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SLIS Notes: Censorship Turbulent Times¹

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Just this past year in 2021, the American Library Association (ALA) had to release a statement in response to an increase in censorship of materials centered on LGBTQIA+ issues and books by Black authors, Indigenous authors, or other people of color. The statement in its entirety is found here: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/statement-regarding-censorship>. The statement reaffirms that ALA and its Executive Board, Divisions, Roundtables, and other units stand firm in the freedom to read and against censorship. One paragraph of the statement specifically focuses on the libraries instead of the association:

“Libraries manifest the promises of the First Amendment by making available the widest possible range of viewpoints, opinions, and ideas, so that every person has the opportunity to freely read and consider information and ideas regardless of their content or the viewpoint of the author. This requires the professional expertise of librarians who work in partnership with their communities to curate collections that serve the information needs of all their users.” (ALA, 2021).

What does it mean to manifest something? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it means several things. While all of them have some similarities, perhaps these two best fit what the American Library Association was trying to convey: “To make (a quality, fact, etc.) evident to the eye or to the understanding” and to “display (a quality, condition, feeling, etc.) by action or behaviour; to give evidence of possessing, reveal the presence of, evince.” (OED, 2022). Another word to clarify the libraries’ role could be **embody**—libraries and librarians need to embody, exemplify, make obvious by action and behavior their support of intellectual freedom and anti-censorship so that all users can find themselves in the shelves of the library.

For the last thirty years, 1990-2019, books have continued to be challenged for a variety of reasons with violence, sexually explicit content, and

offensive language usually being the top reasons (Aucoin, 2022). Chart 1 provides a look at the top 10 challenged books from the State of American Libraries from 2015-2020 and shows that the top three reported reasons for challenges are homosexuality/LGBTQ/transgender topics, themes, and characters; use of racist language, offensive language, and profanity; and sexual explicit materials (Rosa, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019; Zalusky 2020; 2021).

Traditionally, as seen in Graph 2, libraries have faced challenges to materials and services most frequently from parents and library patrons (Rosa, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019; Zalusky 2020; 2021). Elected officials or the government, on average, were responsible for 3.5% of the challenges from 2015 to 2020. However, 2021 and 2022 have been fraught with libraries and schools across the nation facing government interference and demands of censorship over topics dealing with race and LGBTQ topics.

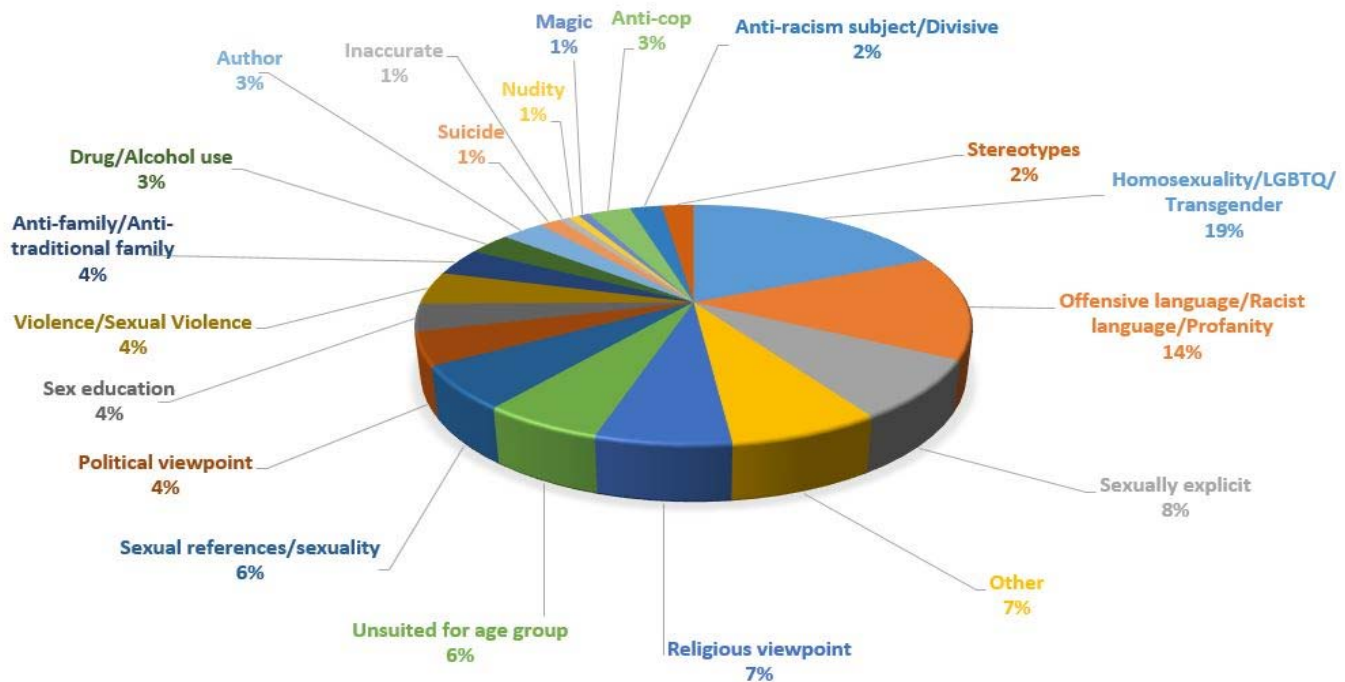
Multiple states have passed laws to restrict educational materials and lessons on race and others have proposed laws at various stages (2022, Legal Insurrection Foundation). Here in the state of Mississippi, a mayor holds the library’s budget hostage since the materials do not match his *own personal* religious beliefs (Garner, 2022), and another state official has voiced support for banning books from the Anti-Racism Reading Shelf program of the Mississippi Humanities Council (Pittman, 2022). These battles with government entities will no doubt play out in a court of law. Censorship by the government is unconstitutional and freedom of expression cases are historically determined by “content neutrality”-- the government cannot limit expression just because any listener, or even the majority of a community, is offended by its content,” and by an “expression may be restricted only if it will clearly cause direct and imminent harm to an important societal interest” (ACLU, 2022).

