

Bad Readers¹

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Abstract

Recent US attempts to curtail academic freedom, censor free speech, and ban books look very familiar when placed on a continuum with similar historical efforts, such as those during apartheid in South Africa. The existence of a small, out-of-print booklet, What Happened to “Burger’s Daughter,” shows us how censors rationalize (or fail to rationalize) their restrictions and connects the dots between repressions past and present.

Academic freedom is inextricably linked to mainstream freedoms of speech and expression. Publicly funded institutions of higher education rely on the goodwill of lawmakers and taxpayers. Social media and bad actors have disseminated and distorted conversations, like the one about critical race theory, that were once the purview of graduate student seminars. Muzzling academic discourse shrinks and silences real debate, real critique, and real-world awareness.

More than forty years ago, apartheid’s architects also knew this, and were happy to use censorship’s amorphous categories interchangeably as justification for eroding civil society, cracking down on what they found offensive or “undesirable” (Gordimer et al. 1980, 6), as in the case of the banning—and then unbanning—of Nadine Gordimer’s 1979 novel *Burger’s Daughter*. In today’s United States, some are equally determined to take offense.

Current attempts at censorship and book banning in US universities, schools, and libraries need to be viewed within a history of such efforts. A slim booklet, now out of print, called *What Happened to “Burger’s Daughter,” or How South African Censorship Works*, clearly shows how apartheid-era censors thought. Their logic (or lack thereof) sounds uncannily like the arguments bandied about here today, as though would-be US censors have taken a page from their playbook.

The booklet, compiled by Gordimer after the fact, includes committee reports, her rebuttals of them, and more. *Burger’s Daughter* was called “undesirable,” “indecent,” “offensive and harmful to public morals,” and was accused of “bringing a section of the inhabitants of the Republic into ridicule and contempt” (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 6–8). That section was, of course, white Afrikaners, who tended to be pro-apartheid. The Burgers of the novel, however,

¹ An earlier version of this article titled [“What the US Can Learn from Apartheid-Era Book Bans in South Africa”](#) appeared in *The Conversation* on July 28, 2022.

committed to the anti-apartheid cause, are the opposite. The director of publications' reasons for the ban, in misunderstanding this fundamental detail, stand as an inadvertent but effective reminder of what bad reading looks like.

The minority report wanted to go further than declaring the book undesirable by also prohibiting its possession: "It's noticeable that the whole attitude of mind in which the book has been composed is such that the writer blames the white man for everything" (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 15). The censors' unironic, unimaginative defensiveness resonates loudly with the language of white "discomfort" we hear in current politics. Bills ranging from South Dakota's House Bill 1337, titled "To Protect Elementary and Secondary Students from Political Indoctrination," to those introduced recently in Oklahoma, aimed at restricting discussion of "any form of gender, sexual or racial diversity, equality or inclusion," with a particular eye to higher education, employ language designed to ward off the specter of "ridicule and contempt" directed at any one—read, white—group of people (South Dakota Legislature 2022; Oklahoma Legislature 2022a). A set of "Emergency Rules" to Oklahoma bill H.B. 1775 places a "general prohibition" on what it calls "discriminatory principles" like "feel[ing] discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex" (Oklahoma Legislature 2021).

The wording of these bills is remarkably similar—often identical—for a remarkable reason. Despite the way even left-leaning media cover these issues,² legislation of this sort does not organically emerge from grassroots parents' rights movements but instead is, with alarming frequency, the product of grand machinations on the part of deep-pocketed, ultra-right-wing think tanks and backers, such as the Manhattan Institute, which shares on its website, as part of a "primer" called "How to Regulate Critical Race Theory in Schools," model legislation available for cutting and pasting into the legal proposal of your choice. It invites us to fill in the blanks in sections that declare, for instance, "No school district, public school, or governmental entity responsible for the oversight of public secondary or elementary schools . . . shall . . . direct or otherwise compel a teacher, administrator, or student personally to affirm, adopt, or adhere to any belief or concept that: i. The United States or the state of [STATE NAME] is fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist" (Copland 2021, 12). It also suggests ways to escalate potential repression: "States that wish to implement a more expansive law may include more prescriptive language to guide curriculum, beyond that merely protecting against compelled speech" (Copland 2021, 12). This coordinated effort reverberates with apartheid-era censorship schemes. What in South Africa was a comprehensive, state-run censorship system is, in many US states

