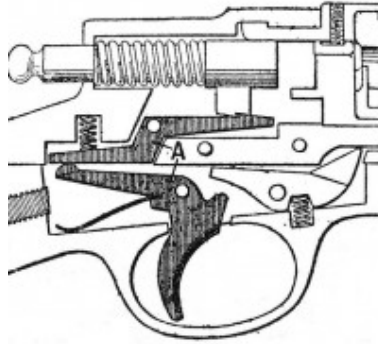




Welcome to the matriarchy.

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## The Illusion of Safety/The Safety of Illusion

By [Roxane Gay](#)

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When I see men who look like him or his friends. When I smell beer on a man's breath. When I smell Polo cologne. When I hear a harsh laugh. When I walk by a group of men, clustered together, and there's no one else around. When I see a woman being attacked in a movie or on television. When I am in the woods or driving through a heavily wooded area. When I read about experiences that are all too familiar. When I go through security at the airport and am pulled aside for extra screening, which seems to happen every single time I travel. When I'm having sex and my wrists are unexpectedly pinned over my head. When I see a young girl of a certain age.

When it happens, I feel this sharp pang that runs right through the center of my body. Or I get nauseous. Or I have to vomit. Or I break into a cold sweat. Or I feel myself shutting down, and I go into a quiet place. Or I close my fingers into tight fists until my knuckles ache. My reaction is visceral and I have to take a deep breath or two or three or more. I have to remind myself of the time and distance between then and now. I have to remind myself that I am not the girl in the woods anymore. I have to try to convince myself I never will be again. It has gotten better over the years.

It gets better until it doesn't.

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The first congressional hearing on television violence was held in 1954 and in the ensuing years, the debate about television and violence has been ongoing. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 dictated that televisions needed to include a chip to monitor program ratings. The current television parental guidelines went into effect on January 1, 1997. These guidelines were designed to help parents monitor what their children were watching and get some sense of the appropriateness of a given television program.

The guidelines rated television content by age-appropriateness from G (all audiences) to MA (mature audiences only). There were also a second set of guidelines designed to protect children from violence, coarse language, and sexual themes. These guidelines, of course, only work if someone is monitoring what children are watching and is able to enforce a set of standards about what children can watch. Cable boxes and most televisions now allow parents to lock certain

channels or shows with ratings they consider inappropriate for their children but there is still only so much a parent can control.

How effective, then, are these ratings and guidelines? In “Ratings and Advisories: Implications for the New Ratings System for Television,” Joanne Cantor et. al. note how research shows that, “parental discretion warnings and the more restrictive MPAA ratings stimulate some children’s interest in viewing programs,” and “the increased interest in restricted programs is more strongly linked to children’s desire to reject control over their viewing than to their seeking out violent content.” Even children want a taste of forbidden fruit. At the very least, children don’t want to be told they cannot taste that fruit.

Television ratings are like airport security—an act of theater, an illusion designed to reassure us, to make us feel like we control the influences we allow into our lives.

We want our children to be safe. We want to be safe. We want or need to pretend this is possible.

When I see the phrase, “trigger warning,” I am far more inclined to read whatever follows. I enjoy the taste of forbidden fruit, myself.

I also know trigger warnings cannot save me from myself.

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When a man enters my office, I am alone, and he closes the door behind him.

\*

Trigger warnings are, essentially, ratings or protective guidelines for the largely unmoderated Internet. Trigger warnings provide order to the chaos; they are a signal that the content following the warning may be upsetting, may trigger bad memories or reminders of traumatic or sensitive experiences. Trigger warnings allow readers to have a choice—steel yourself and continue reading or protect yourself and look away.

Many feminist communities use trigger warnings, particularly when discussing rape, sexual abuse, and violence. By using these warnings, these communities are saying, “This is a safe space. We will protect you from unexpected reminders of your history.” Members of these communities are given the illusion they *can* be protected.

There are a great many **potential trigger warnings**. Over the years, I have seen trigger warnings for eating disorders, poverty, self-injury, bullying, heteronormativity, suicide, sizeism, genocide, slavery, mental illness, explicit fiction, explicit discussions of sexuality, homosexuality, homophobia, addiction, alcoholism, racism, the Holocaust, ableism, and Dan Savage.

Life, apparently, requires a trigger warning.

This is the uncomfortable truth—everything is a trigger for someone. There are things you cannot tell just by looking at her or him.

\*

When someone comes up behind me unexpectedly.

\*

We all have history. You can think you’re *over* your history. You can think the past is the past. And then something happens, often innocuous, that shows you how far you are from *over it*. The past is always with you.

