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Book Challenges: A Polemic on Taking Back Our Joy

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As we, two Black librarians and children's literature scholars, write this issue introduction, book challenges targeting marginalized voices in youth books and removals from libraries and classrooms are in yet another year of unprecedented intensification (Meehan et al.). They are flanked on one side by outrageous personal attacks on individual librarians and educators (Jensen), and on the other by frighteningly familiar trends in legislative attempts to erase BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ rights and histories (*PEN America*). They are fueled by coordinated campaigns screaming for the supposed protection of children that is somehow served by silencing and erasing some young readers and eroding the rights of them all. We find ourselves at a loss for words, perhaps because there is little left to say.

What more can we say when book censorship has occurred, on just this continent, longer than the United States has existed, and worldwide for as long as humanity has had books (Sheehan and Tolin; Boissoneault)? When books featuring Black and queer stories that were challenged 50 years ago still sit atop the Most Challenged Books lists today? When century-old rhetoric of narrowly and conveniently defined "inappropriateness" still shields the bigoted intentions of those who see young readers' knowledge and empathy as a threat?

As this issue on book challenges has come together, what can we say as librarians, as academics, as educators? We say:

Our Stories Matter and Liberate Readers!

Kim Reichenbach Krutka in "Arguing Book Banning" illustrates how using Critical Race Theory as a lens provides valuable insights into the dynamics of power and oppression within library settings, particularly in the context of debates over book banning; they call for librarians and library institutions to adopt an inclusionary and liberatory ideology that challenges systems

of oppression and prioritizes marginalized voices. Stories, and reading them, matter, as Emily Knox writes, “I absolutely believe this: The people who try to ban books truly believe that books are powerful, that reading is a powerful practice, that reading can change who you are” (Wilson).

We won’t stop telling our stories!

In “Dear George,” Chelsea Rae Kent and Jilian M. Kneeland explore the intersection of love and pedagogy, drawing upon various critical and queer theoretical frameworks that discuss love as a force for liberation and justice to offer a compelling content analysis of George M. Johnson’s *All Boys Aren’t Blue* and its conceptualizations of love as a means of reclaiming power, questioning societal norms, and fostering radical self-acceptance. As Johnson themselves says,

When I heard my book was banned, I laughed. I understood the severity of it, but I just laughed. How dare you ban my story? One thing it has done is activated me in this fight for education and our future. Banning the book won’t ban the story—and trust that the story will be told. (“Eight Authors”)

Train up the children and they shall lead!

Sanjuana Rodriguez and Sandra Osorio in “Censorship in Early Childhood” analyze banned Latine picture books and highlight the important themes addressed in the texts. They discuss the importance of educators engaging children in critical conversations about social issues through literature, particularly in the context of increased book banning and challenges, while challenging the misconception that children are unable to comprehend or engage with

topics like racism, immigration, LGBTQ+ issues, and identity, despite expansive evidence to the contrary. As journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones tells us,

Finding joy in the midst of these book bans is easy because, although the proliferation of these bans reflects a dangerous suppressive and antidemocratic surge across our country, communities and particularly young people are fighting back, are demanding a freedom to read and learn and be uncomfortable. (“Eight Authors”)

Be the change we need to see in the world!

In “Everyone’s Culture,” Nick Szydlowski analyzes the rhetorical strategies and coded language deployed in conservative attacks on marginalized identities and experiences in library collections. They encourage libraries to disrupt the weaponization of misconceptions about library neutrality by defending and reemphasizing a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Youth author Jacqueline Woodson encourages this when she writes,

No one has ever been able to take away our folks’ joy. I find talking about the ridiculousness of the bans sometimes brings laughter, in the ways our people have learned to laugh to keep from crying. We do what we need to do: we resist, we inform, we amplify, we write. (“Eight Authors”)

We want to keep experiencing, expanding, and promoting the joy and power about which Nikole, George, Jaqueline, and Emily write. We need your help, to help our professions, take back our joy! As we resist, we must be steadfast in our efforts, confident in our knowledge, and joyful in the stories and information that can literally and figuratively change our hearts, minds, and conditions. We do not have the luxury to have these gifts and opportunities taken from us.

Our opponents are organized and fierce in their misinformation and disinformation, and we must stop talking about what we should be doing—we need to DO SOMETHING.

We cannot and will not be silent!

Our special issues begins, and should end, with a powerful and personal piece by Louisiana librarian Amanda Jones. Amanda is a prime example of the fight so many librarians are battling in their libraries. In “I Will Not Be Silent,” Amanda shares not only her personal experience facing backlash for speaking out against censorship, but also the broader patterns of those who oppose censorship facing baseless accusations and attacks from their own communities. In order to outmatch the insidious tactics being used by extremists to spread fear and doubt, she calls for librarians and other proponents of intellectual freedom to unify, organize, and educate in their efforts to combat censorship. Please read her experience, dive deeper into the issues and research, and then return to Amanda’s words, which serve as a call to action for all of us.

We hope you take inspiration from our brilliant author colleagues and heed the call from Amanda Jones. The fight is not over, but it is within our reach to take back our books, stories, and joy.

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