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Suppressing the Commons: Misconstrued Patriotism vs. a Psychology of Liberation

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In these affairs, no gun is needed. The victims do it all themselves. And the bullets never miss.--Bruce Jackson, CounterPunch , May 2003 Libraries play an important role in community building by supporting the public sphere to provide a commons environment that addresses the need for people to meet and interact with others. (1) Additionally, the library preserves historical and cultural memory and maintains resources for discourse and decision-making. However, since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and the passage of the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT) Act, the community-building commons role of the public library has been at risk. Learning why first requires a look at the climate for free speech in the United States since September 11.

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“Suppressing the Commons: Misconstrued Patriotism vs. a Psychology of Liberation” **Kathleen de la Peña McCook**, *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 42 (Fall 2003): 14-17.

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Libraries play an important role in community building by supporting the public sphere to provide a commons environment that addresses the need for people to meet and interact with others. (1) Additionally, the library preserves historical and cultural memory and maintains resources for discourse and decision-making. However, since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and the passage of the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT) Act, the community-building commons role of the public library has been at risk. Learning why first requires a look at the climate for free speech in the United States since September 11.

Patriotism, when construed as unquestioning support for government actions, narrows discourse and chills dissent. There have been numerous well-publicized instances since September 11 that have equated dissent with lack of patriotism. These include:

- * Canceling public speeches by government critics such as Tim Robbins (by the Baseball Hall of Fame) and Susan Sarandon (by the United Way of Tampa Bay). Both Robbins and Sarandon have been featured on American Library Association READ posters.
- * Censoring Michael Moore's book *Stupid White Men* until librarian Ann Sparanese led an e-campaign to save it.
- * Clear Channel Communications' protesting the singing group Dixie Chicks because one of the singers dared to criticize the war in Iraq.

In a Bad Subjects essay, Lockard characterizes Iraqi war culture as the "beginning of progressive regimentalization. It supplies rationales of repression, demands for the subordination of counter-argument, delimitations between permissible speech, and silence that knows its place." (2) Jackson describes the heartbreaking self-censorship of archivists and librarians who buckle to silent pressure to conform to government

ideology. He discusses the case of the Smithsonian's downgrading of Subhankar Banerjee's photographs of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from a main floor rotunda to a smaller, lower room where the text is cut from most of the captions. The photos were evidently deemed unpatriotic or offensive to a government bent on drilling for oil. "In these affairs," states Jackson, "no gun is needed. The victims do it all themselves. And the bullets never miss. (3)

Protection of the commons function of public libraries and public museums requires recognition of subtle threats as well as the obvious. The full scope of the public sphere must be comprehended. While the suppression of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge exhibit and the attempts to censor the free speech rights of Robbins, Sarandon, Moore, and the Dixie Chicks have been widely discussed and analyzed, there is also ongoing suppression and erosion of the public sphere in libraries. A few examples from Florida illustrate the level of vigilance required to defend the commons function and to protect the public sphere.

The Public Sphere and Florida's Libraries

What if the Church and the State

Are the mob that howls at the door!

--William Butler Yeats, "Church and

State," 1934

Fighting to Save the State Library of Florida

Public library administrators in Florida meet annually at a conference sponsored by the State Library of Florida. The fall 2002 conference, held during the race for governor, was to have included Lance deHaven-Smith, a widely published and quoted professor of public administration at Florida State University, as a speaker on Florida trends.

However, in an August 2002 column on Florida politics deHaven-Smith noted that Florida Republicans had been using "the state government itself against the Florida electorate." They had "become aggressive in punishing their critics, insisting on total

loyalty from professional staff, drastically reducing civil service protections, and interjecting politics into the administration of Florida's public universities. ...

Read more at:

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