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Safety in Secrecy: An Exploration of Motherhood and the Trans Child in Alex Gino's

George and Moms for Liberty

By

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THESIS

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Abstract

In 2015, Alex Gino published their first novel *George* and received numerous awards such as the Lambda Literary Award and the American Library Association's Stonewall Award. Despite its success, Gino's novel has been subject to controversy as it has been challenged and banned for being "age inappropriate." When *George* was on the top challenged list from the years 2016-2020, some of the cited reasons for challenging the work were because: it does not reflect "the values of our community," because schools and libraries should not "put books in a child's hand that require discussion," and the novel conflicted with "traditional family structure" (American Library Association). A common thread that lies between each instance of book banning, or challenging, is the involvement of mothers and their need to protect the community of vulnerable children. While none of these phrases specifically mention the roles that parents play in the challenging of this book, it is indexed by key words such as community, child, and family. With right-wing reactions to mask requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic, racial issues following the Black Lives Matter protests, the hyper fixation on assumptions regarding Critical Race Theory, and an increase in anti-queer legislation on both a state and federal level it is not a coincidence that the censorship of books have risen alongside these moments of panic. I want to shift the conversation away from the government to a place that has been seen as much more private – the home.

To look within the home, I will examine Gino's novel that predates the existence of *Moms for Liberty* as a place of potential overlap between liberal and the conservative mother. A place of commonality is the reliance on a single answer on how to parent a transgender child. I will explore what role secrets play in the anxiety surrounding a trans child, and how secrecy is a privilege that a child does not have within the home. By looking at both the secrets Gino's

protagonist keeps as well as the condemnation of secrecy on the Moms for Liberty *X* page, I aim to highlight how privacy is something that can be reimagined as protection for a child and a sign of agency within the confines of the home.

In 2015, Alex Gino published their first novel *George* and received numerous awards such as the Lambda Literary Award and the American Library Association’s Stonewall Award. Their book follows the story of a fourth-grade girl who navigates being bullied at school while seeking comfort in her friends and loved ones to help accept herself for who she is. Her name is Melissa, but no one knows it yet. To everyone else, her name is George. Melissa’s journey of self-advocacy, bravery, and friendship has been simultaneously praised and condemned. Every year, since 2000, the American Library Association lists the top ten most challenged books in the United States with a series of keywords as to why they are banned or challenged.¹ *George*, not only made the top ten list five years in a row, but also was #5 on the top 100 most frequently challenged books list from 2010-2019. Notably, the last year it makes the top ten list is 2020. In 2021, *George* falls off the top ten list, but now queer themes present themselves in at least 70% of the top ten most challenged books listed from 2021-2023. In parallel, we have a spike of the number of books challenged jumping from 156 books in 2020 to 4,240 books in 2023.² 2021 is also the year that the conservative organization “Moms for Liberty” was officially founded.

The reception history of *George* is a microcosm of gender sensibilities that are reflected in children’s literature that has the potential to receive simultaneous praise and backlash. Some of the cited reasons for challenging the work were because: it does not reflect “the values of our community,” because schools and libraries should not “put books in a child’s hand that require discussion,” and the novel conflicted with “traditional family structure.”³ While none of these

¹ From the ALA frequently asked questions page: “A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. A banning is the removal of those materials. Challenges do not simply involve a person expressing a point of view; rather, they are an attempt to remove material from the curriculum or library, thereby restricting the access of others.”

² This number is a 65% surge over 2022 numbers. Furthermore, the number of titles targeted for censorship at public libraries increased by 92% over the previous year, accounting for about 46% of all book challenges in 2023.

³ American Library Association Top 10 Most Challenged Books, found in the description of *George* over various years from 2016-2020

phrases specifically mention the roles that parents play in the challenging of this book, it is indexed by key words such as community, child, and family. With right-wing reactions to mask requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic, racial issues following the Black Lives Matter protests, the hyper fixation on assumptions regarding Critical Race Theory, and an increase in anti-queer legislation on both a state and federal level it is not a coincidence that the censorship of books have risen alongside these moments of panic. While scholars such as Emily J.M. Knox have written extensively on the role that top-down censorship has played in the dramatic increase of books banned in the U.S., I want to shift the conversation away from the government to a place that has been seen as much more private – the home.

To look within the home, I will begin by tracing the political nature of the mother in relation to the child. From as early as the American Revolution and the formation of “republican motherhood,” white women have habitually fought for their rights behind the mask of a responsibility to educate children on “virtue.”⁴ Maternalism⁵ continues during the first wave of feminism in the United States with groups such as the Woman’s Peace Party, or the “mother half of humanity,” argued that they had a responsibility to preserve life by preventing the war because they are mothers. Again, we see this in the publication of “Votes for Children” by Carrie Williams Clifford who proclaimed that women needed the right to vote to speak on behalf of their children. Interestingly, this deployment of motherhood to serve primarily white conservative women was then moved into spaces of activism for mothers of color. Recent examples such as “The Wall of Moms” activism in the Black Lives Matters protests to “Free

⁴ Kerber, Linda. “The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment-An American Perspective.” *American Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1976, pp. 187–205.

⁵ Maternalism, at it is earliest understood, is defined by Lynn Y. Weiner, in “Maternalism As A Paradigm: Defining the Issues” (1993) as “a kind of empowered motherhood or public expression of those domestic values associated in some way with motherhood.”

Mom Hugs” providing resources for LGBTQ+ children and families all center motherhood as their platform of achieving a means of protecting children across the United States.

