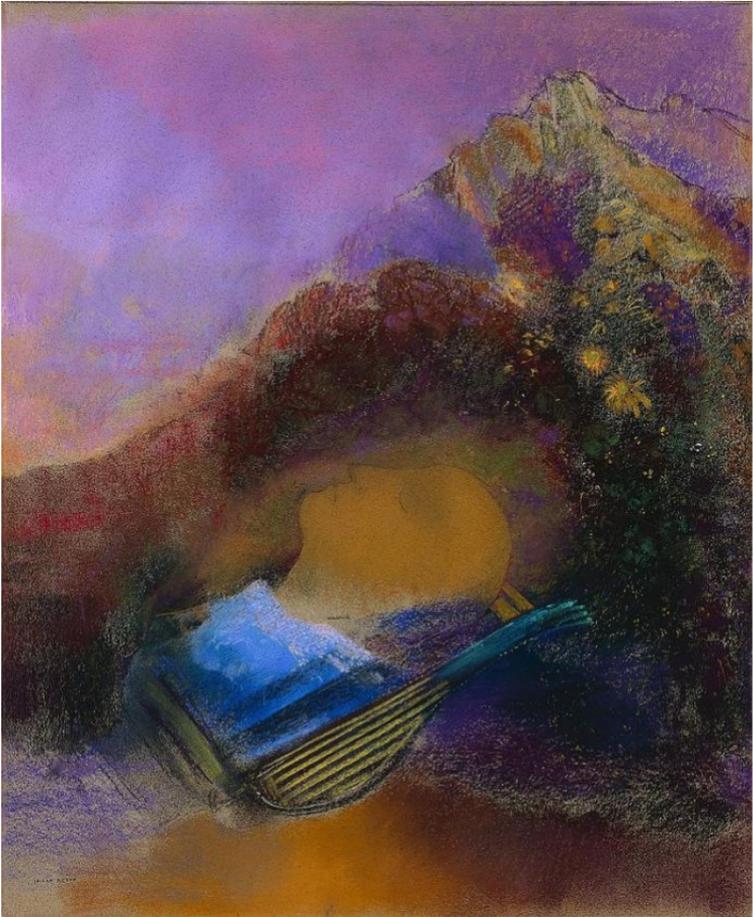




Poetry Editor Rachel Custer  
Editorials on Issues of Poetic Practice

## Safe Spaces: A Pretty Lie



2020 Pamphlet Series

Rachel Custer

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Rachel Custer

## Editorials on Issues of Poetic Practice

### Safe Spaces: A Pretty Lie

“Cruelty is easy, cheap, and rampant,” writes Brene Brown, and nobody who has taken part in almost any online “community” in the past decade or so would question her. New media prizes reaction over nuance, quickness over accuracy, and the dopamine hit of performative outrage over measured emotional response.

We increasingly surrender freedom for the promise of security in all spheres of our lives. Literary magazines increasingly demand contributors conduct themselves so as to make the magazine a “safe space” for other contributors, as if that were possible. Trigger warnings abound.

Somehow, though, people seem more “triggered” than ever.

Not only is there evidence that social media is shortening our attention spans, it seems to be actively encouraging the very same cognitive distortions that lead to increased depression and anxiety and other impairments in functioning. In other words, social media rewards people for not thinking critically. We have never before been so thoroughly warned before encountering possibly distressing information, or so consistently distressed. We have never been more connected or more lonely.

Social media is making us, and our society, very sick.

It’s affecting our writing. How could it not? Writing well requires time, thoughtfulness, silence, consideration. Nuance. To write people well, one must listen. Social media encourages talking. It is all mouths and no ears. It’s also affecting our ability to read and respond thoughtfully to what we’ve read.

Social media prizes the hot take, the snap judgment. Sadly, the larger writing community seems to assume it must follow suit.

The Association of Writers and Writing Programs held its annual conference last week, but not before issuing (via twitter) a somewhat Orwellian “Zero Tolerance Anti-Harassment Policy,” which clearly outlined as unacceptable sexual harassment, in part, “offensive and unwelcome comments,” as if offensiveness were not an entirely subjective and emotion-based state or subject to the agendas of those who would levy such allegations in the first place.

