



From Berkeley to *Beloved*: Race and Sexuality in the History of Book Censorship in Virginia

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RESEARCH
PEER-REVIEWED

**VIRGINIA TECH.**
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

The early 2020s saw a wave of demands for books to be removed from school and public libraries in Virginia and throughout the United States. A disproportionately high percentage of challenges were aimed at books written by LGBTQ+ authors and authors of color. Involvement by public officials was one of the most striking features of the challenges—especially when Republican gubernatorial candidate Glenn Youngkin chose to make “parental control” of children’s education a central feature of his 2021 campaign. However, while these events represent a new and troubling phase in the long history of struggles for control of reading material, race and sexuality have been recurring themes in book censorship throughout Virginia history in periods of backlash to social change. This article surveys episodes in the history of book censorship in Virginia from 1960-present set against the longer arc of Virginia and US history. Books provide exposure to knowledge as well as its representation, ensuring that they will be a focus of cultural and political struggles. Demands to restrict library materials in order to protect children tend to focus on literature giving voice to marginalized communities, and can be followed by demands to restrict adults’ reading material as well.

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KEYWORDS:

history of censorship; book banning; school libraries; public libraries; Virginia; law; obscenity (law); Comstock laws; politics; attitudes towards sexuality; race relations

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Weimer, Keith. “From Berkeley to *Beloved*: Race and Sexuality in the History of Book Censorship in Virginia.” *Virginia Libraries* 67, no. 1 (2023): 3, pp. 1–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/valib.v67i1.651>

INTRODUCTION

The early 2020s saw a wave of demands for books to be removed from school and public libraries in Virginia (and throughout the United States). In May 2022, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* discovered that 42 of Virginia's 132 school districts had experienced challenges to library books during the previous two school years, with 23 of the 42 removing at least one book.¹ According to a national survey conducted by PEN America, during the 2021–2022 school year “41% of [withdrawn] titles have protagonists or prominent secondary characters of color, followed by 33% explicitly addressing LGBTQ+ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others] themes or have protagonists or prominent secondary characters who are LGBTQ+, 22% directly address issues of race and racism, and 25% include sexual encounters.”² Virginia appeared to mirror this trend, with titles like *Gender Queer* and *Lawn Boy* featured in news articles about book challenges, and phrases like “sexually explicit material” and “critical race theory” invoked by parents, teachers, and public officials in their objections to books. Commentators frequently described the wave of challenges as “unprecedented” in scope.³

Involvement by public officials was one of the most striking features of the challenges—especially when Republican gubernatorial candidate Glenn Youngkin chose to make “parental control” of children’s education a central feature of his 2021 campaign. After Democratic candidate and former Governor Terry McAuliffe declared that “I don’t think parents should be telling schools what they should teach,” Youngkin ran a video ad featuring Fairfax County mother Laura Murphy. In 2016, Murphy had successfully campaigned for statewide legislation providing parents with advance warning about “sexually explicit content” in classroom readings, only to have the legislation vetoed by McAuliffe. Youngkin’s campaign produced a second video asserting that “McAuliffe pushed left-liberal bureaucrats into our schools and parents out, covering up rape and sexual assault in our schools. Now our schools are teetering on chaos”—as evidenced by two clips of Black students brawling in high schools.⁴ Youngkin implicitly linked the issue of parental control over “sexually explicit materials” with emerging fears over the teaching of “critical race theory,” which allegedly implicated White children in the oppression of classmates of color and threatened White children’s emotional well-being and even physical safety. Following Youngkin’s victory, two bills were introduced in the Virginia General Assembly—Senate Bill 656, “Sexually explicit content”—essentially a revival of the bill for which Laura Murphy had campaigned⁵—and House Bill 787, aimed at prohibiting such ideas as “an individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or

oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously ... or an individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex.”⁶

Critics of the legislation—including representatives of the Virginia Library Association and Virginia Association of School Librarians—saw it as a form of censorship. The legislation invoked governmental authority to mandate a labelling of instructional materials (and perhaps ultimately school library books) which could inhibit teachers from choosing potentially controversial, but thought-provoking works like Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, which forcefully present the brutality and traumatic impact of enslavement long after emancipation or escape. (Laura Murphy’s objections to sexual content in *Beloved* had led her to champion the 2016 legislation.) They also noted the potentially vague nature of the term “sexually explicit,” and its application to a wide range of literature.⁷ Within days of Youngkin’s election, the Spotsylvania County School Board voted to ban any books that contained sexually explicit content. Board member Kirk Twigg said that he wanted to “see the books before we burn them so we can identify within our community that we are eradicating this bad stuff.”⁸ Events in Spotsylvania inaugurated a wave of local challenges to school library books. At the same time, Youngkin’s election and his rallying cry of “parental control” were seen by political commentators as a potentially successful electoral strategy for Republicans across the country in future elections because he had flipped a Governor’s seat controlled by Democrats for the previous decade.⁹

