

[Insert image here]: a reflection on the ethics of imagery in a critical pedagogy for the humanities

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[Insert image here]: a reflection on the ethics of imagery in a critical pedagogy for the humanities

Using the controversial image of Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi as its provocation, this paper reflects upon the ethics of images used in teaching in a time of high-volume image circulation via social media, as well as a time when debates about content and trigger warnings are starting to gain more traction in the Australian tertiary sector. It integrates personal reflection upon a variety of choices made by the author in teaching with a consideration of the related pedagogical and ethical issues, drawing particularly on theories of the pedagogy of discomfort and visual ethics. It is argued that the discursive space of trigger warnings *per se* remains problematic as this immediately places the students into a negative and possibly traumatic relationship with the material rather than empowering them to use their affective responses and experiences productively. Educators are instead encouraged to develop reflexive critical pedagogies that acknowledge the ethical relationship between student and teacher, while also still fulfilling the prosocial impetus of the humanistic education.

Keywords: critical humanities; pedagogy; ethics; trigger warnings; visual culture

Introduction

In September 2015, a photograph of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler who had drowned on a beach in Turkey after his family's failed attempt to reach Greece, filled social and contemporary media. The image was heartbreaking and touched many who might not have otherwise felt the human cost of the Syrian refugee crisis. Writing a new undergraduate course on global migration issues in the wake of this viral image and in the midst of the crisis, I faced a dilemma: is it ethical to include this viral image that prompted responses from global leaders and global citizens alike? To determine this, I needed to also determine who the key stakeholders in this decision really were: me, my students, or that little boy on the beach? The decision has prompted a reflection about the ethics of images in teaching, with a broader engagement with critical pedagogy as a professional discourse about the ethical dimensions of university teaching. Images can be a powerful tool for communicating ideas

and meaning to students, as well as engaging a different critical faculty beyond the rhetorical. Furthermore, unlike many of the written materials we use in courses, which are usually provided in required and further readings lists, images can be inserted into teaching materials on an *ad hoc* basis, such as in lecture slides or tutorial resources, with little to no prior indication of their inclusion. As such, many images may be unexpected, and the undergraduate viewer may not be prepared for the encounter with that material. The questions arise: how do we as educators prepare students for upcoming content without either shying away or discouraging students from difficult or confronting material? Can making our students uncomfortable be both pedagogically sound *and* ethical?

This paper offers a critical reflection upon the use of images in developing a critical and ethical pedagogy in the humanities. It integrates personal reflection on a variety of choices I have made in teaching with a consideration of the related pedagogical and ethical issues that arose, framed within contemporary debate on trigger warnings as a means of addressing students' relationship with difficult material. As an image of a dead body – let alone that of a dead child – and as content that I am teaching to a cohort that does include students from refugee and migrant backgrounds, the image of Alan Kurdi is potentially 'triggering'. While I am wary of trigger warnings as an effective approach, the debate about trigger and content warnings has nevertheless created an opportunity for scholars to re-evaluate our pedagogical approaches to ethical and critical engagement with the difficult and discomfiting ideas that shape contemporary society. The broader discourse of trigger warnings *per se* is problematic due to its potential conflation of trauma and offence, the latter tied up in questions of privilege, but framing questions of content and delivery in terms ethics and, more specifically, in terms of various ethical relationships between teacher and student, between viewer and image rather than (potential) trauma creates a productive critical and pedagogical space. A clear syllabus and course structure plays an important role in

developing students' skills in addressing material that they may find confronting, but this communication of material should not necessarily be framed in terms of triggering and trauma. Furthermore, transparency around the process of content selection and presentation, including the teacher's own open reflection upon material they find personally challenging, can be incorporated into syllabi as a critical component. In particular, I suggest that combining Michalinos Zembylas' (2015) "pedagogy of discomfort" with Julianne H. Newton's (2005) "ecology of the visual" provides a strategy for engaging with difficult images in an ethical manner without censoring content, which is a particular fear of those critical of trigger warnings. Such an approach prepares students, maintains difficult content, develops an ethical, consensual relationship between students and content, and through this develops a more thorough, engaged, and ethical critical pedagogy.

