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**Questioning Safe Space in the Classroom:
Reflections on Pedagogy, Vulnerability, and Sexual
Explicitness**

Amalia Ziv

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

In recent years, a discourse of injury and vulnerability that posits students as vulnerable and demands to make the classroom safe from the danger of emotional injury and possible traumatization is becoming more and more prevalent in academia. This paper considers the effects of this discourse and the campus and classroom atmosphere it fosters, specifically in the context of courses that deal with sexuality. It draws on my experience of teaching courses on queer theory and pornography in Israeli academia to examine how the spread of a discourse of vulnerability and trauma is redefining the parameters of class interaction, in terms of both subject matter and the acceptable repertoire of attitudes and affects. I question the notion of a safe educational space, both in terms of its feasibility (i.e. is the project of rendering all students equally comfortable practicable or does increased comfort for some groups of students at times entail diminished comfort for others), and in term of its desirability (i.e. should comfort and complete immunity from possible upset be considered educational goals). In particular, in relation to sexuality and sexually explicit materials, I ask not only what impact an optics calibrated to identify harm and an alertness to potential trauma have on the educational process, but also what kind of political and sexual subjectivity they shape and express. I discuss these new forms of feminist and queer subjectivity against the backdrop of past feminist debates about harm and agency in the sexual arena, and underscore their performative dimension.

Something had changed. I was aware of that as I taught the seminar on pornography that I had taught several times previously in the last 15 years. It was 2016, and I was teaching this course after a pause of 4 years. The composition of the class was seemingly ideal: a small graduate seminar in a gender studies program, all women except for

one gay man, and a slight predominance of queer students over straight ones. And yet I was experiencing a certain unease, conscious that I was more guarded in my words, more cautious in the choice of class screenings, warier about students' reactions to them than I had been in the previous times I had taught the course. Granted, teaching a course on pornography that includes—as I believe such a course must—screening sexually explicit materials in classⁱ is not a trivial undertaking, and demands careful attention to questions of pedagogy and ethics. This has always been the case; however, this time around there was for me a new sense of apprehension that attended the teaching of the class, which had not been there before. Have I changed? Have the students changed? What had happened in the intervening years?

In this paper, I will take my experience with that class as a case study, which taken together with a small and admittedly subjective archive of several other instances, will serve as a point of departure for a reflection about the current academic climate—a climate characterized by increased demands for safe space in academic settings, rising concern about abuse in such settings, and the growing currency of a discourse of injury and vulnerability.

Before I go on to criticize some aspects of this climate, I believe I should make clear my position concerning students' safety and professors' ethical obligations toward students. Classroom interactions are characterized by a built-in power imbalance owing to the differential statuses and roles of professors and students. Professors enjoy both a position of authority and symbolic power, and since their role entails conducting the class and evaluating students they to a large extent control the interaction, and the grades they assign may affect students' short- or long-term goals. This basic power imbalance cannot be neutralized and may result in a sense of vulnerability for students; and for this very reason, it confers on professors the responsibility to refrain from abusing their power. I strongly believe that students ought to be safe from abuses of power by professors, either in the form of professors using their authority to mock students or trivialize their opinions in class, or in the form of professors exploiting pedagogic eros, i.e. the kind of erotic transference that often takes place toward teachers, and converting it to extra-curricular sexual liaisons. I also believe that teachers should strive to behave fairly and sensitively toward their students, respect their autonomy, try to be heedful of their wellbeing, and certainly not undermine it knowingly. Professors should also strive to foster a class atmosphere in which students will behave sensitively to one another. To adhere to these principles, professors need to exercise an ethical alertness and be reflexive about their teaching practice.ⁱⁱ However, even those who do so are not immune to error and occasional slips—we all make mistakes. These are the premises of my own teaching practice, and the guidelines I would propose to others. But do they make my classes a safe space? To whom, and according to what criteria?

