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Discursive Placemaking Practices and White Christian Nationalism Analyzing LGBTQIA+ Censorship Debates in a Southern, Small Town Library

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Abstract

This article examines a public library board meeting in a small Southern U.S. town with the goal of understanding local discourses about sexual and gender diversity amid increased challenges to LGBTQIA+ and BIPoC-themed books. Drawing on theories intertwining place, power, and identity, we analyze how arguments for and against censoring LGBTQIA+ materials are insidiously imbued with discursive practices part of, but not exclusive to, white Christian nationalism. Our analysis identifies three key discursive placemaking practices of white Christian nationalism that community members used: instilling fear, enforcing exclusions, and narrating temporalities (pasts, presents, and futures). Findings reveal that speakers—despite opposing ideological positions about LGBTQIA+ life—constructed a vision of their community influenced by whiteness and Christian nationalist ideologies. This analysis offers new pathways for understanding how public spaces become sites of contestation where multiple trajectories of power and identity converge, with implications for advocacy toward more inclusive and just library spaces.



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Introduction

In recent years in the United States, there has been a surge of book challenges in classrooms and libraries (American Library Association, 2023; Meehan & Friedman, 2023), often related to textual representations of LGBTQIA+ identities, BIPOC identities, structures of power such as racism and transphobia, and history. Although these oppressive trends are a contemporary crisis, they reflect longer histories of anti-LGBTQIA+ animus and its intersections with forms of oppression in U.S. public institutions, especially educational institutions, such as the regulation, silencing, and at times purging of queer educators from teaching positions (e.g., Blount, 2005; Graves, 2009, 2022).

Homophobia and transphobia have affected U.S. and international libraries, resulting in limited LGBTQIA+ materials, especially for youth (Chapman & Birdi, 2016; Spiering et al., 2023; Whelan, 2006). This issue spans Africa (Bouaamri & Otiike, 2023), Asia (Mizunuma & Tsuji, 2022), Europe (Hicks & Kerrigan, 2020), and North America (Brendler et al., 2017), as documented through research that has systematically analyzed library collections' content. Other research has examined library staff attitudes (Kitzie et al., 2022; Oltmann, 2016), finding hesitancy and even self-censorship regarding LGBTQIA+ inclusive materials (e.g., Becnel & Moeller, 2021; Steele, 2021). Studies have also explored community reactions to library holdings, such as challenges to *And Tango Makes Three*, which features two male penguins who are in love and create a family together (Magnuson, 2011), and debates about drag story hours (Engström et al., 2024). Collectively, this research illuminates the interplay of collections, librarians, and communities in shaping LGBTQIA+ representation in libraries.

Given the rise in book challenges—both across the U.S. nationally and locally in our own community in the South—we wanted to better understand the discourses circulating around public libraries, whether these discourses critiqued LGBTQIA+ inclusive library materials and promoted censorship or these discourses defended such materials and celebrated their inclusion. Our desire resonates with a larger scholarly need given the relatively low number of research studies taking up this topic, and we seek to complement and extend Magnuson's (2011) and Engström et al.'s (2024) important studies. We do so methodologically through examining public meetings of a library board rather than news media accounts (Engström et al., 2024; Magnuson, 2011), and we focus on community members' talk at such a meeting. Furthermore, although there are many ways to understand conflicts over public libraries' collections, here we frame them as questions of power and place.

Specifically, in this article, we draw on discourse analysis techniques to understand people's talk as documented in video recordings of a public meeting of a library board in a small Southern town located in Acorn County (names of all people and places are pseudonyms), focusing on the phenomena of space and place in relation to white Christian nationalism. The following research question guides our inquiry: *during a public meeting of the Acorn County Library Board discussing sexual and gender diversity, how did people discursively construct the place of their community?* Ultimately, we argue that—despite making ideologically polarized arguments about censoring LGBTQIA+ affirming materials and programming or defending these materials and programming—community members employed discursive elements central, albeit not exclusive, to white Christian nationalism. The presence of these shared discursive elements across ideologically opposed positions suggests the insidious pervasiveness of white Christian nationalism. To make this argument, we delineate placemaking practices of white Christian

nationalism, examining how oppressive anti-LGBTQIA+ arguments and progressive pro-LGBTQIA+ arguments both relied on this shared set of sexual, gender, racial, religious, political, and national normativities in order to become intelligible.

Theoretical Framework: The Placemaking of White Christian Nationalism

To understand placemaking and white Christian nationalism as intertwined, we begin by discussing broader theories of space, place, power, and identity and then connect these with scholarship on white Christian nationalism.

Space, Place, Power, and Identity

It can be common to characterize space and place as static ambient backgrounds against which human dramas unfold or as simply a surface across which humans move or travel. In other words, space and place can become naturalized as simply given and therefore neutral. Tuck & McKenzie (2015), however, critique such perspectives, stating: “we need to move beyond understandings of place as neutral backdrop, or as a bounded and antiquated concept, or as only physical landscape, to instead theorize and practice place more deeply in social sciences research” (p. 18). Resonating with this call, scholars within and beyond human geography (e.g., Cresswell, 2015; Massey, 1999, 2005; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015) characterize space and place as continually being socially (re)constructed through human and nonhuman interrelations, thus involving power, discourse, materiality, and location, among many dynamics. As Massey (1999) explains: “Space/spatiality ... is the sphere of the meeting up (or not) of multiple trajectories, the sphere where they co-exist, affect each other, maybe come into conflict” (p. 283). She continues: “[Space/spatiality] is the product of relations which are active practices, material and embedded” (p. 283).

