On “The Coddling of the American Mind”
by Douglas E. Green, Augsburg College, 18 Sept 2015

In its September 2015 issue, *The Atlantic*, which published an early version of Ta-Nehisi Coates’s electrifying *Between the World and Me*, one of the most thoughtful and troubling general essays on race in recent years, also published a widely-read article by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt on trigger warnings and microaggressions, currently the hottest topic in academia and the media coverage of it. After preps for classes at the busy start of the academic year, I’ve finally read through “The Coddling of the American Mind.” And I'm conflicted about it. Here's a brief statement as to why:

As the former President of the campus chapter of AAUP, I lean toward its view of the situation, which the writers cite: "The presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual.” As the Harvard African-Americanist Henry Louis Gates once said, during a past period of similar debate over speech and academic freedom on campuses, one counters offensive speech with more—and presumably better—speech.

In my view, the authors' analysis of the situation is pretty on-target too, as is their questioning of the efficacy of trigger warnings and the expansion of what constitutes a microaggression as a response to trauma and PTSD.

But I think their categorization of the students (and some staff and faculty) who are calling for triggers and awareness of microaggressions as needing cognitive behavioral therapy, a kind of clinical diagnosis, is about as unhelpful a response as I've read anywhere. Many of these students are in fact grappling with their own experiences, some of which do involve microaggressions and trauma. This should come as no surprise in a world where you can suffer violence or even die just for the offense, as activists put it, of "driving while black.” It's our job to help students think through these matters via the perspectives our disciplines provide. But doing so means risking offense and possibly pain. There may be no other route to the harder truths we have to face.

Recently, students and I spent a class period discussing Hughes's "Theme for English B" and Ta-Nehisi Coates's “Letter to My Son,” the version published in *The Atlantic*. There is no way to read either of these authors, particularly Coates, without emotion—regardless of where you’re coming from—because they cut to the core of the complicated and painful history of race and racism in America. They capture how it feels to face, to live, that history every day in the most mundane activities. If we let triggers and microaggressions govern what gets taught, then—if the culture wars of the past are any indication—those labels will be used to shut down Coates and all the light he sheds on where we are now, not to mention the questions he raises about today, yesterday, and tomorrow. Nor will Claudia Rankine and Richard Rodriguez (an idiosyncratic thinker on racial and sexual matters, often taken to task by the very communities he associates himself with), both of whom we're reading, pass the litmus test: Someone will be offended, possibly troubled.
The response is to ask why, to investigate why, to hear what others have to say about how they respond to the same words and ideas, to place these words in historical context, and to imagine in light of all that what one thinks now, which may by the way change tomorrow. I'll add only that students seemed to me highly engaged in the discussion, even where they felt Coates, for instance, inclined toward hopelessness—not something these young people want to feel. But they were brave enough to risk it.

As I write, I'm grappling with exactly what to do in the current climate with a brand-new work by a poet friend of mine, Jacqueline Allen Trimble. It just appeared in The Offing, a literary journal published by the Los Angeles Review of Books. Trimble has been recognized by Cave Canem, an organization dedicated to “the many voices of African American poetry” and “committed to cultivating the artistic and professional growth of African American poets.” She’s a Cave Canem fellow, a great honor. But her poem won’t be printed in this or any other newspaper in the country (except perhaps the official organ of the KKK): “Ethnophaulism for the News” (you may have to look it up, as I did) will likely shock, annoy, anger, and hurt potential readers of almost every racial and ethnic background even though (or precisely because) most of the slurs refer to black people.

Yet I have read no literary work, other than Coates’s epistolary essay and Rankine’s prose lyric, that captures so wittily and at the same time so directly and starkly the racial crises of the current moment and the way they are playing out in the media. Those dead black boys and men and women did not get to opt out of the violence: So isn’t it incumbent upon us to deal with the aftermath, to do them the honor of facing it, however painful? Isn’t it a failure not to link my students in ENL 111, who are reading Coates and Hughes and Rodriguez and eventually Rankine on race, to http://theoffingmag.com/poetry/ethnophaulism-for-the-news/? Can I call myself a responsible teacher if I don’t?

Even more important, what does it mean to call oneself a student—a pursuer of knowledge, educating oneself to become an informed citizen, a thoughtful steward, a critical thinker, and a responsible leader—if one cannot (or, worse, will not) risk offense and hurt?

The Donald Trumps of this world are not going to adhere to Miss Manners' dicta just because we feel threatened by him. We might, however, want to examine where his rhetoric comes from, why it has such wide appeal (even to many of those whose interests might be harmed by it), and how (if we're so inclined, as many of us are) we can effectively counter it. The resources of classical and modern rhetoric as well as plays (my field) by Shakespeare, Miller, Childress, and Akhtar, to name just a few, might help us do so. Or we can cede the field to Trump.

Academia is not on the fringes of American society—some bizarre place where people have arcane arguments, though we do that too. The debate we're having over free speech and academic freedom, trigger warnings and microaggressions, is related to what's going on in society at large, which is why the media is interested in it. We are still just beginning to face the legacy of our racial history; I might add that given the less than
one-hundred years since the enfranchisement of women, we're in the same boat on gender and sexuality. We need to be able to talk about these complex, often painful matters, to make mistakes, to risk offense, and to work through (in several senses) our differences.