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Censorship in Literature

Introduction

When asked about the concept of censorship, the common perspective to which people jump is that of a dystopian climate in which the expression of the people is restricted through various means and by various criteria. Censorship is the process through which information or ideals are obscured or removed from public view for the purposes of control, security, or protection, so in some sense, this perspective is not hyperbolic. Its most well-known usage is through its use by oppressive forces and totalitarian governments in order to silence dissenters or to restrict the knowledge of the public for control. This definition has been at the center of the apprehension displayed by opponents of censorship as the definitions of free speech and freedom of expression continue to expand. The concern for the overreach of censorship has been inflated not only by comparative experiences found in modern governments, but through media of many kinds that use exaggerated instances of censorship to depict the slippery slope down which an allowance of censorship of any kind is expected to go. This fear is notably prominent among the more vocal members of their respective political groups, with each citing the other as the cornerstone on which the foundations of the freedoms we cherish would be brought down.

The fear of complete censorship pervades society as we steadily approach a world in which we are often at a disadvantage by a government that is backed by the continual and covert influence of the wealthy while claiming to serve the common people. History is also riddled with

instances in which entire histories of communities have been wiped out for the sake of domination by the invading culture, a particularly egregious form of censorship. It is easy to see why censorship's most detrimental form has become infamous, and why it has come to represent the entirety of the concept in the minds of many people.

I argue that there is a benefit to censorship. This benefit is that, for many marginalized communities, censorship presents an opportunity to be protected and to be heard above the cacophony of voices from the majority culture. Members of marginalized communities, such as people of color and those who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, can be harmed by misrepresentations, lack of representation, and by the inclusion and circulation of material that talks over them with the goal of perpetuating harmful ideals. These concerns create a new fissure in the conversation on censorship and presents new challenges for both the writers and the distributors of the content. The question expands to inquire about the concept of representation, what qualifies as "good" representation as opposed to "bad," who is allowed to create and distribute it, and who is in charge of determining the answers to all of these questions.

As a concept, censorship is not negative. It is not something that can be completely and effectively enforced, but it is also not something that should be completely removed for fear of developing into something more sinister. For the purposes of this paper, we will analyze the concept of censorship through the lens of the library system. As the primary methods through which people of all classes can obtain literature for free, the library and the staff therein have an obligation to ensure that the material on the shelves is representative of the community that it serves. The librarian in charge of managing the collection has the responsibility of discerning which material to keep or which to reject, and why to keep or reject it. In addition to reflecting the wishes of the community, librarians are expected to be knowledgeable of not only reading

trends, but the matters that impact their community and to be cognizant of how their choices for their collection may reflect that.

Types of Censorship

Censorship exists in a number of forms. As mentioned previously, the most-well known form of censorship is that which is done by a force in a leadership position with the intent of regulating the spread of information for the purposes of control or security. Many assert that its primary purpose is to exercise power and control over the population (Knox 269). In her article on opposing censorship, Emily Knox identifies both the active and passive processes of censorship. She further breaks down the active processes into four identifiable actions. These actions are redaction, restriction, relocation, and removal. Redaction is the process of marking something out without removing the work; restriction is the placing of a limitation on who may have access to the work; relocation is the act of moving the work from one accessible area to another that may provide less access to the original group; and removal is the revocation of the work from a collection or a curriculum (Knox 269). These active actions make up what is known as direct censorship, which is more broadly defined as the act of removing or modifying material in order to remove it from circulation. Moeller and Becnel identify instances in which librarians engaged in direct censorship by intentionally obscuring images or text that they found objectionable (redacting) in order to keep the literature on the shelf and accessible to the public (Moeller & Becnel 520).

Knox's passive processes of censorship are also known as self-censorship. Self-censorship could be said to be the most commonly practiced form of censorship, as many people do it in their everyday lives without noticing the difference. It is the act of regulating one's own

actions in order to avoid disapproval. In the context of literature, this can take the form of writers refusing to write about topics on which they have controversial opinions or in the form of publishers and librarians choosing not to publish or shelf the work of writers who produce controversial writing. For some writers within marginalized communities, self-censorship can present an internal conflict: they are torn between censoring themselves in some respects in order to relate to or to become popular with a wider audience and being fully authentic to express themselves in the fullest form. For Canadian writer Sunny Drake, the choice of whether or not to include a sexually explicit scene in one of his plays caused him to evaluate the purpose of self-censorship (Drake 122). This evaluation resulted in his decision that his connection with his underage audience was more important at the time, demonstrating the role that autonomy plays in order to make censorship a feasible support for marginalized communities (123).

