Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Volume 6 | Number 1
August 2024

Everyone's Culture is for the Children: Encountering and Contextualizing the Rhetorical Strategies of Book Banners

Nick Szydlowski
San José State University

https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/rdyl

Recommended Citation: Szydlowski, Nick. "Everyone's Culture is for the Children: Encountering and Contextualizing the Rhetorical Strategies of Book Banners," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2024.

Content Warning and Reflection

Because this article discusses rhetoric used to justify book banning and in particular attacks on LGBTQIA+ visibility in library spaces, it contains language that is likely to be offensive to many readers. As the author of this article, I find this language deeply offensive. The language in this article represents a small fraction of the extreme rhetoric currently directed at libraries and librarians, and one of my goals in summarizing and addressing it in this piece is to help other practitioners understand the nature of this rhetoric without having to encounter it directly in its original context.

Preface: Children Choosing Books

My spouse and I have a child who is three years old. Every night one of us puts her to bed, and part of her bedtime routine is to choose three books for one of us to read to her. For as long as she has been able to express her preferences, the choice has been hers. She does not choose the same books every night, but instead examines the books placed neatly on her shelves, as well as the ones piled roughly on the floor, and makes her selections. From week to week the titles and topics change. Books fall in and out of her favor. Books she disliked months ago suddenly catch her interest. Books we thought she had outgrown make surprising reappearances, sometimes accompanied by a flurry of new questions.

Choosing books is part of reading. Learning to choose books is part of learning to read. If a child learns to read the words on the page, but never learns to choose what to read next, will they continue to read as an adult?

It is not a radical idea that children—even children as young as two or three years old—are capable of choosing their own books. However, the freedom of children to read widely and

with a sense of exploration, and to choose from collections of books that reflect the diversity of families and communities around them, is under attack.

Since at least 2020, conservative groups have launched a series of campaigns focused on removing materials from public and school libraries. The materials they challenge and attempt to remove have largely been books by or about BIPOC or LGBTQIA+ people. This article uses close reading to examine the rhetoric used in these campaigns, in particular the way these campaigns use coded language to obscure not only their focus on removing books by and about marginalized people from libraries, but also their general opposition to diversity, equity, and inclusion as appropriate values for libraries and other public organizations. These campaigns are not only about books—they also seek to restrict the types of programming, events, and exhibits that libraries create and host for their communities. These activities are, however, the tactics of a single movement, and I will refer to the members of that movement as book banners even when they are focused on removing drag performers or Black History Month Exhibits, rather than books. This is in part to emphasize the intellectual and tactical consistency of the movement, and in part because “book banners” is the politest term that remains descriptive of their activities.

This analysis will focus on two especially prominent and influential examples of this rhetoric: Stanley Kurtz’s “The Battle for the Soul of the Library,” which appeared in *The New York Times*, and Christopher Rufo’s “The Real Story Behind Drag Queen Story Hour,” first published in *City Journal* and later syndicated in other outlets, including *Fox News*. Taken together, these pieces reveal the extent to which an open opposition to inclusivity underlies recent book banning campaigns. In order to meet this challenge, libraries need to be prepared to defend their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion—to serving every member of their community—as an essential professional value.

This campaign against diversity in libraries has often relied on parents petitioning for the removal of specific materials, and arguing that, as parents, they have a particular right to place limits on the materials that are available to children in their communities. Because I am a parent too, and because these issues will impact the world in which all of our children live, this essay will also include a little more about myself and the cultural touchstones that have influenced me than I would normally bring into an academic setting.

Wu-Tang is for the Children

In thinking about culture and childhood, I can't help but return to a phrase that has likely been seared into at least some of the brains of my generation, if not of those older or younger. In 1998, Russell Jones, who performed under the name Ol' Dirty Bastard, appeared uninvited onstage at the Grammy Awards. Jones, a founding member of the pivotal hip hop group Wu-Tang Clan, interrupted the ceremony after Grammy voters chose to award Puff Daddy's *No Way Out* the third-ever Grammy for best rap album, over his group's *Wu-Tang Forever*. Appearing to speak off the cuff, Jones addressed a national television audience, saying "I don't know how y'all see it, but when it comes to the children, Wu-Tang is for the children. We teach the children. You know what I mean? Puffy is good, but Wu-Tang is the best" ("wu is about the children").

In the context of the United States, the phrase "Wu-Tang is for the children" unfolds like a koan, unveiling layers of cultural assumptions and debate about the nature of childhood. It directly contradicts White[1] conservative assumptions about what is good and bad for children.

[1] I capitalize both White and Black throughout when referring to racial or cultural groups, following the guidance of the Center for the Study of Social Policy: "To not name "White" as a race is, in fact, an anti-Black act which frames Whiteness as both neutral and the standard" (Nguyễn and Pendleton).