The events of 2021–2022 thus represent a new and troubling phase in the long history of struggles for control of reading material in Virginia and in the United States. However, race and sexuality have been recurring themes in book censorship throughout Virginia history, especially in periods of backlash to social change. Religious beliefs have also become powerfully intertwined with race and sexuality. Race, religion, and sexuality have all been important constructs in the shaping of social order and have come to play important roles in personal identity. Control of reading material was essential to the establishment of Virginia’s racial order. Laws reinforcing white supremacy and laws reinforcing a system of sexual mores coincided for long periods of Virginia’s history. Challenges to white supremacy in the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s closely coincided with challenges to traditional sexual mores. This period also saw a loosening of laws restricting access to reading content. As a result of these changes, a greater diversity of experience (including depictions of sexual situations and more frequent use of foul language) began to be represented in publishing, library collections, and public

school curricula. This article will provide an overview of these developments with a focus on several episodes in the history of book censorship in Virginia from 1960-present. This survey is not an attempt to catalog every demand to limit or remove books from Virginia schools or libraries. Rather, it focuses on censorship efforts that have had implications for a broader range of reading material and affected state or local politics. The term “censorship” will be used here to describe any appeal to political authority to suppress or somehow limit access to reading material deemed offensive by some person or group of people. (Restrictions on access to film, the Internet, and artwork have also played a role in Virginia history, but lie outside the scope of this article, as does the concept of self-censorship by librarians.) This definition encompasses a variety of restrictions—from full suppression of publications to demands for restrictions on classroom reading material, which can provoke further calls for removal of these materials from school and public libraries.¹⁰

FROM BERKELEY TO JIM CROW: THE CREATION OF RACIALIZED INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM REGIMES

Before discussing more recent censorship controversies, it is worth examining the longer historical background in which race and sexuality have factored in restrictions on reading material in Virginia. The first ban on books in Virginia was enacted in March 1660 when the General Assembly and Governor Sir William Berkeley passed an ordinance against the Quakers: “that no person do presume on their peril to dispose or publish their bookes, pamphlets or libells bearing the title of their tenents and opinions.”¹¹ The Quakers were a Protestant sect arising in the ferment of England’s revolutionary era (1640–1660), which dethroned the King, disestablished the Church of England, and in Virginia deposed Governor Berkeley. The Quakers were especially associated with egalitarianism—including gender equality because they allowed women to preach—and challenges to sexual mores, frequently attracting to their membership former “Ranters,” extremist sectarians who, like the Quakers, preached the existence of an indwelling Spirit of God and rejected conventional notions of sinfulness.¹²

By the early 1660s, enslaved Africans had come to outnumber white indentured servants in Virginia. In 1667 the General Assembly and Governor Berkeley passed a law clarifying “that baptisme of slaves doth not exempt them from bondage,”¹³ once again striking at egalitarian implications in Christianity. This law was closely related to White planters’ doubts about providing instruction in Christianity for enslaved Africans. Elite resistance to religious

instruction for the enslaved functioned effectively as a ban on books, and inaugurated separate racialized intellectual freedom regimes for most of Virginia’s history. Though planters began to relax their attitudes about religious instruction, including training in literacy, after a group of Virginia Africans successfully petitioned the Bishop of London for support in 1723, education for enslaved as well as free Blacks was intentionally limited in scope, even when provided by sympathetic enslavers. In 1831, in the wake of Nat Turner’s Uprising, the General Assembly forbade education for both free and enslaved Blacks, though some planters provided such instruction on their estates.¹⁴

In 1836 the General Assembly also passed a law requiring postmasters to notify justices of the peace whenever they received abolitionist publications. According to historian Charles Eaton, “The justice of the peace [could] have such books, pamphlets, and other publications burned in his presence and should arrest the addressee, if the latter subscribed for the said book or pamphlet with intent to aid the purposes of the abolitionists.”¹⁵ *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was likely among the books meeting these criteria, and copies of the novel may also have been burned by students at the University of Virginia.¹⁶