Simultaneously to these groups of mothers who rely upon the idea of protecting children, we also see the emergence of Moms for Liberty (2021) who claim that the role of a mother is the antithesis of what the aforementioned mother groups advocate for. Despite their fundamental differences in political, religious, or even family values, these mothers who are seemingly at opposite ends of what they believe a good mother to be all agree on one thing: the role of a mother is to protect their child.

My goal in this research project is to unpack what protection looks like for the children who never asked to be protected, and for whom protection can leave more vulnerable to harm. In this case, I will be unpacking how the transgender child is formed through the eyes of a mother, and therefore controlled, in both a fictional setting of Gino’s young adult novel, and in the real group Moms for Liberty. I will examine Gino’s novel, that predates the existence of Moms for Liberty, as a place of potential overlap between the liberal and the conservative mother. A place of is the reliance on a single answer on how to parent a transgender child. In a pseudo “Question & Answer” portion at the end of *George*,⁶ Gino asks themselves, “I know someone who is transgender. How can I support them?” to which Gino answers, “I could write a whole book on this. In fact, I did. You’re holding it!” Gino suggests by their exclamation that their book should be understood, to an extent, as a template for how a trans child can achieve a happy ending with the help of an understanding and “good” liberal mother. Not only is it a template for a happy ending, but a template on methods of support and therefore care of the trans child.

⁶ In 2021, Gino and Scholastic officially changed the title of the book from *George* to *Melissa* “to respect Melissa and all trans people” (Gino). Since the instances of banning occurred before the title change, I will continue to use *George* when referring to the title of the book. However, when talking about the character, I will exclusively refer to her as *Melissa*, because that is who she is.

The merit of comparing a fictional template of motherhood with a real group of mothers is that it allows space to speculate on not the individual mothers, but on how motherhood as a term is weaponized. In other words, I am not interested in arguing whether Gino's mother character would be a "good" mom if she was real, nor am I interested in the individual founders or members of Moms for Liberty. Instead, I am interested in the template, or the concept of what a mother should be or what their responsibilities are as a community of mothers. By taking this step back away from the individual, both in a fictional and real setting, there is now a new focus on the child when it comes to conversations of parental rights and what that means for the agency of a child. I will explore what role secrets play in the anxiety surrounding a trans child, and how secrecy is a privilege that a child does not have within the home. By looking at both the secrets Gino's protagonist keeps as well as the condemnation of secrecy on the Moms for Liberty X⁷ page, I aim to highlight how privacy is something that can be reimagined as protection for a child and a sign of agency within the confines of the home.

Bittersweet Performances

While the word "privacy" is never used in Gino's novel, it is a central part of the novel as Melissa relies on her keeping secrets before she is ready to tell her mother she is a girl. As soon as the second page of the novel, Melissa sneaks into her room knowing she is the only one home, unearths a denim bag from underneath a pile of stuffed animals that "guard her most prized and secret collection" (Gino 2). The combination of both "prized" and "secret" demonstrates that the contents of her bag are both something private as well as something that is a marker of success. Melissa's value in the contents of the bag is just as important as the continued success of keeping it away from the eyes of her mother, and brother Scott, to slowly build the collection. Inside of

⁷ Formerly known as Twitter.

the bag are “the silky, slippery pages of a dozen magazines” with covers titled “HOW TO HAVE PERFECT SKIN, TWELVE FRESH SUMMER HAIRCUTS, HOW TO TELL A HOTTIE YOU LIKE HIM, and WILD WINTER WARDROBES” (Gino 3). The tactility of this description this early on introduces ways in which Melissa is thinking of trans embodiment, even if those are not the words she uses. Instead, she “caresses” (Gino 3) the pages of the magazine and draws the readers awareness to the culture signifiers of gender, while simultaneously showing Melissa’s own visceral experience of desiring to look like the girls in the pages of the magazine.

Furthermore, rather than the portrayal of the stereotype of boys hiding in bathrooms reading dirty magazines, which his brother Scott assumes Melissa is doing when he notices she is spending a long time in the bathroom, Gino is changing the narrative to show that this moment of secrecy is something that is gender affirming and therefore fulfilling for Melissa. Despite the joy these magazines give her, it is just one of the secrets Melissa is determined to keep from her mother. Gino flips yet another practice of sexuality expression into one of gender expression when Melissa is recollecting information, she has learned about transness over the years stating: “George had been reading websites about transitioning since Scott had taught her how to clear the web browser history on Mom’s computer” (Gino 105). Deleting browser history is often associated with pornography and combined with the “dirty magazine” comment from earlier, is why this passage has been the target of various parent complaints.

One parent website “Saline Parents” breaks down this scene and why mothers should have issue with it, and other content that is deemed inapporpraite. This group of paretns based in Michigan within the Saline school district and are one of the most prominent groups to speak out queer literature in schools. On the homepage of their website they write: “As parents in the Saline School district, we are concerned about the appropriateness of certain topics introduced to

young children and want to empower parents to be able to direct their own child's education. These include the failed Planned Parenthood curriculum attempt in 2012 and 2017, the *I Am Jazz* elementary reading in 2018, the *George* reading in 2019, the issue of Locker Room privacy in 2019, and now the 3 yr curriculum plan.”⁸ By grouping both real legislation that has been passed or fought against with two LGBTQ+ themed young adult novels sandwiched in-between, there is a clear understanding on the role and influence that literature plays in how topics from books can translate to everyday life. When they speak more on *George*, they make claims intermixed with rhetorical questions that lead to directed speculation on the appropriateness of Gino's book:

The book casually talks about the subject of pornography (dirty magazines) and implies it's ok to masturbate. (Should the schools be promoting the idea that it's normal and acceptable for middle schoolers to look at pornography? Portraying this behavior as normal to 6th graders is misleading and potentially harmful.) The book teaches children how to hide their online searches from their parents. (Is hiding and dishonesty when searching online something we want to promote and encourage to our children?)

