

Literacy is Freedom

Carissa McCray and Harley Campbell

Foreword by Carissa McCray

For almost ten years, I have struggled with figuring out how to align my own scholarship with the expected scholarship of my children. I have two daughters—13 and 8 years old. They have both watched and participated in my academic growth; however, I did not have the words to articulate their contribution. In 2020, while conducting research about women in education, I came across the term *motherscholar*—coined by Cheryl Matias in 2011 and inspired by works from Audre Lorde, Beverly Tatum, and Patricia Hill Collins. According to Matias and Nishi (2018), a motherscholar frames scholarship by questioning how we can support and prepare our children to live and thrive in a society driven by segregation and discriminatory practices.

The questioning within motherscholarship is what drove the topic for our contribution to *The New Ray Bradbury Review*. My daughter and I wanted to examine the ways in which censorship has existed for centuries to prevent the enrichment of Black Americans. Without my daughter's contribution, this article would not have been possible.

Foreword by Harley Campbell

When my mom proposed the idea of me being a co-author for an article she was doing on *Fahrenheit 451* in *The New Ray Bradbury Review*, I was surprised. I never really imagined that I would be helping with writing a chapter on a book I read in class, but it was a very pleasant experience. During class time, we responded to questions about *Fahrenheit 451* and when I got home, my mom and I talked more and more about the book, censorship, and censorship's impact on Black people throughout history. With my work at school, my mom told me that she put some of my written and verbal answers in the article. When we finished writing and she integrated my work, it was fun looking over it and trying to find the quotes. I felt like my ideas were being put out there and that others would like my work.

I think this embodies my value as a scholar by showing the fact that you don't need to be in high school, college, or at a job to have your ideas pushed and published. Seeing my writing in the journal article demonstrated that I could think critically, write, and be part of something more than just my classroom. This shows that even little kids, in fact, can help in the writing of articles, even if they're just co-authors.

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In 1953, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* introduced the world to a society in which books—containing the vast knowledge of the world—were censored. Historically, book burnings were used to stymie social change, to prevent the dissemination of something greater. The narrative of *Fahrenheit 451* centers around a male protagonist, Montag, who is a firefighter commissioned to burn books. Montag initially believes that books are evil, but learns that they generate a wealth of knowledge that will free society from the shackles of ignorance and uniformity that are keeping the citizens of the city enslaved. In this article we will show how Montag's journey through deprivation and awakening serves as a compelling parallel to the ways in which the United States historically used literacy—or the *withholding* of literacy—to propagate enslavement and ignorance that has cultivated deep in Black histories and the Black psyche.

In the United States, laws were passed to ensure the enslaved did not learn to read, such as the 1739 Negro Act of South Carolina, the Alabama Slave Code of 1833, and many others. Literacy, the act of being able to read and write, became a punishable offense. Punishments ranged from lashes to mutilation to death. Literacy, as slaveholders knew, would provide the enslaved with an amount of power that would allow them to create freedom papers, read signs to escape to freedom, and learn and develop laws for their equality. More than a gateway to freedom, literacy *was* freedom.

From Malcolm X's speeches in the 1960s to Allen's 2016 empirical ethnography, the phrase "the best way to hide something from Black folks is to put it in a book" has seemed to plague the Black community. This saying was meant by Black men and women to motivate Black youth to read more, countering the false assumption that Black people did not want to read. What is often forgotten is that throughout the twentieth century there were multiple Black Literary Renaissances, an explosion of Black authors and book clubs, and the increased advertisement of Black authors in mainstream media. The "deficit narrative" concerning the Black community seemed to neglect the foundational reasons for literary struggle which included systemic racism, segregation, and the discrimination Black students faced in their attempts to increase their literary capacity. This myth of inferiority continues to manifest in our discussion of how Black children are today consistently—and at high rates—entering school with a vocabulary gap; negative perceptions of Black parenting and education; and with the erasure and censorship of Black authors in textbooks.

