

**Murdoch University, Australia**

**Kathryn Trees**

**Response and response-ability to the death of others who are vulnerable**

Abstract:

This article discusses response and response-ability to shocking real-world events and images that influence our daily interactions with vulnerable others who we do not know. It argues that response-ability includes an ethical obligation to respond, and to facilitate response-ability for self and others. It takes the witnessing of a young man who died while train-surfing as an example of an event that demands response. The description of this tragic circumstance may be disturbing. The article identifies writing as an ethical response.

Biographical note:

Dr Kathryn Trees currently teaches in Media and Communication and English and Creative Writing at Murdoch University. Her teaching focuses on communicating the socio-political consequences of globalisation, such as increasing slavery and human trafficking, as identified by the United Nations.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Vulnerability – Responsibility – Death

In September 1998, I witnessed a young man climb onto the roof of a stationary train at Mosman Park railway station in Western Australia. He stood, took a step forward, reached his arms out to balance. Electricity and blackness rose through his body. Death appeared incremental. He stood charred. However, presumably and hopefully, death was instantaneous. I cannot recall him falling, though he must have remained in motion. It was shocking. A rush plummeted through my body. I stared. Pain caught my throat. The train doors reopened. People pushed onto the platform. It took some time – a second, a minute – for me to comprehend that I had watched his dying and death. As I drove home I stared at the road through the blackening body of the young man, standing arms outstretched, and saw Kim Phuc too, the young Vietnamese girl a running, burning crucifixion. Kim Phuc's image was a 'ghosting[s] ... overlapping ... past and present' (Perdigao and Pizzato 2010: 2), intangible yet present. This experience remains with me. It frequently challenges me to think about what it means to be in relation to myself and others, and the role of response and response-ability – the ability to respond – in those relations.

Response and response-ability are embodied reactions – autonomic, physical, emotional, social actions – that occur through our being in the world. We are relational beings; hence, our responses and response-ability are multi-layered and multidirectional, including in relation to our self. For me, response and response-ability, including whom we respond to and in what circumstances, are about personal ethics; how we respond to our self and others. I am concerned with response and response-ability to others, including those we do not know and those who may unsettle us, whether they are in our local community or elsewhere. I am troubled by the values of worthiness or unworthiness that are attached to those who unsettle us and may be vulnerable.

In this article, I consider response and response-ability in relation to the sudden violent death that I witnessed, and my interpolation or recalling of Nick Ut's photograph of a terrified burning girl in Vietnam decades earlier. I use these examples to explore how we respond to such shocking life events. This necessarily includes affect, 'the instinctual, non-conscious, cellular autonomic impulses prior to emotion' (Trees 2016: 2-3). Our affective response comes in part from our sense of responsibility to the death of people whose vulnerability to harm and sudden death is exacerbated by the socio-cultural circumstances of their lives. Response-ability is mindful. People have agency and often choose how to act. Response-ability thus includes an ethical obligation to respond and to facilitate response-ability for others. Importantly, we may choose to do nothing, which is a response. How and why we respond to situations are rarely arbitrary; personal motivations, ethics, socio-cultural background, economics, politics and more inform them.

The day after the young man's death, I borrowed a book from the library containing the photograph of Ut's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1972 photograph, 'Accidental Napalm Attack'. It is an image of a group of five children, one naked and crying, and four soldiers running down a road away from an oncoming black cloud of napalm. It was part of a journalistic series documenting the Vietnam War (Abbas Raza 2012). Kim Phuc, one of the children in the photograph, is always more than an image; she is a

terrified suffering child or, as Deleuze might say, she is also her future present of that moment (1994). The photograph revealed my misremembering. Her clothes were already burnt away, her skin shedding. The previous day in my moments of distress, I had conflated her with the young man. Looking at the naked young crying girl in the photo, I wanted her beyond pain and horror. It is almost that I wished her dead, rather than continuing to suffer this inhumane treatment. This response is affective; it is about myself and is coextensive with my life experiences. Beyond this, I have a response-ability to others and myself.

