

# WRITING 1968: A NATIVE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE NINETEEN-SIXTIES

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## ABSTRACT

One feature of United States public memory is the way in which it tends to neglect the Native American perspective on mainstream American history, regardless of their involvement. This holds true even for the nineteen-sixties, a decade that is generally seen as multi-faceted. Even if there are countless established memories of this well-remembered decade, however, the Native American narrative is not one of them. Using Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1969) and *We Talk, You Listen* (1970), this paper will explore Native American understandings of the Vietnam War and the African American freedom struggle. Both were focal points of division in United States society at the time and have since come to define public memory of the nineteen-sixties, but are rarely considered from a Native American perspective.

Keywords: Vietnam War, Civil Rights, Black Power, Native American Studies, Vine Deloria, 1968

## INTRODUCTION

Looking at the periods that have come to define United States history, few decades in recent memory have continued to haunt the public imagination quite as much as the nineteen-sixties. Often described in such terms as the “key decade” of the twentieth century (Rockwell 2013, 4) and “a period when the United States lost its way” (Strain 2017, vi), or conversely, a time when “liberation and freedom” (Strain 2017, vi) were found (cf. Isserman and Kazin 1999; Hall 2012; Witham and Haliwell 2018), it is perhaps not surprising that the period's significance continues to be debated even half a century later. After all, it was a time when the United States had to confront its racist past in the wake of the African American struggle for equal rights, ran into the limitations of its new role as a world leader during the Vietnam War, and underwent a political shift culminating in the election of President Richard Nixon. In each of these interconnected narratives, 1968 functions as a pivotal year.

In the 2013 *New York Times* retrospective *The Times of the Sixties*, a collection of defining articles from the decade, these common threads are particularly pronounced as well, featuring articles on civil rights protests, the Kennedys, and the war in Vietnam. These are the stories that made headlines at the time, and subsequently these are also the stories that have been passed down and remembered, whereas others have been forgotten. Most notably, Native American memories are altogether absent from both the book's articles and its introduction looking back on the 1960s half a century later. Obviously, newspapers are but one manifestation of a broader pattern of historical silence. Hence, it is not surprising that when Americans remember the events and developments now taken as defining of the

nineteen-sixties, it tends to be a rather narrow view informed by the experiences of mainstream society, which overlooks a range of alternative memories.

As such, public memory of the nineteen-sixties is multi-faceted in some respects and surprisingly uniform in others. This is true even as certain hegemonic interpretations have lost standing, most notably the idea that American society saw a change for the better in the early nineteen-sixties followed by a change for the worse—the “rise and fall’ or ‘declension’ narrative” (Hall 2012, 6). While this narrative has made way for more open-ended interpretations of the decade that take a broader perspective in some regards (Hall 2012, 17), old frameworks persist both inside academia and outside of it, especially when it comes to the social groups whose stories are remembered, including Native Americans. In this respect, the creation of public memory as a more or less coherent narrative continues to work along lines of ethnicity, class, and gender (see e.g. Reyes 2010). In the context of the nineteen-sixties, the 1994 collection of essays *The Sixties: From Memory to History* is a good illustration of this fact, as it presents the expected narrative of the decade as time of political and cultural change. Despite striving to “gain some clarity in thinking through who we were back then, who we might have become, and who we wish to be” (Farber 1994, 4) and covering a range of political and social issues, American minority groups occupy only a marginal position in the book.

