

Silencing Wingless Truth: Confronting the Suppression of Academic Freedom and Black Liberation in America

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Abstract

In an era of heightened threats to academic freedom and representation, this article critically examines the intersections of race, censorship, and educational equity in education. By analyzing literature on censorship as it pertains to legislative book bans, the authors highlight the historical struggle for academic freedom from the perspective of the Black experience. They use Gholdy Muhammad's equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy to analyze the current bans on certain books in K–20 academic settings, centering their argument on combating propaganda and literary censorship. Rooted in the principles of democracy, social justice, and truth-telling, this article calls for a renewed commitment to defending academic freedom through literacy to maintain an inclusive and equitable space for Black scholars.

Perhaps I stand on the brink of a great discovery, and perhaps after I have made my great discovery, I will be sent home in chains.

—Jamaica Kincaid, “Wingless” (1979)

Black academics are engulfed in a battle for liberation against authoritarian regimes that seek to ban truth-telling curricula from K–20 classrooms while establishing propaganda-filled literature as the standard. As Jamaica Kincaid reminds us, after every great discovery, bondage threatens. Similarly, Black scholars are placed in intellectual bondage and effectively made wingless while pursuing discoveries of truth and academic freedom in their writing. For some, the privilege to pursue discoveries of truth in their literary work has yet to be stripped away, but for many scholars in the United States, the luxury of reading books has led to legislative book bans. Because of this, Black academics are resorting to fugitive pedagogies to subvert anti-Black racism and oppression (Givens 2021).

Throughout his career as a children’s literature author, Jason Reynolds has used his pen to cultivate stories that address the lived experiences of Black children. Reynolds has demonstrated fugitive pedagogy to shirk the bondage of his writing in one of his latest novels, *Miles Morales: Suspended* (2023). As in many stories, Spiderman is the central character, but Reynolds’s version

of Spiderman encounters a uniquely different villain. While a reader may see a typical foe of the Marvel superhero wreaking havoc, the villains in Reynolds's conceptualization of the Spiderverse are enemies that Black people know all too well: oppression, discrimination, and systemic racism. In *Miles Morales: Suspended*, racism underscores the complexities of identity and belonging for young people of color, emphasizing that the challenges they face are multifaceted, both personal and societal. Reynolds is one of many authors who have used literature to combat the attacks on academic freedom that Black academia continue to face. In the current educational environment, where states are censoring any curriculum that attempts to address a multiverse of -isms (racism, sexism, and so on), novels like Reynolds's *Miles Morales* could be banned from K-12 school libraries.

In an interview for the 2021 National Writers Series, guest host Rochelle Riley (2021) poses a question to Reynolds on censorship, academic freedom and discourse, and the impact of legislative book bans within public education: "What is the importance of fighting censorship as it relates to literacy, and how might we prevent the gatekeeping of ideas?" In response, he shares his ideas about the importance of literacy in cultivating academic discourse and mitigating fear:

Censorship has developed in one form as book bans because of fear, not fear of what is within my books, but my books are banned, I believe, because of fear of what that child reading them might know. The books bring forth a challenge for adults because they become terrified of that child having new ideas that counter or go up against old ideas which causes the adults of these children to reckon with that. In reading books among the big pantheon of literature, children begin to understand their place and their relationship with words and as a result, become a child who is forever free. Books are an expression of freedom of speech because they are in essence tools of discourse that provide readers with skills of how to think and therefore give rise to individuals that bring varying perspectives into a space. Censorship works to strip the mental autonomy of the reader when we must remain in a space where we can exercise intellectualism.

Reynolds is among several Black authors of books banned in America. His works have been either removed from the shelves of school libraries and classrooms or identified as harmful to readers due to themes of race or violence. Like other banned authors, he calls for public conversations that reflect critically on the impact censorship has on academic freedom and the overall development of Black students and others in marginalized communities (Watson 2023).

Conceptually, academic freedom maintains its place as a public good wherein the individual conscience of a person is developed; this directly enables the production of knowledge that benefits society and humankind (Gersen 2022). Moreover, for the Black scholar, academic freedom provides a space for identity building that yields the overall development of African American or Black culture and students.

In this article, we highlight the assaults on academic freedom by focusing on the experiences of Black educational leaders in K–12 schools. We draw attention to the ongoing struggle against censorship that impacts the intellectual development of Black students, teachers, and others within this marginalized community. This article draws attention to the dictatorial nature of censorship and calls for leaders in constrictive educational systems to promote truth-telling that counters propaganda. Using the theoretical framework of historically responsive literacy and analyzing data on book censorship, this article examines how culturally responsive literacy can counter laws that seek to erase the experiences and identities of Black culture. It also proposes a path forward to advocate for Black academic freedom and empowerment.

Curriculum Censorship Is Oppression

Individuals who perceive truth-telling curricula as detrimental to their political agendas or cultural interests often resort to censorship. This practice of delegitimizing certain books creates a hierarchy of power that normalizes the erasure of the anti-Black racism in this country. When maintained within systems such as education, censorship provides fertile ground for the development of discriminatory policies (Murray 2017). Consistently, censorship is used as a tool to undermine the intellectual freedom of marginalized communities. For the Black scholar, criticism, questioning, wondering, or even noticing racism are deemed false or, as we know it today, “fake news.”