Thankfully, Kim Phuc lived. After years of pain and hospitalization, she resumed ‘an ordinary life’ and has spoken often about her life and who she is. Kim Phuc responded to herself and to the world beyond. She came to represent many things, including, for some, the West’s ambiguity and culpability in Vietnam. Many were heartened and relieved by her survival, her later life in Canada, her position as a UNESCO Good Will Ambassador (UNESCO 2017) and her continuing relationship with Nick Ut, the journalist and photographer. Some credit the publication of Ut’s photograph with precipitating a turning point in attitudes and public responses to that war. When I think or talk about Kim Phuc in other contexts – teaching, conversations – my response is often motivated by personal views about Australia’s involvement in the war in Vietnam. My response is quite different when I consider the pain of returned servicemen who are unable to cope with the horrors they were part of, live with, and therefore respond to constantly. This sense of ‘living with’ always occurs in relation to response-ability for both self and others; we are never, as Beausoleil reminds us, ‘self contained’ (2015: 3).

Ut’s published photograph is part of my life and the layers of meanings I make from events around me. The photograph facilitates an opportunity for personal response to Kim Phuc, albeit one that neither she nor anyone else need have access to. Fortunately, my knowledge of her life trajectory lessens the pain [affect] and guilt that the photograph prompts for me. There is no corresponding absolution with the young man on the train. He is dead. He had no future. His family, community and friends had no opportunity to live a life free from the memory of his death.

Sometime after the young man’s death on the train, I rang the Western Australian Government Railways for more information and learnt he had been electrocuted by the 25,000-volts of electricity that powered the train. A newspaper article the day after the event situated the young man within a spate of train-surfing by young men in Australia around that time. It did not provide personal details such as age, ethnicity or health. Senior Constable Alan Nieuwenhuis was reported as saying that the unidentified man appeared to have been causing trouble in one of the carriages before climbing onto the roof. This official explanation contextualised him within a discourse of criminality, youth disaffection and risk-taking behaviours. The language used, assumptions made about him, and information provided in the article closed the possibility of positive readings of the young man. Representing him in this way categorises him as ‘other’ and tells ‘us’ what the other was about, without him speaking (Beavers 1990: 3). This is a catalyst for personal and societal response and response-ability.

In *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Judith Butler makes the important point that ‘there are no invulnerable bodies’ (2010: 34), and this is amplified by peoples’

proximity (physical and emotional) to others – whether desired or not – because proximity can engender vulnerability. However, people have more or fewer resources, personal and otherwise, to ameliorate their vulnerability. Physical proximity provokes ‘the face-to-face encounter’, or the ‘intersubjective relation’ (Bergo 2011); the call to another and the corresponding response and response-ability to potentially intervene positively in peoples’ lives, often by changes in one self that support future responses. My presence at the death of the young man was not a face-to-face encounter, and there was no physical connection, however I experienced an affective bodily response to the horrific event. This informs my response-ability now and into the future.

My response can be considered in terms of Kelly Oliver’s explication of responsibility in *Beyond Witnessing* (2001), as ‘the double sense of the condition of the possibility of response, response-ability, on the one hand, and the ethical obligation to respond and to enable response-ability from others ... on the other’ (Oliver 2001: 15). Following Levinas, Oliver argues that subjectivity – personhood – comes from responding to the call of others: ‘Restoring response-ability is an ethical responsibility to our founding possibility as subjects’ (2001: 105). It involves us in witnessing the lives of others and ‘testifying to something beyond recognition that cannot be seen’ (105).