Although some memories of the nineteen-sixties where Native Americans were protagonists have found their way into the mainstream consciousness, especially the main actions of the Red Power movement, uniquely American Indian perspectives of national trends are generally overlooked. This in spite of the fact that Native Americans were soldiers in Vietnam (even in disproportionate numbers, see Holm 1989, 58), voted in the elections of 1964 and 1968, and marched along with civil rights activists. Crucially, they made sense of these events from a perspective rooted in their own cultures and histories. Nonetheless, this type of involvement in the big historical events of the decade continues to be neglected in favor of more specifically Native American topics, such as the fight against termination,<sup>1</sup> protests for fishing rights and Red Power activism. This is true both in general histories like Van Gosse and Richard R. Moser’s *The World the Sixties Made* (2003), Mark Lytle’s *America’s Uncivil Wars* (2006), Christopher Strain’s *The Long Sixties* (2017), and Nick Witham and Martin Haliwell’s *Reframing 1968* (2018), as well as more specific texts, such as Terry H. Anderson’s *The Movement and the Sixties* (1995) or Sherry Smith’s *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power* (2012). Finally, it is important to recognize recent historical accounts that reframe the American past from a Native American perspective, most notably Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’ *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (2014) and David Treuer’s *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee* (2019), which inevitably touch upon the major events of the nineteen-sixties as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Termination refers to the United States federal policy of the 1960s and sixties that aimed to assimilate Native American communities by revoking tribal sovereignty status and dissolving reservations (see e.g. Fixico 1986; Ulrich 2010).

Nevertheless, specific texts dealing with the Native American nineteen-sixties remain few and far between.

Turning to the era itself, however, the Native American point of view on domestic and foreign policies is far from absent. A good example is the work of Standing Rock Sioux intellectual Vine Deloria Jr. (1933-2005), who started a long career of writing about the position of Native Americans during the late nineteen-sixties. Deloria was one of the most influential American Indian critics of his time. Serving as the executive director of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) between 1964 and 1967, Deloria knew first-hand the concerns and feelings of Native Americans. As an author, he used these experiences to present a Native American perspective on contemporary United States society. In his early works, especially the essay collections *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969, 1988) and *We Talk You Listen* (1970, 1972), Deloria specifically addressed contemporary issues affecting American Indian communities such as the federal termination policy, but he also described his views on the larger state of affairs in the late nineteen-sixties. Because he wrote these texts so close in time to when the actual events occurred, Deloria's work has the potential to illustrate how Native American people experienced those events as they were happening. In the second instance, these kinds of writings challenge commonly accepted narratives rooted in biased reconstructions formed after the fact.

Considering the potential value of Deloria's work as a historical source for understanding the Indigenous perspective on American society at large, this paper will attempt to answer the following question: What new understandings of the 1960s can we gain from Vine Deloria's essays? Of the various developments of the decade, the focus here will be on the African American freedom struggle and the Vietnam War, as these were two of the most divisive issues of the time and the ones discussed most extensively by Deloria. In order to answer this question, this essay will first offer background on Deloria and the reception of his works before turning to an analysis of Deloria's writings about the Vietnam War and the African American freedom struggle in two essays from *Custer Died for Your Sins* and one from *We Talk, You Listen*. Where relevant, I will also compare Deloria's work to writings by James Baldwin and Eldridge Cleaver, both of whom were similarly influential critics.

#### VINE DELORIA AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

Many scholars have written about the trajectory of Deloria's personal and professional life (see e.g. Biolsi and Zimmerman 1997, Hoxie 2012, Martínez 2019). Born in South Dakota in 1933, Vine Deloria Jr. was the "descendant of generations of illustrious Deloria men" (Martínez 2019, 16), many of whom had been respected members of the Lakota community in their own right. Growing up near the Pine Ridge reservation, Deloria initially trained to become a minister like his father, but soon turned to advocacy. He entered the national

stage in 1964 when he was elected as executive director of the NCAI, promising to unite Native Americans in their stand against the federal government.

Deloria's tenure as executive director of the NCAI ended in 1967 when he resigned to pursue a law degree at the University of Colorado. Around that time, Deloria began writing *Custer Died for Your Sins*, which quickly became a huge success after it was published in August of 1969 (Martínez 2019, 6), especially following the occupation of Alcatraz by Native American protesters on November 20 that same year. Despite becoming an increasingly prominent public figure, Deloria was not directly involved in this new wave of activism. His position as a witness rather than a direct participant lent him a degree of critical distance. Over the course of the decades following the publication of *Custer Died for Your Sins*, Deloria published nearly thirty books and scores of essays on topics ranging from science to religion to politics. All the while, he continued to be an advocate for Native American issues in a variety of causes, including the foundation of the National American Indian Museum in Washington D.C. and the foundation of an American Indian Studies department at the University of Arizona.

