

# **Developing Library Collections When Everyone Thinks the Internet is Everything... and Other Challenges on the Road to Diversity**

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Presented October 2, 2001  
at The Future of Rural and Small Libraries Conference, Columbus, OH

A few months ago I was referred to a medical specialist for a painful and complicated illness — now cured, thank goodness. I will not bore you with the details as that is not the point of the anecdote, though if you're into gory medical stories — see me later. During the course of the initial consultation, the physician noted on the employment section of my medical history form that I am a professor of library science.

"Ah ha," he said. "You guys teach about the Internet, don't you?"

Not knowing what sort of corner I was about to get hemmed up in, I somewhat nervously admitted that we do "teach about the Internet."

"Well," he continued, "I've got a question for you." He went into a lengthy explanation of how he had gotten intrigued with the works of Jack London. It seems he had recently read one of London's books in which the presence of a water resistant coating on the hair shaft of certain animals played a significant role in the development of the Alaska fur trade. "I have looked everywhere I can think of on the Internet for more information on this and can't find a thing," he reported. "What am I doing wrong?"

"My first guess," I responded, "is that what you're looking for is not even on the Internet or World Wide Web. Where you need to be looking is in a book."

"I thought that libraries were all digitized now," he responded....and the conversation went on from there toward a predictable end.

The point is that only a fraction of what is known is knowable in a digitized form. Try, for instance, to learn anything of substance about Kajiga Balihuta on the World Wide Web. Kajiga Balihuta is considered important enough in African cultural history to have received a full page entry in the Dictionary of African Biography but a search of the World Wide Web pulls up

only a citation to one of his many philosophical works. There is much to be learned about Kajiga Balihuta. Someday we may be able to learn this on the World Wide Web, but for the time being we must rely on well built library collections to inform us.

In considering what to say today on the important subject of collection development vis a vis the World Wide Web, I returned to one of my heroes in the profession and read what he had to say on the topic. His well deserved stature in the profession is sufficient, in my opinion, to make him canonical.

Consequently, I would like to begin my formal remarks today with a textual reading – not a reading from the Holy Writ of our religious culture, but a reading from Lester Ashiem. “Today’s lesson,” as the expression goes, comes from a speech delivered by Ashiem to a similar gathering of librarians some 50 years ago. Though his words hearken from the time of “What’s My Line,” The McGuire Sisters, and Big Fin Cadillacs, they are just as relevant today as they were then – perhaps more so.

Speaking at the North Carolina Library Association, Asheim, who spent a major portion of his professional life on the faculty of the library school at Chapel Hill, called for a “stronger conviction on the part of librarians themselves that we are engaged in a truly professional activity dedicated to the performance of an essential and unselfish service to others; that this service is of sufficient social value for us to acknowledge it with pride rather than with apologies; that the word ‘only’ should be dropped from the all-too-frequent disclaimer, ‘I’m only a librarian,’ and that not until we ourselves recognize the importance of our calling will we be able to expect such recognition from others.” Asheim goes on to say that he deplors “the tendency of many librarians to defend their choice of a career on the grounds that it is so much fun, because it seems to me that librarianship is so much more than that, that the pleasure we get from it goes without saying. Our social value gives us satisfaction and fulfillment [not just fun], and I think we do the profession of librarianship a disservice when we minimize what librarianship does for other people to concentrate on what it does for us.

“I think I can make my point most clearly,” Asheim continued, “by taking a really searching look at the one task of librarianship for which every librarian, whether in a special library, a university library, the public library or a children’s collection is held responsible: the practice of book selection. For it is here that we exert, however indirectly, our greatest influence on the public we serve and the total society of which that public is a part. For one of the most important factors in determining what people will read, listen to, and watch is Accessibility – having the material ready to hand. It is a factor which has been shown to be even more important than the reader’s own professed interest in most cases of free-choice selections of communication experiences. There are few instances where the individual is so interested in a particular

book that he will walk a mile, wait a week or brave a storm for it. If he can't get the specific item, he will take what is there. And when his interest is more general, which is frequently the case, when he just wants a good book to read or some general information on a broad subject – he certainly will select from what is available. The librarian, by determining what shall be available through the library, defines the field from which the average reader will make his choice."