Wu-Tang Forever could only be sold in the US with a large, all-caps warning label reading "Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics," clearly indicating that some thought its contents were not appropriate for children. But the group's lyrics are not merely shocking or needlessly explicit; in their radical inventiveness and sonic and semantic density, they represent a profound cultural achievement and an inflection point in the artistic development of hip hop. While Ol' Dirty Bastard often provided a kind of comic relief in the midst of Wu-Tang's allusive and sometimes difficult lyrics, Jones' statement at the Grammys underscores the depth and seriousness of Wu-Tang's music and mission, in contrast to the lighter fare offered by Puff Daddy. Jones is saying something about Wu-Tang, but he is also saying something about children. What children need, Jones implies, is not to be protected from the adult world, or even to be entertained, but to be educated, which includes being exposed to culture, art, and ideas. "Wu-Tang is for the children" might mean something like "Black culture is for Black children," or "Black culture is for all children." It might also mean "queer culture is for all children" or "no one's culture is inappropriate for children."

The impulse to "protect" children from culture has become so widespread that even canonical works like Michelangelo's David have recently been deemed inappropriate for children by some activist parents (Kim). However, the media and even conservative educators have rushed to defend the value of Renaissance sculpture against its critics (Goñi-Lessan). What if we were to extend the same deference to works of genius from beyond the Western canon? Children will always have questions as they encounter new and challenging works of art—what if we treat those questions as an opportunity to reach and connect, and not as a threat?

When Russell Jones stood on the Grammy's stage and declared that his art was not just OK for children, but that it was actually created to uplift and educate them, he compressed a

complex argument about the nature and value of hip hop and Black youth culture into a memorable phrase. Though the short speech was widely mocked at the time, the phrase has stuck with me and countless others, as a refutation of the idea that children need to be protected not just from harm, but from the messy, complicated, or even "explicit" world of art and culture. Wu-Tang, in all their unapologetic Blackness, their self-described griminess, their cryptic and referential lyricism, could be exactly what children need to grow, thrive, and love themselves in our complex, diverse, and harsh society.

Contemporary book banners are building a political movement around an image of childhood that is White, straight, cisgender, suburban or rural, and most often Christian. This intersectional set of childhood identities is strongly associated with the more neutral-seeming concept of childhood innocence. In our culture, however, innocence is not attributed to children in neutral or equal fashion (Goff et al.). It is instead often imagined as a quality of White children that can only be preserved by protecting them from exposure to difference or discomfort. Book banners wish to protect White children from negative feelings that they might have when learning about United States and international history. They may truly believe that if their children never hear a story read by a drag queen, they will never question their own gender or sexual identity. This study employs close reading to examine the rhetorical strategies this political movement has developed and demonstrates that libraries must understand this movement not as a series of challenges to individual books, but as a challenge to the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and to the presence of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ stories, perspectives, and cultures within libraries and the public sphere.

Because book banning is, at least on one level, about ideas, the language and arguments that book banners use is important. Sometimes that language appeals transparently to the

political tradition of the United States or to patriarchal gender roles, as in the names of organizations like Moms for Liberty or the Proud Boys. However, the rhetorical strategies that the movement has used are complex, varied, and highly effective. In particular, the movement has been successful in radicalizing new members while maintaining its access to mainstream news outlets like *The New York Times* and *Fox News*. In today's polarized and splintered media environment, many readers outside the book banning movement encounter the movement indirectly, through media reports of their activities and the controversies they inspire. The movement's intellectual leaders may stick to friendly media outlets, or code-switch depending on their audience, reserving their fiercest rhetoric for sympathetic venues and readers. This study employs close reading to examine two key essays that most clearly express the ideas of those who are leading this widespread movement. I hope that focusing on more formal documents, rather than social media posts or cable news appearances, will be interpreted first of all as a gesture of good faith and an attempt to encounter these arguments in their most developed and sophisticated form. A study of the rhetoric used by book banners on social media would be a beneficial complement to this study, as many of the ideas behind this movement find their most succinct and influential expressions on X, formerly known as Twitter, or other platforms.

Close reading, while more often associated with the humanities, is an important tool in this context, and in library science in general (Grimm). It is an analytic technique developed to address complex, multivalent texts like the essays of Kurtz and Rufo. The meaning of these texts does not simply rest on the surface. Instead, these tests are multilayered, allusive speech acts whose meanings resist straightforward paraphrase. Relatedly, these texts were selected primarily because they are exceptionally rich, yet also conceptually and thematically representative of the work of the authors. In different ways, these texts set the terms of the public discourse on book

banning. Close reading is one way of understanding just what the terms of engagement are, and how they came to be established.

