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Questioning the Dogma of Banned Books Week

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Not much critical scholarship exists on the topic of the United States' Banned Books Week (BBW), but a few informal and academic articles reveal a sense of skepticism about BBW. Many note that the books on the lists are not actually banned in a legal sense. Lee (2001) wrote: "The irony of Banned Books Week is that it celebrates books, like the Harry Potter books, that are not really 'banned' in any real sense. Every library and every bookstore in the country has multiple copies of these books... even Walmart and several local supermarkets sell copies" (p. 16). Further, others have noted that those who do the "banning," are powerless: "There's something odd about a national organization [The American Library Association (ALA)] with \$54 million budget and 67,000 members reacting so zealously against a few unorganized, law-abiding parents, whose efforts, by any sensible standard, are hopelessly ineffective. The ALA's members have immeasurably more power..." (Muncy, 2009, p. 2). If the books featured in the lists of BBW are not actually banned, and if those who try to challenge them have little ability to actually censor media, then BBW must not exist to liberate books and celebrate the freedom to read, as BBW rhetoric would have us believe.

Scholar Kenneth Kidd has provided some explanation for this, arguing that BBW operates as a system for prizing books and canon-making—if a book shows up on a BBW list, it will most certainly become a bestseller and receive enormous amounts of media attention: "anticensorship efforts more generally tend toward uncritical canon-making, attributing value to books simply because they've been censored or (more typically) challenged" (2009, p. 19). The controversy created by people complaining about a book's language or content inspires an interest in the book rather than a denouncement of it, creating the dialectic of prizing. Authors and publishers know the formula for how to make a book the right amount of controversial in order to make it

on BBW, which helps position a book to become part of the new canon. Kidd's argument makes sense, given that corporate publishers would work toward their interest of selling more books, not emancipating controversial thought.

Additionally, I would like to explore the cultural capital that the ritual and discourse of BBW creates for librarians, teachers, and the institutions they work for. In all cases, I argue that BBW does not exist to celebrate democracy and the "freedom to read" while fighting censorship, but rather, functions to promote progressive identities of the individuals who take part in the ritual. The fact that *actual* banning is not even the problem we are fighting suggests that we have constructed a battle that positions those who speak against it as activists for democracy, but there isn't even much anyone has to do toward these ends in the ritual of BBW. This article focuses on (1) how such a battle is constructed through discourse, (2) what narratives of historical progress make such a discourse possible, (3) and the stakes of creating such battles. This topic is worth considering because it means that one of the biggest and most established anti-censorship movements in the United States is ultimately a distraction from actual instances of censorship—a distraction that helps sell books, write homogenous canons, and supports the performance of activism and progressive identity, in which the only outcome is to be the victor.

Discursive Formations and the Speakers Benefit

Foucault argued, "'Discourse is, with respect to the relation of forces, not merely a surface of inscription, but something that brings about effects.' Thus we should study discourse 'as ways of conquering, of producing events, of producing decisions, of producing battles, of producing victories' (1974, p. 539)" (cited by Marshall, 1999, p. 309). This explanation of discourse fits a BBW conversation easily. A major part of this construction involves how the censor and anticensor are described to set up the battle and the friend-enemy relationship. Victories were

constructed by producing policies such as the ALA's Freedom to Read documents, by teachers electing to teach contested texts, and by libraries and schools circulating the "banned" texts. More statements by various professional organizations, schools, libraries, and county governments produce decisions, building the corpus of this discourse. Further, this discourse is layered with citations toward a vague notion of "democracy" and vague ideas about under what ideology the United States was colonized, and how this founding is bound up in the freedom to read.

