

Banned – Challenged – Censored. A Story of Local Activism fighting Book Censorship through Art

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Abstract:

This article explores the shifting landscape of book banning from the mid-20th century to the present, drawing on both academic discourse and the 2013 art installation *Banned - Challenged – Censored*; the study argues that artistic activism offers a complementary perspective to scholarly debates by juxtaposing abstract statistics to a tangible, community-driven engagement with censorship, intellectual freedom, and cultural memory. Given the sheer volume of banned works, scholarly and public discussions must rely frequently on abstraction. While such approaches can highlight systemic patterns of censorship, they also risk canceling the singularity of individual works.

Keywords: Book banning, censorship, intellectual freedom, community activism, banned books, art installation

According to a 2023 *Reader's Digest* article surveying books banned in the U.S. from the 1950s onwards, many novels “you’d never guess were offensive [...] get banned or challenged due to sexually explicit content or offensive language” (Pennington, 2023). The quote highlights (including the candid disbelief of what used to be considered offensive) the fact that the main common denominator for the most frequently banned, contested, or censored novels up to about the latter part of twentieth century, across transatlantic publications, is undoubtably sexuality, profanity and offensive language, closely followed by broad categories such as racism and violence. The works typically included in the “most banned” category currently constitute a list of twentieth-century “classics”, encompassing literature as diverse as *1984*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Lord of the Flies*, to *Of Mice and Men*, *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* etc.

All of the above, carried a certain prestige (dubious or not) precisely because of their entanglement in obscenity controversies and, at the very least, censorship debates, intentionally or unintentionally, served somewhat as promotional campaigns. It used to be a scandal, during a

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time when book banning could still be perceived as primarily a matter linked to specific novels, and most importantly, the penance of transgressing boundaries always juxtaposed questions of literary merit against moral outrage.

Henry Miller, who comes to mind as serving the argument above, figuratively walked the fine line between what could be defended on the grounds of literary merit and what was simply deemed outrageous. In a sense, the *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) was never just a novel, but a proxy for a broader cultural debate about “appropriateness” – a deliberately vague term perfectly fitting here.

For, in the above case, one could think of appropriateness as either a commentary of Miller’s metaphysical shortcomings – and thus failing to write what would be required to solely serve the arousal of senses:

You know, I wonder if Henry Miller is really all that good? I’ve tried to read his books on cross-country buses but when he gets into those long parts in between sex he is a very dull fellow indeed. On cross-country buses I usually have to put down my Henry Miller and try to find somebody’s legs to look up, preferably female. (Bukowski, 1972: 18)

– hence inappropriate for reading on cross-country busses, or through the legalistic, one size fits all, reductive argument, of pornography:

The government of the United States made it national policy to ban *Tropic of Cancer* from being sold or imported into the country arguing, “[it] dealt too explicitly with his sexual adventures and challenged models of sexual morality.” To push their agenda, the government went on to ban all of Miller’s works from entering the United States, regardless of its content or subject (Baldassarro, 2014).

A quarter century after its initial Parisian publication the book was finally relieved of its obscene status in the U.S., the legal reasoning being that “*The Tropic of Cancer* did have literary merits that separated it from other materials that had been deemed to be obscene” (Grove Press, 1964).

Today, book banning in the U.S. seems to be fundamentally linked to ideological or political stances, typically culminating in legal clashes centered around First Amendment rights in a contemporary culture war. Books themselves became somehow secondary to the larger discourse by which they are engulfed, reduced, at best, to exemplifying political and social (i)legitimacy.

