"The Danger of a Single Story"

Readers' Advisory Work and Indigenous Peoples

Monique Woroniak

***Monique Woroniak** is Customer Services Librarian— Outreach Services, Winnipeg Public Library, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.*

*Correspondence to this column should be addressed to **Laurel Tarulli**, Dalhousie University, School of Information Management, Halifax, Nova Scotia; e-mail: laureltarulli@yahoo.com.*

Author's note: The phrase "The Danger of a Single Story" is from Susan Aglukark's presentation to the National Reading Campaign Aboriginal Roundtable, Banff, Alberta, Canada, October 27–29, 2013.

Many of us work with diverse communities in our libraries, striving to offer the best services to our users. In this article, guest author Monique Woroniak explores the challenges she has observed providing services to indigenous populations in a Canadian public library system—the Winnipeg Public Library in Winnipeg, Manitoba. I've found Ms. Woroniak's perspective interesting and her ideas stimulating, especially her views on community outreach and observing what our users need. In my opinion this extends beyond any single community or ethnic group and moves beyond borders, providing all of us with some good ideas and considerations for providing services to our communities.—*Editor*

I write this the day after the Royal Canadian Mounted Police have released a major report about missing and murdered indigenous women. (In this column, I use the terms indigenous and indigenous peoples to refer to the full range of original nations and cultures found in North America. These terms, which came into more general usage in the 1970s as part of indigenous peoples' efforts to be recognized at the United Nations, are increasingly used in Canada and in Manitoba, the province where I live.[1] Exceptions to this are names documents, organizations, etc., that use different terminology, or when I refer to a specific nation or culture.) The report, titled Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview, contains an updated count of the number of women who were lost to their communities between 1980 and 2012: 1,181.[2] This number represents 164 women deemed missing and 1017 victims of homicide.[3] The report provides select demographic information about the women but does not offer thoughts or an analysis of the root causes for the violence against them. It contains a significant amount of data but is devoid of the stories of the women and their lives.

As I read the report, another account of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls came to mind. The *Walking With Our Sisters* installation, conceived and spearheaded by Métis artist Christi Belcourt, is made up of over 1600 pairs of moccasin "vamps" (the top, beaded portion of a moccasin).[4] Belcourt put out a call for families, friends, and loved ones of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, as well as any other supportive individuals or groups, to bead pairs of vamps to honor lost community members. Her initial call in 2012 was for 600 pairs, which, at the time, was the approximate number of women and girls believed to be lost.[5] She was inundated with submissions from across Canada and the United States (and even some from overseas). The installation is now booked into 2019.[6]

The installation was in Winnipeg over three weeks in March and April of 2014. I had the honor of helping install the vamps in the host gallery space. Great care is taken with the vamps, and each installation is guided by a number of cultural protocols. Respect for the vamps, their creators, and the women and girls they honor are at the center of the work. Each pair is unique. After even just a few moments working on the installation, I felt I was surrounded by stories—of the beaders who had made the vamps and of the missing and murdered women and girls whose personalities shone through each pair. They told a different story each time, 1600-plus times over.

When I was approached to write this column I knew it would be a challenge. It is my feeling that readers' advisory, at its core, is about story—or, rather, matching story to story—about finding the perfect fit. Our profession and the institutions many of us work for may speak about the various groups we serve as though they are more or less homogenous or, at least, can have some common characteristics attributed to them and upon which we can layer our service planning and approaches. We may do this even though our personal experience and, in some cases, our professional knowledge cautions us that this kind of thinking is deeply inaccurate. Certainly both my own personal and professional experience tells me this is the case with respect to readers' advisory work with indigenous peoples.

The ongoing colonialism that exists in North America contributes to the suppression of indigenous peoples' voices and stories.[7] In working to provide relevant readers' advisory services it is my opinion that our focus must begin with—and remain centered upon—learning about the individual stories of the indigenous peoples we serve. If we are effective at doing this, we quickly learn that there is very little to say about this topic related to specific titles, subjects, or authors. The stories we recommend will necessarily depend on the stories that are shared with us. The thoughts I share below come from my experience as a non-indigenous librarian who works in a public library system that has not yet employed an indigenous person at the librarian level.

