CHAPTER 5.

DAKOTA LANGUAGE, RHETORICAL SOVEREIGNTY, AND THE INEFFABLE INFLUENCE OF ANNE RUGGLES GERE ON ENGLISH STUDIES

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I first met Dr. Anne Ruggles Gere (hereafter referred to simply as "Anne") when she was reviewing the English program (a part of her career discussed in Chapter 16) at Eastern Washington University, where I was working as a consultant in the writing center. As she interviewed us about the work of the center, I mentioned that I was returning to Alaska to enroll in Teachers for Alaska (TFA). Anne said that her daughter, Cindy, would also be in TFA. This program, much like the Teachers for Tomorrow program described by Buehler in Chapter 18, was designed to foster culturally responsive pedagogy, specifically responsive to Alaska Native cultures. One of the program requirements was to complete a practicum in an Alaska Native village school. I didn't know it at the time, but this experience set me on a path that eventually led to studying pedagogical approaches to Native American literatures under Anne's direction in the Joint Program of English and Education (JPEE) at the University of Michigan (UM).

For the practicum, I was assigned to Tanacross Village with Cindy Gere, Anne's adopted Kaska Athabaskan daughter. I thought that we would drive to Tanacross, a village about two hundred miles from Fairbanks, and report to the principal at the school. Cindy had different ideas. She said we first needed to drive to a trading post to buy large spools of moose gut, work gloves, and other gifts for the people in the village. I remember Cindy was especially concerned with finding the right moose gut. She also had bundles of sage that she had picked and prepared herself. Once we arrived at the turnoff from the highway to get to the village, I pulled the car up to the school, thinking that now we would check in. Cindy said, "No, let's go for a walk." So, we started walking through the village, which consisted of some houses in the forest—no lawns, no landscaping. I could see moose meat drying on

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2025.2456.2.05

wooden structures behind the houses. This was not the suburban neighborhood of my own upbringing in Fairbanks.

Soon, children ran out to meet us and walk with us. They were curious about who we were, asking us questions. We talked with them and walked. Then one child steered us toward his house, and we met his mom. After a brief conversation, we continued on our way. Then more people invited us in. At that point, Cindy and I split up. I was invited to go for a walk with a woman a little older than myself.

On the walk, I got the sense of how different this village was from any small town I had ever visited. It was in the middle of the wilderness. There were no paved roads, sidewalks, or curbs. There was a forest of black spruce surrounding the village. It was fall, and I still recall the pungent smell of ripe, high bush cranberries under the stands of birch trees that were turning bright yellow in the brief period between the short growing season under the midnight sun and a long subarctic winter. As we walked farther away from the houses, I began to worry about bears, as I often did in Alaska, having come across so many unexpectedly in my hikes and mountain bike rides. I asked my companion if it was common to see bears here. She said, "We don't say the name of that animal when we are out like this," an important teaching, though I didn't fully realize it at the time.

When we got back to the village, we again saw Cindy, who had met some elders. They had invited us to the community center that evening. Only then would Cindy allow us to "check in" at the school, which we then did. Villages like Tanacross don't have hotels, so visitors sleep at the school. We stowed our sleeping bags in the principal's office and then went to the community center.

At this point, Cindy brought out the gifts and gave them to the elders. They then began to tell us stories. Maybe one of the elders had heard that I had asked about bears because I remember him telling us that in "story time" (which means back when people and animals could change natures), Bear and woman were married. So, he advised, if you ever encounter a bear, just rip open your shirt (he pantomimed ripping open his shirt) and show Bear that you are woman. He will remember that you were married, and he will leave you alone. I thought maybe he was joking with me, but I had read those Athabaskan stories about woman and Bear.

When I reflect back on that practicum, I remember vividly being a stranger, a white woman in a Native village, and not really knowing what to do. I imagine the reception I received would have been very different if I had not been traveling with Cindy. I trusted her advice on how to enter this place, and it made a difference. I think this story is a pivotal one in my life because it was the first time I set aside institutional requirements in favor of Indigenous imperatives. When later I would read Krista Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening* about "standing under" (28) discourses for true understanding (and "hard listening," as Glenn and Adams describe in

Chapter 21), I would have the Tanacross experience as a touchstone.