Stanley Kurtz and Coded Language in Attacks on Libraries

While the phrase "Wu-Tang is for the children" suggests a complex and layered understanding of the relationship between childhood and culture, it baffled many contemporary observers by juxtaposing two things—children and hip hop—that occupy very different spaces in mass media, if not in physical reality. In an interesting parallel, the language that is currently used to attack libraries is also rich with implications that are impenetrable to the uninitiated. Words like "groomer," "pedophile," "pornography," and "woke" take on new, coded meanings. In the context of book banning campaigns, these terms function as indirect ways of discussing gender identity, sexual identity, and race in a way that, depending on the context, produces distinct rhetorical advantages. These terms are often used to argue that young children should not be exposed to the stories and cultures of LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC people, or that parents should have the option of forbidding their children from encountering those stories and cultures.

An important commentator in this movement is Stanley Kurtz, a senior fellow at the *Ethics and Public Policy Center*, and a regular contributor to the *National Review* on topics related to education about race and social justice. Interestingly, when writing for a more conservative audience, Kurtz is often critical of outright book banning when applied to libraries ("Critical Race Theory in Schools"). However, when the opportunity arose to write about book banning in *The New York Times*, Kurtz chose to pen an apology for book banners, shifting the blame for their illiberalism onto a new character he wished to introduce to the readers of the *Times*: the "woke librarian" ("The Battle for the Soul").

Kurtz defines woke librarians as "librarians who see it as their duty to promote progressive views on race, policing, sexuality and other issues." He claims, embracing the paranoid tone of the moral panic, that such librarians "are everywhere" ("The Battle for the Soul"). By deploying the word "woke" to mean "promoting progressive views on race, policing, or sexuality" ("The Battle for the Soul"), Kurtz is able to spend the rest of his piece attacking librarians while barely discussing what these "woke" views might actually consist of. In a pivotal paragraph of the essay, Kurtz makes the claim, which may be surprising to many librarians, that "the American Library Association [(ALA)] lends institutional support to the American left" through "**activism** in support of the new woke **orthodoxy**" ("The Battle for the Soul," bolded text indicates hyperlinks in original). Offering evidence for this claim in the form of links, Kurtz directs readers first to ALA's "activist" participation in the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's National Day of Racial Healing ("Libraries Respond"). An accurate description, or even a mention, of the National Day of Racial Healing, might derail Kurtz' argument due to the mainstream nature of the event. The day's sponsor, the Kellogg Foundation, is a large charity with the mission of helping vulnerable children (*W.K. Kellogg Foundation*). The day is held annually on the Tuesday after Martin Luther King, Jr. Day—a national holiday recognizing the importance of movements for racial justice—and has been embraced by *NBC News* and other mainstream organizations. ("NBCUniversal News Group Launches").

The "woke orthodoxy" pillar of Kurtz' argument is supported by a link to a panel in webinar format sponsored by the Public Library Association entitled "Re-Weaving the Culture through Inclusive Norms in the Public Library." One of the learning outcomes for the panel is for participants to be able to "explore how modern library management was shaped by white cultural norms" (Wolfgram et al.). From its description, the webinar is not focused on collection practices

or public service models, but instead on the internal organizational culture of libraries. Given that Kurtz works for an organization which is expressly devoted to applying "the riches of the Judeo-Christian tradition" (*Ethics and Public Policy Center*) to contemporary society, it would seem difficult for him to argue against the idea that libraries are shaped by White cultural norms. Kurtz would likely disagree with the panelists about whether or not the prevalence of those norms is detrimental to library workers of color, though it might force him to pit his own theoretical arguments against claims based on lived experience.

The purpose of this reading, however, is not primarily to refute Kurtz's characterization of woke librarians. Instead, I hope to demonstrate how the invocation of "activism" and "woke orthodoxy," with the addition of vaguely related links, allows Kurtz to avoid arguments about what views on race are acceptable for "neutral" professionals or professional organizations. Is it acceptable, in Kurtz's view, for libraries to recognize Black History Month? To issue public proclamations that recognize high-profile racial injustice when it occurs? To celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day? The invocation of wokeness allows Kurtz to shrug off the question of racial justice and to portray concepts like "racial healing" and "workplace inclusivity" as radical—rather than mainstream—positions without ever addressing their merits or flaws.

Kurtz's use of "woke," rather than descriptive terms like liberal, progressive, or radical, or older epithets like "bleeding heart" or "social justice warrior," is significant. "Woke" is a Black slang term appropriated by the right as a way of signifying about race without mentioning it. As used by some public figures, it has become a way of avoiding condemnation while saying something that might otherwise be condemned as racist. Scholars and commentators have outlined the evolution of the word from its decades-long history in Black vernacular usage, to its popularization in Erykah Badu and Georgia Anne Muldrow's 2008 song "Master Teacher"

(Watson), to a sometimes-ironic way of describing a politically-active or aware person within the Black community, to a very different meaning within the conservative movement (Romano).[2] As the links he shares demonstrate, when Kurtz writes about woke librarians, he means librarians interested in racial healing, or in making their workplaces more inclusive of colleagues of color.

