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David E. Wilkins

University of Richmond, dwilkins@richmond.edu

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A Tribute to Vine Deloria, Jr.: An Indigenous Visionary

DAVID WILKINS

A Standing Rock Lakota citizen, Deloria was arguably the most intellectually gifted and articulate spokesman for Indigenous nationhood in the twentieth century. He was never quite comfortable with the notion that he was, in fact, the principal champion of tribal nations and their citizens, since he expected that each Native nation and every tribal citizen express confidence in their own distinctive identities, develop their own unique talents, and wield their collective and individual sovereignty in a way that enriched not only their own nations but all those around them as well.

Deloria fought tirelessly for human, not just indigenous, freedom and for ecological respect and common sense approaches to heal the environment's gaping wounds, and he believed that America's national soul would never be cleansed until justice had been fully achieved by Indigenous nations, African Americans, Latinos/as, Asian Americans, women, impoverished whites, other disempowered groups, and especially young people.

For Deloria, freedom and justice could only be achieved when those wielding political, legal, and economic power acted with decency and integrity and had engaged in a thorough and honest examination of history. Of course, the dispossessed and disadvantaged in Deloria's view also had an active role to play and he expected the leaders of those often put-upon communities to take the time and carefully articulate what the needs and goals of their constituencies were.

Deloria's numerous and diverse written works and his constant engagement with various human communities during the last five decades of his life are undeniable. But trying to understand the volcanic and nourishing power that animated Deloria is not easy, since his life and his actions reflected a man of unusual talent, fortitude, and insight. In this essay, I offer an overview of some of the more powerful themes in Deloria's work from a personal and professional point of view, as his student, mentee, collaborator, and friend.

Edward Said once described intellectuals as "exiles" since in a metaphysical sense they were always in a state of "restlessness, movement, constantly being

unsettled, and unsettling others” (53). And, according to Said, “the *exilic intellectual does not respond to the logic of the conventional but to the audacity of daring, and to representing change, to moving on, not standing still*” (64).

Deloria never accepted identification as an “intellectual,” but much of what Said had to say about intellectuals applies quite easily to Deloria, especially Said’s discussion of the state of “marginality” that many intellectuals find themselves in—a state that exists outside the halls of privilege and power and yet is one that also carries certain recognition. Deloria, in fact, had a remarkable ability to slide back and forth between various poles, as evidenced by these apparent dichotomies.

On the one hand, he exhibited the passionate revolutionary spirit of people like Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez, and Martin Luther King. On the other hand, he was also deeply pragmatic and looked to find ways to resolve the sometimes profound intellectual and normative differences without taking extremist positions that tend to cut off conversation and alienate contending parties.

On the one hand, he was a generalist, or universalist, and had a visionary spirit with a breathtaking ability to scan the intellectual, moral, and political horizon in a comprehensive way that surmounted partisan, racial, tribal, and ideological differences. On the other hand, he was a grounded and stalwart Standing Rock tribal citizen and he drew immense strength and knowledge from his deep and particular kinship ties to those of his extended family and tribal nation.

On the one hand, Deloria had brilliant and incisive critical abilities that he used to skewer outmoded and prejudicial social norms, stodgy academic institutions and disciplines, and inflated political egos—whether tribal, state, or federal. On the other hand, while he could be formidably critical, he was rarely cynical, and always believed that if good people acted from good values and time-honored traditions, they and the institutions they manned would make appropriate decisions more often than not.

On the one hand, Deloria always remained fiercely independent—never allowing blind loyalty to particular institutions or power brokers to interfere with his ability to pursue and speak truth to power. On the other hand, he accepted the reality that as a tribal person he had a clear moral and intellectual responsibility to help family, friends, nations, and others in need because of the paradigm of interrelatedness and interdependence that he knew were vital to the welfare of the nations, the state, and the planet herself.

Finally, while Deloria was truly a public figure, with all the attendant duties and energy-sucking obligations that come with that status, he remained an intensely private person, always looking to maintain a comfortable, quiet space for himself and his immediate family.