It is sufficient to look at recent numbers to make this justified: for example, ALA (American Library Association) censorship reports indicate for 2023 a number 4240 unique book titles being targeted for banning. The number itself allows for little more than dividing the books

into trends, as per the original phrasing. Two of these are of particular interest:

- *Groups and individuals demanding the censorship of multiple titles, often dozens or hundreds at a time, drove this surge.*
- *Titles representing the voices and lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC individuals made up 47 percent of those targeted in censorship attempts. (American Library Association Reports, 2023)*

Alternatively, looking at a large-scale database such as the PEN club's index of books banned by schools (1648 unique book titles) during 2021-2022, reveals that:

These multifaceted data allow us to empirically assess the full spectrum of content being banned – the majority of which, we show, is written by women and people of color and features characters of color, both fictional and historical – but that otherwise does not neatly align with the descriptions of gratuitous sexual content or dogmatic texts on race and gender theory [...] findings suggest that it is perhaps more apt to think of current book bans as a political tactic to galvanize conservative voters in increasingly divisive electoral political districts, rather than as a pragmatic effort to restrict access to certain materials (Gonçalves et al., 2024).

Therefore, whether the issue of book banning could be summarized solely through the lens of:

(1) challenging traditional notions of power, politics, and governance; (2) examining policy as discourse and political spectacle; (3) centering the perspectives of the marginalized and oppressed; (4) interrogating the distribution of power and resources; and (5) holding those in power accountable for policy outcomes (Perez, 2025:323).

or suffices in the form of let-right debate on the issue:

Democrats asserted that the challenges to library books stemmed from “moral panic” and violated the First Amendment. In stark contrast, Republicans characterized targeted removals as mere “content moderation” aimed at “pornographic” materials that threatened children’s “innocence” (Ross, 2024: 1680).

the conclusion appears to be there remained no more banned books (pornography argument aside – understood here as historical remnant from the last century), there are only banned *categories of books*, everything becoming subordinated to streamlined advocacy efforts that cannot sustain nuanced terms in lieu of abstract political battles.

Second, the *individuality* (i.e. *literary value*, if such a charged concept is still permissible as a gauge) of titles becomes irrelevant for

showcasing intrinsic worth. It might be that “brilliant prose” still might safeguard against banning¹, but that, of course, would require individual pieces of *fiction* and not symbolic categories (such as *voices and lived experiences*) that erase the distinctiveness and literary individuality of each title.

This becomes more evident if academic discourse is taken to be the framework for interpreting and contextualizing these stances, – providing comprehensive explanations of why certain books are deemed unacceptable –, for the vast expanse of directions taken by this type of discourse allows little space for hundreds of individual works to exist *outside* their respective categories.

The sheer amount of academic literature – dedicated to exploring everything from how restricting access to books affects students’ cognitive development, critical thinking skills, empathy, and emotional intelligence, the relationship between censorship efforts and social attitudes toward race, sexuality, religion, and political ideologies on one hand and First Amendment rights to freedom of expression in light of the role played by libraries as a place deemed essential in safeguarding multiplicity, on the other – offers an overwhelming sense of completeness with little compelling possibilities to look beyond what appears not only adequate but perhaps the sole viable way to express a position on the subject matter.

One alternative to move beyond this potential dead end, would be to look at artistic endeavors that, by their nature, put books’ material presence at the forefront, thus countering abstract academic categorizations, and, more importantly, also serving as visual commentary challenging previously expressed assumptions.

A notable example is *Banned – Challenged – Censored*², a 2013 art installation designed to reflect community engagement with the issue of book banning within the larger framework afforded by events such as Banned Books Week³. Displayed in the University of Montana library’s ground floor, the art installation bearing the name Banned-Challenged-

¹ See, for example Emily Mortimer’s argument in *How ‘Lolita’ Escaped Obscenity Laws and Cancel Culture*, New York Times, 05/03/2021.

² In the summer of 2024, the University of Montana hosted the academic component of the SUSI programme for Contemporary American Literature, which brought together 17 international scholars, myself included; it was in this context that I first encountered the art installation displayed in the university library.

³ See, for example, Ellis Angel’s project *The Censor’s Cut* which transforms banned books into woven artworks (PEN America) for “censorship tries to stifle creativity, but it’s crucial that artists remain bold and true to their work, as we are exercising our fundamental constitutional rights”, and also *Unfurled*, an installation at the Lawrence Public Library that juxtaposes covers of banned and challenged books to create a visual statement on the contested circulation of information intended to symbolize “the state of distress in America’s intellectual freedom” (The Lawrence Times).

