that defensively blankets and protects against the intensity of underlying painful feelings. In reference to Tom, van der Kolk writes:

He felt emotionally distant from everybody, as though his heart were frozen and he were living behind a glass wall. That numbness extended to himself, as well. He could not really feel anything except for his momentary
rages and his shame. He described how he hardly recognized himself when he looked in the mirror to shave. When he heard himself arguing a case in court, he would observe himself from a distance and wonder how this guy, who happened to look and talk like him, was able to make such a cogent argument. (p. 14)

Numbing, loss of self, and inability to maintain or form intimate relationships each constitute what Van der Kolk refers to as a reorganization of the self, an attempt by the traumatized individual to rapidly reshuffle and accommodate for a new understanding of the world that feels intensely anathema, perhaps, to the world he or she has known—“The perfect world was a dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from” (Village Roadshow Pictures, 1999). Not unlike Neo in The Matrix, who gets pulled from the matrix and then realizes that the world he has always known has been a lie, the victim of trauma may suddenly find himself not only struggling to cope with what has occurred, but also grappling with the erasure or seeming nullification of what he or she may have always accepted as true and real.

**Turning Away, Dissociating**

Extreme numbing may lead to dissociation among trauma survivors. Dr. van der Kolk (2014) tells the story of Stan and Ute Lawrence, a married couple in their forties, who in September of 1999 left their home in London, Ontario, en route to a business meeting in Detroit. Approximately half way through the journey, their car was suddenly enveloped in a fog so thick that they could barely see an inch in front of them. Stan immediately slammed on the brakes, coming to a stopped position the highway, but it was too late.

An eighteen wheeler went flying over the trunk of their car; vans and cars slammed into them and into each other. People who got out of their cars were hit as they ran for their lives. The earth-splitting crashes went on and on—with each jolt from behind they felt this would be the one that killed them. (p. 65)

In total, 87 cars crashed into each other. The event was considered the worst car crash in Canadian history.
Unusually traumatic experiences, such as the one just described, often trigger coping mechanisms that compel trauma survivors to split off and distance themselves from memories of the trauma. Even despite attempts at self-distancing, flashbacks and cognitive reliving are often inevitable, and at times induce feelings and panic more intense than the original experience of the event. Because the act of reliving can be so unbearable, trauma survivors often “organize their lives around trying to protect against them” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 67), instituting cocoon-like behavioral patterns they hope will ensure protection and fortification against recurrence.

Extreme numbing and dissociation can lead to a loss of self, a splitting off or disconnection from selfhood that causes the mind to go blank and triggers the neural-circuitry to deactivate. Observe, for instance, the PET Scan of Ute Lawrence, who responded to the 87-car pile-up by going completely numb. Notice how de-activated and blank Ute’s scan is. When van Der Kolk exposed Ute to the script of her traumatic event, nearly every region of her brain “showed markedly decreased activity. Her heart rate and blood pressure didn’t elevate” (p. 71). When Ute described how she felt during the scan, she replied that she “felt nothing” (p. 71). The medical field has a term for this: depersonalization, which van Der Kolk describes as “massive dissociation created by trauma” (p. 72).

Depersonalization often presents with physical manifestations such as blank stares, absent-mindedness, and a biological freeze reaction.

Ute’s particular response to trauma was strikingly different from her husband, Stan’s, whose brain launched into a fight-or-flight, sympathetic response in which several brain regions became highly activated. During his script, Stan demonstrated powerful stress
hormones and accelerated nervous system responses, which contributed to trembling and sweating, a racing heart, and elevated blood pressure. Bessel analogizes Stan’s neural response to a fire detector that goes haywire. Intense trauma can cause the amygdala to go into maladaptive overdrive in which individuals lack the ability to distinguish safety from danger.

The difference between Ute and Stan’s neural response highlights an important consideration for educators, as we begin to parcel out how intensely emotional texts may trigger profoundly varied responses among each of the myriad members of any given student body. Trauma and its impacts are not one-size-fits-all. The plot thickens. Although there are patterns and norms, traumatic response is also highly personal and subject specific.

**Frozen in Trauma**

"Can't repeat the past.... Why of course you can."
– F. Scott Fitzgerald, 2013

Perhaps more than any other singular feature of traumatic response is the tendency of trauma survivors to relay a feeling of being stuck, arrested, or *frozen* in the traumatic experience—the amygdala marks “no difference between past and present” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 69). As the brain images from van der Kolk’s patients indicate, individuals who re-experience traumatic experience often respond as though the traumatic event is
happening now. Reflecting on a session he ran with a group of war veterans, van der Kolk writes: “Whether the trauma had occurred ten years in the past or more than forty, my patients could not bridge the gap between their wartime experience and their current lives” (p. 18). A fundamental difference between traumatic experience and other types of experience is that traumatic events can produce memories that do not fade or become altered over time. The aftermath of a traumatic experience can create a neural imprint that, when triggered or re-activated, feels like it is happening: “For most people the memory of an unpleasant event eventually fades or is transformed into something more benign. But most of our patients were unable to make their past into a story that happened long ago” (p. 19). Trauma almost becomes fossilized in the mind.

Though it is common for individuals to carry out involuntary responses based on conditioning, biases, prejudices, and predilections, triggered traumatic responses are particularly involuntary and seem to be neurologically wired in the brain (van der Kolk, 2014). In many of the cases that van der Kolk describes, the post-traumatic response assumes complete control over the individual, causing them to lose present touch with reality and tugging them back, indefensibly, into the quicksand of the past.

**Trauma and Aloneness/Isolation**

“I am much too alone in this world....” – Rilke, 2016

Although Heidegger, the Buddha, and Stolorow argue that trauma is inevitable and therefore universally embedded in the human experience, those who experience trauma often feel otherwise—not drawn into the universal womb of pain and suffering, but rather

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1Recall that Britzman and Pitt (2004), Felman (1982), and Epstein (2014) make the same argument.
alone, isolated, and separated from what they perceive to be normal human experience. Stolorow (2007) describes this deep sense of alienation:

Because trauma so profoundly alters the universal or shared structure of temporality, the traumatized person ... quite literally lives in another kind of reality, an experiential world incommensurable with those of the other.... This felt incommensurability, in turn, contributes to the sense of alienation and estrangement from other human beings that typically haunts the traumatized person. (p. 20)

Like the protagonist of Rilke’s poem, or like Hester Prynne, who must stand on the scaffold and endure the slings and arrows of Puritan oppression, or Willy Loman, who enters old age encased by regret, degeneration, and profound feelings of failure, victims of trauma often walk through the world physically present but emotionally disconnected—“this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory” (Shakespeare, 2005, 2.2.82-83); “It had the affect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity and enclosing her in a sphere by herself” (Hawthorne, 2012, p. 74).

Stolorow (2007) himself describes the intense feelings of isolation and disconnectedness he felt, as he attempted to navigate his once joyous, yet now dismantled world:

There was a dinner at the conference for all the panelists, many of whom were my old and goodfriends and close colleagues. Yet, as I looked around the ballroom, they all seemed like strange and alien beings to me. Or more accurately, I seemed like a strange and alien being—not of this world. The others seemed so vitalized, engaged with one another in a lively manner. I, in contrast, felt deadened and broken, a shell of the man I had once been. An unbridgeable gulf seemed to open up, separating me forever from my friends and colleagues. They could never even begin to fathom my experience, I thought to myself, because we now lived in altogether different worlds. (p. 14)

This perception of isolationism—I use the word perception, since within the mind of a traumatized person, and, in fact, within the mind of anyone, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs are arbitrarily subjective rather than empirical—often colors the trauma victim’s experience of the world, creating chasms and space, rather than bridges, bonds, and connections. Since, both logically and statistically, it is almost guaranteed that some
members of our student body will be or have been traumatized, I believe teachers would benefit from understanding that any or all of our efforts at building community, fostering interdependence, encouraging warmth, and creating brave space for learning may prove ineffective when trampled by the powerful, transferential energies of traumatic response. Though educators may attempt to build spaces for courage, oneness, and attunement, the mind and experiences of traumatized students may house a reality that perceives danger rather than safety, threat rather than warmth. Like heavy metal rock n’ roll blasting over Mozart’s requiem, trauma can mask alternative perceptions. Alison Scott, for instance, may have interpreted my attempts at teaching compression and narrative film as a threatening event that drummed up her past car crashes, one that pressured her into a close encounter with fatality.

**Diminished Reflective Functioning**

There is an inverse relationship between trauma and heightened reflective functioning (RF). Reflecting functioning (Fonagy et al., 1991) is a construct that emerged in the mid-1980s within the British psychoanalytic school, at the University College of London. RF refers to an individual’s ability to mentalize—to understand the mental states of both the self and the other, and to map these mental states to overt behavior. When individuals feel safe, supported, and secure, reflective functioning tends to be enhanced. When individuals have suffered trauma, reflective functioning tends to suffer (M. Steele, personal communication, May 30, 2017). RF breaks down in the face of trauma.

