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In Defense of Cultural Appropriation

By Kenan Malik

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LONDON — It is just as well that I'm a writer, not an editor. Were I editing a newspaper or magazine, I might soon be out of a job. For this is an essay in defense of cultural appropriation.

In Canada last month, three editors lost their jobs after making such a defense.

The controversy began when Hal Niedzviecki, editor of Write, the magazine of the Canadian Writers' Union, penned an editorial defending the right of white authors to create characters from minority or indigenous backgrounds. Within days, a social media backlash forced him to resign. The Writers' Union issued an apology for an article that its Equity Task Force claimed "re-entrenches the deeply racist assumptions" held about art.

Another editor, Jonathan Kay, of The Walrus magazine, was also compelled to step down after tweeting his support for Mr. Niedzviecki. Meanwhile, the broadcaster CBC moved Steve Ladurantaye, managing editor of its flagship news program The National, to a different post, similarly for an "unacceptable tweet" about the controversy.

It's not just editors who have to tread carefully. Last year, the novelist Lionel Shriver generated a worldwide storm after defending cultural appropriation in an address to the Brisbane Writers Festival. Earlier this year, controversy erupted when New York's Whitney Museum picked for its Biennial Exhibition Dana Schutz's painting of the mutilated corpse of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American murdered by two white men in Mississippi in 1955. Many objected to a white painter like Ms. Schutz depicting such a traumatic moment in black history. The British artist Hannah Black organized a petition to have the work destroyed.

Other works of art have been destroyed. The sculptor Sam Durant's piece "Scaffold," honoring 38 Native Americans executed in 1862 in Minneapolis, was recently being assembled in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden. But after protests from indigenous activists that Mr. Durant was appropriating their history, the artist dismantled his own work, and made its wood available to be burned in a Dakota Sioux ceremony.

What is cultural appropriation, and why is it so controversial? Susan Scafidi, a law professor at Fordham University, defines it as "taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission." This can include the "unauthorized use of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc."

Appropriation suggests theft, and a process analogous to the seizure of land or artifacts. In the case of culture, however, what is called appropriation is not theft but messy interaction. Writers and artists necessarily engage with the experiences of others. Nobody owns a culture, but everyone inhabits one, and in inhabiting a culture, one finds the tools for reaching out to other cultures.

Critics of cultural appropriation insist that they are opposed not to cultural engagement, but to racism. They want to protect marginalized cultures and ensure that such cultures speak for themselves, not simply be seen through the eyes of more privileged groups.

Certainly, cultural engagement does not take place on a level playing field. Racism and inequality shape the ways in which people imagine others. Yet it is difficult to see how creating gated cultures helps promote social justice.

There are few figures more important to the development of rock 'n' roll than Chuck Berry (who died in March). In the 1950s, white radio stations refused to play his songs, categorizing them as "race music." Then came Elvis Presley. A white boy playing the same tunes was cool. Elvis was feted, Mr. Berry and other black pioneers largely ignored. Racism defined who became the cultural icon.

But imagine that Elvis had been prevented from appropriating so-called black music. Would that have challenged racism, or eradicated Jim Crow laws? Clearly not. It took a social struggle — the civil rights movement — to bring about change. That struggle was built not on cultural separation, but on the demand for equal rights and universal values.

Campaigns against cultural appropriation reveal the changing meaning of what it is to challenge racism. Once, it was a demand for equal treatment for all. Now it calls for cultures to be walled off and boundaries to be policed.

But who does the policing? Every society has its gatekeepers, whose role is to protect certain institutions, maintain the privileges of particular groups and cordon off some beliefs from challenge. Such gatekeepers protect not the marginalized but the powerful. Racism itself is a form of gatekeeping, a means of denying racialized groups equal rights, access and opportunities.

In minority communities, the gatekeepers are usually self-appointed guardians whose power rests on their ability to define what is acceptable and what is beyond the bounds. They appropriate for themselves the authority to license certain forms of cultural engagement, and in doing so, entrench their power.

The most potent form of gatekeeping is religion. When certain beliefs are deemed sacred, they are put beyond questioning. To challenge such beliefs is to commit blasphemy.

The accusation of cultural appropriation is a secular version of the charge of blasphemy. It's the insistence that certain beliefs and images are so important to particular cultures that they may not appropriated by others. This is most clearly seen in the debate about Ms. Schutz's painting "Open Casket."

