

# **Fahrenheit 450: A Conversation through Poem Used to “Cool Down” the Discussion of Banned and Controversial Books**

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*In this article, we use what we are dubbing “Conversation through Poem” to explore the lived experiences of a father and his daughter, a young adult who has read many of the books that are frequently labeled controversial and banned in schools and libraries. We wrote a series of poems to reflect on how and to what degree reading controversial books has had positive or negative effects. With Parsons’ Reproduction Theory (1959) as a framework, our discussion and reflection through poetry suggests that rather than indoctrinating young people, reading “controversial” books leads to an understanding an openness, as well as showing the need for the voice of young adults in the very conversations surrounding banned books.*

The nation has been on a book-banning rampage in recent years. Texts ranging in topics from sexuality and gender identity to those labeled as being “based on” Critical Race Theory have been bemoaned by parents and community members, and in many cases, removed from schools and public libraries. One sect of people loudly yell that these books are inappropriate, indoctrinating, and an indication of a leftist agenda to groom the next generation to follow a certain political mindset. An opposite group adamantly defends access to and the reading of these books as necessary for open-minded readers to learn empathy for marginalized groups, in addition to recognizing their importance for readers who identify with the characters and issues these books contain. The question arises then, what is the effect when readers interact with these banned and challenged books? If reading them causes undo angst and stress, could it be held that removing them from libraries is a best practice? If careful consideration of these books leads young adult readers to abandon the morals and beliefs instilled by their families, could it be that reading them should be discouraged or

even disallowed? Or, are these books too important to censor from those who want and sometimes need to read them? And could it be that guilt and distress and questioning are in fact positive outcomes?

When watching school board meetings, or reading posts on social media, it has become commonplace for groups of parents and community members to unite in an attempt to restrict what books students can access, typically using their own ideals and values as the sole barometer against which a text should be judged and deemed appropriate. Often, books are removed due to complainants' assessment of what students should be able to read. It seems that in today's discourse about what books should or should not be allowed in libraries, and ultimately in the hands of young readers, the focus is and has been on what adults think is appropriate. Often left out of this conversation is the voice of the reader. Protestors of books complain about what impact banned or controversial books have when read by the young adults whom so many protestors purport to be protecting. In this article, that commonly ignored voice is instead featured. It is bringing that voice into the discussion that might bring down the vitriolic heat, even by just a degree—to 450—as our title suggests, in the national conversation. What began as an empirical study using poetic duoethnography has shifted to focus on a conversation between father and daughter. This paper now stands as a *Conversation through Poem*, where two generations dialogue through poetic expression as they discuss the censorship of books, particularly young adult literature. This arts-based pseudo-duoethnography examines one teenage reader's experience, as well as the experience of her father, seeing the impact of his daughter's reading of books that have been banned or protested in many instances.

## POSITIONALITY

Anytime researchers take on ethnographic study, and particularly when undertaking autoethnography, it is imperative to understand their own positionality in the research. Admittedly, when I first presented Pearson with the idea of writing a study together, aside from her thinking it would be a cool way to think through this topic, I was faced with the problems of backyard research, literally. But much of my effort through doctoral coursework has been done through ethnography, and when considering the impact of reading controversial books, I felt that the lived experiences of my daughter Pearson, and myself, might shed a unique light.

I am a White, middle-class male, who did not question or think to question my privilege and status in any way until well into my adult life. I grew up in a diverse enough area where I naively

thought race and racism were not a part of my daily life. Once I was married and started a family, we lived in different areas with different economic and ethnic makeups, and I taught for many years in a predominantly African American high school. But realistically, it was not until my family grew through transracial adoption that I started thinking intentionally about how my life was different from “others.” My wife and I, and our two oldest children, are all White. But our family also includes two younger kids that were adopted, and who are biracial, Black and Latino/a. Even before our family’s growth, we did not stop our older kids from reading diverse books. But we were also not deliberate about buying and reading diverse books until diverse representation became something near to our lives. As we started learning and understanding how different life would be for our kids who are not White, I began to see the importance as an educator and researcher to advocate for all students to be able to read books where they see themselves, and books where they could begin to understand those who are different. And it so happened that during this personal journey of understanding that many of the national conversations about diverse and controversial books were beginning.

Pearson was 14 when we began this project, just having finished middle school, though now she prepares to enter her sophomore year. She was in grade school when our family dynamic shifted, and so she has learned about differences, others, and diverse literature along with me as she has grown from girl to young woman. When racism has reared its head locally, she has been quick to sign up to speak at school board meetings, often very pointedly, and at times, in a way that calls out actions or inactions of the board and community. As a middle schooler, she already had a goal to find her way to Boston University to work with Dr. Ibram X. Kendi. Like any older sibling, she is not always a perfect sister, but when it comes to race or differences, she defends her family fervently. I say this about her, and myself, as a way to admit that we come into this effort with a clear bias. As a family, we have encouraged our kids to read many titles that frequently pop up on various controversial book lists, even if we have limited their reading of books with curse words or detailed depictions of sexual interactions. Though we have given our own children their own personal reading guidelines, we know it is important not to limit all readers by banning titles and removing books from shelves.