A TRIBUTE TO VINE DELORIA, JR.: AN INDIGENOUS VISIONARY

When the Deloria family held a memorial service for Vine after he passed away in 2005, Norbert Hill, one of his closest friends, noted that with his passing “the training wheels had been taken off” and that it was now essential for everyone to continue the struggle that Deloria had led for so long, relying now on our own individual and collective knowledge and talents. It is unquestionably true that over the last five decades we in Indian Country and beyond were overly dependent on Deloria’s penetrating knowledge, his caustic wit, astute and largely effective political, legal, and cultural strategies, and his delicious and biting humor.

Our over-dependence on this esteemed warrior most certainly contributed to his premature passing. And if that is true then we must all step forward doubly energized to carry on the essential battles that he labored on throughout his fascinating life—treaty rights, repatriation, land recovery and consolidation, federal recognition, affirming the international status of Native peoples, reclaiming and reasserting traditional knowledge, etc.—that are required of us if we are to ensure the continuation of indigenous and all other forms of life on the planet.

The Philosophical Man

Deloria was one of the most prolific indigenous scholars in history. He authored/edited twenty-nine books and over 200 articles, and delivered countless keynote addresses and testimonials.¹ More impressive than his incredible scholarly output was the stunningly diverse range of intellectual disciplines he traversed with aplomb—law, religion and theology, history, natural and social sciences, literary criticism, education, anthropology, geology, paleontology, philosophy, political science, among others.

Deloria also held many important positions outside the Academy. He headed the National Congress of American Indians in the 1960s, the leading intertribal interest organization, and he served on numerous boards. He also played a leading role in developing and leading a number of important organizations like the Institute for the Development of Indian Law.

But Deloria, to me,² was much more than the sum of his scholarly, professional, and public accomplishments. Our paths first crossed in a sustained way in 1980 when he recruited me to a new M.A. degree program that he had

1. See James Treat’s edited collection of some of Deloria’s religious writing, *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America* (New York: Routledge, 1999), which has a comprehensive bibliography of much of Deloria’s scholarship up to that point.

2. This essay draws from two previous pieces I wrote about Deloria: “Vine Deloria, Jr. and Indigenous Americans,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 21. 2 (Fall 2006): 151-155; and “Afterword,” in Vine Deloria, Jr. *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2012): 283-291.

developed at the University of Arizona. This was a two-year terminal degree in political science that focused on training Native students in the quirks and nuances of Federal Indian Policy and Law.

I was part of a small cohort of Native students, thrilled with the opportunity of studying with a man we affectionately, and with some trepidation, referred to as the “Godfather” of Native politics, law, and policy. We called ourselves “Vine’s Disciples,” not because we viewed him as a religious figure, but because we knew that in having the privilege of studying with him we would receive profound lessons in what was required of us as we sought to become active agents in defense of our respective nations’ sovereignty and self-determination.

For those of us who finished this intellectually rich and demanding program, we left feeling prepared to engage our nations on multiple fronts and knew that we had been armed with research and writing skills that would enable us to be strong advocates for our peoples. My relationship with Deloria only deepened over the last quarter century. Although he continued to be my principal academic mentor, we became good friends and I was fortunate to write two books with him.³

It is, of course, impossible to summarize in such a short space the incredible influence Deloria had on me, my nation, the Lumbee, Native nations throughout the land and the world, and the larger society. But what an influence he was and will remain for me and many others. He once said that his approach to scholarship had been largely “ad hoc” and that he produced only “spur of the moment political tracts.” But in another work he more accurately noted that if one read his scholarship in the context of his life it was possible to “see a persistent effort to lay down certain kinds of strategies for political action which are consistent from start to finish” and “they would be alerted that it is in the actions of my life that theories and ideologies are worked out.”⁴

We see this most clearly in what I term the Delorian trilogy: his powerful articulation of *tribal sovereignty*, his distinctive conceptualization and defense of the central doctrine of *tribal self-determination*, and his cogent discussion and analysis of the importance and sacredness of space and place for Indigenous nations. Of the diverse tribal nations, interest groups, and academics that are familiar with his work, most credit Deloria with providing the intellectual and substantive ideological framework that led to the renaissance of Native America that vigorously began in the 1960s and continues to this day.