In 1955, Emmett Till's mother urged the publication of photographs of her son's mutilated body as it lay in its coffin. Till's murder, and the photographs, played a major role in shaping the civil rights movement and have acquired an almost sacred quality. It was from those photos that Ms. Schutz began her painting.

To suggest that she, as a white painter, should not depict images of black suffering is as troubling as the demand by some Muslims that Salman Rushdie's novel "The Satanic Verses" should be censored because of supposed blasphemies in its depiction of Islam. In fact, it's more troubling because, as the critic Adam Shatz has observed, the campaign against Ms. Schutz's work contains an "implicit disavowal that acts of radical sympathy, and imaginative identification, are possible across racial lines."

Seventy years ago, racist radio stations refused to play "race music" for a white audience. Today, antiracist activists insist that white painters should not portray black subjects. To appropriate a phrase from a culture not my own: Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

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Happiness and the Pursuit of Leadership

Harvard Study: Trigger Warnings Might Coddle the Mind

Trigger warnings may do more harm than good.

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A new study out of Harvard—the first randomized controlled experiment designed to examine the effects of trigger warnings on individual resilience—may indicate that Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt were right about trigger warnings.[1]

In the fall of 2015, Greg Lukianoff, First Amendment Lawyer and president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (for which I work), and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, the Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at NYU's Stern School of Business, published an article in *The Atlantic*.[2] In it, they detailed how college campuses may inadvertently promote mental habits identical to the "cognitive distortions" that cognitive behavioral therapists teach their clients to recognize and overcome. The pair argued that some campus practices—presumably intended to protect students from being harmed by words and ideas deemed offensive or distressing—seemed to be interfering with students' ability to get along with each other, and could even be having a deleterious effect on their mental health. Among those practices: training students to identify *microaggressions* (things people say or do, often unintentionally, that are interpreted as expressions of bigotry), turning classrooms and lecture halls into intellectual *safe spaces* (where students are protected from words and ideas they might find upsetting), and the issuing of *trigger warnings*: alerts about the potentially "triggering" content of written work, films, lectures, and other presentations.

A "trigger" is something that affects those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It viscerally reminds them of a past traumatic experience, and provokes an extreme and maladaptive negative emotional response. The trigger itself is not harmful, but is something in a person's environment that reminds that person of past trauma. The thinking behind issuing trigger warnings is that for people who have experienced trauma, distress will be reduced by warning them about possible ways in which they could be "triggered" by content that could remind them of their traumatic experience. The warning ostensibly allows them to mentally prepare for the challenge of confronting potentially triggering material, or to avoid the prospective trigger altogether.

Harvard psychology professor and PTSD expert, Dr. Richard McNally (an author of the recent study) explained in 2016 essay in the *New York Times* that "severe emotional reactions triggered by course material are a signal that students need to prioritize their mental health and obtain evidence-based, cognitive-behavioral therapies that will help them overcome PTSD."[3] In other words, severe emotional reactions are not an indication that professors or others should warn students in advance that material could be triggering for those with PTSD, nor that potentially triggering material should be removed from the syllabi. Constantly warning people with PTSD about possible triggers could potentially even interfere with their recovery. As Lukianoff and Haidt point out in their newest book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*,[4] the avoidance of triggers is not a treatment for PTSD; it

The use of trigger warnings originated on the internet, and they are applied much more broadly than to actual PTSD triggers—which are typically more about an individual's personal experience of trauma than representations of similar kinds of trauma. A trigger can be something as simple as a smell, a sound, a certain color shirt, or the place or type of place where the trauma occurred. A trigger can even be a language, an accent, or the lilt of someone's voice. On campus, however, anything that trauma survivors find upsetting—regardless of whether they suffer from PTSD, and regardless of whether it's an actual trigger—can be a candidate for a trigger warning; as can any material about the mistreatment of people from marginalized groups, and anything else that students or professors predict could be upsetting—even without trauma survivors.