Slavery was abolished in Virginia in 1865 with the defeat of the Confederacy, but the system of racially segregated and inequitably financed schools and libraries enacted during the following century (the Jim Crow era) represents a continuing form of censorship. While books may not have been banned, access to library material was restricted by law. For example, in Petersburg, when the public library was established in 1923, the basement level was “to be kept and maintained for the exclusive use of Negroes,” but the card catalog was located on the Whites-only main floor of the library, thus restricting Black patrons to whatever books were located on the basement floor, which was not expanded or updated along with sections of the library reserved for Whites. In Danville, Black patrons were limited to a branch library that received discarded books from the Whites-only main library. Sit-ins were led to desegregate both facilities in 1960.¹⁷

Amanda Frisken has identified an additional and subtler racialized aspect of limitations placed on intellectual freedom during the late 19th century. In 1873, Anthony Comstock, founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, successfully lobbied the United States Congress to pass an “Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use” (which, along with related legislation, commonly became known as the Comstock Laws), prohibiting use of the U.S. Postal Service to transmit any items deemed “obscene,” including publications discussing marriage reform and sexuality, as well as sexualized images of

women. Depictions of Black men attacking White women were tacitly exempted from prosecution under these laws, which largely remained in force until the 1960s. An effect of Comstock-era censorship was to embody the rapist as a Black man.¹⁸

FROM THE COMSTOCK LAWS TO VIRGINIA'S 1960 OBSCENITY LAW: RESTRICTIONS AND CHANGING DEFINITIONS OF OBSCENITY

It is worth noting that the Comstock Laws were roughly coeval with the Jim Crow era. While the Comstock Laws were not intended as a complement to racial segregation, they may have helped to reinforce it—as Amanda Frisken suggests—and the combined sets of restrictions formed a powerful backdrop of expectations for many Virginians in terms of access to information and societal norms. Certainly, the Comstock Laws were intended to reinforce dominant understandings of gender roles and monogamous heterosexual marriage as social ideals, and to restrict reading material that questioned this ideal as well as actual pornography.

The Comstock Laws were consonant with Virginia's obscenity statute of 1848, which “prohibited any person from disseminating literature ‘manifestly tending to corrupt the morals of youth.’”¹⁹ This law reflected definitions of obscenity supported by the U.S. Supreme Court (“obscenity is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences”), which began to change in the late 1950s. In 1957 two cases decided by the U.S. Supreme Court—*Roth v. United States* and *Alberts v. California*—shifted the test for “obscenity” to “material whose ‘dominant theme taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest’ of the ‘average person, applying contemporary community standards.’” The new test had the effect of permitting a much wider body of literature to be published and distributed without fear of prosecution.²⁰ “Contemporary community standards” also shifted significantly through the 1960s in a liberalizing direction, influenced partly by the greater freedom afforded by the Supreme Court decisions, and partly by a growing public questioning of dominant societal attitudes about racial justice, gender norms, and sexuality. Expectations concerning religious beliefs and practices were challenged within and outside religious institutions, as was Christianity's dominant place in American culture.

The Virginia General Assembly passed a new “Statute on Obscenity” in 1960 that adopted the 1957 U.S. Supreme Court test. It also “expressly exempted public libraries from any legal action concerning obscenity.”²¹ The law was

invoked in 1963 when Alexandria attorney Paul Peachy unsuccessfully sued the Fairfax County Public Library to prevent it from circulating four novels depicting interracial romance: *Without Magnolias*, by Bucklin Moon; *A Month Soon Goes*, by Storm Jameson, *Colorblind*, by Margaret Halsey, and *The Big Sky*, by A.B. Guthrie, Jr.. Ironically, the author of the statute, *Richmond Leader* editor James Kilpatrick, worked to utilize his research in framing the statute as a means of fighting integration without explicit reference to race. In March 1959, he wrote to a friend: “any ‘plan’ aimed at preserving segregation ‘never can succeed at all if it is tied in any way to the integration controversy.’”²² Kilpatrick allied himself with other Southern politicians and opinion leaders who began to speak of the dire effects of integration in cultural, rather than explicitly racial terms, warning of “the decline of the only culture we know,”²³ and pointing to the 1965 Watts Uprising in Los Angeles as an example of integration's failure. “The American Negro has had two generations of reasonable opportunity in the unsegregated North and West. How has he developed the opportunities put before him? In squalor, in apathy, in crime,”²⁴ Kilpatrick wrote. Arguments like this became more pervasive throughout White America during the late 1960s and early 1970s as crime statistics rose and social movements challenging dominant societal norms (including ethnic militancy, opposition to the Vietnam War, feminism, and gay liberation) deepened their critiques and became more provocative. They provided the backdrop for a major controversy over school textbooks in the mid-1970s.

