

Libraries and Censorship: The Accessibility to Information in Wisconsin Public Library Systems

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INTRODUCTION

Public libraries are centers for accessing ideas and information, some of which is perceived as controversial by members of their communities. As such, libraries often receive challenges from community members over books they feel are inappropriate, especially for children's and young adult books.

As protectors of public access to ideas and information, libraries take their responses to book challenges very seriously. Removing books from the collection would be censorship; however, anticipating and avoiding conflict by not obtaining a controversial book could be an act of self-censorship. This research – conducted by the Honors students of GEOG 111 in Spring 2017 – examines the relationship between challenged books and Wisconsin public libraries.

Since 1990, the American Library Association (ALA) has kept track of books that have been challenged. In this project, we have looked at the availability of 20 commonly and recently challenged books with diverse content across all county libraries in Wisconsin; we mapped this information to better understand the geography of access to information and ideas. We are looking for regional patterns in the availability of books with diverse content in Wisconsin public libraries, and what a varied access to such content may suggest about the state.

METHOD

To examine the geographic variability in access to ideas, information, and the potential for censorship or self-censorship across Wisconsin communities and libraries, we identified 20 frequently challenged books and searched for them in the state's public libraries.

There are hundreds of books that have been challenged, so we began with the American Library Association's (ALA) lists of Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books: 2000-2009 and Frequently Challenged Books with Diverse Content to identify the "challenge". After consultations with librarians Robin Miller, UW-Eau Claire McIntyre Library, and Meg Nord, Longfellow Elementary, Eau Claire Area School District (ECASD), we narrowed our list to 20 challenge books (Figure 1). We chose to focus on recent children's and young adult books with diverse themes such as race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, politics and religion, class, etc.

We also identified six popular books that one could expect to be in every library. These "control" books would serve as a baseline against which to compare the challenge books. Comparing the challenge books to the control books may provide insights into the nature of a library's constraints and priorities. We then searched the online catalogs of the state's 16 library systems (Figure 2) to determine which libraries do or do not contain our challenge books. Using the databases, we were able to find which libraries had which books, and how many copies. After compiling the data, we compared the patterns of which libraries carried more of the challenge books as compared to which libraries carried very few of them. By mapping our results, we can see the variations in access and explore the implications of this variability.

FINDINGS

We found that there was significant variability in which libraries and systems included books from our challenge list. We used a cut-off of four challenge list books as a measure of access and the potential for censorship. 100% of the libraries and branches in the Milwaukee library system, 83% in the Bridges system, and 58% in the South Central system had four or more of the challenge books (Figure 3). Fewer than 20% of the libraries in the Nicolet, SW Wisconsin, and Wisconsin systems had four or more books from our challenge list.

In general, systems with more registered borrowers had more challenge books (Figure 3). Some exceptions include the Indianhead and Wisconsin Valley system, which both have higher numbers of borrowers but smaller percentages of libraries with access to challenge books.

Libraries and branches located in areas of higher populations tended to have more books from our challenge list. For example, the Madison and Milwaukee areas have 12 libraries and branches with 60-90 percent of the challenge books (Figure 4), showing a higher level of accessibility than less metropolitan regions. Most libraries and branches with lower populations but high percentages of challenge books tended to be in cities with a college or university. Eau Claire, La Crosse, and Steven's Point are instances of this occurrence. The orange dots on the map (Figure 4) represent libraries or branches with a disproportionately high number of challenge books as compared to control books. Locations such as Boscobel and New Glarus may not have many books in general as they serve a smaller population.