In recent years, another form of self-censorship has arisen with the widespread use of the internet, particularly social media. This form occurs when a public figure is found to be of harmful opinions or habits or is found to have committed objectionable behaviors. It may also take the form of blocking or deleting people, websites, or applications that present violent, misleading, erroneous, or bigoted material, or even choosing to abstain from people that promote these things. While it is a form of self-censorship, it is known more colloquially as “cancelling,” with the general populace that agree with these methods being known, sometimes in a derogatory manner, as “cancel culture.” Many fierce proponents of free speech decry this form of self-censorship, citing the often-ruinous effects that it can have even on those who are unaware of their error (Spurr 10). In fact, some cite this effect as the slippery slope that past censorship efforts have created, calling it “the anti-intellectual, liberty-denying environment, on steroids, to which we have been reduced by the current curse of censorship” (11). Many prominent figures

have found themselves and their longstanding careers brought down by a combination of a simple mistake and the refusal to either learn from it or the inability to be forgiven for it. On the other hand, this powerful form of self-censorship has helped to bring attention to hostile or incompetent individuals within leadership or troubling perspectives that might have otherwise gone unnoticed before they began to affect marginalized communities.

Background

The concept of censorship within literature has had a long history that predates the advent of the internet. Literature has been the primary force through which information has been conveyed to the public. Powerful messages of rebellion and political unrest have been interwoven even within fictional narratives. In addition to providing entertainment, literature was expected to give people a glimpse into worlds that reflected or existed alongside their own.

In the United States, the argument over the proliferation of certain material within libraries sparked the debate between what librarians should and should not permit to get into the hands of their audiences. The American Library Association (ALA) was founded on October 6, 1876, in response to the growing need for regulation with regard to the literature provided to the public. In his article “Reexamining the Origins of the Adoption of the ALA’s Library Bill of Rights,” Douglas Campbell cites the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act as being the true impetus for the ALA’s unification against censorship. This act, which initially began as an attempt to raise tariffs to protect farmers against agricultural imports from overseas, gradually grew through the debate between Senator Reed Smoot of Utah and Senator Bronson Cutting of New Mexico to include the revisions of the contents of books based on morality in an attempt to quell the possibility of rebellion for the increasing tariffs. Campbell states that the librarians unified against this act

viewed it as “an antidemocratic idea and contrary to the idea of intellectual freedom and self-improvement” (45). The result was an address from the ALA which called for the “free and unlimited access to books, including novels of all kinds” (46). However, while librarians had united on the concept of censorship, they remained divided on what this freedom entailed. They debated on whether or not popular literature should be included in their collections, with some arguing that “they primarily should encourage the reading of serious literature” (46). The response to this was to develop the Library’s Bill of Rights, which dictated that collection management among libraries should be left to the determination of the librarians but should represent all sides of an issue (Wiegand 109).

Today, many librarians pride themselves on being a point of access for information for many. At the same time, they find themselves torn between the prospect of representing all sides of an issue and protecting communities. Originally, libraries debated over whether or not fiction should be included in library collections. Over time, the library system has found a growing need to balance the needs of the public with the potential for challenges against public perspective and the librarian’s own professionalism and ethos (Moeller & Becnel 516). With the evolution of some genres, this continues to be an issue today. One such genre is that of the graphic novel and whether it should be included in the collections of school libraries as having any educational value. A graphic novel is a form of literature that uses visuals to tell a story. Because the medium relies heavily on visual art rather than maintaining the focus on literacy alone, public opinion on their capacity for being relevant sources of information to justify their existence in school libraries has been mixed. Because some library administrators have found that some graphic novels do add value to their collections or that they have received requests for the inclusion of these novels, it puts them in a position in which they find themselves needing to engage in

censorship. Librarian may choose to do this by keeping private, restricted spaces in which they can regulate who has access to the material and lower the risk of being challenged while allowing the material to remain accessible (Moeller & Becnel 516).