Texts from libraries and educators construct the censor as the worried mom in Texas, the overbearing minister in Kansas, and others whose politics seem backward to the goals of democracy. Kidd (2009) called them "sinner censors," to describe the way censors are shamed by self-righteous anticensors (p. 207). He wrote, "The censor is constructed as a moron also through mock rhetorics of distinction" (p. 206). Further, these censors take on a sense of terrorism, as their complaints about a book are constructed as treason against American ideals. Muncy (2009) wrote, "The ALA repeatedly emphasizes that public and school libraries are 'government bodies.' Is Banned Books Week a celebration of free speech, or is it a way for government employees to bully ordinary citizens by stigmatizing those who complain..." (para 11). In reality a parent may complain about a reading assignment because they want some agency over what their child read, but through the BBW construction, this parent becomes the censor who we must shame. While it is often true that the person who complains about a text their child is reading has never even read the text themselves, it is very troubling that we make an enemy out of the person who is merely contesting public school curriculum when they challenge an assigned reading, an act that should also be understood as participatory democracy, even if we do not agree with their particular politics. In other words, we are asking for them to

passively accept what teachers and librarians decide are good texts, but in a context where a conservative value is taught in school, we would most likely celebrate those who challenge such curriculum, revealing that our interest is not in freedom to read, but the maintenance of our own identities.

In most cases, when the censor is described, the anticensor is described alongside, in opposition. For example, Laine (2017), the author wrote:

In communities throughout the country, challenges are often made by well-meaning administrators, religious groups, politicians, and parents. They argue for the removal of books they find offensive and believe may be potentially harmful to children or to society. On the other side of the issue are teachers, librarians, concerned citizens, and students who seek to protect the right to read freely. (p. 40)

This quote speaks to the development of friend-enemy politics in BBW. The librarians and teachers are “on the other side of the issue.” Or similarly, in *True Stories of Censorship Battles in American Librarians*, (2012): “Librarians are the gatekeepers of information for the communities they serve. The First Amendment, the Freedom to Read Statement, and the American Library Association’s Bill of Rights are documents that encourage librarians to swing the gates wide open and allow information to flow freely” (p. 1). This instance cites administrative documents that help codify “decisions” in discourse, which is a signal back to Foucault’s notions of discourse that causes effects; this statement also defines the entire profession of librarians as those in opposition to the censor. The ALA Freedom to Read Statement even keeps company with the nation’s First Amendment, providing a powerful image of the role of the ALA as some type of second big-government operation that could lock the gates on information, but has instead decided to let everyone all in.

This rhetoric works well for producing the librarian as activist who fights the censor, but in this formulation, most librarians do not have to *do* much of anything other than talk about it.

How this works can be understood through Foucault, again. He describes the notion of the “speaker’s benefit” in his *The History of Sexuality Vol. I*, to explain how people in the present can easily describe Victorians as being sexually repressive/repressed, and through the commonplace notions that history has progressed for the better, and with it some liberation from sexual repression has been obtained, we are now on the other side of that oppressive power. He proves this is a false notion in great detail; a notion that is created by the present speakers because they have the most to benefit from constructing the idea that those others --those on the wrong side of time-- repressed sexuality so much. He wrote (1976/1990):

But there may be another reason that makes it so gratifying for us to define the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression: something that one might call the speaker’s benefit. If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. (p. 6)

The notion of the speakers benefit is truly at the crux of understanding the success of BBW in creating a professional narrative. Applying this theory about sexual repression more broadly, if educators suggest that books are repressed and prohibited, then the mere act of talking about it, especially in performative outrage –while citing things like general notions of democracy—creates the illusion that we are *better* than that, and that we fight that. Kelly (2013) wrote that Foucault argued that in this world, “Any talk about sex has thus become a radical act of transgression, a political act in and of itself. Overcoming the embarrassment of talking about sex becomes something that proves our radicalism” (p. 20). In other words, the liberator does not have to take action; they only have to talk constantly about it and shame the censor. This works to situate the liberator outside of the repressive power, or so the hypothesis goes.