THE RESPONDING CONTROVERSY

In 1972 the Virginia Department of Education issued a mandate to instill greater multiculturalism in public education. The mandate included new textbooks for language arts classes, of which the *Responding* series, published by Ginn and Company, was among the most widely adopted. It anthologized numerous works by contemporary Black authors, as well as other “high interest” popular fiction like *The Godfather* and *The Exorcist*, and reflected the questioning spirit of the 1960s.²⁵ The Foreword to the ninth grade *Basic Sequence* book stated: “The pieces in this book raise a lot of questions about man—about you. Most of them aren't easy questions to answer. In fact, no one really has any final answers. Maybe no one ever will.”²⁶

Rejection of such relativistic claims as anti-Christian—along with complaints about foul language—featured in backlash against the textbooks, first led in Washington County in the spring of 1974 by Bobby Sproles, owner of

a small business near Abingdon. When Sproles and his supporters failed to obtain satisfaction from the school board and then from the Washington County Circuit Court, they developed a slate of candidates for the County Board of Supervisors and introduced a proposition that would allow the supervisors to appoint candidates to the school board—a highly successful strategy, resulting in what amounted to a political takeover of Washington County for the next decade. The Washington County movement influenced similar complaints in Carroll, Bedford, Roanoke, Henrico, Botetourt, and Prince William counties between September 1974 and March 1975. Only Carroll and Washington counties removed the books, and in Washington, only after a lengthy struggle, despite Sproles' political dominance. As a result of the struggle, three successive Washington County school superintendents were forced from office. Sproles and his closest ally, the Rev. Tom Williams, met with their state representatives and with Governor Mills Godwin, but received only tepid expressions of sympathy.²⁷ However, in April 1975, the State Board of Education announced that it would draw up a new list of textbooks. It also stated that “it expects parents to have the right to review textbooks proposed for their school, orally and in writing, well before the selection day set by the local school board,” and “underlined its determination to get reports from local boards on how they involved parents in the book selection process.”²⁸

Race appeared more as a subtext in the controversy than as a dominant theme. The “profanity” that many parents cited in objection to the textbooks was not found exclusively in the works of Black authors. However, members of the Washington County School District textbook selection committee noted that “Most of the literature being objected to in these textbooks is Black literature. These selections in question often present the prejudices and injustices against the Negroes. These problems have been treated realistically and anyone objecting to the way it is presented would be admitting to prejudice—an admission that many would hesitate to make.”²⁹ Similarly, sociologists Scott Cummings, Richard Briggs, and James Mercy, analyzing the controversy in “Mountain Gap” (most likely the independent city of Buena Vista), quoted a teacher as saying “One of the problems with this literature is that it presents the Black experience. ... That’s a little too frightening for some people to handle.”³⁰ It is likely that stories “presenting the prejudices and injustices against the Negroes” represented some of the “lack of patriotism” in the books that were also part of White parents’ objections. Bobby Sproles admitted that “there’s things in the books that to me, personally, is more damaging psychologically than the words is. Now I’ve played on the profanity, I’ve fought the issue on the profanity, simply because I guess I didn’t know any other

way to do it.”³¹ Sproles dismissed a selection from the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, saying, “Malcolm X as far as I’m concerned has contributed nothing to society, other than trouble and violence.”³² Dismissal of the multicultural goals of the textbooks—that the importance of students in overwhelmingly White, rural counties learning about the experiences and perspectives of students in Black, urban settings could override some foul language or irony in the literature or the objectionable pasts of some of the authors—was a common feature of the protests. As J. Ray Turner of Bedford County emphasized “An area should say what culture they’re going to have,³³ and the protesters insisted that education should reflect and replicate their overwhelmingly White, conservative, fundamentalist Protestant culture.

