

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

2006

## Writing Red: A Tribute to Vine Deloria, Jr. (1933-2005)

Holly Boomer

*Oglala Lakota College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Boomer, Holly, "Writing Red: A Tribute to Vine Deloria, Jr. (1933-2005)" (2006). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 119.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/119>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## WRITING RED

### A TRIBUTE TO VINE DELORIA JR. (1933-2005)

Mention the word vine in Indian country and most people know that you are talking about a writer rather than talking about gardening. Easily identified by only his first name, Vine Deloria, Jr., has achieved iconic status in the American Indian community. He wasn't the first American Indian writer, but he was the most prolific and enduring writer of Indian issues. Vine was not afraid to tackle Indian issues. He was a warrior who used words as weapons.

Deloria's invective was aimed at mainstream society and the government. He had—and still has today—an enormous following of devoted readers, but Indians did not need to read his books to know that his was a voice for their concerns. The titles of his books became anthems of resistance to the status quo: *Custer Died For Your Sins*; *God is Red*; *We Talk, You Listen*; *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties*; and *Red Earth, White Lies*. These titles represented a call to all native peoples to resist being defined, studied, written about, and characterized by the non-Indian establishment.

Deloria spent his writing career articulating problems, historical and contemporary, that have beleaguered American Indians. Disempowerment, subversion of Indian ways to white ways, disfranchisement, self-determination and loss of culture are some of the primary issues that Deloria addresses in his many books and lectures. His solution to these problems can best be referred to as *survival through verbalization*.

Deloria used a literary technique—taking action through writing and demanding attention be paid to Indian issues by the non-Indian establishment—I call “counting coup.” This literary technique parallels the historical Plains Indians’ technique of counting coup in spirit, style, and significance but not necessarily in form. Deloria’s “counting coup” was an attempt to assure Indian survival through verbalization. Specifically, Deloria wanted to reclaim an appropriated and revised history by telling the Indian story in an Indian voice. Indeed, Vine’s many coups inspired a new generation of Indian writers to become educated so they could take action and count coup themselves.

Deloria saw education as a stimulus for students to become leaders and keepers of

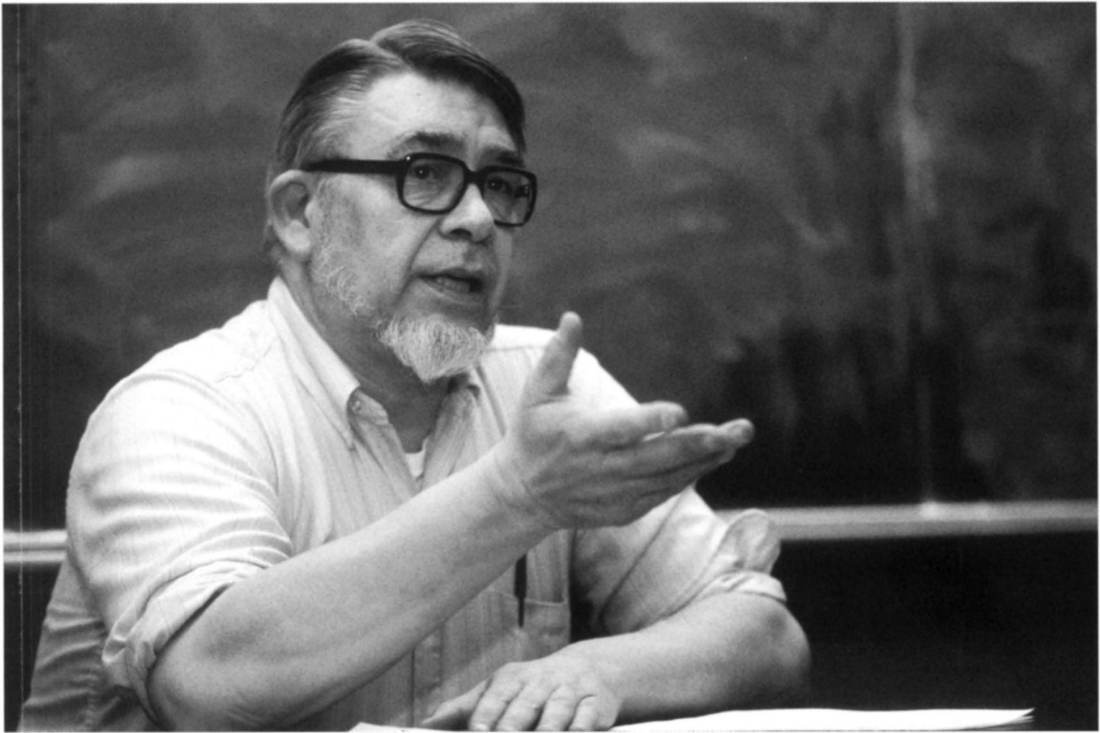


FIG. 1. Vine Deloria Jr. Courtesy of the University of Colorado, Boulder.

tradition in their tribes and communities. He observed that the revival of traditional ways for young people was symbolic of their sense of community but that this traditionalism must be accompanied by “hard and clear thinking which can distinguish what is valuable in the old ways from the behavior we are expected to practice as members of the larger American society” (*Indian Education in America*). Deloria demonstrated that education gave Indians the power to negotiate their way through the world. His perception of the world as “Red” in his books framed Indian traditions, creation, culture, language, medicine, science and religion for non-natives to understand the depth and wealth of indigenous civilizations. The wealth as Deloria saw it was the traditional knowledge of native cultures.

Traditional knowledge enables us to see our place and our responsibility within the

movement of history. Formal American education, on the other hand, helps us to understand how things work and knowing how things work, and being able to make them work, is the mark of a professional person in this society (*Indian Education in America*).

In his book *Red Earth, White Lies*, Deloria hoped that elders will pass on their knowledge so that the next generation of Indians will “respect, cherish, and rescue the remaining bits of information which our people possess.”

Part of Deloria’s legacy is his verbal challenge to Indians to educate themselves in both tradition and in mainstream; his challenge to the establishment is to hear what Indians have to say as authentic and valid in the context of history.

What is it that allows people to know each other? What I thought I knew about Vine came

from congregants of the Episcopal mission church that I grew up in and that his father once shepherded. His father, Vine Sr., “Father Deloria,” to us was much revered and loved at my church. Plenty of people “knew” Vine Jr., or “Punky” as they called him. But I came to realize they knew him, not as an author or an advocate, but as a young man possibly following in his father’s footsteps. His adult persona left an indelible mark in our congregation and our community because he had outgrown that small town he had come from and had become a figure on the national stage. My curiosity about Vine was initiated by that disconnect between what people thought they knew about “Punky” and what they actually knew about the writer Vine Jr.

I didn’t really know Vine, he was my father’s generation, but I was allowed a glimpse of him while writing my dissertation. I was allowed space in his circle while trying to connect the dots—and he welcomed me. He was interested, concerned, supportive, encouraging, and curious about my research and about me. Vine had the character and patience to be genuinely curious and interested in the ideas of the younger generation. So what I now know about Vine is that I think his character was his genius as a person and as a writer. This, and the generations to come who will literally and literarily count coup for Indian survival, is his greatest legacy.

HOLLY BOOMER, Ph.D.  
Oglala Lakota College