

Episode 93: Andrea Riley Mukavetz

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, I talk with Andrea Riley Mukavetz about cultural rhetorics, Indigenous rhetorics, writing as healing and resistance, decolonial theory, relationality, and Tribal Colleges and Universities.

Andrea Riley Mukavetz is an Assistant Professor in the Integrative, Religious, and Intercultural Studies Department at Grand Valley State University. Andrea is devoted to creating cultural rhetorics models of scholarly practice that make visible the rhetorical traditions of Indigenous worldviews, histories, and traditions. Andrea teaches courses related to collaborative communication, the relationship between story, lived experience, and identity, intercultural communication, and Indigenous environmental justice. Andrea's scholarship has been published in *enculturation: a journal of rhetoric, writing, and culture*, *Studies in American Indian Literature*, *College Composition and Communication*, and *Composition Studies*. Her book, *You Better Go See Geri: An Odawa Elder's Life of Resilience and Recovery* (2021) was published by Oregon State University.

Andrea, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your teaching draws on cultural rhetorics and theorizes non-western and Indigenous knowledge making practices. Can you talk about your approach to teaching and how you center Indigenous knowledge making practices and Indigenous rhetorics in the writing classroom?

ARM: Yeah, absolutely, and Meegwetch so much for having me here. I'm so excited to talk with you today. So I'm not in an English or a writing department, I'm actually in an interdisciplinary department that has an integrative studies and a religious studies and an intercultural studies, like certificate and degrees, so it changed a lot of how I teach writing and think about it. For me, how I tend to begin a lot of my writing classes or how I teach writing in these classes that are not writing classes, for example, I begin with Lee Maracle's essay on oratory. I've cited quite a bit in my scholarship, and I love this essay because for me it provides this framework that talks about this hierarchy between theory, history, and story. I want to have a conversation with my students about the role of power, knowledge making, colonialism, because in my experience, a lot of times, students have this belief or understanding that they have to write or perform in academic language.

And that is not an expectation in my classroom. I want to begin by talking about our beliefs and how we've been trained and how that stems from colonialism, and that Lee Maracle essay helps me guide us through that conversation. What I like also about that essay is that she talks about the role of writing as healing, reclaiming, culture resistance in ceremony. I invite students in classes to think about their purposes in those kinds of ways. What does it look like for a student of any background to practice resistance or healing in writing? Because I think that we all carry

some pain that might come from being in a writing classroom. I want to acknowledge that first. So a lot of times I take on this “auntie” role in the classroom. I say that in a way that's framed in this Indigenous community perspective where the auntie is someone of a certain age who provides guidance and mentorship and is committed to nurturing and educating young people when the elders and the parents can't be there.

The auntie is someone who shares their success and failure. So I come to my students as a writer, I come to them as a storyteller and I share my experiences of success, of failure, of purpose, and show them my own writing and research practice, and use it not just as a model, but as an invitation to talk about what does it look like to be a writer teaching writing, and asking students to write. So that CCC's article on snakes that just came out, for me, that is a good example of what a lot of the prompts in my classrooms look like when I ask students to learn land-based methods. So a lot of asking them to think about what it means to learn from the land and how to build a relationship with it, and that relationship isn't an easy one or a pretty one.

I like that it becomes a space to practice critical reflection, incorporating historical context, thinking about space and place and bodies as a framework. And then lastly, the other way I would describe those Indigenous values and the writing classroom for me is through consent. So thinking about consent as a guiding principle. I've changed a lot of my classrooms to where I invite students to consent to how and what I teach. I pair that alongside resistance. So if students don't want to do something in the classroom, if it hurts them too much, if they don't have the space for it, we talk about that. And then we modify that assignment or we come up with another option.

SW: Do you mind sharing and talking about an assignment prompt that invites this writing as healing and writing as resistance practice and approach?

ARM: Yeah, so I teach this course called “Life Journeys,” which it's such a funny name for a course, but this is very much what it means to be in this Liberal Studies department. So in that course, I have a major research paper where I ask students to practice story as methodology, and we're reading memoirs all semester. Students have a couple different options. So one is they do something that's similar to Deborah Miranda's *Bad Indians* where they tell a family history and they take the time to work through artifacts, materials, things like that. The goal there is that they don't have to tell a tidy history. They don't have to tell a positive story. But it's about understanding their relationship to the world, understanding their relationship to the family as a way to then think about who they want to be, right, in the future.

