

26) Indigenous Design and Creating a Circular Fashion Brand with Andréanne Mulaire

ELIZABETH

You're listening to the Conscious Style Podcast, where we explore what it will take to build a better, more sustainable and equitable future for fashion. I'm your host Elizabeth joy. Now let's dive into today's episode

Hey there everyone! Today we are back with another episode on circular fashion, the theme of this season of the podcast. So, with so much talk about circularity in the fashion industry today coming from big fast fashion brands, circularity has been co-opted and greenwashed. These brands are using mass produced recycled polyester clothes to proclaim their green credentials with no mention of fair wages, safety for workers, or reducing production. They're using take back programs as a way to continue to overproduce and encourage over consumption. They are advertising textile recycling technology as a silver bullet solution that will solve all of the industry's problems.

Now, does this mean that circular fashion is a lost cause? Has it been greenwashing so much that the term circularity is totally meaningless? I do still have hope for the concept, particularly when I look at small conscious brands that are thinking through every single stage of their process. Brands like Anne Mulaire. So today on the show, I am excited to be talking with Andréanne Mulaire, the founder of Anne Mulaire about how they are building a truly circular fashion business model that is also local and ethical. Andréanne will be telling us about everything from intentional production to zero waste design practices, and tailoring services to starting a resale program.

Andréanne is of Ojibwe French Métis ancestry, so she is also going to tell us about how she continues to explore her Métis heritage through her brand. As always, the transcript for this episode is in the show notes on consciouslifeandstyle.com. And hit subscribe so that you do not miss future conversations like this one. And for more sustainable fashion content, you can subscribe to our weekly newsletter, The Conscious Edit. I share articles I'm reading, podcasts I am listening to, videos and documentaries I'm watching, and more in these emails. You can sign up for those over on consciouslifeandstyle.com/edit. Or you can find the link in the episode description. Alright, now on to today's conversation. Andréanne is going to start us off with how she got into fashion design and why she decided to create her namesake conscious fashion brand.

ANDRÉANNE

So as long as I can remember, I've always been doing crafting. I'm lucky that my parents always valued creativity. So every summer we had a project to do. And for me it was either I did some beading or necklaces, I even did some dry arrangements. And so we were always, you know, pushed to create something. It was always embraced — creativity.

With that I also started dancing, and I've always wanted to become a professional dancer. So I think in the dance world, that it was just the whole creativity of movements, the body movements, but then dancing a lot, I got injured. So of course there's a point that I had to figure out well what are you going to do if you can't do this? How, what are you going to do in life? And I decided to actually combine my two passions, which are dance and design.

Even though I didn't become a professional dancer, I wanted to be a part of the dance world. So I started doing costumes for different troupes. We all know dance costumes are expensive. So when you're, you know you're starting up, you're always trying to limit your fees. So I started making dance costumes for different dance troupe.

And then I realized two things while one that historically dance costumes are uncomfortable and are very stiff. And also there's a lot of number two, there's a lot of waste happening because you would use the costume for one to show and then you would throw it away. And they're not comfortable enough to wear at your practices, so you never wear them again and it's all made with synthetic fabric.

So when I was approached by, it's called Nafro Dance Company here in Winnipeg. They asked me if I could create costumes for their shows. And they were all about natural, and they wanted that comfort. So yeah, so I started designing for this dance troupe, and I became the costume designer for 10 years. But in doing so, I also realized the body movement, like how the fabric flowed, how there're so many aspects that I, or knowledge that I gained from doing these costumes that allowed me to create the brand I have today that is very comfortable and but still stylish. And I have to owe it to that, because, you know, trying to make a costume or a pair of pants for a dancer that she has to roll, get lifted. It has to be comfortable but yet, it has to show very well on stage. It's a challenge.

And on top of that, I wanted to make it sustainable, I want the fabric to stay and for them to also wear it throughout their practices. So you know, there's so many cool, really fun challenges for me. So that was the first part. And then when I realized that I said, you know what, I need to go and get a fashion degree. I want to learn more.