After the practicum in Tanacross and after six years of teaching English at the high school I had attended in Fairbanks, Alaska, a high school with about 14 percent Alaska Native students, I joined the 2003 JPEE cohort at the University of Michigan. I was surprised when the course Anne taught on literacy included reading *Wynema* by S. Alice Callahan, the first published novel (1891) by a woman of Native American descent. I would have expected a book like that to be offered only in a Native American literature course, but at that time, I did not know about Gere's interdisciplinary expertise. I did, however, know that Cindy had had a daughter, Denali, because Denali was born at a hospital in Fairbanks in between the time my two sons were born there. And I knew that Anne was adept at blending the personal and the professional, having published about her journey with Cindy in a book edited by my Alaska Native high school classmate Dr. Siobhan Wescott and University of Alaska professor Dr. Judith Kleinfeld. These attributes of Anne's work—interdisciplinarity and the blurring of boundaries—influenced my approach to becoming a researcher and scholar.

NATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

In addition to studying with Anne at UM, I had the opportunity to take an American Indian rhetorics course with Dr. Malea Powell (Miami, Shawnee) at Michigan State. Dr. Powell was a member of the Modern Language Association's committee on the literatures of people of color in the United States and Canada (CLPCUSC) when they prepared a "Statement on Native American Languages in the College and University Curriculum," which was approved in May of 2005 by the MLA executive council, of which Anne Gere was a member. As cited in the statement, the Committee drew on "the Native American Languages Act (Public Law 101-477, Title I), dated October 30, 1990" in making its recommendations (226). The statement calls for the following:

> Whenever possible, institutions of higher education should work with Native American language communities and with Native American educational and governing bodies to implement these recommendations.
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> 1. To grant credit for the study of Native American languages when undertaken to fulfill undergraduate and graduate requirements in foreign languages.
> 2. To include, where appropriate, Native American languages in the curriculum in the same manner as foreign languages and to grant proficiency in Native American

> languages the same full academic credit as proficiency in foreign languages. Institutions of higher education are particularly encouraged to teach the languages of Native American nations in their regions, whenever possible.
>
> 3. To encourage research to create and update dictionaries, grammars, orthographies, curricula, and other materials to support the teaching of Native American languages. The preparation of these materials is especially important for languages for which they have never been developed. (227)

In 2006 the CLPCUSC endorsed the "Statement on Indigenous Languages of the World" by the MLA ad hoc committee on Native American Languages, which reads:

> Throughout the world, many Indigenous languages have been so depleted that their survival is now in a critical state. … Preserving and revitalizing Indigenous languages must be central. … [I]nstitutions should, whenever possible, support the study of and research in Indigenous languages and literatures worldwide and devise means for native speakers of Indigenous languages to fulfill foreign language requirements with their Indigenous languages. (Modern Language Association, "Statement on Indigenous Languages")

The MLA statements were useful to me as a new assistant professor at North Dakota State University (NDSU) when I collaborated with others in the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences on a Dakota Initiative, which brought Dr. Clifford Canku, a Native speaker of Dakota, to our department starting in the fall of 2009 for the purpose of teaching Dakota literature, history, and culture and also to serve as a role model and mentor to Native students on our campus. Dr. Canku said there were only three hundred speakers of Dakota on his reservation—the Lake Traverse reservation of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate.

We created a faculty position for Dr. Canku to teach the Dakota language with commitments of support from various departments—history, sociology, and anthropology; modern languages; and English. The NDSU press release led with the precarity of the language as the main impetus for the position:

> Linguists worldwide are trying to save languages, and nowhere are they dying more quickly than in North America. With 25,000 speakers on 15 U.S. and Canadian reservations, Da-

> kota is considered an "unsafe" language in terms of longevity. "[Languages] are dying here," said Bruce Maylath, professor of English. "That's what we are trying to avoid happening to Dakota." ("Dakota Studies Courses")

Although the courses taught by the Dakota professor would have course numbers from history and modern languages, we hosted his office in our department—a physical reminder, in addition to the statements by our professional organizations, to make space in English studies for Indigenous languages.

As someone married to an Italian citizen, with whom I have been a partner in raising bilingual children, I felt an obligation to learn the Italian language, and to use it. I thought about our family's move to North Dakota, the land where Dakota people have lived for millennia. Shouldn't I—out of respect for this land and its people—learn Dakota as well?

I decided to enroll in Dr. Canku's beginning course in the Dakota language. One of the more senior faculty members in my department warned me that members of the promotion and tenure committee might look askance at my taking a class when I should be doing my research, so I thought about my reasons for doing so. For one, if I were working at a university in another country, I most certainly would have learned, or be actively working to learn, the language spoken by the people of that place. Here I was, at North **Dakota** State University, and for the first time the language for which the university was named was being taught. To me, it seemed like a matter of basic respect to the Indigenous people to learn something of the language spoken on their land. Sometimes exhibiting respect is more important than institutional expectations, to go back to my experience with Cindy Gere in Tanacross Village.

