

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Life of the Indigenous Mind: Vine Deloria Jr. and the Birth of the Red Power Movement. By David Martinez.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5rh8q0tv>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 43(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Bond, April M.

Publication Date

2019-09-01

DOI

10.17953/aicrj.43.4.reviews

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Life of the Indigenous Mind: Vine Deloria Jr. and the Birth of the Red Power Movement. By David Martinez. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press and the American Philosophical Society, 2019. 498 pages. \$75.00 cloth; \$75.00 electronic.

Life of the Indigenous Mind examines the early activism, life, and writings of Vine Deloria Jr. (1933–2005). Author David Martinez (Akimel O’odham/Mexican), an associate professor of American Indian studies at Arizona State University, has previously published *Dakota Philosopher: Charles Eastman and American Indian Thought* and edited *The American Indian Intellectual Tradition: An Anthology of Writings from 1772 to 1972*. A prolific author and philosopher, Deloria is viewed as an intellectual architect of the Red Power movement of the late 1960s. Martinez’s foreword places *Life of the Indigenous Mind* in the context of teaching his students about Deloria’s writings that honor a generation, and his legacy among the current generation of young scholars and elders as the most influential Indigenous activist and writer of the twentieth century. As evidence of Deloria’s intellectual leadership, Martinez identifies Deloria’s Red Power tetralogy: *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969), *We Talk, You Listen* (1970), *God Is Red* (1973), and *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties* (1974).

Using critical historical analysis, Martinez seeks to fill a major gap in the existing literature, “specifically the need for a monograph devoted to Deloria’s contributions to the American Indian intellectual tradition” (42). It is this intellectual tradition that articulates the concept of tribal self-determination vis-à-vis tribal sovereignty, which the author contextualizes as a reaffirmation of nationhood throughout the book. The author describes Deloria’s influence, as evidenced in the Red Power tetralogy, as “two very different but complementary legacies” (13). As an integral part of tribal political existence, self-determination was, for his Indian readers, the most important response following the termination policies implemented in the 1950s, while Deloria’s non-Indian audience was invited to the twentieth century on and off the reservation when he wrote about contemporary lived experiences of American Indians.

In *Red Prophet: The Punishing Intellectualism of Vine Deloria Jr.* (2018), David E. Wilkins identifies three main themes in Deloria’s scholarship: tribal sovereignty, tribal self-determination, and the sacredness of space and place. In a sharp contrast to Deloria’s own nonlinear approach, Martinez’s writing engages these concepts linearly. Commencing with Deloria’s days as NCAI executive director, the author paints a picture of congressional testimonies and interviews with famous pop culture talk-show hosts and magazines as a means of disseminating the contemporary lived experience of American Indians to a public preoccupied with the civil rights movement. During these formative years (1964–1968), Deloria began critiquing oppressive stereotypes and paternalistic government policies that informed a distorted view of how American Indians were living during this tumultuous time, which culminated in the publication of *Custer*, the text the author has chosen to organize *Life of the Indigenous Mind*.

While the publication of *Custer* was a watershed moment in bringing American Indian issues to the fore, it was not without its problems; namely, its lack of scholarly citations, bias toward Plains Indian epistemology, gender bias, and an anecdotal tone, critiques that continued throughout Deloria’s career. Large institutions like

the Catholic Church, academia (specifically anthropologists), the BIA, and the Supreme Court are referred to as the nebulous “others” of Deloria’s scorn. The value of *Life of the Indigenous Mind* lies in how Martinez addresses these critiques head-on, examining Deloria’s primary works, pertinent government documents, and archival materials to answer a “lingering question as to whether or not American Indian studies can advance as an intellectual field if it is incapable of criticizing its most distinguished figure” (37). The author’s extensive research gives much-needed context to Deloria’s Red Power tetralogy, filling in gaps that had left readers of Deloria wondering whom he was speaking about, gaps that have grown as more than forty-five years have passed since the events took place. Today’s American Indian studies scholars are well served by Martinez’s patterned analysis. He identifies a core concept within Deloria’s writings, provides extensive examples of how Deloria articulated a core concept, offers examples of how contemporaries take up and employ these core concepts, and finally, situates this rhetorical process within the Red Power movement.

Nowhere is this more effective than in Martinez’s chapter on the historic relationship between tribal nations and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. As a source of secular powers guided by non-Indian policy makers, the BIA looms large in Deloria’s writings. Historically underfunded and staffed by a higher percentage of non-Indians, at the time of *Custer’s* publication, the agency’s bureaucratic absurdity becomes fodder for Deloria. Underlying Deloria’s repetition of examples of BIA inefficiency, Martinez pointedly explains, are two important truths: it is still bloated and ineffective, and although an extension of the federal government, it did not care about fulfilling its trust responsibilities to Indian tribes (251).

The BIA’s “catch-22”—to move tribes into termination and self-reliance, yet maintain bureaucratic controls that undermined tribal sovereignty—led to “many believing that tribal governments were no more than puppet regimes whose strings were pulled by the BIA” (264). Deloria’s opinion of contemporary Indian leadership shows his displeasure with young militants using the tactics of the Black Power movement, writing that it would behoove the young activists to “learn how to externalize themselves to non-Indians” (285). The next few pages contrast Deloria and the leaders of what would become AIM: Deloria working within the system to effect change, while Richard Oakes, Clyde Warrior, Russell Means, and John Trudell were on the front lines of the occupation of Alcatraz, the Trail of Broken Treaties, and the Wounded Knee conflict.

As a companion volume to Vine Deloria’s Red Power tetralogy in particular, *Life of the Indigenous Mind* is an asset for instructors of American Indian studies. Martinez paints Deloria as a wise elder of the Red Power movement, even in his youth, a portrait that bolsters the argument that he was the intellectual leader American Indians needed at a unique moment in history.

April M. Bond
University of Arizona