There have also been a number of court cases in the latter 1900s that further refined the legal freedom given to librarians when selecting material. *Right to Read Defense Committee v. School Committee of the City of Chelsea* (1978) centered on the removal of a poetry anthology called *Male and Female Under 18* from a high school library; *Minarcini v. Strongsville City School District* (1976) saw the removal of *Cat's Cradle* and *Catch-22* from the school library and curriculum of the school district in Strongsville, Ohio; *Case v. Unified School District* (1995) featured a challenge to the removal of *Annie on My Mind* from a Kansas school library. One of the most notable is *Board of Education v. Pico* (1982), in which a New York school district removed several books from the libraries due to the content which had been deemed inappropriate because of anti-Christian and anti-Semitic sentiments. In this case, the court found that the removal of the books violated the First Amendment Rights of the students and that school boards cannot remove books from their shelves purely on the basis of the objection to a viewpoint or idea while simultaneously finding the boards responsible for the ongoing educational enrichment of students through collection maintenance (McLaughlin & Hendricks 9). This constant duality places librarians in a precarious situation in which they must evaluate closely what is pertinent to the wider conversation and what is not, what has objective value to the collection and what does not, and what, if it were to be removed, would constitute a violation of rights.

How Censorship Plays a Role for Marginalized Communities

The need for representation for marginalized communities has become a topic of importance. Even more important has been the need for representation that accurately and fairly reflects the experiences of these communities. This is another area in which the freedom of speech as interpreted by the ALA's Library Bill of Rights and the need for collection maintenance creates a divide within the community. At the base of creativity and expression, we argue that writers should have the freedom to express themselves and their opinions however they choose in order to promote thought among the general public. The same holds true for publishers and librarians, both of which are responsible for the dissemination of the writer's work to the public on a massive scale. However, in the case of marginalized communities such as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), LGBTQIA+, and the myriad combinations of these groups, uninformed and negative opinions can be used to garner support against them that puts them at a further disadvantage within an already uneven system.

Both sides of the issue of censorship can negatively impact a community. In the case of *Sund v. City of Wichita Falls, Texas* (2000), library administrator Linda Hughes was challenged for the inclusion of two children's books, *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy's Roommate*. Both of these books had been requested by the small number of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the more conservative community, and so Hughes had opted to have two copies of each purchased and shelved. The decisions sparked outrage in Wichita Falls. City church officials and parents challenged the books to have them removed from the shelves. In a study on the distribution of LGBTQIA+ literature within small communities, it was found that many librarians in these communities were limited by their access to resources, their desire for positive public relations, and their own understanding of this these communities (Steele 110). Despite the growing reception of literature that represents these communities and the push for the inclusion (Jones et

al. 87, 95), we find that literature centering LGBTQIA+ individuals or with similar themes is still at an elevated risk for censorship (Steele 109). This is especially true for children's literature despite the fact that some children nowadays may come from homes in which they have two parents who are the same sex.

On the other side of the argument are those who utilize self-censorship in order to protect these communities from harmful material. Library director Krista McDonald of Miami University recounted her experience with a print copy of a book that contained negative perspectives on transgender people. When the print copy had been challenged by a faculty member, the request was declined due to the perception that the removal of the work would constitute an inappropriate application of censorship. In another similar instance, an electronic copy of the book was found to have been purchased but had not been in circulation, and therefore the same faculty member was able to have that one removed. McDonald asserts that there is a "gray area" to censorship in that while it is beneficial to present both sides of educational arguments, derogatory opinions about marginalized groups do not constitute something that warrants another side to the opinion at the expense of these people (McDonald). The argument could also be made that such opinions bring no new material to the conversation on LGBTQIA+ rights and identity, and therefore are too outdated to be considered relevant to the educational conversation, even with regard to the historical context.