And here, as they say, endeth the reading.

No doubt, had Asheim been writing this piece today, he would not have limited himself to "book" selection and he would not have used "he" as a generic reference for humanity...just so you know I am not insensitive to technology and gender issues. Given that, I believe that what Asheim has to say in this excerpt and what he has to say in the fuller piece [which I hope you will read!], is as timely – perhaps more timely – today than when it was written.

Now, having grown up in the South...or to put a finer point on it... having grown up in the home of a South Georgia United Methodist minister, I well know the homiletical relationship between a text and an expository message. One develops a relevant message which grows out of or is informed by the foregoing text, which message is designed to edify the foregathered listeners. In that noble tradition, I will use Asheim as a platform from which to make a few comments on today's topic, comments which I hope will be both entertaining and edifying. Oh, and don't worry. I won't be passing a collection plate, or, as we are given to saying somewhat quaintly in the Anglican tradition, the Alms Basket.

To take up Asheim's first point, namely his call for pride and professional confidence in our roles as librarians is not a message that can be too often or too vigorously reinforced. My sense, based on my interactions with students in the master's program in library science and my involvement with working professionals, is that this is a message that today's librarians have taken to heart. No longer is librarianship generally viewed by its professional denizens as one of the "safe occupations for young women," a genteel and comfortable abode – though it can be and sometimes is all of these things. The overarching view of librarianship held by most of today's professional practitioners is, I think, one of a rewarding but challenging profession which presents endless opportunities for innovation in the creation, storage, dissemination, and, when appropriate, interpretation, of information and knowledge. I think that the audience that most needs to harken to Asheim's message of pride and confidence are the institutions in our midst who seem so embarrassed by the label "librarian" that they are willing to contort themselves into all sorts of intellectual tangles, so long as the label "librarian" is no where in the midst of the tangle. So that we now have schools of information

management, colleges of information science and technology, and programs in information representation and when given the opportunity to relabel us, we are stamped as information managers, knowledge brokers. I suppose we could begin repackaging other institutions and professions with the same relabeling agenda so that seminaries would become theology think tanks; priests and rabbis would become homiletical hosts, and churches, synagogues, and mosques would become centers for ethical and spiritual instruction. What we would lose in such a religious relabeling project is exactly what we are in the process of losing in the attempt to redefine libraries and associated institutions without the use of the word library – we are losing meaning. We are losing meaning because we are abandoning the word library, a term which has a rich and noble history and for which worldwide there is more or less a shared understanding of what it represents. And what it represents is that collection of persons, institutions, and, yes, buildings, which are necessary for the acquisition [creation, when necessary], organization, storage, preservation, retrieval, dissemination, and, when appropriate, interpretation of information. The term library is equally applicable to the small Carnegie building in Meridian, Mississippi as it is to Bibliotheque Nationale, the French nation's vast infrastructure of information and knowledge. I see the current attempt to banish the term library from our professional midst as on par with the enthusiasm with which architects and builders in the urban renewal heyday of the 60s decided to pull down so many of our "outdated" buildings and replace them with new and "better" structures which most of us look on today with dismay and frustration.

Further, the term library as used in our culture has imbedded in it the notion of a service organization devoted to enabling those human interactions which yield needed information, direction, education, etc. for the institution's customers. I am referring to such services as reference, reader advisory, story hours, etc.

Now I realize that the foregoing is not directly on the point of collection development or diversity, but since I am taking my cue today from Lester Asheim, I felt I could not let the opportunity pass to interpret his cautionary words in the light of current tendencies to drift from the roots of our profession. In any case, I am happy to report that Clarion University still proudly includes the word "library" in its Department of Library Science and that the faculty, while committed to incorporating the new technologies into the professional tool kits we give our graduates, are still committed to graduating librarians.