So I took a course in environmental textiles, a part of the human ecology program at U of M here in Winnipeg. And that's where we I first learned about the backscene of the fashion world. So the child labor cases, the sweatshops, racism, pollution, and that's like 20 years ago. So we didn't even talk about fast fashion. It was more just fashion in general. So for me, learning all those, I thought I was so interesting, like this is happening. So then I really want to learn about making the products, because I'm like, Okay, I know the backstory, I want to see exactly how to make the product.

So then I moved to Montreal, and embarked on the four year program in fashion design. And that's where it all started. I was able to bring the knowledge that I [captured] from the human

college courses. And what I noticed was, when I had projects, I would kind of remember what the backstory was and about the pollution. And then I would choose better fabrics.

So when I would go to the fabric store, instead of getting a cheap polyester — something that I wouldn't even wear. I started creating clothing that I said, well yeah, I would definitely wear this. This wool skirt in winter, because it's cold. And I'm going to do my A line skirt in this beautiful wool and line it with a nice cotton, because it's comfortable. Like little things like that versus just getting a very shiny satin and just make a skirt just because the project is making a line skirt. So we had to make at least 10 pieces a week, which added so many pieces to my little closet at home. So every summer, I would come back home, then I would embark into a festival or kind of sign up for a festival and have a little booth outside and I would try to sell my samples because I thought well, we'll see if people like them, first of all. And people did!

And I think that was probably the first taste of entrepreneurship, and I did that for four years. Every summer I would come home, I would sign up for another festival and then stay outside for nine hours for a whole week and try to sell my pieces.

Then you know, every year I came back to school, my projects would get a little bit more challenging and fun because I would remember customers I've met at the festival and then, so every year I just start doing the same thing.

And then in 2005, my last year, I had a lady that approached me. She was starting a yoga studio, and she asked me to create a whole clothing line for her studio. So that was probably the beginning of Anne Mulaire.

ELIZABETH

Yeah, that's so interesting. I also used to dance and I can totally relate to costumes being very uncomfortable and expensive and also wasteful. So it's really cool that you came into fashion design through your dance experience. And I know that another major influence for your brand that you talk about is your heritage. So can you tell us more about how your heritage has influenced and continues to influence your work today?

ANDRÉANNE

So Indigenous culture is generally, it's very respectful for the planet and for Mother Earth. So those are values that I was brought up with. And they're still instilled in me. So when I look at my heritage collection, for example, it was definitely inspired by my Métis ancestor. And her name is Katrine Mulaire. So she's my grandpa's grandmother. So my great, great grandmother.

And when I started my company, in 2005, my mom actually showed me a piece — an original piece of her embroidery. And she told me her story where she was the last Métis woman born in a teepee here in Winnipeg. And she became the first Métis teacher in rural Manitoba. And that it's a big story, because there were no woman teachers — she was the first. And I could just imagine, you know, just the stress and just the challenges she had to go through, to kind of stand up and say, education is very important, and I want to help our community.

And so I did find... I really resonated with her story. And I felt her spirit was very strong. So for me to keep her spirit alive, I wanted to add it to my collection and pay homage to my ancestors.

And to keep our story alive, we have to keep talking about it and sharing it with the public. So it really influenced my heritage collection. But overall, you know, the way I was brought up, it was definitely the values of buying less buying better use what you need, not what you want.

ELIZABETH

Yeah, so you mentioned your heritage collection. Can you tell us a little bit more about your heritage prints?

ANDRÉANNE

Yeah. Well, all of the designs are actually created by my father, David, who's also an Indigenous artist. When I created the company, my parents said, well, how are you going to make this your story? How, how are these clothes going to be you?

And so I really looked at my heritage, and I looked at myself, and I thought, well, I would love to add some heritage prints — or we called it more design prints at that time. And my dad being an artist, it's like, well, I can paint on them. And I said, really? Oh, that would be amazing!