**RF: A Definition**

According to Steele, Murphy, and Steele (2015):

Reflective functioning is defined as the capacity to observe and think about mental states, in oneself and in others, in the service of building realistic models of why people behave, think, and feel as they do. The ability to give meaning to our own psychological experiences develops as a result of our
discovery that minds typically operate behind human actions, and are
influenced by actions of the other. Reflective functioning is a construct not
unlike insight or psychological mindfulness and so has arguably been part of
the psychoanalytic thinking since its inception. (p. 217)

One way to better understand what reflective functioning is, is to understand what it is not.

Fonagy et al (1991) differentiate RF from a pre-reflective self, which refers to the
“immediate—that is to say, unmediated—experiencer of life” (p. 202). This pre-reflective
part of the individual possesses little ability to distinguish, separate, or reflect upon the self
that is dynamically engaged in the experience of life. The pre-reflective self lacks the
cognitive mechanisms necessary for pulling back the lens and examining or assessing the
self as experiencer.

The reflective self possesses the capabilities the pre-reflective self lacks. Individuals
with strong RF are capable of enhanced mentalization, engaging in the “dialectic
compliment of the experiencing self” (Fonagy et al., 1991, p. 202). The reflective self is able
to differentiate itself as observer and assessor, distinct from the self-construct that
immediately partakes in the emotional and cognitive bulrushes of existence. According to
Fonagy et al:

The reflective self knows that the self feels, perceives, reacts, and so on.
The reflective self reflects upon mental experiences, conscious or unconscious.
It registers psychic life and constructs representations of feelings and thoughts,
desires and beliefs. Most important, it is aware that its representations of its
behavior and actions are shaped by the content of others’ mentation. It
constructs an image of the self as observed and of the other as observing and in
both cases includes a capacity to reflect upon such observations. (p. 202)

The reflectively functioning self exists as both experiencer and analyzer of self-experience.
An individual capable of reflective functioning is able to assess, analyze, seek
understanding, tolerate, and work through the intensity of first-hand experience. He or she
can pull back the lens and experience the self’s emotions and raw energies with a
psychological distance that provides opportunity for reflection and analysis. Like Lear in
the storm, he can consider the following questions: Why am I angry? Why do I feel
threatened? What is arousing or exciting me and what do I do with these feelings? Rather
than existing simply as an emotionally blind servant to the undertow of human emotional responses, an individual with high RF is often able to maintain some degree of self-mastery and governance.

If high RF improves the individual’s ability to cope with life’s volatility, the opposite is true for individuals with low RF. As a general rule, individuals with lower levels of reflective functioning buckle (cave in) or explode (unhinge) during intense emotional periods, often going through life in a semi-suspended, dream-like state (van der Kolk, 2014). They often feel like life happens to them, and that they lack the capacity for creating metacognitive distance.

This seems significant to consider with regard to trauma and trigger warnings. Since individuals who suffer trauma often become overwhelmed and incapable of handling complex or emotionally triggering circumstances, it is reasonable to extrapolate that RF can suffer tremendously when previously traumatized individuals get activated. During these flashbacks or traumatic re-experiences, intrapsychic forces among the traumatized individual suffocate the self’s ability to frame and delineate experience:

As Christopher Bollas (1990) pointed out recently, this distinction is also apparent in the dream, wherein the self that experiences (the self as pictured in the dream) and the self that takes notice of the phenomenal self as it experiences (the dreamer) achieve separate and distinct mental representation. (Fonagy et al., 1991, p. 203)

Since low reflective functioning can suggest that an individual is relatively incapable of processing or making sense out of life’s intense moments, Steele and Steele (2008) argue that attaining reflective-self functioning—a capacity that emerges during early childhood—represents a critical step toward achieving emotional development.

Furthermore, although RF is often damaged by trauma, re-establishing or improving it can help overcome and understand trauma. Can we help our students to enhance RF? Are there methods that English teachers can employ in the classroom that help to refine
reflective functioning? These questions will be considered in the final section of this dissertation.

Resilience and Being, Striving, Healing

“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks. 
Rage! Blow!”
– Shakespeare, 2002

Trauma is repeated on behavioral, emotional, physiologic, and neuroendocrinologic levels, whose confluence explains the diversity of repetition phenomena. (Van Der Kolk, 1989)

I have spoken, thus far, of the abundant negative consequences of trauma—instances during which affected individuals buckle, dissociate, lose self, fail at intimacy, relinquish innocence, go numb, become “stuck,” or suffer from poor RF. These responses, though legitimate and pervasive among many survivors of trauma, tell only a partial story. The deficits or impediments resulting from traumatic experience fail to account for positive effects that can arise among survivors of trauma as they recover, gain clarity, and begin to heal (Epstein, 2014). Though it takes time, trauma survivors often possess the will to get better, to master their conflicts, and to regain control over their lives. As Jeff Goldblum explains during a critical sequence in Steven Spielberg’s 1993 classic Jurassic Park, “Life finds a way.” It is this tendency among humans to seek to fight despite a sea of troubles that may have great importance here. For although many, all, or some of our students undergo some form of trauma in their lives, they are often looking not only to avoid, but also to confront, challenge, and grow from their misfortune. Like Lear raging in the wilderness, a time comes when students, too, may be ready to learn from the storm. Kohut had a term for this. He referred to it as the leading edge.
Trailing Edge and Leading Edge

“Once more into the breach, dear friends…”
Shakespeare, 2004

Heinz Kohut identified two transferential components of traumatic response: leading edge and trailing edge. Before I explain, I will briefly define what is meant by the psychoanalytic term transference. According to Freud (who coined the concept), transference is a psychological phenomenon in which feelings are transferred from one person or situation to another. Kapelovitz (cited in Birtchnell, Newberry, & Kalaitzaki, 2001) described it as “the inappropriate repetition in the present of a relationship that was important in a person’s childhood” (p. 184). Emery Gross, psychoanalytic self-psychologist, identifies transference, as “the persistence over time of an unconscious pattern of vulnerabilities, perceptions, affects (especially fears), defenses, coping strategies and behaviors activated by circumstances in the present reminiscent of traumatic events in the past” (Gross, personal communication, May 30, 2017).

As Gross’s definition suggests, transference is typical among survivors when they get triggered by reminders of past trauma. In this sense, it may be a form of transference when a student in a literature course tells the professor to use trigger warnings prior to teaching particularly intense literary scenes. When transference is triggered in an interaction with a text, a cascade of unconscious, involuntary networks may fire into action, temporarily seizing control over the student and hijacking her ability to exist emotionally in the present—remember, when trauma gets reactivated, it often transports the individual back to the scene of the original trauma. Since traumatized individuals often dissociate in order to avoid reminders of personal trauma, students with trauma histories may feel upset at professors who force them to engage in literary texts they would rather avoid. For students who have been traumatized, re-experiencing trauma can invoke too much vulnerability, too many defenses, and too much fear.
The Austrian-American psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut referred to these responses as the *trailing edge*, or the repetitive dimension of the transference. The trailing edge, a component of the unconscious, responds by pulling away, avoiding, escaping, or detaching. For the purposes of this research, it may compel the student to insist upon a trigger warning.

But there is a second part of the transference that Kohut and his later disciples referred to as *leading edge* or the *growing dimension*. Unlike the trailing edge, the leading edge seeks mastery, attempts to cope with, and invariably strives to overcome psychological fragility—seeking empowerment and strength. As Jeff Goldblum explains in *Jurassic Park*, “Life finds a way”—the aspirant self challenges the very fears that disable, in an attempt to enhance resilience and build strength. Unlike the trailing edge, which compels the survivor to avoid or pull away from conflict, the leading edge deliberately seeks re-exposure to the trauma, hoping, through repetition, to build mastery and overcome the forces that intimidate, numb, or psychologically overpower them.²

Like Hamlet, who at first is overwhelmed by and oppressed as a result of a promise he makes to fulfill his father’s wish to avenge his “foul and most unnatural murder” (Shakespeare, 2005, 1.5.25), individuals who have suffered trauma often expend significant psychological resources in efforts to overcome inhibitions and move towards action.

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²Analogous to what Freud referred to as *repetition compulsion*. 
Alison Scott, for instance, relayed to me in a conversation that she drives to and from work every day, despite her family history of traumatic car crashes. She also regularly drives to clients’ homes to fulfill her duties as a personal tutor. As much as I shook in the wake of my college friend’s suicide attempt, I, at the same time, strove to better understand what pushes people into such profundity of darkness. I read profusely on mental illness, and also saw a therapist, attempting to comprehend the tragedy. Just as Hester Prynne stands on the scaffold in front of the iron-eyed, iron-visaged townspeople of Massachusetts, trauma survivors often both internally retreat from as well as stare directly at the maddening multitude. They to be, and they not to be. Furthermore, the part of the survivor that seeks mastery may demonstrate a genuine curiosity in regard to the event, person, or circumstance that profoundly hurt them to begin with.