Safe for whom: queer space, safe space, and the academic arena

Holley and Steiner define 'safe space' in academic contexts as a metaphor for a classroom climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors while feeling protected from psychological or emotional harm (Holley & Steiner 2013, p. 50). Relatedly but independently, the idiom of 'safe space' has been gaining currency in queer and LGBT communities, where it signifies spaces that offer protection from the physical and symbolic violence that queer subjects are liable to encounter in a homophobic and heterosexist society. In its queer usage, 'safe space' refers to a variety of concrete, spatially and temporally delimited settings, such as community centers, parties, and other meeting places that aim to provide queer subjects safety from physical and emotional injury, as well as a sense of comfort, belonging, social control, and the freedom to express themselves (Hartal 2017). In its queer deployments, 'safe space' often alludes not only to the negative ideal of immunity from violence and violation, but also to a positive one, in line with its genealogy in feminist and lesbian-feminist separatist thinking, of a space that enables the building of community and the elaboration of an oppositional culture. In this sense, it resonates with the notion of counterpublics engaged in world-making practices (Warner 2002). However, even in its queer usage, the concept 'safe space' carries diverse meanings. As Gilly Hartal points out, it sometimes describes an aspired-to condition while at other times it is taken to be the very precondition of queer space. Further, by examining the ways in which the notion of safe space is actually deployed by different constituencies in the LGBT community, and the spatial practices that ensue from them, Hartal uncovers several disparate and occasionally conflicting framings of this notion in accordance with the different needs and vulnerabilities of these sub-groups (e.g. queer youth, transgenders, people with HIV, queer women), framings that equate safety variously with fortification, anonymity, inclusivity, separation, and control (Hartal 2017).

In particular sites in academia, such as queer studies courses, or gender and sexuality programs in general, these two partly overlapping constructions of 'safe space'—the educational one and the queer one—meet creating an inevitable tension: on the one hand queer, LGBT, and feminist students see these sites as theirs—spaces where they can (finally) express their views, perform their identities, and narrate their experiences without fear of censure and ridicule, and receive validation; on the other hand, these are *not* community or activist spaces the entry to which can be regulated, and in which particular codes of conduct can be instituted on the basis of shared needs and values, but rather open educational spaces, where all students who enroll in the class should be made to feel equally secure and comfortable, free to participate and express themselves honestly.

This is a tension that I have often experienced in my teaching. I have taught queer theory courses in Israeli universities since 2001. When

teaching these classes, one of my aims has always been to create queer space within the bounds of academia, an enclave where heteronormative assumptions are suspended and questioned, and queer knowledges are privileged. In such spaces, not only are the perspectives and experiences of queer students validated and their identities affirmed, but in effect everyday power hierarchies are reversed: in the temporary communities that form in such classes for the period of a term or two (and every class is a unique miniature community), it is the LGBT students who have the relevant expertise or cultural competence, and their perspectives enjoy a privileged status. While members of a socially subordinated group, such as LGBTs, rarely become the majority in class, they may nevertheless attain the status of a hegemonic group—by virtue of their very status as an oppressed minority and/or a political vanguard (I see this happen with queer, trans, genderqueer, polyamorous, or bisexual students). As a teacher, I regard such reversals as welcome, offering not only affirmation to queer students but also a valuable learning experience for straight students who through the temporary suspension of heterosexual privilege may attain an understanding of it that is not merely intellectual but experiential as well.ⁱⁱⁱ However, it is likely that under such conditions, straight students, or at least some of them, will not feel safe enough to participate freely and express their views honestly, whether from fear of offending, of not having the right language, or of revealing their ignorance or prejudice.

Hartal, David, and Pascar (2014) offer a useful distinction between two notions of safety, or two axes around which queer 'safe spaces' tend to be constructed, and which are often in tension with one another: a space that is safe for diversity, and a space that is safe for experimentation, confusion, and error. The first is a space in which every participant can look and behave according to her preferences and have her personal choices respected; the second is a space that allows its participants to encounter new ideas and practices, to ask questions, and to make mistakes. The two types of safety conflict since blunders by those not familiar with community norms might cause emotional injury and jeopardize the other participants' sense of security; and on the other hand, attempts to provide full protection from psychic violation result in a strict codification of behavior that narrows the space for error, and often too in barring those not belonging to the in-group from taking part. This distinction between a space safe for diversity and a space safe for error, and the trade-off between the two types of safety apply to educational settings as well. On the one hand, queer students understandably and justifiably have a feeling of ownership over these queer- or feminist-oriented classes and want to claim them as academic 'heterotopias' (Foucault 1986) where they can finally feel safe to be themselves. On the other hand, in educational settings, not only are the options of either denying entry to members of the dominant group in order to protect and empower members of a subordinated group, or enforcing a strict code of conduct not viable, but moreover, to attain educational goals a space for error must be allowed and safeguarded. In my teaching practice, I consciously attempt to make the straight students feel comfortable too by means of my

responses to their interventions in class.^{iv} However, this can only mitigate the structural tension I have pointed out, and does not change the fact that heightened safety for some students means reduced safety for others, and that the same class environment can be experienced as safe by some students and unsafe by others by virtue of the exact same characteristics.