We find Massey’s feminist work in human geography to be generative, and in it, she attends to gender (for her, in a binary, woman/man framework), emphasizing that identities are co-formed and co-constitutive with space and place. To extend this work to attend to a range of other identities, we are inspired by engagements with space and place in queer and trans studies (e.g., Abelson, 2019; Chauncey, 1995; Halberstam, 2005) and Black feminist thought (e.g., McKittrick, 2006; Sharpe, 2016; Wright, 2015), both of which explicitly theorize how power and identity—especially but not only gender, sexuality, and race—are co-constitutive of the sphere of trajectories that is spatiality. In this view, power struggles—for instance, forms of oppression such as transphobia or racism—do not simply happen in a space but are spatial, a point underscored by McKittrick (2006): “racism and sexism are not simply bodily or identity based; racism and sexism are also spatial acts” (p. xviii). Abelson (2019) offers a complementary perspective:

space and place are simultaneously gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized. Interactions happen in particular spaces and places. Gender, race, and sexuality each shape the meanings that people attach to space, how people shape the environment, and the ways they move in and through particular contexts. At the same time, the gendered and racialized subjectivities and identities created in particular spaces continue to shape the raced and gendered meanings of those spaces. Thus, there is a recursive effect and fluidity to the relation of gender, race, sexuality, and class to space. (pp. 10-11)

We agree and add that additional identities such as religion, nation, and age are part of the nexus of the meeting-up constituting spatiality.

Drawing on these perspectives, different abstract spatial forms—such as region, state, small town, public space, library—can be conceptualized as unfinished relations of ongoing contestation, struggle, and becoming. However, our focus is not abstract spatial forms but rather specific places, such as the U.S. South and even more precisely the public library in what we call Acorn County. In contrast with space, place, as Tuck and McKenzie (2015) explain, entails “specificity” and “rootedness” (p. 21), such that places are unique and not simply interchangeable. Emphasizing how the specificity of place relates to power, Massey (2005) explains that places are “criss-crossings in the wider power-geometries” (p. 101). Rather than being fixed or static, a place is an event “in the simple sense of the coming together of the previously unrelated, a constellation of processes rather than a thing” (p. 141). The messiness of becoming means that “There can be no assumption of pre-given coherence, or of community or collective identity. Rather the throwntogetherness of place demands negotiation” (p. 141). This negotiation—or, to draw from McKittrick’s (2006) phrasing, this power relation of struggle—that constitutes the event of place is our analytic focus in this article, and we use the term *placemaking* to point to this idea.

We understand placemaking in the U.S. South to always already entail, in Massey’s (2005) words, “criss-crossings of wide power-geometries” (p. 101) including gender, race, sexuality, class, and, as we’ll discuss in the findings, religion, the nation, and age. Put another way, the event of the place of the Acorn County Public library is a criss-crossing of governmental funding and bureaucratic actions, employees curating a collection and putting these books and materials on shelves, children and adult patrons frequenting the library, nationwide movements seeking to censor and to resist censoring books due to LGBTQIA+ and BIPoC representation, the physical materials of the building and furniture, the location and land where the library sits, and many, many other dynamics and relations, which, for a time, coalesce to become an event of place.

White Christian Nationalism, Censorship, and Placemaking

To explicate the particular criss-crossings of place integral to our findings, we draw from recent scholarship about white Christian nationalism. As scholars have explained (Du Mez, 2020; Gorski & Perry, 2022; Whitehead & Perry, 2020), white Christian nationalism is built upon several core ideas: 1) the belief that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation chosen by God; 2) the need to maintain rigid national and social exclusions to preserve this chosen status; 3) the assertion that white Christian men should lead and enforce these exclusions to protect the nation’s divine blessings; and 4) the use of fear and moral judgment to uphold this order. Importantly, white Christian nationalism is neither about Christianity per se nor one’s religious faith. Rather, white Christian nationalism is a “political ideology” (Stewart, 2019, p. 11) that merges Christianity, whiteness, and civic life. Thus, people can believe some parts and not others and do so to varying degrees. Furthermore, white Christian nationalism is an ideology rather than an essentialized characteristic, meaning that the ideology is not only promoted by white people, Christians, and/or nationalists and it can be promoted unknowingly and unintentionally, as we demonstrate in our findings. As an ideology, white Christian nationalism extends across multiple spatial scales: from the nuclear family to local communities and public locations to the nation as a whole. State-sponsored educational institutions, including public schools and libraries, become sites where white Christian nationalists assert these ideologies to maintain social order.

The term nationalism suggests a particular spatial form, the nation, and is tied to the U.S. as a place. In this way white Christian nationalism is inherently spatial, and articulations of white Christian nationalism are inherently spatial acts, even if previous scholarship has not explicitly theorized them as such. If place is an event that people (re)create through negotiating “the question of our living together” (Massey, 2005, p. 151), then white Christian nationalism, through its core ideas, seeks to elevate certain ways of living together and make others impossible. The spatial scale of white Christian nationalism often emphasizes the nation, and we add to scholarly conversations about white Christian nationalism not only by theorizing it in relation to space and place but also by making a scalar shift to consider a small Southern town and specifically its public library.