In demanding removal of the textbooks, the protesters explicitly sought to fend off the chaotic trends of the preceding decade. As Rev. Tom Williams said, “The books themselves did not create the moral breakdown, because they were published when the moral breakdown was already in progress. It is just another item contributing a little more to the moral breakdown. If our nation is going to be completely destroyed it’s going to have to be through destroying the moral standards in our people. And they must start with our children.”³⁴ Textbook opponents in “Mountain Gap”/Buena Vista stated: “Our society is sick with despair. It has become morally bankrupt.”³⁵

The controversy over the textbooks led to demands that some of the literature anthologized in the textbooks be removed from school libraries. According to Washington County Assistant Superintendent of Schools B.G. Raines: “Two months after the initial complaint, [the protesters] began to direct their attention to the school libraries. They demanded that *Grapes of Wrath*, *The Godfather*, and *The Exorcist* be removed immediately. The group insisted that they, as taxpayers and patrons, be allowed to enter the libraries and search for and remove “filth.” ...The list of authors included Pearl Buck, Maxwell Anderson, Sherwood Anderson, Charles Beard, John Dewey, W.E.B. Dubois, Oscar Hammerstein, Dorothy Parker, Edgar Snow, John Steinbeck, Louis Untermeyer, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Robert Frost.”³⁶ Raines describes these demands as garnering considerably less public support than those for removal of the textbooks. In 1997, Marion McAdoo Goldwasser, a Carroll County teacher, recalled how “following the banning of the *Responding* series from the English classrooms, James Baldwin’s books were taken from the library shelves, along with books on witchcraft.”³⁷ In a December 1974 interview, the Rev. Tom Williams stated: “We’re determined to clean up the [public] libraries too.”³⁸ The Concerned Citizens do not immediately appear to have acted on this threat. However, in 1980 Williams demanded that the Washington

County Public Library remove novels by authors like Harold Robbins and Sidney Sheldon because of their alleged “pornographic” content. The library director’s refusal to comply with his demand led to a two-year controversy that garnered national attention, including a visit to Abingdon by Ed Bradley for the highly rated “television news magazine” *60 Minutes*. Bobby Sproles and his allies on the Board of Supervisors eventually cut the library’s budget in retaliation for the director’s defiance, but the librarians did not remove the books.³⁹

THE VIRGINIA BEACH REFERENDUM (1980) AND THE FAIRFAX PUBLIC LIBRARY CONTROVERSY (1993–1994): LIBRARY MATERIALS ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

The movement for gay liberation emerged soon after the civil rights movement for African Americans and echoed some of its rhetoric and tactics of protest. It also challenged expectations concerning religious beliefs and practice, and helped form the backdrop for the claims of moral decline made by the Rev. Tom Williams and other textbook opponents in southwest Virginia.

In the spring of 1980, two Virginia Beach City council members and other patrons of the Virginia Beach Public Library objected to the library’s distribution of a gay newspaper titled *Our Own*. Their complaints focused on cartoons apparently depicting sexual acts and the paper’s easy accessibility to children. City Manager George Hanbury asked the Library to remove copies of *Our Own* and cease distribution of the paper, which librarians resisted. A proposed compromise—in which the library would retain a copy of the newspaper in its periodicals section while ceasing distribution—was unsatisfactory to both sides.⁴⁰ The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed suit against the City of Virginia Beach on behalf of the Unitarian Universalist Gay Community (UUGC) of Norfolk—the publishers of *Our Own*—while fundamentalist pastors organized a petition drive to place a referendum on the November ballot asking “Shall a publication whose primary purpose is to depict or advocate, through picture or word, homosexual acts be displayed, distributed, or received into the public libraries of the city of Virginia Beach?”⁴¹ The referendum carried a “no” vote by a margin of 48,217 to 13,694. However, it was an “advisory referendum” only, meaning that it did not obligate the City Council to abide by its outcome.⁴²

It was unclear whether the wording of the referendum was intended specifically to target *Our Own*, or was

intended to be applied more broadly to works dealing with homosexuality. The wording of the referendum could lend itself to either interpretation. Pastor Rodney Bell, one of the leaders of opposition to *Our Own*, had previously associated himself with Christian singer Anita Bryant’s high profile crusade against gay rights, perhaps suggesting that the referendum was intended to be applied more widely to library materials than just *Our Own*.⁴³ The referendum’s meaning was contested by supporters of the UUGC and the library, with William Macali, attorney for the ACLU, arguing that “the primary purpose of this [newspaper] is certainly not to depict homosexual acts,” while City Councilman F. Reid Ervin claimed that “We’d have a hard time finding anything in the library, including *Our Own*, that advocates homosexuality or depicts homosexual acts.”⁴⁴ In March 1981, the ACLU dropped its suit, accepting the compromise reached in summer 1980, with the city additionally agreeing not to establish policies that discriminated against gay publications.⁴⁵