I've seen a lot of these moments where it looks like healing or coming to terms or understanding and in West Michigan that is such an important moment for students because in this space, there's a lot of tension politically or with religious practice, and students don't get that opportunity to look critically at their own family and think critically about their relationship to that family, and what was taught to them and then how they want to move forward.

And then with resistance, this has looked like a lot of different things in my classroom. So right now, I'm having students write a statement of relational practice. I'm teaching a course called “Anishinaabek Lifeways.” I have this question next to it, and so I ask a question, what does it

mean to be the arms of an institution and invested in Indigenous cultural continuance and sovereignty? So to me, that's a way that I want them to think about their complicity that we all have in academia, but also how within academia, how can we use resources or intervene or disrupt the colonial project that's in there. Those are some really cool essays that they provide.

SW: Andrea, you mentioned colonialism and decolonialism, and I feel like your work is connected to these ideas. Maybe you could provide a brief definition of decolonial theory and the key tenets and practices of centering decolonialism. Maybe you could share another project or two that complements this approach to teaching writing.

ARM: I've been thinking, so for me, a lot of it's around Indigenous cultural continuance and sovereignty, it's centering Indigenous worldviews and belief systems, and it's the role of land repatriation that's central to all this. So I love all the decolonial theory that is very much about delinking from the colonial matrix of power or trying to make space or reimagine the university in this like non-western project. For me, more and more, I've been moving towards "indigenizing" instead of "decolonial" because I want to emphasize and insist that to talk about the colonality is to talk about Indigenous people's lives. I feel like more and more, sometimes we get away from that conversation.

In my classes and my work, this notion of land repatriation, this emphasis on sovereignty, this talk of what does it look like to engage in settler harm reduction or what does it look like to center our worldviews in different personal or professional spaces are all a consistent component to my classrooms and conversations with students. I teach this one course called "Wicked Problems of Sustainability." It's partly an environmental studies course and partly it is like integrative studies, a liberal studies foundations course. So one semester, it's a community-based learning class. I have a lot of weird feelings about community-based learning and service learning already for probably obvious reasons.

So we worked with the West Michigan Environmental Action Council. I had a relationship with them ahead of time, and they're the oldest environmental justice organization in West Michigan. They have a white paper and they wanted to get my feedback on how to decolonize it. I'm just like, "You can't decolonize a white paper." I thought it was such a good opportunity for both WMEAC and the students to understand just that. So WMEAC came in all semester, they talked about their goals, their strategic action plan, and we read work around Indigenous environmental justice work and environmental racism, and students gave some awesome feedback on this white paper. They just went at it, they were talking about holding WMEAC accountable to their claims and talking about moments where they have to support and work with Indigenous community. They have to think about what their board looks like and recruiting Indigenous voices on they're board and why those voices and perspectives aren't there.

And they did this presentation where they gave that feedback and they completely just surprised the director and the board because they were looking at these like 18-24 year olds, like "kids" and thinking that they weren't going to hold them accountable in this way. From that project, WMEAC is now revising their strategic action plan. They've interviewed people of color and Indigenous people on how to meet these goals. And they're putting that into action and that's because of this course.

Then another project I wanted to share, I was talking about this course in Anishinaabek Lifeways and students who took that other course look at problems, they were mainly settler white students who realized that as environmental justice organizers, that they needed to do more. So we have this agricultural space on campus called the “Sustainable Agricultural Project.” So lot of white farm club students who want to just do CSA work and it's great, they're great students. They decided that they wanted to practice land repatriation. So in this course, what we did was we wrote a proposal to the director of the staff, and we decided that we wanted to build a teaching lodge for the Native students and Indigenous community members in the area. And a teaching lodge is like, it's a sacred space and a medicine garden. So there's supposed to be a 75x75 plot of land where Native students and Indigenous faculty staff and community members can share knowledge and engage in the practices and tenets that I just talked about.

And that's been a long process. It's been approved, I got some funding for it. Most of those students have graduated and they're waiting to build the lodge. And we got stuck in legal. I want to share that because I think that this is a part of what I was talking about with decoloniality and Indigenous sovereignty is that, in Michigan there's a lot of concerns around affirmative action and making sure that everything is equal and fair, that they're not providing preference to one group or another. The legal team almost didn't approve our teaching lodge and medicine garden because they were so concerned about the idea of land repatriation. They were so concerned about negotiating this expectation that the Native students would be in charge of this space. They were so concerned about possible vandalization, things like that. But to me, those are the projects that I'm doing in my class right now that reflect those tenets and those belief systems. They've been really hard and also very exciting at the same time.