So he started painting on some of my dresses, and people loved it. But then what happened is that we started getting orders and more orders. And then one day one Saturday morning, I go... cause I actually had my atelier workshop in my parents basement for eight years before being where I am today, and we have a location. So I used to be in my parents basement. And so I would go from my house, go into the basement and work every day. And I saw my dad there one Saturday morning, in his bathrobe and painting these dresses. And I thought, oh my goodness. He's like, he's becoming a sweatshop worker or we are becoming a sweatshop where he's not even having his morning coffee. He's actually coming down right away and painting for me. No, this has to stop.

So we started actually, then we started looking at alternatives to help him not have to hand paint all these prints on each garment. So we started silk screening these prints on each garment. And this allowed us to actually work more together in the collaboration of the print. So we would take more time to look at each print.

It actually takes us like a good year to think of the print we want to create, what's the story behind it. And I found it very special, our collaboration, [collaborating] with my father. I think all things are circular and just to be able to work with him and has been very meaningful on a personal level too.

ELIZABETH

That's amazing. I love how it's a family business there with your dad doing the designs.

ANDRÉANNE

Mhm. And my mom, she's always working here too. She's always helping.

But I think the one purpose of all our heritage prints that you can see on the website is that it tells a story of Indigenous people of Canada. Or you know, Canada is also called Kanata — what we used to call it a while back. And I think that's what's really beautiful because it's not just Métis but I try to regroup everyone, as unity. We're all these, you know, Indigenous people walking the same planet.

ELIZABETH

Mhm yeah. So another really unique part of your brand is that you produce entirely in Canada. Even your fabrics are Made in Ontario. And you own your own sewing and textile manufacturer, which is also very rare. So can you tell us about your commitment to local and ethical sourcing and what a vertically integrated supply chain looks like in practice?

ANDRÉANNE

Mhm. Well for me, it was very important to stay local from the beginning. This is my home. These are my roots. This is where.... I couldn't think of a better place to manufacture than right here in Winnipeg or Canada.

So when I started my company in 2005, my mum did ask me one question, just like: how are you going to help people? So I've always wanted to help create better. Going through the courses, seeing what was happening, even throughout my fashion course in Montreal, and how my colleagues were buying fabric or what they were making. I thought, okay, no, we can do better than this.

So I want to keep our production in Canada, because I wanted to keep jobs, I wanted to create jobs. You know, my journey has always been more about the purpose of helping people. So when I decided to be in Winnipeg or to keep production in Winnipeg, I knew there would be challenges.

So many people told me you cannot do this; you will not succeed. There's so many nos. But I think, perseverance, and us as Métis people of Canada were very resilient. I said, no, we will make it. And Winnipeg, for those listening, we used to be the hub of manufacturers. Like we had so many manufacturers in Winnipeg. But then when the fast fashion came in, and the overseas started, then a lot of them closed down.

So I guess maybe, deep inside, I thought we can do this, again. We can revamp our industry to have it again, local. So yeah, it was kind of a no brainer for me to try to make it to create jobs here and to keep our manufacturer here. It was also a good way for me to be able to control it, and to keep an eye on it. Because when you do it overseas, you don't know what's happening. It's the unknown. And if you don't know what's happening, you can't advocate as much.

ELIZABETH

Yes, very well said. That is such a good point. And something else that stands out about your production practices, which I think is also connected to your local and ethical sourcing is your circular fashion initiatives. And I'm really excited to explore these with you because this season of the podcast is all about circular fashion and dissecting what that really means. And you have a lot of circularity initiatives that I'm really excited about, that I'm looking forward to exploring with you. But first, could you tell us what circular fashion means to you?

ANDRÉANNE

Mhm. Good question! I remember the first time I watched the documentary, the True Cost. And it reminded me of the constant direction that I didn't want to go, nor did I want to be part of. You know, all the waste. So then, after watching that documentary, it was kind of a good reminder of what am I doing? What is this brand going to do?

So I firmly believe that if we want a healthier planet, then we have to adopt a circular economy. You know, in terms of the fashion industry, that means like making garments that last years — if not like a lifetime — designing smarter, timeless pieces, repairing, sourcing sustainable materials. That's what it means to me.