Since trauma tends to create an emotional wake, and since individuals tend to navigate the choppy waters in ways that are idiosyncratically personal and specific, survivors at various points along the journey are more or less capable of dealing with the trauma. Even so, the fascination and captivation are often there. It is not uncommon for traumatized people to take great interest in what has tormented or victimized them (van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1989).

Freud referred to this phenomenon as repetition compulsion. Kitron (2003) writes, “In line with the underlying principles of defensive contact-shunning on the one hand, and non-traumatic empathic failure on the other hand, the repetition can be seen as the twofold expression both of the wish for a new benign relationship and of the dread of traumatic, repeated disappointment” (p. 427).

An awareness of repetition compulsion and trailing edge/leading edge helps to explain why individuals who have been hurt or victimized in various scenarios often unconsciously seek out analogous events that enable them to relive and re-experience the trauma. In some ways, it is easy to understand how such re-enactments can trap people in unhealthy cycles. But repeating or reliving past traumas can also serve a beneficial function.
so long as the reliving and re-experiencing are more than simply compulsive or obsessional in nature (van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1989).

Invariably, trauma survivors often want understanding. Like Stolorow (2007), who describes his wish for his therapist to relate to his experience, it is not uncommon for experiencers of trauma to seek to come to terms with and integrate the circumstances that negatively impacted their lives. Stolorow writes:

I remember how important it had been to me to believe that the analyst I saw after Dede’s death was also a person who had known devastating loss, and how I implored her not to say anything that could disabuse me of my belief. (p. 14)

As much as it avoids itself, trauma often also wants to know itself. And, in pursuing this wish, maintains the possibility for breaking out of cycles and moving into expansion and growth. Recall what Britzman and Pitt (2004) said about the relationship between trauma and learning.

And since, as I have argued, trauma may be far more prevalent than we realize (van der Kolk, 2014), this is no small matter. Students who overtly state that they want trigger warnings (trailing edge), may also not want them (leading edge). And even if they do consciously believe that they need them, part of their unconscious hopes to find a way into the material, rather than seeking an escape hatch. The leading edge speaks to a natural propensity for overcoming and healing among survivors (Stolorow, 2007). Like the Kafka poem that Maurizio Fava shared with me the day after I discovered that one of my best friends from college had attempted to take his own life, intense opportunities for learning and growth can happen when the wind blows. And though the gusts push back, trauma survivors can also beat on against the tide. With time, they may begin to see that the tree has deep roots. Though our students may shake, they do not always shudder in vain.
**O Captain, My Captain!**

In early August of 2017, a few weeks after my focus group with the English teachers, it suddenly dawned on me that I really wanted to speak with Bessel van der Kolk, himself. After all, it had been van der Kolk’s work that had powerfully shifted my own way of looking at this problem in the first place. The interview conversations with my participants had provided powerful insight into the English teacher side of this problem. I was deeply curious to know what a trauma expert would contribute.

I’ll reveal the specific story for how I got in touch with van Der Kolk in the following chapter. Suffice it to say, he was surprisingly generous with his time, agreeing to a conversation with me on a hot summer afternoon. During the course of our discourse, we spoke about Shakespeare. We spoke about students. We spoke about trauma. And I asked if he would be kind enough to help me to carve out a “solution” to this mother of all crises—if a solution was, indeed, possible.

The conversation took place at 4 P.M. on a Friday. I called him from the second floor of my parents’ house in Brookline, Massachusetts. I was seated in an Aeron chair, facing a computer screen that sat atop a desk my parents had brought in when my middle brother, Ronan, had left for college. Dr. van der Kolk was out walking in the woods somewhere. I didn’t ask him to specify. It’s likely fitting that the only portion of this research I conducted from my childhood home was the final conversation of all. In my own way, perhaps, there was symbolic significance. *Bringing it home*....

Several hours earlier, I had taken a jog in an attempt to sharpen my mind and prepare it for the challenge of discoursing with the master.

And then 4 P.M. crept up on me, like a lonely date with destiny. I called.

He answered on the first ring.

“Hello.”
“Hello. Is this Dr. van der Kolk?”

“Hi. Yes. This must be Adam.”
Part Five:

HAST THOU SEEN THE WHITE WHALE?
ENTER DR. VAN DER KOLK
Chapter XI

THE WHITE WHALE

All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby-Dick. He piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart’s shell upon it. – Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, 2002

This dissertation began in the heat and will end there, too. If you recall, the first chapter of the narrative took us to a classroom at an elite graduate school in the northeast. The date was July 21st (or so I had thought), and the temperature was 84 degrees with climbing humidity. That was the day that my long-time camp friend, Dan Blaney, had sent me his AT&T “It Can Wait” commercial, and I had decided to share it with graduate students in my *Teaching of Drama* course. Alison Scott had anticipated the contents of the commercial, become triggered, and walked out of the room. The heat. It had started in the heat.

*August 11th, 2017*, in Brookline, Massachusetts had been hot, too. Not unbearably hot. But hot. After all, it was August—the dog days of summer—could I have reasonably expected anything different?

As I explained at the end of the previous chapter, Dr. van der Kolk had been generous enough to agree to a conversation with me. He had emailed me his number and told me to call him around 4 P.M. I took my kids to the park in the morning, jogged around the reservoir at 2 P.M., showered, situated myself in an office space on the second floor of my childhood home—where me, my wife, and two kids had been spending the weekend with
my parents—reviewed my questions, and then took some deep breaths, as 3:45 slowly crept toward 4:00. I felt a little bit like an adolescent schoolgirl waiting to get picked up for the prom.

I had spent more than two years of my life on this. As I had read and reviewed, read and reviewed, conversed and questioned, conversed and questioned, I had watched, as my own emotions and thinking had done a sort of Rubik’s Cube—shifting, searching, spinning, and, invariably, locking into place, one position at a time. But there were still answers that I sought—big portions of cubic space that remained scattered and undefined. And they always would be undefined, relatively speaking; after all, I was attempting to fit together four seemingly disparate fields: literature, pedagogy, psychoanalysis, and trauma. It was not exactly clear to me how or whether this stubbornly resistant tetrad would align. In its own right, any one of these domains might have been worthy of its own dissertation. I humbly sought to reap cloth too cumbersome to sew.

But like all people on impossible missions, I was galvanized by the one necessary ingredient that pushes big-hearted dreams toward fruition: excitement! More than excitement. Subtle obsession. For the past 750 days, I had been seized by the doctrine of pursuit that pushes obscurity toward discovery. For the right type of spirit, there’s something sublime about attempting to do what you know cannot be done. Seized by this form of intoxication, I had reached out to Dr. van der Kolk in the first place.

“You know, he very rarely responds to anybody,” Wendy D’Andrea, an Assistant Professor of Psychology at the New School, had cautioned me. Dr. D’Andrea had worked in Bessel’s research clinic in Boston following the completion of her doctorate. She knew the odds of a response were slim.

Bessel van der Kolk sits among a handful of prominent experts at the Mount Olympus of trauma research. A best-selling author and an astoundingly accomplished clinician in his mid-70s, Dr. van der Kolk had basically nothing to gain from a potential conversation with me. It was I that needed him. The only thing that could possibly compel him—or so my
mind intuited—was a trace recognition of the same type of frenzied inquiry that had propelled his early career as a young man. Perhaps he would recognize an Ishmael to his Ahab. And so, casting my quest into the oblivion of cyberspace, I’d sent him an email. I’d sent it, and then readily presumed to forget about it. Because it seemed to me the chances of anything coming out of it were so small.

But then Dr. van der Kolk responded. He returned my volley. And when the email flashed across my screen, I felt somewhat analogous to the way the 6th grade version of myself might have felt had Larry Bird agreed to play a game of HORSE with me on the local blacktop.

Hi Adam

That sounds really interesting. This may actually the best time to talk since the rest of the year is packed with obligations. How about some time this coming Friday or Saturday? Late afternoon?

Bessel
(Bessel van der Kolk, personal communication, August 9, 2017)

I was certain that if anybody had any answers to the question of how English educators might think about teaching emotionally charged literature to students with a history of trauma, it would be him. I laced up my intellectual boots, crossed the fingers of my heart, and dialed: 6-1-7-4.... Dr. van der Kolk answered on the first ring.