A similar controversy erupted in 1993—this time over a Washington, DC, publication, *The Blade*, carried by the Fairfax County Public Library. (It was probably not coincidental that Bill Clinton—whose campaign had widely been seen as offering unprecedented support for gay rights—had just been elected to the U.S. Presidency.⁴⁶) Conservative parents initially objected to the content of personal ads in the paper, which apparently contained sexual images. Eventually, they broadened their demands to include purchase of titles like *You Don’t Have to Be Gay, Overcoming Homosexuality*, and *Homosexual No More*—“to represent the full range of views on homosexuality”—as well as that parents be able to examine their minor children’s circulation records and that the Music Television channel (MTV) be removed from televisions available in the library.⁴⁷ Activist Karen Jo Gounaud insisted “I am not homophobic; I am not for book banning; and I am not for censorship.” However, she also said “I think we ought to keep a copy [of *The Blade*] in the library; it’s kind of like [Adolf Hitler’s book] ‘Mein Kampf’ during World War II. If there’s a group that’s trying to destroy society, you want to know about them.”⁴⁸ suggesting quite the opposite. Objections to homosexuality as such appear in County Supervisor Ernest J. Berger’s statement that “It [*The Blade*] advocates a lifestyle that mainstream Fairfax Countians are opposed to,”⁴⁹ as well as the County Board of Supervisors’ threat to eliminate the Library board altogether when the latter repeatedly resisted calls to remove the paper, and the hostility directed at library board members who had been especially outspoken in defense of the paper. One member, Phylis A. Salak, had been surrounded and screamed at, as well as spat upon, according to a *USA Today* report.⁵⁰ Opponents of *The Blade* petitioned the Fairfax City Council

to remove Salak from the library board before her term expired, arguing that she “has more authority than Fairfax City should have,” because she served as the city’s voter registrar as well as a Library board member, though she had held both positions for the previous seven years.⁵¹ In the end, Salak was not removed, though the County Board of Supervisors did vote to eliminate the seat of Linda Hunt, another board member who had supported retention of *The Blade*, upon the expiration of her term on the library board in 1994.⁵² The library board saved itself from elimination by promising “to devise a policy to keep sexually explicit material out of the hands of children.”⁵³

Whether “mainstream Fairfax Countians” in fact shared Supervisor Berger’s views of the controversy remained unclear. In 1995, Katherine K. Hanley, Democratic candidate for Chairman of the Board of County Supervisors, criticized her Republican opponent, Elaine N. McConnell, for the latter’s role in efforts to remove *The Blade*, a stance that may have contributed to Hanley’s victory in the spring election.⁵⁴

In 1995 Karen Jo Gounaud founded Family Friendly Libraries (FFL), a national organization dedicated to challenging the American Library Association’s (ALA) policies on intellectual freedom and diversity—especially privacy for young readers and the inclusion of materials reflecting LGBTQ+ viewpoints.⁵⁵ Christine Pawley credits Gounaud with having a significant impact on conservative activism towards libraries: “working to change library policies rather than simply challenging library materials and promoting the idea of ‘safe’ libraries. ... Pro-family activists now step into the cultural fray not simply to determine the library’s role but to declare their right to determine it.”⁵⁶ In the sense of “declaring their right to determine it,” Gounaud and her allies in Fairfax followed the path taken by Bobby Sproules and Rev. Tom Williams.

FROM THE “BELOVED BILL” (HB 516) TO THE 2021 ELECTION: A NEW LINKAGE BETWEEN RACE AND SEX AND THE PUSH FOR STATE-LEVEL SOLUTIONS

Although Gounaud formed a national organization and spoke on national media, her vision of library politics focused on activism at the local level. After 2012, a call for a statewide political solution to problematic reading materials resulted from the activism of another Fairfax County mother, Laura Murphy. Murphy was appalled by depictions of sex and violence in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, including allusions to bestiality, a brutal rape, and the murder of an infant by its mother to prevent the

child’s return to enslavement. She first petitioned the Fairfax County School Board to provide parents with more advanced warning about the contents of course readings, pointing out that “To even show excerpts of the R-rated movie ‘Beloved’ in Fairfax County High Schools, a teacher must get approval from the principal and department chair and, most important, would have to provide two weeks’ notice to parents and receive signed permission slips for each participating student. But assigning the book ‘Beloved’ requires no similar notification.”⁵⁷ When the school board rejected her petition, Murphy worked with political contacts for statewide legislation that would require teachers to provide advanced warning of “sexually explicit content” in any classroom texts so that parents could choose alternative readings for their children.⁵⁸