I could observe this dynamic in my 2016 porn seminar. The class was composed of 6 graduate students of varying ages, two senior-year undergrads, and two graduate students from other departments who audited the course. In terms of their identities, there were four straight women (the two undergrads and two more mature grad students), one gay man, one transwoman, and four other queer women of various stripes. During most class meetings, three of the straight female students participated very little. This could be attributed to a number of factors: for one, I believe that they had very little prior exposure to pornography and might have felt overwhelmed or at a loss as to how to relate to these materials; secondly, since women are socialized not to show overt interest in sex or talk about it, they might have felt embarrassed to discuss sexual practices. LGBT culture is much more eloquent than straight culture about sexuality, and queer subcultures provide the women who enter them with a counter socialization that generally allows them to discuss sexual matters more freely. Discussion of sexuality raises issues of language and attitude, and I suspect that my straight students felt that they lacked the right language or the proper attitude. I suspect too that these difficulties were exacerbated by the dominance of the queer students in class interactions—that the latter's eloquence and ease in discussing sexually explicit representations and sexual practices had an inhibiting effect on the heterosexual women, who might have worried that their perspective wasn't sophisticated enough, that their sexual mores were too conventional, or that they might unwittingly offend the queer students in the class by what they would say. Perhaps they also felt that some remarks by the queer students about heteronormative sexuality undermined their own sexuality. At any rate, I believe that the comfort of the queer students who felt at home in the class was not shared by the straight ones, and at least in some instances served to lessen their own sense of comfort.

The sexually explicit and the discourse of harm

But I would like to go back to my sense of unease teaching a class on pornography in the present academic climate. This unease indicated the tension between the centrality of explicit sexual content to this course on the one hand, and the growing prevalence and authority in academia of a frame of injury and vulnerability reflected in several distinct but related discursive sites—sexual harassment, trigger warnings, and the call to make campuses and classrooms 'safe' or 'safer', both for minority students and for students in general. In all of these discursive sites the sexually explicit, or the sexual in general, holds an increasingly suspect position.

When I started teaching that course in my former academic home, Tel-Aviv University, in the early 2000s, it was offered as an undergraduate elective in a Comparative Literature department open to students from other departments as well. As an instructor, I did feel in a somewhat insecure position—I was a doctoral student employed on short-term contracts, the subject was unorthodox, and while the course was approved by my department no one scrutinized the syllabus or asked about the precise nature of class screenings. I was not sure that the higher echelons of the university would approve, and I felt the need to fly under the radar. Which we did. We would take care to close the class door to elude the gaze of curious passersby who may be attracted by the sound of groans seeping out into the corridor, and a technician coming to fix a problem in the AV system would be hurriedly thanked and dismissed without getting to see more than a DVD box or the relatively innocuous beginning of a film. Somewhat to my surprise, for some six or seven rounds of this course no one complained and there was no scandal. Moreover, I felt that the students and I colluded in the effort not to draw institutional attention, that we were partners in an underground undertaking to sneak these images and these subjects into the institutional space of the university and accord them a place there. The feeling was that we were discussing subjects crucial to their lives as young people with an interest in sexual politics, subjects that they otherwise had very little opportunity to discuss, certainly within the university, but elsewhere too,^v and they were mostly grateful for the opportunity.

However, even at that time when the discourse of safe space and traumatization still had not reached Israeli academia, I was aware that my own vulnerability was not the only one at stake, and that I had an obligation to prevent unwitting exposure to images that might shock or traumatize. For that purpose, I practiced three tiers of warning: first, the course description stated that classes included viewing pornographic materials; secondly, on the first day of class, I explained that we would watch a broad range of pornographic materials, and that many students are liable to find at least some of these offensive. Following that generalized content alert, I urged students to carefully reconsider their participation in the class, and should they decide to stay to take responsibility for the effects that exposure to these materials might have on them; thirdly, before class screenings, I tried to provide information about what we were about to watch, and when screening materials that I thought would be particularly shocking or upsetting (e.g. a sequence from Pasolini's *Sa/b*) I warned students about them. Generally, students knew that if they found certain representations difficult to watch it was okay to go out and come back later. In urging students to exercise judgement and take responsibility for their participation in the class I was treating them as adults who are the best judges of their own sensibilities and boundaries, and since most Israeli students begin undergraduate studies only at 21 or later (after military service), I felt justified in treating them as such.