To express the ideas of the oppressed, we posit that Black culture works to create an intellectually liberated society in which academic freedom is obtained and gives rise to individuals with the capacity and will to know, be open-minded, self-critique, and change their ideas (Murray 2017). In the constant fight for academic freedom we also see a continual struggle against efforts to dismantle Black progress.

Current Censorship of Black Literature

Legislative book bans and the political motives behind the erasure of Black history and African American culture have led to inhumane censorship of curricula. In 2022, Florida governor Ron DeSantis continued an unrelenting assault on truth-telling and freedom of expression with political laws that perpetuate the racial capacities of censorship (Caldwell 2023; Nelson 2023).

The Stop WOKE Act, championed by DeSantis, has significantly reshaped educational pedagogy and curricula, restricting teachers and students from discussing race and gender that conservatives find “unpatriotic.” This law exemplifies the undemocratic nature of censorship, driven by political efforts to limit access to diverse perspectives (Meehan and Friedman 2023). The policies aim to dismantle Black representation by banning books and initiatives labeled as “woke,” thereby silencing narratives that critically examine American history and the experiences of marginalized communities, particularly those recorded by Black writers.

Kasey Meehan and Jonathan Friedman (2023) examine censorship in literature and describe it as an action taken against books based on content by parental or community challenges, administrative decisions, or in response to direct or threatened action by lawmakers or other government officials. Meehan and Friedman (2023) study instances of legislative book banning over two years. These banned book titles equated to over 800 works or approximately over 100 book titles being removed each month during a given school year (Meehan and Friedman 2023). The authors revealed 1,477 instances of book bans, 874 of which included unique titles, covering themes of grief, death, student well-being, many of which centered characters of color or discussions of race and racism. The movement to censor books affects a diverse literary field working to include the identities, topics, concepts, and stories of diversity that exist within the United States. Seventy-four percent of books in their research were banned in direct response to organized efforts or advocacy (Meehan and Friedman 2023). The most influential of such advocacy groups, leading 58 percent of book bans around the country, is Moms for Liberty (Meehan and Friedman 2023).

Censorship as an Overt War on Black Literature

Black literature encompasses storytelling from the experiences and perspectives of Black people. Currently, with the rise in literary works showcasing the stories of many marginalized groups, such books have met a wave of censorship. According to PEN America, an organization that tracks the growth of the censorship movement, as the country endured the COVID-19 pandemic and experienced, for a moment, racial awakening, organized groups and politicians emerged advocating for book bans, policy revisions, and new legislation at the state level that would silence curricula that centered marginalized Black voices (Meehan and Friedman 2023).

To maintain academic freedom, Black scholars have worked to elevate Black representation in K–12 curricula and in academia. The late Nobel laureate and professor Toni Morrison is one of many acclaimed authors who have confronted the censorship of Black voices in school curricula (Lister 2009). In her novel *Sula*, set in an African American community in Ohio called The Bottom, Morrison explores the lifelong friendship between Sula and Nel, tracing their paths through womanhood amid social and racial tensions. Themes of identity, community, betrayal, and personal choice unfold against this backdrop.

Morrison challenged the expectation that Black literature should conform to white perspectives (Lister 2009). As a Black academic in the United States, she emphasized the struggle for academic freedom, advocating for the ability to write authentically without conforming to racialized norms imposed by white society (Lister 2009). Her novels, like *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, tackle racism, sexism, and violence, defying societal norms while advocating for truth-telling and, indirectly, academic freedom, even when it confronts uncomfortable truths and challenges prevailing beliefs (Drayton 2022). Censorship of Black narratives in education limits engagement with authentic Black experiences, reinforcing dominant white perspectives.

Black scholars and teachers find themselves in a constant battle to mitigate the perpetuation of oppressive structures by consistently finding ways to elevate the narratives of Black people in the United States. This has been and will continue to be the hard and valuable work of the Black scholar. The arduous battle for academic freedom has continued through varying forms of advocacy for Black liberation in the US education system. While censorship through book bans and policy development finds itself in an all-out war on Black literary works, Black scholars maintain that literature is and must always be the driving force that tips the scales of injustice in educating Black students.

Literary Societies as Spaces for Black Liberalism

In addressing the censorship of Black literary work in the United States, Gholdy Muhammad's *Cultivating Genius* (2020) serves as a beacon in the storm. It is important to acknowledge that education is a socially constructed system relegated to the state level, intending to provide "equal opportunity" for all students (Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings 2016). And yet, people of color experience continued and sustained inequalities. For the Black student, curriculum design, instructional practices, and desegregation were tools used to perpetuate racist ideas that maintained power in the hands of the dominant white group, rather than sharing power with nonwhites. The education system in the United States often maintains a white-supremacist master script that censors the stories of African Americans through erasure and silencing, especially when they challenge the dominant culture, authority, and power (Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings 2016). The master script in various education spaces consistently cultivates a race-neutral and colorblind perspective that perpetuates false narratives about Black experiences in the country. While white students are empowered to design their galaxies and develop a keen sense of critical thinking and reasoning, Black scholars' creativity, ingenuity, and freedom to explore are all too often restricted. This control renders the Black academic wingless, unable to fly freely through the breadth of literary ideas, production, and scholarship. In book bans that ostracize themes, genres, and complete literary works centered on Blackness, these instructional constrictions on educators of Black students make academic freedom an unobtainable abstract idea rather than an assumed right.