Kidd describes how the censor is presented as a “moron” in this rhetoric, but when we add the vague idea of democracy, the censor also becomes unpatriotic, and perhaps even a terrorist, which is most likely worse than being a moron in some circles. One piece on BBW reads: “Here in the USA, our founding fathers recognized the importance of the freedom to examine all ideas. They framed it in the First Amendment of the US Constitution” (Long, 2006, p. 73). This type of rhetoric is problematic, given that we know our country was founded as a colony, we know “our founding fathers” performed genocide to take the land and resources, we know that slavery became operational early on and provided the power to build the country, and so on. Given this, how can “the freedom to examine all ideas” be held up in this context, especially when this is being cited for the mere act of making enemies with censors who one might argue, want some freedom to examine ideas related to assigned curriculum. Similarly, the introduction to another piece on BBW begins,

On September 11th, as terrorists slammed two hijacked planes into the World Trade Center, another into the Pentagon and a fourth heroically diverted to a field in Pennsylvania, the wobbly “d” in democracy, which has been legislated and ‘hated’ into lower case over the decades, fell into those thousands of dismembered and instantly cremated bodies at the World Trade Center... With the fall of that already wobbly ‘d’ comes a greater sense of unease and terror, for these tumultuous, hate filled and violent times are certain to encourage the banning of even more books. (Muse, 2002, p. 22).

In this sense, BBW has gone so far from simply advocating for “controversial” books to be read in schools and libraries, and into the destruction of democracy through dismembered bodies; the rhetoric of the decay of democracy fits romantic ideas that have little to do with the reality of our founding of the country. The restoration of democracy also somehow involves a cessation of challenging books, putting violent terrorists alongside random people who have complained about books being read in schools and libraries.

The relationship of banned books and democracy, and arguments that hinge on restoring democracy through the cessation of challenging books, might make sense if the books were actually banned, but this kind of discourse is evidence of the rhetoric created through BBW. Not only is the notion that books are literally banned a construction, but this also gives a sense that books are being banned in such large volumes that those who do it, like those who crash planes into buildings full of people, are threatening what American life once was like, but which is now lost. An obvious fallacy of this is that the notion of the lost, better American life is not any real American life that ever existed, but a sort of vague neoliberal version of some past we did not ever have.

Essential to this discourse is a specific historical narrative of librarianship. Koehler (2015) describes that the ALA's office for Intellectual Freedom explained that "intellectual freedom is the heart and soul of the profession" (p. 124), but that these are actually new adoptions, as "Intellectual freedom has not been the heart of the profession for most of the history of libraries. It is only in the twentieth century that intellectual freedom has been equated with democracy and accepted among the first principles of librarianship by librarians and library associations" (p. 124). U.S. Libraries of the early twentieth century were still on precarious footing as individual units with few unifying elements. Wiegand (1989) wrote that for many years libraries were "local institutions only recently established and, on the whole, representing and reflecting the dominant culture the vast majority of which were managed by a white, Protestant, middle class searching for a clear identity and a clear set of professional goals, and eager for public recognition" (1989). This need for professional goals and public recognition lead to library school curriculums, ALA axioms, and other standards that helped pull the local institutions together.

Libraries have been involved in ethical selections of materials since their beginning. In the early days, promoting didactic books that contributed to education for good citizenship was a point of pride. Wiegand (1989) wrote, “Because the ideology of reading dictated the exclusion of bad reading as well as the inclusion of good reading, turn-of-the-century public librarians willingly assumed the role of censor as a part of their professional credo” (p. 4). These librarians would have been proud to publicly express that they collected with a certain goal. Contributing to citizenship education was this era’s promotion of democracy. In these earlier days, defending democracy through reading meant promoting good reading, and in times of war, this meant weeding the collection of propaganda that might aid enemies. Both Wiegand (1989) and Arthur P. Young (1982) have written about the ALA’s involvement in WWI through providing books for soldiers to improve the library image in the USA. Regarding this weeding of propaganda, Wiegand (1989) wrote, “Despite the potential impact of the cases on library services and collections, however, the nation’s library community was noticeably silent... A few members of the library community did protest individually...” (p. 188), but largely the library community supported this type of censorship within its own walls. This history does not suit the ALA’s current chosen identity, so it is not talked about much. Zerubavel (2003) describes how such narratives are created, writing, “The discursive production of a continuous biography consists of playing up those elements of our past that are consistent with ... our present identity while downplaying those that are incongruous with it. That process entails invoking the classic Aristotelean distinction between the ‘essential’ aspects of an object that we believe constitute its ‘true’ identity and those we conventionally consider merely ‘accidental’” (p. 53). In the case of the field’s professional identity, moments of censorship are incongruous with the biography that aids its current identity. It is “true” that librarians are liberals and will fight for that which is