While dirty magazines arguably connect to pornography and masturbation, Gino's work does not promote it as something that should be done. Instead, it is an acknowledgement that it is something that the older brother is familiar with, being in high school, and communicating with his younger brother based on assumptions he has made in response to Scott's own experiences. Furthermore, by this omission of pornographic content – a common reason for books to be declared obscene or offensive – they invite the question of what is inappropriate at all if it is not explicitly a case of sexuality. By complicating the scene involving “dirty magazines,” Gino creates space to critically think about where to draw the line of when sexuality is appropriate content, and when it is not. If the mild indication of magazines or masturbation was the only

⁸ <https://salineparents.org>

issue, it would be easily refuted. This has now become a conversation in which parents must now distinguish the difference between gender and sexuality, which is something that is not treated as separate by groups such as Saline Parents. Instead, they focus on any moments of overt moments that could be *interpreted* as inappropriate. Their real fear is not these small moments. The real concern is dishonesty. They are concerned that the main plot line of this book is that Melissa keeping a secret.

Despite Gino's novel being a target of conservative attacks, the mother has problematic characteristics that both humanize her while also leave space for growth throughout the course of the novel. Despite her job never being specified (making her more of a template and generic figure than a specified character), she is described by Melissa as a way to clue readers into the type of person she is outside the home: "[Melissa's mom] wore a polo shirt and blue jeans – the same clothes she wore under her white lab coat at work every day. She preferred jeans to skirts and didn't wear makeup" (Gino 43). The lab coat suggests a job in the medical field, but with flexible enough hours that she cooks dinner every night and can take her children to school in the mornings if they miss the bus. She also does not wear makeup, which places her outside of stereotypical gender norms. This is worth noting as the mom is comfortable in defying specific gender conformability, but she does have a line she is unwilling to cross – the acceptance of her trans child.

Gino establishes early in the novel that Melissa, despite the conflicts that occur over the course of the narrative, loves her mother and sees her as a good mom. Melissa demonstrates this in her understanding there is strength in her mother divorcing her father, going as far as to say that he makes a better "part-time" father than a full-time one (Gino 26). There is even a routine of care, a tradition, of the mother giving Melissa a glass of chocolate milk every night before bed

as a response to the disruption of the home when the father moved out (Gino 48). Gino shows that while there is a tie to labor in the household, taking the time to make sure Melissa is taken care of with a sweet treat, there is also joy that is brought in this exchange. Furthermore, it is notable that it is milk that is given to Melissa rather than any other drink. A return to a mother giving milk to a child is a return to nurturing. The artificial layer of it being chocolate powder stirred into the milk highlights that while it is an act of labor, there is a disruption to it that makes it more than just life-giving - it is a childlike joy that values sweetness over nutrition and biological well-being.

The scene with the chocolate milk, however, is further complicated by Melissa's mom intertwining gender normativity and care. Melissa is given an assignment at school to audition to be in the play adaptation of *Charlotte's Web*. Her apprehension stems from her desire to play Charlotte, rather than Wilbur, Templeton, or any other "male" character her teacher has suggested. After dinner, Melissa stays behind at the dinner table, working up the courage to tell her mom what is bothering her, which is the ultimate desire to tell her mom that she is a girl. Before Melissa can work up the courage, the mom intervenes with what she assumes are reassuring words: "Whatever happens in your life, you can share it, and I will love you. You will always be my little boy, and that will never change. Even when you grow up to be an old man, I will still love you as my son" (Gino 47). Words such as boy, man, and son act as weapons against Melissa's self-identity. Pairing them with unconditional love, Melissa can only understand that this love is contingent on her being a boy rather than being her child. While at the surface, the mothers' words are reassuring that "whatever happens" she will be there, she adds the caveat that she can only share if she is a boy. Melissa, at a loss for words, can only focus on the chocolate milk in front of her: "The sweetness of the chocolate milk had coated George's tongue, covering

the words sitting on the tip” (Gino 49). Here, we see the sweetness now being an act of smothering rather than a reassurance that this mother is somehow different from the rest. Her transphobia, while perhaps unintentional, has stifled Melissa’s identity in a moment where she was prepared to be vulnerable. Remembering that Gino’s novel is written with the intention of acting as a template for what a good mother should be, this scene works to show that care can turn into harm. The chocolate milk that was once nostalgic of the bond that Melissa and her mother shared quickly turned into one of emotional distress. Rather than having chocolate milk as a means of communion and understanding, it became one of silence. Melissa knows she is not ready to share her identity at school, but now she knows she cannot be herself at home either. Despite believing her mother was somehow different because of the sweetness she shows, Melissa is quickly reminded that she cannot be who she knows she is, even at home.

Presuming that a mother has an innate intimate access towards the child, Gino’s novel explores privacy and consent in the moment that the mother finds out about Melissa’s magazines. This access does not need consent of the child, which is why the reciprocation of harm persists. The day after they have the conversation over chocolate milk, Melissa goes to school and auditions for the role of Charlotte to her teacher’s disdain. Melissa returns home, hoping to find comfort in her denim bag, but instead comes home to see her mom holding the same bag she fought to keep secret. Melissa’s mom explains that she was “feeling under the weather” so she went back home “to do some cleaning” (Gino 93). Not only is this reminiscent of a fib a child would tell their parent to get out of going to school, but it is also unclear whether the mother felt sick at all. Given that the chocolate milk conversation was the night before, it is likely that the mother sensed that something was bothering her child and wanted to return home to see if she could infer what it could be. She may have not even needed to use this excuse if it weren’t for the

fact that Melissa and her brother had overslept and missed the bus that morning, making it so the mom interrupted her own morning routine to take them both to school. Regardless, the mother does not have to answer to Melissa for snooping nor for her secrecy in doing so; all she does is hold up the denim bag with an accusatory look towards Melissa.