Since a sense of psychic injury can be induced not only through exposure to the sexual images themselves, but also by people's

reactions to them, I would set out in advance guidelines for class discussion—stating that expressions of misogyny and homophobia are not acceptable (this is something I deemed necessary in larger groups that included straight male students; in gender studies classes this kind of warning is redundant), and urging students to take into account the possible effect their speech might have on others and try to speak in a way that would not silence other students. I find it helpful to remind students that people's reactions to sexual representations vary widely based on a large number of factors, such as socialization, sexual experience, and the sexual culture we belong to; hence that they should not assume that their own response (when they find an image offensive, or boring, or grotesque, or hot) is universal or normal, and be respectful of different opinions and reactions. These precautions seemed to be sufficient. And while I have heard a couple of times from former students that in retrospect there were some images that were a bit too much for them, they said it without grudge. They did not see themselves as injured but, I believe, regarded this unwanted exposure as a side-effect of an overall interesting and rewarding experience.

To go back to the present moment, teaching this course again in 2016 after a gap of several years, I found myself suddenly much more concerned about inadvertently harming my students by what I was showing them. First, students have come to be considered and to see themselves as much more fragile creatures, and exposing them to sexually explicit images could be construed both as a form of traumatization and as a form of sexual harassment. In addition, the notion of pornography as indisputably injurious has in the meantime gained ascendancy in Israeli feminism. Many local feminists see pornography, prostitution, and trafficking as lying along a continuum, and regard pornography as incontestably pernicious and one of the agents of 'rape culture'. Hence, when it comes to women gender studies' students, they are even more likely than others to regard pornographic images as essentially suspect, as both representing violence and exerting violence on their viewers. Some of them may exempt feminist and queer porn from this overriding judgement, but mainstream porn is bound to be condemned. Taken together, the rise of the injury frame in academia and the dominance of the feminist anti-porn paradigm combine to make the presence of porn in the class ineluctably suspect, even hard to justify: if these are essentially noxious materials, and I am exposing my students to them, doesn't this make me a perpetrator?

In the past, my ability to screen explicit materials was based on the credit I had as a female professor, an out lesbian, and a queer scholar. I did not fit the profile of the privileged white heterosexual male professor, whose motives for discussing sexual matters in class are always questionable, and who is carefully scrutinized for evidence of sexism. I was quite aware that male professors simply could not teach a similar course. I assume too that part of the credit that both I and the course enjoyed had to do with the overt labeling of the class as feminist, the fact that the feminist debate on pornography was given a central place in the syllabus, and that one of the course's major preoccupations

was with feminist and queer alternatives to mainstream porn. To a large degree, I believe this still holds true, but not to the same extent—owing both to the changing sensibilities of students and the altered institutional climate. Two incidents that occurred in my university around the time of the seminar served to illustrate this for me.

First, there was the end of term presentation in a performance art workshop in my program. This workshop is an exceptional elective course, in which students get to explore issues of identity, gender, and sexuality through performance. It is a very popular class that earns excellent student evaluations. But that one time, one of the performances went too far. One of the students, a transgender woman did a sexually explicit performance piece that involved full nudity, masturbation, and self-injury. All the performances took place simultaneously in a number of adjacent classrooms, with spectators moving between them. The sexually explicit piece was partly screened-off from the rest of the room, and there were cautionary notices taped to the screens that stated the performance included full nudity, sexual content, and self-injury. For a few of the attending students (undergraduates from the gender studies minor who were invited to the event by friends who participated in the class) this piece was apparently too much, and a couple of them went on to complain to the administration. It may be argued that a performance of this kind has no room in a university setting at all; alternatively, it may be argued that while it could be acceptable in certain contexts, e.g. as part of a performance studies program, in the present case—as part of a one-off class—it lacked suitable context and therefore should not have taken place. I actually agree with the latter claim, and I do not underestimate the shock that those students—not having a proper context for reception—suffered. However, I find it somewhat baffling that despite the explicit warning notices, and despite the fact that the performer belonged to a marginalized and vulnerable group herself, the instructor was clearly identified as queer, and the event took place under the auspices of the gender studies program, i.e. in a context that is avowedly pro-women and anti-sexual-harassment, the students still considered themselves injured, not just unpleasantly shocked, and opted to make a formal complaint. This seems to be a manifestation of what Sarah Schulman identifies as a contemporary tendency to overstate harm; and turning to the university authorities to complain of injury strikes me as structurally parallel to the growing propensity noted by Schulman to seek police intervention in situations of interpersonal conflict between members of marginalized communities, rather than try to resolve the conflict within the bounds of the community (Schulman 2016). It is also interesting and indicative of the current construction of these issues that the handling of the case was delegated to the officer in charge of investigating sexual harassment complaints.

