

# Open Letter to the CFLA Board On Intellectual Freedom

The Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) positions itself as the “united voice of Canada’s Libraries.” However, we are not united<sup>1</sup> behind the three position statements put out by CFLA’s Intellectual Freedom Committee since 2017<sup>2,3,4</sup>, all of which defend works or events that are critical of trans peoples’ gender expression. Using Intellectual Freedom only to defend transmisia does not reflect the views of many in the CFLA’s affiliated membership, does not represent the myriad of challenges to intellectual freedom posed to library workers in all sectors of libraries, and does a disservice to the need for open dialogue about the concept and practice of intellectual freedom in libraries. The IF Committee statements, instead, cause active harm to the trans library workers in our field, as well as our communities and patrons. To be clear, we believe that intellectual freedom is a complex issue worthy of discussion; the humanity and fundamental right to gender expression for trans people is not. CFLA needs to reckon with what happens when abstract principles are prioritized over real people’s lives.

National advocacy is about empowerment, but there is little empowerment evident from the IF Committee for trans library workers, community-responsible collection development, 2SLGBTQIA+ books and events, and marginalized patrons and the library workers who work to support them.

The CFLA Intellectual Freedom Committee’s statements do not reflect willingness to engage in an open and transparent dialogue about a contemporary and nuanced position on intellectual freedom. These statements do not reflect the position of the undersigned.

To CFLA, we say: not in our names.

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<sup>1</sup> As previously evidenced by BCLA’s commentary on the subject [https://bclaconnect.ca/wp-uploads/2014/03/Board-Meeting\\_Minutes\\_February-4-2019.pdf](https://bclaconnect.ca/wp-uploads/2014/03/Board-Meeting_Minutes_February-4-2019.pdf) (see Item 5), the Toronto Public Library Workers Union statement on the TPL room bookings (<https://twitter.com/waharnum/status/1184931741917761539>), and many other responses reflecting a significant portion of CFLA’s members.

<sup>2</sup><http://cfla-fcab.ca/en/intellectual-freedom/challenges-to-the-book-irreversible-damage-by-abigail-shrier-a-cfla-fcab-intellectual-freedom-brief/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://cfla-fcab.ca/en/news/cfla-fcab-upholds-intellectual-freedom/>

<sup>4</sup> [http://cfla-fcab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CFLA-FCAB\\_statement\\_meeting\\_rooms.pdf](http://cfla-fcab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CFLA-FCAB_statement_meeting_rooms.pdf)

## Background information:

- The most recent statement is in defense of inclusion of a work that spreads medical misinformation<sup>5</sup> and has been recognized as “violent” by the American Booksellers Association.<sup>6</sup>
- The CFLA IF Committee indicates that it does not endorse prior restraint as a method of avoiding controversy in the library; however choosing not to collect books that dehumanize marginalized communities isn't a mechanism of controlling controversy, rather it focuses on reducing harm<sup>7</sup>.
- There has been no substantive support from the Committee for other book challenges in the form of briefs or guidance. For example, *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*, has been challenged widely, including within the last two years in BC, Ontario, and Saskatchewan, but has not received attention at the Committee level, beyond inclusion in the Intellectual Freedom Challenges Survey<sup>8</sup>.
- This maximalist view of Intellectual Freedom does not recognize power imbalances in our society<sup>9</sup> and the fact that “all persons do not have equal protection under the law”<sup>10</sup>.
- There are other vitally important intellectual freedom issues that the Committee is silent on, such as how public library workers deal with requests to distribute disinformation heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing reliance on police forces (which by their nature close off the public space of the library for some), and how to respond to programming requests with hateful content.
- Precarious library workers in the public sector are more likely to be a part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.<sup>11</sup>
- The IF Committee’s statements do not align with statements released by the CFLA Board. For example, the Position Statement on Diversity and Inclusion<sup>12</sup> calls for Canada’s libraries to recognize and respect the dignity of *all* people. Acknowledging that these statements can and do conflict with one another in practice is a starting point.
- Other CFLA committees such as the Copyright Committee and Indigenous Matters Committee carry out national advocacy on behalf of the entire library community by consulting with different library sectors, legal experts, and other stakeholders to reflect a more genuinely united position.

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/political-minds/202012/new-book-irreversible-damage-is-full-misinformation>

<sup>6</sup><https://web.archive.org/web/20210808025551/https://twitter.com/ABABook/status/141539939147776409><sup>8</sup>  
<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/aba-conducts-internal-review-after-sending-out-book-against-transgender-craze-1274982>

<sup>7</sup> See

<https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/rights-aren-t-a-competition-anti-trans-hate-is-on-the-rise-in-canada-activists-and-advocates-say-1.5530155> , and

<https://redlibrarian.github.io/article/2020/06/01/force-harm-intellectual-freedom.html> for discussion of ‘harm’.

<sup>8</sup><https://www.freedomtoread.ca/articles/the-shifting-landscape-for-intellectual-freedom-recent-challenges-in-canadian-libraries/>

<sup>9</sup> As acknowledged in the [CFLA Communique on Anti-Black Racism](#), for example.

<sup>10</sup> <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2020/05/01/neutrality-when-speech-isnt-free/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://cupe.ca/surveys-highlight-need-bargain-against-precarious-employment-library-sector>

<sup>12</sup> <http://cfla-fcab.ca/en/guidelines-and-position-papers/position-statement-on-diversity-and-inclusion/>

- The current CFLA Code of Ethics uses language of neutrality, but fails to address current anti-colonial and anti-racist critiques examining the bias behind much purported neutrality<sup>13,14,15</sup>, the nuanced way ‘neutrality’ is approached in actual practice<sup>16,17</sup>, and fails to reconcile this “representation of both sides” argument with the need for selectivity and curation in collections.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:18389/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://emilyknox.net/media/remarks-ala-midwinter-2018-presidents-program/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2018/02/11/debating-y-our-humanity-or-are-libraries-neutral/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.emilydrabinski.com/are-libraries-neutral/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/stoken/default+domain/10.1177%2F0961000620935501/full>

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