Towards a pedagogy of discomfort: unangling trauma from discomfort

In one of my classes, a broad survey of ethics for humanities students, I teach a module on animal ethics. I begin the class, as I begin every class, with a music video related to the week's topic. For this module, it is the Humane Society of Canada's (2008) public service advertisement accompanied by the Pretenders' "I'll Stand By You". It contains images of animals kept in captivity, for either research or entertainment, of animals hunted, including rhinos' horns being cut, and animals suffering from the human impact on the environment. The video is the only image of animal abuse and exploitation that I show in the lecture. There is also a personal dimension to this choice. As a lover of animals, I find it incredibly difficult to watch images of animals in pain – very few people would admit to enjoying this – and I begin the lecture feeling slightly choked up, my pretence at objectivity visibly and audibly compromised. I do not provide students with a warning prior to this video, although it does come at a point late in the semester; in the very first lecture they are reminded that critical

ethical studies require us to examine difficult topics but I do not specify what those topics will be, beyond the details already provided in the syllabus and course materials.

I do, however, give students a strong warning about another video contained in the extra material for the animal ethics module. This video, produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's current affairs documentary program Four Corners, presents a harrowing report into the cattle live trade industry between Australia and Indonesia, featuring explicit footage of cattle being mistreated (ABC 2011). When the program first aired in 2011, it caused national outcry over the treatment of the cattle, and a temporary moratorium on live exports; it was a significant moment in animal rights, corporate/consumer ethics, and public policy (see, for example, Textor 2011; Sherman and Johnson 2011). Personally, I have never succeeded in watching more than a minute of the program before becoming too emotionally overwhelmed to continue. Again compromising that veneer of objectivity, I openly admit this failure to my students in the course materials. I caution that even people in the livestock industries, people accustomed to witnessing slaughter, have difficulty watching the footage. I emphasize that under no circumstances is it required by the course to watch the video, but that the material is available for students should they wish to engage with it in their weekly reflection or in their final case study. In the first semester that this material is offered, several students do choose to watch the documentary. Afterwards, they produce thoughtful reflections on the ethical treatment of animals in an industry that banks upon their eventual death, or on ethics of the socio-economic impacts of a moratorium on one of the largest national primary industries, weighing animal rights and welfare against principles of social justice for humans. Yet in the course evaluations another student expressed disgust at the video's inclusion, citing it as my own bias, and falsely claiming that the class had been "forced" to watch it. To respond to this feedback, the following year I emphasized the warning and the optional status of the

material even further, using bold, italics and underlining for the typeface, and placing a little stop sign image next to the disclaimer, hoping to encourage that same three-second pause and assessment of personal risk that one would take in a car. Perhaps scared off by the warning, no students opted to engage with the case that year. Gone is the risk of complaint, but has it obscured the opportunity for critical engagement with a challenging issue?

I think of this story as I read the debates about trigger warnings in American universities. One of the critical questions that have emerged from this debate centres on the difference between offence and trauma. My example above is certainly a question of offence rather than trauma as the complaint was framed in terms of distaste, appropriateness, and allegations of political bias. It thus becomes useful for illuminating the particular problematic of offence and trauma. While both offence and trauma are, to some extent, subjective and emotional responses, they differ in degrees of social and psychological significance and in so doing necessitate different responses. An act of offence is defined here as one that affects or insults the personal taste or sensibilities of an individual or group. It can be hurtful and frustrating, and certainly should be taken seriously for its potential to touch upon legacies of race, class, and gender, but ultimately it is a matter of social relations.

A traumatic response, on the other hand, reaches a more deeply-seated hurt of psychological significance for an individual. It centres upon an initial trauma, which Cathy Caruth (2016, 11) summarises as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events” such as assault, war, or disaster. Yet Maria Tumarkin (2005, 11) cautions that trauma should not be seen as “another word for tragedy or disaster”. She argues that its popular misuse, often in conjunction with ideas of offence, “obscures the fact that ‘traumatic’ is in no way a synonym for ‘unpleasant’ or ‘emotionally taxing’ or even ‘intensely painful’” (Tumarkin 2005, 11). Rather, trauma is so overwhelming that “the ways in which they experience the world and make sense of their own place in it are effectively shattered”

(Tumarkin 2005, 11). It is “a past that refuses to go away” (Tumarkin 2006, 12).

Accordingly, a traumatic response to stimuli centres not on the act in question, but on how that act returns the individual that moment when their world was shattered and can manifest itself physically, for example in the form of nausea or difficulty breathing. This is the process known as “triggering”, wherein something occurring in the present activates – or triggers – the traumatic response. Where an act of offence may, in some cases, be assuaged by an apology or other appropriate form of reparation, a traumatic response may require more complex support mechanisms, such as counselling.

