

Dialogue: A Short Story

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Abstract

An Indigenous author is working with her non-Indigenous editor on the manuscript for her novel. This piece deals with cultural ignorance, dealing with the colonial past, and moving towards a more promising future of open dialogue and the validation of the Indigenous voice.

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Dialogue

The manuscript sat on Naomi Adams' desk and she picked it up for what felt like the hundredth time. She kept picking it up because she felt the need to hold it, because she saw the potential in it, and she wanted to revisit the haunting words the author had conjured. Naomi had spent the past three years at Raincoover Press and she hadn't come across a voice like Courtney Johnson's before. Maybe this was because Courtney was the first Indigenous author Naomi was going to work with. Sure, Courtney offered a different cultural perspective, but in Naomi's mind a piece of literature should just speak for itself. If literature was good then it would stand out, at least that was Naomi's core belief. When trying to decide on which authors to take on at Raincoover Press she didn't think of the skin colour behind the names. It never really occurred to her that the majority of author's who had their titles published were white, or even the fact that she herself was white. Clueing into the systemic power structures that allowed this to happen just weren't at the front of Naomi's mind because hey, it was about the writing.

In this case the writing took Naomi to Northern British Columbia, through the mountains and forests, and along the Highway of Tears. Between Prince

George and Prince Rupert stretched 720km of highway where over thirty women had gone missing with the majority of them being Aboriginal. From 1989 to 2006 nine women went missing or were found murdered along this stretch of Highway 16, all but one of those women were Aboriginal. In her novel, Courtney went into detail about the investigation and violence that women continued to experience in this isolated part of the province. The lack of public transit and prevalence of poverty in the area encouraged the dangerous practice of hitchhiking, which is how Courtney's novel began. A sixteen-year-old Aboriginal girl was hitchhiking along the highway, trying to travel from Prince George to the coastal Prince Rupert when she disappeared. One year later the missing girl shows up in Prince Rupert, damaged but alive. She had permanently lost her voice and this was when Courtney began to weave in elements of magic realism into her story as her protagonist is unable to communicate with anyone, even though her written explanations make sense on paper. This was where Naomi felt the need for some heavier editing to make the storyline clearer. Of course, there was some technical editing to do as well, like every piece of writing needed.

Naomi put the manuscript back on her desk after flipping through a few pages when there was a knock at her office's door.

"Come in," she called.

Courtney Johnson opened the door and came into the room, taking the seat across from Naomi. Courtney was in her mid-twenties, wore her black hair in an edgy bob and came in with a smile.

"Overall I love your story," Naomi started and Courtney breathed a sigh of relief, "but of course there are some things that needed to be changed."

This was the difficult part. For authors their books were their babies, and it was difficult to hear that your baby wasn't perfect and needed some work. Naomi had developed a gentle but firm technique over the years that she found most effective, even with her more sensitive authors.

It was best to jump right in so Naomi cracked open the manuscript for the hundred-and-first time, flipping past the red mark ups and straight to the sticky notes.

"The biggest thing that I focused my edits on was your protagonist's inability to communicate clearly. She's mute and I understand that for her the spoken

word is out, but it becomes confusing when only a few people can understand her written word and even then, when they try to communicate that back to the detectives or other authority figures it's misunderstood. Maybe if your protagonist spoke in riddles that could be more effective?"

Naomi wasn't looking at Courtney's reaction when those words left her mouth. Courtney hadn't said anything, or rather Naomi hadn't left her room to say anything before charging forward in her commentary. A clenched jaw and pursed lips were what Courtney was left with in reaction to the riddle suggestion. However, Naomi felt that it could give the protagonist some mystical characteristics and revamp that old medicine man trope.

"I also think that Detective Smith should play a more prominent role since he's one of the characters trying to solve the case," Naomi continued. In Naomi's mind it couldn't hurt the story to add a strong male character and to give more insight to the justice system that was trying to unravel the mystery of all those disappeared girls. There was even potential to make Detective John Smith a romantic interest for the protagonist. It was almost always a good hook for the female audience.

"Your protagonist is... *Lheidli T'enneh*," Naomi stumbled over the unfamiliar words. Her pronunciation was the same for the majority of the other First Nations tribes, Squamish or the Musqueam Nations excluded since they were more commonly known in Vancouver. Naomi could never get a grasp on the pronunciation of the smaller Nations, or their languages which were so foreign to her. How were you supposed to pronounce something with a "?" in the middle of it?

Naomi continued, "And you use their tribe's language quite a bit. I just think that it will be easier for your readers if you used fewer foreign words since it makes reading less smooth."

Naomi was trying her best to think of ways to improve this novel for a broader market. They would have to rearrange some things, make some adjustments here and there but it would benefit Courtney in the end, at least that's what Naomi was thinking. Her methods may have been tailoring themselves to the mainstream but it was called the mainstream for the reason and it meant a larger readership.

At this point Naomi was essentially reciting a monologue without consulting with the author, or even acknowledging her body language which consisted of crossed-arms, tensed shoulders and furrowed brows.