In the 2020s, we are still censoring books while questioning the literary merits of Black students. Across the United States, twenty-six states have banned over 1,000 books within a nine-month timeframe (Ramos 2022). Maya Angelou, for writing about her experiences as a Black female child in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is one of the most banned authors in the country. Toni Morrison, who has consistently written about the Black experience, is consistently banned. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* has remained on the banned books list for decades, as identified by the American Library Association (2021). However, even more recently, we are seeing a shift in what would cause a book to be banned. Ray Bradbury suggests in *Fahrenheit 451* that knowledge would threaten the power structures of society and create an uprising from the now empowered people. Therefore, seeing a children's book like *Sulwe* by Lupita Nyong'o (2019) banned for its portrayal of a dark-skinned girl realizing how beautiful she is in her skin should come as no surprise. Black authors and their experiences of Blackness are continually censored, because one goal of censorship is to continue the enslavement of a person's mind and body.

Throughout this article, our goal is to draw parallels between the fictional setting, situations, and environment of *Fahrenheit 451* and the tragic history of literacy in Black communities in the United States.

The Hearth and the Salamander

“The Hearth and the Salamander” is the phrase Bradbury uses to title the first part of *Fahrenheit 451*. This chapter heading is a metaphor suggesting that people must continue to persevere in order to survive the trauma and turmoil that happen in their lives. Legend has it that the salamander lives in fire—with the ability to not only remain safe, but to consume the fire source to gain magical power. Almost like the phoenix, the salamander uses the supernatural powers of the fire (Klein 2011). However, where the phoenix uses fire to rejuvenate and rise from its ashes, the salamander uses fire to hide and strengthen itself from persecution. As a salamander is engulfed in the protective flames, it is undoubtedly a symbol of perseverance and grit, the ability to survive through any obstacle. Absent from the myth of the salamander is fear—the fear of being seen, the fear of death, and the fear of what would happen if it survived. Within salamander legends, the creature does not seem to escape (Wake and Koo 2018). It is trapped to the nearby confines of the hearth, repeating the cycle of escape and retreat, and never really reaching its goal. Even though viewed as an immortal creature able to withstand flames the salamander’s existence is filled with trauma and suffering. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Montag endures a similar cycle of fear and freedom as he is learning about the history and true meaning of books, reading, and literacy.

The enslaved, too, were like the salamander caught within the fringes of fear and freedom. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, enslaved Black people knew the risk of reading and writing. Some would take on that risk in their attempts to escape to freedom. (We are reminded of the old woman in *Fahrenheit* who risks her life—and actually burns to death with her books—in part to ensure the message of literacy and freedom is received (Bradbury 2013, 32-37).)

Literacy helped to forge freedom papers, and supported communication between families. Reading was freedom. While in *Fahrenheit 451* “it was a pleasure to burn” books (and only, as a last resort, people) (Bradbury 2013, 1), in the days of slavery it was more a pleasure to see how broken a human could become as basic needs were stripped away, as violence became commonplace, and viewings of murder became entertainment. As the enslaved population grew, the fear of insubordination and insurrection increased; illiteracy and the consequences of literacy were a necessary component to ensure enslavement. Enslaved people were less-than—less than white human life, less even than livestock.

Reading, attempting to read, learning, and even being perceived as meditative were all acts met, according to Givens (2020), with more work, severe beating, amputation, lynching, and murder—sometimes by fire. To guarantee the message was loud and clear, enslavers turned those horrific events into spectacles. They gathered family, friends, children, and other enslaved people to showcase what happens when an enslaved person is thought to be literate. These events of savagery and brutality that destroyed Black bodies became fuel to encourage obedience.