In the second incident I was personally involved. My book on pornography by women had come out the previous summer, and my program organized a book launch event. Posters for the event were hung in several buildings in campus. The poster used the image on the book's front cover, a frame from 'Phonefuck', a short lesbian porn video

that formed part of the *Dirty Diaries* project.^{vi} The image shows two women: one with a bare breast looking down at her lover, and the other holding the first woman's breast, her face adjacent to it. The image is grainy, but not too grainy to be deciphered. Because of its erotic suggestiveness, I asked the graphic designer who made the poster to tone it down a bit, and accordingly he covered the breast and mouth area with a horizontal black stripe on which some of the text appeared. I thought this a good solution, but somehow in the printing office's computer the black stripe disappeared, and the posters were printed without it and sent for distribution before we spotted the problem. When we did notice it, a second batch was printed and the buildings' custodians were asked to remove the faulty posters and replace them with the new ones. Apparently, at least some of them failed to do so, and some of the more explicit posters remained hanging. A couple of days later I received a message from the sexual harassment officer who forwarded to me a faculty member's letter of complaint. The faculty member from the medical school (I mention his discipline because the difference in academic cultures between the different fields seems pertinent) complained about the offensive content displayed on bulletin boards. He stated that he felt offended and harassed by the picture, and that he believed the public display of nude pictures was inappropriate and constituted a grave form of injury. He deemed this an extreme case that lies beyond the bounds of freedom of speech. I wrote back, explained what had happened, and apologized for the unpleasantness. He wasn't quite satisfied, since for him even the 'censored' version of the poster went too far but the case was dismissed at that. As in the case of the performance class (which nevertheless involved a more elaborate inquiry), the sexual harassment officer exercised judgement and there were no further institutional repercussions.

What do these stories, this little eclectic dossier, demonstrate? I believe they show the ease with which unsettling encounters with the sexually explicit tend to be translated into the language of sexual harassment nowadays; translated, that is, both by the institution and its members. What was once deemed offensive in the sense of offending sensibilities, lying beyond the bounds of good taste, is now deemed offensive in a new sense, i.e. injurious, causing psychic harm; or rather the distinction between the two senses of the term has been eroded. I also believe that it is not merely incidental that the two complaints were provoked by encounters with unorthodox sexuality or unorthodox gendered embodiment. When the bodies or genders in question lie outside the heteronormative sphere the practices they engage in always seem more 'obscene' and offensive to the heteronormatively trained eye.^{vii} The faculty member who complained about the poster objected to the nudity; the students who complained about the performance objected to the nudity and the sexual content. The fact that the nudity in the poster occurred in the context of a lesbian encounter, and that the nudity in the performance was of a transgendered body were not mentioned, they were left out as seemingly irrelevant, but of course they are far from irrelevant. It may be objected that a poster with the image of a bare-breasted woman in

an analogous pose of erotic intimacy with a man would have caused the same amount of outrage, or that a similar performance by a cisgender woman or a cisgender man would have been equally traumatizing for the students; however, such objections overlook the distinctive role of the sexually explicit in queer culture as an idiom of affirmation of same-sex eroticism and gender variance in the face of mainstream culture's suppression of queer sexualities and bodies. The two anecdotes instantiate how, when linked to heteronormativity, the discourse of injury and trauma can and does function to silence queer sexual speech.