Through a placemaking lens, a public library is more than a mere physical location; it is an event constituting an arena where community members clash regarding power, normativity, belonging, and legitimacy. White Christian nationalism, as a discourse, often characterizes various groups as threats, including adherents of other religions, secularists, socialists, people of color, non-white immigrants, women challenging patriarchal norms, and LGBTQIA+ individuals (Gorski & Perry, 2020). Burke et al. (2023) apply this broader lens of white Christian nationalism to education, including schools and libraries, suggesting that book bans, censorship movements, attacks on libraries, and organized parent groups focused on so-called “freedom” and “liberty” in education can all be usefully interpreted through attention to white Christian nationalism. We agree and add that censorship as one focal effort of white Christian nationalism can be productively understood via placemaking. In her scholarship on literary censorship, Moore (2013) argues “Censorship is about state making ... It is primarily a geopolitical technology—an instrument of place making ... National uniformity, social constitution, boundary making—these are the primary effects sought by censorship” (p. 56).

Thus, we argue that censorship debates can be productively understood as placemaking practices that constitute exclusions, specifically interweaving normative borders of place with gender, sexuality, race, and religion. The presence of LGBTQIA+ resources, for example, in public libraries challenges the gender binary and compulsory (cishetero)sexuality, which are central to white Christian nationalism as a political ideology. To further develop theorizations of white Christian nationalism as entailing placemaking, in our findings we describe three placemaking practices. Before turning to these findings, we next describe our methods.

Method

In this article, we present findings from an ethnographically-informed discourse analytic study (Bloome et al., 2005) of a U.S. public library board’s meetings. Although our study does not meet the time and participant observation expectations of ethnography, we are informed by ethnographic perspectives emphasizing cultural practices (Blommaert & Dong, 2020; Heath & Street, 2008), in our case, discursive practices. We use discourse analysis to examine place and identity, notably white Christian nationalism, in order “to expose the possibilities and consequences of various discourses, with their attendant ideologies, practices, and preferences” (Kamberelis & Dimitriades, 2005, p. 53) in a Southern U.S. town’s library board meetings. We analyze publicly available video and audio recordings, focusing on the case of one meeting, informed by 18 months of participant observation at community events. We provide background on the focal meeting before detailing our data collection and analysis methods.

The Library Board Meeting

Acorn County Public Library is part of an interconnected system of libraries in its area in the Southeastern United States. During 2022-2024, there was a small group of community members lodging complaints about Acorn County Public Library's LGBTQIA+ inclusive materials and programming, especially children's and young adult literature and programming intended for young people. This small group included people associated with Acorn County's Moms for Liberty chapter. This group is a political organization founded in 2021 and labeled as "far-right" and "extremist" by the Southern Poverty Law Center. It is both an "anti-governmental" and

far-right organization that engages in anti-student inclusion activities and self-identifies as part of the modern parental rights movement. The group grew out of opposition to public health regulations for COVID-19, opposes LGBTQ+ and racially inclusive school curriculum, and has advocated books bans. (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2025, n.p.)

This organization has close ties to the Heritage Foundation, a nationally recognized anti-LGBTQ hate group (GLAAD, 2024). In Acorn County, people associated with Moms for Liberty encountered both support and resistance.

After some smaller protests and disagreements between people supporting Moms for Liberty and censorship and people opposing Moms for Liberty and censorship, both groups showed up in larger numbers at an Acorn County Public Library Board Meeting during the summer of 2023. This meeting became a community flashpoint due to recent controversies. A community member, who had been vocally opposed to the library's Pride month event and participation in the local Pride parade, had requested the censorship of the book *Flamer* by Mike Curato. This graphic novel—which depicts the experiences of a bullied, gay, Catholic, Filipino-American boy who is a Boy Scout—was challenged due to supposed profanity and sexual content. The reconsideration request asserted that the book should be moved from the young adult section to the adult section. Amidst a national context of increased book challenges, this meeting became a local battleground over censorship. Over 200 people attended the board meeting, an unusually high turnout for what were typically sparsely attended sessions. Indeed, the meeting room itself was packed tight, with some people trying to listen from the hallway and many people simply waiting outside. Many arrived hours early to sign up for one of the limited speaking slots during the public comments portion of the meeting (sign-ups were required to be done in person, signing up on a handwritten sheet put out that day in the library).

Approximately 20 people spoke during the public comments portion, and in the findings we focus on two representative speakers: Brenda, a leader of the local chapter of Moms for Liberty, and Ashley, a military veteran and long-time resident of Acorn County. Brenda had numerous supporters in the crowd, though the majority were against censorship. This was evident from the signs, vocal opposition to Brenda's comments, and the larger number of anti-censorship speakers. Ashley advocated against censorship and offered a counterpoint to Brenda's views.

Data Collection and Analysis

We came to collaborate on this project through shared interests in literacy education, censorship, and LGBTQIA+ advocacy in the rural South. Bekah was a student enrolled in a

doctoral course on ethnography taught by Ryan, a course which included practicing with a variety of ethnographic data collection methods. Ryan had already been attending local library board meetings and other public meetings, such as nonprofits, prior to the course, and the course was designed to practice ethnographic methods by focusing on local conflicts regarding censorship and library collections. Bekah became particularly interested in this research, and the two of us decided to collaborate. Thus, primarily in the fall of 2023, we gathered publicly available video and audio recordings of library board meetings in the region in which topics of censorship, library materials and programming, and LGBTQIA+ identities were discussed. We also gathered news media accounts and commentary in other online contexts (such as Reddit or comments sections on news sites).