3. *Tribes, Treaties, & Constitutional Tribulation* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999) and *The Legal Universe: Observations on the Foundations of American Law* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing 2011).

4. Quoted in David E. Wilkins “Forging a Political, Educational, and Political Agenda for Indian Country,” 156-204, *Destroying Dogma: Vine Deloria, Jr. and His Influence on American Society*. Ed. Steve Pavlik and Daniel R. Wildcat (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2006), 159.

A TRIBUTE TO VINE DELORIA, JR.: AN INDIGENOUS VISIONARY

Reflecting on his own work and, in particular, his research and thoughts on these three ideas, Deloria once stated that “these concepts form the major framework of the federal relationship with the Indian tribes.”⁵ This is certainly the case and much of the fortunes of First Nations today are linked to their ability to effectively implement and fundamentally relate to the notions of their own inherent sovereignty, their fundamental right of self-determination, and the relationship Native communities have with a sacred territory.

Deloria’s powerful trilogy of ideas, along with the many other equally profound, timely, and important recommendations that he propounded for Native nations, the states and federal government, and the larger society provide an Indigenous roadmap that, if put into practice, could rectify many of our ongoing problems. His visionary talent and the ideas he proposed across a wide range of fields at the capacities to stabilize and clarify the cultural identities of tribal nations and not Indian communities, would help firm up the political and legal standing of tribal nations and other oppressed minority groups, and would lead to a greater degree of ecological respect that would benefit all of America.

Such recommendations would include, but are not be limited to the following: formal federal acknowledgment of tribal sovereignty via constitutional amendment; revival of the treaty making process; disavowing congressional plenary power; continuing the consolidation and restoration of tribal lands; affirming the political rights of bona fide non-recognized tribal groups; establishing a permanent Court of Indian affairs; supporting the international status of Native nations; modifying the trust doctrine from an active to a passive role; forging better ties between urban and reservation base communities; and increasing the teaching of indigenous knowledge to Native youth, among others.

A thorough review of Deloria’s major works across the disciplines that he traversed reveals his true genius and visionary appeal. His ideas catapulted Indigenous America from a period of dormancy and decay to revitalization and immense growth. Moreover, his skills in critiquing the fundamental problems of contemporary Western religious expressions, and examining the theory of evolution, and his assessment of the broader ecological problems with which we are still confronted have a residency that has educated abroad and ever-growing audience.

In the early years of his public life, Deloria’s writing focused broadly on popular political and legal tracts that provided the critical terminology, the intellectual substance, and the moral and spiritual foundation that inspired and galvanized the cultural, political, and legal renaissance of Native America.

In the latter stages of his public life he produced a number of impressive studies—*The Aggressions of Civilization* (1984), *The Nations Within* (1984), *Red Earth/White Lies* (1987), *Tribes, Treaties, & Constitutional Tribulations*

5. *Ibid.*, 156.

(1999), *Power & Place* (2001), *Evolution, Creationism, and Other Modern Myths* (2002), and *The Legal Universe* (2011)—that were incisive critiques of federal Indian policy, constitutional law, education, and scientific knowledge.

In between these two broad and distinctive eras, but spilling over into each, Deloria wrote a set of thematically-connected works that thoroughly explored the rich world of religion and spirituality and metaphysics and philosophy. These studies include, in the order they appeared, *God Is Red* (1973), *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence* (1979), *For This Land* (1998), *Spirit & Reason* (1999), *The World We Used to Live In* (2006), and *C. G. Jung & the Sioux Traditions* (2009). In my view, the most powerful of these works was *Metaphysics*, which was reissued in 2012 by Fulcrum Publishing.

Although *God Is Red*, a brilliant comparative analysis of Native and Judeo-Christian religious traditions, appeared six years before *Metaphysics* and was Deloria's second most popular book after *Custer*, it was in *Metaphysics* where we saw significant evidence of how brilliant Deloria was and witnessed his most detailed exploration of a new metaphysical framework that sought to synthesize the critical insights of Native peoples—values, spiritual traditions, ecological practices, and social organization—with those of contemporary Western scientists, philosophers, and theorists who were seeking to understand and arrive at a new and more realistic vision for the future that accurately and appropriately dealt with reality.