Kurtz portrays himself as a relatively moderate member of this movement. He opposes book bans in favor of a both-sidesist "balancing" approach. Despite his frequent invocation of "classical liberalism," Kurtz does support illiberal bans on the teaching of "critical race theory"[3] in K-12 schools ("Stopping K–12 Indoctrination"), and refers to ethnic studies programs as "promoting the new progressive orthodoxy on ethnicity and race" ("The Battle for the Soul"). In order to paint himself as a classical liberal, Kurtz must argue that woke librarians, not book banners, are the true radical activists.

I would be remiss if I did not point out that Kurtz's editorial follows a pattern that has been repeatedly observed in *New York Times* editorials, to the extent that it has become a meme (@DougJBalloon). In this rhetorical strategy, the author claims to condemn a particular view, person, or action, while actually writing in justification or support of it. To follow the meme, Kurtz's article could be summarized as "Banning library books, which I do not support, is a reasonable response to woke librarians trying to make their profession slightly less racist." This

---

[2] Is it a coincidence that Erykah Badu was on the Grammy stage as an award presenter when we first learned that Wu-Tang is for the children? Perhaps, but it is also a reminder of the centrality of hip hop specifically and Black culture in general to our national culture—a central role which is not always adequately represented in library collections. On the same album that introduced "woke" to the popular lexicon, Badu reminded us that, for many, "hip hop is bigger than the government" (Badu).

[3] The quotation marks here reflect the fact that Critical Race Theory, as espoused by Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and others, is rarely, if ever, taught in K-12 schools. What Kurtz opposes seems to be education about United States history. He writes, "telling minors that they *should* feel guilt or responsibility because of their skin color is a line that should not be crossed by any school district in these United States" ("Stopping K–12 Indoctrination"). Anyone who has read much Critical Race Theory will likely agree that how high school students should feel about race is not a major concern—scholars of our deeply unequal legal system generally have "bigger fish to fry."

rhetorical strategy, like Kurtz's reliance on the term "woke," serves to introduce extreme perspectives like those of many book banners to mainstream or centrist readers. Moving on to the work of Christopher Rufo, I will now examine rhetoric used within right wing media circles and how it functions to legitimize attacks on diversity and inclusivity.

Christopher Rufo and the Crafting of Rhetorical Strategies

Christopher Rufo is a conservative activist whose role in the movement against diversity is well-documented. He is widely credited with popularizing the use of the term "Critical Race Theory" or "CRT" to refer to nearly any mention of race in the classroom, a rhetorical innovation that allowed conservatives to portray mainstream curricula on topics such as the history of the United States as left-leaning or revisionist. An important part of Rufo's strategy in introducing opposition to CRT as a rhetorical strategy was to argue for a link between mainstream educational practice and decades-old academic work from an unrelated discipline. The original Critical Race Theory, as pioneered by legal scholars like Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw, focused on studying and theorizing structural racism within the US legal system. While a full discussion of the impact of Rufo's campaign to demonize the discussion of race in the classroom is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that many sympathetic readers seem to have been drawn to Critical Race Theory in the past few years, possibly even as a result of its new prominence in public discourse.

In turning his attention from race to issues of gender and sexuality, Rufo has repeated the pattern of linking contemporary practice in libraries and education to theoretical academic work from prior decades. In order to encounter Rufo's arguments in the best faith possible, I propose to focus not on his prolific television appearances or social media posts, but on his more formal

written work, in particular the article "The Real Story Behind Drag Queen Story Hour," which appeared in the Autumn 2022 issue of *City Journal*. This piece, which appears to have been well-received within the conservative media sphere, and was later syndicated on the *Fox News* website, argues that Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH) should be seen in light of the radical queer theory of the 1980s and 1990s. While discussions of Rufo often portray his strategy as a mere rhetorical sleight of hand—labeling benign practices as moderate or extreme in hopes of shifting the discourse—here we encounter his arguments in their full elaboration.

In "The Real Story Behind Drag Queen Story Hour," Rufo traces two histories in significant detail—one of drag performance itself, and one of queer theory. Neither of these histories, importantly, is the literal history of Drag Queen Story Hour the organization, or of the practice of drag as a pedagogical strategy. Rather than a descriptive history, what Rufo practices instead is a form of genealogy, locating the "real" origins of DQSH not in the place it began (San Francisco) or in the work of its creators (Michelle Tea, RADAR Productions, Julián Delgado Lopera, and Virgie Tovar), but in a sequence of historical settings and evolving cultural discourses. In a profound, and profoundly meaningful, irony, this mode of genealogical investigation is strongly identified with the work of Michel Foucault, who is portrayed in the piece as the "father figure" of queer theory. In order to make the argument that DQSH is inherently sexual and subversive, Rufo must become a kind of queer theoretician himself, seeing the practice through the eyes of Foucault, Judith Butler, and Gayle S. Rubin. This tension reveals itself in Rufo's energized and fanciful descriptions of drag performance:

> By the 2000s, the performance of drag had absorbed all these elements—the social-justice origin story of William Dorsey Swann, the carnal shock-and-awe of Gayle Rubin,

> the ethereal postmodernism of Judith Butler—and brought them together onto the stage. (Rufo)

Rufo insists that the reader see drag as the most highly-theorized, radically-inflected version of itself. This is, of course, necessary for the factually unsupportable link that Rufo wishes to make between drag performance and the sexual abuse of children (Jenny et al.). But Rufo is not merely creating a link between DQSH and the academics he groups under the label “queer theory;” he is using the work of those academics to queer his own understanding of the phenomenon.