So, with our lived experiences surrounding diverse literature, we entered this endeavor not wondering whether reading banned and controversial books could have an impact on young adult readers. We know they do because we have seen it, first and third hand. When writing about the book censorship that this volume finds as its center, we were drawn to a particular way of thinking

about the issue. In addition to our shared interest of diverse literature, we also share a proclivity for writing poetry. Because we both find poetic expression to be such a powerful tool, we had the idea to have a Conversation through Poem, with verses serving as the focal point for our discussion. I have written poems as a way to understand things in my life for decades and have spent years using poetry as a research tool. Pearson has similarly used poetic expression both in mediating personally, and as a way to share her thoughts, feelings, and views with others. And so, writing poems about this important issue became a means for us to dialogue in a way that we would not have otherwise.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To best understand and analyze the poetic data in this article, it is important first to know what literature already says about the issue. My review of the literature, and the overall study, will be viewed through the lens of reproduction theory (RT). Though Parsons (1959) outlined an understanding of RT based largely on the ways schools codify social stratification in order to reproduce outcomes preferred by society, it also follows that in restricting what books students are allowed to read, schools place de facto limits on their students' ability to break from mindsets that are perceived as socially acceptable. Kim (2016) described RT as a way to see schools as a sub-system of the larger overall society, and that they try to instill "societal values that sustain a common American culture" (p. 37). With this framework in place, I focus on two aspects of the existing research: 1) literature about the need for and effect of diverse books, and 2) literature about banning books.

I begin with research about the need for and effect of diverse books, which is important to include due to the nature of most of the current controversial books. Part of the rationale for having or allowing students to read many of the books in question is that reading them allows students to step through a sliding door into another's world (Bishop, 1990). While this has long been a concept with regard to books about racially diverse characters, the same principles apply to books about those that are marginalized based on gender, religion, economic status, or any other reason. There is a current common refrain, lauded both by nationally recognized politicians warning against "woke agendas" (Abbott, 2023) and local pot-stirrers who suggest "Your kids are being indoctrinated to the fullest extent by the left" (Ponce, 2021). These book banners say that schools need to stop indoctrinating students with certain ideas, and instead focus on reading, writing, and arithmetic. Some contend that the only reason people are talking about racism, or sexism and other "isms," is because those narratives are being pushed by teachers, schools, or the media (Leonard, 2021).

Modern studies, however, dispel the notion that students do not see, think about, or feel the impact of these topics. White students have been found to prefer to be in class with students of the same race (Meisel & Blumberg, 1990) and, in more recent years, have explicitly expressed a desire not to attend school with African American students (Mabbott, 2017). This is in addition to the implicit bias against people of color that has been discussed in many studies, including studies that focus specifically on biases, racial and otherwise, of students in elementary grades (Dijkstra, et al., 2008; Husband, 2012; Pertiwi, 2017).

Further research suggests that social groups show a preference for those considered like themselves, or in-group members, as well as showing an inherent dislike for those considered unlike themselves, or out-group members (Brewer, 2002; Mabbott, 2017). However, other studies have shown that in spite of participants original dissimilarity, cross-categorization and commonalities have the power to break exclusionary out-grouping, suggesting that students can find similarities and become members of new more inclusive in-groups (Crisp, et al., 2016; Stathi & Roscini, 2016). These studies combine to suggest a need for students to gain empathy for those who are unlike themselves, and also that reading books about people or groups unlike themselves can help accomplish that goal. Studies have suggested that diverse literature can be an effective tool for building empathy as well as gaining appreciation for those considered to be “other” (Colvin, 2017; Glazier & Seo, 2005; Himmelstein, 2021). Most of those who protest books do so because of the way they perceive it will affect “their kids,” whether their own children or those they think are like their children, a clear indication of the notions of RT at work. But in keeping those books out of schools and libraries, the banning also keeps titles from students who might be looking to see someone who looks, or acts, or lives, like themselves, a concept validated by recent work that has shown literature, in general, helps students build their own identity and that literacy is affected by students seeing themselves in what they read (Enriquez, 2021; Garces-Bacsal, 2020).

In addition to research about the effect of diverse literature, it is important to understand what has been said previously about banning books and the books being banned. While some protests about books are lobbied due to specific instances of content being deemed inappropriate, Knox (2019) pointed out the regularity with which books featuring diverse protagonists appear on banned or challenged books lists across the nation, noting that publishers are often weary to print books on banned lists, which disproportionately include literature featuring Black and LGBTQ+ characters. Though some anecdotal accounts suggest that the historic standardization of White

heteronormative people has decreased in recent years (Sorbo, 2022), research shows that with regard to literature, books taught in schools have remained largely unchanged over the last several decades (Al-Shalabi, et al., 2011; Mabbott, 2017). RT would suggest that this adherence to decades, and in some cases centuries-old, literary canons is one way for schools, and society, in general, to maintain their preferred values in students.