Furthermore, the mother must also continue to work to uncover what it means for her child to hide magazines of teenage girls as it is a threat to the family structure she is expected to maintain and uphold. She recollects when Melissa would try on her clothes and says, “That kind of thing was cute when you were three” (Gino 94) suggesting that there are age limits to when one can explore gender expression. She then tells Melissa she is no longer allowed in her room and that Melissa is to stop collecting these magazines. The invasion of privacy is a form of forced intimacy that was not consented to by Melissa. This is an unfair boundary to set as now the mother has explicitly stated that while she can enter Melissa’s room, Melissa cannot enter hers. The unequal access to privacy is what gives Melissa’s mom control and therefore a reassured sense of stability that she is upholding her role as a mother. In this characterization of the mother, Gino is inviting criticism for both the mother’s invasion of privacy and the way she frames the dialogue around Melissa’s gender expression. Here, Gino also puts time at the center of the discussion, saying that there is a time in which exploring gender expression is acceptable, and that that time has an expiration. This temporality is brought up again at the end of the novel, highlighting that Gino understands and condemns the harm that temporality plays in the regulation of gender expression.

While the framing of the mothers’ concern for Melissa’s gender expression is a fear of bullying, it is actually a fear of it reflecting poorly on the mother herself and her ability to regulate Melissa’s growth. When Melissa is sent home early after a fight she got into at school,

Melissa's mom assumes it is because Melissa expressed gender nonconforming actions at school, leading her to be a target for bullying. Melissa's mother cannot help but see Melissa's self-identification as trans as a disturbance in the home, now that it is in the public eye. She states, "I mean, being gay is one thing. Kids are coming out much earlier than when I was young. It won't be easy, but we'll deal with it. But being that kind of gay?" (Gino 128). Immediately, she takes the stance that being gay is not an issue, suggesting that queerness is something that can be dealt with. Even then, however, the language implies there is a problem that must be solved. By staging this dialogue, Gino is creating a pedagogical moment for mothers who may experience this moment or one like it. Rather than skipping to an immediate acceptance of Melissa embracing her identity as a girl, Gino shows that there is a learning curve in parenting a trans child. Parenting books market themselves as the solution of parenting any child that one can have, yet there is a reason why one does not stand out above the rest. It is because every child is different and cannot be reduced into one example or one identify. Gino is showcasing something similar – this is just one way in which this conversation can go. By showing it from the child's view, rather than the parents, Gino is giving space to show how a misstep on the parents' part is neither without consequences nor unforgiveable. Instead, it is a part of a story and has room for error and acceptance moving forward if one chooses to do so.

The next query, or even exclamation, shows there are limits to this course of parenting. The mother is shown as being able to envision her child as gay as that is something that is familiar to her from when she was "young." However, the unfamiliarity with transness is something that not only does she self-censor, but then goes on to completely reject when Melissa first comes out to her mom:

Melissa: "Because I'm a girl!"

Mom's face relaxed and she gave a short laugh.

Mom: “Oh, Gee, I was there when you were born. I changed your diapers, and I promise you, you are one hundred percent boy. Besides, you’re only ten years old. You don’t know how you’ll feel in a few years.”

She couldn’t wait years. She could hardly wait another minute” (Gino 129)

The temporality of “a few years” versus “another minute” shows the oppressive role that time plays in the overseeing of a person’s transition. By showcasing Melissa’s despair, Gino is making a case despite Melissa being in the 3rd grade, it should not exclude her from exploring her identity when she sees fit. Here, Melissa feels trapped and confined by her mother’s relieved response demonstrating the lack of correlation between the mother and the child’s wants or needs. The mom feeling relief and expressing this through laughter only serves to highlight the negative feelings that Melissa rightfully feels. Rather than ushing the matter further, Melissa accepts this answer outwardly, but continues to feel isolated and misunderstood within her home. The invocation of time by Gino highlights the detrimental role that time plays as a method of control and suppression by parental figures who hold the control and power to either support or repress their child’s identity.

Melissa’s first chosen expression of her gender in the public eye is when she goes on stage in a school play to be Charlotte, despite her being told numerous times she could only play boy characters. Melissa’s friend, Kelly, gives up her role as Charlotte to support Melissa taking a step to express who she is, even if it means getting in trouble. As a result, Melissa takes the stage as Charlotte and by the end of the play she states: “Charlotte was dead, but George was alive in a way she had never imagined” (Gino 157). Through performance art, Melissa showed herself as she was meant to be, and was perceived by the audience as a girl. This received a range of reactions from smiles to disgust, but the most important reaction was her mother’s whose “face turned to stone” in response to Melissa’s adamant reminder to her mother’s stating “I already told you. I’m a girl” (Gino 160). When Melissa’s mother has had time to compose herself, she

verbally affirms Melissa's transness under the restraints of temporality and ultimate control on her part of when and how transness takes place. Melissa's mother tells her that they should talk to someone who knows about these things" (Gino 171) the suggestion being a therapist. While therapy is something that is helpful for both Melissa and the mother, it is still something that is regulated by the parent as it is a part of the healthcare institution. Therefore, Melissa's mother will oversee scheduling the appointments, taking her to them, and have the ultimate say in the therapist they both attend. Regardless, Melissa takes this as a step in the right direction and excitedly asks "And then maybe I could grow my hair out and be a girl?" to which Melissa's mom responds, "One step at a time" (Gino 171). Here, again there is a moment that is on the surface a step in a positive direction as Melissa's mom has left room for hope for Melissa to one day be the girl, and woman, she knows she is. However, it must be managed by her mother to subdue her anxiety around Melissa transitioning.