Vulnerability, trigger warnings, and identity work

So, what does it mean to teach a course on pornography in this climate? My unease in this class came not only from contextual factors, but had to do with the class dynamic as well. In several instances, I felt that my sensibilities and those of the students (at least some of them) were completely out of touch. For instance, we read the story 'Rubenesque' by Magenta Michaels from *Herotica 2*, a collection of Women's erotica, in which a full-figured woman receives clandestine oral sex in a public place from a strange man who crawls under her table (Michaels 1991). A couple of the students objected to the story because they construed the act of unsolicited cunnilingus as harassment or assault, despite the fact that the character in the story does not perceive it this way, but rather as an adventure that boosts her self-confidence. The fact that the sexual encounter is geared solely toward the female protagonist's pleasure did not seem to carry weight with the students that read it as an assault. Another student objected to Catherine Tavel's story 'About Penetration' from *Herotica 3*, in which the female protagonist develops an affair with an obscene phone caller, and ends up having sex with his best friend while he watches as a means of vicarious consummation, because he would not have sex with her (Tavel 1994). Here too, the student saw the character as exploited and objectified even though the story stresses her desire and her sense of agency. In general, students of this generation seem more prone to evaluate fantasy according to the same standards as real-life behavior, and less likely to view women as sexual agents in complex or ambiguous situations. I have deliberately brought examples that relate to written erotica rather than cinematic representations, because in the latter, students' concerns about possible abuse or exploitation of the performers seem to me more understandable. These examples certainly reflect a propensity to see things in black-and-white and shrink from grey zones in which agency may coincide with objectification; however, I suspect that the student responses I cited are indicative of a broader phenomenon. I believe Jack Halberstam is correct in suggesting that feminism has taught students to be wary of representation itself, and that this attitude has its roots in the anti-porn feminism of the 1980s (Halberstam 2017).

In the 80s and 90s, the decades that shaped my cultural sensibilities and political outlook, the sexually explicit was the idiom of feminist self-

assertion for sex-positive feminism and of queer rebellion. However, pro-sex feminism only crystalized in response to the feminist anti-porn position that regarded sexuality as a central site of women's subordination, attributed pornography a major role in this subordination, and drew an inevitable connection between the exploitation and victimization of individual women in the making of pornography and the detrimental effect that pornography consumption by men has on women as a social group. Feminist scholars like Catherine MacKinnon completely eroded the distinction between representation and action and attributed pornographic representations the power to injure and subjugate.^{viii} In the contest between anti-porn feminists' emphasis on female vulnerability and victimization, and pro-sex feminism's stress on women's sexual agency and the complex entanglement of pleasure and danger in the sexual arena, the former outlook seems to have won the day among the 'triggered generation', to use Halberstam's phrase (Halberstam 2014). And for reasons that are partly overlapping and partly distinct, young queers of all genders have joined feminists in adopting the frame of injury.^{ix} One result of the dominance of the frame of injury in the field of sexuality in general and sexual representation in particular is that the sexually explicit has fallen under suspicion not only as the putative product of exploitation and abuse but also as a vehicle of injury.

My students have not demanded trigger warning (this wave has still not hit Israeli academia, and to judge by the migration patterns of other academic and social trends originating in the U.S., it would probably hit much more lightly); but since trigger warnings are spreading in queer and feminist circles, this emergent norm is shaping the sensibilities of those students who belong to these cultures. I did find in their responses to pornographic representations the workings of an optics calibrated to identify harm and vulnerability, and even what felt to me a new form of political piety. As Halberstam observes, trigger warnings are often called for by people not on their own account but on behalf of—often hypothetical—others, and the same goes for allegations of harm of other kinds. For instance, when I screened Annie Sprinkle's *Sluts and Goddesses Video Workshop* (Beatty & Sprinkle 1992), one of the queer graduate students in the class was outraged by Sprinkle's casual use of elements from Indian culture and by the figure of an ostensibly white woman doing a Chinese sword dance, which she saw as instances of cultural appropriation. The tongue-in-cheek tone of the entire video and its deliberately eclectic aesthetics did not seem to her to make this charge irrelevant or at least mitigate its gravity.