Navigating these boundaries of offence and trauma have become a core part of contemporary teaching practice in the university sector, with the practice of trigger warnings – that is, by warning students that content may potentially trigger those who have experienced trauma – becoming frequently common. Not all difficult content is relevant to the idea of trigger warnings, yet this is the dominant discourse that has emerged for dealing with discomfort in the classroom, and it can also be co-opted to address personal offence or distaste. Furthermore, some calls for the implementation of trigger warnings on course materials ask that these accompany any material that displays or represents violence or abusive behaviour, which is certainly evident in the footage of live trade. Despite the clear difference in the example provided above to, for instance, a decision to show representations of sexual violence, trigger warnings and trauma have become the primary discursive framework through which students and teachers alike have come to consider all difficult material, with both parties arguably seeking to protect themselves from the ire and affect of the other.

Trigger warnings, trauma, and discomfort in the classroom

Derived from practices in feminist social media and blogging (Jarvie 2014; Vingiano 2014), trigger warnings have emerged as one response to this question, increasingly becoming *de rigueur* in many universities worldwide (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015). The humanities and social sciences, those disciplines charged with the specific responsibility of unpacking and understanding the very endeavour of being human, are hit hardest by these pressures, often exerted by students, to provide content warnings on course materials. Perspectives on trigger warnings are diverse, driven by cultural and institutional contexts, as well as the intersection between personal and professional politics, but for the time being the problem appears to be here to stay, prompting further emotional, psychological and ethical considerations regarding the content we choose to embed in our courses, and how we present this to our students.

In 2014, the American Association of University Professors released a report on trigger warnings, in which they were framed as a “threat to academic freedom” (AAUP 2014). The report expresses concern that the practice of using trigger warnings will lead to a widespread avoidance of “politically controversial topics like sex, race, class, capitalism, and colonialism” in university classrooms. Reading such a list, I see my syllabus for a critical survey of Western ideas disappearing before my eyes; indeed, I am inclined to argue that there is a significant difference between warning of a rape scene in a particular film or novel, much in the same manner as media classifications, and having to caution students that the history of Western ideas may include elements of discrimination, exploitation, and conflict. Even though the AAUP report may be guilty of conflating offence and trauma, what the authors seek to combat is the development of a culture of privilege where offence utilizes the language of trauma in order to avoid challenging situations in the process of education. To put it in cynical terms that might be unfair to the contemporary university student, just as assessment periods prove fatal for grandparents each semester (Adams 1999; Reed 2017), so too might trauma be invoked when course preparation is incomplete, or class clashes with a

preferable engagement; in short, educators privately fear what various internet commentators publicly quip: “‘This triggers me’ is the new ‘the dog ate my homework’” (Soave 2016). No teacher seeks to traumatize their students, but similarly no teacher wishes their students to miss out on an enriching, albeit challenging, educational experience because of personal distaste. Furthermore, the hijacking of the language of trauma, a very real psychosomatic response, for the purposes of privilege and avoiding offence strikes at the social justice and civic principles that should be at the heart of a humanities education. The contemporary university teacher must therefore negotiate the crossroads between an ethics of care for their students and professional duty to their discipline (Thorpe 2016).

Trigger warnings may not necessarily be the best strategy for negotiating these tensions, but the discussion surrounding their use has been increasingly useful for engaging more scholars in a dialogue about critical pedagogical responsibilities in the contemporary university. Angela M. Carter (2015) rightly criticizes the AAUP report for misunderstanding trauma and triggers, and for erroneously conflating these with offence and discomfort, but she also argues optimistically that a teachable moment arises from this conflation: “As educators, rather than dismissing trigger warnings outright, we could engage students about how systems of oppression work and explain the difference between pedagogically productive discomfort and trigger-induced re-traumatization.” Teaching students the difference between offence or discomfort and trauma should be part of the critical thinking toolset with which we equip our students. Carter’s position is informed by bell hooks’s (1994) concept of “engaged pedagogy”, which is in part derived from the work of famed pedagogical theorist and practitioner Paulo Friere. Engaged pedagogy emphasizes the well-being of both student and teacher, and urges a holistic approach to teaching that acknowledges the humanity and vulnerability of those inhabiting the classroom space. hooks’ work does not use the terminology of triggering, predating its common usage in teaching by

over a decade, nor has she entered into contemporary commentary on the issue. It is nevertheless important to consider within this debate, particularly given her long tenure and influence at Oberlin College, one of the most prominent sites of student demand for compulsory trigger warnings.