Ultimately, we decided to focus on the public comments portion of library board meetings with the goal of understanding “the possibilities and consequences of various discourses, with their attendant ideologies, practices, and preferences” (Kamberelis & Dimitriades, 2005, p. 53) expressed by community members in conflict over censorship, access to information, and LGBTQIA+ life. Given previous research has focused on news reporting, we believed that an analysis of community members’ talk would add valuable perspective to scholarship. Furthermore, we chose to focus on one library board meeting in depth. We did so not because the meeting was representative or typical but rather because of its unique status as a critical incident (Green, 1983; Mitchell, 1984). Many library board meetings were largely dominated by seemingly mundane bureaucratic procedures, and therefore a cross-event analysis was ill suited to answering our research question. A few meetings contained public comments in which people criticized censorship and defended both LGBTQIA+ people and LGBTQIA+ inclusive library materials and programming. However, only one meeting featured public conflict where public comments both called for and criticized censorship. Although it is both notable and curious that in this study the people working to censor LGBTQIA+ texts largely eschewed the public democratic forums established for decision making, this phenomenon remains beyond the scope of our study. Nonetheless, the particular meeting we feature in the findings was a public flashpoint, including many protestors and speakers with competing views, and these qualities offered us as researchers a unique opportunity to attempt to understand some of the discursive dynamics at play. In short, although we focus on one meeting from the larger data corpus, we do so because the data from this event offer unique insights not available elsewhere in our data corpus.

With this particular library board meeting selected, we transcribed the meeting and conducted an initial cycle of open coding (Saldaña, 2016). Building on this initial coding, Bekah completed multiple rounds of analysis in the spring of 2024, using different discourse analytic techniques, including: 1) ideational analysis within critical discourse analysis (Martin & Rose, 2008; Fairclough, 2003); 2) ideational analysis within systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 2014); and 3) an appraisal analysis of judgment. The two of us then met together to discuss analytic insights and collectively reanalyze data together. We then completed an additional cycle of independent thematic coding (Saldaña, 2016), meeting throughout the summer of 2024.

Through this process, we identified questions of place to be of particular salience (e.g., who and what belonged or did not belong according to community members’ talk?), and these questions led us to draw on white Christian nationalism to make sense of the confluence of place, identity, and power. In presenting our findings, we recognize that discourse is not limited to simply verbal utterances but is more robust semiotically, including meaning-making that is multimodal and embodied. Although we focus on the verbal for much of our analysis, we also draw on broader

forms of discourse, including embodied semiosis, specifically to analyze racialized power dynamics which were present even if not explicitly named in a speaker's verbal utterance. We now turn to the findings which detail insights from our analysis. In the findings, we focus on two speakers: Brenda and Ashley.

In completing our analysis and presenting our findings, we are informed by queer theorists (e.g., Eng, Halberstam, & Muñoz, 2005; Halberstam, 2005) in an important way, namely our attention to normativity. Queer theorists often foreground questions of discourse to, as Eng et al. (2005) explain, “interrogat[e] the social processes that not only produc[e] and recogniz[e] but also normaliz[e] and sustai[n] identity, ... including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality” (p. 1). Thus, in the findings, we trace how discursive dimensions of white Christian nationalism were normatively present as a type of “common sense” (Kumashiro, 2015) across speakers with different ideological stances and aspirations. Our purpose is not to critique or praise any single individual because such individualized judgments miss the point: our purpose is instead to trace normative discursive practices in shared cultural practices in Acorn County, which we return to in the discussion.

Findings: Censorship and White Christian Nationalism at the Library Board Meeting

We now turn to the public library board meeting itself, focusing on community members' talk during the official public comments portion in order to understand people's discursive practices of placemaking. Drawing on Massey's (2005) conception of places as “criss-crossings in the wider power-geometries” (p. 101), we analyze how the library board meeting functioned as an event where multiple trajectories—including those of race, gender, sexuality, religion, and nation—converged through discourse. During the meeting, two polarized positions emerged: one advocating for the censorship of the queer-themed young adult book *Flamer* and the other opposed to this censorship. We demonstrate how speakers at the library board meeting—despite their opposing stances on censorship—employed discursive practices that exhibited elements common in, although not exclusive to, white Christian nationalist discourse, even when advocating for opposing positions. This parallel use of similar discursive practices, we argue, illustrates the insidious and pervasive influence of white Christian nationalism in U.S. public discourse, particularly in discussions about community values, children's welfare, and public institutions—in other words, in the event of place. More specifically, despite our sympathy with Ashley's pro-LGBTQIA+ stance, we are concerned that the elements of white Christian nationalist discourses present in her defense of queer and trans life ultimately undermined her efforts, revealing ways in which people who do not ascribe to white Christian nationalist ideologies can unwittingly perpetuate this perspective.

Although we foreground LGBTQIA+ identities, it is important to recognize that whiteness and racism operated as one historical trajectory criss-crossing with others in the Acorn County public library. We begin here, illustrating how white normativity functioned as a subtle, seemingly invisible, placemaking practice intertwined with the other three we present: instilling fear, enforcing exclusions, and narrating pasts, presents, and futures. Although we divide these practices for rhetorical purposes, in practice they were intertwined, interdependent, and not easily separated.