While many books have been and continue to be banned, all while adding new titles to those previously targeted, there is research that suggests these controversial books are in fact integral to the development of students. Many have suggested that reading and thus talking through controversial subjects, is a way to teach students how to navigate difficult conversations, seeing this as a skill that should be included in a well-rounded education (Gregory, 2014; Solely, 1996; Rivera & Flynn, 2022). Commonly, banned and controversial books have the ability to help students make sense of their own identity, as well as break down barriers that come from cultural differences, leading to safer schools and young adults more able to fight against discrimination (George, 2002; Glasgow, 2001; Stover, 1996; Swartz, 2003; Whittingham & Rickman, 2007). Rivera and Flynn (2022) suggest that reading controversial books help students develop a sense of self, as well as becoming more aware of others.

In spite of research that shows the potential benefit of allowing students access to controversial books, there is conversely literature showing that many educators preemptively censor book options, often as a way to avoid potential conflicts with parents and community members (Boyd & Bailey, 2009; Jacobson, 2016; Malins, 2016). Kimmel and Hartsfield (2019) recorded preservice teachers and librarians discussing controversial books, finding common themes of politics and identity-building at the center of the teachers allowing or not allowing certain books to be available to their readers. These discussions, when read through the lens of RT, support the notion that it is easiest to maintain societal expectations, as many of the respondents focused on not wanting to deal with fallout from parents when reading books that might be considered controversial. And while some of the research supporting the idea of banning books takes the student's voice into account, our study here does more than ask questions about what was read, going further to ask the student how they feel about books being banned at all.

## POETIC PROCESS EXPLAINED

Some studies begin by asking a question or by finding a question that needs to be answered. In truth, this effort came from a teenager's natural reaction to national and local events. Pearson has, for years, written poetry as a way to process and make sense of things, and as a way to respond to what she sees happening around her. Similarly, I have used poetry as my primary mode of research since studying arts-based research during my doctoral coursework. While finishing a dissertation that focused on White folks' interaction with diverse books, I so often saw the vitriol with which some in my community speak against students having access to books about race, gender, and other topics they find controversial. As a response, I knew that we in academia and education, need to bring in the voice of those students whose access is being decided by loud parents and committees. In the case of Pearson, and myself, that voice is expressed through poem.

In lieu of a traditional methodology section, we will moreso expound on our process in writing poems as a means of conversation between a father and daughter. That said, we would be remiss not to unpack some of the history of the use of poetry in research. Neilsen (2008) wrote of poetry being able to find the lyricism in other's stories, which was important as we weaved each other's experiences into our own as part of the Conversation through Poem. Frye, et. al. (2018), in their study of middle school students stepping through the sliding door, used persona poems to enable White readers to experience worlds unlike their own. Previous poet researchers have discussed how poetic method has an inherent tendency to show us the truth and explain our human existence to us, in a way prose sometimes cannot (Hirschfield, 1997; Richardson, 1998). While this study comes short of reaching for social justice, there is a matter of equity involved in the advocating for diverse books to be included in libraries and schools, and this type of social movement has been discussed by earlier poet researchers (Hartnett, 2003; Madison, 2004).

In choosing to use poetic method, there is further attention that must be paid to the work. Rather than seeing poetry as a way around traditional academic writing, I contend that ensuring quality poetic writing adds another level to the inquiry in this project (Furman, 2006; Percer, 2002). Others have spoken of attending to the art of poetry, the craft of poetry, and the poetic knowledge needed to write good poems (Faulkner, 2007; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005; Oliver, 1998). This article relies on Holman Jones' (2005) understanding of autoethnography more broadly where she challenged researchers to see the power of an intersection between the content and aesthetics of

research. And more specifically, it leans on her understanding of poetry in particular, as suggested by her chapter's epilogue subtitle "There Are Living Forces in Poetry."

Before this effort, we had written poems separate from each other for years, and in my case decades. Though we have often talked about poetry, sharing verses and ideas about poems we are writing, we had never written anything together. But I had engaged in a similar duoethnography with a classmate during my coursework, so I had seen the power of conversing through poem. Pearson is probably the most passionate member of the family when it comes to advocating for diverse books, so when given the chance to add our experience to the conversation centered around diverse books, we quickly arrived at the idea of writing poems not together but in concert, as a way to express what we each had seen in our lives, in our community, and in our world. It should be noted that for clarity's sake, several formatting choices were made that will show up in this section and the following. Our poems break from the standard font as a way to stand apart visually. Additionally, in the case of both poems and commentary that is interspersed, all of Pearson's direct writing has been italicized and her commentary block justified.