Now, to take up Asheim's second point, I would like to address the issue of what we actually have in our collections and the relevance of those collections for serving the needs of a diverse population. And I take diversity to be a phenomenon characterized by, among other things, age, gender, race, sexual orientation, region of origin, culture, physical and mental challenges – in

character who reflects the values and interests of teens. An inferior book with such a character is generally preferred by most teens to a superior volume that has no character with whom the teen can connect. The great southern writer Flannery O'Connor explained the phenomenon in her own distinctive if somewhat caustic style:

"I find that everyone approaches the novel according to his particular interest – the doctor looks for a disease, the minister looks for a sermon, the poor look for money, and the rich look for justification; and if they find what they want, or at least what they can recognize, then they judge the piece of fiction to be superior" (O'Connor 122).

Another story that beautifully illustrates this idea is one that I heard told by the director of the Minneapolis-Hennepin Public Library. As you may know, Minneapolis has one of the largest concentrations of Hmong refugees in the U.S. Being an astute and dedicated librarian, the library director began collecting books in the Hmong language and developing programming for members of the Hmong community; however, all her efforts came to naught as the Hmong declined to participate. Then, one day, she heard one of her clerks talking on the telephone in what she recognized as Hmong language. She interviewed the clerk and learned that the clerk had been a Peace Corps volunteer among the Hmong in their native Cambodia. She spoke the language and knew enough about Hmong culture to be accepted as a legitimate figure within the Hmong community. Using her clerk's acceptance in the community, the library director was able to determine several key pieces of information that helped her build a library program that worked for the Hmong. The first thing she discovered was that the written form of the Hmong language is of very recent origin and many of the Hmong did not even read it. So, the collection of books was of very little value to their life situation. The Hmong tradition was an oral tradition and what they really wanted were recordings [both music and spoken word] and videos, particularly recordings and videos that grew out of their own culture and, hence, featured Hmong music and images. This presented an acquisitions problem which the library director was eventually able to solve by working with the Asian grocery stores that had sprung up in the community. While the recordings and videos the Hmong were interested in were not available in the US trade, they were readily available in Southeast Asia, and the library director began importing items for her collection through the grocery stores.

In any case, the first step toward building a collection that is responsive to the needs of a diverse community is ensuring that there are materials in your collection in which persons can find images with which they can connect. The process of building these collections is, for the most part, one of systematic bibliographical searching. Some bibliographic tools I have found helpful in this process are: The Wilson Catalogs, *The Reader's Catalog* by Geoffrey O'Brien [New York: Reader's Catalog, 1997], *World Literature Today*,

*Multicultural Review*, the Gale multicultural encyclopedias, and the vast array of bibliographies that systemize the search for relevant works. Two of my favorite bibliographies are *American Ethnic Literatures* by David Peck [Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 1992] and *Our Family, Our Friends, Our World: An Annotated Guide to Significant Multicultural Books for Children and Teenagers* by Lyn Miller-Lachmann [New Providence, NJ: RR Bowker, 1992].

Asheim made reference to the “inherent pleasure” of our profession, and the above described bibliographic work certainly falls within the realm of pleasure for most librarians. I did my first serious multicultural collection development some 15 years ago when I was asked by the literature department at the University of North Carolina at Asheville where I was working as a reference librarian to develop a collection in support of a new Black Studies Program. The process of immersing myself in a body of literature and discovering fascinating writers of whom I had never heard can only be described as pleasurable. It was also eye-opening in that here were a group of elegant, determined, hardworking writers committed to the call of literature but also committed to the cause of a race of people trying to slough off the shackles of slavery in Jim Crow America – people like Sutton Griggs, Oscar Micheaux, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper who have never found their way into the Norton Anthology of American Literature. I would probably never have heard of any of them had it not been for the collection development project I undertook, and now I have published pieces on two of the writers and given papers on all three of them.