In her writing about death and dying, Glennys Howarth makes a distinction between ‘good death’, for which we are prepared and respond to by celebrating the person’s life, and ‘sudden death, particularly violent death’ (2007: 160), which she argues is the antithesis. Howarth also points to ‘the space that the death of an “unworthy” person might occupy’ by explaining sudden death as ‘a death out of time and out of place that disrupts both the individual and social biography’ (161). It could be the result of a road accident, a falling tree limb, or drinking to excess. Howarth suggests that not all members of society necessarily view this ‘disruption’ as a loss, if they deem the person ‘unworthy’ in some way, or not connected to their own social reality. White and Cunneen in *Juvenile Justice: Youth and Crime in Australia* use the example of youth who ‘are more visible in the public domain as an “outsider” group’ (2006: 20), thus sanctioning others’ lack of positive response-ability toward them. In the instance of the young man whom I witnessed dying on the train, people watching his death had no basis on which to deem him unworthy beyond that he was causing danger to himself and stress and grief to others. His death would have consequences, perhaps not thought of by him, to the train driver, passengers, his family and others. The newspaper report’s representation of him following the event enabled people to designate him as unworthy, after the event, perhaps lessening their feelings of responsibility. This concurs with Levinas’s assertion that any time we allow the idea or representation of a person to stand in for the actual person, we cut off connection with the other, further thwarting our possibility of witnessing their life and testifying to their humanity (2000: 36-39).

Howarth suggests that we understand ‘[u]nnatural death as requiring an element of agency, whether or not intention was present’ (2007: 164). Thus, our response might include: ‘it is his/her own fault’. That the newspaper report included only negative comments about the young man concerns me, because it encourages such responses. This can be contrasted with when the media mourns the loss of a young person who ‘has lost a battle with cancer’ or ‘died when a branch fell on her in a picnic area’ or

‘was a model student’, and provides a narrative of their positive attributes and contributions to society. These deaths, also tragic for their families, friends and wider community, are, however, a stark reminder of Margaret Gibson’s point that ‘not all deaths are equal’ (2007: 6).

Disaffected youth, people who are welfare-dependent long-term, and minority groups are easy targets for scapegoating to deflect public attention from other socio-political issues. In *The Myth of Privilege: Aboriginal Status, Media Visions, Public Ideas*, Steve Mickler points to the role of the media in the early 1990s in creating the idea that Aboriginal people are privileged at the expense of other members of society. This was coupled with a series of radio, television and print news reports on Aboriginal youth and high-speed chases in stolen cars, house-breaking, and other anti-social public behaviour. Media headlines incited fear, and in some areas hysteria, around Aboriginal youth in particular and youth more broadly, manifested in public comments about danger to people and their property, and the need to guard against attack. Importantly, as Mickler demonstrates, statistics did not support the perception of increased crime. However, the campaign, and it certainly was that, culminated in 30,000 people marching on the Western Australian State Parliament and influencing the introduction of legislation resulting in the harshest penalties for juvenile crime in the country. The consequence was a persuasive negative attitude and responses to Aboriginal people.

A similar tactic and result occurred in April 2003, when the Labor Premier of Western Australia announced an after-dark curfew on all unaccompanied under-18-year-olds in Northbridge, the central city entertainment precinct. This coincided with the forthcoming State election and Labor’s falling popularity. A renewed focus on crime, law and order, and dangerous youth pleased local business owners and local media and saw the party retain government. There was, however, concern from researchers, policy makers, lawyers, judges and non-government agencies working with children, who feared a return to 1990s public attitudes and discriminatory legislation (Rayner 2003). The campaign ignited personal and public responses of fear, anger, grief, feelings of exclusion, and more that affect future responses.

From the late 1990s until now in Australia, disaffected youth and others protesting social conditions and conventions have sometimes expressed themselves through ‘train-surfing’. This is a dangerous activity involving a person running along the roof or clinging to the outside of a moving train. According to the *Sun Herald* newspaper’s transport reporter in 2014, there was an increase in reckless and risk-taking behaviour on trains in the city loop. Young people who train-surf film the daring stunts and circulate images on the internet. This disaffected, risk-taking group is part of an international trend (Devic 2014: 1, Devic and Ainsworth 2014: 1). As with any dangerous behaviour, it calls for a response. Here I am particularly concerned, though, with the youth who carry out this reckless behaviour as a response to concerns about their sexuality, anxiety and panic attacks, depression, sexual assault, being bullied, and the feeling that no one will miss them if they die. It is these youths whom the Australian Suicide Prevention Foundation campaign *Hold On to Life* is trying to assist (Australian Suicide Prevention Foundation 2016).