Our team is always looking for a more sustainable material that can be reused, recycled or even biodegradable. We're always putting a lot of time into research and development. So for me, that's what it means. And then if you think of what it means for Anne Mulaire, well, it also means you know, making sure that workers are paid ethically. That's also where our zero waste program came, the birth of our zero waste program. But we'll probably go more in detail with with what we do.

ELIZABETH

Yeah, we are going to get into all of the various initiatives or elements of your brand, and you actually lead into my next question quite well, which is, you know, could you tell us about your zero waste design techniques and your zero waste program?

ANDRÉANNE

Mhm. So the zero waste program or technique: it starts with when I release a collection, and then I have remnants of leftover fabric. So then these remnants are nurtured in love, and we create a whole new collection. That's when I realized, when I started doing more production I, I saw the waste happening. And I thought, uh oh, that's not good. So yeah, I started curating color combos and usually, when I create a style for the zero collection, I usually try to use a timeless style or a classic style. Because I find the zero waste concept gives it that little flair, you know?

So I think my first airways piece was a sweatshirt, and that was a few years ago, and I thought, what can I do, how can I use these remnants? Now what if I did a really cool sweatshirt, because that's something that people know, it's a cut that people understand. It's something that people wear. But let's give it this, this additional flair. So that's how it all started.

Then also, once I create the design, and because it's all small pieces, I either, so we have two styles of zero waste. We either have one where we recreate a fabric. And so when I take all the remnants, and I put it in the big bin, and I have a sewer sew little patches and recreate a big fabric, then we cut a style in that fabric again.

And then [the second] technique is where we block color, or zero waste. So I actually create patterns, small patterns to create a block color style. And those small patterns are put in my computer where I will put them directly on a marker. A marker is where you put all the patterns and it's kind of a Tetris thing, you put all the sizes, and that's where we lay it on the fabric. And we cut it from there. And so that will go in all the corners and kind of capture the whole space, the whole meter or yards of a fabric. So you have no waste, basically. And then you sew that piece together and it becomes a one-of basically.

ELIZABETH

Yeah, that's so interesting to get a little bit more of a glimpse into your practices! So when talking about waste in fashion, overproduction is a huge problem in the industry, if not the biggest problem. So with your zero waste, or low waste ethos, how do you avoid overproducing and having a bunch of excess stock.

ANDRÉANNE

So a few years ago, we started doing trade shows. And that was because, it actually started because for us in Canada in 2008, we had an economy crash. And a lot of stores closed their boutiques. So for us, we had wholesale accounts, and some of these wholesale accounts cancelled their orders. So I had all this extra stock.

So I decided, well, I guess let's go back to trade shows or let's go back to craft shows. And that was great, because I was able to bring other season products that were not selling too much back to the tradeshow or to the shows. And then new eyeballs would see these pieces and say, hey, this is really pretty, and and they would buy it. So we started doing that.

Because one thing was wholesale, I felt was doing a lot of production — I was producing a lot. And not often I had to sell. And they wanted a new collection every season. So then when this happened, we had to shift and start doing our tradeshow and selling.

Then COVID hit. And so doing all these trade shows, I was producing a lot and then COVID hit, and then that really gave me a pivot time to think about my production. And we started doing more online sales so that I decided to change our habit in production. And do let's do Just in Time . So whatever orders comes in, we make it.

Also you don't because of the fabric or fabric supplier, the yarn was delayed, which you know, everything was delayed. So blessing in disguise, I realized just in time, it was actually really good because we were able to use our fabric efficiently. And we were able to make the garment whenever it was sold and not have stock of the garment.

So that tactic of Just In Time I had always kind of done it all through my years, but not fully. So for the last few years we have really put a — not pressure I mean like a focus on it. And for me I know there's other companies saying, Oh, how can you be successful doing that? Because it yes, it takes time. We have one full cutter, and all she does is she cuts every piece. But we also offer customization.

And it ties into: you buy better, and you buy less. You buy something that fits well, you get it hemmed to your length, you get it, taken into the shoulder because you have smaller shoulders. We do all that and I feel the customer is happier that they received something that actually fit versus just something from a cookie cutter box. So yeah, the whole Just In Time process, I find it has been great in reducing excess stock.