In 2021, when six books by Theodor "Dr. Seuss" Geisel were removed from circulation by his own company, the decision was blamed on "cancel culture" and oversensitivity. Geisel had been a political cartoonist in his life whose work reflected the opinions and perspectives of his time in addition to his own personal opinions and perspectives. Some of these leaked over into his book as well. The "Seuss Six" refers to the titles *And to Think I Saw It on Mulberry*

Street, *McElligot's Pool*, *If I Ran the Zoo*, *Scrambled Eggs Super!*, *On Beyond Zebra!*, and *The Cat's Quizzer*. These books had been revised a few times during Geisel's lifetime to update their content, but in 2021, they were found to have extremely outdated and racist depictions and lines. The company opted to remove them from circulation altogether. Although many of the other more notable and popular titles such as *Green Eggs and Ham* and *The Cat in the Hat* remain in circulation to this day, public outcry arose over the perceived violation of childhood nostalgia and freedom of speech. Those who disagreed with the decision believed that the removal constituted one of the most heinous applications of censorship, disregarding the fact that another Seuss title, *The Lorax*, had once been banned in 1989 by a school in California because of its negative portrayal of the logging industry. Some librarians assert that the pruning of resources does not constitute censorship, but rather that it illustrates conscious and professional collection maintenance and a sense of social responsibility. Some opponents argue that even the racist depictions within the books have some educational value to readers about what beliefs were popular in the eras that these books were written. In fact, according to Susan K. Burke in her article "Social Tolerance and Racist Materials in Public Libraries," some writers feel that the access to the information from an early age can help children to build a stronger moral system, "to be able to discard negative depictions and stand by morals and values taught by their parents" (370). This, of course, bears the assumption that the morals and values taught by the parents are not intolerant themselves. In her article on the removal of the Seuss book, Annette Lamb inherently corroborates the perspective of McDonald by stating that "librarians make available the widest possible diversity of views and expressions. However, libraries are also safe spaces that support inclusion and respect for diversity" (15). While the books are still accessible for those who wish to view them, they are not as widely available as before thanks to the self-

censorship efforts of the publishers and librarians in the absence of the writer himself. In "Sanitizing American Library History: Reflections of a Library Historian," Wayne A. Wiegand gives the example of the film *The Speaker,* which sparked another conversation in 2014 about the application of censorship based on the benefit versus harm done to the community represented. The film divided members of the ALA between those "who argued the film represented a good way to generate discussion about the importance of defending intellectual freedom" and those "who said the film's subject matter was probably racist, certainly highly insensitive" (Wiegand 114). For the writer, publishers, and especially the librarians, the decision comes down to whether or not they find more value in the writer's freedom of speech than in the safety of the community being depicted.

Opposition to Censorship

The original purpose of the ALA's Library Bill of Rights and its promise to protect intellectual freedom is often knowingly and unknowingly cited by those who oppose the concept of censorship in its entirety. The opposition is often felt the strongest with writers, who decry limitations on their method of expression. In her piece "Blot, Erase, Delete," British author Hilary Mantel expresses her view on what she deems to be the pointlessness of censorship. For Mantel, the existence of the internet removes the capability of truly hiding anything (Mantel 66), a viewpoint that she shares with Emily Knox in her piece on opposing censorship when she states plainly "censorship in an age of ubiquitous access seems to be an entirely futile act" (Knox 269). Mantel likens the experience to a period of time in which she lived in Saudi Arabia, in which she recounts that a number of things there had been censored for public safety, including imported newspapers having sections redacted before being made available for purchase (67).

With regard to the protection of marginalized communities through censorship of harmful material, Mantel seems to believe that “oppressors don’t just want to do their deed, they want to take a bow: they want their victims to sing their praises” (68). Those who contribute to the oppressive narrative wish to gain as much attention as possible while doing so, and no amount of censorship would restrict or correct their viewpoints nor protect members of oppressed communities from being targeted by them.

Other writers and reviewers hold the staunch opinion that restriction on literature opens the door to restriction of important methods of thought. After all, it was just such a restriction that Campbell surmised prompted the application of the Library Bill of Rights and united librarians against censorship. Some believe that if censorship were to be taken “too far” in the way that some other governments and systems have taken it, it could result in a society in which writers themselves are the targets of censorship, enforced to an inhumane degree by government authorities rather than by the general public. There are countless recollections of writers who have been imprisoned or persecuted for their work. Many of these works are meant to oppose the government or expose unfair social systems or beliefs (Jose & Rakasekaran 300).

