

Duarte, M. (2013) "Engaging Diversity and Building Community: Keynote Lecture at the 2013 iYouth Conference." *iYouth*, Seattle, Washington. February 9, 2013, University of Washington Information School.

Good morning.

Thank you for inviting me to participate in the 2013 iYouth conference. I am honored to be your guest, especially, as this year's theme is on a topic that is close to my heart. That is the topic of finding common ground to engage with diversity toward building a safe inspiring community for the young people for whom we care.

I am honored to offer you this morning one way to think about these ideas: diversity, community, and youth. While each idea is worthy of much thought, many conferences and many conversations, I will do my best to make these ideas meaningful to you in the here and now.

Community

First, let's start with community. Take a moment and shake the hand of the individual sitting beside you, in front of you, and behind you. Please introduce yourselves, and briefly share what has brought you here today. It's important that we enjoy each other's company, as by the end of this talk, we are going to initiate a new relationship as the iYouth 2013 community.

Now we know one another, names and faces. We know that each of us has arrived with purpose. We also know, without having said it, that each of us, at one point or another, was a child, a young person experiencing the world, just learning how to make sense of it.

Youth

This brings me to this idea of youth. Let's take a moment to remember how we were as children. Be still for a moment, close your eyes, and remember yourself at thirteen years old. What would you have been doing on a Saturday like this one? What city or town were you in? How did you look? How did you dress? The room that you slept in: what did it look like? When you slept, what were your dreams like? Who did you love? Who loved you? Who scared you? Who were your friends? What did they look like when you walked together, and laughed together? How did you feel about school? How did you feel about learning new things? What did you wish for? Who did you wish you could be? What was your favorite book? Why?

You can open your eyes. Let's come back into the present. Each of you has a card that says, 'Hello! My name is 'fill-in-the-blank.' I work as 'fill-in-the-blank.' Please take a moment to fill this out. I will soon explain what we are going to do with these cards.

This idea of youth. There is so much possibility in this idea of youth. When as librarians and educators we think of serving young people, we have all these ideals, values and requirements in mind. We think, 'my third-graders have to be able to pass their reading test, or risk being held back;' 'I can't seem to get teen boys to come into the library; they are too much into video games;' 'I'm worried parents will be upset about the violence in this manga series. I think I'll shelve it YA,' and so forth. Our concerns are laced with the worries of an adult society. We want our youth to be educated a certain way so that they can make it through the school system and get a job as an adult. We want our youth to be well-rounded; as adults we believe we know what 'well-rounded' means. We don't want our youth to be uncomfortable. We want to provide shelter, but we do not want to shelter the children in our communities to the point that they are unable to make wise decisions. We want our children to grow up to be wise, but we worry that we are not the best suited to guide them. Sometimes we aren't good at listening to what young people have to say. Is it because we forgot how to see like a six-year-old? Imagine

like a twelve-year-old? Need like a seventeen-year-old? As librarians serving young people, it is our job to help the young people in our care acquire the tools and techniques that will help them to become literate, inquisitive, and confident in their capacity to learn. But those are just part of the job. As leaders in our communities, our goals are greater. It is our privilege to inspire in young people a love for the stories around them, especially the ones they live through day by day.

Diversity

Now I will tell you true stories about this idea of diversity. At thirteen I was a student in Zia Middle School, in Las Cruces, New Mexico, about thirty minutes from El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. The year before, we had had our first school shooting in that small town. There had been some unsolved murders. It seemed like whoever committed those crimes could speed into town invisible in the night, and disappear via the Interstate 10, deep into the bigger cities toward which Las Cruces is but a crossroads between the United States and Mexico. At thirteen, one of my friends had gotten herself a high school boyfriend. She thought she might be pregnant. We lay in the back of my father's truck, looking up at the moon sitting like a slice of lime in the dark sky. She asked me to feel her belly, to see if I could feel a baby in there. I put my hand on her stomach. I didn't know what I was feeling for. I drew my hand back. I told her, 'my grandmother's people say there is a rabbit in the moon.' Her family was from Thailand. She told me, 'so do mine. But they say it's a hare.'