ELIZABETH

Mhm. Yeah, and you talked about the importance of a good fit as well. And you actually do offer alterations services at Anne Mulaire. So can you tell us about that, and also, maybe about your repair services as well, because I find that really awesome.

ANDRÉANNE

Yeah. So our alteration, right now if you go on the website, you can actually select the inseam you want for pants. We often do if somebody is short, we will shorten a skirt. All we need is the height. People ship back their leggings, if there's a small hole we repair, we ship back, you know.

Someone brought back a pair of leggings from eight years ago. And we actually upcycled them and made them a little bit more cool and cute. And I think she even had a second pair and we made shorts for her. You know, that's what's innovative and fun and creative for us is to see these products come back after eight years. And the girl you know, customers still loving it, but like, don't worry, we're going to make it even better! Or changing it a little bit.

So of course, being sustainable, or being a brand that offers circular fashion, it means having an alterations program, having a repair program or services. And of course, it's always a little bit more, but I think that's the future. If we can't offer ways to.. it's our responsibility to find ways to respect the planet and to find ways to keep our system circular.

ELIZABETH

Yeah. And that's a testament to the quality of your products that people are still wearing them 8 years later! So size inclusivity is something that is also very important to you that you've recently made further improvements upon. So can you tell us about why that was important to you, and what the process of expanding your size range was like.

ANDRÉANNE

Mhm. So, I say this... I try to say this to everybody at the brand and everybody. But to truly be sustainable, you need to be able to invite everybody in, right? And to have fair and equitable

access. So you know, in my personal life, I know the importance of representation, being Métis, being two spirit, being French.

So the process that we took for expanding our sizes is that we interviewed over 100 ladies. And we also test fit — we test fit them., it was important for us that well first is to hear their stories. Second, also to get their feedback on feeling oppressed and excluded. So from there, I was able to gather all the valuable feedback and create a line.

I didn't want to create a plus line, I wanted to just expand my brand to all women. So it was important to go through this whole process. It took us six months to really value these ladies that were coming to us and telling their stories. And for me to listen and for me to really acknowledge what they were saying and try to create as well as I could pieces that would actually make them feel better and feel good and part of this sustainable world. Because at the end I want everybody to have access to sustainable fabrics or sustainable clothing.

ELIZABETH

Mhm yeah, and I love that extending your size range was such an intentional thoughtful and thorough process.

ANDRÉANNE

Mhm. It's always... anytime you do something new, it's just again a you know, I guess it's the way I was brought up is the brand. We don't just push something out. We really keep meaning. We take it slow, but we make it grow authentically and..

ELIZABETH

Mhm. And sustainability is an ever evolving journey. So it's really inspiring to see how you are continually making efforts to be more circular and inclusive and sustainable with the way that you're running your brand. So one of your upcoming initiatives is your Revive Program. So can you tell us about that, and anything else new to Anne Mulaire?

ANDRÉANNE

Yeah. We actually just launched our first ever sleepwear collection in full Tencel. We just started introducing Tencel, which is another sustainable fabric that uses a closed loop system. But it's actually also made in Canada, so that was super exciting to collaborate with another knitter.

And aside from that, we've also expanded our manufacturers and then we have 10 employees, it's all women lead, which is really cool. Including the cutting because usually cutting, it has always previously been men. So now we have a woman cutter, which is cool.

And the Revive program coming into 2022. So the Revive program is a resale program. And its main goal is to keep our clothing in the loop longer and out of the landfill. So in a way, it's kind of our big step in creating a circular economy within our brand which I think it's pretty cool.

Yeah, and the other goal is to be able to create a lower price point, but to gain access to our clothing. So I think it's gonna be really fun, it's gonna be a good creative outlet too for me, you know. People bring their pieces back and then we either upcycle, or we repair, mend, resell or we bring it into the zero waste program, and we change it all up and do something really fun with it.

ELIZABETH

Right, yeah, these circularity initiatives can also spark creativity. And I'm always so inspired by designers and brands who are doing really cool mends or upcycled / rework projects.