Groups such as Parents of Gender Diverse Children⁹ explicitly list *George* as one of many books that has the means to help parents. As a prelude to the list of books that *George* is on, the group writes: "Seeking support, advice and information for yourself can give you confidence, increase your understanding and equip you to be a strong ally through this process." Echoing Gino's call for this book to be a template to supporting trans people in your life, this website is one of many blogs, Facebook posts, or petitions that support the importance of Gino's work as a means of understanding what it means to be the parent of a trans child. Despite the control of the temporality of transition, or management of the transition process, Melissa being able to play Charlotte in the play is a moment of triumph that is within the YA genre expectations of achieving both independence and finding a way to define herself in a public setting. This

⁹ https://www.pgdc.org.au/books_for_parents

victory, however, is complicated with the call for therapy and for Melissa to move “one step at a time.” While Melissa ignores this and has a short excursion to a zoo outside of town with Kelly, wearing Kelly’s clothes and presenting herself as a girl that day, she chooses to hide this moment from her mother intentionally because of these words. Arguably, Gino is both advocating for therapy to move forward, as it is the mother’s last actionable choice in the novel, but also suggesting that the mother can never be entirely in control of what her child chooses to do. In other words, this template still cannot imagine what a happy ending can be besides the mother choosing to educate herself and agree to therapy. This is not a criticism of Gino, but instead a criticism of a model of parenting that hinges upon the parent needing to control the time and place of their child’s identity exploration, and not knowing what alternative modes of releasing some, or any, control could look like.

Protection as Control

The anxiety of children being exposed to something that makes parents uncomfortable is nothing new. One of the earliest groups of people to read and filter out literature for children, or juveniles, was a subgroup of the Unitarian Association and at the suggestion of the secretary of the association “The Ladies’ Commission on Sunday-school Books.”¹⁰ While the status of the women is never explicitly stated, they must be deemed to be “competent persons” who could assess the moral and religious character of the books. This would mean they are wives, and most likely mothers, who have an explicit interest in what the children in the community are reading. In their first round of suggestions in they selected from twelve hundred books only 200 titles that were deemed suitable for children in the home, at libraries, and in schools. Along with filtering out titles that seemed vulgar, they also undertook the procuring of publication of “suitable”

¹⁰ George Willis Cooke’s Unitarianism in America “The Ladies’ Commission on Sunday-school Books.” This group was formed in 1865 to create a shared reading list for folks in the community.

books for children. Notably, this group was given a name that centered their gender to add to the credibility of morality and judgement of women. If not for groups such as these, scholars of children literature might have said the censorship of children’s literature has been a 20th century phenomenon. It is worth noting that this instinct stems from the fact that there has yet to have been a children’s book declared illegal by a court of law to this day.¹¹ The censorship of children’s literature is therefore solely due to pressure from city community members to remove books from circulation at the local level. Those at the forefront of the expansion are mothers.

One of the most infamous tweets made from the Moms for Liberty X page directly responds to this anxiety of unrecognizable gender identity by referring to transness as gender dysphoria. On July 25, 2022 the account tweeted: “Gender dysphoria is a mental health disorder that is being normalized by predators across the USA. California kids are at extreme risk from predatory adults. Now they want to ‘liberate’ children all over the country. Does a double mastectomy on a preteen sound like progress?” (July 25, 2022). Here, Moms for Liberty equate child predators with adults who support a child’s ability to transition. We also see the weaponization of the prioritization of mental health as being something negative and “normalized.” While it is true that gender dysphoria had been classified as a disorder in medical texts, such as the previous DSM manual under the name “gender identity disorder,” Moms for Liberty and other right-wing groups equate this with instability, sickness, and something that can be reversed. However, that is not the role of this diagnosis in cases where the DSM makes it so selected insurance companies can cover some of the expenses of sex reassignment therapy or even surgery. Putting “liberate” in quotation marks also serves as a sarcastic remark that anyone who listens to their child about feelings of psychological distress of performing a gender identity

¹¹ Darling, Richard L. “Censorship—An Old Story.” *Elementary English*, vol. 51, no. 5, 1974, pp. 694

that does not align with their gender assigned at birth is therefore a predator. Furthermore, as a group that self-proclaims themselves to be fighters for freedom, the ironic condemnation of the word liberate highlights the similarities in which the rhetoric of protection of children is shared across political stances. While liberation on a progressive end does endorse gender affirming surgeries, liberation for groups such as Moms for Liberty is to save children from a discourse in which gender affirming surgery is even possible.

The repetition of the word predator also serves as a way for Moms for Liberty to seek support from others as a child predator is not someone that anyone on any side of a political spectrum wishes to protect. Their violent and exploitative language to discuss something that stems from internal anxieties of lack of control over their own child, or what their child will be exposed to, is progress that they aim to identify as wholly negative. By framing transness as something that could not possibly come from a child but only from a predator or someone with intentions of indoctrination, there is an implicit introduction of what consent looks like for a group like Moms for Liberty. This tweet was then reported for violating the Twitter rules, specifically for the violation of their hateful content policy. As a result, the account was suspended from making tweets and could not resume activity unless the tweet was deleted. However, this negative attention only spurred an increase of right-wing support from both politicians and mothers alike.