In *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury discusses the importance to the state of showcasing the brutal consequences of getting caught reading. Throughout the novel, the burnings are publicized for everyone to see. Firefighters engage in burning property and sometimes the person, with live media coverage. This media coverage does two things. The first is that it desensitizes the audience, so that there can be a gradual increase of savagery, pain, and suffering without consequence. The second is that it provides a warning to others: read and we destroy you. Cheers and joy during these events provide permission for the erasure of histories. Onlookers, as they become enthralled and overjoyed by the sight of fire, become instigators of the destruction of human lives. The media coverage presented in *Fahrenheit 451* parallels media coverage during the enslavement of Blacks and those of the African diaspora. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the media

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coverage consisted of photographs, paintings, newspaper articles, and word of mouth that displayed and retold the horrors of mutilation, lynchings, and burnings of those who attempted to learn. The message was loud and clear: reading will get you punished. Similar to enslavers, *Fahrenheit's* firemen relish in the burning, destruction, and erasure of people's lives, history, and futures. Book burning brings "down the tatters and charcoal ruins of history" (Bradbury 2013, 1); and abruptly reduces narratives to ashes blowing in a breeze. "Fire is bright and fire is clean" as it frees oneself and society from turmoils, pleasures, enlightenment, and ignorance of the past (Bradbury 2013, 57).

Driven by fear, enslaved Black people focused on survival. That focus led to generational fear that can still be seen today. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the public torturing of literate enslaved Black people ensured that children would be taught that reading was not good for their safety. Parents helped instill that fear into their children because, by reading, their lives were in danger; fear and distrust were the only way to survive. Even though reading was said to bring freedom, it was difficult for those enslaved and those who witnessed the torturing of their family and friends to believe that such freedom could ever exist for them.

Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), learning to read and write as a young enslaved child, also learned that knowledge is the pathway to freedom (Douglass 1995). He and countless others risked their lives to learn how to read. Reading was not just something enslavers attempted to stop; laws were in place to protect the goals of anti-literacy. During the eighteenth century, laws were created to prevent the education of slaves. Getting caught teaching enslaved people to read resulted in jail time or a fine. However, for the enslaved it was much more dangerous. Anti-literacy laws were created because of the fear of insurrection which would result in the loss of financial stability (Givens 2020). The goal of ensuring illiteracy among enslaved peoples was to create such a subservient race of people that anything could be done to them. Fear became the controlling mechanism. While Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Phillis Wheatley, and others were successful in learning to read, many were not.

The legalized fear tactics used to keep Black enslaved people subordinate were gruesome and terrifying. Those caught reading or having books were publicly arrested and given the death penalty. Following Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831 there was an increase in anti-literacy laws and torture for being caught reading. Turner, as an educated enslaved person, used the Bible to encourage rebellion; following this insurrection, many Black enslaved people were tortured or killed (Holden 2021). The goal was to instill fear consistently and thoroughly through physical, emotional, and mental manipulation. Turner himself was tortured, then murdered, and his body was skinned as souvenirs for onlookers (Holden 2021). The purpose was to ensure that no enslaved person would educate themselves, as education would lead to the enslaved wanting freedom, which in turn would lead to insurrection. Both Douglass and Turner used literacy as a route to freedom: Douglass, born into slavery, used his knowledge to free himself and then educate others; Turner as an enslaved man used his knowledge to free and inspire enslaved people to rebel. The obstacles, challenges, and Turner's horrific death had two contradictory consequences: they variously inspired enslaved people to use literacy to gain freedom, or halted the literary growth of enslaved people who were in fear of their lives.

As Captain Beatty explains to Montag about book burning, he shares its origins—but in a history which is evidently inaccurate. He asserts that book burning really got started around "a thing called the Civil War" (Bradbury 2013, 51). However, it is important to note that Captain Beatty's explanation of the Civil War is incomplete; while he is aware of some of the turmoil and upheaval of that period, he skips over (or is ignorant of) the detail of the triggers and consequences

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of that war. Among the things Beatty glosses over are the connections between slavery and the Civil War. (After political unrest and turmoil regarding slavery, the southern states declared secession and created the Confederacy and, as a result, the Civil War erupted; during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed and enacted the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, which stated that anyone who is a slave shall be free (Krishnan 2019).)