It's understandable that some people want to be protected from this truth.

I used to think I didn't have triggers because I told myself I was tough. I was steel. I was broken beneath the surface but my skin was forged, impenetrable. Then I realized I had all kinds of triggers. I simply buried them deep until there was no more room inside me. When the dam burst, I had to learn how to stare those triggers down. I had a lot of help, years and years of help.

I have writing.

\*

When I hear the word *slut* in a certain tone.

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Every so often debates about trigger warnings flare hotly and both sides are resolute. Trigger warnings are either ineffective and impractical or vital for creating safe online spaces.

It has been suggested, more than once, that if you don't believe in trigger warnings, you aren't respecting the experiences of rape and abuse survivors. It has been suggested, more than once, that trigger warnings are unnecessary coddling.

It is an impossible debate. There is too much history lurking beneath the skin of too many people. Few are willing to consider the possibility that trigger warnings might be ineffective, impractical and necessary for creating safe spaces all at once.

The illusion of safety is as frustrating as it is powerful.

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When I visit the gynecologist.

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There are things that rip my skin open and reveal what lies beneath but I don't believe in trigger warnings. I don't believe people can be protected from their histories. I don't believe it is at all possible to anticipate the histories of others in ways that would be satisfying for anyone.

There is no standard for trigger warnings, no universal guidelines. Once you start, where do you stop? Does the mention of the word rape require a trigger warning or is the threshold an account of a rape? How graphic does an account of abuse need to be before meriting a warning? Are trigger warnings required anytime matters of difference are broached? What is graphic? Who makes these determinations?

It all seems so futile, so impotent and, at times, belittling. When I see trigger warnings, I think, "How dare you presume what I need to be protected from?"

Trigger warnings also, when used in excess, start to feel like censorship. They suggest that there are experiences or perspectives too inappropriate, too explicit, too bare to be voiced publicly. As a writer, I bristle when people say, "This should have had a trigger warning." I think, "For what?"

I do not understand the unspoken rules of trigger warnings. I cannot write the way I want to write and consider using trigger warnings. After a while, I would second guess myself, temper the intensity of what I have to say. I don't want to do that. I don't intend to ever do that.

Writers cannot protect their readers for themselves nor should they be expected to.

There is also this: maybe trigger warnings allow people to avoid learning how to deal with triggers, getting help. I say this with the understanding that having access to professional resources for getting help is a privilege. I say this with the understanding that sometimes there is not enough help in the world. That said, there is value in learning, where possible, how to deal with and respond to the triggers that cut you open, the triggers that put you back in terrible places, that remind you of painful history.

It is untenable to go through life as an exposed wound. No matter how well intended, trigger warnings will not staunch the bleeding; trigger warnings will not harden into scabs over your wounds.

\*

When. When. When.

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I don't believe in safety. I wish I did. I am not brave. I simply know what to be scared of; I know to be scared of everything. There is freedom in that. That freedom makes it easier to appear fearless—to say and do what I want. I have been broken, so I am prepared should that happen again. I have, at times, put myself in dangerous situations. I have thought, *you have no idea what I can take*. This idea of unknown depths of endurance is a refrain in most of my writing. Human endurance fascinates me, probably too much.

Intellectually, I understand why trigger warnings are necessary for some people. I understand that painful experiences are all too often threatening to break the skin. Seeing or feeling yourself come apart is terrifying.

This is the truth of my trouble with trigger warnings: there is nothing words on the screen can do that has not already been done. A visceral reaction to a trigger is nothing compared to the actual experience that created the trigger.

I don't know how to see beyond this belief to truly get why trigger warnings are necessary. When I see trigger warnings, I don't feel safe. I don't feel protected. Instead, I am surprised there are still people who believe in safety and protection despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

This is my failing.

But.

I do recognize that in some spaces, we have to err on the side of safety or the illusion thereof. Trigger warnings aren't meant for those of us who don't believe in them just like the Bible wasn't written for atheists. Trigger warnings are designed for the people who need them, who need that safety.

Those of us who do not believe should have little say in the matter. We can neither presume nor judge what others might feel the need to be protected from.

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And yet.

There will always be a finger on the trigger. No matter how hard we try, there's no way to step out of the line of fire.

*Roxane Gay's writing appears in Best American Mystery Stories 2014, Best American Short Stories 2012, Best Sex Writing 2012, A Public Space, McSweeney's, Tin House, Oxford American, American Short Fiction, Virginia Quarterly Review, and many others. She is a contributing opinion writer for the New York Times. She is the author of the books Ayiti, An Untamed*

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