To counter this strategic design of the education system, Black scholars have worked to implement truth-telling curricula with a focus on dismantling institutional racism. Fostering educational equity, academic freedom, and truth-telling involves building up Black students toward a goal of criticality, where Black scholars can see, name, and interrogate the world around them to make sense of injustices, while also working to transform the world (Muhammad 2020).

Rooted in Black scholars' historical use of books and other texts as tools to drive progress, Muhammad's historically responsive literacy framework posits that literacy has been one of Black culture's greatest instruments for cultivating academic freedom (Muhammad 2020). The use of book bans to censor the narratives, experiences, and truth of Black history in America is an

example of the strategic and extreme methods used by traditionally powerful groups to maintain control of the education system. For Black scholars, one way to counter such methods is through the development of literary societies, used to construct and curate spaces where Black students can learn (Muhammad 2020). These societies are designed to assist Black people in developing abilities to read, write, and build additional literacy skills. Ultimately these societies foster a better humanity for all. In the historical effort to mitigate the harmful effects of censorship, and maintain academic freedom, literary societies maintain Black literacy development and promote Black freedom and liberation in America.

Muhammad (2020) highlights that the development of Black literacy consists of literary presence, pursuits, and character. To combat historical erasure and the rise of propaganda that cultivates false and oppressive stereotypes of Black culture and people, literary presence requires Black people to stake a claim within the world around them (Muhammad 2020). The development of intellectual communities, and the identities and stories within them, has allowed the Black individual to become visible. The stories and histories of Black people thus propel themselves into society, producing a rift in the ideas and content that have historically marginalized them. Through literary pursuits, these societies encourage Black scholars to seek truth and express it. Through readings, lectures, and intellectual discourse, the overarching white narrative of Black scholars can be dismantled (Muhammad 2020). Books and other forms of text become weapons (or tools) used to create social action and change. By curating experiences through literature for Black scholars and students, literary character develops as an individual's personal and academic characteristics are engaged; as Black students are empowered, their lives are transformed to counter the propaganda used to maintain the oppressive status quo.

Charting a Path for Black Academic Freedom

No matter which points of history one interrogates, white power and individuals with the privilege of harnessing it have always done whatever is necessary to maintain it. Black people have always known that education can be an equalizer for all people who have been strategically marginalized. The historical work of Black literary societies has shown that Black scholars can exist; their perspectives and experiences provide elevated levels of excellence, innovation, and creativity. With the tenets of Black literary societies, school leaders and policymakers can rethink learning in classrooms with a critical focus on individuals battling for academic freedom (Muhammad 2020). To mitigate the effects of censorship and the limitations it can place on Black academic freedom, Muhammad (2020) suggests the following:

- Literacy instruction for Black students must connect to their histories and social realities. By creating learning spaces that extend beyond the classroom, education can encourage critical engagement with the world and provide literary works that reflect Black students' lived experiences.

- Educating Black students requires content that does not neglect the joy and contentment literacy practices can provide to enhance the reading and writing Black children engage in. Through the commitment to having students represented in literary spaces, educators can cultivate the hearts and minds of Black students learning within a starkly white system.
- Reading and writing within an educational space must move beyond placing limitations on the texts, genres, and authors students can access. Black students must be provided access to both African American writers and writing by authors from around the globe.
- Literacy learning provides Black students with an opportunity to enhance their intellect and gives them a sense of their individual and collective identities in the culture.

What School Leaders and Policymakers Should Do

Educational leaders can foster academic freedom in their schools by strategically incorporating the principles of literary societies. Just as early scholars used literary societies as spaces for liberation, today's educational leaders are called to action. By adopting the historically responsive literacy framework, they can create teaching practices that weave the histories and identities of Black people into the educational experience (Muhammad 2020). This approach designs learning spaces where Black students see themselves reflected, rather than confined to spaces not meant for them. In these environments, academic freedom thrives, and the Black identities of members of educational communities are liberated from censorship.

The role of educational leaders should extend beyond the school walls. In promoting academic freedom, we must strategically combat oppressive state-level policies. Just as there are advocacy groups pushing for book bans, educational leaders must empower all those serving the Black community to hold elected officials and school boards accountable for fostering inclusion, particularly in curricula and pedagogy.

Even as book bans and other suppressive tactics aim to silence Black narratives and literature, Black scholars have persistently worked to liberate Black students, even under distress. To counter the spread of "fake news" and propaganda in education, Black scholars and their allies must remain focused on elevating the Black experience through literature. By committing to culturally and historically responsive pedagogies, Black educators will continue the long struggle of their ancestors to dismantle censorship and propaganda. With ongoing effort, Black academic freedom will be realized, as Black scholars remain dedicated to creating paths toward a liberated education.

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