The Conversation

"Hast thou seen the White Whale?"
– Herman Melville, Moby Dick, 2002

The researcher’s disposition toward his participants impacts the way they speak, and the nature of the information participants choose to share (Chase, 2005). And though we may utilize our awareness in order to approach “neutrality,” invariably biases work to shape our ends. During my initial conversations with the seven participants, I had
anticipated some confusion. That’s not entirely true—when I asked them questions about literature and pedagogy, I expected that they’d be able to answer with clarity. After all, they were English teachers; books and teaching were their bedfellows. But when I turned the topic to trigger warnings, trauma, and neurology, that was a little bit of a setup. I wondered whether many of them would feel pulled outside their comfort zones, and thereby compelled to deliver uncertain responses to baffling questions.

But with van der Kolk, my assumptions biased elsewhere. As I prepared my questions, I think I assumed that most of what I asked him would encompass areas of thought aligned with his natural interests and research. In some ways, I was right. In other ways, I wasn’t. In fact, he met my first question with a type of resistance that actually surprised me and made me wonder whether he’d be willing to entertain any of my inquiries.

After a brief exchange of pleasantries—apparently, he was somewhere “in the woods”—I opened the conversation by asking: “In recent years, the topic of trigger warnings has become progressively more central in educational circles. Given what you know about trauma and how it impacts people, how do you feel about trigger warnings?” He hesitated for a brief moment, and then responded with “Hmm. I don’t think I’d like to articulate an opinion about that.” For a pregnant sliver of a moment, my research career fervently flashed in front of my eyes. I don’t think I’d like to articulate an opinion about that.... Uh oh. I wondered, suddenly, whether his reputation as a world-renowned clinician—a pioneering scholar at the forefront of trauma research, a New York Times best-selling author, etc., etc., etc.—might compel him to be very careful about what he said and didn’t say. Since he knew I was writing a dissertation and that the contents of his responses may be used later for publication, perhaps he had decided to navigate his words very carefully; and, if this was the case, then would the conversation have much value? My balloon of optimism let out a giant puff of air and began to careen to the ground.
But then he continued: “I don’t know whether it’s coddling or—you know, it’s what happens when you expose yourself to a class. You can expect it will be painful stuff. And so it’s up to the survivor somehow to learn to cope with this.... It’s part of being in the world.”

Throughout the course of our conversation, he often referred to victims of trauma as “survivors.” I hadn’t thought about the term before. Any mention of the word “survivor” in my own writing came about as a result of my conversation with van der Kolk. Survivor ... this added a new element to the way that I began to think about traumatized individuals, and, specifically, traumatized students. They are survivors—human beings who have been exposed to at times unbearable circumstances and then, rather than giving up hope, shutting down completely, or ending it all, have decided to carry on and cope. In The Body Keeps the Score, van der Kolk (2014) repeatedly tells stories about victims of trauma and emphasizes his own amazement with how many of these individuals have managed to continue—a little girl whose father rallied a group of friends to gang rape her, and then poured gasoline all over her body. A woman who was not properly anaesthetized during a stomach surgery, and lay wide awake, but unable to communicate while doctors hacked away at her body and cauterized her organs.

These people exist in the world every day. They ride next to us on subway cars. They dine with us at a local restaurant. They may even be our lawyers, our police officers, and our accountants. A miraculous aspect of the human condition is that we can be remarkably resilient, even when presented with conditions that seem absolutely and utterly impossible to bear. And the worst off of any of them, as van der Kolk (2014) describes in his book, are children—the ones that many of us teach—because young people who are exposed to trauma lack the defensive structures and capabilities for self-care that adults have had a chance to construct and integrate. And, if these same children have been abused by their own parents—which is too often the case with trauma—the impacts are even worse, because caregivers are meant to be the ones who protect. Abused children suffer the
double whammy of receiving trauma, while also being deprived of the very emotional and physical supports that defend against it.

In talking with van der Kolk, it quickly became clear to me that he had seen the very farthest side of human horror and despair. I had read it in his book, of course, but there was something also in the way that he spoke—his thick Dutch accent. Its gravity. The heart knowledge that his tone gave away. I can’t explain it any other way, other than by saying that while I had often heard genuine uncertainty in the conversations with the teachers, there was something about van der Kolk’s voice that I picked up on almost instantly—this man had wandered the deep paths of suffering with thousands of patients. He had met, dwelt with, and aimed to help—often successfully—the trails of tears wept by Dante and others, as they had walked deeper into the abyssal circles of personal Hell. And then I, too, felt like a neophyte—an Ishmael stepping on board a ship for my first voyage. It was humbling.

We continued.

I asked Dr. van der Kolk about the inherent paradox implicit in attempting to teach literature, a force promoting arousal, to a student body, some of whom defend against arousal. Literature is aimed to arouse, shock, excite, shift mental states, and yet trauma survivors tend to deactivate, go numb, shut down, or hyper-arouse.

He acknowledged the implicit paradox, but proceeded with a fairly pragmatic response: “I think, people, in part, go to school in order to learn to deal with stuff like that... And so, part of becoming an adult is to see how your trauma gets replayed and relived.” It was clear from this response, and also from subsequent remarks that van der Kolk would make along the way, that he believes in building resilience and that he sees school as a place that can help traumatized people build personal strength and better position themselves for the world. He continued: “So I think it’s important for the teacher to be sensitive to that and to understand that people may become very upset by that. But it’s up to people who become upset to learn how to regulate it. You know, the world cannot
become the therapist of every traumatized person.” As I had gone about to understand and construct methods for how teachers can work with traumatized students, I had underscored the importance of encouraging victimized students to better work with and understand themselves. Teachers must be sensitive to student trauma—that feels absolutely essential—but, invariably, survivors of trauma must also know their traumas, know what activates them, and, to the extent that it is possible, seek to manage their emotional reactions when they get triggered. As van der Kolk said to me, “The world cannot become the therapist of every traumatized person.” This felt very important to me.

Part of the problem with trigger warnings is that they have resulted from an age of over-protective expectations on the part of authority figures (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). As the reality of therapy and the prevalence of trauma has become more culturally accepted, many students have come to expect a level of teacher support that at times blurs the boundaries between therapeutic and therapy. In the best of all worlds, a productive English classroom may build strength, heighten feeling, and therefore feel therapeutic. But the teacher cannot be expected to serve in the role of the therapist. On the first day of her Introduction to Trauma course at the New School, psychologist Wendy D’Andrea clarifies to her students: “I am a therapist, but I am not your therapist” (Wendy D’Andrea, personal communication, August 16, 2017).

We live in an age where the boundaries are being redefined. And, since they are being redefined, the borderlines are not clear. One thing that seems important is that there are some boundaries that English teachers set up and adhere to. Perhaps the messy nature of things presently reflects a sudden re-positioning and re-interpretation of student-teacher relationships. Sometimes things need to fall apart before we can piece them back together anew. Yet as we do re-constitute the relative hierarchies and expected relationships between teachers and students, I believe we do need to establish boundaries and limits. Postmodernism, like many progressive principles, is theoretically powerful but sometimes pragmatically flawed.
Bessel continued: “I mean, life is filled with misery and hardship, and, you know, you cannot avoid it in colleges and teaching it. The question is how you can teach them. Of course, when you teach English, you ask your students—how does this apply to you?” (van der Kolk, personal communication, August 11, 2017).

In life, many of us, much of the time, do our best to protect the people we love. But there is an inevitability to problems that is woven into the very fabric of human experience (Stolorow, 2007). Milk will get spilled. People will become upset. Life is tough, and learning may necessitate painful experiences and difficult emotions.

During a recent writing workshop I ran with masters students, I used some guided meditation to help students get into the zone. My approach involved asking the students to close their eyes, begin to focus on their breathing, relax their muscles, and slowly begin to become aware of their feelings and thoughts. I then suggested that they journey along a path. I asked them to feel the ground beneath their feet as they walked, to notice the sun and sky around them, to feel the light wisp of an afternoon wind. In the next phase, I led them to a cave (analogous to Plato’s allegory). I asked them to journey into the cave, move deeper into the dark space, and begin to notice as things got colder and the air grew still. I led them to a fire that was burning up ahead, and I had them approach the fire from a safe distance, stare at it, get lost in its flames. Finally, I had them notice that the fire was actually casting shadows of objects, shapes, and perhaps people on the far wall of the cave opposite the flames. I instructed them to stare at the shadows and to choose one, in particular, that they found interesting and rich.

Leading them out of the meditation, I then asked them to focus in on the shadow they had chosen on the far end of the cave wall and to write a letter from the shadow to themselves. I gave them 7 minutes to do this. I then flipped the paradigm and asked them to write back to the shadow, giving them 7 minutes for this as well.

In all, the workshop lasted about an hour. It was, admittedly, avant-garde. I have conducted it with five or six groups at both the adult and adolescent level, and it often leads
to some really interesting writing breakthroughs, because the meditation often frees the mind from its traditional thinking patterns and shifts students into a less judgmental, more organic writing stance. Most of the feedback I get from students is very positive.