#### DELORIA STUDIES AND ITS BOUNDARIES

Generally, scholars of Deloria's work tend to remember him as one of the most prolific authors in the field of Native American Studies and a powerful advocate for the rights of American Indian communities, and rightfully so. Given that his works are "knit together by an overarching concern for the place of American Indians in the modern world" (Demallie 2006, 933), it is not surprising that this is also the primary lens through which critics have studied his oeuvre. In his 2019 study of Deloria's early works, David Martínez offers a detailed overview of what he refers to as "Deloria Studies" (32), which illustrates this tendency quite clearly. In various obituaries and books published after his death in 2005 (e.g. Demallie 2006, and five articles published in the Fall 2006 issue of the academic journal *Wicazo Sa*), American Indian critics expressed their admiration and confirmed the general image of Deloria as a "role model" for his many contributions to Native American Studies (Tinker 2006, 170). In general, publications on Deloria focus on his position as an influential social critic who contributed greatly to the field of Native American or American Indian Studies. Judging by the literature on his life and legacy, however, the same cannot be said of his possible lessons for American Studies in general. Hence, it is interesting to see not just what Deloria wrote about Native American issues to Indian and non-Indian audiences, but especially what he has to say to American society at large *about* American society and the specific developments of the 1960s.

David Myer Temin (2018) and David Martínez (2019) both address Deloria's perspectives on non-Indian issues in some detail. Martínez devotes an entire chapter to Deloria's views on the African American freedom struggle, citing extensively from both *Custer Died for Your Sins* and *We Talk, You Listen*. Still, the chapter's overall emphasis is

primarily on the ways in which Deloria linked Black Power and Red Power. Likewise, Temin discusses *Custer Died for Your Sins* in the context of a changing perception of United States national identity after the Second World War, addressing the connections between termination policy and ideas of inclusion that played a major role in the early movement for civil rights. In addition, Temin also briefly comments on Deloria's writing about the Vietnam War. Like Martínez, however, Temin discusses these issues mainly in relation to the historical position of Native American communities. Both authors therefore address society-wide issues, but end up circling back to the significance of these developments for American Indian people instead of studying them in their own right. Nevertheless, both of these texts illustrate the value of reading Vine Deloria's work from a different angle that is more concerned with general society.

#### READING DELORIA

Within Deloria's overall corpus, the texts most valuable to the study of his thinking on the United States of the late nineteen-sixties are his earliest works, what Martínez refers to as the 'Red Power Tetralogy'—*Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969), *We Talk, You Listen* (1970), *God is Red* and *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties* (1974). In each of these books, Deloria presented different facets of contemporary American Indian life, contextualizing the rise of Red Power and giving insight into the issues that Native American communities faced. At the same time, however, Deloria also addressed the wider context of United States society at large. Although he touched upon a range of issues that were not specifically Native American, including the state of the economy, recent presidential elections and the role of religion in the United States, the Vietnam War and the African American freedom struggle feature most prominently and have entire essays devoted to them.

Although there are mentions throughout his early work, three essays from *Custer Died for Your Sins* and *We Talk, You Listen* stand out for their comprehensive overview of Deloria's thoughts on these issues. In *Custer Died for Your Sins*, Deloria discusses the Vietnam War at length in "Laws and Treaties," and the African American predicament is the main subject of "The Red and the Black." *We Talk, You Listen* on the other hand is "more theoretical in tone" (Martínez 2019, 135) and presents a broader vision of activism in the late nineteen-sixties. Particularly relevant here is "Another Look at Black Power", in which Deloria further develops his thinking on the African American protest movement. Taken together, these three essays articulate most clearly how Deloria felt about the ongoing issues of his time. Although *We Talk, You Listen* also includes an essay that pertains to Vietnam, it is concerned less with the military conflict itself, and focuses instead on the specifics of the domestic peace movement.