“Final note,” Naomi said with a smile, oblivious to what was going on with Courtney. “You have all these wolf motifs through your novel and include them frequently in the story. I guess I don’t really understand their purpose or what they really add to the story so maybe we can take them out if they’re not really necessary.”

Naomi passed the marked up manuscript over to Courtney, “I’ve attached all my notes, and there’s some mark ups throughout the manuscript, just small things. Take a look and get back to me with the revised copy by the end of the month?”

Courtney took a deep breath and took her baby back but didn’t get up to leave. “You’ve never worked with an Indigenous author before, have you?”

This took Naomi by surprise and she hesitated before answering, “No, I haven’t. But why should that matter? We’re working with stories and it’s the writing that counts. Your writing shows a lot of promise, Courtney.”

“It’s not just the story that matters, it’s also the storyteller. My people lost many of our storytellers and our stories because of colonization. Our voices are constantly discredited and it’s only just now that we are starting to be heard again. Do you know of my people’s historic trauma at all?” Courtney spoke as evenly as she could but her voice caught with emotion at the end.

“I... I’m not very familiar. I’m sorry,” Naomi admitted. Yes, she knew colonialism was bad and she knew that her ancestors had caused a lot of harm to the Indigenous people who inhabited these lands long before them. However, she was fuzzy on the details of the atrocities committed.

“Based on the suggestions you’ve made for my manuscript it really shows how unaware you are. I don’t think I feel comfortable working with you on this project, and I would like to take my manuscript elsewhere. Maybe to one of the four Indigenous publishing houses in Canada. I believe they would have a better understanding for what my manuscript needs,” Courtney said and stood up, the hurt clear on her face.

Naomi was bewildered, she couldn't understand why Courtney would want to give up her deal with Raincouver Press, especially over something so small. All she could understand was that she was about to lose an author and a great piece of literature along with her.

"Wait, please, I'm sorry," Naomi started, not knowing in the slightest where to start fixing things. "Please don't go."

Courtney sighed, "Don't be sorry, it's not you who is personally responsible for what happened to my people. Except, you've been quite ignorant and that's the problem I have."

Naomi was standing at this point too, "Again, I'm sorry... but I also don't understand," she pleaded.

"All of the things you 'edited,' well they have cultural significance. It's not your fault for not understanding, but if I took those parts out or changed them then it would take away from the message I'm trying to get across with this novel," Courtney said.

A moment of silence hung in the air as Naomi let that sink in, and all she wanted to do was apologize again. Naomi refrained from an apology, and instead asked, "What if you explained things to me instead?"

Courtney hugged her manuscript to her chest, "I don't know. I was hoping that we were going to have a closer relationship as editor and author. In the past, granted I was working with a First Nations editor, we had more of a mentorship relationship and we worked closely together on my writing. It was more of a dialogue and it was my hope that we were going to have the same kind of relationship. Right now, I'm not getting that feeling from you," Courtney said.

"Courtney, I want to at least try to create a dialogue between us. Maybe having a dialogue would help me to understand?" Naomi offered.

"I think creating a dialogue *would* help you understand, but I think you need to educate yourself on your own time before that can happen," Courtney said.

There was a part of Naomi that was wondering if all this work was worth it just for this one novel, this one author. The Indigenous presses and their Indigenous editors were probably much better equipped to work with Courtney. However, Naomi could only name about one of the Indigenous presses off the top of her head and that wasn't a good sign for Courtney getting her novel the

audience it deserved. There was a part of Naomi that wanted to fight for Courtney and give her novel the best chance it could. It was clear which part of Naomi was going to win.

“Then let me educate myself, and then we’ll talk,” Naomi was stubborn, and she wasn’t giving up that easily on a novel she believed in even when she didn’t understand the cultural implications.

Courtney hesitated, “I’m going to need some time to think about it. This novel isn’t just important to me, but all of my people. That is something you have to understand.”

“Is a week enough time? Why don’t you come back next week at the same time and we can try this again?” Naomi offered. A week was enough time for her to think things over as well, and decide whether it was best to let Courtney go or not.

Slowly, Courtney nodded, “I’ll see you in a week.” Naomi wondered whether Courtney had also been weighing her options before she answered.

As soon as Courtney left her office Naomi went to work. Research was nearly second nature for Naomi and it didn’t take her long to get lost in her author’s past. She began with Courtney’s author bio and went on to look up the two tribes that made up her heritage. It was her father who was a member of the Lheidli T’enneh Nation in the Prince George area. Naomi cringed at the memory of how she had pronounced the name. Courtney’s mother was from the Tsleil-Waututh Nation, who had its roots in the Burrard Inlet area. More digging and Naomi discovered that the Tsleil-Waututh Nation had a strong connection to wolves. An important legend for their people was that of the wolf and their ancestor who was rescued and raised by a she-wolf. That would explain the wolf motifs through the novel. Naomi cringed again at her misstep.