democratic. It is “essential” that librarians prevent censorship from anti-intellectuals. All of this is controlled through careful identity construction.

Historiography, Bibliography, and Progress

Essential to creating the proper effect, this discourse must take on a particular historiographic orientation. Often the “speaker” or liberator will be thrown into a state of incredulity that a censor would do something so shocking as to challenge someone reading a book. This outrage largely hinges on history: we should be *beyond that now*; people should not do that *anymore*; democracies are not primitive spaces in which such behavior is acceptable. Working with the repressive hypothesis means that we are looking at others from a different time or from a different place, and the mere act of speaking against it creates our superiority to such repression.

This feeling of outrage toward either the past censor or the current censor—regardless of whether this outrage is authentic or merely a show—is only possible when working under the notion of historical progress; society has gotten better through the years because of technological and ethical progress. This is one dominant view of history and one that literature on BBW embraces.

For example, a bibliographic book on banned books begins with this introduction:

Twenty-first-century society continues to deal with a restraint that has inflamed passions since humanity began to keep a physical record of history—that is, the censorship of important ideas and truths accepted by many, yet offensive to a vocal few. In lighter moments of thinking about censors, we might imagine a creative cave dweller industriously chiseling figures on a rock wall to record recent incidents. As the cave dweller works, a self-important local official walking barely upright appears and demands the addition of distinguishing characteristic to signify the prestige of the leader, the separation of certain participants who should not appear together, the reduction of the apparent prestige of another figure and the provision of additional loincloths or other body coverings to still other figures, as well as the removal of symbols, once popular but now offensive... (Karolidas, Bald, and Sova, 2005, p. ix)

The argument here is that we have not evolved as much as we should have; we are doing what cave dwellers, barely walking upright, must have done. Most likely pre-capitalist society did not function in exactly this way, but regardless, these authors urge us to think that because a teacher in the mid-west thought that a young adult novel with a masturbation scene was too graphic for ninth graders, we have defied the natural inclination to evolve into better humans than our barely upright former humans.

The rhetorical position that posits that we should be beyond this, and that only “backward” people still do this, is crucial to understanding how such a narrative has materialized, and how the profile of the censor is created. Zerubavel (2003) argued, “Yet the most common manifestation of this progressionist historical scenario is the highly schematic backward-to-advanced evolutionist narrative. It is quite evident, for example, in conventional narrations of human origins, which typically emphasize the theme of progressive improvement with regard to the ‘development’ of our brain, level of social organization... it is evident whenever modern, ‘civilized’ societies are compared to so-called underdeveloped, ‘primitive’ ones” (p. 15). The performance of BBW would not work with someone who does not buy the progressionist historical scenario, as the outrage that it *still* happens is essential. For example: “Censorship by religious, kingly, and parliamentary authorities was familiar in the past. Actual or attempted repression by governmental authorities at every level is all too familiar in the present. This is true even in the relatively free societies.” (Haight and Grannis, 1978, p. vii).