¹ Reprinted from *Mississippi Libraries*, 85(1), 11-13.

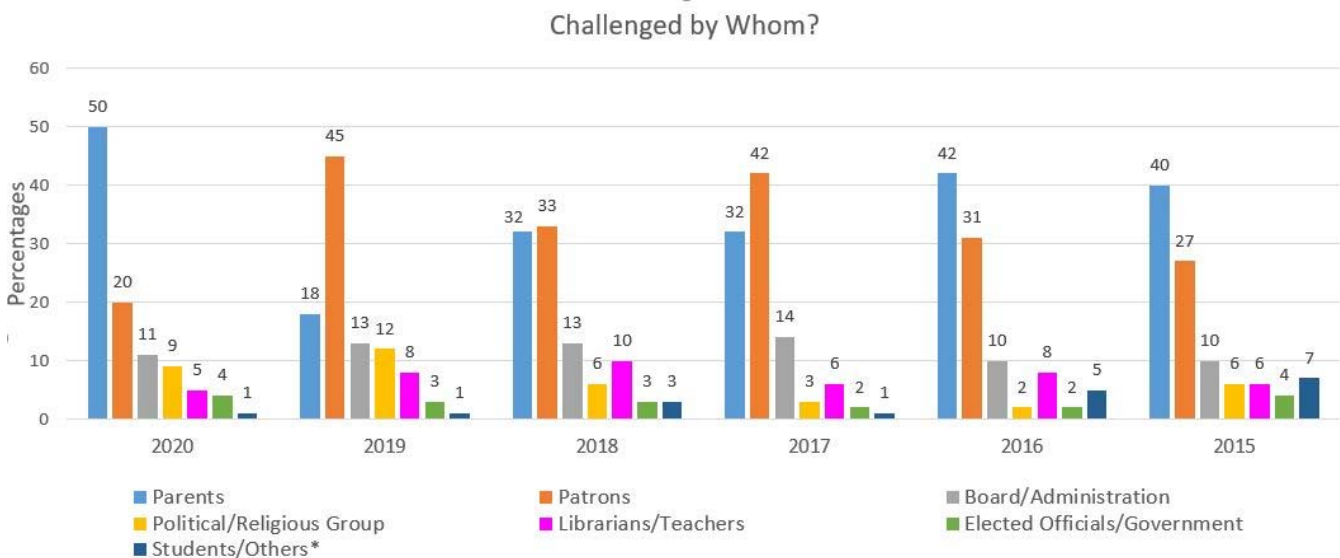
Censorship and banning of books have a long history with the courts and the United States Government. James Joyce's *Ulysses* was banned for 12 years before it was permitted to be published after the US District Court ruling *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses* and other government reports have led to industry bowing resulting in self-policing like The Comics Code Authority (Head, 2019). It seems, for now, as if history is doomed to repeat itself with a

return to the 1950 McCarthy era, “a time in which books or films that dealt with race issues were often attacked as Communist propaganda” (Robbins, 1994, p. 331). Until these things work their way through the legal system, it is more important than ever before for there to be plans and procedures in place given these tumultuous times. If it has been awhile since the libraries’ reviewed their policies for handling complaints, some of these resources can help.

CHALLENGE REASONS: 2015-2020



Graph 1: Top 10 challenged books by topic (Rosa, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019; Zalusky 2020; 2021)



Graph 2: Challenges by group by year in percentages

*Other was used in 2015 and 2016 (Rosa, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019; Zalusky 2020; 2021)

Resources:

The American Civil Liberties Union

(<https://www.aclu.org/>) provides resources about censorship, anti-discrimination, LGBTQ rights, race, current fights, and more.

American Library Association (<https://www.ala.org/>)

offers a plethora of information on intellectual freedom, reporting and handling challenges, and how to gird up library collection development policies.

Mississippi Library Commission

(<https://www.mlc.lib.ms.us/>) has resources to help librarians gather information to defend against challenges and tips for handling complaints.

National Coalition Against Censorship

(<https://ncac.org/>) serves to provide resources including toolkits for defending materials.

National Council of Teachers of English's

Intellectual Freedom Center

(<https://ncte.org/resources/ncte-intellectual-freedom-center/>) offers a variety of resources and kids specific to schools.

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