Whiteness and the Acorn Library

Whiteness was a subtle, perhaps seemingly invisible, but powerful normativity permeating the Acorn library board meeting's conflict. In describing whiteness in this way, we are inspired by Ahmed (2007) who argues that whiteness functions as "what does not get seen as the background to social action" (p. 165). This subtlety makes whiteness no less real or consequential; rather, its power often derives precisely from its ability to remain unmarked while constituting, in part, the social relations of place. In Acorn County, where over 80% of residents were white and the community was locally understood as associated with whiteness, this "background," to borrow Ahmed's term, was particularly salient. In the Deep South, racial segregation is never simply a chance occurrence but rather the legacy of white supremacy as a foundational trajectory constituting the South. Thus, whiteness did not need to be explicitly named by any speaker in order to be relevant in the event of the library board meeting. The very composition of the crowd (almost exclusively white), the institutional setting (a public library in a predominantly white county), and the embodied presence of both speakers (white women discussing community values) all contributed to whiteness permeating this event as an organizing force. From a discourse analytic perspective, it is important to recognize discourse as a material and embodied phenomenon: utterances are produced by bodies, by vocal cords producing soundwaves that move molecules and eventually enter other people's ears; in this case, primarily white bodies produced and heard these utterances. Thus, even when speakers made no explicit reference to race, their use of terms like "we," "our community," and "our children" carried unmarked and implicit racial meanings in this context. Thus, although explicitly focused on LGBTQIA+ topics, speakers at the library were speaking in ways that were implicitly also about race.

Instilling Fear

Through this lens of whiteness, both Brenda and Ashley engaged in a discursive placemaking practice of instilling fear, whether advancing or criticizing anti-LGBTQIA+ censorship. This practice involved constructing perceived threats to the safety and security of the community, thereby constituting Acorn County as a place through relational danger. By promoting panic, these speakers suggesting that the wellbeing of the Acorn County community was at stake.

Brenda, for instance, emphasized what the Southern Poverty Law Center describes as "the modern parental rights movement" (2025, n.p.) in order to instill fear. She said:

It was also discovered that the director over youth programs here at our library was purposefully going behind the backs of parents to recruit children into the gay community under the guise of giving them a safe haven via a club ... The sacred trust has been violated. Federal rights and children's rights have been violated.

Drawing on anti-queer characterizations of lesbian and gay people as "recruiting" or "grooming" youth, Brenda discursively instilled fear by fabricating a threat: library employees intentionally "violat[ing]" the "sacred trust" of parents by trying to recruit youth to become queer. Such manipulative and inaccurate statements are hardly new or uncommon (see Blount, 2005; Graves, 2009, 2022). Furthermore, although not explicitly centering Christianity in her word choice, Brenda used of "sacred" subtly indexed Christianity, implicitly setting up a binary between Christian and LGBTQIA+ identities as a backdrop for her comments. Analytically, what we stress is not that Brenda's statement was unique or unexpected (it was not) but rather that she drew on

histories of homophobia to instill fear, a discursive action that, in effect, defined Acorn County as an imperiled place. Thus, Brenda participated in a broader pattern of discourse constituting place through constructed moral threats, particularly to children, a strategy commonly seen in white Christian nationalist movements but not exclusive to them.

In contrast, Ashley's talk, while also engaging with questions of fear and threat, operated primarily through the framework of constitutional rights and democratic values. She said:

I'm going to talk to you about this as the veteran that I am. When I put my hand down [on the Bible] and raised my other hand, I swore to defend the Constitution of the United States, and I swore to uphold freedom. I meant it for everybody. There are people in this room that want to pervert what freedom is and tell me what I can do with my rights, what I can have them read. They want to take my rights. They want to take things that I want in the library. That's not freedom. That's a perversion of freedom.

Whereas Brenda named threats beyond the meeting, Ashley instead located the danger to Acorn County as present "in this room," a statement intertwining fear and place. Relying on neoliberal ideas of freedom and individual rights, Ashley narrated her intentions as a veteran who "swore to uphold freedom." She suggested that Brenda's actions threatened to take away rights, such as by taking away "things that [she] want[ed] in the library" that were her right to access. Although arguing against Brenda, Ashley also acted to instill fear and in doing so defined Acorn County as a place in danger. Yet, although Ashley's invocation of constitutional freedoms and military service echoed discursive patterns found in white Christian nationalist discourse, her deployment of these themes worked to explicitly oppose exclusionary practices and defend broader access to information.