While the Delorian trilogy of sovereignty, self-determination, and space and place continued to be of significant value to Deloria and Native peoples, in *Metaphysics* he discussed, challenged, critiqued, and synthesized on a much grander scale, a planetary scale. In this important study he added to his trilogy of concepts by closely examining two additional terms: *interdependence* or *interrelatedness*, and *maturity*.

The idea of interdependence or interrelatedness was two-tiered. On the one hand, it was based on the notion that there was a need to transcend the traditional Western monopoly on human knowledge by broadening and linking new knowledge to that of non-Western knowledge—both Eastern and especially indigenous. On the other hand, the concept comported with the fundamental indigenous idea that all species and all beings were organically and morally related to one another and that we have an emotional and kinship obligation to treat all beings with respect.

Deloria, moreover, was convinced that a synthesis of what we believed—science and religion—and how we act—politics, property, ecology, and social relations—was vital to the survival of the human species and to improved intercultural, interracial, and interspecies relations. He was convinced that such a comprehensive synthesis of our beliefs and actions, being essential to human experience, needed to fit together in some comprehensive unity that was easily understood if we, as a species, were going to survive the stunning

A TRIBUTE TO VINE DELORIA, JR.: AN INDIGENOUS VISIONARY

communications, scientific, religious, technological, environmental, political, and cultural changes that were increasing exponentially.

The second major concept that emerges in *Metaphysics* was his notion of maturity. As he put it, there has occurred for Western polities “a centuries-long process of fundamental change in which the triumphant Western worldview of colonial days is replaced by a planetary understanding of the meaning of human existence that so transcends particular national differences as to enable the human species to create a planetary space in the absence of an imperial power to enforce its particular institutions on anyone. In short, a coming to maturity of the human species” (5-6).

Both terms, *interdependence/interrelatedness* and *maturity*, would reappear in many of his later works dealing with religion, philosophy, theology, and history, as he was constantly searching to find the most relevant and accessible language that would allow him to reach across cultural, ethnic, political, and legal boundaries. In one interview he observed that “differences in people are not usually evolutionary differences but are differences of metaphysical viewpoint, of ways of looking at, understanding, and interpreting the events and experiences of the world” (in Peters & Piendergast 6).

At this point Deloria appeared cautiously optimistic that the bolder more risk-taking Western thinkers in the social and physical sciences, and even some of the religious writers, were on the cusp of arriving at an entirely new interpretation of much of the phenomenon that they studied and he was even more optimistic that these brave theorists’ understandings offered tangible proof that supported non-Western and indigenous beliefs and interpretations of the planet, of historical development, of the solar system, and of the universe itself. Such a synthesis, an articulation of a new metaphysics, then, would be of real benefit not only to groups like indigenous peoples that had for too long been ignored or derided—but would benefit all other groups as well. Deloria knew that such a radical reorientation of reality would not be accomplished without enormous intellectual conflict, but he was anxious to fully engage all the parties and he was prepared to consider all points of view as part of this essential process.

As great an advocate as he was for indigenous knowledges, traditions, values, and principles, Deloria knew that we could not “return” to the manner in which Native peoples had historically lived and simply pull those knowledges, institutions, and values forward into the latter part of the twentieth century, much less the twenty-first century. Nor could the larger society or state look to “borrow” from native cultures. “We face,” he said, “the future immediately, and while we can be aware of the sound basis for primitive beliefs and customs, we can never return to them or take them up, expecting them to save us” (160).

It was more realistic, he pointed out, that “the most fruitful avenues of development today are directing us toward a new type of social existence

that parallels primitive peoples', perhaps incorporates some of their insights or unconsciously adopts some of their techniques, but which will be fully modern and capable of providing a meaningful existence" (160). He went on to suggest that "the importance of these movements for primitive peoples is that as modern industrial society becomes aware of new ways of structuring its understanding of the world, economic and political decisions will begin to reflect a more comprehensive and intelligent view of the world and of our species, thereby taking the pressure, in a political and economic sense, away from the surviving primitive and tribal peoples" (160-61).