It was around the Civil War, according to Beatty, that *Fahrenheit*'s book burning began. As, in reality, former enslaved people began to gain rights to freedom, education became the forefront of their independence. With literacy, former enslaved people could become educators and landowners, and run for political office. The act of burning books around this same time, according to Beatty, was part of a process that ensured "everyone" was "*made equal*". However, it can be surmised that book burning around the time of the Civil War was more likely happening to stop the acquisition of knowledge of formerly enslaved people. Over two hundred years, enslavers had the exclusive ability to write and create history for enslaved people. After the Civil War, former enslaved people would have been able to share their own personal experiences through reading and writing. The banning and then burning of books sought to ensure the erasure of enslaved people's own histories, forced out by the histories created by the enslavers.

The Sieve and the Sand

In part two of *Fahrenheit 451*, Montag recalls a story from his childhood in which his cousin plays a cruel trick on him. They say, "Fill this sieve and you'll get a dime!" However, no matter how hard Montag tries to fill the sieve, the sand continues to sift through (Bradbury 2013, 74). At the end of the day, he is hot, tired, angry, and the sieve is empty. This poignant moment symbolizes the struggles faced by Black people during the twentieth century. Just as Montag's efforts to fill the sieve were futile, the promises of equality and opportunity for Black Americans were consistently undermined by systemic racism and oppressive laws.

The death of Clarisse—brought about because she spread literary awareness—reflects the sinister approaches people will take to ensure the enslavement of others. Black Americans were promised many things—land, full citizenship, rights to vote; however, laws that seemingly were to benefit the country, stifled the advancement of Black Americans, and opportunities were undercut with cruel intentions.

In 1896 the Plessy versus Ferguson case ushered in the era of "separate but equal." This segregation era from c.1900-c.1955 attempted to keep Black people at the bottom of the social, economic, and political hierarchy. While there were opportunities for Black Americans to read, write and go to school, those opportunities were limited based on the family's economic status and the violence faced for striving for an education. Physical violence was met by many Black Americans as they attempted to learn in the early twentieth century (Devlin 2018). Black schools were giving little to nothing in the realm of public education. Learning environments were not conducive, and material was outdated or destroyed (Peters 2019). Even with these obstacles, Black American literacy rates sprung from 10% to over 60% across the nation in 1910—the fastest documented growth in Black literacy (Snyder 1993). Following enslavement, the Civil War and Reconstruction, Black American communities worked hard to ensure that literacy was a priority. The thirst for education among Black Americans evidently did not go unnoticed, as legislation continued to create obstacles that would prevent Black Americans from gaining any type of consistent headway in social, economic and educational arenas. Schools began to receive less

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funding and the environment became more dangerous, with ongoing education oppression, physical violence, and an extreme lack of resources.

The separate but equal mandate came to an end in 1954 with the ruling of *Brown versus Board of Education*. The ruling determined that segregation in schools was unconstitutional. This meant that Black American children would have the same access and opportunity to education as their white counterparts. It also meant that Black American children would be met with even more violence; Black children going to school were abused, spit at, and beaten. All of this received media coverage reflecting a narrative that Black children should “go back where they came from.” For some students, death was a risk they would take to be educated equally and equitably. Political leaders, such as senators and mayors, chose to close schools rather than desegregate them; families took their children out of schools rather than desegregate them; investors took their money out of schools rather than desegregate them. In 1957, the Arkansas governor called for the National Guard to prevent nine Black students from entering Little Rock Central High School (Devlin 2018). Florida officials stated that they would not recognize the ruling of *Brown versus Board of Education*. In 1963, the Alabama governor loudly decreed “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” as he proceeded to block the entry into school for Black students. In North Carolina, governors, state officials, and various city officials declared to the media that they would abide by the ruling of *Brown versus Board of Education*; however, after auditing it was found that full integration of schools did not actually occur until 1971.

The national ruling in *Brown versus Board of Education* did not only impact students; Black teachers were also impacted. Across the country, as schools were attempting to move toward integration, Black teachers were released from their teaching duty often with a claim that they had low performance and could not properly teach an integrated student population (Peters 2019). In many northern states, “white flight” occurred: white families simply moved away from neighborhoods to prevent Black students from being able to attend the same schools as their children. As a result, many schools that were once majority-white were now majority-Black, and the expected integration did not occur. Now Black neighborhood schools received little funding that would have been used for books, equipment, and faculty.

