

“Cultural Depository Libraries for Native American Communities”

“The history and development of library services to the Indigenous people of the United States is largely undocumented, even referred to as a “blind spot” by library history scholar Wayne A. Wiegand” (Littletree, 4). I believe that it comes as no shock that the native American communities have spent large amounts of their time marginalized in United States Society. Because of this, resources in libraries for Native Americans is lacking both on and mostly off reservations further alienating them from their past. “The general assumption was that Indians not living on reservations were assimilated into the majority population and had no specialized information needs that were not being met and that Indians on reservations were served by libraries in Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools or mission schools.” (Burk, 430). The general assumption for a long time was that information needs for Native American resources off reservation was not needed and that the information needs on reservation were taken care of, but this was not the case. “Tribes can now plan and set priorities for themselves and, in many instances, having a library is high on their list. Libraries, however, must compete for scarce funds with roads, utilities, and other basic services on reservations. Where libraries do exist, most are staffed by non-degreed personnel who often have little or no training in operating a library. Even in instances where there are professional librarians available, tribes generally cannot afford to pay adequate salaries to attract qualified personnel” (Patterson, 183). Today there is a large disconnect between tribal libraries and non-tribal libraries or libraries not on reservations. Those on reservations do provide its community with a much important Native American history, that is kind of push aside elsewhere. These libraries serve as archives for their information with audio

and visual information handed down through generations. This is not the case with libraries that are not on reservations, this may not apply to all libraries, there are a lot of programs out there but not all libraries are created equal or promote enough equality. With roughly 70% of Native Americans living off reservations, according to nativepartnerships.org, the majority don't have access to their tribal libraries and must use public libraries for their library needs. With the above information in mind, I propose public libraries establish a sort of cultural depository, much like government depository libraries, for Native Americans in non-reservation public libraries, giving anyone free access to cultural materials that have been provided and validated by tribal libraries and authorities.

The Native American Community is somewhat unique in that they have a direct relationship and treaties with the US government as recognized nations with tribal lands (reservations) that are considered separate from US soil. According to many different websites the national poverty rate for native Americans on reservations hovers right around 30%. On top of the high poverty rates the reservation governments do not have the resources to allocate for a tribal library even though a library is high on the list of needs for many of them. Those that have libraries are often poorly staffed as well, not having many Native library professionals. For the tribal libraries that do exist "Tribal libraries in the United States have become sites of cultural and language renewal, gathering places, and places to collect, preserve, and share Indigenous knowledge." (Littletree, iii). Unfortunately, there is still a disconnect between the tribal libraries and public libraries, many of whom do not communicate with each other or know that each other exist, further leading to the alienation of Native Americans. On top of this tribal

libraries are not well known in their own communities as well. Step one in providing better library access for Native Americans will be to get better funding for their tribal libraries, but that is easier said than done. Another direction is to spread knowledge in other public libraries about Native American resources so that people are aware of them, if more people are aware, more people will utilize them and then more funding can be allocated. If public and tribal libraries were to get in touch and establish connections, they would be able to help build up resources for Native populations and provide them with materials and resources.

The resources for Native American users in public and academic libraries off reservations is also not amazing. Having better Native resources will benefit everyone not just Native Americans, those not apart of the native community will be able to have a better understanding about other communities around them. "While browsing library collections, Native American students encounter problematic and even racist terminology and organization. Notably, Native students identified these problems while their non-Native peers did not." (Bucy, 418). This was from a study done in an academic college library, the non-native students did not even realize that some of the materials were racist towards their fellow Students. It is no fault to the non-native students they simply did not have the teachings or knowledge to know since the appropriate resources are not there for them to learn from. The information need of Native Americans is not very different from any other group, everyone uses the libraries for research, using internet, computers, hanging out, homework, and other tasks. It would not take a whole lot to provide the little extra culturally appropriate resources for our Native populations or for any group. Having these sections will make it feel more

inclusive. With books in native languages, or explaining the local tribes in the area, which I feel like sometime people forget the number of different tribes and languages they all speak. According to USA.gov there are 574 officially recognize tribes in the US with about 500 different distinct languages. It seems like a daunting task, but libraries really need only to allocate resources for materials about their local tribes and then a handful of more over all generic resources of information.

With all the above information considered, I propose establishing in libraries a sort of cultural depository much like a government depository. Not only will this bring cultural resources to the public and provide easy access. It will also bridge gaps between tribal libraries and non-tribal libraries. To start the libraries will need to get in touch with each other and set up this sort of cultural exchange with the tribal libraries approving and providing the materials about their culture to the non-tribal libraries with larger budgets and traffic to house and display the materials. This would best be done on a primarily local level, so a tribe in California would not send the materials to a library in Connecticut for example since the tribes are different. This will also help people to realize that there is a diversity among Native Americans, that they are all apart of different and unique groups with different cultures and beliefs.

Like with all projects this will take time to implement, the project will need approval from libraries all over the country, and it will require people to reach out to their local tribal libraries and Native communities and vice versa. Money is also a factor in any project of this size, not every library has the budget for a project of this kind, especially the tribal libraries which are often underfunded and understaffed. The largest thing you can do is donations to libraries, this will allow libraries to allocate the funds for

these projects, and if enough attention is paid then government and other grants may even become available for libraries. Native American communities may be unique with their relationship with the US government, but a project like this can benefit all communities, storing cultural materials for open access for communities and allow for more learning and understand and more interaction between libraries and their local culture and communities. With cultural depositories it will make libraries more welcoming, allowing communities to know that when they go to a library with a cultural depository that they will have materials about themselves and their people creating a more welcoming space. I advocate for Native American communities in this essay because I believe that tearing down the divide between only displaying their culture on reservations and in public libraries is essential for future growth. When exploring Native American history, the term “the last Indian” comes up often, this implies that they are gone which is not the case at all, that though is destructive to their culture and allowing for a place in public libraries to store their culture will only help to teach others. But I believe that with enough help from others the Idea of Cultural Depositories can help all cultures and communities.

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