

What a Recent Ta-Nehisi Coates Lecture Offers the “Intellectual Freedom vs. Social Responsibility” Debate

Daniel Clarkson Fisher

ABSTRACT: Author Ta-Nehisi Coates's 2023 Arthur Miller Lecture at the PEN America World Voices Festival has been little remarked-upon since he delivered it. This oversight is particularly noteworthy in the field of library and information science, as his comments have much to offer the perennial debate between intellectual freedom absolutists and social responsibility advocates.

Keywords: Ta-Nehisi Coates, censorship, free speech, cancel culture, intellectual freedom, social responsibility, librarianship



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The cancellation of this year's PEN America World Voices Festival, which came after "months of steadily mounting criticism over the organization's response to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza," is an occasion to look back at the Arthur Miller Lecture from last year's event (Maher, 2024). Not just because there will not be a new speech this year, and not just because last year's speaker, Ta-Nehisi Coates, is one of the highest profile figures decrying the genocide on the American literary scene, but also because his lecture should have been discussed much more than it was (Goodman, 2023). However, aside from a short report in *Publisher's Weekly*, conversation about it has been almost non-existent (op de Beeck, 2023). This is gobsmacking, especially in light of the fact that Coates issued rather bold challenges to free speech orthodoxy – and at a gala PEN event, no less. But it is particularly surprising that library and information science (LIS) professionals have had nothing to say about it: with his talk, the celebrated author has provided quite a lot of fodder for the field's perennial "intellectual freedom absolutism vs. social responsibility" debate.

At its heart, Coates's lecture is a penetrating and impassioned critique of what he calls "free speech abstractionism" – or, when "the right to free speech [is] disembodied from all the other rights it necessarily needs" to meaningfully flourish. One example of this tendency would be civil libertarians' over-reliance on the adage that the solution to hate speech is more speech. To Coates's way of thinking, such a notion is "bankrupt" to the degree that it fails to take into consideration issues of "power" and the fact that not everyone is equally "protected by the force of law." He continues: "More speech *might* be the answer to hate speech. But when hate speech has a gun? When hate speech has an army?" (PEN America, 2023).

By way of illustration, he points to D. W. Griffith's explicitly racist and plainly incendiary 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*. At the time of its release, the NAACP and other Black organizations called for it to be banned, worrying (correctly, as it turned out) that it would "endanger the lives of Black people" (among other things, the film inspired a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan). Griffith reacted by publishing an overly aggrieved, grandstanding tract called "The Rise and Fall of Free Speech in America," as if there was ever any real threat to his free speech from these groups in a White supremacist society. (Then-U.S. President Woodrow Wilson even famously endorsed the film, calling it "history written with lightning.") Later, in 1920, Black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux responded directly to Griffith's film with one of his own, entitled *Within Our Gates*. By sharp contrast, it faced censorship and banning in numerous American cities, where White leaders feared that the film would inspire Black audiences to riot. Micheaux literally countered hate speech with more speech but received none of the privileges or protections afforded his White counterpart, not to mention support from any of the so-called "free speech" movement's most prominent bloviators (including one D. W. Griffith) (PEN America, 2023).

Coates goes on to underscore that free speech as a concept was "conceived at a time when freedom was not [as] expansive [as it is now]," and that we have still not corrected all the various social wrongs that continue to hold people of certain racial, gender, and sexual identities outside "the umbrella of freedom and rights that we so boast about and tell the world about." Paraphrasing W. E. B. Du Bois, he wonders, then: how on Earth can anyone possibly talk about free speech as if all things are equal when women, people of color, 2SLGBTQI+ people, and others have effectively been "dropped into the midst" of "all these divine rights and great things we say we're about" without adequate redress of historical and contemporary inequities? Indeed, "to yell 'free speech' at a group of people who [comparatively] have no other freedoms is to yell something incredibly empty and incredibly hollow" (PEN America, 2023).

