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The Right to Read: *It has never been just about the books*

In March 2022, *NBC News* reported that in the first three months of this year “[s]tate lawmakers [had] proposed a record 238 bills that would limit the rights of LGBTQ Americans” (Laviates and Ramos). Sixty-five percent of these bills are directly aimed at trans people. On November 19, 2022, a person opened fire on Club Q, a Colorado Springs, CO, club known for being “a safe haven for the L.G.B.T.Q. community in the area” (“What We Know”). The attack killed five and wounded 18 additional people. As Jack Healy reports for *The New York Times*, after the shooting, members of the local LGBTQ community “now [wonder] if it would be safer to just present to the world as [...] straight” (Healy). Just days prior to this tragedy, residents of a Kansas town met to discuss the fate of their regional library. Members of the city commission advocated for the library’s closure because it “refused to comply with the [city] commission’s request to remove all LGBTQ, sexual, racial or otherwise ‘socially divisive’ content from its shelves” (Mipro). While many in the community want the library to remain open, the damage has already been done: a local parent has paid to have the elementary-grade book that prompted the controversy, *Melissa* by Alex Gino, removed from the library entirely. *Melissa*, published in 2015, centers the story of a transgender girl navigating fourth grade and coming out to her friends and family.

From legislation, to violence, to book bans, marginalized people in America receive the message loud and clear that they are not wanted and that they should not exist. Much media

attention in recent months has called attention to book banning campaigns, like the one in Kansas, highlighting the common themes in the books facing challenges as well as the tactics those advocating for book censorship employ. Much less reporting, however, has focused on exposing these campaigns as efforts to silence marginalized voices and deny queer youth and youth of color access to safety and community. This denial of access to basic human rights directly supports the white nationalist agenda to eliminate queer people and people of color.

As Rudine Sims Bishop states, books can provide mirrors, reflections of “our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience,” windows into the lives of those unlike us, and even sliding glass doors that allow us to, through imagination, enter another’s world (Bishop). This representation matters immensely, especially for youth of color and queer youth. These young people face higher incidents of bullying and harassment in school than their white and straight peers, are less likely to take their concerns to an adult, and, if they do, are less likely to see positive outcomes from seeking adult support (*2018 LGBTQ Youth Report* 8-10; Kosciw 28-31). All young people deserve access to books that reflect their experiences. This reflection can reduce feelings of isolation that arise from bullying and harassment. Furthermore, engaging with a different experience or perspective than one’s own provides the opportunity to develop empathy for others. When young people read books with characters of different social locations, their worldviews are expanded as they learn to see from a different perspective. As future leaders, they “then operate from a lens of knowing that they have to also protect the rights of other people,” as oft-banned author George M. Johnson explains (qtd. in *The PEN Pod*). Books that provide mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors contribute to young people’s sense of self and their positive awareness of others, with far-reaching impacts extending into adulthood.

However, the past two years have seen more than 700 challenges to books across the country, specifically targeting books that address racism, gender identity, and religious plurality, under the guise of “parents’ rights” to guide and protect their children (Friedman and Johnson). According to research by PEN America, an organization that advocates for literacy and free expression rights, 41% of the books that have been banned across the country since July 2021 “explicitly address LGBTQ+ themes or have protagonists or prominent secondary characters who are LGBTQ+,” and 40% of the books “contain protagonists or prominent secondary characters of color” (Friedman and Johnson). By attacking books that counter cisheternormativity, white supremacy, religious (Christian) homogeneity, and the myth of America as a multicultural melting pot, those advocating for book censorship aim their assaults on students who are already among the most vulnerable: queer students, students of color, and non-Christian students.

Books that center the stories of young people of color and queer people can offer community for isolated youth, encourage empathy and provide education to readers of different backgrounds, and serve to legitimize marginalized identities and experiences. Therefore, book bans and challenges, as well as all-too-common “soft censorship” practices (Jensen), block marginalized youth from a community and a sense of belonging, empathetic and supportive peers and adults, and an understanding of these experiences as valid and real. Seeing one’s experience and identity positively portrayed on the page or screen can help reduce feelings of isolation and demonstrate the possibility of living one’s life authentically and openly. These efforts deny queer youth and youth of color the opportunity to see themselves reflected and celebrated in the media.

Book bans function to make marginalized people feel unwanted and unwelcome in their communities. They serve to prevent marginalized youth from connecting with each other and to

those who lived similar lives before them. They can make marginalized people feel like they can't live as they are and must change to fit into the dominant racist cisheteronormative society. Author Ashley Hope Pérez, whose 2015 young adult book *Out of Darkness* has been a frequent target of current assaults, asserts, “the recent attacks on diverse, relevant, complex literature in schools are, at bottom, a PROXY WAR ON STUDENTS [sic] who share the marginalized identities represented in the challenged books” (Pérez). Challenges to these books position LGBTQIA+ characters and characters of color—and therefore students who share these identities—as “unacceptable” and too “immoral” to exist in schools based on their social identity and appearance, and who and how they love.

