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### Banning without Bans

Contemporary ideas about censorship are riven with contradiction. On the other hand, the annual recognition of Banned Books Week reminds us that book banning continues throughout the United States. Following the model of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's *Racism without Racists*, which argues that racism thrives even without the existence of out-and-out racists, in this essay I show how banning literature continues without legally empowered censors. The traditional view of censorship being limited to government restriction is an outdated misconception.<sup>1</sup> Instead, censorship is the threat that anyone, regardless of race, class, or social status, has the power to remove literature at any given moment across the US. New mechanisms of censorship elude legal restrictions and typically work to perpetuate literary expressions of hegemonic power dynamics. Those most affected, then, are those who do not subscribe to prevailing American ideologies when it comes to sex, sexuality, gender, race, violence, and religion. Thus, the new modes of censorship can be understood as a privatization of censorship in public spaces that is designed to maintain prevailing hierarchies. This is what I call banning without bans.

I explore the tactics of decentralized censors through an analysis of a parent censorship website and an exploration of the censorship of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. These novels are vastly different in genre, topic, and theme; however, they are both Pulitzer Prize winners that have been banned multiple times across the US in the last forty years. These books also share the accusation of "obscenity" because they address

controversial topics such as sex, sexuality, gender, race, violence, and religion. Individual parents, parent groups, college students, and school boards at multiple points over the years have all deemed these topics to be censorable in the US despite the federal courts ending government censorship after the *Miller v. California* case (1973). Notably, the privatization of censorship has yielded more potent strategies to restrict readership in the United States and by extension to limit the freedom of young individuals across America. Thus, I argue that after the US created a legal structure that should have eradicated book banning, advocacy based on moral beliefs has led to the persistence of extralegal censorship through private domains and nuanced language that has come to replace the term *banned*.

### **What Is a “Bad” Book?**

The individuals that most frequently feel they have the responsibility to censor literature due to obscene content are the parents of K-12 children. In 2001, a group of Virginia parents calling themselves Parents against Bad Books in Schools (PABBIS) published a website offering examples of “bad” books, justification for removing “bad” books from schools, and suggestions about what to do if you find a “bad” book. Ironically, they admit, “[bad] is not for us to determine.” They go on, however, to insist that “[b]ad is what you determine is bad. Bad is what you think is bad for your child. What each parent considers bad varies and depends on their unique situation, family and values” (“Welcome!”). Despite their earlier claim that it is not up to them to decide what constitutes a “bad book,” they take it upon themselves to follow the century-old pattern of labeling a book “bad” when it contains sex, violence, and vulgarity (i.e., obscenity). In insisting upon parental rights, they imply that the act of becoming a parent

automatically gives an individual control over what their child consumes in the education system. When these parents argue for these extralegal parental rights, they are arguing for the ability not only to proclaim what is right and wrong for their child but also to act as community parents responsible for all children.

The work of PABBIS indicates that book banning has fallen into the hands of select individuals, oftentimes parents, who deem themselves responsible for the protection of alleged community values. This amounts to a shift from what Louis Althusser calls repressive state apparatuses (RSAs) to ideological state apparatuses (ISAs [92, 98]). Before *Miller v. California*, proponents of censorship relied upon RSAs in the form of the court system. However, after 1973, ISAs became the chief means of supporting censorship. As Luke Ferretter explains, rather than functioning through violence (or its threat), the ISA “functions by ideology” (80). Althusser’s use of the term *ideology* refers to an unconscious “stream of discourses, images and ideas that are all around us all the time” (Ferretter 77). In censorship cases, ideology comprises the malleable concept of morality.

It would be incorrect to assume that the parents who have embraced privatized censorship are all conservatives. In fact, censorship can also be an act of liberal individuals who feel that they are protecting their children from derogatory language, particularly when that language involves race or sexuality. Therefore, *ideology* should be understood to refer to a range of “moral” positions deployed to defend the right to remove literature from schools, including liberal and conservative positions and anything in between.

Parent groups recognize the importance of maintaining small-scale banning to control the circulation of information among those in the immediate area. For example, despite its claim that its crusade against “bad” books was the morally responsible thing to do, PABBIS knew that if its

actions attracted publicity, it would be stopped. Thus, its website warns that “challengers may be labeled censors, right wing lunatics, etc. Outside groups (ACLU, ALA) might help the schools if the case involves enough books or publicity” (“What to Do”). This is a subtle acknowledgment that the parents in the group are aware, at least at the most basic level, that their actions are legally dubious. Parental involvement in early cases of censorship marked the beginning of what has become a pattern of parents projecting their own systems of morality onto their community to censor literature containing controversial topics that are loosely categorized as “obscene.”