Murphy said that she was not calling for the removal of *Beloved* from Fairfax County school libraries, nor “censorship” of the title.⁵⁹ However, opponents of the proposed legislation regarded it as a form of censorship because it could inhibit teachers from choosing potentially controversial, but thought-provoking works. They also noted the potentially vague nature of the term “sexually explicit,” and its application to a wide range of literature.⁶⁰ Gayle Wald, professor of English and American Studies at George Washington University, pointed out that Murphy’s statement to the General Assembly supporting the bill referenced another Toni Morrison novel, *The Bluest Eye*, and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, also works by Black authors depicting problems uniquely faced by African Americans. “The notion of the ‘sexual explicitness’ of works such as ‘Beloved’ is a ruse and an evasion, a way of underhandedly denying students access to books by African American authors and knowledge of slavery and its legacies,” Wald wrote.⁶¹ Whatever Laura Murphy’s original intentions, the politicization of her quest for comprehensive parental notification did lead to increasingly hyperbolic condemnation of *Beloved* in the General Assembly – exaggerating its “sexually explicit” content and obscuring its depiction of racial trauma. According to one state senator, “That evil act is just like a kitten. It may be playful and harmless in the beginning, but you feed that evil, it grows and it grows.”⁶² The Murphys’ objection to the violence in the novel—the murder of the baby girl, based on a real-life incident from 1856—was no longer mentioned.

The bill requiring parental notification (HB 516) passed with bipartisan support, but developments during the second half of the 2010s centered support for a new wave of book censorship among Republican politicians. Republicans’ embrace of cultural conservatism and Democrats’ corresponding association with more liberal tendencies had been noticeable since at least the

Presidency of Richard Nixon, but Donald Trump's successful bid for the Presidency in 2016 suggested the value of tapping into voters'—especially White voters'—fears and resentments at cultural and demographic changes. These changes included the growth of the nonwhite population in both the United States and Virginia, along with the number of persons professing no religious affiliation—to a point where former racial and religious majorities faced the prospect of becoming minorities—leading to talk of “the End of White Christian America,” as well as “The Great Replacement” of White Americans by nonwhites. Democratic politicians were specifically accused of aiding “the Great Replacement” by supporting liberal policies on immigration. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement challenged policing in a systemic way in order to end police violence against African Americans. BLM also heightened scrutiny of institutionalized racism in American institutions and attempted to raise public consciousness of racism, including attention to unconscious small acts of racism, or “microaggressions.” The United States Supreme Court's recognition of a right to same-sex marriage in 2015 (*Obergefell v. Hodges*) was soon followed by increasing calls for transgender rights and significant increases in the number of people—especially youth—who identified as transgender, “nonbinary,” or “gender nonconforming.”⁶³

Many of these social currents were reflected in books for children and young adults produced during the decade. From 2015 there was a steady growth in the publication of young adult (YA) and children's books treating LGBT characters and themes. To a lesser extent, there was growth in the number of YA and children's books by Black authors, including works dealing with police violence. These books were frequently the subjects of library challenges. For example, books describing the experiences of transgendered children like *George*, and *I Am Jazz* were on the American Library Association's Top 10 Most Challenged Books List most years between 2015 and 2021, as was *The Hate U Give*, Angie Thomas's novel about police violence in an inner-city neighborhood, published in 2017. At the same time, libraries removed or reassigned to adult sections of their collections older works of children's literature depicting racist imagery or reflecting racist attitudes, especially after the deadly Unite the Right March in Charlottesville in 2017—causing cries of “woke censorship” and accusations of double standards on the part of librarians in opposing challenges to library materials logged by conservatives.⁶⁴