FIGURE 3 Access to Frequently Challenged Books with Diverse Content

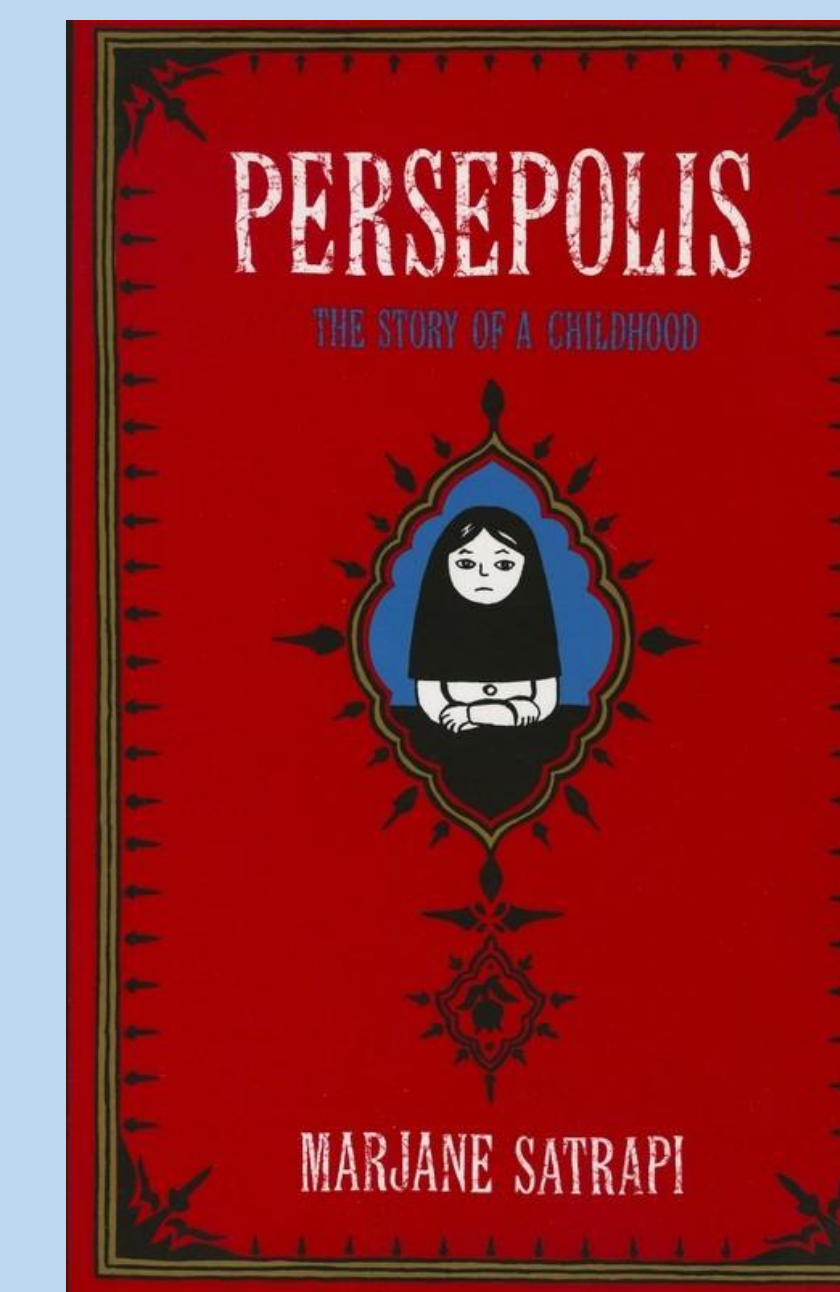
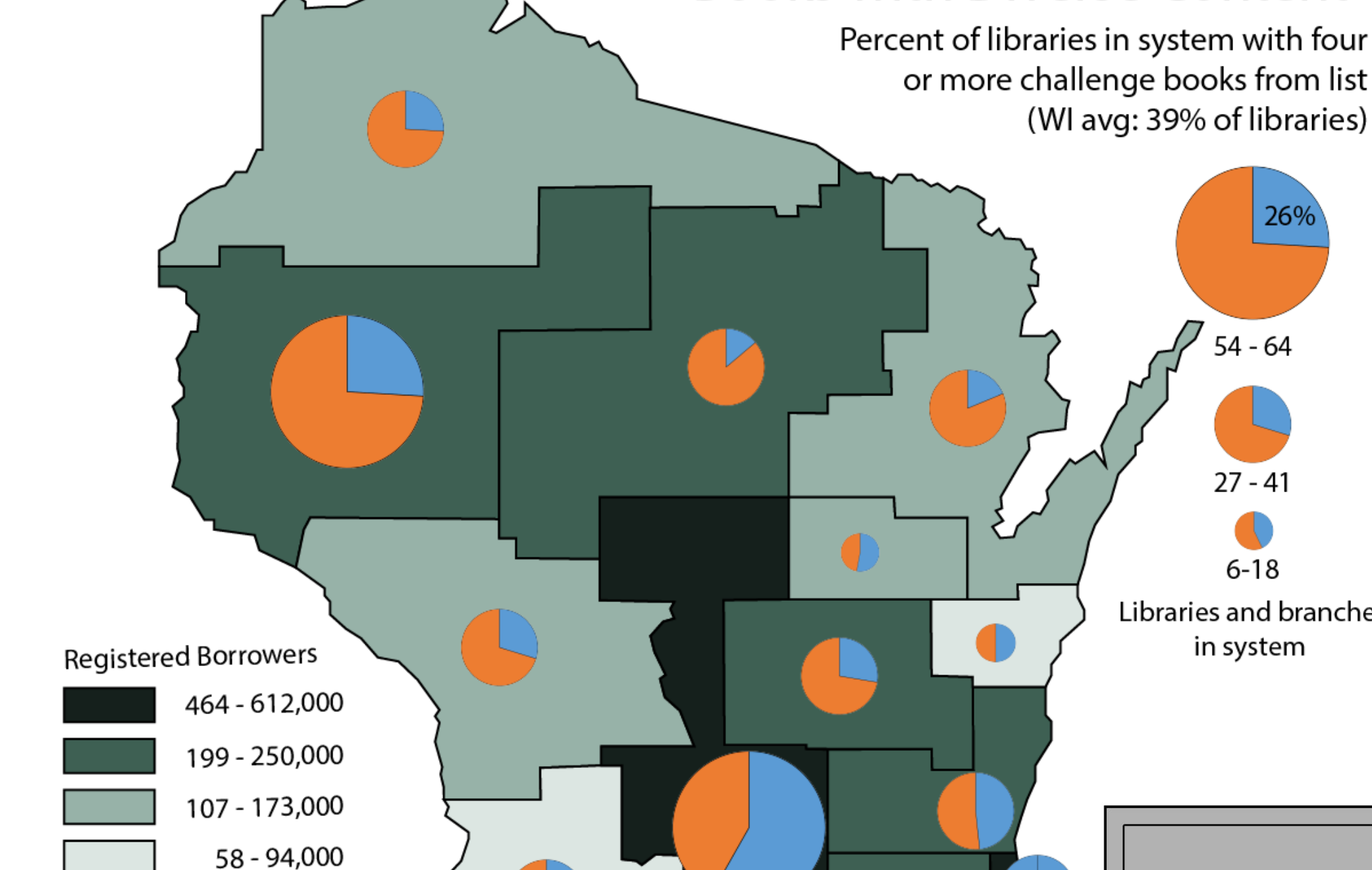