### **Archiving Gaps**

Censorship cases dating from before 1973 are well documented, and sources exist that contain all the information needed to evaluate the means and motives for censorship: direct statements, lists of cases involved, reasoning behind the censorship, and accounts of outcomes. This evaluation is not possible for any case after 1975 that I have encountered. But as Caren J. Town argues of contemporary censorship, “While the sources [of censorship] differ, the challenges remain,” and “[T]oday far less speech and literary content is restricted for adults, but children and young adults are still suffering under authorities that want to silence and blinker them” (350, 354). Surveys from the American Library Association indicate that “82-97% of book challenges—documented requests to remove materials from schools or libraries—remain unreported and receive no media” (“Top Ten Most Challenged Books Lists”). This gap in the archive of book bans, deepened by strategic omissions, comprises another subtle form of censorship.

## Delegitimizing Pulitzer Prize Winners

Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* demonstrates how the lines between conservative and progressive agendas in cases of censorship can become blurred. Sexuality, religion, and violence have all been cited as reasons to challenge Walker's novel. In Walker's novel, a black woman named Celie, the protagonist, endures sexual assault and emotional abuse, and she begins to discover her own identity by finding out more about her past and embracing her sexuality as a closeted lesbian woman. Despite these controversial aspects of the novel, its literary merit should be undisputed after the Pulitzer committee's decision in 1983 to make Walker the first African American woman to win that award in fiction. Walker's award has not protected her novel from censors.

In 1986, Walker's novel was successfully removed from a school library in Newport News, Virginia, because of "profanity and sexual references," and if students desired to read it on their own, it was "made accessible only to students over 18, or who had written permission from a parent" (Baldassarro). The requirement of written permission is a form of censorship because it puts up a barrier that restricts easy access to the novel. This is an example of a successful challenge because the challenger got what they wanted: Walker's novel was no longer unequivocally accessible.

Privatized censorship has proved a more effective method because it allows for multiple ideologies to dictate what is right or wrong in the consumption of literature. So, for example, "profanity and sexual references" are vague enough reasons for censorship that the terms might be harnessed to either a progressive or conservative challenge. From a progressive perspective, parents could be wary of their children seeing racial slurs and not want their children to witness

sexual abuse in the detailed way in which Walker describes it. From a conservative perspective, “sexual references” could be an ambiguous way to attack the lesbian relationship Celie develops with Shug over the course of the novel. Since every individual’s take on morality differs and is unconsciously formed through a network of discourses, there is not a singular definition of morality. Therefore, morality is an effective tool precisely because it is unstable and shifting. The state apparatuses that are used primarily in cases of censorship are religious, educational, family, and political institutions. Notably, these institutions are a part of the private domain rather than regulated by an RSA that would be universally controlled through the federal government.

The injustice of privatized censorship has led to an incomplete archive of bans that will increase as long as censorship is controlled by dynamic holders of power. In Verne Harris’s essay “Archives, Politics, and Justice,” he refers to individuals who have control over the archives as “elites” (178). It is important to clarify that parents, or anyone else who censors books, are not typically regarded as “elites.” In general, government high officials who hold positions of power in office or have a higher social class are regarded as elite. But this is a more complex situation because privatizing censorship and not requiring documentation of the events that occur allow any individual, regardless of status, to try to censor a work of literature. They view themselves as having that power for no other reason than their *perceived* moral authority. They then attempt to control the publicity of local censorship and therefore hold control of the archive. Therefore, “elite” is not only the role of a parent; it is the role of any individual who enables the continuation of an undocumented, privatized case of censorship in the US.

## Rated R for Realistic

While censorship cases have been primarily located in K-12 schools, they are also prevalent in higher education, where censorship falls primarily in the control of the college student. In censorship cases in higher education, students become a new authority figure when policing what is appropriate for them and their peers to read. As recently as 2015, Duke University assigned Bechdel's memoir *Fun Home* as an optional reading assignment for freshmen. In Bechdel's work she creates her own hero, whom she places alongside James Joyce's hero Leopold Bloom and Homer's hero Odysseus and who explores what it means to be told that homosexuality is wrong, knowing that closeted homosexuality can lead to depression and even suicide. Despite the prominence of these topics in twenty-first-century American culture, several college students have protested against *Fun Home* being taught at their university.