Inevitably, however, there are one or two students each year who complain to me that they wish I had given a trigger warning before leading them into the workshop. One student, in particular, became angry with me following the session and asked if she could speak privately with me. Of course, I agreed.

She relayed to me that her parents had died several years ago, and the meditation into the cave brought back frightening and unsettling memories and feelings for her. Of course, I felt deeply sorry for the student and offered what comfort I could. At the same time, nothing about the meditation had asked or suggested for her to think about her parents, or to recall these painful memories. Ironically, she had called the memories forth herself.

So was I to blame for triggering her traumatic history? Maybe. If I had given the students a spelling test or quizzed them on vocabulary, the painful memories perhaps would not have re-emerged. Perhaps.

But, as English teachers, isn’t part of our job to encourage students to connect with rich, emotional contents from both fictional lives of characters and also their own experiences? Isn’t a major objective of humanities education to promote aesthetic experiences that awaken the senses, encourage rich feeling and emotional response? As Dr. van der Kolk stated during the conversation:

Of course, when you teach English, you ask your students—how does this apply to you? And have you gone through stuff like that yourself. I think that’s probably what most liberal arts colleges do ask their students... I think. Connecting with the self is a goal of many therapeutic practices, but, for some students, the self is too painful, and they’d rather avoid personal connection. As I discussed in Chapter X, trauma survivors often tend to dissociate from the pain they feel—through numbing.
alcohol, drugs, etc. English teachers are trying to get students to feel. Trauma survivors are often attempting not to feel. It’s a very tricky coordination.

What Do We Do When Students Get Triggered?

I asked Bessel to explain what he thought an English teacher should do if a survivor got triggered in response to engagement with literature.

“It’s a tough question,” he began, and then paused.

As I have learned over the past two plus years, these are all tough questions! van der Kolk thought for a moment, and then relayed an experience at one of his workshops in which participants in one of his workshops got triggered. He gives workshops throughout the world, almost every month of the year. In the following six months alone, he is giving multi-day workshops in British Columbia, Italy, Phoenix, Houston, Stockbridge, Australia, etc.

During some of his workshops, participants get triggered. Bessel explained that he has “people in the workshops that help to calm people down.” He then explained that he teaches people how to breathe in order to calm themselves down.

I think the teacher is best off by acknowledging what is going on and talking to the student about how they usually deal with stuff like that. Because, of course, the world is filled with triggers. Every time you go to the movies you are exposed to stuff. Every time you go to a party, a conversation—the world is filled with triggers. And it might be helpful for teachers to know something about triggers and something about how you can calm people down.

For months, I had been thinking about psychoeducation for teachers, and about what that might look like. If teachers are spending eight hours a day with students, and a significant percentage of students have complex trauma histories, then shouldn’t teachers have some form of knowledge around how to recognize, initially respond to, and then manage traumatic responses when they happen in our classrooms?
My interview conversations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with English educators—each highly skilled instructors and exceptional thinkers—only further deepened my belief in the importance of some form of teacher training around trauma and traumatic response. If it takes a teacher between 35 seconds and three minutes to even begin to formulate an answer about trauma, what it does to students, and how it impacts the brain—as it had with Kelvin and Jacob—then can you imagine the confusion and chaotic circumstances that may arise for teachers when a student gets traumatically triggered within the context of a classroom engagement with literature? Camp counselors are required to get training in CPR. Hospital employees must learn procedures for fire drills. Why shouldn’t teachers be required to learn something about handling traumatic response?

van der Kolk mentioned some teachers he knows in some of Boston’s inner-city schools (where trauma is normative), whom he described as particularly skilled in responding to traumatic triggers when they occur in their classrooms. He mentioned that he does not know of any books “simpler than [his] own at introducing people to this topic.” He then joked that every teacher should read *The Body Keeps The Score*—not a bad idea, actually! He followed that up by suggesting that every police officer and politician could benefit from reading it as well. Although he was half-joking, I agree with him.

**Is it Intractable?**

When you talk about trauma, at times you feel like you are falling further and further down a rabbit hole that has no clear beginning, and never actually reaches bottom. Every problem sparks a new and perhaps unexpected problem, and just when you think you believe you’re resolving one piece of the puzzle, you realize there’s an entirely new part of the dilemma you have yet to properly account for. As van der Kolk and I continued to talk, I asked him whether he believed this was an intractable problem—this mad interplay between literary arousal and trauma survivors. Art triggers; trauma seeks to avoid being
triggered. Is it all just as incompatible and paradoxical as it seems? van der Kolk did not think so.

“I think people learn to manage it,” he said. He then mentioned that 8-10% of the population has PTSD. “They learn how to manage it, somehow. And I think it would behoove the class and the teacher to be aware of the fact that triggers happen.” He then emphasized that, despite the fact that kids get triggered, teachers still need to teach their curriculum—that educators can’t allow the reality of traumatized students to prevent them from teaching emotionally charged and complex texts. Life goes on. Hurt, pain, and horrendous realities will always occur and cannot be fully defended against or protected. But the show must go on. We must move through our material with courage and sensitivity, just like trauma survivors somehow still get out of bed in the morning, still board the subway, still complete their homework, take tests, confront their bosses, etc., etc., etc. The world is not our therapist, and we cannot press the pause button on life. As one of my friends and recording artists, Gashi, says: “No matter what, homie, life goes on. You can never press pause” (L. Gashi, personal communication, March 23rd, 2015).

In our attempts, as English teachers, to come up with methods for how to teach in classrooms inhabited by survivors of trauma, we may benefit from relinquishing our quest for perfect solutions. Part of what makes this feel so intractable, perhaps, is the fact that we are trying to come up with neatly bow-tied and fully comprehensive answers to problems that are far from binomial. Intrinsically, this is geography with unclear borders. A certain amount of hurt, conflict, pain, frustration, and chaos may be utterly inevitable in any classroom—irrespective and inclusive of the issue at hand. In this regard, it comes down to not whether individuals will get uncomfortably triggered in the classroom, but rather to how well we, as English teachers, can prepare ourselves and have procedures in place, so that, when triggering occurs, we are not entirely caught off guard and can work to minimize the damage. ER doctors are taught how to handle medical crises. Parents of new infants often learn CPR. It seems appropriate that classroom teachers get some training, too, in
how to receive and handle the trauma they will invariably confront in the classroom. This is something my participants had lobbied for decisively during the focus group.

The first step, it would seem, would be to help teachers recognize when a student is being triggered. In some cases, the student may tell you, although, more likely, triggered students tend to hyper-arouse or freeze. When I spoke with Wendy D’Andrea, she told me a few stories about students who had been triggered during her class. In one instance, a student became hyper-aroused, verbally abusive, and emotionally unhinged. Most of the time however, “they shut down or disappear” (Wendy D’Andrea, personal communication, August 16, 2017).

During our conversation, van der Kolk explained his belief that recognizing traumatic response is fairly simple:

Either people freeze or they become hyper-aroused ... anxious and panicky. It’s a pretty visible reaction.... Most of the time in classrooms, it’s likely that people will actually shut down and freeze, and disappear basically. But it’s a fairly simple reaction.

He then added, “You see it in dogs during thunderstorms.” As Kelvin, Alaina, Tanya, and Sarah had mentioned when they relayed their group’s structural considerations, teachers are on the front lines. They receive traumatic responses. But in order for them to properly handle what they receive, teachers must be able to recognize what trauma looks like when it gets activated.

In Chapters IX and X, I explained three major classifications of trauma ([impact, relational, and everyday life]), and then highlighted what trauma can do to the brain, how it affects people emotionally, and how survivors tend to respond to it. Of all of the—at times quite meaningless—teacher meetings and professional development sessions that take place on a yearly basis in schools across America, there’s no reason why some training in trauma recognition could not be integrated. Even an hour or two of in-depth response training could go a long way toward putting standards and procedures in place for responding appropriately to traumatic responses that are destined to get triggered at some
point in almost any classroom. If I think back on my 18 years in the classroom, I can easily pinpoint dozens of situations in which students were demonstrating traumatized responses that I wish I had understood better at the time.

As a positive example of how a teacher handled student trauma, van der Kolk relayed the story of one of his Shakespeare directors—in recent years, van der Kolk has taken a great interest in Shakespearean acting. During a rehearsal, one of the actresses got triggered. Rather than focusing on the trigger, the director repeatedly emphasized, in a quiet voice, “Say your lines. Say your lines.... Stay focused on your lines.” The actress invariably was able to channel her emotions into her character, and the experience became productive and powerful rather than dismantling. van der Kolk relayed to me that he was “very impressed with that actually.”