² For instance, National Public Radio sums up a 2021 *Morning Edition* report thusly, "Attempts to remove books from school libraries have increased, spurred by activism from conservative parent groups and resistance to teaching socially progressive ideas in schools" (Ujjyediin 2021).

today, a corporately funded, private plot to influence what the minority report called “the public attitude of mind” (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 15).

Censorship makes assumptions about how we read—that people will take offense and so on. One strategy of censorship is to read wrongly purposefully (or at least deliberately obtusely) to take offense. In both the appeal of the ban and in Gordimer’s account, censors are accused of having not “read accurately” or having not “read [or] understood the book properly” (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 1–2). As readers, we have the privilege of different interpretations. These censors abused that privilege and actively misread by selectively quoting or quoting out of context, redefining the terms of debate, misstating the facts, and failing or refusing to hear tone. Gordimer also points out various inconsistencies and logical fallacies, but in the end, there is no such thing as the “rationality of censorship” (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 73).

The same tactics of misreading feature in the Trump administration’s *1776 Report*, a response to the *New York Times*’s 1619 Project and to recent racial justice demonstrations. The AAUP’s statement on the report calls it an example of “cynical politics” that “skillfully weaves together myths, distortions, deliberate silences, and both blatant and subtle misreading of evidence” (Reichman 2021). Cynical or not, this kind of document contributes to real suppression of academic freedoms; according to a *ProPublica* article, “Seven states, including Florida, have passed legislation aimed at restricting public colleges’ teaching or training related to critical race theory” (Golden 2023).

As with the *1776 Report*, in whose preparation “no professional historians of the US were involved” (Reichman 2021), the definition of an apartheid-era censorship committee is notable for what it was *not*, as “an extra-judicial body, operating in an administrative capacity, whose members need have *no* legal training, before whom the appellant has *no* right of audience, who in their deliberations are *not* required to have regard to the rules of justice designed to achieve a fair trial, whose proceedings are *not* conducted in public and who are *not* required to afford any reasons for their decision” (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 5; emphasis mine).

The reins of censorship often sit firmly in the hands of amateurs and flunkies whose agendas override the public good—or worse, masquerade as it. The South African censorship committee declared that “parts of the book are indecent, as well as offensive and harmful to public morals” (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 7), and as evidence gave the scene in which Rosa and Baasie as little kids play with their own pee and poo. In her rebuttal, Gordimer concludes that it must be “the fact that Baasie is a black child and Rosa, his companion, a white one, which constitutes the ‘indecency,’ ‘offence,’ and ‘harm to public morals’” (Gordimer et al. 1980, 21). By highlighting this scene, the censors center contestation in the body—specifically, the legally classified, raced, and gendered body of the child—although the body itself is absent from the law, which skirts around it with talk of the indecent and the obscene.

This same move is practiced repeatedly in modern US censorship. Last year, Oklahoma passed House Bill 3702, which, under the pretext of protecting children from “obscene” material

they might encounter in academic library databases, puts the burden of compliance on librarians and other educators who “aren’t exempt from prosecution for ‘willful violations’” (Oklahoma Legislature 2022b). Because the bill is connected to state and national efforts to ban books and restrict material on gender- and race-based topics (Taylor 2022), we again see the conflation of various so-called obscenities in the contested figure of the child.