For example, in 2014, Harvard Law professor Jeannie Suk Gersen published an essay in *The New Yorker* outlining the effects of trigger warnings on pedagogy, and how the concept of "triggers" had come to mean content that was generally upsetting, not just material that could trigger an emotional reaction from those with PTSD. She reported that campus organizations were requesting trigger warnings for classes covering rape law, and were advising students who believed they might be triggered not to “feel pressured” to be present at class sessions in which rape law would be covered. “Some students,” Gersen lamented, “have even suggested that rape law should not be taught because of its potential to cause distress,” and further, some professors had stopped teaching rape law altogether because they feared that covering the potentially triggering material could make the classroom “a potentially traumatic environment” and emotionally “injure” their students.[6] In their 2015 article, Lukianoff and Haidt used examples of requests for trigger warnings for things like misogyny, classism, and even privilege, and argued that “rather than trying to protect students from words and ideas that they will inevitably encounter, colleges should do all they can to equip students to thrive in a world full of words and ideas that they cannot control.”[7]

It is essential for trauma survivors to learn how to go through life without constantly being warned about potential reminders they will undoubtedly encounter,[8] but as Lukianoff and Haidt worry, trigger warnings could contribute to trauma survivors seeing themselves as constantly at risk of being triggered and perpetually unable to tolerate reminders of trauma. They also contend that trigger warnings and other protective campus practices could prompt even students who have not experienced trauma to perceive threat and harm where there is

Many people experience trauma, but PTSD is rare. While symptoms of acute post-traumatic stress in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event are common, more than 90% of people who have experienced trauma are able to move forward without developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the vast majority of those who do suffer from PTSD eventually recover—all without the aid of trigger warnings.[10]

The Harvard study's lead author, U.S. Army veteran Benjamin Bellet, told me how important it is to "dispel the myth that trauma equals PTSD." But trigger warnings, the study indicates, not only contribute to the misconception that trauma equals PTSD. They may serve to intensify rather than eliminate the stigma associated with experiencing trauma, reinforcing the impression that trauma always leaves people emotionally impaired. The whole premise of trigger warnings seems to be an outgrowth of that myth—that those who have experienced trauma will necessarily be permanently scarred by it and must be protected from any potential reminders.

But trigger warnings aren't just bad for trauma survivors and people who suffer from PTSD. According to the Harvard study, for people who have *not* experienced trauma, trigger warnings seem to decrease the belief in their own and others' resilience, and increase the belief in their own and others' post-traumatic vulnerability to developing a mental disorder, being unable to effectively regulate emotions, and generally becoming unable to function. This is of particular concern because beliefs about one's own post-traumatic vulnerability have a meaningful impact on post-traumatic recovery. In other words, believing that suffering acute symptoms after a traumatic experience (which is common) results in enduring impairment and PTSD (which is rare) can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. And the researchers point out that trigger warnings may have the effect of encouraging trauma to become central to the identity of those who have experienced trauma; and this is associated with increased severity of PTSD symptoms.[11]

Employing trigger warnings may also inadvertently communicate to members of the school community that ideas and material that students find upsetting or uncomfortable is harmful to them or to others. For people who are predisposed to thinking that words have the capacity to do harm, trigger warnings serve as a threat-confirmation. And the tendency to negatively interpret ambiguous situations—to see threats where no threats exist—is associated with increased risk of developing PTSD in the event of trauma.[12]

Perhaps the most striking finding, however, is that trigger warnings appear to confirm that words can cause harm for people who already believe that they do. The idea that words cause harm has begun to take hold on campus. In an opinion essay in the New York Times, respected psychology professor Lisa Feldman Barrett even claimed that "speech can be a form of violence."[13] Lukianoff and Haidt responded with an essay in *The Atlantic* explaining why it's a bad idea to tell students that words are violence. Citing "aggressive and even violent protests [that] erupted at some of the country's most progressive schools, such as Berkeley, Middlebury College, and Evergreen State College," they argued that encouraging students to believe that words are violence "tells the members of a generation already beset by anxiety and depression that the world is a far more violent and threatening place than it really is."

In my own rejoinder to the Feldman-Barrett piece, I argued that telling people they will suffer can make it more likely that they will.

> Students who believe that hearing certain words or listening to certain speakers can harm them, may in fact succumb to a self-fulfilling prophecy. ...it is the *belief* that words can do harm that causes the harm, not the words, themselves.[14]

This seems to be borne out by the Harvard study: Subjects who believed that words caused harm experienced increased anxiety when they were presented with material preceded by a trigger warning, *whereas subjects who did not already believe that words caused harm did not*. In other words, as Bellet told me, "beliefs regarding harm and trauma matter."

At least for people who are *not* survivors of trauma, it appears that trigger warnings can be remarkably disempowering. ◆

Pamela Paresky's opinions are her own and should not be considered official positions of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) or any other organization with which she is associated.

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