FIGURE 5

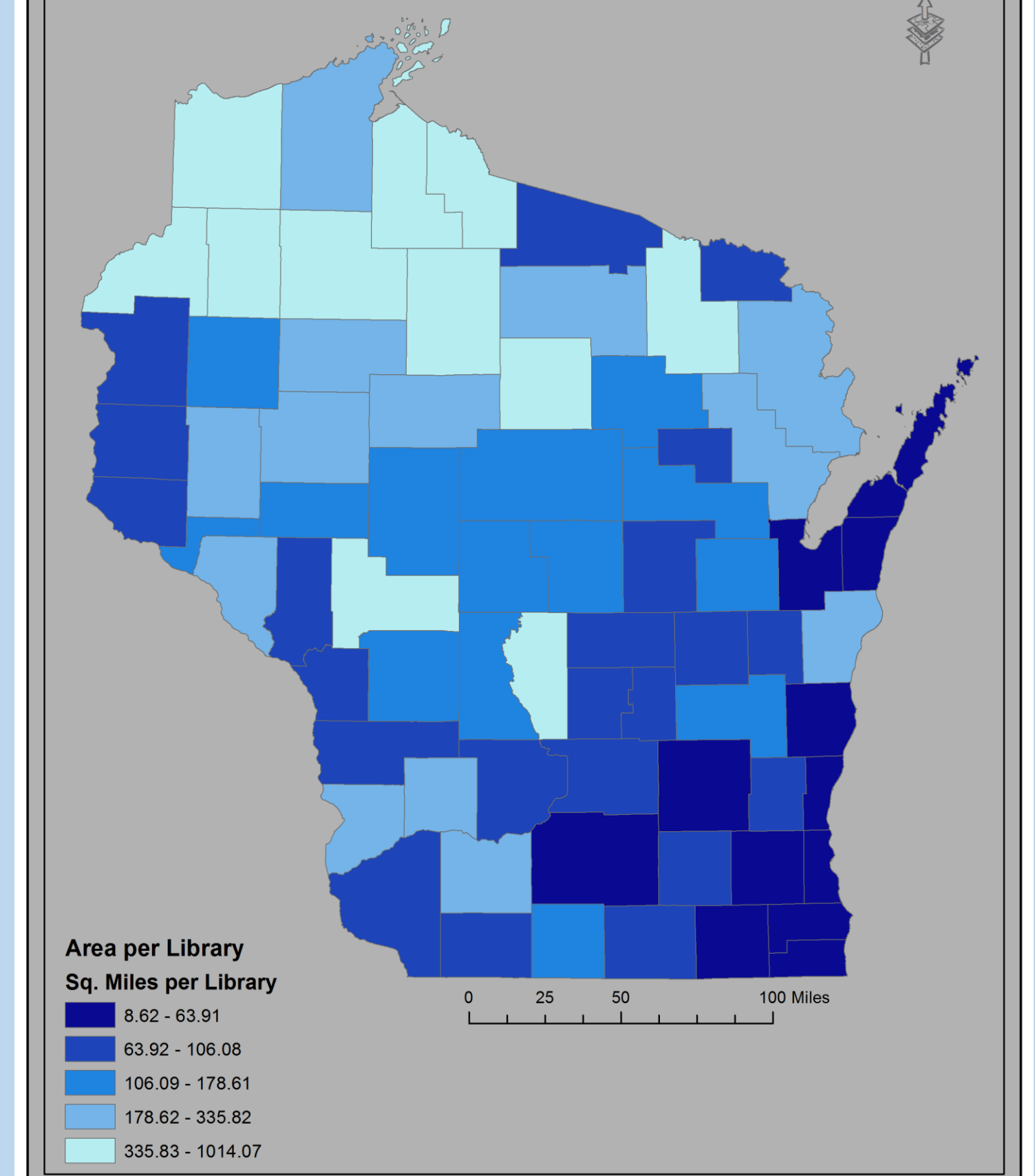


FIGURE 1

Challenged Book Rankings

(In order from most available to least available)

1. Running with Scissors (235)
2. Persepolis (227)
3. And Tango Makes Three (192)
3. Monster (192)
5. All American Boys (184)
6. The Librarian of Basra (156)
7. Two Boys Kissing (132)
8. Morris Micklewhite & the Tangerine Dress (104)
9. I Am Jazz (103)
10. The Miseducation of Cameron Post (99)
11. Fun Home (95)
12. Mexican Whiteboy (68)
13. This Book is Gay (67)
14. Habibi (66)
15. My Princess Boy (65)
16. Rainbow Boys (49)
17. Nappy Hair (38)
18. King & King (25)
19. Uncle Bobby's Wedding (24)
20. Baby Be-Bop (17)