To understand what is going on, I think we need to ask about the work that such protestations of outrage and concern do. I believe that these performances of political piety are often a means of signaling subcultural belonging and political awareness and commitment (the latter being incontestable assets in gender studies classes). Not seldom do such performances function to secure for ethnically unmarked students who might also be from a socio-economically privileged background a status of political virtue that earns them points in a calculus in which their class and ethnic background detracts from

their credentials. Needless to say, I am not suggesting that there is anything calculated or insincere about these performances, quite the contrary. Rather, I believe they have come to operate as a kind of required identity performance, especially for a generation socialized through interaction in social media, where exposing one's own vulnerability and hurt guarantees sympathy and support, and calling out others' offences, bias, or privilege secures a status of political righteousness.^x I would propose that social media function as a diffuse but very effective form of social control, and that the norms internalized in interactions in the virtual world shape sensibilities and behaviors in other arenas as well.

I will not repeat here the various critiques that have been made of the use of trigger warnings in academic settings.^{xi} I believe that one of the problems with trigger warnings that has not received sufficient attention is the way they work to orient and foreclose the reception of the representations they attach to.^{xii} For aside from alerting those individuals suffering from post-trauma to the presence of potential 'triggers', trigger warnings guide reception for the class (or audience) as a whole, performing a reductive framing of the text, which is branded suspect and potentially harmful.^{xiii} Instead of an unmediated encounter with the text, the experience of the spectators or readers becomes shaped by the questions: does this have the potential to traumatize me? Is this traumatizing people around me? Should I feel shocked or offended? Is this as bad as I expected? For instance, when I screened in class a segment from Nagisa Oshima's now classic film *In the Realm of the Senses* I felt obliged to forewarn the students about the sexual harassment scene in the beginning of the film—the relationship between the two protagonists begins as Kichi, the master of the house, sexually harasses Sada the servant girl; however, such a framing does gross injustice to a film whose very theme is mutual erotic obsession, and whose plot inverts the initial gender hierarchy and stresses female erotic power. When I prefaced the viewing with a warning that the segment begins with a scene of sexual harassment, what was the meaning of my gesture? Was I really worried that any of the students in the class might be re-traumatized by it? Or was I in fact signaling to them that I realize the behavior depicted is not acceptable according to contemporary standards and our shared values, but am asking them *not* to let this fact determine their entire appraisal of the film? Following Halberstam's suggestion that trigger warnings developed through a series of intergenerational miscommunications and misunderstandings (Halberstam 2017), I would propose that in the context of this intergenerational crisis of communication, the use of trigger warnings is tantamount to asking our students' toleration for cultural texts that bear the traces of various modes of domination (i.e. most cultural texts) and do not stand up to political appraisal. In other words, their avowed purpose notwithstanding, the actual work that trigger warnings perform is that of mediating between the triggered generation's strictly political standards of appraising culture and our, their teachers,' conviction that there are other important criteria for assessing cultural texts, and other relevant interests beside the viewpoint of domination and oppression.

While one of my concerns about trigger warnings relates to its reductive framing of texts and the impoverished readings that ensue, the other concern has to do with the kind of political and sexual subjectivity that an optics calibrated to identify harm and the constant alertness to potential trauma shape and express. Why do present-day students, especially queer and feminist ones, project themselves as so fragile? I believe that Joan Scott has at least part of the answer when she points out that the neoliberal framework allows students to make claims for equality and empowerment only when such claims are formulated in terms of personal injury and lack of comfort and safety, rather than as collective demands voiced in the language of social justice (Scott 2016). However, it warrants consideration whether feminism itself (along with LGBT identity politics) is not partly responsible for the production of this type of fragile subjectivity. Janet Halley argues that a politics of injury has come to characterize (most varieties of) feminism. She observes that in order to secure its aims within the legal and political system grounded in liberal thought, according to which only harm can justify regulation, feminism, along with other kinds of identity politics, has had to translate claims of subordination into the language of injury. Hence, 'the production of the apprehendability and articulacy of pain, injury and trauma—harm—is a central element of subordination theory working on race, ethnicity, gender, sex¹ [i.e. biological dimorphism], sexual orientation, nationality' (Halley 2006, p. 324). To extend Halley's argument, then, the production of fragile subjects who perceive themselves as vulnerable and injury prone would be the logical upshot of a politics that turns injury into identity-defining. I believe that often this fragile subject position is a means for young people of staking a claim to collective identities—whether feminist, queer, or racial ones—rooted in histories of struggle and suffering. Halberstam asks (rhetorically I believe) whether the triggered self fetishizes safety; yet paradoxically, it seems that the fetishization of safety goes hand in hand with an identitarian attachment to vulnerability—which entails, of course, that the safety so sought after and insisted upon would remain a moving target, forever unattainable.