Rufo’s engagement with gender studies, queer studies, or queer theory is, however, highly selective and idiosyncratic, most all in its focus on child sexual abuse and pedophilia. Additionally, in its emphasis on a few key academic figures, Rufo’s piece paints a misleading picture of the Gay Rights Movement as primarily an intellectual or performative exercise, rather than an important example of a marginalized community coming together to advocate against oppression and achieve major legal and cultural victories. Moreover, in refusing to acknowledge the existence of queer communities beyond “New York, San Francisco, and other hubs,” (Rufo) Rufo’s rhetoric takes a sinister turn. The nationwide spread of DQSH reflects the fact that there are LGBTQIA+ people in every single community in the United States. Rufo, citing queer theory, advances the argument that LGBTQIA+ identity is “always already” subversive, and that the acceptance of anything other than compulsory cisgender heterosexuality contains within itself the recognition that “the family, the law, the religion, the culture” are all “vectors of oppression” (Rufo). This is certainly one way of understanding queer identity, but it is far from the only way of understanding it.

The source that Rufo cites as the “manifesto” for DQSH is a perfect example of the multiplicity of perspectives that exist within the LGBTQIA+ community on the issues that are of

the most interest to Rufo. In "Drag Pedagogy: The Playful Practice of Queer Imagination in Early Childhood," Harper Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess situate the work of DQSH within the academic discourse of education in general and curriculum studies in particular. Far from a manifesto, the article discusses the pedagogy of DQSH, which originated outside the academy as a result of "queer author Michelle Tea's personal desire to connect her toddler with queer culture" (Keenan and Lil Hot Mess 452), and presents that pedagogy in terms that are legible and meaningful within the academic discourse on education. The piece contextualizes DQSH within the broader context of pedagogical strategies related to diversity and inclusion, and argues that, "rather than building empathy from a set of presumed straight or cisgender children, then, drag pedagogy might enact a mode of queer kinship that acknowledges that there is already queerness within the classroom" (Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess 454). This very basic acknowledgement—that there is already queerness in our classrooms, libraries, and communities—is an important underpinning of library efforts to provide more appropriate services and collections for all families.

In his analysis of the piece, however, Rufo radically recontextualizes the authors' arguments, removing them from both the academic discourse of curriculum studies and the intra-community discourse that frames parts of its argument. When Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess write that "[i]n discussing the work of DQSH within our social circles, we have occasionally encountered critiques that DQSH is sanitizing the risqué nature of drag in order to make it 'family friendly'" (455), they evoke the range of opinions that exist within their own social circles, and by implication within the LGBTQIA+ community, about the meaning of drag, authentic and appropriate modes of drag performance, and the value of drag as pedagogy. Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess address those concerns by arguing that DQSH is "less a

sanitizing force than it is a preparatory introduction to alternate modes of kinship" (455). Eliding the context of this argument, Rufo offers this as evidence that "the goal [of DQSH] is not to reinforce the biological family but to facilitate the child's transition into the ideological family" (Rufo). Remember, however, that DQSH was created out of a mother's desire to create a setting where her toddler could experience her own culture. Ironically, Rufo's selective and decontextualized appropriation of queer theory allows him to erase the existence of queer culture and queer families.

This decontextualizing is not merely rhetorical—it is also literal. In drawing attention to Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess' article, Rufo has pulled the article out of its original context in a remarkable way. "Drag Pedagogy" is the all-time most-read article on the website of the journal *Curriculum Inquiry*, with three times as many views as the next most popular article, despite having been published much more recently ("Most Read Articles from *Curriculum Inquiry*"). While the article has received 16 academic citations since its publication in 2021, the vast majority of the attention it has received seems to be driven by conservative social media. As of December 2022, the paper has been tweeted about over 8600 times by over 6000 accounts ("Altmetric"). Many of these tweets feature screen shots of the text of the article, removing the text from its academic context and juxtaposing it with the heightened rhetoric of anti-diversity activists. Tweets that contain hateful language, such as referring to drag queens as "groomer clowns," have been viewed as many as 750,000 times at the time of this writing (@ConceptualJames).

As Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess effectively argue "there is already queerness in the classroom" (454), it is precisely in refusing to acknowledge this queerness, or to recognize it as valid and deserving of love and nurturing, that activists like Rufo begin their attack on diversity

and inclusion. As "Drag Pedagogy" makes clear, DQSH does not merely bring queerness into the classroom, library, or community. Importantly, it acknowledges the queerness that is already there and provides an opportunity for children to experience and understand something that is really just a part of life. Even more broadly, while DQSH may provide an opportunity for children to interrogate questions and assumptions about gender, it does not introduce gender into the library or classroom. Gender, like queerness, like Blackness, Whiteness, and other aspects of identity that students, teachers, and librarians bring to their work and education, does not disappear when we stop talking about it.

Conclusion: Direct Attacks on Diversity and Their Implications for Libraries

Looking closely at these two prominent examples of conservative opposition to diversity in libraries—one from the small but influential conservative publication *City Paper,* and one from *The New York Times*—is one way of accessing the intellectual underpinning of contemporary book banning and other attacks on libraries. While some analyses, such as Paige Williams' reporting in *The New Yorker* focus on the political forces, and possible political opportunism, behind the movement, libraries often need to address book bans and challenges locally, which may require both policies and responses that address individual challenges on their merits.

Conservative attacks on library collections rely heavily on coded language to discuss marginalized groups and identities. Terms like "woke" and "Critical Race Theory" are deployed strategically to oppose materials that discuss Black identity and experience. Similarly, language that suggests a link between LGBTQIA+ identity and child abuse, such as "groomer" or "pedophile," is used to argue that any depiction of LGBTQIA+ experience is inappropriate or

even "pornographic" for children. While Rufo relies on a Foucauldian genealogical approach to make these counterfactual claims, other members of the right-wing press are even more open about the fact that their use of these slurs is merely a vicious lie made for rhetorical purposes (Gutfeld). It may be more appropriate to understand book challenges that rely on these terms and tropes as challenges to the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion or as attacks on local BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities, rather than as challenges to individual books or to intellectual freedom more generally.

The distinction between challenges directed at values and communities, as opposed to challenges directed at individual titles or even more general political positions, is important on both a theoretical and practical level. The familiar rhetoric and policies that libraries often deploy in defense of intellectual freedom do not effectively address the type of argument we are seeing here—the argument that the experiences of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ people are not appropriate for children, and that in attempting to serve everyone in their communities, libraries somehow violate the rights of White, Christian parents. These attacks on libraries are strategic. They take into account the types of policies and positions that libraries currently have in place, and attempt to use them to force libraries to abandon diverse collections and inspire librarians to self-censor in their collecting and programming.

Returning to Kurtz's *New York Times* piece demonstrates the way library rhetoric can be weaponized against diversity and inclusion. Kurtz repeatedly invokes the library value of neutrality, and uses recent debates within the profession about the place of neutrality as evidence of librarianship's "woke" turn. Using the rhetoric of neutrality, Kurtz offers the seemingly reasonable suggestion of book balancing—for every "woke" book, the library should also collect a title of which Kurtz would approve. However, while this binary approach might make sense

when building a collection of political titles for adults, it is highly problematic in the context that is actually under discussion—the inclusion of diverse titles in children's collections. When dealing with issues of identity and representation, or of historical or scientific fact, balance between political factions is neither an actionable nor an appropriate principle on which to build collections. Whatever one thinks of neutrality as a professional principle, it is hard to imagine how a "one for the blues, one for the reds" approach to book buying would result in a neutral or appealing approach to building a children's collection.

Many have noted the inappropriateness of demands for balance in addressing historical atrocities like slavery and the holocaust (Berryman). But it is also inappropriate to imply that, for example, a book depicting an LGBTQIA+ family represents a political position that needs to be balanced out with a conservative perspective. Framing neutrality in this way quite literally places the full humanity of LGBTQIA+ people up for debate by demanding that their mere presence in the library be countered with a message that argues against that presence. Imagine, for example, how most libraries would respond if a patron demanded that every children's book depicting a straight couple as parents be balanced by a book arguing against heterosexual marriage as an institution.

Kurtz's use of neutrality as a means of discrediting "woke" librarians demonstrates one way in which library rhetoric can be weaponized against libraries and librarians. If neutrality is to continue to be a relevant professional value, it will be because the profession recognizes and articulates that diversity and inclusion are themselves important prerequisites for any authentic form of professional neutrality.

Libraries should not accept the framing that diversity, equity, and inclusion are "woke" or left-wing values, and that therefore the inclusion of diverse authors and perspectives in their

collections is either inappropriately political, or needs to be balanced with right-wing perspectives. There is no "other side" to the existence or experience of any group or individual. Everyone's culture, everyone's experience, can be expressed in a way that is appropriate for children. After all, every culture has families with children.