Numbers in () = total number of copies across all Wisconsin systems

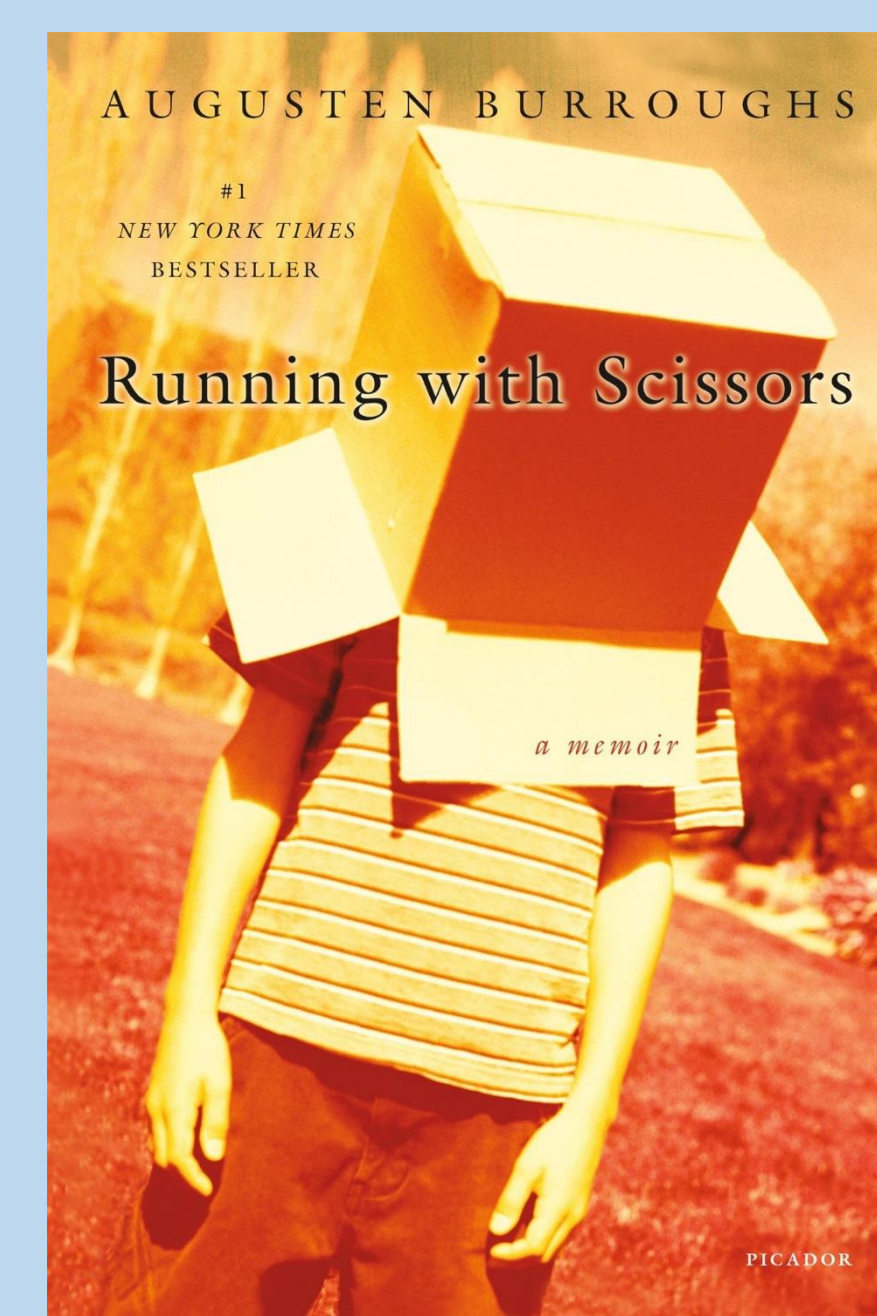
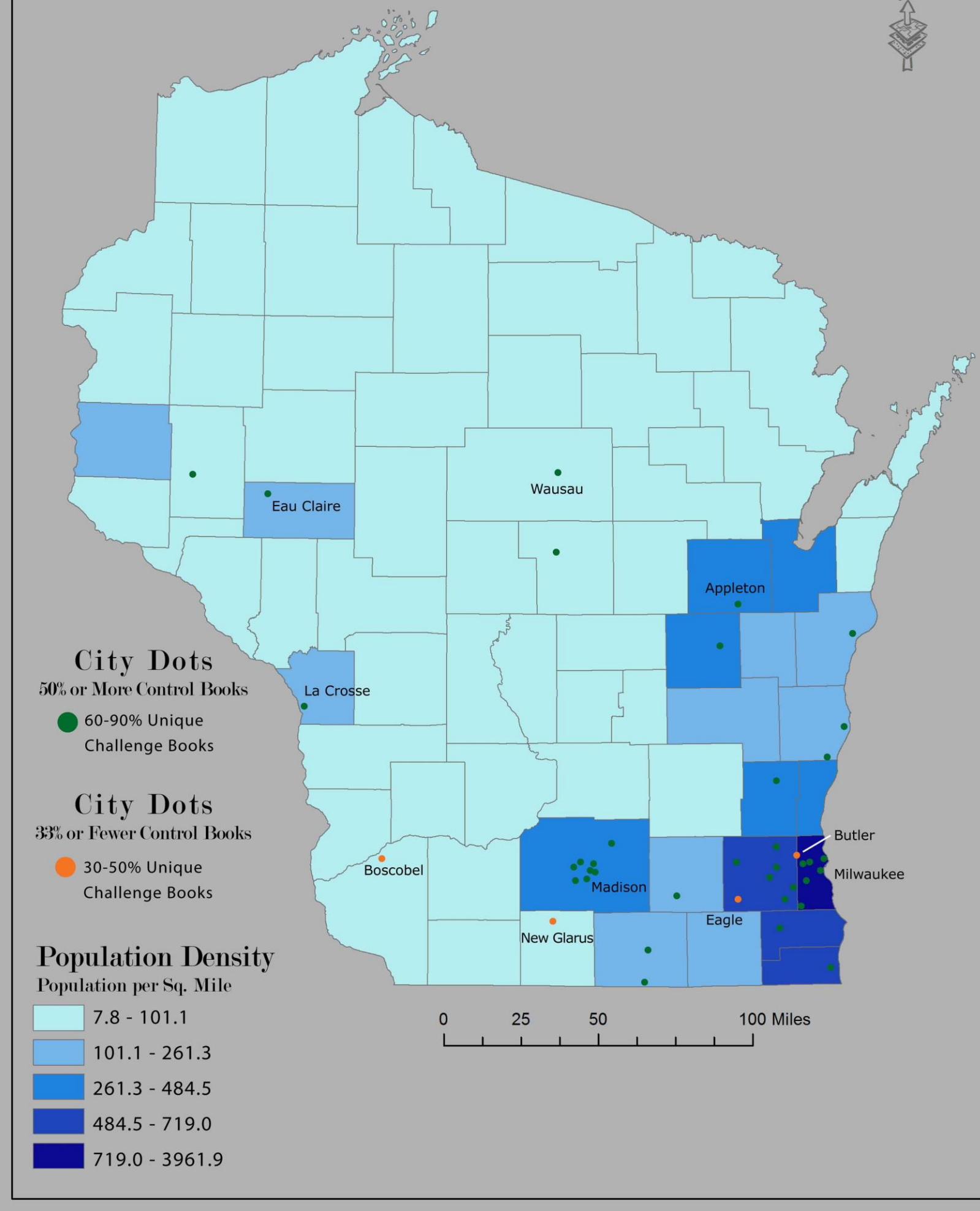


