

Obituary

'HE FORCED US INTO THE FRAY': VINE DELORIA, JR.
(1933-2005)

Vine Victor Deloria Jr. was born on 26 March 1933 in Martin, South Dakota, and died on 13 November 2005, in Boulder, Colorado. Deloria, of Standing Rock Sioux origin, was born in South Dakota near the Pine Ridge Oglala Sioux Indian Reservation. He was educated at reservation schools, graduated from Iowa State University in 1958, received a master's degree in theology in 1963 from the Lutheran School of Theology in Rock Island, Illinois, and a J.D. from the University of Colorado in 1970. Deloria taught at the University of Arizona from 1978 to 1990, and then at the University of Colorado. As an author of more than 20 books, he was one of the most outspoken figures in Indian affairs, with his works promoting Native American cultural nationalism and a greater understanding of Native American history and philosophy. He retired in 2000, but continued to write and lecture until his death.

This essay is neither a eulogy nor an obituary, but rather an acknowledgement of an individual who made a significant impact on anthropology; more conventional obituaries were published in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Denver Post*, the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, the *Associated Press*, and *Indian Country Today*. Internationally, the *Guardian* (UK) and the *Scoop Independent News* (NZ) also noted his passing. In addition, Howard Berkes provided a segment on his life and passing on National Public Radio's Morning Edition on November 15, 2005.

Though not an anthropologist, Vine Deloria, Jr., probably had more of an impact on the discipline than many of us practicing the craft today will have. His impact on a generation of scholars is immeasurable. The 1969 publication of his book, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, marks a watershed event in the history of American anthropology by forcing 'anthros' to become more aware of the feelings that American Indians held toward them. It appeared at a time when American Indians were protesting against the excavation of archaeological sites and the exhibition of human remains in museums. As a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, I was forced to think about the direction I wanted my research to follow. I was not the only one who was likewise influenced by Deloria's work.

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Nearly thirty years later, a group of anthropologists wrote on the impact of Deloria's writings. Of particular importance to archaeology, authors McGuire (1997: 63-91) and Zimmerman (1997: 92-112) recall how Deloria's writings changed the way they practiced anthropology. More recently, McGuire talks of Deloria's influence on his professional life: '*Two things influenced me to take a pro-indigenous stance in archaeology. The first of these were my Pawnee friends who . . . made me aware of how Native People felt about anthropologists and archaeologists. The second was Vine Deloria's book . . . I would never have come to the positions that I did without reading Custer Died for Your Sins. Clearly what he wanted to do was challenge us, and forbid us the comfort of our complacency. He was very successful doing these two things*' (McGuire pers. comm.).

Not all of the impacts of Deloria's work were seen as positive. A comment on a listserv in response to the posting of Deloria's death noted that '*. . . Deloria may well have done some good for some indigenous people, but he also wrote a lot of incorrect and misleading nonsense that most professional archaeologists, geochronologists, etc, would probably not want to promote . . .*' (Gillespie pers. comm.). Additionally, newspaperman

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Vincent Carroll, in an editorial in the Rocky Mountain News on 18 November 2005, wrote: 'Many of the published tributes to Deloria since his death have... rightly emphasized his influential books. But what the obituaries and tributes have for the most part danced around or ignored is the utterly wacky nature of some of his views... Deloria insisted that we shouldn't sanitize America's past. But let's not sanitize his legacy, either'.

Vine WAS inconsistent – for example, he wrote 'Anthropology departments still cling fiercely to the belief that it is more valid and scholarly to have an Anglo study an Indian tribe than to have a member of that tribe trained in anthropology' (Deloria 1997: 211). Yet, eight pages later he writes: 'Some prominent Indian anthros have announced at Indian meetings, 'I'm an Indian, but I'm also an anthro'. There is no question in this announcement that the individual has chosen the profession over the community. Once this happens... unless they prove momentarily useful they are never trusted again and people avoid them whenever possible' (1997: 219).

Such inconsistency marked the way he treated American Indians in the field of archaeology as well. I met Vine numerous times over the course of my career in varied circumstances. He was supportive and witty, yet at the same time sarcastic, acerbic, and over-bearing. This is how he was to many Native and non-Native students alike, yet, as Choctaw archaeologist Dorothy Lippert noted, Vine's work 'revealed to the wider community the problems with anthropology as it was being practiced' and 'allowed for the eventual development of Indigenous archaeology. I think that many of us might not agree with all of Vine's work, especially towards the later end of his life, but we still

have to agree that without his initial fight, we wouldn't have the space now to engage in our own battles'.

Such perhaps would be a fitting epitaph: Vine Deloria, Jr. – he forced us into the fray.

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JOE WATKINS
Department of Anthropology,
University of New Mexico,
Albuquerque, NM, USA
(Email: jwatkins@unm.edu)