Recent attacks on libraries have deployed coded terms that, to their intended audience, are rich with implications, of which this article only scratches the surface. Accusations of grooming and child abuse have special resonance for followers of QAnon and other conspiracy theories, but they also resonate with many, both inside and outsider the conservative movement, who have been involved with religious groups that harbor child abusers among their clergy.[4] In that context I want to return, perhaps surprisingly, to the phrase "Wu-Tang is for the children." At least for me, "Wu-Tang is for the children" still resonates after more than 20 years, because it is also rich with implications, and deeply evocative of a commitment to encouraging children to engage, deeply and authentically, with the world around them. It may even be the guiding principle that libraries need in these difficult times. It captures the liberatory possibility of powerful, direct, and meaningful advocacy for diversity and inclusion in libraries, specifically in service of children and parents, in the face of coordinated attacks on those critical values. While there are no easy solutions in this complex situation, doubling and tripling down on our commitment to antiracism and diversity is the only way for libraries to protect our services and the communities that rely on them.

[4] In the spirit of being open about my own positionality, I grew up in the Catholic Church in Boston during the Cardinalship of Bernard Law, a period that was rife with well-documented, institutionalized abuse of children. I personally find baseless accusations of "grooming" made for political gain shocking, offensive, and embarrassing for our shared culture.

For me, "Wu-Tang is for the children" points the way to a library that embraces not only diversity of individuals but diversity of culture—to a library so full of rich, textured, complicated texts and performances, so full of drag performers, musicians, and thinkers, that there aren't enough Proud Boys in the country to shut it down. It points the way to articulating that children are readers with their own preferences, passions, and rights. It points the way to articulating, at a personal and professional level, that inclusivity and antiracism are prerequisites for intellectual freedom, not competing values. We don't win by compromising our values—we win by embracing them with ever greater commitment and determination.

Coda

I began this article at my child's bedtime and, true to the rhythms of toddler life, I will end it in the same place. The last part of bedtime is a song, a ritual that has morphed from lullabies to something much closer to pub singing. I take requests, and the songs often come from the day's listening—traditional Irish songs like "Eileen Óg," children's classics like Carole King's "Pierre," and even clanging rock songs like "Big" by Fontaines D.C. It is important to me, as a parent, that she encounters as wide a variety of music, of books, of sounds and ideas, as possible. The diversity enriches her world, and it leads her to unexpected ideas, connections, and questions.

I want to end this article the same way my toddler ends her day—with a song. While my own child hasn't quite clicked with Wu-Tang yet, she has adopted "Can I Kick It" by A Tribe Called Quest as her current most-requested song. In the final lines of that song, Phife Dawg extends an invitation to everyone, regardless of age—minor or major—to experience the rhythm, and by extension the culture, that the song embodies and communicates.

A rhythm recipe that you'll savor

Doesn't matter if you're minor or major

Yes, the tribe of the game, rhythm player

As you inhale like a breath of fresh air (A Tribe Called Quest)

Works Cited

"Altmetric – Drag Pedagogy: The Playful Practice of Queer Imagination in Early Childhood Overview of Attention for Article Published in Curriculum Inquiry, January 2021." *Routledge Taylor & Francis Group*, 29 May 2023, https://routledge.altmetric.com/details/98777121/twitter.

A Tribe Called Quest. Lyrics to "Can I Kick It?" *Genius*, 2023, genius.com/A-tribe-called-quest-can-i-kick-it-lyrics.

Berryman, Luke. "How Holocaust Denial and Other Bogus Claims Are Poisoning Schools." *Education Week*, 14 July 2022, www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-how-holocaust-denial-and-other-bogus-claims-are-poisoning-schools/2022/07.

Badu, Erykah. Lyrics to "The Healer." *Genius*, 2023, genius.com/Erykah-badu-the-healer-lyrics.

@ConceptualJames (James Lindsay, now with extra salt). "Since we've put it back into the news, I want to go through the Groomer Clown Story Hour issue by doing a thread on an academic paper they wrote about it themselves. (Will unfold as a reread the paper) https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03626784.2020.1864621." *Twitter*, 20 Dec. 2022, twitter.com/ConceptualJames/status/1605338013340352512.

@DougJBalloon (New York Times Pitchbot). "Donald Trump, who I do not support, was the most progressive president of my lifetime by Glenn Greenwald." *Twitter*, 10 June 2021, twitter.com/DougJBalloon/status/1403098652332146695.

Ethics and Public Policy Center. eppc.org/. Accessed 8 Jan. 2023.

Goff, Phillip Atiba, Matthew Christian Jackson, Brooke Allison Lewis Di Leone, Carmen Marie Culotta, and Natalie Ann DiTomasso. "The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of

Dehumanizing Black Children." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 106, no. 4, pp. 526–545. *APA PsycNet*, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035663.