FIGURE 4



DISCUSSION

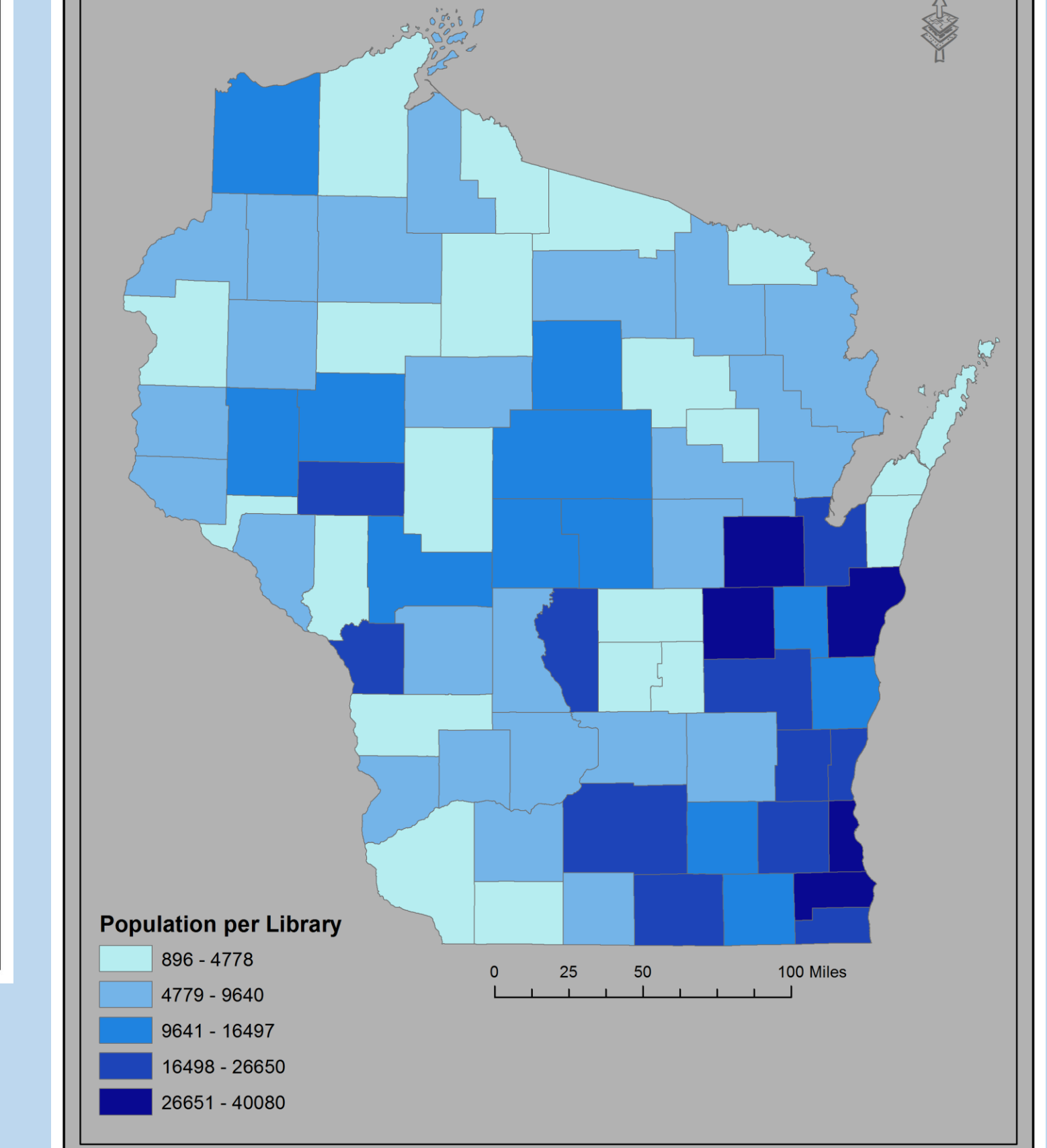
We began our research project by pursuing questions of censorship and self-censorship within the public library systems in the state of Wisconsin. Although the data we collected did not provide direct evidence of censorship in Wisconsin's libraries, it is an initial step and provides insights regarding libraries and access to ideas, information, and knowledge. A critical role of libraries in society is ensuring every reader can find life-changing and transformational books (Vance 2016). There is a physical-geographical element to this (see Figures 5 & 6). Libraries of rural Wisconsin serve greater areas, where people must travel much farther to get to a library.

Decisions made within libraries also affect access. From our research, we have learned that many factors affect which books are in library holdings. One of public libraries' biggest challenges are budgetary constraints and limited amounts of money to spend on new books. Librarians must also consider the interests of their communities when they select books. Librarians want to purchase books that are most likely to be checked out by borrowers. Due to such factors, it is difficult to determine that the lack of books from our challenge list within the library systems is directly related to some sort of censorship. Nevertheless, our data highlights issues of accessibility communities have to diverse information.

Figures 3 and 4 show the availability of our list of control and challenge books within systems and specific libraries. As pointed out in the findings section, a majority of the green dots are located in population dense communities. By having a larger population, it is likely that those areas consist of a more diverse population than more rural areas. Therefore, it is possible that counties such as Milwaukee county have a greater number of books from our challenge list because its libraries serve a population that would be interested in that diverse content. Similarly, many of the green dots not located in highly dense counties coincide with public state universities. Universities are known as outlets of information, so it would make sense that more challenged books would be available in the public libraries close to those universities.

Returning to Figure 3 (the distribution of libraries within each system with at least four books from our challenge list), in general, the counties that have the most books from our challenge list in their system also have the greatest number of registered borrowers. This suggests that the more users a library has, the more diverse information the library contains.

FIGURE 6



CONCLUSION

We started our research looking for cases of censorship, but as we progressed we found there was not enough specific data to draw explicit conclusions about censorship. There are significant variations in diverse content of library holdings across the state, but the causes remain uncertain. To demonstrate instances of censorship, further and more detailed investigations at the library level would have to be conducted. However, the state-wide variation in availability – and, thus, accessibility – to books that have been challenged for their diversity content has important implications. Namely, access to books that provide diversity perspectives, and their potential for raising awareness and understanding, is unevenly distributed across Wisconsin. Having ready access to a wide range of ideas is a key part to growth for individuals and communities.

CITATION

Vance, Candace, K. 2016. Censorship in the Library: the Dark Side of Dystopia. *Against the Grain*. September: 22-24.