We are, of course, sympathetic with Ashley's argument and her seeming efforts to draw on discursive elements of white Christian nationalism in order to subvert white Christian nationalist aims, a tension we return to in the discussion. In our analysis here though, we recognize a convergence of shared discursive practices. Namely, Brenda's and Ashley's contrasting approaches to constructing threat narratives illustrate how discursive practices found in white Christian nationalism have become deeply embedded in U.S. public discourse of place and belonging. Brenda's invocation of parental rights and Ashley's appeal to constitutional freedoms connect with broader themes of white Christian nationalism, which often relies on fears of losing security and dominance, economic, cultural, political or otherwise. Indeed, as Whitehead and Perry (2020) explain: in white Christian nationalist discourse, dominant groups "perceive a certain degree of threat to their status by some minority group (e.g., racial minorities, immigrants, Muslims, feminists, the LGBTQ community, secular elites)" (p. 60) and subsequently work "defend (their) freedom and impose (racial and gender) order" (Gorski & Perry, 2022, p. 89). Extending these general arguments about white Christian nationalism, what Brenda and Ashley alternatively revealed is how a fear of loss due to a threat functioned as a placemaking practice. Although their public comments were specifically about the issue of whether the young adult book *Flamer* would exist in the place of the library's young adult or adult section, both speakers' discursive practices invoked broader anxieties about threats not just to the library but to the family, Acorn community, and nation.

Enforcing Exclusions

A second discursive placemaking practice, one implicit in the discussion of fear, was the enforcement of community exclusions, even though Brenda's and Ashley's discourse manifest these exclusions in conflicting ways. Despite some of these differences, Brenda and Ashley both used exclusions to define the limits of acceptable inclusion in Acorn County. For both, too wide of criteria for inclusion was negative, especially in that it opened up greater vulnerability to the threats they feared.

Brenda, for instance, described the dangers of inclusion and suggested the need for exclusion. She stated:

LGBTQ is an acronym for sexual affiliations: lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer and the plus is there to be all-inclusive down to pedophiles ... All-inclusive is all inclusive right? But LGBTQ+ is not for children. Any of it. None of it. When I heard that our library was participating in the Pride Parade, having gay pride parties for kids, and that a book about the life of a drag queen was being read to young children, I didn't ask why the children were there. Rainbows, flags, and dresses are fun right?

Relying on alarmist homophobic tropes linking queerness and pedophilia, Brenda offered a cautionary tale of inclusion. She suggested the common "plus sign" added to the end of the "LGBTQ+" acronym coupled with an inclusive ethos recognizing sexual diversity meant that LGBTQ+ advocates were also advocates for pedophilia. After all, in her words, "All-inclusive is all inclusive right?" In turn, she instrumentalized the figure of the child (Edelman, 2004; Schey, 2024) as a discursive resource for promoting her own ideological stance, one that equated reading an LGBTQ+ inclusive children's book or attending a Pride parade with the sexual abuse and exploitation of children. Although not explicitly stating a need for exclusion, Brenda illustrated the dangers of inclusion for Acorn County or, in other words, how exclusion could protect the community, specifically vulnerable children. Brenda's utterances threaded together the placemaking practices of instilling fear and enforcing exclusions.

Ashley most definitely did not equate queerness and pedophilia. Instead, she challenged Brenda's authority to speak on behalf of Acorn County. However, despite her opposition to Brenda, Ashley also drew on the discursive practice of enforcing exclusions. She did so by highlighting the danger of Acorn County being too inclusive, specifically of outsiders, a stance which, similar to Brenda's, suggested the need for strong protective boundaries. Ashley said:

We have an interloper here who's an agitator, who came to this county to stir up division. We have an interloper who wants to create conflict, and I raised my kids here and I know Acorn County is better than this.

A few moments later, Ashley described the interloper as "want[ing] attention, so desperate for it that I won't even say her name." For Ashley, too broad of inclusion in Acorn County would mean that Brenda—the "interloper" whose name Ashley refused to say—would be a valid member of the community and would have a legitimate stake in community decisions, such as restricting access to *Flamer*. Because of the "division" and "conflict" that Brenda "stir[red] up" and because Ashley raised her children in Acorn in contrast Brenda being a recent transplant, Ashley suggested that Brenda was not an insider and should not be treated as such. By excluding outsiders such as

Brenda, Acorn County would be able to “better than this,” which seemingly meant better than having internal debates over book bans.

Through showing the dangers of inclusion, both Brenda and Ashley discursively constructed Acorn County as a place in need of firm and exclusionary ideational boundaries. Yes, these two speakers mobilized the notion of exclusion for conflicting ends, but still both speakers became intelligible through a shared discourse of placemaking. This discourse of enforcing exclusions reflected themes in white Christian nationalism. As Whitehead and Perry (2020) explain about the construction of boundaries, white Christian nationalism holds up a society where “*real* Americans—white, native-born, mostly Protestants—maintain control over access to society’s social, cultural, and political institutions and ‘others’ remain in their proper place” (p. 119). Albeit at a different spatial scale than the nation, the conflict over inclusion and exclusion that Brenda and Ashley enacted functioned as a microcosm of larger nationalist struggles, not only over the in/exclusion of books but rather what choices about in/exclusion meant for sexuality, morality, childhood, and community wellbeing. To be clear, we are not arguing for “inclusion” with respect to pedophilia. Instead, we highlight the false dilemma and moral panic Brenda was fostering through distortions and outright lies. In contrast with Brenda, we believe that affirming sexual diversity also entails promoting ethical relationships and practices such as consent and care and opposes sexual violence, assault, and exploitation.

Narrating Pasts, Presents, and Futures

Whereas instilling fear named a threat and enforcing exclusions constructed boundaries, Brenda and Ashley engaged in a third discursive practice—narrating the community’s pasts, presents, and futures—that constructed place not as a static entity but rather one that existed in and across time and thus was open to change. Indeed, the interconnections of space and time were always implicit as both speakers expressed anxieties about the future of the Acorn community (e.g., Halberstam, 2005; Schey, 2023). The speakers’ narratives established a historical essence of what Acorn County was and was not, and these histories established a present moment from which the speakers argued about the desirability of competing futures.