How do we find common ground? How do we draw together as a community, and why, and when? I think it's the stories that hold us together, like threads in a great weaving we are too preoccupied to discern.

Since I was twelve I wanted to be a writer. I would curl up in the back of my mother's van and listen as she drove in the night through the roads connecting Tucson, Las Cruces, and Alamogordo, and told scary stories with her sisters about ghostly brides,

executed soldiers, and owls that could talk. I jumped up and down when my father would come home, because he always had a story about how he was going to start a union strike with the janitors at the hospital, how he built a dialysis machine out of a washing machine when he was at Sunnyside High in Tucson, and how in college, he and his engineering friends had a plan to cast a giant hologram of the Virgin Mary on A Mountain in Tucson, so that they could watch all of south Tucson repent! (They were nerds.) But I loved that. I still love it, and I wonder, when am I going to get a chance to write all of these stories?

But can you hear in these bits I share with you now the seeds of possibility? College. I was a child, and my father told a story where one setting was in college. This is a big important idea to share with a skinny little brown girl growing up thirty minutes from one of the most violent sites of socially allowable murders against women, the femicides of Ciudad Juarez, the border, where the governors can be charged with acts just as heinous as the leaders of cartels, and where factories pop up and shut down like morning glories in the rainy season. College. Union strikes. Animals that talk, that communicate, that plan just like you and I. One thing about the borderlands: they are, in part, a crystallization of the remarkable social inequity between classes, races, genders, nationalities, languages, and the physical capacities of differently abled people. So when I, as a person who came of age in the borderlands, hear this ideal of diversity, what I hear is less the dream of a socially just world, where all different peoples have an equal opportunity, and more the reality that when one group of people stands up, another must stand down. When the adults speak, are the young people silenced? When the men speak, are the women silenced? When the whites speak, are the dark-skinned silenced? And what of the wealthy and the impoverished? And what of those in-between? If I want to share stories with my neighbor, who is so different from myself, how do I know when it's time to speak, and time to listen? And what if they do not hear me when it is my turn to speak? What if they do not care? What if they cannot hear me? What do I do in that oppressive deafness, that some would call ignorance, the

transverse of diversity, the unwillingness to find meaning in the stories of the oppressed.

When in 2010 the state of Arizona passed House Bill 2281, banning ethnic studies in the public schools, and in particular, Mexican American studies at Sunnyside High School, where my father first built his washing machine dialysis machine, I was struck silent. I took a moment. I called my family. They were in an airport on their way to Las Vegas. (My mother loves to play the slots.) My sister was horrified, 'what is going on in the world!' she asked. Because, having grown up with a knowledge of Mexican American history, Civil Rights history, and our own tribal ancestry, we know, as a family, as a part of the borderlands literary community, how many sacrifices across the generations it has taken for us to have supported writers like Sandra Cisneros, Rudolfo Acuna, Roberto Anaya, Los Bros Hernandez, the musicians Santana and Los Lobos, the artists Frida Kahlo, Yuyi Morales, and Lalo Alcaraz, I mean even Dora the Explorer was not imaginable for us as children growing up, much less for our parents. How many compelling stories were told in how many families such that these individuals, on their own, in a quiet moment, made a commitment in their hearts to inscribe these stories so that others could learn from them and be inspired by them, regardless of the overt racism of a society that says, through mainstream presses and galleries and libraries, 'there is no place for your stories here, because we don't have the money, the cultural background, the time, the space.' The tacit message—the microaggression—is, 'We do not find your stories meaningful. We do not believe your people have the right to read. Or to write. We do not believe that you have anything to teach us, or to teach the young people in the schools.' As a librarian, I find the Arizona ban on ethnic studies to be an assault on the intellectual freedom of all of the people of the borderlands. As an educator, it is painful for me to imagine young people becoming confused, disappointed, or disenchanted by their literary heritage because the adults could not find common ground, in fact, in segregated cities like Tucson and Phoenix and El Paso,

refused, on a massive scale over time, to shake their neighbor's hand. They refused to make that connection.