Yet the usefulness of hooks's work for proponents of trigger warnings is ambiguous at best. Writing from the perspective of the early 1990s that is ominously prescient of the current context, hooks notes that student demands on their teachers far exceeds those made by her own undergraduate generation, noting with sympathy that her classrooms are often "overflowing with students who feel terribly wounded in their psyches" (1994, 19). However, she eschews the idea that students can expect the classroom to be a place of therapy as "utterly unreasonable" (hooks 1994, 19), which destabilizes the usefulness of her arguments to support a practice that has therapeutic undertones. While hooks's engaged pedagogy comes from a commitment to progressiveness in education, in many ways it is simply a return to the core ethics of a humanities education, which she asserts should be transformative, conscious-raising, and driven by a commitment to freedom of expression for both teachers and students (1994, 44).

Freedom of expression is a key concern for critics of trigger warnings, although it could be equally argued that also constitute a form of freedom of expression for those who are triggered (West 2015). This is particularly important at a time when increased attention to sexual assault on campus has highlighted the challenges students can face in not only finding a voice for their experiences, but finding an audience (particularly within the administration of institutions) that will listen (Wade 2017). The case of Oberlin may therefore not necessarily illuminate a student body with a sense of entitlement, but a student body trying to enact the social justice principles that have been instilled in them by their liberal arts education (Heller 2016); hooks may argue that they have been successfully taught to

transgress against a system of injustice that they have been taught to recognize. A hooksian engaged pedagogical response requires educators to listen to their concerns and address them in some way, but again I emphasize that the tactic and discourse of trigger warnings may not be the most productive response, nor one that adequately addresses the objectives of engaged and critical pedagogies as modes that facilitate progressive and transformative educational experiences.

In the Australian context, debate about trigger warnings is only just beginning to develop, with Monash University becoming, in 2017, the first Australian university to implement an institution-wide policy to include trigger warnings in all course syllabi (Monash University Learning and Teaching Committee 2015). Despite the sensationalized media coverage of the policy (see, for example, McGinn 2016), it is both optional and framed in terms of ‘content’ rather than ‘trigger’ warnings, which is slightly less politically charged terminology and arguably a slightly different practice; it is comparable to Office of Film and Literature content classification codes. It is also worth noting that media commentary on the Monash policy has focused on ideas of offence and restriction of free speech rather than the mental wellbeing of students (Baxendale 2016). Other universities have issued statements that they do not have official policies on trigger warnings as the relevant issues of sensitivity, safety and cultural competency are already in-built into institutional policies; individual academics are, however, free to include any disclaimers or course notes that they wish (Avenell 2016).

While individual academics have been using trigger warnings for some time, the practice is not widespread and very little debate has emerged on the topic until very recently; certainly, the Monash policy has been a significant catalyst for this (Palmer 2017; Palmer 2017a). It is important that a stronger critical conversation on the issue develops to address the particular milieu offered by Australian society and its higher education system. Such a

discussion is all the more pressing with the proposed amendment to clause 18C in the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* with the rationale of protecting freedom of speech (Australian House of Representatives 2017). This amendment makes it all the more important that vulnerable groups are protected from vilification and discrimination. Indeed, it could be argued that the amendment underscores the importance of having open discussions with students about difficult events, materials, and views within Australian society, and the importance of better providing them with the critical toolkit with which to combat discriminatory views and policies. Nevertheless, such an impetus on university campuses does not need to be couched in terms of trigger warnings.

Critical scholarly commentary on trigger warnings in Australian universities may be sparse but it is more nuanced than the media responses to the Monash policy might suggest. Interestingly, those who have written on the topic work predominantly within literary studies and creative writing. Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas (2016) found that scaffolding course content, including contextualising material and foreshadowing particularly challenging content, promoted student agency in approaching difficult material, while Ika Willis (2016) has argued that trigger warnings constitute a form of consent between teacher and student. Very few Australian tertiary teaching practitioners have spoken out against trigger warnings, perhaps because the practice is not widespread and the effects of the Monash decision are yet to be seen. Amongst these few critics, Michelle Smith (2014) has suggested that trigger warnings place undue emphasis on negative dimensions of course content rather than on the productive and positive responses that might emerge from open and critical engagement with difficult material – the very purpose of a humanities education. As Smith highlights, engagement with difficult material can yield productive discussions, providing students with more effective strategies for combatting oppressive ideologies and behaviours, such as sexism and racism. Willis, Cardell and Douglas, amongst other proponents of trigger

warnings elsewhere, certainly do not refute this claim, but simply argue for a different way of framing the material. My own position lies somewhere between Smith's fear of missed educational opportunity and Cardell and Douglas's scaffolded approach, although Willis's ideas of ethics and consent are important to consider. I am critical of how the discourse of trigger warnings promotes a wary relationship with unfamiliar material that may deter students from engagement, particularly given the contentious debates that now surround this instrument.