Brenda narrated a future in peril due to historical and contemporary threats to Acorn County as a symbolic of larger nationalist struggles. She said:

Why would a small town library be participating in the gender ideology movement and recruiting our children? How did that happen here in conservative Acorn County? But one doesn’t have to look far to figure out the motive behind it. The sexualization and recruitment of children in this country is a plague on our nation with its roots in Marxism. [crowd laughing] These are centuries old Marxist tactics!

Brenda here narrated “conservative” Acorn County as encountering a historic threat: Marxist queers, which, in subtle Biblical terms, she described as a “plague.” Such a claim resonates with 20th century coupling of anti-Marxist and anti-LGBTQIA+ ideologies in the forms of the intertwined Red and Lavender Scares (Graves, 2022), meaning that Brenda drew on a fiction that was historical (even if not “centuries old”) rather than creating anew. In contrast with this historical threat, she invoked the child as a figure of futurity (Edelman, 2004). Through these temporal narratives, Brenda discursively defined Acorn County as a place at the crossroads. It could potentially be destroyed through a queer plague with Marxist roots, from which her guidance seemingly provided safety.

Again, Ashely argued against Brenda's perspective. However, to do so, she drew on a shared placemaking practice. Although focusing on the immediate rather than "centuries old" past, Ashley also narrated a past and present in order to argue for a future through the figure of the child. She said:

We are neighbors! We work together! We live together! When you come to my office for services I don't ask you for your political affiliation. We live here! We are here! And *Heather Has Two Mommies* does not make anybody gay, it keeps my kids from being bullied!

Ashley emphasized the local history of Acorn County, referencing the fact that the people in the room (the "we") were "neighbors" who "live[d]" and "work[ed] together." Referencing her local psychiatry practice, she pointed out that her services were not contingent on political affiliations. In doing so, she defined Acorn County as a place of collective belonging constituted by a history of being there together. Then, seemingly shifting the referent of the plural first person "we," Ashley appeared to suggest that queer parents, like her, were in Acorn County, arguing that queer books, such as Newman's children's book *Heather Has Two Mommies*, did not threaten Acorn's future as metonymically represented through the figure of the child but rather protected this future, specifically through stopping queerphobic bullying.

Both speakers' narratives imbued Acorn County with temporality, portraying it as a place shaped by its past and present struggles and open to future changes. In doing so, both utilized a discursive practice common in white Christian nationalism, namely a tendency to position contemporary social changes as moral threats requiring defensive action (Gorski & Perry, 2022). In sum, both speakers' narratives imbued Acorn County with temporality, animating place to be dynamic and thus open to having boundaries compromised through fear-inducing threats that needed to be protected through exclusion. Thus, all three discursive practices were intertwined, with no single practice existing on its own.

Discussion: Paradoxical Shared Placemaking Practices

At the Acorn County Public Library Board's meeting debating the censorship of the graphic novel *Flamer*, Brenda and Ashley presented impassioned arguments that extended beyond the mere categorization of the book as young adult or adult. Their debate delved into the meaning of Acorn County as a place. Brenda described LGBTQIA+ affirming practices—such as children's book readings, queer youth affinity groups, and the existence of LGBTQIA+ inclusive books—as external threats endangering the future of Acorn. Conversely, Ashley depicted Brenda as an interloper promoting discord and conflict, which equally jeopardized Acorn's future. Despite these starkly opposing viewpoints, both Brenda and Ashely drew upon a shared set of discursive placemaking practices. Brenda's discursive actions promoted a violent exclusion and erasure of queer and trans life not only in Acorn County but the U.S. nation. Ashley, in contrast, discursively defended the presence and validity of LGBTQIA+ life in Acorn; indeed, she appeared to self-identify as a queer parent who was a longstanding member of Acorn.

It is exactly the opposing viewpoints of these two speakers that make this event such a compelling case for understanding censorship debates within and beyond public libraries. We are sympathetic with Ashley, and her arguments for LGBTQIA+ people resonate deeply with us. At the same time, we are concerned about the ways in which, at times, many of her discursive practices mirror Brenda's, and this shared repertoire of placemaking practices suggests the

insidious pervasiveness of white Christian nationalism in the contemporary U.S., including how it influences placemaking. Specifically, we are concerned that the elements of white Christian nationalist discourses embedded in Ashley's defense of queer and trans life in Acorn undermined her pro-LGBTQIA+ efforts by perpetuating other forms of domination such as racism, xenophobia, and religious intolerance. Both speakers employed three key practices—instilling fear, enforcing exclusions, and narrating temporalities—to discursively construct Acorn County. These placemaking practices, though manifesting in different ways and to varying intensities, were grounded in dimensions of white Christian nationalism. The discourse of white Christian nationalism included subtle indexing of Christianity (e.g., using the lexical items “sacred” and “plague”), overt appeals to the national identity (e.g., invoking nationalism or veteran status), and a pervasive, ambient sense of whiteness and white normativity.