When Naomi began to research the Highway of Tears she found herself walking down a dark path which lead back to the first colonizers who invaded the west. The forced assimilation brought on by the colonizers destroyed languages and cultures, their domination and authoritative abuse created a society of exclusion that tore Aboriginal peoples from their homes and traditional lands. The residential schools brought forth more horrible realities. Children were forced away from their families, brought to schools that not only abused their culture and

attempted to erase their languages but also subjected the children to physical and sexual abuse. Naomi leaned away from her computer and rubbed her face. Even though it had been unintentional she had still been dismissive of Courtney's, and therefore her novel's, cultural context.

Naomi still didn't understand how nearly all of her edits were useless or stepped on toes but this was a start and it did point out some of the blatant errors she had made. Maybe Naomi could still convince Courtney to go for a hunky detective character or to tone down the use of Indigenous languages to make it easier for her readers. A dialogue was about compromises, right?

One week later and the two women were sitting across from each other again, and Courtney held skepticism in her eyes. She had been on the brink of calling this meeting off and spending her time with an Indigenous editor she was familiar with. Instead she decided to take a chance.

"I want to let you know that I've done my research and I'm sorry for being ignorant. I can't possibly understand what it feels like to have the history that your people have, but I'm acknowledging it and I know that it happened," Naomi began.

Courtney let out a breath she had been apparently holding in, "Thank you. Thank you for acknowledging that. Again, I know it's not your fault for what has happened in the past, and I don't blame you for that. Acknowledgment is a start, but I still believe you have a lot to learn." Courtney said.

Naomi wasn't sure if she was ever going to know enough, and she knew for a fact that she was never going to truly be able to understand Courtney's point of view. Except this was something she wanted to work on, despite everything.

"There's only one way to start learning," Naomi said.

"That's true," Courtney said and cracked a small grin. Maybe there was potential here after all.

Author's Note

First, I would like to acknowledge that there are limitations in working with this topic in such a short timeframe and if I had more time I would have loved to have workshopped this project further. It would have been ideal to interview Indigenous authors and editors to garner a better understanding of what the publishing process is like for them. The problems that Indigenous authors, editors and presses face are complex and deserve an equally complex response. I hope that this short story at least serves as a start to that response, just as my characters are starting with an acknowledgment and opening a dialogue.

The protagonist Naomi made several errors in how she went about editing Courtney's manuscript. In case it wasn't clear, Courtney's protagonist's inability to communicate is a metaphor. First Nations have had their voices robbed from them, their languages destroyed and left on the border of extinction because of colonization. The residential schools left them unable to communicate in their own languages since it was forbidden for them to speak them and they were given insufficient education in English. They were left "mute." In Courtney's novel it's only the white characters who cannot understand the protagonist and they dismiss her explanations. Plus, the 'riddle' suggestion by Naomi to "fix" this problem is just a throwback to the wise old Indian man trope, which is just one of the many harmful distortions and appropriations placed on Indigenous people and their cultures.

Naomi's second blunder was with Detective John Smith (yes, a play on the John Smith in Pocahontas). Not only is there an issue with that from a feminist perspective, but there is a huge issue in giving another white character power in a story that is not theirs. It would give way to the white man swooping in to save the day, which somehow forgives all the wrongs of the past by the colonizers. Having a character like Detective John Smith become more prominent only dismisses Indigenous authority.

Language is the third mistake Naomi makes. English, one of the colonial languages, has done an excellent job of erasing many other languages over the last few centuries. It is important that Indigenous authors are able to use their

languages in their writing, which helps preserve and strengthen their culture. Again, it's important to acknowledge that their language is *just* as important as the colonial one. Having their language present in their books may not be mainstream, and it may very well be difficult for "typical" readers to understand but it is something that is necessary for the Indigenous community as well as the author.

Lastly, there was the cultural misstep with the wolf motif in Courtney's novel. This is meant to address the problem that non-Indigenous people would have trouble picking up on things that are culturally significant and would be ignorant to the meaning behind these symbols. For the Tseil-Waututh Nation wolves are seen as protectors, and this is something I learned by doing my research. Had I read a novel with a prevalence of wolves without this background knowledge it is unlikely I would have made the connection. That's why for non-Indigenous editors working with Indigenous authors it is crucial that they take the time to create that dialogue and make certain that cultural subtleties are not lost along the way because of ignorance.

First Nations authors struggle for representation in this country, and they struggle to have their voices heard. It is painful to see people with privilege, such as white editors, allowing themselves to remain ignorant whether or not they mean harm. Akiwenzie-Damm discusses the close relationship Indigenous author and editor have in her article "We think differently. We have a different understanding': Editing Indigenous Texts as an Indigenous Editor." That relationship is an open dialogue and that is how I believe we will achieve progress and move towards a better cultural understanding in the future. It is an idealistic hope, but perhaps if we can facilitate that open dialogue we can address those deeply wounding issues of cultural appropriation and cultural neglect. I'm not saying those conversations will be easy, but as I wrote in this story: there's only one way to learn, and that's by simply starting the process.



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