The violence and the extreme measures that some white people would go to in order to stop the literary education of Black students was horrifying, and even included murder. Medgar Evers, in his attempts to overturn segregation at the University of Mississippi, was killed by a white supremacist. With racist laws in place and racist men as jurors, the murderer of Medgar Evers was not convicted until 1994—three trials and thirty years after the murder (Williams 2011).

Literacy is about much more than reading. It is the key to education, and in turn education determines who is able to participate in political and economic infrastructural decision-making in the United States. Literacy therefore continued to be one of the most important goals in the Black community in the 1950s and 1960s. Civil rights leaders from Malcolm X, members of the Black Panther Party, Martin Luther King Jr., and others reveled in literacy. Malcolm X suggested that people should read for four hours per day to stay abreast of current events and to act (Haley & X 1992). This idea of reading aligns to what *Fahrenheit 451*’s Faber tells Montag about the value of books: they provide a necessary means for survival. Faber is quoted as saying that books require and provide a combination of three items: “Number one [...] quality of information. Number two: leisure to digest it. And number three: the right to carry out actions based on what we learn from the interaction of the first two” (Bradbury 2013, p. 81). Malcolm X suggested that reading would provide Black Americans with quality of information. However, a major concern was obtaining the time to engage in reading, due to sociopolitical actions affecting Black Americans: around this

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time redlining, prejudice and discrimination in the workforce, the inability to join unions for economic protection, and financial discrimination impacted on the ability to engage in leisure reading.

Faber's third value of books is "the right to carry out actions." And here lies the biggest problem for Black Americans—whose actions were met with horrific beatings, economic violence, and death. Fear and Black literacy, therefore, seemed to go together; as much as Black communities invested in their goal of literacy, there were continually white supremacists attempting to reduce Black Americans to less-than.

After the wave of desegregation laws, integration was supposed to be a sure thing. Yet shortly after forced integration the rhetoric of the "achievement gap" emerged, which continued the propaganda of Black academic inferiority. For example, in 1966 the *New York Times* released an article with the headline "Negro Education is Found Inferior." The main premise of the accompanying story was that predominantly Black schools had a poor student population, poor academics, and a combination of students perceived to be intellectually behind, and poorly performing teachers (Herbers 1966). The Coleman Report of 1966 was conducted to assess equitable practices across the nation, and its information gathered from standardized tests revealed many things, one of which was the truth about the racial achievement gap: the disparities were in the approaches to learning that students faced at school. In fact, the data did not state that Black students were able to learn less, but that Black students were given less and yet could still meet standards of excellence (Hill 2016). Data from the Coleman Report was subsequently used to justify funding and to create legislation that would further widen equitable opportunities for public education. Schools with predominantly Black populations received lower funding because their test scores were not quite up to par...because of the lack of resources. The cycle ensuring poor literacy for Black students was vicious.

This cycle of reducing funding, reducing equitable opportunities, and an increase in standardized testing continued into the early 1990s before researchers decided to analyze the racial disparities in the data. Researchers such as Gloria Ladson Billings, Catherine Hall, and others discovered that schools were exacerbating the literacy problem, partly through the use of standardized testing which was founded in eugenics. "Curriculum violence"—defined as silencing students and perpetuating stereotypes, prejudices and biases within learning experiences that are inequitable and harmful (Dozono 2020)—ensured that, intellectually and emotionally, students were not getting what they needed, nor what they deserved. While curriculum violence does not have to be purposeful, its detrimental effects are long lasting.¹ Students grow up without wanting to engage in literature, and consequently seek mindless entertainment due to consistent poor expectations. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Captain Beatty quotes Alexander Pope: "little learning is a dangerous thing. Drink deep or taste not the Pierian spring; their shallow drops intoxicate the brain, and drinking largely sobers us again" (Bradbury 2013, p. 102). With forced integration beginning in the 1950s and even continuing today, curriculum and literacy violence continues to manifest in multiple ways: by including topics that examine race through a single narrative or lens; incorporating activities that expect students to assimilate; endorsing resources and activities that continuously dehumanize diverse identities. As a result, literature becomes unrelatable and something people intentionally stay away from.

