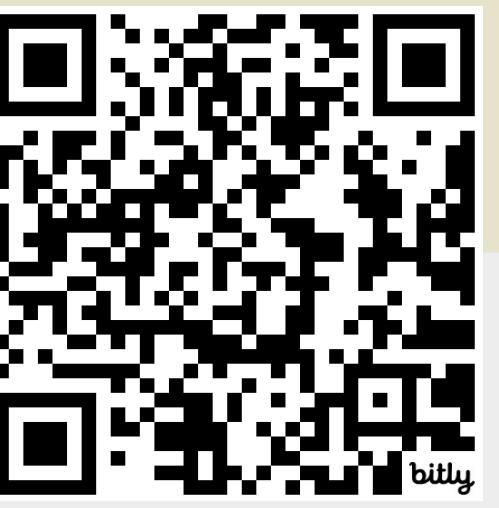


# Counter-Stories as Resistance to Book Bans

## References



Reference list at this link:  
[bit.ly/refLRSkrutka](https://bit.ly/refLRSkrutka)

## How can the writings and speeches of 4 authors serve as counter-stories that resist book banning and promote a liberatory library ideology?

Since acceptance as a poster at this conference, this project has been accepted for publication in *Library Quarterly*. It is anticipated it will be online on the journal's "Just Accepted" page by late September (link: [journals.uchicago.edu/toc/lq/0/ja](https://journals.uchicago.edu/toc/lq/0/ja)) and in the January 2025 printed publication.

### Introduction

Three themes have emerged from arguments made by those who are challenging and banning books across the nation:

The books are harmful

We are protecting children

We have a right to define what is appropriate for everyone else

These themes operate as a dominant narrative. Utilizing the concept of **library ideology**, book banning efforts and this dominant narrative promote an *oppressive library ideology*.



Photos by: Orchard Books/Scholastic, Inc; Vincent Marc; Afsoneh Khorram; Red Scott

### Data Sources

1. Ruby Bridges' testimony at a 2022 U.S. congressional hearing on book bans & academic censorship
2. George M. Johnson's 2023 (Un)Banned article: "America Banned My Book, But I Refuse To Stay Silent"
3. Adib Khorram's speech at a 2023 school district board meeting where book access was being restricted
4. Maggie Tokuda-Hall's 2023 letter and blog post in response to a request from Scholastic to censor her work



## Analysis of Authors' Works as Counter-Stories

### COUNTER-STORY: THESE BOOKS ARE REAL, VALID EXPERIENCES

Resisting the narrative that these books were harmful, the authors explained that these stories were their own lives. They represented the experiences they wish they had read about when they were students in school libraries. For instance:

- Johnson and Bridges relayed their childhood experiences missing books with the truth of Jim Crow or the civil rights movement. Johnson explained the books they read hid the "most heinous parts of what slavery looked like." Bridges, speaking to her role in the well-recognized walk to desegregate her elementary school, "questioned if it really even mattered." She was not learning about it in school and "there was no Black History Month then... and it didn't come from the textbooks used to teach me that history, unfortunately."

### COUNTER-STORY: THE AUTHORS ARE PROTECTING BY PROVIDING WINDOWS, MIRRORS, AND AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES

The dominant narrative around book banning argues that book banners are protecting children. These authors' counter-stories disrupt the claim by reversing this logic and pointing out that in fact they, as authors of targeted books and activists against banning, are protecting children. For instance:

- Tokuda-Hall explained her reason for the author's note and how censoring it was harmful: "When we do not call what happened to [my grandparents] racism, when we do not connect them to others experiencing racism, we only allow it to happen again. And again. And again."
- Khorram told the school board that to remove books about topics they deem "inappropriate", such as being an immigrant or being queer, experiencing depression, abuse, or incarceration, or being Black, brown, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, "you're telling these children that they are inappropriate for school...that there is no place for them in this community."

### COUNTER-STORY: COMMUNITY AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

These authors presented a counter-story to convince their audiences that it is possible to disrupt the claim that book banners can define appropriateness for everyone. Ultimately, the goal of counter-stories is "social transformation" (Martinez 2020, 213) and these authors contributed to that effort in disrupting the dominant narrative and refusing to accept their claims of absolute right and power. For instance:

- Johnson stressed the community that supports this fight: "To all the Black and LGBTQ young people, I want y'all to know that there are people like myself who are not going to give up on you. We will keep fighting for you and fighting against the attempts to block you from having the same rights and dignities that are afforded to your heterosexual classmates and friends... my commitment to you is to continue to write these stories so that you will always know you exist in this world."

## Discussion

### Double Counter-Story:

These authors have felt compelled to provide a counter-story (these speeches) to their counter-stories (books), in effect, a double counter-story. These authors' speeches and articles speak to the oppression of the current book banning context *as well as* the continued under-representation of diversity within book collections.

The presence and need for this double counter-story is compelling in understanding the issue of book bans. As a school librarian, I consider how this might impact a school official or school board member.

### Liberatory Library Ideology:

These counter-stories help inform future efforts to disrupt book bans & provide guidance for a liberatory library ideology. A liberatory library ideology includes, affirms, and actively refuses to other, exclude, or oppress the identities and lived experiences of individuals and communities.

The books on a shelf are one part of the message that a library sends to its students. This message is a part of the library ideology we choose to champion. This message is one that a community is responsible for, in the books we have, the identities we value in words and action, the times we choose to act, and the times we allow oppression to continue unchecked.

### Purpose & Methods

- Analyze authors' speeches and articles, demonstrating how these texts resist book ban arguments and disrupt an **oppressive library ideology**
- Rely on a counter-story lens based in Critical Race Theory and discourse analysis to guide interpretation

### Related Lit. & Current Context

Scholarship provides a foundation of understanding about counter-stories and their power to disrupt dominant narratives:

- communications field (e.g., Mumby 1987; Lagnellier 1989; Price and Britt 2023; Peterson and Garner 2018)
- critical scholars (e.g., Bell 1995; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado 1989; Leung and Lopez-McKnight 2021; Martinez 2020; Solórzano and Yosso 2002)
- education scholars (e.g., Adam 2021; Bishop 1990; Crawley 2017; Hughes-Hassell 2013; Newstreet et al. 2019)

Censorship research has:

- explored themes within challenger discourse (Knox 2014, 2017; LaRue 2007; Oltmann, Peterson and Knox 2017; Poppel and Ashley 1989)
- emphasized the need for diverse voices to be protected in educational settings (e.g., Cooke 2023; Knox 2019, 2023; Sachdeva, Kimmel, and Cherres 2023).

Current Context:

- Book bans disproportionately target works by or about people of color and LGBTQIA+ individuals (ALA 2023)
- A dominant narrative of book banning that promotes an oppressive library ideology is enforced through both legislative measures and social pressures (e.g., EveryLibrary Institute 2024; Gross 2023; Jensen 2023, 2024; Patriot Mobile n.d.; Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.)