It is equally important to show just one of the many supportive comments from folks after this tweet received backlash and negative media attention. James Lindsay, one of the authors of *The Queering of the American Child: How a New School Religious Cult Poisons the Minds and Bodies of Normal Kids* writes about the “cult of Queer Theory” and how it “preys on children” following the rhetorical use of predators shown by Moms for Liberty. In response to

the suspension of the Moms for Liberty account, Lindsay retweeted and created his own



The screenshot shows a tweet from James Lindsay, full varsity (@ConceptualJames) with a verified badge. The tweet text reads: "Twitter has locked out *MOMS* fighting for their kids' safety and educations against emotional manipulation because it wants to protect cult (and perhaps other types of) grooming and the ideological groomers deliberately engaging in it. #FreeMoms4Liberty @Moms4Liberty". Below the tweet is a suspension notice for the account Moms for Liberty (@Moms4Liberty). The notice includes the original tweet text: "Gender dysphoria is a mental health disorder that is being normalized by predators across the USA. California kids are at extreme risk from predatory adults. Now they want to 'liberate' children all over the country. Does a double mastectomy on a preteen sound like progress? https://t.co/eGhMShbOLN". The suspension notice explains that the account violated Twitter Rules for hateful conduct and lists the consequences: limited account features for 12 hours. It also provides instructions on how to appeal the suspension, such as verifying the email address and deleting the violating content.

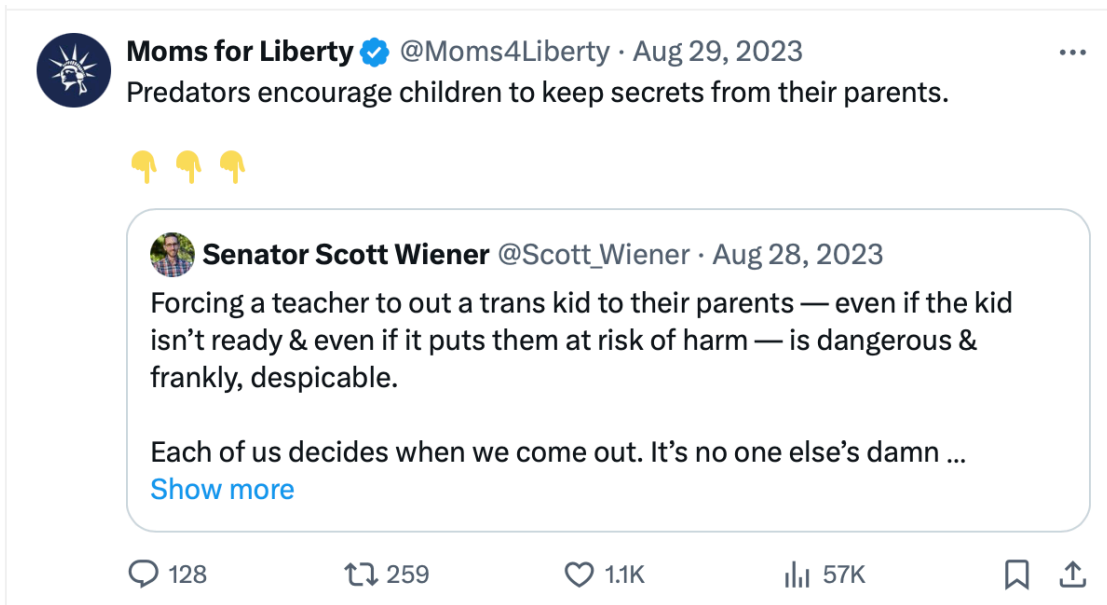
response highlighting the importance of the funding of “mom” in Moms for Liberty:

By drawing attention to the word “mom” by placing it in all caps and between asterisks, Lindsay is weaponizing the perpetuated belief that moms always know what is right for their child and exist to protect and raise the child. He then uses the words “manipulation,” “cult,” and “grooming” as buzz words to connote maltreatment of children with gender affirming surgery. This move mirrors that of Moms for Liberty, despite not being a mom himself. The hashtag “FreeMoms4Liberty” suggests that their twitter suspension is equivalent to being locked up or confined, despite their active choice to tweet against community guidelines of the social media platform, and the transparency of the solution in order to restore the account. Their support relies upon the fictitious construction of the word “Mom” that becomes a placeholder term for a person

who wishes to expand their power and control over a child, and at times hinges upon economic support to maintain growth and presence on social media. Moms for Liberty, as of 2022, made \$2.1 million in total revenue, with a one-time donation of \$1 million and another donation of \$500,000 (Swenson). In other words, more than two-thirds of their funding came from two individuals (or organizations) with significant sums of money. Despite the “About Us” of their website¹² stating that they are composed of “Moms, Dads, Grands, Aunts, Uncles, Friends” there is no indication that political figures are a part of this group, or men who write anti queer books and spread propaganda on various media platforms. This is why “Mom” is a powerful tool for even those who are not moms to extend protection over and demand justice for. By claiming to defend motherhood, any cis man or person who aims to silence queerness can incorporate buzz words into tweets to campaign for immediate support of the “wronged” group of Moms for Liberty.