Despite incoming freshmen at Duke not being required to read the book, several of them posted messages in a private *Facebook* group about their discomfort in being asked to read Bechdel's work.<sup>2</sup> Brian Grasso commented in the *Facebook* group that he felt that he would "have to compromise [his] personal Christian moral beliefs to read [the book]," using vague religious language to explain his position (qtd. in Ballentine). In an interview with the Duke student newspaper *The Chronicle*, Grasso goes on to say that in suggesting the book for students "Duke did not seem to have people like me in mind," apparently referring to students with conservative religious beliefs (Ballentine), and according to one commentator, the expressions of discomfort by Grasso and his peers implied that they were "being bullied when [they were] encouraged to read *Fun Home*" (Brogan). Grasso also writes in an op-ed piece for *The*

*Washington Post* that “almost 20 people privately messaged me, thanking me for my post. I received many messages from Christians.” In his article he is adamant that he is not against reading “memoirs written by LGBTQ individuals” or content that hints at suicide. He instead argues that “viewing pictures of sexual acts, regardless of the genders of the people involved, conflicts with the inherent sacredness of sex” (Grasso). However, in an interview with Duke’s on-campus newspaper *The Tab*, he states that “at the bottom line I believe homosexuality is wrong because God exists” (Parrott). Rather than directly citing homosexuality as the source for his discomfort with Bechdel’s book in his *Facebook* post and his later op-ed, Grasso may have strategically omitted verbiage that might have been seen as homophobic.

A complaint involving Bechdel’s work also reveals that obscenity and pornography are in danger of becoming synonymous. Two years before the complaints about Bechdel’s book by Duke University freshmen, “a wealthy and influential family with ties to politics in South Carolina challenged the book for being included in the reading for College of Charleston freshmen, again calling the work pornographic” (Sawdon). “Pornographic,” a term omitted from the 2015 complaints by Duke students, refers to the spread in Bechdel’s memoir where Alison, the protagonist, engages in her first sexual encounter with another woman. Despite the claim of pornography, Bechdel does not include the performance of oral sex gratuitously. Instead, it is within the context of Alison’s journey of self-discovery in parallel with the journeys in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Homer’s *The Odyssey*. Alison compares her sexual encounter to Odysseus’s experience on the “Island of the Cyclops,” where “[i]n true heroic action, [she] moved toward the thing [she] feared” (Bechdel 214). Here, her fear is of embracing her sexual identity after years of being a closeted lesbian. This graphic memoir has clear literary merit, passing the Miller



Test established in *Miller v. California*, and yet a single spread of images depicting lesbian sex lead to calls to cut an entire program in fear of homosexuality in literature.

Subtle mechanisms of censorship are achievable without having to explicitly call for the banning of a book. Despite Bechdel's book's powerful assertion of heroism in the face of fear, the South Carolina House of Representatives proposed a cut of \$52,000, which would effectively eliminate the cost of the summer reading program that included Bechdel's work (Sawdon). Bechdel herself responded to the situation, saying, "It's sad and absurd that the College of Charleston is facing a funding cut for teaching my book—a book which is after all about the toll that this sort of small-mindedness takes on people's lives" (Sawdon). The fear that Bechdel's book might be pornographic made its way to the House of Representatives; however, in continuity with cases of censorship in the past, it led to compromises being made. Ironically, rather than accepting the original proposed complete cut of the budget, the finance committee "reallocated the funds to books that teach about the Constitution" (Williams). The reallocation comprises a more subtle form of censorship. Rather than banning the book, the reallocation made it impossible to read Bechdel's work given the expectation that the funds were for supporting the reading of the Constitution only—not progressive works of literature such as Bechdel's memoir. The subtlety of this ban demonstrates that groups, or individuals, will continue to be able to find a way to censor, even if not to the fullest extent.

Ultimately, censorship in the US has neither disappeared nor lessened. All that has changed is the language, the privatization of censorship, and the growing gaps in the archives of what is being silenced. Rather than continuing on the path of allowing arbitrary reasons for censorship to thrive, we need to adopt democratic principles when addressing challenges in literature. Rather than allow these cases to become buried in broken Internet links while books

are quietly removed from small-town libraries, we must devise systematic means of tracking these cases. We should ask ourselves why these topics of race, sex, sexuality, gender, and violence are at the root of these cases of censorship and what we lose by not discussing these works of literature. Until we can track where censorship is occurring and the true reasoning behind these cases, there will always be a gap in understanding how books continue to be banned without bans.

#### Notes

1. The continuing notion that censorship is located in central government institutions informs the work of the American Library Association, which is the main organization tracking modern-day censorship; therefore, I use the association's definition of censorship in my essay: "the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups, or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous" ("Top Ten Most Challenged Books Lists").
2. The *Facebook* page in question is the Duke Class of 2019 page, which has now been deleted.

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