While I do not wish my students harm – indeed, no teacher does, even if they are critical of trigger warnings – I do wonder whether shielding students from uncomfortable material may in itself be a form of benevolent harm. As Diana Pozo (2015) explains, the language of trauma may prime students to be traumatized rather than provide them with an appropriate critical context with which to approach the difficult material. E. Margaret Thorpe (2016, 91) suggests that if the creation of a 'safe' classroom comes at the cost of disempowering students and removing their agency to engage with new and challenging material, "we are doing marked harm to our discipline and to our pedagogy." To support this concern, Thorpe cites Jeannie Suk Gersen's (2014) *New Yorker* piece reflecting on the difficulty of teaching rape law to a student body that claims the material to be triggering. Similarly, Pozo's reflections on the issue come from the perspective of porn studies, a field which, perhaps like rape law, effectively embeds the trigger warning in the course title itself (see also Penley 2013). These courses also require students to examine difficult material for the purpose of critical understanding and industry or legislative progress and reform. Allowing discomfort to be part of the classroom may be, as Smith suggests, more productive for developing critically engaged and informed graduates who are equipped to tackle the various social and political issues with which a broad humanities education is concerned.

Developing discomfort as a critical pedagogical space

Various commentators emphasize the productive role discomfort can play in the classroom. This argument underpins Michalinos Zembylas' (2015) "pedagogy of discomfort", which is useful for negotiating the potentially conflicting responsibilities of a humanities instructor to provide a discomforting space that is also intellectually and psychologically "safe". In general terms, a pedagogy of discomfort seeks to create a productive critical space by challenging students to move beyond their comfort zones. Drawing upon Foucault's 'ethic of discomfort' and Butler's theorisation of Adorno's 'ethical violence', Zembylas is careful to distinguish between discomfort, and pain and suffering; one promotes uneasiness due to moving beyond a zone of comfort, whereas the others are "linked to injury or harm" (2015, 173). Similarly, those engaged in the debates around trigger warnings argue that precision in our definitions is paramount; a trigger exceeds the limits of discomfort and offence, stimulating a psychosomatic response akin to a panic attack in its physical manifestations (Gay 2012).

The pedagogy of discomfort approach derives in part from affect theories addressing the therapeutic value of engaging with unpleasant feelings, or deploying these feelings for the purpose of social critique (Figlerowicz 2012). Rebecca Flintoft and Christopher Bollinger (2016, 26) agree that discomfort is a "natural consequence of education", observing its positive effects upon the development of students' skills. Todd Gitlin (2015), perhaps one of the most vitriolic opponents of trigger warnings, states even more boldly: "discomfort is the crucible of learning". It would be erroneous, however, to imply that those advocating the pedagogical benefits of discomfort sit entirely within an anti-trigger warning camp; the positions are frequently far more nuanced, and it is in this complex space that productive discussions are able to take place (see, for example, Thorpe 2016; Wyatt 2016). Flintoft and Bollinger (2016, 25) argue that trigger warnings are an ineffective approach that serves

neither students nor teachers. Importantly, they emphasize the difference between discomfort and trauma. They do not dismiss the possibility that the latter may enter the classroom space, but also argue that improved communication between students and their teachers, staff development, critical pedagogy, and support provision by universities would enable both staff and students to better understand this difference for themselves and to accommodate it more productively in the university classroom.

Pedagogical approaches that embrace discomfort encounter the notion of the classroom as a “safe space” but, as Zembylas argues, the absence of discomfort does not necessarily guarantee safety, nor does the presence of discomfort equate to the absence of safety. He concludes that “Safe space, then, is not about the absence of discomfort, but rather it is a way of thinking, feeling, and acting that fosters students’ critical rigor” (Zembylas 2015, 166). Here, Foucault’s ethic of discomfort becomes useful as it promotes discomfort as a particular critical space and “point of departure for individual and social transformation” (Zembylas 2015, 166), which resonates in Smith’s arguments against trigger warnings. Such an ethic does not, however, necessarily imply an ethics of care in terms of the particular moral relation to others that is required by the notion of the “safe classroom”, which can lend itself to a discourse of protection from rather than engagement with difficult material. Rather, Zembylas derives the ethics of care utilized in the pedagogy of discomfort from Judith Butler’s (2005) *Giving an Account of Oneself*, in which she “seeks to establish a conception of ethical violence and ethical responsibility based on an understanding of the self as non-sovereign, vulnerable, and dependent on others” (Zembylas 2015, 167). Butler’s emphasis on social relationality is pivotal for teasing out the ethical implications of a pedagogy of discomfort, particularly in that Butler’s ethical subject must recognize their own vulnerability and limitations, leveraging this for the recognition and understanding of the same vulnerabilities and limitations in the Other; through this the conditions of ethical

