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## **Unveiling the Forbidden: A Digital Dive into North America's Censored Literature**

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## **Unveiling the Forbidden: A Digital Dive into North America's Censored Literature**

This project explores the intricate history of book censorship in North America, with a particular focus on the United States from the 19th century to the present day. By analysing censored works across different periods, we aim to understand the evolving nature of literary suppression.

### **Project's Aim**

1. Investigate the primary reasons behind book censorship across various regions of North America from the 19th to the 21st century.
2. Examine how the targets of censorship have changed over time.
3. Visually represent a map sustained by a digital archive of censored books in North America from the 19th to the 21st century.
4. A digital archive of banned books with a searchable interface for easy access

### **Methodology**

The dataset for this project was curated by retrieving HTML files from Project Gutenberg and non-scrapable text files from the Internet Archive. Metadata, including book titles and authors, was extracted using BeautifulSoup and organised into a structured DataFrame using pandas. Text preprocessing, including tokenization, cleaning, and stopword removal, was performed using libraries like SpaCy and NLTK. The cleaned texts were saved as .txt files in a designated directory (FINAL\_TXT), ensuring they were ready for subsequent analysis and visualization.

Our study will utilise a variety of digital humanities techniques to analyse a corpus of censored literature, including:

- Topic Modeling: Using tools such as Voyant and the R package for Zeta analysis will help uncover common themes among censored books.
- Visualisation techniques: An interactive map created with a tool called ArcGIS is used to illustrate the geographical distribution of banned and censored books in North America.

We will focus on three main periods:

1. 19th century: Highlighting the censorship of abolitionist literature, such as "Uncle Tom's Cabin" by Harriet Beecher Stowe.
2. 20th century: Examining the impact of the Comstock Act and censorship in Boston during the 1920s.
3. 1950-2024: Analyzing shifts in censorship targets, including works by LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC authors.

### Historical Context

Book censorship in the United States has a long and complex history. One of the earliest and most famous cases of literary suppression occurred in the first half of the 19th century with Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which alarmed and created a significant backlash resulting in its banning in the Southern states. Blakemore writes how the book was even publicly burned and burned by slaveholders along with other anti-slavery books and in Maryland, free Black minister Sam Green was sentenced to 10 years in the state penitentiary for owning a copy of the book. This period marked the beginning of a long struggle between free expression and attempts to control the circulation of ideas.

In the late 19th century, the introduction of the Comstock Act in 1873 made it illegal to possess or distribute materials deemed "obscene" or "immoral." This federal law had a profound impact on literary censorship, targeting works related to sexuality and birth control.



Moreover, the 20th century saw intensified censorship efforts, with Boston becoming a hub of literary suppression. In the 1920s, the Watch and Ward Society, a private organisation that included Boston elite residents, pressured law enforcement to ban numerous works, including Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of*

Grass. Ironically, this censorship often had the unintended effect of increasing a book's popularity, with the phrase "Banned in Boston" becoming a marketing tool for authors and publishers.



In recent years, there has been a significant increase in book-banning attempts, with the American Library Association reporting a 65% rise in 2023 compared to the previous year. These modern censorship efforts often target works by LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC authors, reflecting ongoing societal debates about representation and inclusivity in literature.

Blakemore highlights that Texas had around 713 bans on books, which is double that of any other state.

### Hypothesis & Criteria

This project aims to preserve important cultural artifacts and provide a valuable educational resource for understanding the complex history of censorship in North America and its implications for contemporary society by creating a digital archive and analysing censored literature. The selection of books was guided by three key criteria, which were slightly adjusted to fit the more recent decades:

1. Status of Censorship or Ban: Only books that were officially banned rather than merely challenged were included, focusing on those facing total prohibition instead of partial alteration.
2. Restrictions in Specific Environments: The project prioritized books banned statewide or nationwide in the United States rather than those restricted solely within schools or libraries.

3. Accessibility for Extraction: The selected books were sourced from public digital repositories, such as Project Gutenberg and other open digital libraries, ensuring accessibility for research and analysis.

The second criterion was adapted to address contemporary challenges in book censorship. Given the absence of a federal law for nationwide bans and the recent surge in state-level book bans, coupled with increased internet accessibility, the scope was narrowed. The focus shifted to books banned in specific counties or school districts, particularly those censored after 2020. This selection was based on PEN America's list of banned books in American schools for 2022-2023, with emphasis on Florida and Texas due to their high censorship rates. The final selection was determined by cross-referencing banned books in these states and considering their availability in open-source online libraries.

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