It’s not that teachers don’t want to help traumatized students, it’s that they often feel incapable of doing so. And since we are living in a culture where educators are often getting blamed either for inciting the traumas that they, themselves, did not create, or improperly handling the traumatic responses they receive, it simply makes sense that some time and training should be implemented toward helping teachers to better recognize, understand, and respond to the traumatic triggers they encounter in the classroom. When students know their problems are being taken seriously, they often feel more comfortable, more engaged, and become less likely to buckle, hyper-activate, or shut down in class.

**The Importance of Stress**

When I conversed with the English teachers, a handful of them suggested that they would consider removing triggering texts from the curriculum if they felt specific students in the classroom could not handle the content. Dr. van der Kolk felt strongly that this was an improper move. Stress is not only an inevitable part of any classroom experience, but in fact a *desired effect*. As I indicated in Chapter VI, when I discussed the diathesis stress
model, a lack of adequate stress in the classroom leads to under-performance. I have worked with students who attend cushy private schools where teachers demand little from their students. One such student actually described his high school experience at an international school by saying that the teacher, who perhaps prioritized his will to be liked over teaching with rigor, came in on the first day and addressed the class by saying it was going to be an easy class. According to the student, the teacher literally said, “Just kick back and enjoy the ride.” This is obviously an extreme circumstance, but we can easily imagine what might happen to productivity, determination, grit, and personal growth if teachers attempted to diminish stress so as to ensure that students didn’t get triggered.

While we spoke on August 11th, van der Kolk lobbied for the value of stress. He reflected on his own experiences in medical school and during his hospital rotations during training. He conveyed that he knows what it’s like to be stressed to the max and “how beneficial it is to be stressed to the max, and to come out of an extremely difficult course and say ‘Oh my God, I did it!’ I never thought I could do something as tough as this.” And the same may be true for our traumatized students. For some, encounters with complex literature that triggers them may feel too threatening or tap too directly into their own trauma histories. But for others—and perhaps most of them—being stressed and triggered may be part of their path toward overcoming or growing from their traumas.

**The Story of Yana**

I will never forget the story of Yana, a 17-year-old senior in one of my high school Shakespeare courses. Yana was, by almost any standard I can identify, an ideal student. Bright, vivacious, determined, forward-thinking, focused. She is one of the best students at any level that I have worked with during my 18-year career as an educator. She was among

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1I mentioned Yana briefly in Chapter IX when I was discussing van der Kolk’s work on trauma.
a group of twenty students to whom I taught *Hamlet* in the Fall semester of 2012. At Bay Ridge Preparatory, where I have taught for almost 20 years, I have gained implicit trust from my principal and have tremendous freedom with my teaching choices and practices. After beginning the year with a unit on the sonnets, I spend ten to twelve weeks on *Hamlet*. We get into every line. I have the students act out the text. We memorize and perform soliloquies. We watch film versions, interpret, analyze. I can be fairly dramatic and intense. I don’t hold back.

During that particular year, we finished *Hamlet* shortly after Thanksgiving. Right before Christmas break, Yana approached me and asked whether I would be willing to read her college essay. I replied that ‘of course I [would].’ She handed it over, and asked that I keep its contents confidential, explaining that she was only showing it to a small handful of people she trusted. I, of course, assured her that I would keep it between the two of us.

That evening, after taking a jog around Prospect Park, I sat down with her college essay and read it. Yana was from the Ukraine. In the sixth grade, she had come over to the United States with her mother and older sibling in order to build a new life in America. Given family circumstances, her father had needed to remain in the Ukraine during that time but planned to join the family shortly. One year passed. Then another. Every summer Yana hoped that her father would join the family in the U.S. Then, in July of 2012, mere months prior to our embarking on *Hamlet*, Yana learned that her father had tragically died. Seventeen now, she had not physically seen him in almost seven years. This is the story that she relayed in her college essay—the story of a young woman who had learned the value of determination and family sacrifice—the tale of a daughter who vowed to honor her parents’ decision to grant her a better life by persevering and making something of herself in this country.

As beautifully written and powerful as the piece was, I could not help but feel a sense of personal horror as I read it. *Hamlet* is a play about death of fathers. The piece begins with the death of Hamlet’s father. It then highlights the death of Fortinbras’s father.
Midway through the play, Hamlet kills Polonius, Ophelia’s father. The theme and circumstances are everywhere.

For the past three months, I’d strutted the classroom floor, embodying the life and times of a young prince dealing with the loss of his father. Since death and loss are so universal, and yet so under-discussed and digested in American culture, I’d made it an intentional act to highlight and process these pivotal aspects of the play. I had attempted to gaze into the souls of my students, urging them to reach for the inevitability of loss and encouraging them to feel, experience, and confront life’s powerful counterpoint, death.

And there Yana had been all along, watching me strut and fret my hour upon the stage, prisoner, as it were, to my barrage of Hamleting. When I read her essay and realized how insensitive I may have seemed, I buckled with shame—“Why, what an ass am I!” (Shakespeare, II.ii, 545). The next day, with humiliation, I asked her if we could chat about her piece. She agreed. Over lunch, while her classmates headed off to local eateries, I sat with her in my office and conveyed to her how powerful I thought her essay was. I also thanked her for having the trust and faith to share it with me.

I then opened up to Yana, expressing my concern that I had failed terribly as an educator and human being—digging so deeply into themes of father death that so immediately touched her own life and experience. Initially, I think she was a little taken aback by my apology. She had not intended the essay as a condemnation or a personal attack against my teaching. She assured me, in fact, that she loved my class and would not have changed anything that we did: “I felt very—I don’t know. I felt very, I guess, alive, to some extent. I felt very passionate about what we were learning.” She also emphasized that I had had no knowledge of her personal circumstances.

Even so, I felt horrible. I asked her what it was like for her to work so directly with a play that highlighted a severe loss that was so close within her personal history. Here’s what she said:
I think that it was—I mean, how do I word this? It was probably even, on some aspect, helpful, I guess, to some extent. Obviously, it sparked some emotions, and not all good ones, to be fair. But I think a text like that, it can always—you can't avoid things in your life regardless how much you want to. So it’s better to deal with them rather than just pretend that they’re not happening, because things will spark some sort of emotion at some point in your life. So when it’s in a controlled environment like that and, in addition to that, you’re feeling like this character is going through—however similar or different it is—is going through some sort of struggle in their life just like you are, I guess—and maybe you opened your mind to "someone else is going through that, someone else is experiencing this," and I think it was more helpful than harmful it could ever be.

What I was hearing, in Yana’s account, was somebody who found value in dealing with the personal intensity of confronting a tragedy. Analogous to the bibliotherapists, who use the indirect mirroring within literature to help clients process, work through, and identify conflicts in their own lives, Yana was expressing her belief that working with Hamlet had actually given her some comfort and identification as she struggled to make sense of her own circumstances.

She continued:

I thought it was therapeutic. It was always an escape to see into his mind, but at the same time kind of opening my mind, I guess I would say, just thinking about situations that I might not normally want to think about but nonetheless are sometimes necessary to think about. But no, I wouldn’t call it traumatic at all. I thought it was helpful.

Given that she seemed surprisingly at ease discussing this complex and painful topic with me, I pressed her a bit further, asking her how she felt about engaging in a literary text that represents a type of trauma she can relate to.

I think that if there’s any situation where you should be open to—relating to something or even being open to thinking about something that you might not necessarily wanna think about, it’s best to do it in a situation like that, where you could live your life through maybe a character, or you would see his struggles and it helps you. I don’t find it anything but helpful, to be honest.

So this was interesting. What I sensed in Yana’s response was a certain safety in the fact that trauma survivors can use literature to process experiences in a way that is, perhaps, more safe and less vulnerable, since they don’t in fact have to be open or direct about their
own experiences. The literature, in this case, is the subject that presents the vulnerability. Referencing Cristina Bruns, then, in a Winnicottian sense, the text serves in this context as a transitional object for the developing mind, allowing the reader or student, in this case, to experience the difficult event indirectly.

And, as mentioned in Chapter II, an individual student’s ability to cope with their respective trauma may be in part dependent upon her psychological distance and readiness in relation to the event (Scheff, 1979). For Alison, the car crash commercial was too intense. She had needed to leave the room. For Yana, Hamlet’s struggle with the death of his father was something that facilitated her grieving, helped her to process her trauma, and inevitably aided in her recovery. Part of what makes this so very difficult is that there are no perfect rules or solutions. Every student is his or her own case study. What works well for one in one context may be quite different for another student in a different context. No magic bullets here.

**The Inevitability of Suffering**

“The only way you can endure your pain is to let it be painful.”
— Shunryu Suzuki, 1970

As van der Kolk and I continued to speak, the inevitability of pain became a central feature of our conversation. Within the model of Yerkes-Dodson, why are some experiences too intense for some students, while similarly jarring aesthetic triggers tolerable or even comforting for others?