However, it is not merely the co-presence of whiteness, Christianity, and nationalism in the speakers' discourse that matters, but rather how these discursive practices were intricately tied to the epistemological and placemaking resources of white Christian nationalism. Instilling fear utilized white Christian nationalist discourses about the perceived threats of outsiders, justifying even extreme measures and violence as necessary for protection. Enforcing exclusions mobilized binaries of “insiders versus outsiders,” leveraging xenophobia and fears of the “other” to justify strict borders and rigid exclusionary practices. In turn, narrating pasts, presents, and futures shaped the temporal experience of space, casting the future as uncertain and vulnerable, if not imperiled, if inclusivity and openness were allowed. These fundamental interconnections illustrate why we categorize these three discursive practices as the placemaking practices of white Christian nationalism. Although Brenda and Ashley were enmeshed in a polarized debate, they both, intentionally or not, reinforced discursive practices that ultimately defined Acorn County through a lens of white Christian nationalism.

We understand that some might interpret Ashley's use of discursive elements present in white Christian nationalism as a savvy appropriation bolstering her argument. We are hesitant to forward this argument for several reasons. First, the Acorn County's library board after this meeting voted in favor of relocating *Flamer*, thus acquiescing to Brenda and her supporters and not taking up Ashley's or anyone else's requests to keep this young adult text located in the young adult section. Moreover, the queer-affirming librarian Brenda criticized continued to be targeted for harassment and eventually resigned. Of course, it is absurd to suggest that Ashley or her discursive choices at this board meeting caused all of this. Causation is a vexed and complex web that cannot be untangled through our study. However, the relocation of *Flamer* and the librarian's resignation give us pause in celebrating Ashley's rhetoric as a subversive reversal of white Christian nationalism. Instead, we are reminded of Lorde's (1984) oft-quoted caution that “*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (p. 112, emphasis in original). Such a caution, for us, resonates with queer theorists' suspicion of normativities. Again, we stress that we are not criticizing Ashley, nor are we equating her actions with Brenda's. There are significant differences between the two, especially Brenda's anti-LGBTQIA+ vitriol compared with Ashley's defense of queer life. Yet, it is because of these differences that we are concerned with how—seemingly unwittingly and seemingly in contrast with Ashley's goals—discursive elements found in white Christian nationalism became part of her repertoire of placemaking practices.

Conclusion: Placemaking, Libraries, and Liberation

Our analysis of the discursive practices at the Acorn County library board meeting illustrates how debates about book censorship are intertwined with placemaking, resonating with Moore's (2013) description of censorship as "geopolitical technology – an instrument of place making" (p. 56) through which communities, such as Acorn, negotiate the boundaries of belonging and legitimacy. Indeed, the presence or absence of LGBTQIA+ materials and resources in Acorn County's public library became a focal point for broader contestations over the very meaning and character of Acorn County, revealing how seemingly localized disputes are embedded within broader power-geometries of nation, religion, sexuality, and race, among many identities. Furthermore, our analysis suggests the pervasive influences of white Christian nationalist discourse in shaping public debates over place, even as its influences are complex and even contradictory. Such complexity—indeed, Brenda's and Ashley's opposing stances—highlights the need for nuanced analysis of how discourses circulate and transform across spatial scales.

Past research about libraries and youth services has often focused on the content of libraries' collections or the perceptions of librarians (see, Spiering et al., 2023). As a result, Spiering et al. (2023) argue for the importance of considering libraries' practices more broadly, which we understand to include questions of library policies and governance, such as public conflicts centered on LGBTQIA+ materials and programming. Our findings, especially in relation to fear and neoliberal notions of rights and freedom, resonate with the few studies also examining public debates about library collections and LGBTQIA+ topics (Engström et al., 2024; Magnuson, 2011). Indeed, the consistency over a decade (Magnuson's study was published in 2011) and across continents (Magnuson's and our study are U.S. focused while Engström et al.'s was in Sweden) reveal particularly entrenched discourses that make right-wing, fascist anti-LGBTQIA+ actions possible and intelligible. Importantly, our work extends notions of conflicts regarding sexuality and gender and libraries to be part of a larger hegemonic configuration intertwining white supremacy, nationalism, and Christian dominance.

We applaud and admire the nuance of Engström et al.'s (2024) analysis, especially as they clearly argue for the importance of "public libraries' work to promote democracy" (p. 240). We concur, and we point to the generativity of frameworks explicating multiple, intersecting structures of domination at play, especially given the subtle ways that whiteness and Christianity operate as an ambient normativity with a deep gravitational pull. Community members mobilize these oppressive normativities not only in the service of anti-LGBTQIA+ animus but, at times and seemingly unwittingly, in attempting to subvert such animus, effectively short circuiting their intents to work for LGBTQIA+ justice and liberation.

It is in such complex quagmires that people construct places and work toward desirable futures. By identifying the pervasive and insidious influence of white Christian nationalism on discourse and place, we hope to illuminate pathways for advocates of queer and trans liberation to mobilize alternative discourses. These alternative discourses can contribute to the creation of more inclusive, just, and humanizing places and futures, challenging the hegemonic structures that currently dominate. The Acorn County library board meeting reveals how place is never simply a neutral background for social action but rather a constantly negotiated and contested sphere of relations. By attending to the discursive practices through which speakers sought to define the library and Acorn County more broadly, we gain insight into the ongoing struggles over belonging, legitimacy, and power that constitute place itself. Ultimately, understanding and addressing these

discursive placemaking practices can pave the way for transformative actions that better align with principles of liberation and justice.

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