responsibility are provided. Zembylas interprets this to mean that “despite our limited understanding, recognising our relationality will mark our ability to lead an ethical life, thereby allowing others to do the same” (Zembylas 2015, 169). As hooks’ (1994, 15) observes, the members of a pedagogically engaged humanities classroom, both staff and students, ought to be “striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world.”

This highlights the ethical role of the humanities instructor as one who should facilitate the ability of others to lead an ethical life through self, social, and political knowledge. Such knowledge is not, however, always pleasant, so discomfort and unease are sometimes necessary for the transformative endeavour of constructing the ethical self. By placing oneself on the same vulnerable plane as students, the humanities instructor can use critique of the self and practice as an important tool within the pedagogy of discomfort, arguably role-modelling ethical decision-making within the classroom by rendering the pedagogical approach transparent.

Uncomfortable images: developing ethical visual literacy

Once, in presenting on contemporary Australian migration issues, I used an image of a nine-year-old Afghani asylum seeker, Seena Aqhlaqi Sheikhdost, sobbing at the funeral of his family who were lost in the then-recent Christmas Island boat tragedy in 2010. I wept as I wrote the section of the lecture that dealt with Seena’s loss, grieving for his grief; I wanted students to feel this grief too, and to use it productively in thinking about Australian migration policies. My impulse was activist, but upon reflection it was not only naive but also exploitative. I was effectively seeking to exploit my students’ emotions to my own political ends and, perhaps more problematically, to exploit the grief of a child. If, as Willis has argued, trigger warnings establish a consensual relationship between students, teachers, and

the material taught, how can consent be negotiated between the viewer and the subject of an image? Might thinking about that relationship further illuminate our pedagogical responsibilities?

In developing teaching resources and policy, universities are often more concerned with copyright issues than with image content, with the exception of those that are instituting content disclaimer policies. Certainly, it is part of the role of the lecturer to assist students in developing their visual literacy, which includes understanding ethical representation, ethical use, and the ethical obtainment of images. When discussing ethics, most photography associations and professional bodies focus predominantly on intellectual property issues, although some, such as the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (2017), which takes its information from the Arts Law Centre of Australia and the Australian Copyright Council, do address issues of ethical representation of subjects. Even fewer photography organisations directly address ideas of subject consent, which is certainly a primary ethical concern for university human ethics committees assessing the collection of visual data. In general photographic practice, obtaining permission to take a photograph of a member of the public is recommended, and release forms are required for images used for commercial purposes. Photojournalists are subject to the ethical parameters outlined in journalism codes of ethics, which emphasize ideas of fairness, lack of bias, respect for subjects, accuracy of representation, and obtaining material ethically. The ethical obtainment of images in this journalistic context does not necessarily refer to consent. As Philippe Calain (2013, 282) points out in his analysis of the role of photography in humanitarian medicine, photography does not require consent in a technical sense (that is, an image can be taken without consent or even knowledge, and be entirely unobtrusive to the subject) and in many newsworthy situations consent may be too difficult to obtain; the question remains, however, whether this technical dimension negates the need for consent in a moral sense. Furthermore, we must also

interrogate whether and how unethically obtained, or ethically questionable images can and should be used in teaching practice.

In the case of Alan Kurdi, both as a minor and as a dead person in a public, newsworthy space, his consent to the image taken was impossible, and the photograph of Seena Sheikhdost I have previously used is similarly problematic. While the question of consent in such cases cannot be easily settled, this does not mean that this question is no longer relevant to how we receive, circulate, and interpret such images. To treat a non-consensual image ethically, it is perhaps important to retain as much as possible the idea of the *subject* of the image, rather than the *object*. This should be understood as an attempt to counter what Susan Sontag (1977, 14) characterized as the predatory nature of photography: its ability to turn “people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.” Sarah Parsons (2009, 290) highlights that Sontag did not seek to deter us from the emotional power of photography, but rather to encourage us to develop a more robust dialogue between thinking as knowing objectively and feeling as knowing authentically. Sontag (1977, 24) acknowledges that images themselves can never be “ethical or political knowledge”, so captions at the very least and critical commentary at best are important as “only that which narrates can make us understand” (1977, 23). From this understanding, a more ethical relationship can evolve between the viewer and the subject of the photograph. Similarly, critical narration and contextualisation can address the ethics of how such images are used in the classroom environment, and through this the ethical relationship between teacher and student in negotiating difficult material.