ANDRÉANNE

Mhm. Yeah, definitely. Like you probably know this brand, Eileen Fisher. But I find she's always very inspiring, because they've been doing that Renew Program for a long time. And, they have so many stores. So I'm so happy. I see that they're doing this, you know, circular economy, economy or circular clothing within their company. But it's more... if more companies can do that this, this would be amazing. That means less pieces are going through the landfill.

ELIZABETH

Yeah, for sure. So another one of your initiatives that I'd love to talk about with you, is your work to trace the entire footprint of your brand's production practices. So can you tell us a little bit about why you decided to do this whole tracing process and know what that all involved?

ANDRÉANNE

Mhm. Yeah, so, you know... well, we're forward thinkers. And so we recognized where we had to go to be more sustainable. Like, every year, we try to do better. You know, this year, we wanted to aim to show our customers transparency of our supply chain. There's always a way to grow and be better, do better.

So and we also, we all have to be accountable for our actions and decisions. So we hired a company to trace our environmental footprint from seed to shelf. Which was really cool, because that's even sometimes information that we didn't know. And so, so then we did a global as well, they did a global lifecycle analysis. And they performed an internal audit to trace our supply chain.

So that way, we were able to showcase on our site, the whole information from where we get our crops, to getting the yarn done, to getting the thread shipped to Canada, where the mills are knitting the fabric. And then the fabric dyed right across the street, to fabric shipped to Winnipeg, where we cut, sew, design, finish everything and then shipped to the customer. And so along the way, you know, moving forward, we're always going to try to say, okay, well, how can we do this even better? Less carbon footprints. But yeah, we'll always keep on trying to keep this moving.

ELIZABETH

Yeah, totally. And as we've talked about, it is an ever evolving journey. I think that's what it means to be a conscious fashion brand is to continually work towards sustainability in all various ways and, you know, be open to continually learning and changing. So thank you for letting us into that process.

ANDRÉANNE

Yeah and I wanted to just add, you know, there's a fashion trade that I first attended, in 2018 I believe, in Copenhagen. And it's a sustainable fashion trade. And it was my first time and it was so amazing to see so many sustainable brands and also conversation around sustainability and how to be better, do better. Because, you know, I sometimes I do feel I'm the only one here and Winnipeg. And I know, I'm not the only one. But it's, it's hard to see us wanting to do better, but being sustainable. There are so many challenges, and it's not always profitable. So you really have to put your mindset and say: Okay, why am I doing this? For profit, or for people, and we made a decision a long time ago is: for people. But we need to stay alive also, right? So, being at that tradeshow gave us it just inspired me a lot to okay, come back and use some of the tactics and information that they had provided. So, the Revive, the traceability, these are words and tactics that they had talked about five years ago, when I went to the first fair.

And then I went back in 2020. And then the next big topics was inclusivity, traceability, authenticity, and I find this is these are things that all businesses have to keep in mind, in order to be responsible for whatever they're putting out. We're all responsible for our own businesses and what we put out, so I'm always trying to, to help other companies try to think ahead, too, and everybody can be sustainable in their own ways. And I think it's it's a big topic, because it's the future.

ELIZABETH

Yeah and as we start to think about the future here, I think that transitions into my final question for you, which is: what does a better future for fashion look like to you?

ANDRÉANNE

I would definitely think of these three things that are always in the back of my head. Inclusion for all, responsible cons... consommation...

ELIZABETH

Consumption?

ANDRÉANNE

Yes, there you go. I'll teach you a couple of French words.

ELIZABETH

Yes, I love it.

ANDRÉANNE

So yeah, so responsible consumption, and circular economy for sure. So those three things.

ELIZABETH

And that's a wrap for this episode, be sure to take a look at the episode description in your podcast app for the links referenced in this episode, as well as the various links to learn more about today's guest. For the full transcript of this episode, you can head on over to consciouslifeandstyle.com and navigate to the podcast section of the site. The link to the full show notes should also be linked in whatever podcast app that you are listening on.

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