

“Meaning, Rhetoric, and Story” – River City Chautauqua Radio show, December 28, 2017
<http://www.kkfi.org/program-episodes/river-city-chautauqua-question-meaning/>

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First, I want to say thank you to Julie Bennett Hume for inviting me on the program for River City Chautauqua, and to you listeners.

I'll begin with a story, because that's the best way I know how. When Julie asked me if I could work with the theme of “meaning,” I laughed, because if I had to sum up what it is I teach and do, it's dealing in meaning-making. And then she told me I had 10 minutes, and that was even funnier. “Meaning” in ten minutes. OK.

But in all honesty, it really is what I work with, all the time. We all do, to be truthful: our hours, our days, our lives are clusters of experiences that we struggle to make sense of, and everyone is in the process of crafting their own story. It's a human thing. It's a social thing. Go log on and check your social media feeds – what's your story today?

As a professor, as a teacher of rhetoric and writing, I'm immersed in not just the story-building process, but also the questions surrounding how and why and for whom we shape our stories. As it turns out, making sense, and making meaning, is far more of a connected process than the idealized individualism of the United States would like to admit. We aren't just telling our stories to ourselves, and even if we compose these stories in our own heads without uttering them, we are still at least imagining an audience. We are not just telling, we are shaping, and so meaning-making is deeply rhetorical.

A note on rhetoric, and what I mean when I say that: when we talk about rhetoric in the field of study, we mean it in its broadest sense. That includes communication in all its forms, in all communities, and across communities; I know the street connotation of the term has more to do with deception and manipulation – just think of the phrase “political rhetoric” and most people will have nothing positive to say – but I mean it in this much broader sense. I'm interested in speakers and writers and makers, I'm interested in the listeners and readers and users who make up the audiences (because it's never only one audience who hears or reads), I'm interested in the contexts, I'm interested in communicative intentions, and I'm interested in the actual communicative effects of those words. I'm interested in how meaning making happens between people or between communities – or doesn't. I want to know how community building works through positive meaning-making together, and I want to know how meaning-making fails and why. That's rhetoric.

For those of us working in cultural rhetorics, it means we are looking at culture – another nebulous term – as a defining factor in rhetorical practices, whether it's how communication defines a community (which in turn shapes its communication to serve its purposes) or how communication happens across community boundaries. We're also interested in history, because cultures don't exist in a vacuum, and we are interested in tracing the lines of power and that power's impact, because we also recognize that meaning-making does not happen on an even playing field. Some voices are privileged, others are suppressed, and it rarely, if ever, happens by

accident. Power structures influence meaning making, too, and to ignore that is to ignore a key factor in who gets to speak, who has access to hear, and who sets the terms of discourse.

My particular work has to do with rhetorical practice and how it happens across cultural boundaries, in public spaces. Specifically, I work with Native American and Indigenous- owned or oriented museums and cultural centers in order to understand the ways in which Native and Indigenous communities are using museum spaces to tell their own stories. If you look at the history of museums – a Euro-American construct – they were constructed alongside the colonization of lands outside of Europe, and frequently their collections and displays were constructed to illustrate the superiority of colonists and the cultural differences and inferiorities of non-Europeans. In the United States, museums became sites for preserving Native cultures and objects as relics of the past...with no future. Native peoples were written out of those stories. So what is so beautiful to bear witness to, in all their forms, are the varying ways in which Native communities are creating their own spaces and advocating for themselves in established museums in order to speak back to the stories that erased them and in turn speak their own stories on their own terms. If you ever get to DC, go see the National Museum of the American Indian; if you ever get over to Lawrence, go visit the Haskell Cultural Center and Museum; if you ever make it up to Mount Pleasant, Michigan, go spend some time with the Saginaw Chippewa Zibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways. I promise you, it's worth your time.