## NEW CONFLICT ABROAD, ONGOING BATTLES AT HOME

In the second essay of *Custer Died for Your Sins*, “Laws and Treaties,” Deloria addresses President Johnson’s argument for continuing the war in Vietnam based on a supposed commitment by the United States to the people of Vietnam. Johnson first laid out this notion in a 1965 speech, stating that “to leave Vietnam to its fate would shake the confidence of all these people in the value of American commitment, the value of America’s word” (Johnson 1965), thus justifying continuation of the war in order to protect the reputation of the United States. In the essay, Deloria takes this speech as the starting point for a discussion of treaty relations between the United States and Native American nations, which in his perspective highlight the irony of Johnson’s remarks. Deloria describes a number of treaties the federal government made with Native nations across the country and some ways in which various promises, including rights to land and sovereignty, were broken. Perhaps the most egregious example of this behavior by the federal government is the taking of native-owned land, of which Deloria gives numerous illustrations, including the forced removal of several southeastern nations during the 1830s. At the end of the chapter, Deloria returns to the issue of Vietnam to demonstrate how the war embodies the same American hypocrisy that is evident from the history of treaty relations.

## MAKING AND BREAKING PROMISES

By connecting his views on the Vietnam War to a discussion of treaty relations between the United States and American Indian nations, Deloria makes the case that these issues are in fact two sides of the same coin. The suggestion that the United States would lose face if it failed to keep its commitment to the people of Vietnam rings hollow given that “America has yet to keep one Indian treaty or agreement despite the fact that the United States government signed over four hundred such treaties and agreements with Indian tribes” (Deloria 1969, 28). Not only is the war in Vietnam reminiscent of the way in which the United States has historically treated Native Americans, the conflict also mirrors current behavior toward their communities. Citing a contemporary case where the Kennedy Administration took land from the Seneca tribe for the construction of the Kinzua Dam in 1960, Deloria remarks, “history may well record that while the United States was squandering some one hundred billion dollars in Vietnam while justifying this bloody orgy as commitment-keeping, it was also busy breaking the oldest Indian treaty” (1969, 29). Here, Deloria cites the Pickering Treaty of 1794, which explicitly states that the land on which the dam was built legally belongs to the Seneca tribe unless they decide to sell. For him, such recent incidents and the history of injustice they represent serve as a reminder for Native Americans that the idea of the United States keeping its commitments to non-white peoples in Vietnam or anywhere else is ridiculous (Deloria 1969, 50).

If anything, Deloria’s comments only became more relevant after the occupation of Alcatraz Island, not three months after *Custer Died for Your Sins* was first published. In a

sense, Deloria's reading of the Vietnam War through the lens of treaty relations provides a perfect example of Hoxie's comment that it seemed as if the "angry words in *Custer Died for Your Sins* were taking human form" (2012, 368), as the activists that were mobilizing in Alcatraz made treaty rights an integral part of their strategy. One example of this is their claim to the island based on the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, a mocking gesture that had no legal standing but nonetheless drew attention to the way the federal government has treated treaties. After all, the Treaty of Fort Laramie applied to Sioux territory in the Dakotas, but for the federal government it may as well have applied to Alcatraz or anywhere else, as they displayed a complete disinterest in Native American land claims across the continent. In a similar vein, Native activists staged other events in the following years—such as the 1972 Trail of Broken Treaties and the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee—that further illustrated Deloria's point that treaty promises are not something of the past. Consequently, making an effort to live up to these agreements is a prerequisite for future commitments, in Vietnam and beyond. Indeed, for Deloria the situation in Vietnam is clearly an immoral atrocity, but not necessarily more so than what the United States continues to do within its borders.

