

Uniting Multicultural Voices in Libraries

By: Clara M. Chu

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*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

A multicultural society is constituted not just by culturally diverse groups but it consists of the individuals who make up each distinct group. In such a rich and dynamic society, a diversity of voices is found. For example, the unified voice of a group may exist alongside the individual voices of group members representing distinct perspectives. My theme as EMIERT Chair is the uniting of multicultural voices in libraries by recognizing, respecting, and transmitting diverse and shared perspectives. This means that the voices of mainstream society found in books and other materials and represented in the users, staff, administration, and funders of libraries need to share library space with the voices of ethnoracial individuals and groups.

Public library history shows that services have not been equally provided to all residents of the United States; the voices and information needs of many have been ignored or made invisible. For example, during the early part of this century services to immigrants and African Americans were differentiated. "Librarians set policies to encourage basic educational opportunities for immigrants and discourage the availability of such opportunities for Blacks" (MacCann, 1989; p. 97). In his book on American public library service to immigrants (for the most part Europeans), Jones concludes that "... the public library was a consistent provider of information and personal attention, which empowered many immigrants to lead productive, fulfilling lives and to enter into the mainstream of American life." (Jones, 1999; pp. 193, 195) Service to immigrants was a central and continuing mission from the time when the American Library Association (ALA) was founded to the dissolution of its Committee on Work with the Foreign Born (ALA CWFB), 1876 to 1948, respectively. However, these services were provided for a specific purpose; that is, they were part of the Americanization, i.e., assimilation, efforts by public libraries.

Any action towards equity of information access needs to be based on the same understanding of multiculturalism in libraries. In order to have a mutual understanding and to work toward common goals, I wish to share the following working definitions of multicultural library services I have been using for the last ten years. Multiculturalism is the recognition that we live in a multicultural society, that each constituent contributes to the development of our society and should have equal opportunities, and that culture determines, consciously or unconsciously, much of our perceptions and behaviors. Culture includes nationality, race, and ethnicity, as well as other variables, and is manifested in customary behaviors, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking, and communicative style. Multicultural information services include both the provision of multicultural information to all types of users and the provision of information services specifically targeted to ethnoracial groups.

The challenge and fulfillment of working and serving culturally diverse communities are linked to the continually evolving and dynamic nature of these communities as a result of immigration, migration, interethnic or interracial marriage, and the availability of distributed communication networks, such as the Internet. All these elements were addressed at our annual program. In collaboration with REFORMA, EMIERT presented the program "Racially and Ethnic Mixed People: Information Needs, Services, and the 2000 Census" on Sunday, June 27th at the ALA annual conference in New Orleans. This possibly first national panel and dialogue on information service to racially and ethnic mixed people drew an audience of over 100. This program, which was

followed by a book signing of *White Chocolate* (Note: Complimentary copies of the novel were provided by the publisher, Forge), addressed the identities, experiences and information needs of racially and ethnic mixed people; the information resources and services to address these needs; the collecting of Census data on race and multiracial/ethnic people; and the use of Census data in designing and planning services.

I had the honor of moderating a distinguished panel of speakers that included:

Karen Downing, University of Michigan Library, and Creator of the Web page "Karen Downing's Homepage" where she presents her interracial family and a bibliography on "Resources by and About Interracial & Multi-Cultural People" <<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~kdown/karen.html>> — shared her multiracial experiences, the challenges of finding information on multiracial topics, and the information needs that her Web page addresses.

Elizabeth Atkins Bowman, author of *White Chocolate* (Forge, 1998) — spoke on her multiracial experiences, how she incorporates them in her writing, and the treatment of multiracial/ethnic experiences in fiction.

Linda Absher, Sequent Computer Systems, and Creator of the webpage "You Don't Look Japanese! — Interracial/Biracial Resources" <<http://www.angelfire.com/or/biracl/>> — described her difficult experiences and information needs as a multiracial person, the need for multiracial materials, and the development of her webpage.

Judith A. Castiano, San Diego Public Library — discussed multiracial issues from an American Indian perspective and the opportunities of libraries working with community organizations or social service agencies to address the needs of racially and ethnically mixed people.

Claudette Bennett, U.S. Census Bureau — presented an historical perspective on the Census Special Populations Statistics and the current issues regarding a multiracial Census category.

Toni Bissessar, Brooklyn Public Library — described her experiences addressing multiethnic/racial questions, and spoke on the challenges of using census data to create a community profile and to plan library services for racially and ethnic mixed people.

In addition to the joint REFORMA sponsorship, the program was endorsed by the American Indian Library Association (ALLA), Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA), Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA), ALA Government Documents Round Table (GODORT), and Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLDS). In New Orleans, we were also enriched by the programs presented by the Jewish Information Committee, "Why is this Jewish Community Different From All Other Jewish Communities of the Deep South?": History and Culture of the Jews of Louisiana and New Orleans, and the Armenian Libraries and Librarians Information Committee, "Armenian Linkages."

