Interview with Graduate Student: Andrea Sullivan-Clarke

Andrea Sullivan-Clarke, a member of the Muskogee Nation of Oklahoma, moved to Seattle in 2005, with her family of four children (age 5 to 13) in tow, to pursue a Ph.D. in UW's philosophy graduate program. She will defend her dissertation, *Analogical Reasoning and Scientific Practice: The Problem of Ingrained Analogy*, this spring/summer. She took time out of her extremely busy schedule to talk to us about her studies in philosophy, balancing a family and graduate school, and what her future may hold.

**How have you balanced being a parent to four children and being graduate student for the past eight years?**

I would be the first to admit that it isn't easy. Most would think that I am really organized, but I don't think I am. I have had help from friends and family; and the staff and faculty here at UW have been very supportive. As the kids got older, I expected them to be more independent and to pitch in with chores around the house. In a perfect world, that might have worked. Lately I accept that life is very messy (and it is okay that my house is too.)

**What is your dissertation about? And have you been able to combine that with your other areas of philosophical interest.**

My dissertation focuses on the problems that can occur when the assumptions grounding a metaphor are taken for granted and accepted as fact. For example, when scientists state that gas molecules are like billiard balls, they assume there are some similarities between the two. Their assumptions guide research, influencing how scientists design their experiments, and how they interpret data. If the assumptions are incorrect, like in the case of 19th century research on race, then science is led astray. I argue for organizing scientific communities in ways that will challenge the assumptions of their metaphors.

In my dissertation, I limit my analysis to scientific communities, but I would like to extend my project to other communities as well. I think that the membership practices of Native American tribes rely on internalized assumptions of race, and may be subject to similar type of critique.

**What has been your favorite part of teaching philosophy?**

I love interacting with my students. Recently, I presented Pascal's wager to my Practical Reasoning class. It went over so well, that several students hung around after class talking about how to respond to some of the objections. When the students are engaged and everyone is participating, it makes teaching wonderful. Of course, it is a challenge, but the payoff is big.

**Being a teaching assistant is a large part of graduate studies here at the UW. Did having faculty mentors help develop your teaching style?**

Definitely. Working closely with the faculty was great. I learned from each and every professor I assisted (and from some I did not assist!) I really appreciated the chance to work one-on-one with David Keyt. He helped
me to think about designing a class on Plato's *Republic*. From how to lay out the course to what topics I would cover — working with him was a great experience.

*What has being a member of the Muskogee Nation brought to your study of philosophy?*

I believe that being a Muskogee has played a large role in the types of questions that I find interesting. Metaphor, analogy, the marginalization of standpoints, and the quest for a socially responsible science can all be traced back to my being a mixed-race Native American. In addition, I think philosophy has influenced how I look at being Native too. I think tribes should turn a critical eye to their practices and goals.

*Tell us about your work on an entry about Native American Philosophy for the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP).*

I noticed that the SEP did not have any entries on Native American philosophers or philosophy. With the encouragement of Professors Michael Blake and Alison Wylie, I approached the editor of the SEP with the idea of creating a general entry. Once I had the go ahead, I asked Professor Thomas Norton-Smith (Kent State University) to co-author an entry with me. It is in the initial stages, but I could not be happier. It is an opportunity to get the word out about Native American philosophy.

*Ideally where and what would you like to be teaching when you have completed your PhD?*

I am not sure where I would like to teach, but it is very important to me that I be a role model for Native Americans who dream about going to college. I am the first in my family to attend. It isn't easy, but I had people to encourage me, and cheer me on when I needed it. It is incredibly exciting to know that I am close to finishing my dissertation. I am looking forward to the next step. Wherever I end up, you can be sure that I will be encouraging others to chase their dreams.

**People Involved:** Andrea Sullivan-Clarke

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