To extend this “pleasurable” theme a bit further, I would also note that part of the work of a bibliographer is to become knowledgeable in the field s/he is working, and this is most effectively accomplished by reading representative works in the field. I have now been engaged in multicultural bibliographic work for more than 15 years and, in the process, have read representative works of all the major cultural groups in the North America, people such as Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich, Abraham Cahan, Gary Soto, Jamica Kincaid, Joy Kogawa, Arna Bontemps representing Native American, Jewish-American, Hispanic-American, Asian-American, and African-American cultural groups. I have also ventured into the realm of the literatures of the root cultures, reading books by Africans, Israelis, etc. One of the things that becomes apparent in collecting and reading literary works from cultures outside the Euro-American mainstream is that they frequently work out of a different aesthetic than the literature that most of us grew up learning to appreciate so that literary works from Africa often have a lean and undeveloped look about them, the result of that culture being much closer to an oral tradition than our own and the texts that have emerged from that tradition are in many cases a bare-bones narrative that a storyteller is expected to expand upon. In the Chinese tradition, literary works are often long and episodic, the result of scribes taking down and embellishing stories from their

culture. Pearl Buck addressed this very issue in her Nobel acceptance speech. Her point and the point I am making here is that the aesthetic tradition out of which some of these literary works come is often misunderstood by critics whose frame of reference is the Euro-American tradition. Consequently, they are dismissed.

So, now that I've convinced you of the need for and the pleasurable benefits to be derived from systematically collecting materials from other cultures to add to your library, let's turn our attention briefly to a couple of other pieces that are needed to solve this puzzle. First is the issue of staffing. Libraries in our culture are seen – for better or worse – as essentially middle-class white institutions. Given the history of our culture, this is entirely understandable. Since at least the 19th century, the North American continent has been dominated both in numbers and in politics by Euro-Americans. Prior to the 19th century, of course, the now displaced Native populations were a serious presence on the continent, but by the end of the 19th century they had been either wiped out or herded well out of sight onto reservations. The great upsurge of library development in North America began during the second industrial revolution near the end of the 19th century when the Carnegies, the Astors, etc. decided to found and endow cultural institutions. Libraries in our culture were built by Euro-Americans, populated with Euro-American materials, and used primarily by Euro-Americans. The personnel in today's libraries continues to reflect this tradition, even though we have made much progress in recruiting librarians and other library staff from outside the Euro-American tradition. There are many good reasons for wanting to change this. First is the issue of service. The presence of a member of a particular race or cultural group signals to other members of the group that the institution is truly committed to meeting the needs of that group. The presence of that person also provides an important point of connection between the library and other members of the group. This is, once again, illustrated by a story from my family. Whenever we go out to a restaurant to eat, Loudon immediately surveys the diners to determine if there is anyone near his own age in the room; if there is, he **MUST** go and speak to them. He wants to make contact with them, to be in their presence because he shares a bond with them that he will never share with us – he is their same age. I see the same phenomenon occurring in our university library where Basil Martin, an African-American, works as a reference librarian. He is frequently seen to be in conversation with African-American students who seek him out. They do not seek him out because he provides better reference services [though he is an excellent reference librarian]; they seek him out because they have a connection with him that goes beyond the need for information.

We still have a long way to go in recruiting more librarians from outside the EuroAmerican mainstream, and this is a challenge that you – the librarians – and we – the library science educators – must meet together. Each year we have about 100 graduate students in our program, though that promises to increase dramatically now that we are expanding into the Philadelphia area. Of the approximately 100 we currently have enrolled, two are African-American, two are Asians, and two are Native American, and these numbers are fairly typical of most library schools except for the two historically black schools, the one Spanish language school, and the University of Hawaii, which attracts many Asians and Pacific Islanders. We are expanding our program into urban areas to meet the needs of the commonwealth but also to reach out to traditionally underrepresented populations in our profession. You can help us through recruitment and we, in turn, will try to respond by continuing to expand our program and make it more accessible to all sectors of the commonwealth.

I mentioned earlier there were a couple of good reasons to diversify our personnel. I have talked at length about the service reason. If that doesn't convince you, perhaps the political reason will. Unless you've been on Mars for the past 20 years, you have been aware of recurrent reports in the news media of the changing demographics of our society. The latest census reveals the strongest growth trends in our culture are among non-EuroAmericans. As these populations gain the ascendancy at the voting booth they will both directly and indirectly control the decisions that relate to the funding of libraries. And if they see libraries as irrelevant to their destinies and their interest that vision will eventually be translated into funding cuts. And this is as it should be. If we can't make our services relevant to the people who are paying our salaries, then we should be downsized or eliminated. I do not think that will happen, however, as I think the service motivation of our profession will keep us far out in front of any political backlash of the growing majority...at least, that's the assumption I'm going on.