*I write poetry all the time. It's how I interpret the world. I love writing poetry, but I never really shared it with anyone until a few years ago.*

Pearson's experience is told through her lens of having actually read many of the books that are commonly challenged, offering both insight to the effect of reading diverse books and a needed voice in the conversation about whether books should be banned at all. Her lived experience as someone who has read many books that have often been challenged or banned gives a perspective about whether such literature causes anguish and distress, and whether the experience of reading is positive or negative. And though she has walked through Bishop's (1990) sliding door into other's worlds, the focus in our Conversation through Poem is to use her lived experience to add to the discussion that happens before many children even get a chance to read these books. Conversely, I include my experience as a father seeing the impact of my child reading controversial books, while comparing her life to mine at that age. The lived experiences shared here are not meant to be prescriptive, as if to show students a way they must go in order to open their minds to others. Rather, they are descriptive, countering common protests with descriptions of the often positive effects of reading the books that some people are trying to remove from libraries and schools.

*When my dad asked me about writing this piece with him, I was ecstatic. Not only did I get to write poetry about a topic I care deeply about, but I got to read my dad's poetry and respond.*

If our conversation is something akin to a duoethnography, our individual mode of inquiry might be described as reflective poetry. Whereas poetic inquiry is often a term used to describe a method of poetic transcription or coding (Dunkley, 2018; Leavy, 2013; Saldana, 2020), here we have used poetry to reflect on our understanding of the conversation surrounding controversial books, as well as expressing our lived experiences through poetic representations (Chilton & Leavy, 2020). Because we both write poetry so often, it was easy and natural to begin our conversation by simply writing. We had our general focus - banned books - and we started with a period where we were each writing without sharing our work.

After writing several poems, we then shared our work with each other and talked about what we each thought, both while writing and about one another's work. Even though we had talked about diverse literature and banned books many times before, letting poetry lead our discussion led to a different, and I think deeper, understanding of each other's ideas. I would contend it was much richer than a typical conversation between a father and a teenager, and it certainly was richer than our previous discussions about the issue. As we talked about our first efforts, we also each wrote several more poetic reflections, now using our own thoughts and combining them with reflection of the other's. This back-and-forth exchange of poetry and conversation continued for several weeks, not only giving insight to me as the researcher, but also offering an example of how the conversation surrounding banned literature can include the voice of the students whose book lists are being decided.

I often shared what I learn about poetic inquiry and arts-based research with Pearson, and she was immediately drawn to the poetic form of the Golden Shovel, created by Terrance Hayes in 2010 and further developed by Nikki Grimes in 2021. After our first exchange of poetry and discussion, Pearson had the notion to enter a second phase of poetic expression, writing poems where we each responded to our poetry and conversations by taking a "striking line" from one of the poems to create a new poem using the words from this original line (Grimes, 2021, p. 7). This allowed us to reflect on the original piece and write a new work that both maintained the original's spirit, while also giving space for our own reflection of both the poem and the context in which we were writing. With these pieces, we not only reflected on each other's thoughts, we further took what

the other had said and made it part of our own expression through new poems. The final compilation of poems provides a look into the experiences of a father and daughter, some unique and some shared, as they mediate on the issue of banning young adult literature. The lines stand on their own as poetry in addition to being useful for analysis toward that greater discussion, adding not only mine as a researcher, but the often-missing voice of the young adult.

## CONVERSATION THROUGH POEM

Here we begin to share the work that came through our Conversation through Poem. What follows first are the poetic works of a teenage girl who has read many of the books that commonly show up on parents' and politicians' banned books lists. Though our actual conversation included more back and forth, beginning with a lengthy section of her poems serves two purposes: it helps with the flow of the section, and more importantly it centers her voice. The poems included here speak to her experience reading these books, as well as offering insight from the voice that has so often been left out of the conversations surrounding these books. Interspersed with the poems are sections of commentary from each of us as they fit in our larger conversation.

### ***The real deal***

*When children open books, we see things,  
We see people,  
We see places,  
We see ideas.  
People that inspire us,  
Places that ignite us,  
And ideas that unify us.*

*Not everyone is going to love every book in the library,  
But for some, books including "controversy"  
Can be most helpful.*

*Take me for instance,*

*I am a white girl from Texas,  
I read challenged books to challenge my mind.  
I read books that some adults have deemed unsuitable, not just for their children, but for all children everywhere*

*-We call this censorship and it is very, very bad-  
I read banned books*

I read "controversial" books...  
 But, through reading these pages of "controversy,"  
 I have found my own sort of truth.  
 I now have a better understanding of the world and its many, many faults.  
 I can now strongly argue about "controversial" topics without sounding uninformed or crazy.  
 I read books that not everyone is going to want people to read.  
 But in reading these books,  
 I have become a better thinker and student and my well-being has improved quite a bit.