As the invocation of Du Bois suggests, many of Coates's criticisms are not new per se. The fact that they keep needing to be made is also indicative of an obstinately ensconced *status quo* when it comes

to thinking about free speech and expression. So much so that the ideas critiqued and advanced in this Arthur Miller Lecture should feel very familiar to LIS professionals even slightly aware of the ongoing, intra-professional debate between intellectual freedom absolutists and social responsibility advocates. For the uninitiated, intellectual freedom absolutists usually argue that “implicit in intellectual freedom is the principle of neutrality” (LaRue, 2018). In other words, to protect intellectual freedom, library workers cannot be perceived to take sides and must ensure a platform for all kinds of speech, even hate speech. The problem with this line of thinking – and the essential argument of social responsibility advocates – is perfectly articulated by American Library Association (ALA) President Emily Drabinski: “Those steeped in and rewarded by dominant ways of seeing the world don’t have to know how intensely political the ostensibly neutral position is. If the white supremacists booking your meeting space are not after you, you don’t have to know how dangerous they are. Books about reparative therapy for gay people can be simply another point of view if yours is not the body and mind those authors seek to destroy. To imagine that neutrality could be something we could choose is an intensely privileged position, one that I [as an out, queer person] have to imagine my way into as I listen to the arguments of those absolutists whose worlds are rarely contested” (Drabinski, 2018).

The position of social responsibility advocates on neutrality very much jibes with Coates’s rationale for guarding against free speech abstractionism. “Whenever you want to look at a society, and you want to ask questions about how broad its freedoms extend, how broad its notion of citizenship extends, I think you can do no better than to look at that group of people who have actually been the most marginalized,” he argues. “We don’t talk about how great our health care system is by looking at the wealthiest people” (PEN America, 2023). This certainly seems like common sense logic. It follows, then, that any hope of LIS professionals having genuinely constructive conversations about intellectual freedom hinges on their ability to carefully consider the reality of inequality in society.

But therein lies the rub. As Anastasia Chiu, Fobazi M. Ettarh, and Jennifer A. Ferretti have explained: “Because the entire framework of neutrality assumes that equity already exists in all social systems, it functions in our inequitable culture to obfuscate the myriad experiences of library patrons and workers. It aids vocational awe in creating a professional culture that assumes and relies on its own perceived goodness and curtails meaningful criticism and dialogue, particularly about the ways that libraries perpetuate oppression” (Chiu et al., 2021, p. 68). And it is quite telling that many intellectual freedom absolutists not only fail to deal with these “myriad experiences” in good faith but also seem rather aloof from “meaningful criticism and dialogue.” For instance, James LaRue, the former executive director of both the ALA’s Office of Intellectual Freedom and the Freedom to Read Foundation, has defended Nazis in the library, arguing that to deny them a platform there would be to “deny them the common legacy of humanity: the right to be really wrong in public, and possibly to learn something.” But why is the priority here on the remote possibility of Nazis learning and not on the much more likely possibility of threats to the physical and psychological safety of those targeted by Nazis? Is it really the best idea for libraries to allow *Nazis* free rein right up until the point that these already marginalized patrons face “imminent and immediate physical danger”? And if we can and should “set limits on behaviour” in the library, why put such a heavy burden of proof on patrons who might justifiably feel unsafe because of the overt presence of Nazis and expect staff to act proactively to protect them? (Nazis, meanwhile, seem to be getting the dangerously naïve and wholly undeserved benefit of the doubt that their behaviour and speech will of course fall within acceptable limits and stop there.) (LaRue, 2018).

While thinking that a library can host Nazis without potentially alienating away patrons they seek to exterminate is a pretty fanciful notion to begin with, intellectual freedom absolutists now have an even tougher row to hoe as more and more libraries make formal commitments in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); anti-racism; and social justice. At many libraries, it seems like it will be even

harder in the future than it has been historically to mount a coherent case for trying to have it both ways. Realistically speaking, how does a library both make good on these sorts of commitments *and* appease, say, those who “want to kill anyone who threatens their conceptions of the ‘purity of the white race’”? (Seiter, 2018). Intellectual freedom absolutists will undoubtedly cry foul over the give and take that will be needed in order to strike a tenable balance between the values of social responsibility and intellectual freedom. But, coming back to Coates and free speech abstractionism, we might interrogate this singularly uncompromising stance. Regarding the custom of talking about free speech as if it is not inherently “enmeshed” in “a suite of other rights,” he observes: “I don’t think we would do that for any other right. I understand that if I [as a Black man] have the right to vote it really doesn’t mean anything if I’m not [also] protected by the force of law. I can say I have the right to the ownership of property, but I need other rights to make that a viable thing” (PEN America, 2023). Similarly, intellectual freedom absolutists should understand that freedom of speech is “fragile and unable to be fully realized in an unequal society” (Farkas, 2020), that many marginalized communities are not as free to fully exercise that right as others, and that this was the case long before the latest hate speech cause célèbre came along.