More allegorical writing escaped the apartheid censor’s pen because it was not obviously “a blueprint for action or a call to arms” (de Lange 1997, 108). In contrast, Gordimer’s book explicitly tells the story of a family of anti-apartheid activists and contains previously banned material—a pamphlet distributed by the Soweto Students’ Representative Council during the 1976 uprising. Because it appears “in all its naivety, leaving spelling mistakes and grammatical errors uncorrected” (Gordimer et al. 1980, 30), the document’s realness increases the novel’s reality effect, which in turn unsettles the censors who demonstrate a fundamental failure to understand the fictive. The appeal board decision objects, “The reader doesn’t get the impression that it is merely the opinions and views of the main character, but that, in actual fact, it is the real situation” (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 58).

With remarkable internal inconsistency, the appeal board’s report argues that *Burger’s Daughter* is “dangerous” because it is both too realistic and too improbable (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 58). The author of the minority report is so *verklemt* that he complains twice: “The whole concept of *Burger’s Daughter* is unrealistic” and “the whole concept is far-fetched” (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 15). Gordimer, not surprisingly, has a much more nuanced understanding of how fact and fiction conspire to create a truth: “I reproduced it because it is sometimes essential, for the total concept of a work of fiction, to incorporate blunt documentary evidence in contrast to the fuller, fictive version of events” (Gordimer et al. 1980, 30).

Andrew van der Vlies has written about how much of the debate about apartheid censorship, somewhat bizarrely, came down to whether a book had literary merit rather than whether it was dangerous, subversive, or otherwise a public threat. For instance, the minority report proclaims, “The book doesn’t possess one particularly positive quality—of creation, insight, style, language or composition—which can save it as work of art or as contribution to the public welfare” (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 15). Tellingly, the translator’s note for this same section reads, “Stylistically this section is badly written. I have translated literally.” Does the anonymous translator want nothing to do with the poorly written Afrikaans or nothing to do with its message? Either way, the note countermands the censor’s own authority as arbiter of literary merit and “good taste” (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 38).

This is not the only way in which the censors set themselves up for “ridicule and contempt.” *Burger’s Daughter* was first banned under the 1974 Publications Act and then unbanned without the cooperation of Gordimer, who opposed a tactic designed to reflect well on the government and to give the impression that white writers were cooperating with it (Gordimer et al. 1980, 2–3). Gordimer writes, “It is a criminal offence to denigrate or ridicule the Appeal Board and its

Chairman. I publish here the facts of what happened to *Burger's Daughter* to place on open record the totally arbitrary powers of censorship in South Africa, and exactly how they work" (Gordimer et al. 1980, 3). By setting these sentences back-to-back, Gordimer mocks the system by suggesting that the facts alone will serve to ridicule it.

In what Gordimer called a "total discredit," the banning of *Burger's Daughter* was overturned because the director of publications appealed against his own censorship committee, which a new "committee of literary experts" said "stands convicted of bias, prejudice, and literary incompetence. It has not read accurately, it has severely distorted by quoting extensively out of context, it has not considered the work as a literary work deserves to be considered, and it has; directly and by implication, smeared the authoress [sic]" (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 1). In other words, the censors failed because they were bad readers. They read badly and they misread the book as bad literature. At the same time as they redeemed *Burger's Daughter* as a work of "considerable literary merit" (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 36), one of them said, in a public forum, "Don't buy it—it is not worth buying. Very badly written. . . . This is also why we eventually passed it. We knew our people wouldn't read it anyway. You know us *boere* find it a bit irritating when someone practises politics so badly" (quoted in Gordimer et al. 1980, 2). Accusing Gordimer of practicing politics badly is the ultimate irony from a body that repeatedly botched its own.

PEN America, in one of its monthly roundups of educational gag orders and censorious legislative efforts, observes that "one . . . feature that is increasingly common to 2022's bills is how sloppily many are written. Legislators, in their haste to get these bills out the door and into the headlines, are making basic factual errors, introducing contradictory language, and leaving important terms undefined" (Sachs 2022). Bad writing, bad politics, bad reading. Whether the recent spike in US book bans (Haupt 2022) cribs directly from the South African model or not doesn't matter: all censorship is bad censorship, and it all looks the same.

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