*The first time I ever presented my poetry publicly was at a school board meeting in the fall of 2020, calling for the resignation of one of our school board members, after a photo of said member in blackface had surfaced on the internet. After that, my public comment poems became more and more frequent. Whether speaking again for resignation, or against banning books, or even for the hiring of a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Director (a position that no longer exists in our district thanks to angry parents), I could constantly be found at school board meetings making my voice heard. These poems not only reflect my thoughts on censorship, but also respond to poems my dad has written, citing the duoethnography previously discussed in this article.*

### **How many people does it take?**

One person can make all the difference  
 Rebuilding a system that was broken to begin with,  
 but-  
 only if given the right tools and training  
 Only if she can find truth through discomfort and pain  
 Only if she can see how these marginalized people live day to day  
 If only she could read what the adults in her life don't think she needs  
 If only this girl could read  
 If only this girl wasn't me

### **Personally Speaking**

like my skin my privilege shows explicitly, my bias implicitly, if insensitive not deliberately,  
 Not knowing to think differently, that I could make a difference, see...

### **Why Banning Books Sucks**

All children deserve to know about people who are different from them,  
 In hopes that they will find people who are different, like them.

Don't ban books...ban censorship.  
 Removing these books,  
 Removes people,  
 Removes opinions,  
 Removes opportunities for a stronger community,  
 And it removes the right to learn,  
 The right that we all have.

Reading is knowledge,  
 Knowledge is key,  
 And that key can unlock worlds of goodness

*This last poem was inspired by the book banners, the censors, and the anti-change agents who care so deeply about their beliefs, they often overlook the beliefs of others. After some rather absurd Facebook posts, my favorite of which labeling me a Marxist, I responded to these folks the only way I knew how: good ole fashion satire. I figured if it worked for George Orwell, it would work for me.*

### **Hello Lisa/Kathy/Brenda/Ashley**

I get it, I truly do  
 I get why you don't want to read about people who aren't like you  
 It can be scary, it can be hard  
 You will feel uncomfortable too many times to count  
 So in truth  
 I get why you ban books.

I can relate to those who don't want their children reading these books.  
 Not those books, these books.

These books that my innocent small child brought home  
 These books that are so downright filled with propaganda  
 These books that are clearly communism in disguise  
 These books that go so far as to suggest we are a "diverse" group of people who should "love" each other and treat each other with the same amount of "dignity" we all came into the world with!!!!  
**NONSENSE!!!!!!**

These disgustingly retched books are so evil and bad that even THINKING about these books makes me want to puke, then rip out their pages, then pull my hair out, then blackout the words on said pages, then rip duct tape off my hairy arm, then burn the pages with blacked-out words, then release the ashes into the desert where the sun can burn them up and no one will ever have to know what I did, except that I'm posting the whole thing on Facebook for my friends to see and then do the same with the liberal books their innocent children bring home.

Yeah, I can definitely relate to those people ;)

*The end.*

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*[yeah that's right, I use the yellow emoji hand because I don't see color and therefore don't believe in race which means using a skin-toned emoji is against everything I believe in.]*

After this first set of poems, Pearson and I talked about some of her thoughts and reflections. Though we did not go into this endeavor with an understanding of RT (or most other theoretical frameworks, as that is not typically discussed in middle school), in talking to her about her poems, it is clear that she displays something along the lines of the resistance notions that fight not authority but against reproduction itself (Kim, 2016). It is of note that Pearson is focused mostly on issues of race and racism, which shows in her poems. This is largely due to the transracial dynamic of our family, which served as a catalyst in her book selection. By her choice, she has not read many books with strong themes of gender identity or sexuality, though those issues have been secondary in some of the titles she has read. She does know some kids at school who are part of the LGBTQ+ community, but not to the extent where she shares her passion for race with those issues. Though we have most of Pearson's poems before the beginning of mine, we will include one here, as this poem led to her writing a direct response to my words. What follows is one of my first verses as we began our Conversation through Poem.

### **Me at that age**

I used to be her age,

I don't remember all of 14, but I know I was there, once

I can't help but think of how different

My 14 is from hers.

I know the things I said, and did, and thought

and it is not the same as what she says, or does, or thinks

I know what I watched, and read, and learned

and it is not the same as what she watches, and reads, and learns

I know what I talked about with my friends, and my family

and it is not the same as her

And I know what was in my room.

I can see my walls with so many posters, coasters, adornment that I used to "express" myself

And there was a flag.

The spilled blood red, deep like the shared ideology driving their soldiers

The blue not so much of royalty as loyalty, misguided as it may have been

The 13 stars, one for each and then some

Mine had an eagle, because I guess it was meant to make this treasonous tartan  
 more patriotic, more “American”  
 I think I thought it was cool maybe  
 Or it was what middle class White kids were supposed to think was cool  
 Because I don’t know, or didn’t  
 Because, how would I

But I look at her walls, and there is no flag, no blood red or loyal blue  
 Instead, there are quotes, and pictures, and all kinds of antiracism and allyship and activism

Not because she thinks it’s cool, but because she thinks it’s right

Because she knows,  
 Because of course she does  
 Because she reads

After we talked about her first offerings, she wrote this second selection even before we decided to  
 use Golden Shovels as a final salvo.