Censored resembles a miniature tower covered with banned books and paper shreds; the art work itself is 2m tall, 1.2m wide and weighs about 140kg – being constructed of steel, Plexiglas and barn wood.

This, of course, is not to suggest that academic literature is insufficient or inferior in the explanations brought forth to the expansive topic of book banning; rather, the art installation simply provides an alternative perspective highlighting something perhaps missing or discounted within traditional academic discourse and misplaced within percentages and trends.

And that alternative perspective is the tangible reality of censorship, a censorship that isn't just conceptual or legalistic, but a palpable threat to cultural memory, identity, and diversity. If bridged together with the efforts of a community, it highlights shared commitment to safeguard intellectual freedom.

This premise advances a new possibility when looking at book banning beyond an academic discourse: it brings visibility⁴ to the books themselves beyond the sterility of categories and replaces academic parlance with direct engagement.

For, “if, in the past, agents in the literary sphere were individuals with specific interests and powers, the discussion of and feedback on literary texts are now dominated by anonymous forces driven by multiple and highly complex quantitative elements.” (Salgaro, 2022). In this sense, the installation recalls an earlier mode of literary exchange, standing in contrast to the dominance of big-data interpretation and quantitative approaches to literary value.

In the case of *Banned – Challenged – Censored* there are several factors that give the above stance credence, for all - complex terms such as *community* and *actors* become something with a clearly defined identity; it transposes an abstract discussion into a local narrative (if only one of many).

Community is not a mere concept but it is *The Journal Ladies LLC*, a private enterprise that crafts journals from recycled vintage books labeled for destruction, *The Bozeman Public Library Foundation*, a public institution with a strong penchant for community building and *Humanities Montana* which defines its mission as offering “experiences that nurture imagination and ideas by speaking to Montanans’ diverse history, literature, and philosophy” (Humanities Montana, n.d); all of the above became sponsors (with additional support from 60 private parties)

⁴ For a relevant and ingenious approach see the *Unbannable Library*, hosted at Austin Peay State University, which employs oversized interactive book installations meant to resist censorship through their sheer size and also “encourages conversations about the importance of intellectual freedom, highlighting the valuable role libraries play in fostering knowledge and connection across all locations and ages” (Austin Peay State University).

to artists George Cole (former UM graduate), Sara Williams and Collin Letts who decided to create a sculpture project dedicated to books banned across the U.S.⁵

Conversely, the discourse surrounding the motivation behind the art installation, becomes more anchored, in the sense that it offers personal views based on individual experiences, making the conversation authentic and relatable. So, freedom of expression, as voiced by George Cole, reads like:

My dad actually used to tell me that freedom was never easy, and sometimes freedom of expression can be an ugly experience too; it's not always poetry and smooth reading, and so all of us kind of have to evaluate and realize the importance of freedom of expression, but at the same time, know that sometimes, we're going to disagree with the content of that book or that movie (What Maya Angelou, 2013).

and a library's intrinsic role becomes, as expressed by Flathead County Library Director, Kim Crowley:

Many people say that any library worth their salt has something to offend everyone. So, you and I might not have the same reading tastes, but you can find what you want to read, and I can find what I want to read, Crowley said libraries strive to have a broad, diverse offering to satisfy the reading taste of their communities, and maybe even challenge some people's ideas (*Ibidem*).

This, of course, is entirely different to a polished academic rhetoric relating freedom of expression to divisive content (in the particular context of libraries). However, the most notable thing it achieves is that it affords individual visibility to the books chosen for displaying.