Diversity is not about the proportion of books featuring people of color in our collections relative to the actual number of people in our communities. It is not about making sure that we simply 'hear' the concerns of those who are different or less privileged than we are. It is not about tasting lots of different kinds of ethnic foods or marking all the ethnic days of celebration on a workplace calendar. To me, diversity is about understanding how, where, and why oppression occurs. It is about understanding your own family's histories, and the stories of the communities of which you are a part. It is about knowing these stories in your heart, so that when, as a librarian, you meet a young person who is different from you, as each one is, you are prepared to connect with him through the sharing of a story, which is ultimately the fine art of making meaning. This ability to connect with another in a compassionate way is the basis of community building.

Our work as librarians serving young people is never done. This December I traveled to El Paso, Texas, for a convening of border writers in exile. We met at a photography studio in El Chuco, off of Gateway Boulevard, so named for the border crossing into Ciudad Juarez. A lovely tall woman with wild curly hair approached the microphone. Her four year old daughter peeked out from behind her mother's leg. The little girl smiled and hid, purple boots shining, as her mother read a poem about the lessons her Lakota grandmother shared with her regarding the becoming of this place called America. I introduced myself to this poet, Georgina Cecilia Perez, an eighth-grade school teacher at Parkland Middle School, whose students not only consistently ace the state-mandated exams but who also host a banned books reading group, in which they read the writings of Chicano, Mexican, and Mexican American writers. This is part of an Indigenous approach to learning, informed by the morally just practice of the Nahua Ollin: 'In order to make change, I must change myself first.' I called her while she was shopping for

tomatoes and other ingredients at the local supermarket down in El Chuco. 'Georgina!' I said, 'Let me interview you and tell my fellow librarians up north about your good work!' 'Tell them about Tu Libro,' she said, Tu Libro meaning 'Your Book,' the organization she has formed to deliver new and gently used books featuring Chicano, Mexican, and Indigenous authors and characters to children in the El Paso region. She purchases boxes of books, and takes them to local festivals, where, Sharpie in hand, she greets children and invites them to choose a book, and write their name in it. 'This is your very own book,' she tells them. 'You don't have to return it to the school, you don't have to give it back to the library, it is your very own to keep in your collection so that you can begin to have a library in your home.' I asked Georgina, 'Why do you do this work?' She sighed, held her daughter on her lap, and explained to me what it was like growing up in El Paso where white teachers teach brown students erroneous history lessons about dead Indians and how nothing of historical importance ever happened in El Paso, in El Chuco, where young people don't imagine that they can leave the barrios they grow up in. She told me about an assignment she gives students where she asks them to choose their favorite food, the one food that is so meaningful to their families during the holidays, and to learn and write about the history of that special dish: the ingredients, the preparation, the importance of sharing the taste with loved ones. Every time, she told me, a parent calls upset by this assignment. I nod in understanding. Our border communities are rife with historical trauma. Families love another, but also stifle the anger of our shared losses, the losses caused by incarceration, abuse, workplace discrimination, and the willful ignorance by those in power. This is the hardest part of engaging diversity to build community. We have to stand beside those in pain, acknowledge that suffering, and tell them that they must turn that anger into a passion to know more. Listen closely for the source of the trauma, listen to the stories, and find the beauty in those stories. As Leslie Marmon Silko, Scott Momaday, and Cherrie Moraga teach us, our stories are our survival. They are a medicine that will help us locate the pain in our communities, and as we learn to add on to those stories and tell them in a new light, we heal the pain, and cultivate beauty. We begin to see ourselves in

a new light. Instead of misbegotten and out of place, we begin to feel strong, intelligent, and good about ourselves. Georgina quotes Paolo Freire to her students, 'read the word and read the world.' She tells me, 'my passion is to inspire the desire for knowledge in others.' I asked her, how can I ask my fellow librarians to help you in your work? She gave me a list of instructions, predicated by the following question:

Ask yourselves, iYouth community, what are you doing for the world? Not what are you doing for a paycheck, but what are you doing for the world?