It is important to note that marginalized communities are also referred to as minority communities because of the position they hold in society. They make up a relatively small percentage of the populace and hold a comparatively small amount of wealth or social status. Although upward mobility has been increasing for many members of this community, they continue to remain at a disadvantage due to embedded social structures in our system meant to keep the majority culture at the helm. While representation for BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ individuals continues to grow in spite of challenges (Jones et al. 87), this representation is still subject in a large way to the evaluation of non-BIPOC and non-LGBTQIA+ culture. This places

the onus on publishers and librarians as the distributors of the material to be socially aware and capable of evaluating the material as well as its impact on these communities.

Conclusion

Whether we want to admit it or not, humanity has always engaged in some form of censorship. However, our history with it at its worst has caused many of us to become wary of its use and effects. All who produce art have some responsibility to the public in addition to their own need for self-expression, and that responsibility is to contribute to the wider narrative in any amount and while causing the least damage. Some hold immovable opinions on the concept of censorship, finding it to be a direct opponent to the freedoms that many of us hold dear. It may be difficult for some people to see how their own self-expression may limit the expression of others within these communities. Censorship can be used as a protective tool to not only provide safe spaces for these communities to flourish, but avenues through which we can grow as a society with the exchange of information and evolution of thought rather than to be weighted down with outdated stereotypes and illogical or bigoted thinking. The application of censorship has the opposite effect of what many of its opponents believe. It can be said that censorship, when wielded correctly, can provide a kind of cleanse to the conversation surrounding the issue. By removing "noise" in the form of outdated and irrelevant information, it can keep these conversations going in earnest.

In referring back to Sunny Drake's work and his choice on when to include and when to exclude the sexually explicit material in his play for the sake of freedom of expression, he was presented with two outcomes. In removing the scene from the play out of fear, he found that his adult audiences, who had anticipated the scene, felt that they had been missing a crucial part of

Drake's experience. Drake concluded that "there's…a danger in becoming so fixated on particular gains that we lose sight of our bigger dreams by censoring ourselves down to those aspects deemed acceptable at any given time" (Drake 122). However, he found that, when the material was to be presented to a group of Indigenous schoolchildren, the removal of the explicit parts did not hinder their capability of grasping other core concepts that were equally as pertinent to Drake's work. More importantly, he found that he was able to connect with a wider audience when he chose to censor himself at the "right" time (123). Drake's play is an instance in which we see how the same work can be affected and effective when applied in diverse ways.

The question then becomes who is to make the discernment as to whether or not a work qualifies as being relevant to the wider narrative surrounding marginalized communities. The answer to this is, simply put, members of those communities. This would be done with assistance from allies in majority communities, who would be expected to both be educated in the issues affecting the communities they support and would understand when their voices are needed and when these same voices are needed to back down. This, of course, implies that there is to be a form of self-censorship that will be practiced. While there would be an expectation placed on writers and publishers, the onus falls on libraries because of their free access to the public. The freedoms of speech and expression would need to be evaluated on the basis of consent of the individuals as well as the knowledge exercised by the community. We must refer again to the case *Sund v. City of Wichita Falls, Texas*, and how the lack of education among the people about the LGBTQIA+ community resulted in the denial of access to literature that could have helped children with some affiliation to that small community to find representation in the same way that children with two straight parents are often able to.

Unfortunately, it is likely to be impossible for librarians to consolidate the need for the freedom of speech with the public's general fear of the slippery slope involved with censorship. Librarians are held in a position in which they need to balance their own morality and professionalism with a need to remain accessible to the public and favored in order to gain funding. Fortunately, there is more than one way to engage in censorship outside simple removal or refusal to purchase. Even with the looming threat of challenges, librarians still have a good deal of freedom when it comes to their selection of materials to shelve. There is some hope that as time passes, the conversation surrounding marginalized communities will become less inundated by louder majority voices demanding the same chance to speak that they have had for years. With recent years seeing the growing rate of literature written by and centering BIPOC and LGBTQIA+, there may come a time when librarians will not need to concern themselves with censoring as the public will understand how to do that themselves. Until then, marginalized communities should continue to be of significant importance to the conversation on censorship, and more effort should be placed on the education of the public on matters affecting these communities.

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