Such a solution purposefully integrates ethical visual literacy within the pedagogy of discomfort. In her efforts to establish a theory of visual ethics, Julianne H. Newton (2005, 434) frames this in terms of an “Ecology of the Visual”. She argues that conceptualising an ethics of the visual in ecological terms places the focus upon the dynamic processes of

meaning-making, which encompasses both how the image is created as well as how it is interpreted, and how viewers relate to it. Importantly, Newton emphasizes the visual as an *interaction* that involves a power exchange: between the creator and the subject, the image and the viewer, the viewer and the context of circulation (such as the classroom). While the responses of individual viewers are still an important part of this ecology, the emphasis is placed more upon an affective sociality of emotions (Ahmed 2004), rather than isolating the viewer within an individually (possibly ‘triggered’) emotional space.

My original use of Seena’s image was, in this sense, highly unethical, as I used him as an object to solicit an emotional response for the ends of manipulating responses sympathetic to my own political and emotional perspective. While pedagogy can and, as illustrated by hooks and Friere, should be politicized, this should be for the purpose of open debate rather than indoctrination into a particular worldview. A more ethical framework for presenting this photograph in the space of the classroom based upon Newton’s ecology of the visual would require foregrounding my own response to the image and my rationale for its inclusion in the course material, integrating this with a clearer analysis of its meaning and impact, and openly acknowledging the problematic nature of photographing an orphaned child at his family’s funeral, leading also to a discussion of the objectification of children in asylum seeker politics. Such a practice would fulfil hooks’ advice that teachers ought to role model vulnerability and reflexivity for their students in order to promote risk-taking in learning and the importance of applying critical thought to all endeavours. It does not require students to agree with the teacher’s stance, only to reflect upon their own politics and processes in formulating their scholarly response.

This may not, however, completely satisfy concerns about the ethical relationship between the student viewer and the teacher displaying the image unless the necessary contextualising groundwork and development of critical skills has already occurred in

preparation for these visual engagements. Returning to Cardell and Douglas's scaffolded approach to difficult material may be useful here as their approach focuses on contextualising material prior to encountering it in the classroom, as opposed to the risk of deterrence and censorship in trigger warning discourse or the use of an uncontextualized image purely for shock value. Rather than simply warning students of the content to be covered, the syllabus can be built around developing both skills and knowledge that will equip the student with the critical tools that will enable engagement, and build the student's confidence in approaching personally challenging or generally confronting content that they might have previously been wary of completing. To address Willis' concerns, this not only develops a consensual relationship between teacher and student but, more crucially, enables *informed* consent, which is a core principle in the kind of professional ethics that should determine this particular relationship.

Conclusion

*Ultimately, I chose not to include the image of Alan Kurdi in the course, instead offering my students a blank slide with the words "[insert image here]" while I discussed my decision-making process and the impact of the photograph on public debate about the Syrian migrant crisis. The students were encouraged to make their own decision about viewing the image - sufficient detail was provided about the image to enable students to source it for themselves (not an onerous task in this digital age of global media) - and were asked to voice their views on the rationale and effects of my choice. The module's discussion was framed theoretically in terms of one of the assigned readings for that week, the introduction to Joseph H. Carens's (2013) *The Ethics of Immigration*, in which Carens is highly reflexive in outlining his approach to the issues and the core ethical questions he grapples with as a researcher in the field of immigration studies. Working from this reading, students were encouraged to use that*

week to reflect upon their own understanding of how we can research and discuss immigration in a rigorous and ethical manner that is human-centred and that is not necessarily about partisan politics. This facilitated critical discussion of how immigration issues are represented in global mainstream and social media outlets, fostering a more thoughtful engagement with such material.

I would like to say that my concern about using this image was centred squarely on my students, some of whom are of refugee backgrounds, but the decision was more about Alan Kurdi himself. Remembering my misuse of Seena Sheikhdost that was realized only in retrospect, I was wary of rendering Alan Kurdi a symbolic possession, to put it in Sontag's terms, although the absence of the image may equally have performed this act. I was also confident that the image was known and that even if it was not, students had been provided with sufficient information and context in the course materials to pursue and interpret the image for themselves, and through this develop their own ethical relationship with the image and its subject.