That kind of work is a challenge, though. If rhetorical study teaches us that we need to think about our audience, and cultural rhetorics tells us we need to understand the histories, contexts, power structures, and cultures as part of rhetorical practice, then Indigenous rhetorics teaches us something else: it reminds us of relationship and responsibility. And if you have a situation in which you know you are speaking back to a powerful story, and most people are pretty comfortable with that story and don't really want it changed, you have to create a moment in which they want to hear you over the noise of that comfortable, wrong story. You have to tell your story the best way you know how, but you are going to have to invite them in. The audience is your guest, and your responsibility. No, Native peoples don't need your approval to exist, and they don't need to be respectable on your terms or put away their anger and grief. All of the experience has to be told. But if the story of survival and thriving and continued presence is to go beyond community boundaries, the shape of the story has to invite others in. It has to be a story that starts at the heart of the community, and then connect with other stories. Relationship. Responsibility.

At the same time, it requires that the carriers of other stories be willing to listen. Meaning making happens together, I can't say that enough. Most of my students take for granted that if you want to communicate well, you need to be able to speak or talk well. That's a commonplace you'll find inside and outside of education. It's a commonplace within the free speech debate as well – a speaker has the right to say whatever they want, it's a free country, right? The emphasis is so often on talking. What my students haven't learned to do yet, or are in the process of learning, is to listen. Actively listen. Responsibly listen. Not listen just long enough to come up with a counterargument – I mean listening intently, to understand, to see where the speaker is coming from. Relationship. Responsibility. Your story is connected to theirs, look for it. You don't have to like it, but nothing can be done unless you hear it.

But that tension, though. Meaning making isn't always a pretty exchange, your story for mine. Especially if the story is meant to cut, or hurt, or erase another person.

It shouldn't be a question of domination, of needing to erase other stories in order to keep your own. That's not how meaning making works, at least not in a way that honors all participants.

If your story is the one that has been dominant, the one that always gets told so often that everyone knows it, it is time to listen. It's your responsibility to hear more than your own story. Relationships cannot be built on one person's story.

If your story is the one that has been silenced, the one that doesn't get told, consider when you want to speak it. Your community needs you, and while it may require the right place and the right time, in your own time, new relationships cannot be built without you.

That's a start. It's not the finish.

Here's one more idea that I want to offer, one more concept, a different way of telling the stories: "constellations." Yes, like the stars. Constellations. I'm indebted to Malea Powell, Daisy Levy, Andrea Riley Mukavetz, Marilee Brooks-Gillies, Maria Novotny, and Jennifer Fisch-Ferguson for gifting us this orientation. Unlike the "us vs. them" and the "winners vs. losers" story frames we so often rely on, "constellations" gives us a way of thinking about all the stories we keep as individuals. They harmonize, contradict, they work in tension with each other, they are three-dimensional, they are in motion. We have our internal constellations and then we ourselves belong to larger clusters of stories and histories and identities, which in turn also hang together in sometimes harmonious and sometimes violently discordant connection. We have some agency in the stories we keep in our constellations – we can shape them – and we are also given stories about ourselves or our communities from the outside. For better and for worse. Whether we want them or not.

Moreover, thinking of our stories in terms of constellations allows us to consider how we are connected. How multiple perspectives, like different points of observation, allow us new understanding. and since no one person can embody all perspectives, we are reminded again of our obligation to listen and to take those perspectives as seriously as we take our own.

In the abstract, I find it beautiful, and in practice, it is hard. The "us vs. them" frame is a strong one. Not everyone chooses responsibly and roots their stories in evidence or fact. Echo-chambers abound these days, and by definition they exclude any stories except their own. Power differentials are a reality, and can't be ignored. Like everyone else, I'm wondering about the divisions in this country, and what it means to make this country great "again" when there has never yet been a time when all the stories have been reckoned with. At the same time, I still see hope. If stories are rhetorical, it means that we have choices, and choices mean agency. We can act. We can be active. If we take meaning making seriously as a practice we do together in a constellation of stories, then the intent is better relationship, and we will own the effects of our stories and words and try again when our stories fail to connect or heal.

The most interesting part of all of this? The storytelling is ongoing. Yours isn't done. Neither is mine. And I thank you for listening.