The young man's climbing onto the train roof that I witnessed was not an 'isolated' or 'unmotivated' act. It cannot be properly explained as such. His actions are necessarily a response to complex personal and/or socio-cultural circumstances, the details of which others can only surmise. Whatever his everyday life situations were, we occupy the same reality, though we experience it differently. Our humanity requires that we recognise connections to others, including that young man, the aid worker who gives their life for others, and the child to whom someone straps a bomb and who is represented thereafter as a 'suicide bomber'. Oliver explains that acknowledging the reality of a person's life does not involve judging its worth, bestowing respect, or necessarily understanding it. Rather, our humanity requires that we respond 'in a way that confirms response-ability'. Oliver thus argues that we have an obligation to respond regardless of our inability to comprehend the circumstances, or recognise motivations, 'because ethics is possible only beyond recognition' (2001: 106).

For Karen Malone, youth such as the young man on the train may be 'ambivalent', feeling they have 'nothing to lose'; they may be 'less socially connected', and they often face responses that are alienating and are thereby drawn to such behaviours (2005: 173). However, no one can testify to the young man's thoughts at that time. Was he responding to feelings of alienation? Was this a spontaneous act, possibly subconsciously prompted by reports of train-surfing, which he thought to be relatively safe and so did not mean himself any harm? Whatever the young man's circumstances, there was nothing I or anyone else seeing the event could do to prevent the loss of his life and the subsequent pain to his family and friends. However, as social subjects, his 'proximity' (again from Levinas) and my witnessing of his death demand a response.

Although it was eighteen years ago, this death continues to affect me tangibly. The shock of seeing him die remains in what Michael Mendelson calls 'vestiges' (or Derrida's traces) that 'are always there to haunt us' (Perdigao and Pizzato 2010: 1). The vestiges call for response-ability towards the young man and the need to acknowledge him as a complex person, to respond to him 'in a way that confirms my response-ability' (Oliver 2001: 106) as an ethical witness to his dying.

When considering such deaths, my own privilege challenges me. In the West, we only have to consider the increase in the number of middle-aged homeless people on the streets post the 2008 global financial crisis, and the end of the mining boom in Western Australia, to be reminded that life trajectories are fragile vectors that for many people may veer off in any direction with no apparent regard for goals or desires. Individual people's complex life stories are not readily accessible, so that interactions with people who are homeless rarely include consideration of details of their lives. Similarly, we do not have access to the testimony of those who have died. When death is conceived of as the result of a dangerous or anti-social act, does this diminish our responsibility to the person, or do we have, personally or socially, a responsibility for the circumstances of their death? Our lives and deaths are social, not individual, happenings; as Levinas says, we are above everything else social. It is through the social we have meaning and therefore responsibility (Beavers 1990: 6).

For many people who did not know him or his family, the death of the young man on the train may have been a shocking tragedy, a spectacle, a fleeting news item, the

subject of criminality or youth disaffection, and for some, a troubling indication of problems within our society. My concern with the young man precipitates his continuing influence on my thinking about sudden, violent death and judgements about a person's worthiness. I desire a response. It might be that I could receive the confirmation, 'the complexity [of response] I require' (Grehan 2010: 1), from another bystander. I want a particular response, one that acknowledges the acid burning in my stomach as I recall the young man's blackening body, and an answer to the question: What deaths and whose deaths are denied respect, and why? It is the lack of an ethical community response that makes this incident so disturbing, and hence I continue to speak and write about it within a broader social context for which we all have some responsibility.

The Vietnam War is long past, but sadly similar conflicts continue in countries including Syria and Afghanistan. I recall from July 2016 the image of a Syrian man standing in the midst of bombed homes, holding a lifeless child's body in upturned arms for the world to see. Others around him were weeping while huddling over yet more bodies. The man pleads for help from the camera crew, those witnessing the events and those of us viewing. For him the presence of the camera presumably represents forces outside of Syria that have power and the ability to influence change in the tragic situation. The man's direct gaze calls for a response, or at the very least for an acknowledgement that 'you see me and the body of my child'. His gaze calls to account the responsibility of countries and companies that fuel this war and this death. His gaze also demands a response, human to human. As in Grehan's analysis of Aalst, 'spectators or witnesses are not afforded ... relief' (Grehan 2010: 8). The young man on the train, Kim Phuc, and the Syrian man are people, and the connections between them and the observer, witness, viewer, constitute our humanity and therefore our response-ability.