¹ "Curriculum violence" is a term originated by Erhabor Ighodaro and Greg Wiggan, in *Curriculum Violence: America's New Civil Rights Issue* (2010): "deliberate manipulation of academic programming [...] compromis[ing] the intellectual or psychological well-being of learners." See Jones (2020).

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Despite legislation that attempted to stop Black literacy, reading and literacy was a consistent priority among Black communities. During the 1920s and 1930s, a Black literary revival called the Harlem Renaissance occurred. Black men, women, and children produced literature, engaged in literary debate, and participated in literary clubs. Not only were the stories told of life in the United States, but Black authors explored other countries and used literature as a source of narration. Literary clubs allowed both students and adults to discuss literature in ways that may have been new to them, providing a gateway to political conversations, economic discussions, and accumulated education. As Faber suggests in his three-pronged approach to literature, being literate requires action. Those who engaged in literary clubs and literary society activities aimed to enrich their communities by ensuring that others received the same level of education as they had. In so doing, they facilitated participation in political narratives and the promotion of generational values of education.

Literacy was not only found within the pages of a tangible book. In the 1980s, as television became more prominent in homes, the *Reading Rainbow* series premiered, transforming the act of reading into a virtual experience. While children engaged in tangible reading, host LeVar Burton was the face of opportunity in which all children could have access to literature. For over twenty years, *Reading Rainbow* was a staple in many Black homes. Burton told and showed audiences that reading was fun and allows us to travel to new places. Reading was the thing to do. *Reading Rainbow* encouraged reading and provided reading opportunity for those without the resources to own tangible books. In the mid-1990s then-talk show host Oprah Winfrey, began her own book club. Today, a novel supported by Winfrey will garner enough sales to be listed on best-selling lists across the country. With the help of these significant Black role models, literacy in the 1980s and 1990s was the focal point of many Black communities.

Burning Bright

In the beginning of part three of *Fahrenheit 451* Captain Beatty asks “what is there about fire that’s so lovely?... Its real beauty is that it destroys responsibility and consequences. A problem gets too burdensome, then into the furnace with it” (Bradbury, 2013, p.109). Across the United States in 2023, dozens of fires are burning to stop literacy. In the late 1980s, Banned Books Week was launched in response to the vast number of books that were banned in schools, bookstores, and libraries. One commonly banned book is *1984* by George Orwell, which deals with “Big Brother,” the all-seeing and all-controlling governing entity. Another of the most banned books is Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in which the author discusses her years of silence following the murder of her rapist.

Looking at the list of banned books one will notice a pattern: these books address social issues, economic issues, political issues, religious issues, and race and ethnic issues. Banned books call for the reader to engage in critical thinking and, as Faber says, to take action for or against the narrative that is being discussed. With many of these books banned from schools, students have fought hard to regain access to these important works in school libraries.

However, mass legislative moves in the United States are attempting to further disrupt literacy across the nation. In February 2022, the Florida house passed the Stop WOKE Act,² which limits discussions regarding race, gender, and discrimination in schools and workplaces—

² The acronym WOKE here stands for “Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees.”

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based on claims that such discussions actually widen racial division. Governor DeSantis has stated that “we won’t allow Florida tax dollars to be spent teaching kids to hate our country or to hate each other,” and that “we must protect Florida workers against a hostile work environment,” and that he will do so by subjecting employers to discrimination claims if trainings are required that discuss Black history, LGBTQ+ issues, and other concepts regarding discrimination, equity, and injustices (Governor of Florida 2021).