Still, it doesn't initially sound like something with which a reasonable person might disagree. Who wouldn't want the professional organization that claims to represent writers nationwide to create a “safe space” for those writers to convene?

Maybe feminist thinker Eve Ensler, who tackled our growing national obsession with security in her book “Insecure at Last,”:

Why has all this focus on security made me feel so much more insecure? What does anyone mean when they speak of security? Why are we suddenly a nation and a people who strive for security above all else? In fact, security is essentially elusive, impossible. We all die. We all get sick. We all get old. People leave us. People surprise us. People change us. Nothing is secure. And this is the good news. But only if you are not seeking security as the point of your life.

Can any artist seek security as the point of her life and be said to “succeed”? What is art if not an openness to experience, to the examination of something beyond what we comfortably know? In her TED Talk “Listening to Shame,” Brown says, “vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change....To create is to make something that has never existed before. There's nothing more vulnerable than that.”

Vulnerability and security stand in definitional opposition to one another; one cannot be achieved without a relinquishment of the other. Security, then— the molding of the world into a “safe place”— is not only illusory as presented by Ensler, but also entirely undesirable as presented by Brown. “Courage,” she writes, “is a heart word. The root of the word courage is cor- the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage

meant: “To speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.”” The pursuit of safe places in language or in fact suffocates in the creator the very heartbeat of creative work.

Universities are beginning to recognize the problem with safe spaces and their verbal equivalent, the trigger warning. The University of Chicago welcomed its 2020 class with a letter pointedly disavowing their usefulness in the university setting, proclaiming, “diversity of opinion and background is a fundamental strength of our community.”

Some readers may wonder what “diversity of opinion and background” has to do with AWP’s policy of zero tolerance for harassment. Those who do are fortunate never to have been falsely accused of behavior in which they did not engage or attitudes which they did not hold, based on half-truths and screenshots and direct messages between bad actors.

It’s a frustrating thing to realize that the world will not bend to one’s desire for safety from hard ideas, but it’s an important lesson to learn, and it’s best learned early. Trigger warnings are not only not helpful to people who actually have PTSD, but actively harm those who don’t. And the chilling effect these warnings have on discourse is more suitable to the most cultic of religious groups than to the vulnerable openness in which creativity flourishes.

If the act of creation requires vulnerability, the creator must actively seek engagement with a world she cannot bend to her own will for the sake of security. The problem with policies like AWP’s is the current conflation of language with violence. The Harvard study linked above actually suggests that it is the belief that language is violence that causes harm, rather than the language itself, but that hasn’t stopped recent readers of Judith Butler from declaring, loudly and everywhere, that people who voice “problematic” opinions are “known abusers and harassers” of the most marginalized.

Of course, it’s not a long stretch from “words as violence” to “beliefs as violence,” and suddenly we have academics publicly calling for actual blacklists of fellow academics who publish in certain venues. Equate disagreement with abuse and watch how

quickly a “zero tolerance policy” for harassment becomes a “zero tolerance policy” for disagreement.

It happened. Of course, it happened.

One poet was unceremoniously disinvited from AWP’s bookfair, for which he had paid to rent a table. Some may believe that to be warranted; this particular poet did, after all, write some fairly disturbing poems that may give women serious pause before trusting him. And vulnerability doesn’t have to mean naivete or stupidity about engaging with potentially dangerous people.

But another poet’s entire panel was cancelled for vague allegations that amounted to nothing more than “I saw your name on social media and didn’t know how to handle the possibility of backlash.” So now, the mere possibility of public backlash is causing poets with longstanding reputations as excellent literary citizens to be professionally harmed? Have we come so far past due process that we no longer even wait for actual allegations?

If so, we have given up a great deal of creative vulnerability in pursuit of security, that pretty lie.

**About the writer:**

Rachel Custer is the Poetry Editor and a reviewer and editorialist at O:JA&L. Her first full-length poetry collection, *THE TEMPLE SHE BECAME*, is available from Five Oaks Press. Other work has previously been published or is forthcoming in *Rattle*, *OSU: The Journal*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *B O D Y*, [*Pank*], and *The Antigoneish Review*. On February 13, 2019, Rachel Custer became a recipient of a 2019 Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Rachel Custer is the poetry editor at O:JA&L.

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