SW: You've also worked on oral history projects with multi-generational Native women. In your enculturation article, you talk about relationality and practicing relationality in your writing. What stands out to you the most from these conversations and how has this work shaped your teaching?

ARM: I love this question. So for me, when I look back at that project and those early publications, I really think that that reflects who I was as a graduate student, understanding my role in Indigenous communities and what I wanted to say in and to our discipline about Indigenous knowledges and rhetorical knowledge and traditions. So for me what continues to stay the same is that when I think about relationality, place, contacts and relationships are still what guide how I think about that. I'm in Grand Rapids and the Indigenous community here is very different than it is in Lansing, even though we're only like an hour and a half away. I've been forming these relationships since 2017, and so my teaching here is very interesting because there is both a small, but also very large invisible Indigenous community on campus than in West Michigan.

I'm teaching Native students all the time in my classes and I'm teaching their siblings, their cousins, one semester I'll have a parent, the other semester I'll have their children. To me, this is all relational. I'm trying to figure out what that is teaching me and what I want to say now to the discipline about those experiences. I think it's very much about making Indigenous space in higher ed and our profession. It's a lived experience. I'm around people who devoted their entire

lives to explaining to universities to K-12, that Indigenous students matter, that we need better and different metrics to talk about Indigenous student experiences in communities.

And the projects that I mentioned before, I think that those reflect that relationality component. I'm inviting students from all different backgrounds to understand how to tend to and recognize and work in coalition for Indigenous student success and cultural growth. To me, the accountability aspect of this is what's really crucial to relationality is that it's teaching me about how I need to hold my institution accountable and how I am okay with needing to be held accountable by indigenous community members in the area.

SW: Andrea, I think this last question builds on what you're talking about in terms of holding the discipline and ourselves accountable, I'm interested in hearing your thoughts on the lack of representation in voices and experiences coming from teacher-scholars and students within Tribal Colleges; a lack of representation from Indigenous educators and students. This feels like a gap in our discipline and research. Is this an accurate observation? And what is this absence or silence saying and doing? What future directions do you feel like the field can take to listen and build relationships with Tribal Colleges and Universities?

ARM: I was so glad that you asked this question. So yeah, I 100% agree with you. I mean, it just feels in general that our discipline is not having these conversations or paying attention to them. I want to hear more from Indigenous people at these Tribal Colleges. I also want to hear from Tribal education directors and curriculum specialists and the K-12 system. I feel like to me, those are interconnected. In some ways I think that those conversations are the ones that are occurring in relation to each other. It's like rhet/comp isn't listening to those conversations. I've been thinking a lot about this, and I think it's because we're not invested in teaching Indigenous students. I think that we're not invested in Indigenous faculty as well, because I think for both, you have to be invested in Indigenous communities and survival and we're not there.

I am somewhat critiquing our field and I would say the larger of academia talks about decolonial fear. I think that's because of this, there's a lot of appropriation of Indigenous concepts and discussions around decoloniality, and it's used in this way to talk about white first-year writing classes. It's used to talk about in this way of how settlers can do better for themselves. These stories are never going into those communities or understanding one's relationship to those communities. So you asked about action and things like that, and the CCCC has that Tribal faculty fellowship. The Caucus works consistently with trying to recruit people to apply for that fellowship and it's really hard. It's hard because it's very clear that our profession isn't up to receive or be interested in what people from Tribal Colleges have to say.

Even in general, thinking about our relationship, our proximity to Tribal Colleges, and how hard it is to get folks from there to come to these conferences is another issue. In the spring, the DNE college invited a bunch of scholars from our discipline, myself included, to present an online conference called "Still Sacred." I see them paying attention to our scholarship, our ideas, our contributions around Indigenous perspectives and first-year writing. So we need to think about what our values are and how we're not representing the actual work and labor of what happens in a Tribal College.

So my friend Adam, he teaches at Saginaw Chippewa Tribal College, and he teaches things like how to trap muskrats and the stories of beavers. Again, thinking about land-based practices. I think that, I'm a theorist and I'm going to say, I think we're too theoretical. I think that's, and I'm wondering if that's even true, but I think it is. I think that we need to really rethink what we're valuing and we need to also go and establish those relationships with Tribal Colleges, offer resources, reciprocity, establish trust, show that we can make space for them and our discipline in our profession.

SW: Thanks, Andrea. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.