In some ways, I think this question is powerfully meaningful and significant for the work at hand, but I also don’t think we need to answer it. Every individual is different. Every student comes from a complex set of circumstances. Some are going to be more sensitive to particular events, while others will be less so. Even for the same student, sometimes he or she may be able to tolerate particular reminders of trauma, whereas other
times he or she may not be able to. When I spoke to Alison a year after she walked out of my classroom, she told me that at this point she probably would have been fine sitting through the commercial, given her increased psychological distance from the initial traumatic event (Scheff, 1979). Remember the student who got upset with me because my cave meditation workshop had triggered memories of her parents’ fatal car crash? That same student sat through a talk I conducted this past summer on literature and trauma—a workshop far more directly related to what she had personally experienced (I actually show the AT&T car crash commercial during part of that seminar).

People change in relation to their traumas and in relation to themselves. Our reactions to the events of our lives modify in accordance with our particular feelings of resilience, moods, stages of life, etc. In Chapter X, I discussed trailing edge and leading edge transferential responses to trauma (Kohut, 1971). As we attempt to work with the traumatic moments of our lives, a part of us avoids and resists reminders (trailing edge), while a healthier part of us attempts to work through and gain mastery (leading edge). Sometimes the trailing edge dominates, and we are incapable of handling reminders of the past. Sometimes the leading edge assumes control, and we move forward with courage and strength.

As educators, we may need to acknowledge that our students assume various psychological orientations in relation to their traumas, and that these positions can shift. Recovery from trauma is not linear, and the response we see today may not recur tomorrow—either for good or for bad. As we go about to design methods for working with traumatic response in the classroom, an acknowledgement of this reality is important.

In the Hands of the Survivor

Thus far, I’ve talked a lot about the responsibilities of the teacher. As I’ve attempted to make sense of how English teachers might think about working with traumatized
students in the classroom, the focus has been on the educator. In some ways, this makes sense, since the teacher is presumably the authority figure in the room, and therefore should have some knowledge of how to respond to traumatized students, should they get psychologically triggered in the classroom.

But there’s more to this than simply the teacher. There is, of course, the student, him or herself. And this is something that seems to have been lost in the shuffle, as pro and con trigger warning advocates or negaters have weighed in on this highly complex and controversial topic.

When Dr. van der Kolk and I spoke on August 11th, he admitted that, invariably, he had no perfect answers to my questions. At one point, he stated that, though he found these questions “fascinating,” he would need to hear “a lot of cases” before being able to formulate a plan of action.

But as we began to wrap up the conversation, and move toward a type of “conclusion”—I put that word in quotation marks, since I would hardly call any of this perfectly conclusive—van der Kolk shifted the discourse away from the teacher and onto the survivor. Over the past two and a half years, almost everything I’ve read—*and I’ve read a lot!*—about trigger warnings, teachers, and student trauma has placed the primary responsibility for ensuring student psychological security on the teacher. Lukianoff and Haidt discuss this in their 2015 *Atlantic* article, in which they explain that the millennial mindset sees the educator as responsible for protecting students from harm. But van der Kolk saw it differently:

My basic sense would be that the survivor has the obligation to case out the environment to see what he or she would be capable of doing. Ah, so the obligation is not primarily with the teacher, but is primarily the student’s. That would be my cultural prejudice.

Stop everything. Hold the phone. For the past 230 pages, I’ve been writing about what teachers need to be aware of when working with students who may have trauma histories. Almost everything I’ve written so far, I believe, focuses on the teacher—how the teacher
can better understand, recognize, and then initially manage traumatic response when it gets triggered in the English classroom. But van der Kolk, who has devoted his professional career to working with traumatized individuals and helping build them back toward restoration and productive lives, believes that ultimately the responsibility lives within the student. van der Kolk continued:

When you’re a traumatized person, you need to determine what it is that you can or cannot tolerate. But the obligation to take care of your own physiological reaction rests with you, and not with your environment.... And my basic proxy is always ‘Yeah, you need to try to find a way to make yourself feel safe, and know when you’re being triggered, and have an escape’.... As a policy—in a college you might say—if particular material is too emotionally overwhelming, talk with your teacher about how to deal with that, or how to substitute another topic for this particular topic. But at the end, you know, to deal with your trauma, you have to learn to know how to deal with yourself, and you cannot ask for your environment to do it for you.

As educators, we may be with our students for an hour or two a day. If we teach middle school or lower school, we may see our students more. But the student, him or herself, lives in his or her body 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for the duration of their lives. As students—and, in fact, simply as individuals in this complex world—we do hope that we can rely on others at times to support, comfort, and facilitate conditions for our psychological comfort and safety. But, in the final equation—and this is not said with Darwinian cruelty—the person most responsible for helping a student to feel safe and protected is that individual student.

Individual students in classes may well benefit if they understand what triggers them, if they premeditate—either independently or with the help of a parent, guardian, or therapist—an understanding of what triggers them, and also of how and what they might do to deal with the discomforts of feeling triggered, should triggering occur. If a student has had a history of traumatic events, he or she can access a class syllabus, do some research on the texts at hand, and think about options for escape or maintenance, should he or she get triggered by one or more of the texts.
Dr. van der Kolk continued, emphasizing that what happens to a trauma survivor in the classroom will happen to them everywhere in the world—in the movie theater, in the subway car, at home with parents, on the street corner, at the local deli. “The world is not your therapist,” and since it’s not, traumatized students, to the extent that it’s possible, may greatly benefit from learning how to therapeutically understand and protect themselves when triggering occurs. van der Kolk reminded me that even he gets accused of triggering people, and this is somebody who gives workshops all over the world with traumatized individuals, where triggering is not only expected, but necessary for healing. Students who take on more responsibility for their own psychological well-being will likely ensure protection for themselves best of all.

This is not to take anything away from teachers—the purpose of this dissertation, in large part, is to help teachers better recognize, respond to, and work with student trauma once it’s triggered. That having been said, the world will not take responsibility for the problems of each individual survivor. The teacher will not either. In the final equation, outside of the therapy office, an individual in this world is likely far better off by learning enough about his or her trauma, that he or she can serve as his or her own therapist when traumatic response arises.

I was surprised when Dr. van der Kolk relayed this belief to me. It felt oddly Darwinian—and yet, ironically, it also aligned with my initial beliefs prior to conducting any of my research. On some level, the student is ultimately responsible for being able to manage his or her life circumstances and how they might impact his or her performance in the classroom—if for no other reason than that, in the final equation, most educators in most contexts will not see themselves as responsible for handling the fragilities of any student’s life. Although in recent times, authority figures are expected to protect and defend those they serve, students in classrooms get no guarantees. And since, in his clinical practice, van der Kolk’s work centers around ensuring the best possible results for his
patients, it makes sense that he encourages students with traumatic pasts to create security from within. The world is not your therapist. But you can learn to become your own.

In concluding, I thanked Dr. van der Kolk for his time. He offered some spirited encouragement and asked me to send a copy of my dissertation to him when it was completed: “It’s good that the teachers are confronting this, actually. And I think that the fact that you’re studying this is, to my mind, sounds like a really good thing to do…. That people become more aware of all these issues, and that there’s a debate about where the locus of control should be.”

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Upon wrapping up the interview conversation, I sat back in my chair peacefully. The conversation with Dr. van der Kolk represented the last official data collection for my study. I was grateful I had made it through, and also satisfied, in a moderate, self-congratulatory kind of way. Research can be a doggerel sort of thing—an at times endless hunt that has no clear beginning and no definitive endpoint. The final conversation with Bessel felt like a fitting end to a 750-day quest. Then, because I couldn’t help myself, I logged onto his website to see his scheduled workshops for the next few months. Given my recent interest in van der Kolk’s work, I was determined to get to one. My family and I were scheduled to fly to Vancouver, British Columbia on August 17th, where we would stay through the 24th. Without a hint of exaggeration of hyperbole, van der Kolk’s next workshop was scheduled for August 18th through the 23rd on Cortes Island in British Columbia—a moderate boat ride to the northwest, where we would be staying in Vancouver.

For the hell of it, I clicked on the link to see whether I’d be able to register. The event was sold out. I smiled to myself. It was for the best. I needed a vacation and some quality time with the family. Still, I couldn’t help but feel that the universe was trying to tell me something. My work in this field and my connection to Dr. van der Kolk’s work seemed far from complete.
EPILOGUE: LITERATURE AT THE DAWN OF TRAUMA CONSCIOUSNESS

From his stint as a consultant he learned something valuable, however. It seemed to him that a big part of a consultant’s job was to feign total certainty about uncertain things…. The consulting firm that eventually hired him was forever asking him to exhibit confidence when, in his view, confidence was a sign of fraudulence. (Lewis, 2017, p. 28)

Confusion represents a higher form of understanding. (Sheridan Blau)

We live in a world that often demands certainty. The stockbroker must make the right investments. The doctor must get the right diagnosis. Engineers the right specifications. Pharmacists the right dosage. Even musicians and poets are often required to work within the correct metric demands of beats and measures. In many fields, exactitude is not only a preference, but a necessity.