Followed by:

Read, read, read. Read the books banned by the state of Arizona. Read the books that are important to the communities you work for. Because if you do not know what the books are about, then how will you know what kinds of books your community will like? How will you know what stories your communities need to tell?

Find out who is on the local school board. Are they literate and educated individuals? Do they know anything about how to educate, care for, and inspire young people? Use your position of privilege to make them aware of what you need to best serve the young people in your care.

Turn anger into a passion to know more. Make it possible for your youth to find out the reasons for whatever it is that they are going through. Get them the books they need to find out more. Introduce them to the writers who can help them learn.

I would add to this list:

Support the good work of the ethnic caucuses and social justice roundtables of the American Library Association. Those include the American Indian Librarians Association,

the Black Caucus, the Asian Pacific American Librarian's Association, the Chinese American Librarians' Association, and Reforma. Each year these associations work to support youth services by hosting book awards and events such as Dia de los Ninos. For those of you following the work of the Librotraficantes, we can celebrate how Tony Diaz and the Librotraficantes recently received the 2012 Downs' Intellectual Freedom Award for their efforts in spreading awareness of Arizona's censorship campaign and in delivering banned books to readers throughout the southwest.

Learn your history. Know where your people came from. Know the stories that brought them to this place, and that have shaped you who are and the work that you do. These stories will serve you when you strive to find common ground in places you've never been before. Learn to listen without speaking. Learn to lead by following. Learn to be a white ally. Learn to be a straight ally. Learn about how you are privileged, and when appropriate, use that to correct the microaggressive words of your neighbors who are still learning to live in right relation to others in spite of an unjust world.

Practice this from the Nahua Ollin: 'In order to make change, I must first change myself.' Our communities are only as strong as our hearts, and our hearts are made stronger through right relationships with our neighbors.

Finally, something concrete. Something here and now. Through iYouth's generosity, I am pleased to accept an honorarium of \$500. Half of that I am going to donate in your name to purchase books for the Tu Libro program. The other half I am donating back to iYouth with a caveat. I would like for you to donate that half to a local organization that supports literacy for diverse youth in the Seattle area. This could be through El Centro de La Raza, the Clear Sky tutoring program, the Social Justice Fund, or any other organization of your choosing. I told officers in the American Indian Librarians Association that I was giving this talk, and they donated five t-shirts, which I hope that five of you will purchase today at \$20 a pop, proceeds of which will go to support the

American Indian Youth Literature Award as well as more books for Tu Libro. Remember in the beginning when I said that the iYouth community is initiating a new relationship today? Here it is. Each of you has a card that begins with a greeting in Spanish, either 'Saludos' or 'Hola.' Please fill out this card. What we are going to do is send these cards to Georgina, and she is going to give them to her students and the young people she gives books to through the Tu Libro program, with the next book give-away scheduled for a March festival at the Cesar Chavez Park in El Paso, Texas. We are also going to send the cards you filled out in the beginning of the talk. As of now, each of you is a librotraficante. Georgina has also asked me to invite you to visit the blog she has made for her eighth grade students, called the Reader, where they discuss books and writing. Most of her students have never left El Paso, and Georgina would very much like to introduce them to you so that you can share your experiences and help open up their world through this blog.

Thank you for your kind attention this morning. This is a lovely group with so much to share and to learn. Please enjoy this beautiful day. Let's all express our gratitude to the iYouth organizing committee.