It is precisely for this reason that Deloria feels a potential solution to the Vietnam crisis lies in the improvement of relations with Native American tribes domestically. Referring to the war as a "symptom" (Deloria 1969, 52) of American ills, Deloria describes the conflict as "a side issue in comparison with the great domestic issues which must be faced—and justly faced—before this society destroys itself" (1969, 53). Here, Deloria takes Vietnam to be indicative of the imperialism that hides underneath the surface of American exceptionalism, and which could potentially be much more destructive if those affected by it decided to revolt. In his perspective imperialism, although affecting minority communities in myriad different ways—be it reservations, assimilation policies or police brutality—always results in oppression and would give Native Americans and others plenty of reason to make a stand. Vietnam serves to Deloria as a potent reminder of injustices committed within America's borders and is in many ways indicative of domestic tensions. In order to resolve the Vietnam crisis, Deloria therefore concludes that "morality must begin where immorality began" (1969, 52), as the United States should get its domestic affairs in order and reflect on its moral character before turning its gaze outward. That is to say, the United States cannot hope to keep any commitments in Vietnam until the federal government has made an effort to reconcile its imperialist nature.

In addition to being a war with imperialist undertones, the conflict in Vietnam was also part of Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, which Deloria engages with in the essay as well. Most interestingly, Deloria holds up a mirror to the United States by illustrating the similarities between American policy decisions considered acceptable on the one hand and Soviet actions criticized by President Nixon on the other. "It would take Russia another century to make and break as many treaties as the

United States has already violated” (1969, 28), Deloria states in response to a speech by Richard Nixon from the early nineteen-sixties on the treachery of the Soviet Union. To underline this point, Deloria even draws an analogy between the satellite states of the Soviet Union and Native American nations. Here, he suggests that Soviet interventions in Czechoslovakia and Hungary pale in comparison to some of the atrocities committed by the United States (1969, 42), such as the betrayal of Native American tribes that were allies during the War of 1812 and later became victims of Andrew Jackson’s policy of Indian Removal. Perhaps this is not a flawless analogy, given that the comparison overlooks differences in the respective relationships between the United States and Indigenous nations on the one hand, and the Soviet Union and the nations of Eastern Europe on the other. Nevertheless, as a rhetorical device, the comparison Deloria makes between the United States and its adversary is thought-provoking and has enough truth to it to serve as a powerful evidence for showing off American hypocrisy.

#### DOMESTIC TENSIONS ON AN INTERNATIONAL STAGE

The view of the Vietnam War as a domestic conflict playing out on a larger scale is not unique to the Native American community. James Baldwin and Eldridge Cleaver—African American critics who were, like Deloria, each in their own way at a distance from society and the events they critiqued—likewise wrote about the racist character of the conflict and its parallels to violence occurring in the United States. For example, in a 1967 essay, Baldwin wrote that “the assumptions acted on at home are also acted on abroad, and every American Negro knows this, for he, after the American Indian, was the first ‘Vietcong’ victim” (Baldwin 1967, 202). Where Deloria based his comparison on the specifically Native American issue of treaty relations, this particular analogy is rooted in a more specifically African American experience of United States imperialism. In an analogy presented by Baldwin (1972), the ghetto becomes the Vietnamese village and the Black Panthers the Vietcong (167). Similarly, Cleaver wrote that “the blacks in Watts and all over America could now see the Viet Cong’s point: both were on the receiving end of what the armed forces were dishing out” (1969, 131), likewise equating the two types of violence as manifestations of the same imperialist behavior. Although their oppression takes different forms, both Native Americans and African Americans saw parallels between injustices done to their people within the United States, and the contemporary situation in Vietnam. Even if there is a significant difference between the structural oppression of life in ghettos and on reservations and the direct military assault on the Vietnamese, the similar conclusions drawn by these authors suggest that both are manifestations of a similar logic of white supremacy, causing violence and oppression.