*The poem below was inspired by my dad’s poem ‘Me at that age.’ My dad and I talk  
 a lot about a lot of things, but most of his story is still unknown to me, so when I first  
 read his poem, I was moved by the raw honesty of his hindsight in comparing his  
 childhood room to my current abode.*

### **Ages of a Radical**

*Seeing how 12-year-old me has become 13, only to become 14, to later turn 15  
 Seeing how context can change, but root ideas remain the same  
 even through this pubescent change*

### **U-R-Q-U-H-A-R-T**

*My last name is Urquhart  
 He mispronounces this European name as if it doesn’t belong to this white girl, this pale child before  
 him,  
 Albeit he doesn’t know there is a Black family in town who shares my surname  
 [Though the way they acquired their Urquhart-ness is most likely much different than how I acquired  
 mine]  
 But when he makes his mistake, even on the third time, it is overlooked  
 Afterall,  
 how could this white girl possibly be offended?  
 Afterall,  
 this incident must happen ALL THE TIME.*

***In the beginning...***

*Those first meetings were rough, though most people spoke for the same cause,  
it became a circus nevertheless  
I kept crying,  
as if by some miracle, my white girl tears could change these white people's minds*

*The third time I didn't cry  
even though nothing had changed.  
I spoke because the adults were silent  
I spoke because the adults were yelling at each other['s opinions and "political agendas"]  
And with each word, even through my rushed poetic way of speaking, I gained more hope  
I gained hope that my library would look different in the coming months,  
that no more books would be removed from shelves,  
and every child could find themselves in the awesomeness of literature  
Because when I read these awesome books, I become a more aware person  
I don't read these book because it's cool (even though, in my honest opinion, it is the coolest thing in the  
world to be able to walk in someone else's shoes by looking at words on an off white piece of paper  
bound to together by grit and cardboard)*

*I read because it's how I best learn  
I read to learn to grow to change  
I read because it grows me as a person  
I read to learn to grow to change  
I read books that widen my views and change my mindset  
I read books to learn to grow to change the world*

***In Thy Room***

*In my room there is a chair  
it hangs from the ceiling and sways from the fan  
The chair has two cup holders and two book holding-things and three pillows  
even though no one in their right mind would ever put books there  
This chair is the source of my greatest ideas, my deepest thoughts, my most radical dreams  
This chair has been through it all  
In this chair I have learned about kids who aren't like me  
I read books in this chair, with its pillows and cup holders and book holding-things.*

There is useful data within these poems themselves, as well as in looking at the progression of thoughts from her first set of poetry to what was written after a time of reflection. Rather than conducting an interview where I asked questions and recorded answers, we instead engaged in several informal discussions, seeing that collaborative self-reflection might be the most useful source of data for our work (Roy & Uekusa, 2020). The lines themselves show the value of reading

controversial books, as they show growth and admit to a caused distress that is seen as a positive. In discovering the truth, this teenager reveals a mindset different from the adults who are trying to limit what is available with lines like “I now have a better understanding of the world and its many, many faults,” in ‘*The Real Deal*,’ as well as later challenging the very notion of book removal when she says “-We call this censorship and it is very, very bad-.” Though she is admittedly being tongue-in-cheek with her poem, *Hello Lisa/Kathy/Brenda/Ashley*, Pearson explores the way distress and guilt can have a positive impact in asking readers to interrogate their presupposed beliefs and thoughts about something. Ultimately though, the poems show that for this particular lived experience, reading controversial books has led to growth, change, widened views, and learning about others.

The next set of poetry is written by me, the researcher. While I have seen changes in my life and mindset in the last few years, specifically after my family grew through transracial adoption, perhaps the greater impact has been seeing how much Pearson has changed, and how much empathy she has compared to myself at that same age. Seeing the impact of her reading banned books, and having the conversations we have shared, has led me to write the following poems.

### **White Girl Who Keeps Commenting at the Local School Board Meetings**

They turn their eyes to this girl,

She looks all of 12 as she walks to the podium  
(more confident more bold with each next trip)

She nervously jokes about her missaid name, but not to worry, after her fourth time at the mic,  
he will finally get it right

As she settles in to speak, her words come to them much unlike the adults who preceded,  
and those that will follow

They may have started tuning out much of the noise, these meetings have turned into  
something of a circus

But as she speaks, more confident, more bold,

They hear her words, sometimes poetry, often poetic, always piercing  
and they applaud, even when her message rings TRUE?