LISTENING FOR STORIES: OUTREACH VERSUS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES

Reviewing the differences between outreach and community development work in libraries can provide helpful direction for learning the stories of the individual indigenous peoples we may serve. Both terms are common in the library and grassroots, not-for-profit circles in which I work, but they are often used, mistakenly, inter-changeably. The *Working Together Project* (Canada) is one initiative that provided clarification of the differences between the two perspectives and the services they inform.[8] Services informed by an outreach perspective are likely the most prevalent when libraries seek to serve a community with which they traditionally have not much connection. When informed by an outreach perspective, services maintain a focus on informing community members about the already-existing services and resources of the library:

> At its core, outreach involves delivering a message that the library believes to be important: e.g., that reading to your preschoolers is important for early literacy development; that the library has important online resources that will help high-school students do their homework; that the library offers a wide-array of services with broad appeal, etc.[9]

To these I would add libraries' readers' advisory products broadly, that is electronic pathfinders or other reading/listening lists (particularly when they are informed only by library staff's choices or expertise), sharing and recommending items from "most borrowed" lists, and so on. No matter the content of the communication, the library remains firmly in the place of authority, using outreach approaches to communicate its knowledge and expertise to communities.

A community development approach turns outreach work on its head. A community development perspective to service delivery requires that the library let go of its role as expert and engage in a service planning process that positions it as a partner of the community it seeks to serve.[10] Beyond relinquishing its expert role, in community development work the library actively positions itself as learner, so that both the service and service delivery process become the result of true collaboration.[11] Put another way, while outreach work can be considered user-focused, employing a community development perspective seeks to create services that are user-driven.[12]

When we consider that members of indigenous communities with which library systems may seek to interact and serve are made up of individuals with diverse interests, literacy levels, and life circumstances (much like the so-called general population), the short-comings of an outreach approach to readers' advisory becomes apparent. An activity, for example, like conducting book talks about titles that the library has determined would be of interest to a community, accomplishes very little towards the goal of having the library learn something of the community's actual interests. It does nothing to shift the library from expert to learner, and while some of the content presented may be of genuine interest—simply out of sheer probability—to audience members, the absence of collaboration means the library has not listened for or learned about community stories that would increase its capacity for delivering relevant and meaningful service in this area.

COMMUNICATING STORIES: COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT—RA IN REVERSE?

But what should be done until, and also after, a library increases its capacity to learn the stories of those it serves? When it comes to the topic of readers' advisory and indigenous peoples, I believe public libraries especially do have a related obligation. Namely, they should make materials available that portray, celebrate, and discuss the lives of indigenous peoples (whether real or imagined in works of fiction) that are culturally accurate, full of depth and variety, and that do not dehumanize indigenous peoples by reducing characters or figures to stereotype. Put another way, "What messages about indigenous peoples are communicated through [our] collections?"[13]

Focusing on the quality of our collection development is one important way we can help to combat harmful stereotypes and ensure that our readers' advisory efforts involving recommendations of indigenous-related works enrich, rather than reduce, readers' knowledge of indigenous-related topics and works. Just one example of a series containing problematic stereotypes is the classic *Indian In the Cupboard* books by Lynne Reid Banks, which the American Indian Library Association have called "perpetrators of the most base stereotypes," for, among other offenses, their incorrect attributions of cultural dress, the primitive speech of the "Indian" character, and the manipulation of that character by a white child.[14] Employing a critical eye, and one that is especially focused on rooting out stereotypes, particularly in books for young people, can be difficult work, but it is essential to help ensure that accurate and wide-ranging stories about indigenous peoples are told.

Thankfully resources exist to help in this work. One of these resources is, of course, the work of Debbie Reese. Tribally enrolled with the Nambe Owingeh, Reese's website *American Indians in Children's Literature*, provides exhaustive and continually updated content about both the big questions related to developing collections (different types of biases and stereotypes, their origins, and current day effects) and the practical resources (book lists, etc.) to which busy librarians are often drawn.[15] Her content is heavily US-based, but the rigor with which she evaluates texts—both old and new—is an example of the kind of diligence that public librarians across the continent need to undertake in order to meet our obligations related to public education in this area. A recent example of Reese's efforts is her analysis of the Cooperative Centre for Children's Books 2013 list of titles identified "as being by/about American Indians/First Nations/Latin America." Titles by the "Big Six" publishers did not fair well under Reese's analysis while, notably, works released by small publishing houses and typically authored by indigenous writers are given the stamp of approval.[16] While her focus is on evaluating children's materials, much of Reese's work can be used to inform adult collection development.

Another excellent resource for evaluating materials is Oyate. Oyate is an indigenous organization based out of California that focuses on materials and curricula evaluation and related awareness workshops.[17] In 2000 they published *How to Tell the Difference: A Guide for Evaluating Children's Books for Anti-Indian Bias*. The key recommendations from the book have been made available on their website as well as a listing of additional criteria. Again, both sets of criteria focus on children's materials though, in many cases, they can be applied to collections development decisions for adult materials. The *How to Tell the Difference* criteria cover a wide range of considerations from the names given to indigenous peoples in picture books and stereotypical and generic portrayals, to loaded language and portrayals of success relative to a normative standard.[18] A number of the additional criteria made available notably focus on authorship and, specifically, authors' relationships to the stories or information they communicate.[19]

In my own workplace, we have just begun a project to evaluate our Aboriginal Resources Collections. These are collections of materials for adults, children, and teens that are found in branches throughout our system. This work will include updating collection development statements (including weeding considerations), potential changes to processing (i.e., spine labels), and, most importantly, the inclusion of explicit anti-bias/anti-stereotype statements as a key referral resource for staff.