Coates adds further dimension here with his discussion of safe spaces and trigger warnings on college and university campuses. Reflecting on his time as a student, he wonders: “Did I feel as challenged as some of the students feel today? Did I feel like I needed a trigger warning?” Coates recalls sitting through one deliberately provocative classroom lecture on the ideas of eugenicist William Shockley, which was intended to goad Black students into rising to their own defence. “Why was I OK with that?” he asks. For him, the answer has to do with the particular context within which this learning took place: Howard University, the historically Black institution, which, as Coates notes, was “[originally] founded to educate the [formerly] enslaved.” He continues: “I walked outside and all I saw was other Black people around me. I was in class with other Black people. I understood I was studying questions intellectually, but I felt free in that environment. It was the freest I ever felt in my life.” Coates goes on to observe that this is not the case at most other colleges and universities, where Black students and other marginalized groups are often in the minority. “How would I have felt if I was at Harvard and [I was experiencing that Shockley lecture]?” he wonders. “I don’t think I would have taken it too well. I don’t think I would have wanted to sit in a class where the majority of students are not Black and have that lecture” (PEN America, 2023). Along the same lines, it behooves library professionals to bear in mind that the context within which we are trying to sort out issues of intellectual freedom and social responsibility is one that is nearly 90% White (Kendrick & Hulbert, 2023). Until we change this, it is imperative that we keep matters of power, privilege, and difference at the forefront of our thinking, and listen to feedback and criticism from those who are not well represented within our ranks.

Coates also urges dialing down the overblown rhetoric that has tended to come in response to such feedback and criticism. Specifically, he looks at the mainstream conversation around “cancel culture,” where things like college students trying (with mixed success) to “shut down” hateful guest speakers on campuses get equated with things like “state legislatures...passing [rights-restricting] bills with all the force and arm of the government.” As Coates correctly notes, these examples really “can’t” be compared because of their differing power dynamics; in fact, they are “not the same thing” at all (PEN America, 2023). This is mindless bothsidesism, utilized in bad faith with a view to ending productive conversations before they can begin. Looking elsewhere, intellectual freedom absolutists warn that any limitation or compromise will invariably lead to the slippery slope of censorship, with unforeseen consequences for everyone – including especially those who were supposed to benefit from the limitation or compromise. And to be fair, this is something that social responsibility advocates grapple with and believe requires a thoughtful response (Seiter, 2018). At the same time, though, there is room to push back at least a bit. As Andrew Marantz points out: “Libel, incitement of violence and child

pornography are all forms of speech. Yet we censor all of them, and no one calls it the death knell of the Enlightenment” (Marantz, 2019). So, who says we can’t “take steps to mitigate [the] real risks” presented by “unchecked speech” and also “protect unpopular speech from government interference” at the same time? (Marantz, 2019). We are doing that already.

And, ultimately, that is all we are really talking about here: better mitigating risk and questioning the impulse that leads us to think that a severely blinkered interpretation of intellectual freedom should trump other considerations every time, all the time. If intellectual freedom absolutists want to see these aspirations as affronts to the profession, that is their choice. But social responsibility advocates and marginalized communities deserve better from them than the same old canned responses and glib rejoinders that get trotted out whenever concerns are raised. Hold your ground if you must but do so in a way that demonstrates circumspection and a willingness to come to terms with other values. Otherwise, we are effectively being asked to subordinate all other LIS values to the dictates of intellectual freedom absolutists, and that just will not work. For as Ta-Nehisi Coates warns us: “It mocks your commitment to freedom when you only care about a thin sector of freedoms” (PEN America, 2023).

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