The Timeliness of a Timely Work

Deloria, ever the humble philosopher, said that *Metaphysics* was little more than a "sketch" of where we should look for a new vision of reality. Of course, it was much more than a simple sketch; it was a detailed and synthetic critical assessment of the wealth of Western thought, merged with a mature understanding of indigenous and Eastern knowledges. Originally, it was to be followed by a second volume that would "reinterpret how we look at specific fields of knowledge when that knowledge is cast in a planetary context and the witnesses of all peoples are considered" (xii).

That second book was never written for reasons to which I am not privy. But although the companion book did not emerge, many of the themes, concepts, and issues dealt with in *Metaphysics* found their way in several of his later publications. As his son, Philip J. Deloria put it in his preface to *The World We Used to Live In*, at the end of his life, Deloria, although now in his early 70s, was just now coming to embrace his status as an elder. "The world," Philip said, "has known Vine Deloria, Jr. in the spring, summer, and autumn of his life. We can only imagine the things he would have been able to say as an elder, during a winter time of reflection" (P. Deloria xvi).

Deloria's critical analysis in *Metaphysics* of concepts like space and time, evolution and creationism, the power and accuracy of oral traditions, the vital role that history should play in our efforts to forge a more appropriate understanding of our place in the universe, the need for a comprehensive understanding of education and a much more broadly defined understanding of property, and the vital role that interdisciplinary knowledge must play as we move ever deeper into the twenty-first century are all ideas that warrant substantially more detailed study and analysis.

But one of his most insightful comments centered on the need for individuals to develop a more generalized way to relate to and interpret life. In his words, "the manner in which primitive, tribal people understood the world and the way we must now understand the world are identical. We stand at the dawn of a new creation, for we can no longer process our experiences into

A TRIBUTE TO VINE DELORIA, JR.: AN INDIGENOUS VISIONARY

predetermined categories of explanation; we require a generalized approach to life which can give us a meaning that transcends the immediate intake of data" (107).

In a related comment, and one that ought to be considered closely by current academics, politicians, scientists, and economists, Deloria, building upon something Marshall McLuhan said, urged that "in the world of human social, political, and technological institutions, the nature of rapid change makes it imperative that we perceive patterns rather than conceptually identify them" (182). In other words, what we need are more individuals trained to be generalists not specialists. "The true seeker of wisdom," according to Deloria, "the true philosopher, the inquiring mind, will provide leadership in the coming generation, not the experts who bring only specialization and myopic vision to the problems" (182).

The pace of technological, financial, and environmental change throughout the world is operating at a breakneck scale and shows no signs of slowing down. Simultaneously, the world has been shrunk by new social media and other innovations that can instantaneously link individuals and communities and intimate conversations across the globe. And while interdisciplinarity has increased, many dogma-based fields of study, and institutions like corporations, continue to expand and are more powerful today than they have ever been.

In the end, Deloria reminds us that one of the essential tasks in forming a new metaphysics is to "eliminate old interpretations of data that already predispose us to understand certain things about the world and preclude us from considering other things" (211). But in order to accomplish this Jean-François Revel suggests, and Deloria concurs, "that the next giant step our species must take is to achieve maturity" (212).

This, as we are presently witnessing, with the apparently never ending War on Terrorism, global warming, the fragile financial status of the European Union, the rapidly polarized nature of American politics and political parties, the absolutely dominant status of corporations that are now endowed with human-like characteristics, among other things, all suggest that we are far from approaching a planetary vision of reality that synthesizes the best of Western theorists with the rich repositories of knowledge still evident among aboriginal peoples.

Nevertheless, occasional glimpses of the syncretic vision Deloria imagined in 1979 are visible—the general consensus that has emerged on the causes of the global environmental crisis, federal environmental policies like dam demolition to restore critical ecosystem habitat for various wildlife species, and the seemingly inexorable expansion of legal and political rights for gays and lesbians—are titillating yet largely isolated examples of what can happen when we jettison discredited and prejudicial theories and act from a more holistic, honest, and realistic perspective.

Will these kinds of positive examples of a new metaphysics multiply or are these merely aberrations? It is far too early to tell. But had Deloria lived, he no doubt would have continued his deep search for useful concepts, meaningful dialogue, and the construction of a new theory of reality that respectively and realistically offered a place at the table for all life forms.

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