Democrat Ralph Northam succeeded Terry McAuliffe as Virginia's Governor in 2017. By the end of Northam's term, tensions over race, sexuality and gender identity in public schools combined with frustration over lengthy school closures and mask mandates during the COVID-19

pandemic created an opportunity that Glenn Youngkin was able to successfully exploit in his bid for the governorship in 2021. The Northam administration and Democratic-controlled General Assembly had supported the 2021 creation of a “Culturally Relevant and Inclusive Education Practices Advisory Committee,” which had “recommended age-appropriate anti-bias education to students,” including “Acknowledgment of inequity on the individual level, such as biased speech and harassment, and injustice at the institutional or systemic level, such as discrimination, and the harmful impact of inequity and injustice on the community, historically and today.”⁶⁵ It had also mandated the creation of “Model Policies for the Treatment of Transgender Students in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools” which emphasized “student privacy and confidentiality.”⁶⁶ Youngkin aligned himself with parents who were dissatisfied with these policies and feared that their authority was being undermined. McAuliffe's gaffe in the 2021 gubernatorial campaign—“I don't think parents should be telling schools what they should teach”—came in an exchange during which McAuliffe described HB 516, the bill for which Laura Murphy had campaigned, as “letting parents veto books.”⁶⁷ McAuliffe's apparent dismissal of parental authority enabled Youngkin subtly and skillfully to link dangerous reading material to a combination of voters' racial and sexual fears.

As noted earlier, a new wave of local challenges to library books was inaugurated within days of Youngkin's election. Social media helped spread news of objectionable titles as well as successful challenges and tactics. National groups like Moms for Liberty organized chapters in Virginia and led campaigns to have titles removed from school libraries. In some ways, the Moms picked up where Family Friendly Libraries left off—implicitly defining “parenting” in heteronormative terms (though explicitly denying an anti-LGBTQ+ stance), nominating candidates for school board elections, and expressing an apocalyptic sense of cultural struggle in which the educational and library professions were part of a conspiracy attacking traditional American family values. Republican politicians gave support to the challenges. In May 2022, attorney and State Delegate Tim Anderson and Congressional candidate Tommy Altman unsuccessfully sued Barnes and Noble booksellers in Virginia Beach to prevent sale of two YA novels, *Gender Queer* and *The Court of Mist and Fury*, because of “obscene” content. The suit was dismissed in Virginia Beach Circuit Court, but Anderson and other Republican legislators sponsored a number of bills during the 2023 session of the General Assembly that would have required school librarians to develop policies requiring “mandatory written parental consent before a student is permitted to check out” any

item depicting various sexual acts (SB 787); required school librarians to review every book in their collections and flag those containing “sexually explicit content” (HB 1379 and HB 1463); redefined the Virginia Code’s definition of “obscenity” to “that which depicts or describes patently offensive representations or descriptions of ultimate sexual acts” (SB 1204); and prohibited institutions of higher education from staging art exhibits, dramatic performances, or showing films containing “sexually explicit content” if minors were present (HB 1708). All of this legislation failed to pass through the House or Senate committees assigned to review it.⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

The 2022 legislation and book challenges represent the latest phase in which efforts to restrict reading material have been part of Virginians’ attempts to determine—most often to maintain—a social order. Books provide exposure to knowledge as well as its representation, ensuring that they will be a focus of cultural and political struggles—especially when it comes to widespread access via public libraries and the school system. Broadly speaking, before 1965 race and sexuality were explicit factors in book censorship and censorship efforts encompassed adults as well as children. After 1965, censorship efforts centered on children, with race more often an undercurrent rather than an explicit justification. Demands to restrict library materials in order to protect children tend to focus on literature giving voice to marginalized communities. As the example of Washington County suggests, such demands can broaden to restrict a wider range of literature, including reading material aimed at adults.

Dominance can be established over a community’s access to information, but this survey also suggests that as far as restrictions on books are an effort to restrict or suppress “undesirable” groups of people, the arc of the moral universe may be long, but it bends towards justice,⁶⁹ or at least inclusion. In a 2019 column for *The Daily Signal*, a blog produced by the conservative Heritage Foundation, Anna Anderson wrote: “Politics helps shape culture, and the school board will determine which belief system will shape our children’s moral imaginations, their vision of family, and even how they view their own bodies.”⁷⁰ The politics of censorship have been successful, at times, in producing outward conformity to this vision. However, it has not necessarily produced a deeper internalization of conservative values nor limited demand for literature that explores themes objectionable to the censors. The larger moral victory that Anderson imagines has proven elusive, producing recurring demands for censorship.

NOTES

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Weimer, Keith. "From Berkeley to *Beloved*: Race and Sexuality in the History of Book Censorship in Virginia." *Virginia Libraries* 67, no. 1 (2023): 3, pp. 1–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/valib.v67i1.651>

Submitted: 27 February 2023

Accepted: 04 April 2023

Published: 12 July 2023

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