How do we unite multicultural voices in libraries? Through our actions in the following areas of library service:

1. Staffing - Constitute a culturally diverse and multilingual staff whereby individuals have an equal and realistic opportunity of holding any position and level of responsibility. Such a staff make-up demonstrates that librarianship is an equal opportunity and viable profession, reflects the cultural make-up of the community, and provides professional role models and mentors to children and young adults.

2. Services - Library services, including reference, collections, programming, hours of service, organization of materials, and information technologies, should emphasize equity of access to all users and reflect their interests and needs. It is necessary to conduct community analyses and needs assessments to learn about subject areas, forms of information dissemination, languages of communication, and physical access appropriate for a multicultural community. One place to start is with signage and library forms in multiple languages. Two potentially useful Internet sources are: *PLUS: Public Libraries Using Spanish*

<<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Thebes/8107>>, created by Bruce Jensen, and my *Diversity & Libraries Web Site* <<http://scow.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/cchu/diversity/index.html>>, which serves as a macro site providing links to major Internet resources and lists of other useful resources.

3. Collections - Library material should include individual as well as shared opinions and perspectives of members of culturally diverse groups in the languages and formats to meet the needs of a multicultural community. Otherwise, users who do not see/hear/read about themselves in library materials will not have their group or be themselves validated and will remain invisible to others. Group stereotypes will persist if information about diversity of opinions within groups is not made available.

4. Programming - Through programs librarians offer activities that not only address the information needs of users but create an opportunity to interact more personally with them. These programs should be available in languages appropriate to the multicultural user community and address topics that allow users to share their cultures and concerns and enhance their lives. Involvement of community members in the planning and delivery of programs ensures ownership and relevance of activities. In thinking about the opportunity of libraries to unite multicultural voices, I am inspired by the work of David Cohen, an EMIERT founding member. In the Summer of 1997, David's "Open Hearing: The Meaning of Multiculturalism" program at ALA addressed how people are brought together by library programming, services, and books, and he recently wrote about "Bringing People Together" in the *EMIE Bulletin* (vol. XVI(4), Summer 1999, p. 3). David has dedicated his life to multicultural librarianship and it was a special honor for EMIERT members to commemorate his 90[±] birthday at the annual membership meeting (see *American Libraries*, 30(7): 85, August 1999) In addition, the EMIERT Board approved the David Cohen Multicultural Library and Information Paper Award. This award for best research paper recognizes David's long-term contribution to multicultural library and information services, and education; honors his work as a founding and active member of EMIERT, and long-time editor and publisher of the *EMIE Bulletin*; addresses his concern about the lack of published research in multicultural librarianship; and encourages others to remember and aspire to David's commitment to multiculturalism. Josh Cohen is chairing this award's committee.

5. Promotion, Outreach and Collaboration - The availability and range of library services needs to be communicated to its community, especially to individuals who may not have grown up in places with free public services. Non-mainstream media channels should be used and visits to community locales should be made. In order to tap into community expertise and not duplicate efforts community, collaboration should be sought in all areas of service development, provision, and decision making. For the latter, the Board of Directors should represent the diversity of the community.

6. Advocacy - In fulfilling its social responsibility, librarians can play a significant role in providing information to empower multicultural communities and advocating equal access to information and information technologies to all members of society, for the publication of materials which represent all, especially minority, experiences, and for the representation of all voices in libraries.

7. Research and Education - Expertise and research on multicultural groups, their information needs, and appropriate services need to be conducted and disseminated through publication and librarianship courses. In order to deliver effective and successful multicultural services, they should be designed based on informed practice and empirical data. (See above for information on the David Cohen Multicultural Library and Information Paper Award.)

As this year's EMIERT Chair, my work follows the able leadership of past-Chair Tamiye Meehan and I look forward to representing your voice as we work together in uniting multicultural voices in libraries. EMIERT can play a leadership role and work with other professional organizations to raise multicultural voices. Speak up for multicultural library services and to share your perspectives and expertise in the *EMIE Bulletin* and the *EMIE-L* discussion list. Information about EMIERT officers and activities can be found on our Web site hosted by John Barnett <<http://lonestar.utsa.edu/jbarnett/emie.html>>. Let's hear from you and let's honor our multicultural voices. These voices of many originate from the heart, the heart of individuals and groups striving for recognition, respect, equal opportunity, and happiness.

Hear my whisper.

Read my sister's yearnings. Learn the craft of our ancestors. Listen to the songs of my tribe. Watch the dances of my people.

Reflect on the words of our leaders. Share in the struggle of our community.

Remember my brother's face.

Teach our children to find their voice.

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