Meanwhile, in Texas parents have banded together to ban books from school libraries. One book, *When Wilma Rudolph Played Basketball* by Mark Weakland, is an illustrated children’s book that shares Wilma Rudolph’s experiences with racism growing up in Tennessee in the 1940s. Parents want this book banned because it discusses race prejudice. And a school board in Tennessee has banned Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus*, in which the author narrates the experiences of his father during the Holocaust. The reasoning for this ban was inappropriate language and nudity. It is important here to add that the characters in this graphic novel are cats and mice.

Throughout *Fahrenheit 451*, it is typically a neighbor, a friend, or a spouse who calls to report the person illegally possessing books. Life imitates art in the twenty-first century: in some states such as Virginia, there is a hotline where parents, teachers, or students can call or email to tell on their peers for reading literature that has been banned, for having discussions regarding race and other forms of discrimination, or simply existing. According to the Virginia governor this hotline is to report “divisive teaching” (Abdel-Baqui 2022). But this is curriculum violence. This is how a nation will burn brightly as it continues to dismantle the importance, value, and purposes of reading.

Conclusion

At the end of *Fahrenheit 451*, Granger talks about the phoenix:

“[E]very few hundred years [the phoenix] built a pyre and burned himself up. [...] But every time he burnt himself up he sprang out of the ashes, he got himself born all over again. And it looks like we’re doing the same thing, over and over, but we’ve got one damn thing the Phoenix never had. We know the damn silly thing we just did. We know all the damn silly things we’ve done for a thousand years and as long as we know that and always have it around where we can see it, someday we’ll stop making the goddamn funeral pyres and jumping in the middle of them” (Bradbury 2013, p. 156).

To release the shackles of literary subjugation, we must move toward a literate society that allows books to bridge communities, and promotes the discussion of people at various intersections of reality and experiences, and continue to educate ourselves on the diversity of those around us. *Fahrenheit 451*’s narrative is a discussion of subjugation. Black Americans have continued to be subjugated in the United States for hundreds of years and the biggest gateway to freedom—literacy—continues to be blocked at the intersection of politics and education. Literacy is the foundation of freedom; yet systems are in place to ensure subordination due to the lack of literacy.

The vivid images created from the burning in *Fahrenheit 451*—“things eaten, to see things blackened and *changed*”—demonstrate the horrors that are continuously placed on literary

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goals (Bradbury 2013, p. 1). Literature, as Faber suggests, helps one feel alive because of the excitement, ability for change, and learning that occurs. If we can at least get society to begin thinking like Montag—questioning, critically thinking, and taking strides to make amends—then we can stop attempting to burn one another.

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LITERACY IS FREEDOM

Carissa McCray, PhD (she/her) is an English instructor in K–12 education who has worked in the city of Duval County and rural Sumter County, Florida. With insight gained from teaching grades 6 through 12, including teaching corrective to advanced courses, she has refined her craft to focus on redefining the educational trajectory for students of color that addresses equitable education, rural education, and the impact of trauma. As a motherscholar, Dr. McCray has two beautiful daughters who inform her teaching, scholarship, professional and personal experiences.

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Abstract

Throughout history, books have been banned. Reasons have varied; however, the impact often remains the same. Laws and policies, violence and death often accompany destructive movements that attempt to censor individuals to ensure the group remains ignorant, docile, and obedient. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* offers a critique of this narrative. The critique discusses and questions how the censorship of books and publicized violence control the minds and actions of many.

Within this article, there is an exploration of literary censorship in the United States targeted toward one specific group – Black Americans. From the 1730s to present-day, literacy has consistently been stymied by laws, policies, violence, and death for Black Americans. This article seeks to draw comparisons between *Fahrenheit 451* and the historical patterns of censorship, as well as examine how those practices continue today.

Fahrenheit 451's narrative is a discussion of subjugation through book censorship. Literacy continues to be blocked between the intersections of education and policy for Black Americans with systems in place to sustain subordination. It is important to understand that as Black Americans continue to strive for literacy, they are also striving for freedom.

Key Words Literacy, freedom, censorship, United States, history, violence, Black history