A related issue that Baldwin and Cleaver address is that of minorities fighting in Vietnam. Baldwin wrote, “I challenge anyone alive to tell me why any black American should go into those jungles to kill people who are not white and who have never done him



any harm” (1967, 200), urging his readers to reflect on the fact that American minorities are fighting people in a similar position rather than the real enemy, the white oppressor. In a message to African American soldiers in Vietnam written in January of 1970, Cleaver went so far as to urge soldiers to stop fighting for the United States, even encouraging them to take up arms against American generals if they want to. Obviously, Cleaver’s comments were not unique, as peace protesters frequently presented Vietnamese flags and slogans, and fellow Black Panther Huey Newton even addressed the Vietcong in a 1970 letter, offering to send party members to South Vietnam to aid their cause (Newton 1972, 178-181). What sets Baldwin and Cleaver apart, however, is the direct links they draw between the racist history of the United States from slavery through segregation, and Vietnam. Crucially, such calls to action draw attention to the potential domestic implications of the conflict, echoing Deloria’s warning that American society would tear itself apart if the United States did not come to terms with its history of imperialism. Here another parallel emerges, as Baldwin, Deloria, and Cleaver each in their own way introduce the notion of a reckoning based on the idea that the United States will have to face consequences for the way it has treated non-white communities across the globe. Such fatalism is particularly interesting in hindsight given that it feels almost hyperbolic in retrospect, knowing that none of their predictions came to pass, but indicates just how much was at stake from their perspective.

#### NATIVE AMERICAN SOLUTIONS TO AFRICAN AMERICAN PROBLEMS

In “The Red and the Black,” the eighth chapter of *Custer Died for Your Sins*, Deloria outlines the perspective of Native Americans on the African American freedom struggle. The essay addresses common misconceptions about the status of Native Americans and their relation to other minority groups, as well as the way the United States government has historically treated different ethnic groups. Writing shortly after the heyday of the civil rights movement, Deloria reflects on the movement’s successes and failures, as well as the reasons why the movement had been unable to realize its full potential. In addition, he describes responses from the American Indian community to the demands and strategies of African American activists. Based on his observations, Deloria outlines his views on the future of federal policy toward minorities, as well as the future of relations between different ethnic groups within the United States, concluding that “the red and the black must not be fooled either by themselves, by each other, or by the white man” (Deloria 1969, 195). In “Another Look at Black Power,” the sixth essay from *We Talk, You Listen*, Deloria follows up on this line of thinking, as he evaluates the successes and failures of the Black Power ideology. Crucially, Deloria argues that American society is “built upon individual expression and has no place for group expression” (Deloria 1972, 112), something that was gradually changing with the rise of these new movements. That is why Deloria concludes that despite the immediate practical failures of the more radical African American movement, their driving

philosophy is a valid one that can help the United States move toward a group-based society.

#### FROM CIVIL RIGHTS TO BLACK POWER: EXPECTING THE INEVITABLE

While not giving a strictly chronological overview, Deloria makes a clear distinction between the different strategies that African Americans employed over the course of the 1960s. The first iteration of black activism involved the explicit demand for civil rights, a concept that “greatly confuses the issue and lessens our chances of understanding the forces involved in the rights of human beings” (Deloria 1969, 178), overlooking the immediate socio-economic circumstances of African Americans. By fighting only for a better legal status in rather abstract terms of equality, these activists failed to get to the root of the problem. As a result, Deloria finds that “for the majority of blacks progress is not made” (1969, 174) because ending segregation in restaurants does not fundamentally change the life of poor African Americans. It is a first step, but ultimately falls short of addressing more structural issues of inequality, which helps to explain why the progress that civil rights activists made did not truly revolutionize United States society.

A very different approach, which initially seemed more promising to Deloria, was Black Power; a notion that he suggests Native Americans had in some ways been anticipating from the start. As Deloria writes, “we only wondered why it had taken so long to articulate” (1969, 180), illustrating his perception that this development was almost a historical inevitability. In the end, however, Deloria concludes that despite its initial promise, the Black Power movement also fell short, because it “was not so much an affirmation of black people as an anti-white reaction” (182), as black activists still mainly presented their demands in opposition to white society. According to Deloria, the crucial problem here is that the African American community lacks ties to a homeland, which prevents them from developing a culture of their own and moving toward peoplehood. Concepts of both land and nationhood are central in his diagnosis of the African American situation—“the black needs time to develop his roots, to create his sacred places, to understand the mystery of himself and his history, to understand his own purpose. These things the Indian has and is able to maintain through his tribal life” (Deloria 1969, 188). The solution to the conundrum of African American rights therefore entails taking separatism to its logical conclusion by creating separate institutions for separate communities. By implication, Deloria feels he cannot say what the best way forward is, because every group can only know for themselves what they truly need. In order for African Americans to get there, however, they first need to develop a greater sense of peoplehood.