Following a community development model of service, our collections librarians and myself will not undertake this work in a vacuum. The foundation of our work will be consultations and continuous communication with key stakeholders from our local indigenous teacher, student, and writing communities, as well as community elders. To this end, we are fortunate to be working in a city where there are a number of indigenous educators who are actively working to refocus content and curricula. In this respect it is we, the librarians, who find ourselves surrounded by experts from which to learn. Our goal is to use this new knowledge to develop a framework that will support our collecting indigenous-related materials that members of our local indigenous communities (and, hopefully, those beyond our city) feel are relevant and reflective of both their histories and their current day accomplishments, interests, and priorities.

STORIES GROW

It is a wonderful time to be working in this area of public library services. Renewed activism among indigenous peoples, such as the Idle No More movement, has meant that in some centers a flood of new stories are being shared by community members.[20] As librarians it is our duty to not only be aware that these stories are being told, but to listen to them deeply. It is through this listening that we may position ourselves to find that perfect match that results from good readers' advisory work. Being attuned to the flood of new stories can also support our collection development work and help us to fulfill our role to make relevant, accurate, and meaningful stories about indigenous peoples available to the general public. Many of us are working in a time and in places where indigenous-authored material is garnering mainstream attention and accolades.[21] This is a very positive thing for both our collection development efforts and our putting these materials to use in our readers' advisory work with both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. When the number of stories we listen to, read, and recommended grows, so do we.

References

1. "Terminology," indigenousfoundations.art.ubc.ca, accessed April 5, 2014, http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/?id=7400.
2. Royal Canadian Mounted Police, *Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview*, www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/pubs/mmaw-faapd-eng.pdf.
3. Ibid.
4. "The Project," *Walking With Our Sisters,* accessed April 5, 2014, http://walkingwithoursisters.ca/about/the-project.
5. Ibid.
6. "Event Touring Calendar," *Walking With Our Sisters*, accessed April 5, 2014, http://walkingwithoursisters.ca/events.
7. Joyce A. Green, "Towards a Détente with History: Confronting Canada's Colonial Legacy," *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 12 (Fall 1999): 85–105; Andrea Smith, "Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy," in *Racial Formation in the Twenty First Century*, ed. Daniel Martinez HoSang, Oneka LaBennet, and Laura Pulido (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 71–72.
8. Working Together hompage, accessed April 5, 2014, www.librariesincommunities.ca/?page_id=8.
9. Ibid.
10. "Outreach," Working Together, accessed April 5, 2014, www.librariesincommunities.ca/?page_id=7.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Monique Woroniak, "The Road From Here: Indigenous Services in Public Libraries" (presentation, Manitoba Libraries Conference, Winnipeg, MB, May 12–14, 2014).
14. Naomi Caldwell-Wood and Lisa A. Mitten, "Selective Bibliography and Guide for *'I' Is Not for Indian: The Portrayal of Native Americans in Books for Young People*," *American Indian Library Association*, http://ailanet.org/about/publications/i-is-not-for-indian.
15. "Home," *American Indians in Children's Literature*, accessed April 5, 2014, http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.ca/p/about.html.
16. "2013 CCBC Data on Fiction by/about American Indians—US Publishers," *American Indians in Children's Literature* (blog), March 17, 2013, http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.ca/2014/03/2013-ccbc-data-on-fiction-byabout.html?m=1.
17. "About Us," Oyate, accessed April 5, 2014, http://oyate.org/index.php/about-us.
18. "Resources: How To Tell Difference," accessed April 5, 2014, Oyate, http://oyate.org/index.php/resources/41-resources/how-to-tell-the-difference.
19. "Resources: Oyate's Additional Criteria," Oyate, accessed April 5, 2014, http://oyate.org/index.php/resources/42-resources/oyate-s-additional-criteria.
20. "Timeline: Idle No More's Rise," CBC News, October 4, 2013, www.cbc.ca/news2/interactives/timeline-idle-no-more.
21. Shelagh Rogers and Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, "Globe Books 2013: A New Chapter in Aboriginal Literature," *Globe and Mail*, December 27, 2013, www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/globe-books-2013-a-new-chapter-in-aboriginal-literature/article16116492.