Following the use of the word predator, it is almost always in response to the support of teaching children that sometimes it is best to keep secrets and maintain their right to privacy. In another tweet about a year later, California senator Scott Wiener tweets, “Forcing a teacher to out a trans kid to their parents – even if the kid isn’t ready & even if it puts them at risk of harm – is dangerous & frankly despicable.” The tweet continues on, but the Moms for Liberty retweet is only interested in the initial message of the tweet:

¹² <https://www.momsforliberty.org/>



This oversimplified statement reduces the word predator to someone who encourages secret keeping. This dramatic comparison, or identifier, demonstrates just how much anxiety stems from the notion that a child can keep a secret from a parent. Furthermore, not only can the child not keep the secret, but if the child entrusts another adult to keep this secret, the adult is now culpable and labeled a predator or a groomer by the far right. The invocation of sexual abuse feeds into the subtext that these mothers are not only concerned that the child is going beyond the mothers' control, but the possibility that their child could be controlled by someone else who is abusing their power – in this case it would be public education teachers. Regardless of who is in control, there is a notable refusal to recognize that the child, or the child's peers, could be in control in any understanding of the word. Moms for Liberty automatically assumes that their children are not capable of forming ideas outside of the ones introduced in their home, and specifically that they could not be capable of asking for this information themselves. This move shows that Moms for Liberty is above all concerned that another adult would know more about their child than them, therefore the mother will not be in absolute control of what a child thinks,

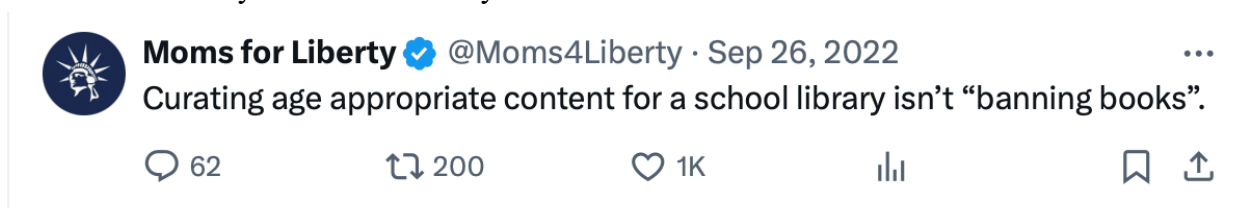
feels, or has access to without once stopping to think what it would mean to see the child as having agency in what they want to have access to and learn about themselves or others unlike who they see in their immediate family.

Curating Identity

On November 16, 2021, Kara Floyd, Chair of Moms for Liberty-Hernando (Florida) Chapter, attended a regularly scheduled school board meeting, to share her concerns over what she deemed to be inappropriate content contained in books on the shelves of the school district libraries school libraries. Her, and other mothers, deemed 17 books in elementary and middle schools in Hernando County immediately bannable out of a current list of 128. After the school board meeting one school, Fox Chapel Middle School, was informed of two books by Alex Gino and they were immediately pulled off the shelf indefinitely. Next month, the Wake County, North Carolina chapter went so far as to file a criminal complaint against the Wake County Public School System over three books, one of them being *George*, under the pretense that it was breaking federal and state laws around the distribution of obscene material to minors.

Just as recently as February 21, 2023 Oklahoma Attorney General John O'Connor announced his department would review 51 titles found in public school libraries to determine if they violate state obscenity laws in response to the Tulsa County Moms for Liberty chapter's complaints of obscenity, once again Gino being an author of this curated list of "inappropriate" literature.

This curating of content, as noted earlier, has been done since the 19th century by women who feel that they have the right and responsibility to dictate what is and what is not appropriate for their community. Moms for Liberty follow a similar vein of belief:



Rather than acknowledging the censorship for what it is, they mask it as curation, protection, and a case of maturity levels. In truth, maturity is not an issue, but the potential of children having access to content that shows them that it is in their right to keep a secret if it means it will protect them and help them embrace their identity, or even explore what it could be as it changes over time. Rather than confront the issue and acknowledge it for what it is, right wing women, or mothers, reject the notion that they are banning books or restricting their children from content in an unconstitutional way. Rather, they say in this curation they are returning to the ideologies of founding fathers, such as John Adams quoted on their website, stating that “Children should be educated and instructed on the principles of freedom.” For this goal to be met, there is an inherent desire to return to times where freedom was limited to white property owners and before any amendments to the constitution were made. Therefore, they set up that principles of freedom are the antithesis of what is being taught in public schools such as Critical Race Theory, texts with queer characters, and a desire for intersectional inclusivity for children.

The founders of the organization forefront their role as a mom, quickly followed by their employment as school board members, demonstrating that mother is a placeholder for one who seeks to have power over a child’s education. While their performativity under the pretenses of protection seems laughable at first, over the span of less than three years they have self-reported more than 130,000 members across 48 states. Their county specific chapters are responsible for the majority of campaigns that are largely responsible for the removal of books from public school curriculum and public libraries in various counties. By expanding their membership, they have encouraged moms across the country to also become a part of their local school boards to influence education policies and they begin this change by challenging and removing books from

the classroom. This expands further in their public support of state legislation such as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' 2022 "Don't Say Gay" bill, or as it is formally called, the "Parental Rights in Education" law. The deployment of "parental rights" continues to encourage the narrative that parents have more rights than other adults. These "extra" rights come in the form of having more control not only over one's own children, but the children in the surrounding area, and eventually nationwide. To do so, mothers and politicians have acknowledged the power of books and the necessity to remove them to remove the visibility of marginalized communities that do not fit with the vision of returning to when America was "great."

The word "indoctrination" allows Moms for Liberty to turn conversations about race, sexuality, and gender in schools into targets of criticism and invoke fear of government control. In the Moms for Liberty call to keep the government out of the education system, there is an irony in partnering with politicians to provide the large portion of their funding to keep their organization running. They continue their demand for an increase of parental rights on the platform in response to a tweet that targets "extremist politicisms who seek to threaten our students' birthright to an education that is complete, truthful, and just." Before moving to Moms for Liberty's response, its noteworthy that even in the defense of progressive education movements, this twitter user is employing a language of violence using the word "threaten" and ambiguous language of "complete, truthful, and just." Moms for Liberty takes this opportunity to turn their language against them in a retweet:



Moms for Liberty  @Moms4Liberty · Aug 7, 2023



We, as parents, will not tolerate activist “educators” who seek to indoctrinate our children and deny our fundamental parental rights to direct their education, medical care, morality and religion.