In light of these initial comments, it is interesting to see how Deloria’s thinking on the issue of African American rights developed. In “Another Look at Black Power,” Deloria is both outspoken about the failures of Black Power and optimistic about the possibilities for their ideology to point the way forward. After a brief analysis of the philosophy

presented in Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton's *Black Power* (1967), Deloria presents his own vision on the value of embracing group identity. More than simply a way of improving the structural position of African Americans, Deloria argues here that these ideas can also help Americans "find a way beyond the violence and hatred that has characterized the last few years" (1970, 101). From this perspective, Black Power and the movements it inspired—"Chicano Power, Red Power, Flower Power, and Green Power" (Deloria 1970, 101)—ended up aggravating divisions in society. Simultaneously, however, the basic principles underlying these movements can also provide a solution to these divisions by providing a new way of conceptualizing society. Deloria reiterates throughout this essay that the basic idea of embracing group identity is a step in the right direction. For Deloria, moving beyond a society of individuals is crucial, as he feels that "in recognizing the integrity of the group we can understand the necessity for negotiations between groups" (1970, 106)—only once groups know their own needs can they come together and work out their differences. For Deloria, the only way for the United States to survive is by allowing groups to flourish.

#### THE NATIVE AMERICAN RESPONSE

In his analysis of why the African American protest movements were ultimately unsuccessful, Deloria also gives an impression of the reasons why Native Americans—especially tribal leadership—were generally not interested in getting involved. Where African Americans should look for ways to come into their own as a people, what is important for Native Americans is *maintaining* their cultures (Deloria 1969, 188) and fighting the entirely different struggle of protecting their heritage and sovereignty. To explain these distinctions, Deloria outlines the traditional government policies of assimilation and segregation, by which "the white man forbade the black to enter his own social and economic system and at the same time force-fed the Indian what he was denying the black" (173), placing African Americans and Native Americans in very different and sometimes even opposing positions. Given these contrasting histories, it is not surprising that Native Americans were not interested in events like the March on Washington, where abstract notions of equality were the central concern (Deloria 1969, 179).

Even the 1968 Poor People's Campaign, which targeted more specific issues of poverty and economic equality, represented an endorsement of "middle-class values through pointing out their absence in the life of the poor" (Deloria 1969, 186-87) that ultimately fell short of addressing the real needs of Native Americans, too. At the same time, however, Deloria does acknowledge that while his skepticism was shared by part of the American Indian population, disinterest was only one response among several. Indeed, a number of Native Americans were part of the Campaign's organizing committee and around 100 Native activists protested outside the Bureau of Indian Affairs during the event (Landry 2017, n.p.). What is especially interesting is that, according to Deloria, even those

that did not take part in an event like the Poor People's Campaign were ultimately affected, as "Indian people all over begun to question the nature of their situation" (Deloria 1969, 187) in light of the kinds of concerns raised and the strategies employed to make these demands. Most importantly, Deloria's discussion illustrates that Native American engagement with African American activism was complex and often had unforeseen consequences.

## THE CHANGES OF '68

What is interesting to see is that Deloria explicitly identifies the year 1968 as a crossroads in his discussion of African American activism.

No one seemed to know which direction the country would take. Return to the old integration movement seemed out of the question. Continuing to push power movements against the whole of society seemed just as senseless. (Deloria 1969, 183)

For Deloria, it seemed that peaceful activism was definitively over, and Black Power was struggling to live up to its goals. As a result, the way forward seemed uncertain. This sense of despair is embodied by the assassination of Democratic senator and presidential hopeful Robert Kennedy, which Deloria identifies as a particularly pivotal moment for United States society. In fact, he felt that Kennedy's death "has completely changed the nature of the Civil Rights movement and has altered the outlook of the American Indian toward American society" (Deloria 1969, 193). Most importantly, he felt that Kennedy had been one of the few white politicians at the time to go beyond race and identify the real issues facing Native American and African American communities, saying "Robert Kennedy did prove that race was not the real thing bothering this country and that the turmoil over Civil Rights was misunderstood" (Deloria 1969, 192), pointing out his role in changing the discourse. Even though Kennedy's legislative record on Native American issues was disappointing to Deloria (192), he did play an instrumental role in changing the debate on minority issues. In that respect, his death silenced a powerful voice that had been speaking on the behalf of Native Americans.