Finally, to go back to the question of the sexually explicit, as I have noted, the combined effect of the injury frame and the feminist anti-porn paradigm is to brand sexually explicit representations as essentially noxious, and to make any appearance of the sexually explicit in class inherently suspect. Thus, paradoxically, while the field of porn studies is becoming an established area of scholarship, teaching courses on pornography is turning into an increasingly risky and dubious endeavor—first of all, since the objects of study themselves could be construed as either traumatizing or harassing, but also because the language available to discuss them is increasingly constricted, and the repertoire of acceptable attitudes and affects in discussions of sex, let alone commercial sex, seems to have narrowed down to the range between concern and outrage. As the discourse of safety/injury gains ground, sex in general and the sexually explicit in particular have less and less of a legitimate place in academia, and we are facing the paradox of academic spaces that by virtue of the very aspiration to

promote safety are safe only for a very sanitized and desexualized version of queer culture and experience.

Amalia Ziv is senior lecturer and head of the Gender Studies Program at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. She is the author of *Explicit Utopias: Rewriting the Sexual in Women's Pornography* (SUNY Press, 2015) and *Sexual Thoughts: Queer Theory, Pornography, and the Politics of Sexuality* (Resling Press, 2013). Her research interests include pornography, queer kinship, and queer culture in Israel.

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Notes

i Cf. Smith's similar conviction.

ii In the same way that researcher reflexivity can minimize but not eliminate power relations with interview partners, so teachers' reflexivity concerning their teaching practice can mitigate but not undo pedagogic power relations.

iii As an example, I can quote from an email message I recently received from a heterosexual feminist-identified graduate student, a committed activist against sexual violence, who participated in my queer theory class. She jokingly sums up her experience in this way: 'No doubt, this course has confronted me with many things. Not only did I realize that I'm a poor feminist because I don't undermine heterosexuality in any way and contribute to my own oppression and that of women in general, they also call me an 'ally', and it turns out that I ruin sex workers' lives and take part in sexual oppression'.

iv My strategies include answering readily questions that betray ignorance, correcting misconceptions without censure, and engaging seriously with questions and comments that the queer students in the class are liable to find ignorant or offensive, thus modelling to them a mode of response that I hope they would follow, while also signalling that the straight students too have full citizenship in the class community.

v Smith makes a similar point about sexually explicit materials as a platform for classroom discussion of sexuality in general (Smith 2009).

vi *Dirty Diaries* 2009 [film], dir. Mia Engberg, Story AB, Sweden.

vii There is a long history of queer representations being banned as obscenity—from the *Well of Loneliness* in the late 1920s to Robert Mapplethorpe’s retrospective exhibition in the early 1990s.

viii For a comprehensive analysis and critique of the feminist anti-porn position, see Ziv (2015).

ix Halberstam provides a partial explanation for this phenomenon with his observation that queer youth internalize narratives of damage that they themselves may not have actually experienced as part of their socialization into queer culture, and thereby both develop a sense of themselves as endangered and become hypersensitive to signs and evidence of abuse (Halberstam, 2014).

x Sara Schulman observes that contemporary culture is characterized by a pervasive tendency to overstate harm, conflate discomfort with threat, and represent conflict as abuse. She sees the demand for trigger warnings and what she terms ‘call-out culture’ as manifestations of this tendency, both stemming from an expanded definition of violence (Schulman 2016).

xi One document that sets out the major problems with the use of trigger warnings is the AAUP report on the subject, which states: ‘Trigger warnings suggest that classrooms should offer protection and comfort rather than an intellectually challenging education. They reduce students to vulnerable victims rather than full participants in the intellectual process of education’. The report expresses the concern that since these are often politically controversial topics that are associated with triggers, the demand for trigger warnings would result in teachers’ avoidance of such subjects, and therefore create a chilly climate for critical thinking in the classroom (AAUP 2014).

xii I am indebted to Sarai Aharoni for this insight.

xiii CF. the AAUP report, which notes that trigger warnings focus students on one aspect of the text, and signal an expected response to it, thus precluding other reactions (AAUP, 2014).

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