At first, she is speaking for herself, but at once she is speaking for her peers  
Black, White, Same, Different

She tells them how important it is to read books about others, to learn how to be different  
She chides them for failing to be the example that her generation needs,

She, this young girl, gives the example that she wishes they were

And as she does, she is making her point, once and once again

Her words once, and the way she shares again

This is why and how, reading diverse books can help White folks

She has learned about differences, and how they can be talked about, and celebrated  
And she's become an ally, sure,  
but her example shows it doesn't have to be that much - it can be something less,  
and simple, but civil

Just because she's read some books

### **Her steps have outreached mine**

it was five years ago, today actually,  
when my world changed  
when my mind changed  
that means she was only nine  
when her family changed  
when her life changed  
when her world changed  
our family of four turned into a family of six  
our White family was not so White anymore  
so what our family needed changed  
what I needed changed  
and for every step I took, she took one further  
when we started adding diverse books to our shelves  
she started reading them  
when we started talking to talking about racism  
she made activism and put it in the center of town  
when I asked if things were right from the quiet of our home  
she went to the school board and said it loudly

and so we wonder if certain books will change the way kids think  
but maybe we are asking the wrong questions

Do we want them thinking we should silence certain voices?  
Do we want them thinking some lives have less value?  
Do we want them following our beliefs without thinking for themselves?  
Do we want them to make the same mistakes we have made?

Do we want them to wait until they are old men and women before they question what they  
always were told was right?

It was five years ago when my life changed, probably too late for me to change the world,  
but for her, maybe reading, and thinking, and knowing, will let her do the changing

**Books**

There are books, so many books,  
That I didn't read.  
but she has

There are people, so many people,  
That I didn't know.  
but she has

There are lessons, so many lessons,  
That I didn't learn.  
but she has

There are differences, so many lives,  
That I didn't value.  
but she has

There are pages, so many pages,  
That I didn't turn.  
but she has

There are lives, so many differences,  
That I didn't understand.  
but she has

There are stories, so many stories,  
That I didn't hear.  
but she has

There are others, so many others,  
That I didn't see.  
but she has

There are books, so many books,  
That I didn't read.  
But she is.

Analysis of these poems brings to mind the notion of deconstructing the self or taking the “I” out of autoethnographic works (Ellis, 2004; Jackson & Mazzei, 2105). In writing about my own daughter, I am writing as her father, but also as a researcher. Despite our deep connection, I am trying to see her just as I would see any other teen reader of controversial books, though my “data” is certainly tinged with more than a hint of fatherly pride. When setting aside that duality of family member and researcher, I am drawn to the comparison of my own lived experience and this person who is reading books I did not.

With lines like “my skin my privilege shows explicitly, my bias implicitly, if insensitive not deliberately” in *Personally Speaking*, the guilt and distress supposed by some book challengers is evidenced in some of Pearson’s poems. Conversely though, that guilt and anguish has been intertwined throughout my life’s events, due in part to the younger me never having thought so deeply about racism, discrimination, and society’s ills. And so, when addressing that part of the national conversation about banning books, I wonder if it would be appropriate, instead of asking whether reading diverse books causes distress or anguish, to question whether reading this type of literature saves distress and anguish later in life. Further, I am drawn back to this notion of RT, where my own life serves as an example of being reproduced the way society would prefer through my childhood and schooling, leading to the questions I ask in *Her steps have outreached mine* when I ask:

Do we want them thinking we should silence certain voices?  
Do we want them thinking some lives have less value?  
Do we want them following our beliefs without thinking for themselves?  
Do we want them to make the same mistakes we have made?

And that, again, asks for a comparison to Pearson, who is not actively working against being reproduced, but asks if what society seems to want her to be is in fact best, as in her poem *Why Banning Books Sucks*:

*All children deserve to know about people who are different from them,  
In hopes that they will find people who are different, like them.  
Don't ban books...ban censorship*

Next, we revisit Golden Shovel poetry, in this case with me having taken a striking line from one of Pearson’s poems (included beneath the title) and writing a poem as part response, part mediation of my own thinking. These poems were written after reading of her work and reflecting on both her and my lived experiences. These poems allowed me to share a more formed version of my lived experience, mediated through my understanding of hers.

### Reexamination, not Indoctrination: A Golden Shovel of L\_A\_S\_T\_N\_A\_M\_E\*

*how could this white girl possibly be offended?*

Her reading has taught her so much about others...the who, what, why, and **how**

Some say reading these books might make kids feel bad, and maybe they **could**

But if what comes from reading is **this**

This girl who doesn't seem like she's ashamed of or feels guilty for being **White**

But more that she has become a slightly more educated **girl**

Understanding people who are different from her, making her kinder maybe, slightly, **possibly**

Isn't that what we want all our kids to be, what we should want EVERYONE to **be**

So if reading books can make us all a bit kinder, better, why again are we getting **offended?**

### She Reads so She Needs Their Response: A Golden Shovel of "In the beginning..."

*I spoke because the adults were silent*

Books, it seems, tell us about "them" to help us think more deeply about "**I**"

So after she thought about her own "I," she knew they had missed something when they **spoke**

She didn't come to speak because she was better or smarter, but **because**

She had been changed, and she thought **they**

Should know, after all, she figured the "them" that needed help, needed help from **adults**

Because kids like her, kids that care about "them" know where they are and where they **were**

They need the ones who in charge to stop being idle, stop being complacent, stop being **silent**