Interestingly enough, accounts by Baldwin and Cleaver present a similar view of 1968 as a pivotal moment in the struggles for minority recognition. For them, however, *the* defining moment is the assassination of Martin Luther King, an event that Deloria refers to but does not discuss in detail (Deloria 1969, 188). Throughout *No Name in the Street* (1972), Baldwin's retrospective of the nineteen-sixties, Baldwin returns to King's death time and again, frequently referring both to the ways in which it affected him personally and the African American community more generally. Cleaver likewise refers to King's death as a profound moment in his "Requiem for Nonviolence," stating that "the assassin's bullet killed a period of history. It killed a dream" (Cleaver 1968, 1). For Cleaver, however, the assassination was not simply a tragedy but served primarily as a reminder that King's strategy of peaceful activism had indeed been the wrong one.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, Vine Deloria's work shows that Native American people often present narratives that are altogether different from those of other groups in United States society. In his discussion of the Vietnam War for example, Deloria focuses not on the geopolitical context of the Cold War in which historians traditionally position the conflict. Instead, he uses that context against the United States to illustrate how the war connects to domestic issues concerning Native Americans. With respect to African American activism, too, Deloria's accounts offer a slightly different understanding from traditional historiography. Crucially, his comments shed light on the Native American view of African American activism. Looking at the place of 1968 in all of these developments, it is interesting to see that Deloria and his contemporaries felt it was indeed a pivotal year in the history of the African American freedom struggle, with the assassinations of King and Kennedy. At the same time, however, this is much less the case for the Vietnam War, even though this is something on which the popular opinion *did* change its views that year.

Considering the discrepancies presented here between what we know from public memory, historiography, and the narratives introduced by Deloria and his contemporaries, it is evident that there are advantages and disadvantages to an approach rooted in contemporaneous accounts such as these. Most importantly, even if there is a short gap of time between events occurring and the publication of a book like *Custer Died for Your Sins*, it still gives an accurate impression of the way people felt about these developments while they were unfolding. That being said, accounts like this are subjective and can be prone to present a one-sided view of history. Furthermore, their closeness to past events means that authors may highlight events that turned out to be of less importance in the long term. An interesting example of this is the fatalism that appears in discussions of the Vietnam War in particular, but emerges in discourses surrounding the Civil Rights Movement as well. The idea that the events of the nineteen-sixties would trigger a reckoning for the racist and imperialist past and fundamentally change the United States ultimately turned out to be unfounded. Nevertheless, these kinds of ideas are an important indication of how strongly people at the time felt about what was happening in society and help to explain why they are perceived as having had such a lasting impact.

Finally, the approach presented here opens up a range of possibilities for future research. For one, this paper only covers three essays from Deloria's vast corpus, which is why the analysis presented here can easily be extended to his other work. For example, Deloria also discussed the Vietnam War at length in *We Talk, You Listen*, albeit in the context of the peace movement. Additionally, Deloria comments on the political process throughout *Custer Died for Your Sins* and *We Talk, You Listen*, another interesting case where his views extend beyond the scope of Native American Studies. Finally, this paper is also limited in its focus on Deloria, who is to some extent representative of the Native American voice but still only a single person from one tribe, which is why it would be

worthwhile to seek out other American Indian authors. What is more, a similar analysis is possible for critics from other backgrounds whose experiences may differ markedly from the narratives presented in mainstream public memory. In the end, Deloria and his contemporaries invite us to expand our views of United States society, and consider points of view that are not traditionally part of narratives about either the past or the present.

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