Similarly, if there are numerous instances of book banning through history, we can accumulate them to make the idea seem urgent. Bibliography is the dominant genre of BBW even today, which is surprising given that bibliographies have become less relevant as guides for selecting books. Bibliographies were once very important to librarians and thus a topic taught in

library school (now typically only taught at Rare Books School) because they provided a guide for libraries to create a thorough collection. Things like *Booklist* are born from this tradition. Bibliographic literature is much less essential now and used more often to compile obscure things, such as all the alternative presses related to a topic. The ALA publishes the “Top Ten Most Challenged Books Lists” and Robert P. Doyle authors “Books Challenged or Banned” list annually, but there are also bound versions, like *120 Banned Books* and *Literature Suppressed on Sexual Grounds*. Most begin with a qualification, such as, “Although examples of this unofficial censorship are shown here, we cannot easily address ourselves to these small daily murders of words and ideas except to note that they exist and hope that the reader does not forget them” (Haight, 1955, p. viii), creating the drama that though nothing is official about this, a murder has taken place.

Most of the books on these lists are, as Holley (2012) put, “easy to defend” (p. 82). Indeed, “In 2001, the three most controversial titles for young readers were *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J.K. Rowling, *The Giver* by Lois Lowry and *Are You There God? It’s Me Margaret* by Judy Blume” (Muse, 2001, p. 22). The lists of books are ones that are so agreeable that any reasonable person would be outraged if they found out such a book was banned: “In 2004, that may seem difficult to believe, but the reality remains. Parents and librarians are often shocked to hear that books in the Captain Underpants series have been challenged ...” (Karolidas, Bald, Sova, 2005, p. ix). Most of the lists tend to look like the book displays in libraries and stores, rarely containing anything *too* controversial, such as *120 Days of Sodom* and other hyper-sexual texts. The assertion that “Banned Books Week (BBW) celebrates the freedom to choose or the freedom to express one’s opinion even if that opinion might be considered unorthodox or unpopular” (ala.org, para 1) is not actually true, then, as BBW does not act as a

way to open the doors to all reading material. It promotes specific books to aid corporate publishers and particular (as Kidd argued) or to promote books that construct a certain narrative and identity for “anticensors,” as I am describing. Truly radical books do not support the capitalist imperative: “Booksellers often display challenged books by the cash register or in store windows; in some instances, literary characters appear behind bars or in stocks. Independent bookstores and the ALA are certainly worthy of our patronage but it’s telling how easily BBW has become yet another literary-consumerist party, one that gets bigger every year, by celebrating books that are ostensibly imperiled” (Kidd, 2009, p. 211). In all cases, the thing that we are selling in these bibliographies and displays is a very specific product, though we are not honest about what that is.

Further, bibliographies and book lists like the ones that create the BBW canon, often critical intervention, as they are mostly just lists, which can in turn create a narrative of history that lacks critical intervention. The form of a bibliography can operate through sheer accumulation; the character of the contents of the bibliography does not matter as much as the volume of the contents, sometimes. Bibliographies have a piling-on effect, especially when arranged chronologically. Ultimately, they do not tell history, they create history: “Libraries, bibliographies, folk legends, photo albums, and television archives thus constitute the ‘sites’ of social memory as well as some useful means for studying it. So, for that matter, do history textbooks, calendars, eulogies, guest books, tombstones, war memorials, and various Halls of Fame” (Zerubavel, 2003, p. 6). A list can seem banal and harmless, like that of a guest book or tombstone, but actually it has power to create a linear narrative history out of random incidence, combining many instances into something that then forms a mammoth whole.

Hidden Verdicts

Simply talking about censorship constantly does not deliver us from censorship, as even the act of making a BBW display is an argument about what one should read. As Kelly (2013) says in reference to Foucault's theories, "It is quite conceivable that we can talk about sex all day long and remain sexually repressed" (p. 22). Discussing how libraries have a strong role in what communities read, Muncy wrote, "but this power is so familiar it's invisible. Why do parents' public petitions constitute censorship, while librarians' hidden verdicts do not?" (para 10). BBW creates a small canon of mostly uncontroversial books, directing reader's attention toward some texts and away from potential others. Holley writes, "My particular favorite as a challenge for intellectual freedom is a specialized career guidance book for the sex industry, *Turning Pro*, by Magdalene Meretrix. Many of the occupations in the sex industry are as legal as being a church secretary; but this book, according to WorldCat, is held by only one American public library system" (2002, p. 82). The lists, then, also help to prevent censorship by privileging commonplace books over ones like Holley mentions. They also rarely include small press books, radical philosophy, non-assimilationist queer books, and so forth.