Another reason had to do with my research interests in studying how Native American literatures are taught. With so much damage caused by non-Native researchers who have worked with Native people in the past, we non-Native people cannot just barge in and start researching. As Devon Abbott Mihesuah (Choctaw) writes, "For decades anthropologists and other writers have treated Natives as second-class citizens" (76–77). When Dr. Mihesuah was at Northern Arizona University, she chaired a committee of scholars charged with "researching the problems of knowledge appropriation and ethical transgressions when researching and writing about Indians" (75). Her book, *So You Want to Write about American Indians?,* provides a lot of important information, including ethical guidelines in Chapter 6.

In addition to guidelines, I believe, as a non-Native person, that it is best to wait and see if we are invited to work with a Native community. If invited, it is important to behave as a respectful guest, listening and taking care to learn what

questions the community wants to ask and collaborating with the community to design research that answers their questions. Furthermore, the results of the research should reside with the people studied. Reciprocity and respect should be at the core of whatever project emerges. Something that makes this work easier today is the presence of tribally controlled Institutional Research Boards (IRB) that spell out additional requirements for how research is to be conducted and also review research proposals themselves. Many of Dr. Mihesuah's guidelines have been incorporated into tribal research protocols.

While waiting for an invitation that might or might not come, I attended Dakota class, reflecting on my previous experiences with studying language. I had studied Spanish from middle school through a minor in college, and Spanish was the language exam I took for entering my doctoral program. From past experiences with studying Spanish, French, and Italian, I expected to work on vocabulary acquisition, learn verb conjugations, actively repeat what the teacher has said or speak with classmates, and learn grammar.

Dakota class started out very differently.

First, the class was mainly in English. It soon became clear why—Dr. Canku wanted us to first understand some essential information about Dakota culture along with learning the language, teachings that continued throughout the course. This made sense; after all, culture is transmitted through language.

In the textbook used for the course, Nicolette Knudson et al. write in the foreword, "We'd like to stress, that the culture of the Dakota people is not captured in this workbook" (ix), which could be another reason why Dr. Canku emphasized culture in class. Even though the foreword makes this statement, the very first chapter of the book doesn't start with basic greetings and vocabulary, like the first chapter of my Spanish textbook. Instead, it covers "The Great Sioux Nation," "Early European Contact," "Treaties and Government Policy," "Modern Accomplishments," and "Resources." Some advice given in this last section: "Remember! There are many myths and untruths about the Dakota and Native Americans in general. Always question the source, use your own judgement, and, if possible, verify the information with an elder" (6).

Dr. Canku told us about the Oceti Sakowin (Seven Council Fires) of the Dakota, the names of each group, and where their lands are. He also shared his land values in class: "We have a sacred relation with the land, Mother Earth; it is a living entity that we have to take care of." This value was shared multiple times throughout the class, whether through stories or advice given. For example, Dr. Canku told us that when you die, your relatives call out to you by your tribal name and your spirit flies away to be with them. He said when you come to the Milky Way, an old woman asks, "What did you do down there?" He told us the answer is you learned that everything is your relative, a belief encapsulated in the

phrase Mitakuye Owasin—we are all related. He clarified that the Dakota have a relationship with everything—including Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit—but don't worship anything. This word, "wakan," meaning sacred or divine, came up again and again. The land is sacred, and it has a healing power, Dr. Canku told us, saying that when he has a headache, he doesn't take an aspirin; he takes a walk in nature. The land and everything around us are also a source of knowledge, he emphasized during a class lecture: "We humans—we were created last, so we are supposed to learn from everything that came before us."

Dr. Canku also talked about how language means something different to him than it does to most others. He explained how when Dakota warriors came back to the village after fighting, the community would bring them into the inipi, the sweat lodge. It was where they got to talk to Wakan Tanka and get anything off their chests that they needed to so they wouldn't suffer in the future. Whatever is said in the inipi is not repeated outside because it belongs to God. Dr. Canku emphasized that "language is alive" and also that "we look at language as a creative force." He also said, "Every language has its own spirit, and you have to respect that." He said when you go to a wacipi (pow-wow), don't pay attention to what people look like, the way their hair is done; instead, pay attention to the language you hear because, "To us, language is a living entity that is very, very sacred."

My point here, in talking about the experience of studying the Dakota language, is that there was much more being taught than just vocabulary and grammar. The stories and teachings from Dr. Canku were communicating to me a different epistemological view of the world. This view is reflected even in the syntax of a Dakota sentence. The sentence, "I have a dog" is said this way in Dakota:

Sunka wan bduhe.