A comprehensive list off all the books displayed on the art installation includes: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* – Mark Twain (1884), *Call of the Wild* – Jack London (1903), *The Catcher in the Rye* – J.D. Salinger (1951), *Invisible Man* – Ralph Ellison (1952), *Lolita* – Vladimir Nabokov (1955), *Run Rabbit Run* – John Updike (1960), *Forever* – Judy Blume (1975), *The Color Purple* – Alice Walker (1982), *The Qur'an: A New Translation* – Cleary, Thomas (1985), *Giovanni's Room* – James Baldwin (1956), *The Bluest Eye* – Toni Morrison (1970), *The Giver* – Lois Lowry (1993), *Women on Top* – Nancy Friday (1997), *Daddy's Roommate* – Michael Willhoite (1990), *Wounded: A Love Story* – Claudia Mair Burney (2005), *My Mom's Having a Baby!* – Dori Hillestad Butler (2005), *The Bible, The Grapes of Wrath* – John Steinbeck (1939), *Native Son* – Richard Wright (1940), *Fahrenheit 451* –

⁵ The art work was displayed at several libraries in Montana, including Missoula Public Library, Bozeman Public Library, Great Falls Public Library, Butte, Billings, and Helena.

Ray Bradbury (1953), *Catch-22* – Joseph Heller (1961), *Fools Crow* – James Welch (1986), *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* – Sherman Alexie (2007), *The Hunger Games* – Suzanne Collins (2008), *Animal Farm* – George Orwell (1945), *The Diary of a Young Girl* – Anne Frank (first published in English in 1952), *Clockwork Orange* – Anthony Burgess (1962), *Joy of Sex* – Alex Comfort (1972), *What's Happening to My Body? Book for Boys* – Lynda Madaras (1984) and *The Satanic Verses* – Salman Rushdie (1988).

On a random side of the art installation, *The Bible* appears right next to *Huckleberry Finn*, and both are displayed just above *Fahrenheit 451*. In perfect symmetry, there is a holy book that has been challenged for nearly every reason imaginable – from concerns about religious neutrality to accusations of inappropriate content –, a seminal American novel banned for its racial language, and a censored work warning against the very act of censorship itself.

Such an eclectic collection of books invites a wide range of commentary, from shifting cultural attitudes toward censorship to the idea of literature – and, by extension, libraries – as spaces where public values and tensions are both reflected and contested. Yet, the installation doesn't merely display banned books – it stages a conversation among them and at the same time with the viewer.

It permits an engagement with the *individual* titles on display, not as static artifacts but as individual pieces of (mainly) literature, carving out a space somewhere between one's understanding of them, the intentions of those who tried to have them silenced, and the convictions of those who deemed them worthy of symbolic status in an ongoing dialogue across cultures, decades, and ideals.

The Catcher in the Rye perfectly illustrates this point. While often relegated to the category of “subversive influence”, in the Romanian educational system of the 1990s the novel was introduced as a coming-of-age narrative, praised and taught for its artistic merit and perceived age appropriateness. By contrast, its censorship history in the United States reflects deep cultural anxieties:

because *Catcher* presented a “negative” view of the world that they did not want their children to adopt. The issue was not the right of free expression but the power to assign. The disagreement was over “what ‘truth’ ought to be shared with adolescents”. The fear was that Holden Caulfield would persuade people as young as he to have no values at all – and that America was already well advanced in that direction (Maynard, 2002:714).

Encountering the same text within the context of banned-books underscores two observations: first, that “literary value” is not solely theoretical or institutionally conferred but also personal, shaped by emotional responses; and second, that categorizing books primarily along

political or social lines risks overlooking these individual receptions and distinctive literary merits.

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Therefore, if nothing else, art installations such as *Banned – Challenged – Censored* reintroduce into public discourse the possibility that debates about book banning are more effective when they engage directly with recognizable works of literature rather than relying exclusively on abstract trends, categories, or groupings.

By highlighting the material presence of books and inserting them within community contexts, these installations restore attention to literature as singular works that embody both artistic merit and personal resonance.

Considered alongside similar initiatives, they indicate that meaningful discussions of censorship should account not only for the broader structural forces that shape bans but also for the individuality of texts, which is too easily concealed when literature is reduced to labels.

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