The things that would never make it onto a banned books list would require too much contentious activism and a questioning of the ethics of circulating certain media, the ethics of reading, and the pedagogical risks people would perceive within the texts. Given that some people still complain about books that have mild content, like boys kissing boys, truly advocating for more extreme controversial content would require more of a burden than BBW would want. One librarian opened up about her approach in a book about fighting censorship in libraries: "Had the characters not been gay, I most likely would have ordered the book without a second thought.... I discussed my decision with our library branch manager, who sincerely

thanked me for not selecting the title. She agreed that we did not need to invite a challenge...” (Kaney, 2012, p. 15). Some have noticed this trend in libraries silently avoiding things that are too controversial for fear of having to actually defend a decision or simply because they themselves are offended. Lee (2001) noted: “As is often the case, books that have a ‘radical’ political agenda are not particularly welcome in libraries.” (p, 17). Kidd (2009) addressed this too, writing “A more delicate issue is what we might call progressive censorship, the censorship of materials that are racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise out of line with contemporary social and ethical mores... ‘the classic liberal dilemma: the responsibility of a democracy to allow free expression to the most repugnant of ideas, even those that deny the very principles of freedom on which that hospitality is based’” (p. 200). In other words, the librarian as liberator of information is the construct of BBW, which promote a notion of heroism while also not requiring much heroism. This is not an open gate to knowledge, but is the performance of such.

It is important to have this conversation, as Booth (1988) stated, “Few questions can be more important today than whether or how a democratic society should protect its citizens from harming themselves, without harming them more seriously by infringing upon their freedoms” (p. 27). Even a young Kurt Vonnegut felt that he was not wise enough to play the role of liberator: “Yet Vonnegut admitted that when parents of the students he was teaching in Cape Cod complained of his assignment of *Catcher in the Rye*, he agreed to change the assignment to *Tale of Two Cities*. ‘My job was to teach,’ he explained, ‘not to defend the First Amendment.’” (Foerstel, 1994, p. xix). When we create BBW as we have, an “effect” takes place, and this effect is ideologically troubling. Mervteld (2007) argues that

books and libraries gain a symbolic dimension precisely because they can act as a powerful force to shape identity... They become agents (and not just repositories) of cultural memory... Yet, at the same time, the symbolic use of books and libraries as

ideological weapons makes them vulnerable because ideologies change and communities evolve and reinterpret their past to redefine their identity. (p. 532)

I argue that the performance of BBW is problematic, but in fact, that is not because I think educators, librarians, and professional organizations should be apolitical. Rather, I think we have performed a type of political emancipation and taken so much for granted in doing so, such as what democracy is and what a history of progress looks like. We have also decided that our enemies are random citizens contesting curriculum and circulating books, which is deeply misidentified. I challenge that denials of freedoms are *not* an anachronism, but a current reality. Censorship and lacks of freedom are the norm, but partnering with corporations to promote specific books does no productive work other than creating identities. Walter Benjamin wrote (1976/1940), “One reason why Fascism has a chance is that, in the game of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm” (p. 257). Lowry (2005) explains, “One of the trump cards of Fascism was, as Benjamin stressed, the incomprehension shown by its opponents, inspired as they were by the ideology of progress. He is thinking of the Left here... Hence his critique of those –the same people—who were astonished that Fascism should ‘still’ be possible in the twentieth century” (p. 59). There is nothing anachronistic about denying people rights to information and knowledge and there is little evidence to suggest that our democracy in the U.S. is free from such oppressive modes, but BBW risks distracting us from such real instances.

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