Becky Pringle @BeckyPringle · Aug 7, 2023

We, as educators, will not tolerate extremist politicians who seek to threaten our students’ birthright to an education that is complete, truthful and just.

 224

 259

 1K

 41K



Contrasting educators and politicians, the Moms for Liberty account uses their presence as “Mom” to call the students “our children” as if they are a collective mother for all children in the United States. Furthermore, by drawing attention to morality and religion in conversation with education, there is an underlying call for a privatization of education as a means of bringing morality back into schools. By doing so, parents would more easily be able to restrict and control what children have access to based off their own personal fears and anxieties of what they do not understand or want their children to be exposed to. This, in tandem, would make it harder for children to protect themselves at the only other place they have the freedom to go to and explore parts of their identity that they may not feel safe exploring within the walls of their home.

Regardless of if one sees George’s mother as good or bad, it is clear numerous times over the course of the novel that to succeed at parenting at any level is the sensibility of invading a child's privacy if it keeps them safe. Safety, in the novel, is only found in negotiating control but never fully relinquishing it. Similarly, Moms for Liberty’s campaign relies on the oversight of the mother for all content the child has access to. The threat for both projected mother figures is the idea that the child can keep a secret and therefore control when that knowledge is shared and to

what extent it is acted upon. The problem is the parents' definition of safety does not need to align with what a child needs or wants. In this way, these extreme points of motherhood rely on dehumanizing the child and treating them as property to negotiate moments of intrusion, punishment, and unilateral control over the child's daily life and identity formation. This is why the public education system is a point of contention as it is the one time a child is mandated to be away from the home and given the chance to explore ideologies and information that they are not privy to in the home. The dramatic escalation of book challenges in the U.S. in just the last year are a testament to the power that books have and the threat that they post to parents who demand to filter and mediate anything that does not align with their specific ideologies.

This is why Gino's novel, and the constructed persona of the mom in *Moms for Liberty*, cannot imagine a child to have secrets for any other reason than to disobey or with malintent. However, we see clearly in Gino's book that Melissa keeps her secret out of fear, and then continues to keep secrets as a means of taking agency over her own identity regardless of her mother's subdued discomfort over Melissa's desire to transition. This critique of secrecy, temporality, and negotiations of control is one potential reading of an otherwise successful text that celebrates trans children and their role in self-advocacy, and what a happy ending could look like. Indeed, while the mother is imperfect in the story, no mother is perfect in real life either. By embracing mistakes and trying to learn, ultimately Gino shows the possibilities of improvement even if they cannot encapsulate them all in one book (nor would anyone expect them to try).

In a more aggressive form, equating secrecy with pedophilia, *Moms for Liberty* rely on constructed the child as a malleable and vulnerable figure that is taught to keep secrets to destroy the family from within and create internal trauma. However, their evidence is, at best, pseudo-scientific and at worst harmful bigotry that supports and creates anti-queer legislation being

passed across the U.S. Both cases demonstrate the need to reimagine what role secrecy plays in a larger conversation of privacy within the home, rather than looking at it solely from a top-down governmental approach as to why queer literature is being challenged. The zone of overlap between these two fictional figures of a mother is the belief that they are protecting their child by controlling when and how they learn about experiences that do not align with what is introduced within the walls of the home. As Hil Malatino explains in their book *Trans Care*: “Then there are the debates about trans-exclusionary radical feminism currently convulsing the feminist Left and leading to forms of unlikely alliance between certain sectors of radical feminism and the religious right that we haven’t seen since the height of the Sex Wars” (Malatino 67). The government alongside prominent political groups indeed play a role in passing legislation and therefore setting precedent for school boards to enforce book restrictions; however, it cannot be ignored that the correlation between the rise in book bans has shown in parallel to the increase of parent group chapters across the U.S.

In the wake of Alabama Senator Katie Britt delivering the Republican response to President Joe Biden’s State of the Union address, sitting at the dinner table with many references to the variety of ways in which “our families are hurting,” it is important to critically interpret the deployment of the structure of the family, particularly the mother, as a weapon. She, and politicians on both sides, will be drawing voters in on what is seen as the universal truth that the family is supposed to be happy - and guaranteeing that this next president will be the one to make the family happy. Like Ursula LeGuin, and others after her, I encourage the skepticism around the so called “happy family”¹³ and what it means when politicians, government officials,

¹³ LeGuin, Ursula “All Happy Families” (“The enormous cost and complexity of that "happiness," its dependence upon a whole substructure of sacrifices, repressions, suppressions, choices made or forgone, chances taken or lost, balancings of greater and lesser evils-the tears, the fears, the migraines, the injustices, the censor- ships, the quarrels,

and groups like Moms for Liberty mean when they make these promises. The truth is, there will never be a clear answer to when motherhood is weaponized or when it is beneficial as long as we continue on in the institutions of capitalism that never imagined nor wanted gender-non binarism, non-monogamy, or any other relationships that do not fit neatly into a category that can become privatized or monetized. For now, the solution is to critically examine the way protection as care can be weaponized within the home and give space for the potential that secrecy as privacy provide as agency for a child who seeks to feel safe in embracing their own identity.

the lies, the angers, the cruelties it involved-is all that to be swept away, brushed under the carpet by the brisk broom of a silly phrase, ‘a happy family?’”)

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