Goñi-Lessan, Ana. "Hillsdale Cuts Ties with Tallahassee Classical, Revokes Curriculum License after Art Outcry." *Tallahassee Democrat*, 30 Mar. 2023, www.tallahassee.com/story/news/local/2023/03/30/hillsdale-drops-tallahassee-classical-affiliation-over-david-outcry/70064373007/.

Grimm, Alexandra. "Problematic Expectations: Using Close Reading to Surface Emotional Labor in School Librarian Job Postings." *Journal of Library Administration*, vol. 62, no. 3, Apr. 2022, pp. 334–358. *Taylor & Francis Online*, https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2022.2043690.

Gutfeld, Greg. "'Groomer' Is the Right's Answer to 'Racist.'" *Fox News*, 13 May 2022, www.foxnews.com/opinion/greg-gutfeld-groomer-rights-answer-racist.

Jenny, Carole, Thomas A. Roesler, and Kimberly L. Poyer. "Are Children at Risk for Sexual Abuse by Homosexuals?" *Pediatrics*, vol. 94, no. 1, July 1994, pp. 41–44. *AAP Publications*, https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.94.1.41.

Keenan, Harper, and Lil Miss Hot Mess. "Drag Pedagogy: The Playful Practice of Queer Imagination in Early Childhood." *Curriculum Inquiry*, vol. 50, no. 5, Oct. 2020, pp. 440–461. *Taylor & Francis Online*, https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2020.1864621.

Kim, Juliana. "A Principal Is Fired, Invited to Italy after Students Are Shown Michelangelo's 'David.'" *NPR*, 27 Mar. 2023, www.npr.org/2023/03/27/1166079167/tallahassee-classical-michelangelo-david-principal-fired.

Kurtz, Stanley. "The Battle for the Soul of the Library." *The New York Times*, 24 Feb. 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/opinion/battle-library-neutrality.html.

———. “Don’t Ban Woke School-Library Books, Balance Them.” *National Review*, 13 Dec. 2021, www.nationalreview.com/corner/dont-ban-woke-school-library-books-balance-them/.

———. “Stopping K–12 Indoctrination Is Right.” *National Review*, 6 July 2021, www.nationalreview.com/corner/stopping-k-12-indoctrination-is-right/.

“Libraries Respond: National Day of Racial Healing.” *American Library Association*, 4 Jan. 2017, www.ala.org/advocacy/diversity/libraries-respond/dayofhealing.

“Most Read Articles from Curriculum Inquiry.” *Taylor & Francis Online*, www.tandfonline.com/action/showMostReadArticles?journalCode=rcui20. Accessed 29 May 2023.

“NBCUniversal News Group Launches 14-Part Digital Series on Racial Healing.” *W.K. Kellogg Foundation*, 1 Dec. 2022, www.wkkf.org/news-and-media/article/2022/12/nbcuniversal-news-group-launches-14-part-digital-series-on-racial-healing.

Nguyễn, Ann Thúy, and Maya Pendleton. “Recognizing Race in Language: Why We Capitalize ‘Black’ and ‘White.’” *Center for the Study of Social Policy*, 23 Mar. 2020, cssp.org/2020/03/recognizing-race-in-language-why-we-capitalize-black-and-white/.

Romano, Aja. “A History of ‘Wokeness.’” *Vox*, 9 Oct. 2020, www.vox.com/culture/21437879/stay-woke-wokeness-history-origin-evolution-controversy.

Rufo, Christopher F. “The Real Story Behind Drag Queen Story Hour.” *City Journal*, 23 Oct. 2022, www.city-journal.org/the-real-story-behind-drag-queen-story-hour.

———. "Drag Queen Story Hour's Radical Origins and the Subversive Sexualization of Our Kids." *Fox News*, 28 Oct. 2022, www.foxnews.com/opinion/drag-queen-story-hours-radical-origins-subversive-sexualization-kids.

Williams, Paige. "The Right-Wing Mothers Fuelling the School-Board Wars." *The New Yorker*, 31 Oct. 2022, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/11/07/the-right-wing-mothers-fuelling-the-school-board-wars.

Watson, Elijah C. "The Origin of Woke: How Erykah Badu and Georgia Anne Muldrow Sparked the 'Stay Woke' Era." *Okayplayer*, 27 Feb. 2018, www.okayplayer.com/originals/what-does-woke-mean-history-origins-erykah-badu-georgia-muldrow.html.

W.K. Kellogg Foundation. 2023, ww.wkkf.org/. Accessed 8 Jan. 2023.

Wolfgram, Derek, Chantel L. Walker, James Allen Davis Jr., Lalitha Nataraj, and Sonia Falcón. "Re-Weaving the Culture through Inclusive Norms in the Public Library." *Public Library Association*, 3 June 2021, www.ala.org/pla/education/onlinelearning/webinars/ondemand/inclusive.

"wu is about the children." *YouTube*, uploaded by gerblonowicz, 4 Jan. 2008, www.youtube.com/watch?v=_V0fLG-seIw.