I've talked for some time now about collection development and staffing. I would like to say a few words about programming, and then I will sit down. This is NOT the time for applause!

In most of the courses I teach at Clarion I try to build in real-life experiences, for instance, in addition to discussing the theory of reference service, I try to give students a taste of what it is really like to do reference work by having them answer question sets, participate in mock reference interviews, etc. I also have a variety of exercises that require them to "get their feet wet" in the area of programming and materials development. I am always amazed when I am designing these assignments at what a rich opportunity there is in librarianship for developing multicultural programming. Here are a few of the ideas and strategies that I employ that seem to work well.



First, always be on the lookout for ways of incorporating other cultures into the products, displays, etc that you create. When I design reference questions I always purposely include questions that relate to other cultures or that challenge assumptions that grow out of EuroAmerican culture such as “What were Kajiga Balihuta’s major contributions to philosophy?” Here, you are required to go beyond traditional philosophical sources which tend to overlook the contributions of Africans and you also have to really wrestle with name authority issues. So, when you’re designing library instructional products, consider expanding your illustrative material to include other cultures. If you’ve designed a handout to explain how to locate short stories, it’s just as easy to use an Hispanic American writer like Gary Soto as it is to use Edgar Alan Poe.

Second, look for ways to use the library’s collection to interpret and celebrate other cultures at appropriate times. When I was at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, I was, among other things, in charge of the library’s special collections which included major archival holdings of various Jewish institutions. In looking for a way to display these materials in appropriate manner, I came across an annual event that lends itself beautifully to a library display – National Jewish Book Month. So each year we mounted larger and more elaborate displays which – in addition to the library’s holdings – began drawing on the artifacts and heirlooms of local Jewish families – Menorahs, dreidles, prayer cloths, etc. It became an event that was anticipated by the entire university community. Now, at Clarion, I usually teach the course Multicultural Sources and Services in the fall when National Jewish Book Month occurs. As a part of the class, all of the students have to work as a committee to design and install an interpretive exhibit celebrating National Jewish Book Month. The results have been impressive and have even been written up in the local newspapers.

Third, try to put yourself in the shoes of a non-librarian who is seeking information on a topic related to his or her culture. While some of this information can be found in a classification area related to that culture, much of it lies hidden in non-culture specific areas. The real offender here, of course, is fiction. Most public libraries organize it alphabetically by author so unless you just happen to know that James Baldwin is African American and wrote exquisite stories about African American culture you would be out of luck because for the most part, adult fiction is not classified and does not have subject headings. There are tools for finding it, such as NovelList and the Wilson Catalogs but even when these tools are available, most library patrons are not aware of how they are used. What I have found that works quite well are pathfinders and bibliographies on specific themes, including cultural themes. When I teach the basic reference class I have students develop an annotated bibliography of adult-level fiction that is both genre-specific and about a specific culture, for example, “Mysteries Featuring Gay Detectives,”

“Westerns with African American Characters,” etc. These can be easily posted on your library’s Website or put in spin racks in the reading room.

One of the things you discover when preparing such bibliographies and pathfinders are the strengths and weaknesses of your library in specific areas. In most cases I have found that libraries actually have a wealth of information to put together such reading lists, so that you can develop reader advisory tools that direct people to Korean romances and Israeli detective novels. These are not the sort of things you can routinely expect to find in book stores but any good library will be able to deliver the goods. And that is something of which we should be immensely proud.

To return briefly to Asheim, I would like to conclude my remarks with a brief textual reading from his 1950s speech. “A trap into which librarians sometimes fall is to accept the mass medium notion that the ‘public’ is a kind of single entity. It is not, of course, and because it is not, the library must diligently work to perform the individualized service which the mass media ignore. Most of the other media of communication today deliberately design their services to fit an audience – a vast undifferentiated, faceless audience. The library still serves the individuals who make up the audience and they are all different. This is a most important distinction to observe; if we ever lose that, the brave new world of 1984 will really have arrived.”