## DISCUSSION AND FINAL THOUGHTS

In many of the conversations committees have about removing certain titles from schools and libraries, or about banning books in general, the people on both sides make the notable mistake of excluding student voices from the conversation. Parents and community members bring concerns about what might happen if access to books they deem inappropriate is given to students. Librarians and parents who oppose these protestors talk about the right to education and the right to read as interpreted by various laws and statutes. What we endeavored to do here though is display the lived experience of a teenager who is and has been reading many of the books that are deemed controversial, and who furthermore speaks openly whenever possible about her thoughts on banning books. While poetry was not the only way we could explore this issue, it is the way that we both felt most comfortable doing so. And that is part of the core concept. When talking about what books students should be able to read or not, it is essential to have their voice in that conversation, and to allow them to speak in the ways in which they are comfortable speaking.

In her own reading of many of these controversial books, Pearson shared an experience of having her mind opened and gaining an understanding of people that are unlike her. And though

some will label her with political ideologies, as many admittedly have in our own community, she did not share an experience of being indoctrinated, or having core beliefs changed through any type of brainwashing. In some cases, she realized that she needed to grow and change. And as her father, I maintain the ability to speak and teach against that change if I feel it is necessary. I will not always agree with everything in every book she reads. But when she has questions, that just means we have an opportunity to talk through those questions together.

We set out in this Conversation through Poem to address how the lived experience of a teenager who reads controversial books shows literature causing distress and guilt or leading to growth and maturity. After writing our verses to share something of a duoethnographic mediation of Pearson's experience, we feel there are some clear answers. While there were hints of guilt or distress in Pearson's writing about feeling she needed to learn more or do better, those emotions were greatly overshadowed by the growth she described. From my perspective, as a father thinking about the effect of his daughter reading frequently banned books, it is impossible not to see how much more understanding and accepting she is of others when comparing to myself at that age. Through the lens of RT, something strikes me as keenly important: If societies, and thus schools, strive to reproduce its desired values and outcomes, it would seem fitting to ask what it looks like when those desired values are reproduced. This would suggest that adults should be role models for students. But comparing the teenager's comments here and in public forums to those of the adults arguing on either side of the issue, it appears that the learning and growth she has had after reading controversial books has flipped the roles and made her the role model that many of the decision makers and influencers in our community should follow. Tensions about what books are put in students' hands, or even just made available, are reaching a fiery point. But the lived and shared experience of this teenager, who has simply read some of these controversial titles, shows that with reading comes understanding and compassion, and that may be all that is needed to drop the book-discussion temperature, to stop the flames before they begin.

The original idea for this study centered on the impact of reading books that are often discussed as being inappropriate for their intended audience for one reason or another. In these Golden Shovel poems, two things seem evident. First, the lived experience of this particular teenager suggests that by reading controversial books, whatever guilt, anguish, or distress might exist is of no consequence compared to the personal growth she sees in herself, evidenced by these lines at the conclusion of her poem, '*In the Beginning*.'

I read to learn to grow to change  
 I read because it grows me as a person  
 I read to learn to grow to change  
 I read books that widen my views and change my mindset  
 I read books to learn to grow to change the world

Second, by reading many of the books the adults around her are discussing, she not only shows that reading them is a positive thing for people her age, she brings an informed voice into the very conversation that is trying to keep her from reading them in the first place. So rather than supposing that some of these books “might” be bad for the kids to read, she is showing that they are not. And so we end this paper just as we began the conversation, with Pearson’s words, centering a voice that in the greater conversation has so often been excluded.

*I first learned about golden shovel poems through poet Nikki Grimes (as the title of this selection shows). Writing poems using lines from my dad’s poems wasn’t easy. I tried to change the context of the original line, but that wasn’t always easy since we both are writing about the same topic.*

### **A Golden Shovel Poem (aka Thank You Nikki Grimes)**

In the books I read I see that **there**  
 is a world beyond my small town. I see people who **are**  
 from all over, who share my same thoughts, even through our **differences**  
 we are united. And **so**,  
 this inspires me to speak out when adults try to take these books away. They’ve tried **many**  
 times to remove these windows, despite this truth: reading diverse books can change **lives**.

### **Taking candy from a baby**

I cannot understand why the adults in my community love taking books away from **kids**  
 It’s as if they **were**  
 trying to keep their children safe by destroying what is **supposed**  
 to be the safest place for people **to**  
 be. By removing books from the shelves, how are kids ever going to **think**  
 and learn and grow? When in history **was**  
 banning or burning books ever **cool?**

*One of my favorite quotes says “when in history were the people banning books ever the good guys.” The previous poem is based on that quote as I look at the news, at my nation, and even at my town and see adults suppressing voices all around me.*

*There are so many books, so many voices that I've read that have been banned or challenged in the past years, and it only seems to be getting worse. So the question is posed:*

*how do we-*

*readers,*

*youth,*

*advocates*

*anywhere*

*-stop this from happening everywhere?*

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