Sunka means dog; wan is the article, and bduhe means I have. Dr. Canku explained that the reason the sentence starts with dog is that Dakota people value life first, *all* forms of life. Possession is not as important for Dakota people as it is for white people, so the sentence doesn't start with "I have." He likened the Dakota sentence to a flight of stairs going down, with the most important things at the beginning of the sentence and the least important at the end.

Other early lessons had to do with how the language is different for men and women. For example, a simple thank you for a man is Pidamayaye-do and for a woman it is Pidamayaye-ye. The different endings—do and ye—mean the same thing: "it is said" or "it is so." Dr. Canku stated that men and women are equal in Dakota culture, but they have different roles in society. The importance of this was emphasized when Dr. Canku gave me a handout, "The Five

Stages of Becoming a Dakota Man or Woman." Diane Wilson, who is a Dakota descendant, writes about this lesson in her book (86–87). In the chapter about Dr. Canku, Wilson shares how teaching about these roles helps Dakota people heal from the trauma they have experienced. Mona Susan Power, in *A Council of Dolls*, also emphasizes the healing power of her Dakota language.

When I reflect on the Dakota class, I realize that—in addition to learning some language—I was learning about the importance of being an ally. Everything—our country's violent history of settler colonization, the genocidal practice of assimilation carried out in over 500 boarding schools around the country, as well as resilience and survival, even healing, and more—is carried in the language. I took another Dakota language class, and this time a non-Native professor from the history department joined in. In later years, he and I would advise and serve on committees for many Native graduate students. I believe Dakota language class helped us to support these students.

SUPPORTING RHETORICAL SOVEREIGNTY IN WRITING ASSESSMENT

The value of studying Dakota also helped me when I was invited by Karen Comeau to work with teachers at Sitting Bull College on the Standing Rock Reservation and at the reservation middle school and high school on writing assessment. The Lakota language is dominant at Standing Rock, but the languages—some say dialects—are similar.

As I was working with the teachers, most of whom were non-Native, one of the principal concerns they had was that students did poorly on writing assessments, like the COMPASS test. I noticed this focus on standardized assessments had led to some deficit thinking about the writing abilities of the Native students, so I was trying to shift the discussion to assets. One day I had an opportunity to use the structure of a Dakota sentence to make this shift. Once teachers could see that what they assumed was an entrenched "error" in student writing was actually a marker of Dakota language structure, they were able to focus on teaching strategies for code-switching instead of "fixing the errors" in the student writing.

Out of respect for Sitting Bull College, we first published the results of our writing assessment in *Tribal College Journal* because that is where they wanted the work to be seen (Sassi et al.). Unfortunately for me as an untenured professor, this was not a peer-reviewed publication at the time. Later, I was able to publish a book chapter about the work with Mya Poe, Asao Inoue, and Norbert Elliott as editors and mentors for my work. This allowed me the space to explore the data in more detail and in relation to the concept of rhetorical sovereignty. Scott Richard Lyons (Leech Lake Ojibwe) conceptualizes rhetorical sovereignty as "the inherent right

and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" (449–50). Rhetorical sovereignty, I argue, also extends to the right to determine how writing is assessed (Sassi, "Bending"). Shortly after we did this study, Sitting Bull College stopped using the COMPASS test as a measure of student writing and later the test itself was discontinued.

LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE

Another reason to learn Native languages is that Indigenous authors are using more and more of their Native languages in their books. For example, in Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman*, based on her grandfather's work to prevent termination of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, the final scene is of Zhanaat tapping birch trees as Patrice returns home. They drink the tonic of birch sap together, and the last line is "Ambe be-izhaan omaa akiing miinawa" (439). There is no translation of this line (or others in the book) and there is no glossary of Ojibwe words, so the expectation is that the reader knows some Ojibwe and/or is willing to learn. When Erdrich won the Aspen Award for this book, she said, "So, this particular award will also go to assist in the revitalization of the Ojibwe language" (Travers).

We non-Native people, especially those of us teaching English language arts, which is a *second* language on this continent, are starting with an understanding gap (Sassi, *Rhetorics*) due to our history of (and continued complicity in) settler colonization. We have to bridge that gap by learning about our settler colonizer history, and that begins with understanding differences in world views (Cull et al.). Language holds these views and cultural values. What if doctoral programs required an exam on the language traditionally spoken on the land the institution occupies? What if all scholars could freely move across boundaries and connect the personal and the professional, as Anne Gere has so courageously done? The forces of colonization—often invisible and seemingly benign (my urge to report to the principal's office in the village of Tanacross, for example) have trapped us in a scholarly world that has yet to reach the potential of rigor, wholeness, and vitality that we need. Anne Gere, her daughter, Cindy, and her granddaughter, Denali, have ineffably influenced my scholarly journey and pursuit of these questions.

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