Beyond the attacks on representation of marginalized experiences in literature, there is also a distinct lack of positive media representations of queer people and people of color. The 2020 film *Disclosure* demonstrates the ways that transgender and gender expansive people are only found in the media as villains, criminals, and victims, or as deceased or repulsive beyond measure (*Disclosure*). Children, however, can't be what they can't see (*Disclosure*). If a young person experiencing gender dysphoria has never seen a positive representation of a trans or gender expansive person in the media, they may not know that a trans experience is possible. The censoring of written representation through book bans and the lack of visual media representation work together to eliminate the existence of queer people and people of color in the public.

Opportunity hoarding, a phrase articulated by Charles Tilly, describes a tool of social inequality whereby one social group secures and maintains a monopoly to a resource (Rury and Saatcioglu). More specifically, opportunity hoarding “is about maintaining advantages through existing mechanisms (such as the education system) ostensibly open to everyone” (Rury and

Saatcioglu). Scholars have argued the multitude of ways that white supremacy utilizes opportunity hoarding, including through redlining and tracking in schools. Similarly an act of white opportunity and cultural capital hoarding, book banning campaigns serve to deny students of marginalized identities access to a sense of belonging and cultural knowledge, particularly in the context of school. Seeing one's identity and experience reflected on the page and in the classroom can contribute to a sense that one belongs in the school environment and a legitimization of one's experiences and identity. This opens the opportunity for marginalized students to see their existence as important and more easily push past the confines of the roles assigned to them by white supremacy. Therefore, book banning campaigns operate to hoard these opportunities and this access to cultural capital for white, straight, and cisgender students only.

While recent book banning campaigns strive to appear hyperlocal – coordinated by parents concerned for their children's well-being – they are actually supported by national organizations who provide these parents with book lists, talking points, strategies, and monetary support (Friedman and Johnson). To make their point, these concerned parents often pull the most graphic sections – sometimes even individual words – from books to hurl out-of-context at school board meetings, stoking the kinds of fires that gain national scrutiny when picked up by conservative news media. Their direct tactics include attempts at vilification of anyone involved, lawsuits, and death threats. These advocates label anyone affiliated with the book and its inclusion in the library or school a “pedophile,” calling these books evidence of “grooming” and “pornography” (Hixenbaugh). In addition, censorship efforts have also included attempts to criminally charge authors and librarians under obscenity laws (Sye). That national interest groups devote extensive resources to book banning campaigns, in addition to the ways their strategies

are specifically chosen to stoke fear of social, political, and physical ramifications, signifies a broader political interest in book banning that must be examined.

The tactics used to challenge books, authors, librarians, and any who support the existence of these books point to a larger agenda—that of the white supremacist project in America—to dictate who belongs and who does not, who is allowed to live and who is not. This nationalism strives to maintain the white supremacist Christian cisheteropatriarchal status quo and “idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity and American civic life” (Whitehead and Perry 151). Adherents to this ideology “tend to hold authoritarian and exclusionary attitudes, particularly regarding ethno-racial minorities and nontraditional family forms” (Whitehead and Perry 151). Therefore, this nationalism rests on a foundation of white power, the nuclear family, gender traditionalism, and a patriarchal structure in all areas of life, including in family and government. Anything that exists counter to these values is seen as an active threat because this project depends on absolute control of the narrative and the structure of society. Just by existing, queer people and people of color jeopardize this power structure, and, in the eyes of this ideology, must be eliminated. The fascist project works to eliminate marginalized people through outright violence (including mass shootings), legislation, and controlling the information people have access to. The information that children—in particular—receive and have access to must be carefully regulated. Books that encourage young people to question the world around them, provide an entry point to learning about others, and offer a mirror to an individual’s own experiences as a queer person or person of color are a danger to the society that white nationalists strive to maintain, hence the virulent, ceaseless attacks on books over the past two years.

It has never been just about the books: there is a direct connection between book bans, acts of violence against marginalized communities, and anti-gay and anti-trans legislation. All young people deserve to see their experiences and identities positively reflected in the world around them, on the screen, and on the page. They deserve to believe in a future in which they can be themselves. They deserve to feel welcome and to have a community that understands their experiences. White nationalism hoards the opportunity to feel safe and to see a positive future for oneself for youth who are white, cisgender, and straight, those whose identities align with this agenda. Through book banning campaigns, in conjunction with physical violence and political attacks, nationalism asserts its dominance and power. Fights for liberation from this fascist regime must understand these connections and oppose this trifecta altogether, not just in part. By joining together with activists challenging anti-trans and anti-gay legislation and those contending with the violence queer people and people of color are subject to, librarians, authors, and anti-censorship advocates will have a stronger base to shut down these book banning campaigns.

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