While the approach I chose in relation to the image of Alan Kurdi is not entirely unproblematic, it was nevertheless an attempt to integrate the various principles of engaged and discomforting pedagogies, and the ecology of visual literacy. As stated above, the purpose of that introductory module was to encourage students to reflect upon their own ethical, political, and intellectual relationship to the course content. In assessing the case, I decided that role modelling critical reflexivity was the most effective strategy for attaining my pedagogical goals. I foregrounded my own discomfort with the material, but stepped through it critically in order to illustrate to students how discomfort could be harnessed positively in the classroom environment. Although the image itself was absent, my discussion centred upon its visual ecology; I problematized my relationship to the image as a viewer within the 'global' context of a cosmopolitan concern and the 'local' context of how to

effectively and ethically engage students with the image and its context without compromising the moral status of its deceased subject.

One risk of this approach is that the revelation of my own politics and feelings to the students may affect how they frame their own responses, as my analysis could be perceived as the “right” answer that the teacher is looking for. To counteract this, it was important to establish an ethos of open debate in the classroom by framing my analysis as equally a point of critique, achieved by raising questions about the rationale and effect of my decision to exclude the image. This transparency trains students to approach all texts critically, including the teacher’s own analysis, in order to become engaged in productive debate and through this to consolidate their own position. Such an approach role models visual ecology and critical reflexive analysis of personal discomfort in order to provide students with the tools to make their own intellectual decisions and the space to allow for, and reflect upon their own affective responses without judgment and without the discursive framing of triggers.

The decision to use or not to use the image of Alan Kurdi is not unique to my situation. Media outlets did grapple with the dilemma of publishing the image of Alan Kurdi, fearing it was too graphic for western audiences who were unused to the circulation of images of dead bodies (Lenette and Miskovic 2016), while each person (with a social media account) who encountered that image was also faced with the decision to share or not to share. On the one (altruistic) hand, sharing the image was a means of consciousness-raising. On the other (possibly narcissistic) hand, it was a way of showcasing one’s already raised-consciousness, to show that you are an engaged and connected citizen of the world who cares about the lives lost on a distant Turkish beach. Both alternatives run the risk of being exploitative of the image and, more importantly, of its deceased subject, which is precisely what gave me pause. My context does, however, offer a different opportunity to the average social media user, and that is to place this image into a clear critical and theoretical context,

and to use this as a starting point for informed and educated debate about global immigration issues, media, and cosmopolitan ethics. The context of the visual encounter does affect response and interpretation (Gil-Glazer 2015). Our students are engaged in this media context, encountering their own decisions about what content to share and how to frame their interpretation for the consumption and subsequent interpretation of others. The images we choose to use in course materials become a crucial opportunity for university lecturers to role model thoughtful circulation and interpretation, demonstrating how our media are integrated into professional and civic discourses. Social and political changes, such as the amendment to 18C in the Australian *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, make it all the more important that universities engage in robust discussions about how to best equip students for their particular milieu, as well as broader global dynamics.

Constructing and teaching a course is, after all, about a series of choices, many of which are not purely abstract or intellectual. Although some ideas and skills must necessarily be covered, such as core texts and critical theory within the discipline, we also face the challenge of engaging students - not just intellectually, but of obtaining and maintaining their attention at all. The need to be topical and engaging can be confused with the temptation to be sensational or unnecessarily controversial. Such engagement is subjective, which presents a further challenge in that it is also our goal to nurture intellectual skills, such as critical engagement, that may require greater objectivity. The humanities thus exist at the nexus of the subjective and objective, constantly working at the interplay between the two.

The kind of thorough, integrated approach to the material that emerges from the combination of Cardell and Douglas's syllabus scaffolding, Zembylas' pedagogy of discomfort, and Newton's ethical visual literacy is certainly more taxing to the teacher in terms of workload and ethics of care, but ultimately better satisfies our obligations as educators and, most importantly, offers the opportunity for better learning outcomes.

Nevertheless, I do maintain that the discursive space of trigger warnings *per se* remains problematic. This immediately places the students into a negative and possibly traumatic relationship with the material rather than empowering them to use their affective responses and experiences productively. Certainly, it may be argued that the difference I am suggesting is purely semantic, but a large part of the humanities and social sciences is focused upon recognising and understanding discursive power, and developing more sophisticated language and instruments for articulating and unpacking these dimensions of our social world.

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