Having argued for the personal and societal need to ethically respond to, and take responsibility for, the circumstances leading to the deaths of vulnerable people, the question is: What can an individual do about it? One standard scenario is political action as an attempt to convince governments to be proactive in meeting the needs of vulnerable people, particularly in a wealthy society such as Australia where resources are available and governments prioritise their use. However, as seen in the some 30,000-strong march against social justice mentioned above, the ethical voice may well be drowned out, and our response does not meet our requirements. Other ways of responding are through teaching, speaking, listening and writing.

Here, I consider that writing occurs at various levels of abstraction that fulfil a range of purposes and elicit a variety of responses. At a personal level, writing about the affective experience can be cathartic. It is thus a way of ordering one's own ongoing response so that it might be less painful, less destabilising, less dysfunctional and more positive and useful. It might also be a way to retain the experience as much as possible in a form that invokes the immediacy of the event, as was the case for me when I tried to capture how 'the pain caught my throat' and 'the blackness rising' in the vignette I wrote. Some people write for catharsis routinely via a reflective journal, 'for their eyes only', while others may carry out a mutually supportive and therapeutic correspondence with an old friend. Modern communication technologies such as blogging and

Facebook have proliferated the potential mechanisms for accomplishing this. Writing created for an initial purpose may well not remain confined to that form. In the case of my writing of the young man's death, this is so.

As stated above, we are social beings, and a key part of our writing response might be not only talking to others about our experiences of tragic deaths, but also seeking to encourage others to adopt an aware, ethical, sympathetic and personalised response to the needs of vulnerable people in society. An extension of this can be the mobilisation of dissent against unfair government policies; however, that usually involves much more than writing. And in part, I rewrite my account of this unsettling event to elicit such a response. It is as Barthes claims: we write 'to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text' (1974: 4). Here I use 'the reader' to include the listener.

A further level of abstraction about writing as a way of understanding response, response-ability and responsibility is represented by what this article is attempting to accomplish: that is, to participate in an informed dialogue with other scholars about theoretic issues relating to responses to the deaths of vulnerable people. My engagement with writers such as Barthes, for instance, speaks to this. It acknowledges that the writing of others enriches my ability to think, understand and write. For instance, in September 1998, I did not intentionally recall Kim Phuc. Rather, the young man's outstretched arms interpolated Kim Phuc, or Ut's photograph, because his arms were the punctum in my image of him standing, attempting to keep his balance as the train jerked into motion and abruptly stopped. A sense of burning, less well-defined than their arms, then ghosted across the conflated images. Intertextuality was at work. It did not require my deliberate attention. The reader (of Ut's text) and the writer or viewer (of the image of the young man), both myself, produced another text: the text of my memory of the event I had just witnessed. 'This text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds' (Barthes 1974: 5) or stable meanings. The new text 'has no beginning, it is reversible' (Barthes 1974: 5). This is so because my memory is not a pure recreation of the young man's death; that is not possible. It is a text that I have produced, both consciously and unconsciously, and I can unravel it at least partially to move into the future past (borrowing from Deleuze) of the Vietnam War and Kim Phuc's experience. I and others 'gain access to it [the text produced in response to my seeing the young man die] by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable'. It is, after all, not just Ut's photograph I interpolate; it is anti-war protest songs, films, and demonstrations. As Barthes teaches us, 'the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language' (1974: 5).

As an academic community, we have a shared responsibility to investigate, discuss and respond to these matters, including writing about them in publications such as this.

