

Intellectual Freedom, Social Responsibility, and Praxis in Librarianship and Education

American Library Association, Social Responsibilities Round Table

November 15, 2023

Rachel Rosekind, Introduction

With a humble and heavy heart, I want to acknowledge the unfolding events in Gaza and Israel—the human pain, destruction, and suffering; struggle for liberation and self-determination; *and* contest over the historical narrative, present reality, and future possibilities. Now, as ever, we must be vigilant about whose lives and whose words matter. To ground us in our shared humanity, I'd like to read just a few excerpts from Sofia Ali-Khan's poem **Someone asked me for a poem, like a prayer**:

Here is what I know:
I am with the humble,
the dispossessed,
the colonized. I am with the forsaken
and the trapped and the heartbroken.
I am with people of conscience
telling the truth
regardless of nationality or
faith or consequence.
Whomever and wherever
and whenever they may be.

And here is what I pray:
That the oppressed be made whole
and that oppressors make reparation.
That every child eat
every day.
That no mother or father be thirsty

enough to drink sea water.
That no people be condemned to live trapped behind
borders or cages or walls.
That whatever I have, you also have
and whatever you have, I also have.

And that whatever **we** have,
we are prepared to
share with any neighbor in need,
whether we have grown to love them
or dislike them,
or have been taught to despise them.

And that when any state tries to
divide us,
using our woundedness in the
service of that goal,
we resist.

That we fight with everything we have
for one another.

Books are bridges to belonging. As Da'Taeveyon Daniels, Youth Honorary Chair of ALA's 2023 Banned Books Week, said "For me and my peers, books are not just stories; they are lifelines. Literature provides us with solace, understanding, and a sense of belonging to a world where our voices matter." **Literature is liberating.** To illustrate this, in a potent act of reclamation, PEN America's Prison & Justice Writing Program titled its recent craft anthology *The Sentences That Create Us*. **Books are empowering.** As Richard Wright, whose book, *Black Boy*, has been routinely challenged and banned, said of his own initiation into reading (accessed through surreptitiously using a white co-worker's library card), "It was not a matter of believing or disbelieving what I read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made the look of the world different. I had a new hunger."

We should **all** be able to feed this hunger and find this lifeline. To have the freedom to learn and explore the fullness of who we are, the world we inhabit, and the others we inhabit it with. For being a person is as much relational as it is individual, and identities are forged through circumstance as well as through reading, education, dialogue, solidarity, and struggle. The current landscape has revealed how unfinished conversations and a thirst for truth, reckoning, affirmation, and connection mark our collective path forward. The question is who gets to write the script, who has the speaking parts, and who gets to read it?

Why focus on the intersections between collection challenges, curricular bans, anti-Blackness, and suppression of historical truths and marginalized voices, identities, and experiences? There are at least 5 reasons: (1) Books written by Black authors or that depict aspects of Black experience or history are disproportionately challenged as is curriculum that centers it; (2) the censorship and erasure of the historical record is at its most virulent when probing interconnections between our contemporary reality, “the afterlives of slavery,” and the current landscape of social movements for Black lives; (3) the silences that result from removal, relocation, or revision of specific texts and histories have material consequences, from particularly impacting mental health and social belonging for LGBTQ+ youth and young people of color to contributing to social issues like gun violence, poverty, and mass incarceration; (4) in a country where access to robust and diverse library collections and inclusive educational opportunities are bifurcated by race, class, and geography, we have a social responsibility to contest these inequities from a broad vision and contextually-strategic vantage points; and (5) the historical refusal of many stakeholders within the library establishment to confront or explicitly condemn racism and segregated libraries in the South or to publicly support those who did, despite the backdrop of its professed defense of the freedom to read, equity of access, and opposition to censorship **and** the preamble to the first Library Bill of Rights, issued in 1939, which read: “Today, indications in many parts of the world point to growing intolerance, suppression of free speech, and censorship affecting the rights of minorities and

individuals.” **And so here we are. Again. With a new lens on entrenched and trenchant issues. Let us continue. And begin.**