But what happens when we can’t be certain? When definitive protocols don’t quite apply? Even Heisenberg, the German physicist who studied the behavior of atoms, invariably concluded that we can know the speed or the location of an electron, but never both at the same time. Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, which he coined in 1927, is a form of confession—a concession to the limits of human understanding. And though what we cannot fully know can be unsettling, sometimes uncertainty represents a higher form of truth.

Over the past two and a half years, I’ve pored over the literature. I’ve conversed with advanced educators with prominent pedigrees. I even sought the counsel of the great guru, himself, in Bessel van der Kolk. And though, admittedly, I now embrace significantly more knowledge and insight into this problem than I had in the summer of 2015, when Alison Scott marched out of my classroom, I also would be lying if I feigned that I didn’t actually possess more prominent and enduring questions as well.
Teaching is a messy business. As the filmmaker and comedian Woody Allen says, “If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans.” On a daily basis, as English teachers we construct our syllabi, we create our lesson plans, we design a seating chart, we map it all out—we spend hours poring over concepts, ideas, calculations, determinations—and then we step into our classrooms at 8:15 A.M., and the world presents us with different ideas. Jennifer doesn’t show up. Molly is having a hard time staying awake. Jamal can’t stop speaking with Timothy. Raymond is sick.

“But it worked so well yesterday! But it worked so well in Mr. Greene’s class....” That was yesterday, and that was Mr. Greene. Though we may utilize the best predictive measures within the scope of our experience, wisdom, and know-how, oftentimes what we best design and intend crashes up against the interminably complex chameleon of reality.

In the summer of 2017, while working with a group of masters students (not the participants for this study), I listened to a teacher lobbying for an instructional method that would ensure that no student got triggered or became upset in the classroom. In that moment, while she passionately and nobly lobbied to safeguard and protect her own imagined students from harm, Shakespeare’s waves continued to race toward the pebbled shore, time’s bending sickle continued to mow, millions globally continued to starve from malnutrition, two billion could not afford shoes, the ozone layer continued to deplete, and the sun slowly, slowly progressed along its inevitable march toward the Earth’s crust.

Rough-hew our classrooms though we will, students will get triggered. Trauma will surface and then re-surface. Reminders of what appears forgotten will tug, unintentionally or haphazardly at the memories we cannot store away. Suffering, like all things, is part of the price tag we pay for being human.
So Then What?

While working on this project, I have realized how little many English teachers may know about trauma—about how it impacts the brain, about what it does to people, and about how it gets activated. Through the course of my own research—both the literature that I’ve read, the interview conversations I’ve engaged in, and the focus group—I’ve come to understand more about trauma. And though I would hardly call myself an expert, and though I will likely never work therapeutically with trauma survivors in a clinical setting, I can say that learning about trauma and extrapolating this knowledge to my classrooms has helped me feel more knowledgeable and more comfortable with the potential for traumatic response that I know will arise in my present and future classrooms.

When I began working on this project, my goal centered around discovering methods for teaching literature to students with traumatic histories. Like much research in the field of English education, I was attempting, I believe, to provide a form of a solution, or potential solutions to the very real problem of what it means to teach literature in classrooms where significant numbers of students have endured complicated and alarming life circumstances. And though I do believe that some of what I have written here may serve to offer methods or practices for teachers as they set out to teach complex texts in complex classrooms, invariably I believe this dissertation is less about solutions and more about deepening and dignifying a very real and relatively intractable reality.

When I first began to read about trigger warnings in 2015 (my first article was actually the Lukianoff and Haidt piece in the *Atlantic*), I was struck not only by the idea that trigger warnings might promote coddling in the classroom, but also by how superficially tactical the practice seemed. Many students have trauma. Many literary texts trigger trauma. But if we give students a warning that what they are about to read may activate trauma, we somehow treat the problem....
This simply did not sit right with me. It felt remarkably incomplete. From what I knew about both literature and trauma at the time, this felt like an American, corporate band-aid bureaucratically placed over a severe wound that deserved much more dignity, attention, and understanding. And though, within the margins of these pages, I have offered some ways for teachers to procedurally handle psychological trauma should it get activated by literary texts, the purpose of my work has been more geared toward honoring a problem and asking the reader to more deeply consider his or her own tactics for mollifying an imperfect reality.

Even though I walk away from this project with countless questions and newly paved pathways for further research, I do believe that my engagement with this hybridic space not only makes me a more aware educator, but increases the probability that I will better handle traumatic triggers and traumatic response when they occur in my classroom.

Though the teachers and I had worked together to come up with solutions teachers may employ in the classroom, Bessel van der Kolk concluded our conversation by stating his belief that invariably the responsibility for self-care in the classroom lives with the trauma survivor. To reiterate his words:

When you’re a traumatized person, you need to determine what it is that you can or cannot tolerate. But the obligation to take care of your own physiological reaction rests with you, and not with your environment.... And my basic proxy is always ‘Yeah, you need to try to find a way to make yourself feel safe, and know when you’re being triggered, and have an escape’.... As a policy—in a college you might say—if particular material is too emotionally overwhelming, talk with your teacher about how to deal with that, or how to substitute another topic for this particular topic. But at the end, you know, to deal with your trauma, you have to learn to know how to deal with yourself, and you cannot ask for your environment to do it for you.

This is a fairly hard line stance, and, of course, I think the possibility for this type of “solution” predicates itself on a number of contextual factors, including the age of the student, their relative awareness of their trauma, and their specific capacity for handling, making sense of, and managing what has happened to them.
But though it may ideally rely on the student’s ability to help him or herself, I do believe that all parties here have a role to play, and that an optimal “solution” necessitates student awareness, teacher awareness, and bureaucratic procedures within the school. If the student does his or her part, the teacher does his or her part, and the senior faculty have measures in place (guidance counselors, social workers, school psychologists), then everybody is better off. It takes a village. It won’t be perfect. But it can be better.

“We are on the verge of becoming a trauma-conscious society” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 349). As the stigma behind traumatization continues to lift and a greater awareness of the prevalence of trauma and its consequences comes to light, the Pandora’s box of human hardship will continue to find gated channels both in and outside of English classrooms throughout the world of education. The sensationalist culture surrounding trigger warnings may simply represent the type of cultural energy that places itself behind a can of worms, when the initial cracks in the container begin to rush out with energy and need.

We are at a starting point now. In future years and with future generations, the polarizing forces of this beginning will equilibrate into various forms of plateau, potentially to once again burst forth, shock, transform, and settle anew. That is typically the way progress occurs, through a series of spasmodic steps forward, followed by awkward retreats, followed by … progress is hard.

In some future generation, the confrontation between education and student trauma will feel less dramatic, less destabilizing, and potentially more normal. The field of English will have answers and methods we cannot see today. But until that time, I do believe it is the responsibility of the English teacher to think through this matter with greater care, rather than simply placing a one-trick pony onto our books and stories, warning potentially triggered readers.

There’s more at play here. More dignity for the literature that we read, the teachers that teach them, and the students that people our classrooms. At the edge of a dock, across
a bay, the green light turns once again to face us. The waves stop receding and push forward at last, into that infinite estuary rushing out toward the sea.
REFERENCES


Orwell, G. (1953). *Such, such were the joys*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace.


Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your teaching experience? How long have you been teaching and at what types of schools?
2. What is your current school culture and student population?
3. How would you describe your teaching of literature process?
4. How important are shock, drama, aesthetic experience for you when you teach literature?
5. Can you share some examples?
6. How do you feel about trigger warnings?
7. Why do you think they exist?
8. Is there pressure at your school to use them?
9. Do you use them?
10. If so why? If not, why not?
11. For those who answer yes, can you explain a scenario where you used them?
12. For those who say no, can you imagine a scenario where you would use them?
13. What is your definition of trauma?
14. To your knowledge, have you ever worked with a traumatized student?
15. What percentage approximately do you think of your students have been traumatized?
16. How would you feel about presenting highly charged, potentially trigger literature to a student with a history of trauma?
17. Would you take any measures to safeguard that student any more than others? If so, what? If not, why not?
18. What if you suspected or knew that the specific nature of the literature you were teaching interacted directly with the individual’s traumatic history?
19. For instance, if you knew one or more of your students was being abused, would you teach a text featuring abuse?
20. If you suspected or new one or more of your students had been sexually molested, abused, or raped, would you teach a text featuring sexual abuse?
21. Any ideas or knowledge about what happens to the brain of people who have suffered trauma?
22. How do you think about the difference between therapy and a therapeutic English classroom?