## **Works cited**

- Abbas Raza, S 2012 'AP "Napalm girl" photo from Vietnam War turns 40' 1 June, at <http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2012/06/ap-napalm-girl-photo-from-vietnam-war-turns-40.html#sthash.StwUmmlq.dpuf> (accessed 8 September 2017)
- Australian Suicide Prevention Foundation 2016 *Hold on to life*, at <http://aspf.com.au> (accessed 8 September 2017)
- Barthes, Roland 1974 *S/Z: an essay* trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang
- Beavers, Anthony 1995 'Introducing Levinas to undergraduate philosophers' Undergraduate Philosophy Association at the University of Texas, at <http://faculty.evansville.edu/tb2/PDFs/UndergradPhil.pdf> (accessed 10 December 2016)
- Beausoleil, Emily 2015 'Embodying an ethics of response-ability' *Borderlands e-journal* 14 (2), at <http://www.borderlands.net.au> (accessed 8 September 2017)
- Bergo, Bettina 2011 'Emmanuel Levinas' in E Zalta (ed) *Stanford encyclopaedia of philosophy*, at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas> (accessed 8 September 2017)
- Butler, Judith 2010 *Frames of war: when is life grievable?* London: Verso
- Cover, Rob 2013 'Undoing attitudes: subjectivity and ethical change in the *Go back to where you came from* documentary' *Continuum* 27 (3), 408-20
- Cunneen, C and R White 2006 *Juvenile justice: youth and crime in Australia* 3rd ed, South Melbourne: Oxford UP
- Deleuze, Gilles 1994 *Difference and repetition* trans. Paul Patton, London: Athlone
- Devic, A 2014 'Train thrillseekers wreak havoc on Melbourne's city loop' *Herald Sun* (31 August), at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/law-order/train-thrillseekers-wreak-havoc-on-melbournes-city-loop/news-story/7a851a89cf78e59ce464da91c6f287db> (accessed 10 December 2016)
- Devic, Aleks and Michelle Ainsworth 2014 'Picture of stupidity: train surfers defy law and continue dangerous behaviour' *Herald Sun* (October 4), at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/picture-of-stupidity-train-surfers-defy-law-and-continue-dangerous-behaviour/news-story/7ee56a560d37b7a76aa9c31a9de10b7c> (accessed 10 December 2016)
- Gibson, Margaret 2007 'Death and mourning in technologically mediated culture' *Health Sociology Review* 16 (5), 415-24
- Howarth, Glennys 2007 *Death and dying: a sociological introduction* Cambridge: Polity
- Levinas, Emmanuel 2000 *Entre nous: on thinking-of-the-other* London: Athlone
- Malone, Karen 2005 'Trainsurfing "...it's like bungee jumping without a rope"' in K Gilbert (ed) *Sexuality, sport and the culture of risk vol 6* Oxford: Meyer & Meyer Sport
- Mickler, Steve 1998 *The myth of privilege: Aboriginal status, media visions, public ideas* Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre
- Oliver, Kelly 2001 *Witnessing: beyond recognition* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P
- Perdigao, Lisa K and Mark Pizzato 2010 'Introduction' in *Death in American texts and performances: corpses, ghosts and the reanimated dead* Farnham: Ashgate, 1-10
- Rayner, Moira 2003 'Northbridge curfew' *Indigenous Law Bulletin* 5 (27), at <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/IndigLawB/2003/56.html> (accessed 8 September 2017)
- Trees, Kathryn 2016 'Death as a threshold: being with a person as they are dying' *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* Special issue 35, at <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue35/Trees.pdf> (accessed 8 September 2017)
- UNESCO 2017 'Kim Phuc Phan Thi' Honorary and Goodwill Ambassadors, at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/goodwill-ambassadors/kim-phuc-phan-thi> (accessed 8 September 2017)
- Westwell, Guy 2011 'Accidental napalm attack and hegemonic visions of America's war in Vietnam' *Critical studies in media communication* 28 (5), 407-23

White, Rob and Chris Cunneen 2006 'Social class, youth crime and justice' in J Muncie and B Goldson (eds) *Youth crime and justice: critical issues* London: Sage 17-29