

Speaking with Philip Deloria

An Interview by Richard Mace

Philip Deloria is currently a professor of History and the Director of the American Culture Program at the University of Michigan. Philip Deloria's books include Playing Indian, Yale UP (1998) and Indians in Unexpected Places, U of Kansas P (2004). Earning his Masters in Broadcasting from the University of Colorado, Boulder in 1988 and his PhD in American Studies from Yale University in 1994, Deloria records and examines history and representations of identity. In his article "Thinking about Self in a Family Way," Deloria describes the 1971 ethnographic project he undertook with his brother. "We brought our grandfather Vine Deloria Sr. together with our father's tape recorder, and we pushed the record button. A Dakota native clergyman in the Episcopal Church, my grandfather had spent much of his life collecting stories, and he was a gifted teller." (25). From that point on, Philip Deloria has been a collector of stories and histories. Philip Deloria is son of lawyer and author Vine Deloria Jr., and grandnephew of author, ethnographer, and linguist, Ella Carla Deloria.

Richard Mace is a doctoral student in English at St. John's University.

Mace: You have a very recognizable last name. Your father, and your great aunt were well-respected authors and scholars, and you mention the story telling of your great uncle, Philip Lane Sr.; how does their writing affect or influence the way you approach a topic and write about it?

Deloria: One's own voice is always inflected by the many voices that one takes in during the course of a lifetime. So in that sense, my father, in particular, appears in such things as syntax and word selection (anytime I hear myself using the word "exceedingly," I know he's there in the back of my mind, for example). But it is my grandfather, Vine Deloria Sr., who may actually be the most significant figure for me in terms of writing. He was a masterful storyteller, a man who spoke with verve and power, emphatic gesture and subtle modulation. He had a great sense of story rhythm as well. And what a voice! Of course, I never thought about those things when I was listening to him, but I think—I hope—that they are also in the back of my mind.

To the extent that I've managed to grow as a writer over the last years, I've tried to move increasingly toward narrative and storytelling, and to frame for myself the challenge of telling a good story while at the same time laying out interpretations and analyses. The Dakota storytelling tradition from which my grandfather operated demanded that listeners work. There were overt lessons embedded in those stories, to be sure, but there were also analyses and philosophies that operated within the narratives. These required reflection, and their presence helps explain how it was that you could hear the same story many, many times and still find it satisfying. I find myself aiming these days for the historical stories that tell their own analyses, to some extent, and that ask readers to meditate on their meanings.

I'm an academic writer, of course, so I put some kind of interpretive framing on those narratives, but I'm trying to think of ways to let the stories themselves do more of the work.

I don't think either of my first books do this kind of storytelling very well, but I hope I'm getting there. It seems to me that there's a real difference in tone and mood, for example, between *Playing Indian*, which feels to me a bit "tight" and nervous (as befits a revised dissertation, I suppose) and *Indians in Unexpected Places*, which is much more comfortable writing. I'm hoping to get even more comfortable with story next time around.

Mace: You are currently the director of the Program in American Culture, as noted in the University of Michigan's website, the program started in 1952 through the English department and is consistently evolving. Since you have become director, what goals do you have for this program and what are its benefits?

Deloria: I feel incredibly lucky to be serving the faculty members in this program, which really is quite unique. American Culture brings many of the key genealogies that underpin ethnic studies work—community accountability, political visibility, explorations of the histories and practices of inequality—into dialogue with the broad methodological and analytical dimensions that emerge out of the American Studies tradition. The University of Michigan has supported this program in extraordinary ways, with the result being an array of faculty strengths in Native American, Latino/a, Asian American, African American, Arab American, and Pacific Islander American studies, and the real possibility for a new, cross-cutting, relational approach to ethnic studies and cultural analysis. In that context, my goals have been both pragmatic and idealistic.

On the one hand, there is a great deal of practical work to be done nurturing our young faculty through the tenure process, building political capacity for the program within the University, and enabling creative discussions and work both inside and outside the institution. On the other hand, American Culture is really a kind of experiment, and I've tried to help set up opportunities for us to think through just what that experiment is really about and how it might work. How do the American Studies elements in our program stand in relation to the ethnic studies elements? What does it mean that we're almost all humanists, when the traditional ethnic studies institutional formation rested heavily upon social science? What are the ethical obligations and implications for work that crosses not only disciplinary boundaries, but also those made visible around race and ethnicity? I'd like to think that the more abstract conversations that we are having in Ann Arbor will be productive for others contemplating these kinds of inter-, multi-, and sometimes post-disciplinary moves.

Mace: How would you construct a Native American Studies program that encompasses ideas and information students need to attain a fuller understanding of the situations facing Native Americans that would not be found in a typical literature or history classroom?

Deloria: There's a couple of ways to think about this issue. On the one hand, you really need to get serious about what a NAS curriculum does and how it is structured. That might mean a distinctly multi-disciplinary set of courses, and, in that sense, it may be something that looks a lot like earlier Native American Studies programs—sociologists teaching about social relations; political scientists giving students training in policy and law; historians tracking Indian histories; economists, literary critics, environmental justice specialists, linguists—and we could go on and on. This kind of thorough-going curriculum, though, implies that your program serves primarily Native American studies majors, and while there are a number of programs that do so, it is also the case that many programs are like ours—they get a limited number of opportunities to educate non-Indian people in the basics. That kind of situation implies a very different kind of curriculum, one with power and breadth at the introductory level and then specializations for more advanced students who want to pursue questions more deeply. Of course, we could go on and on with the different options for curriculum!

So it is also important to note that “other hand”: we also build academic programs based upon the intellectual work of our faculty. It seems to me that at one point, Native Studies programs really needed to be as broad as possible. I'm not so sure that we haven't reached a point (maybe!) at which individual programs can build certain kinds of specializations. I'm thinking, for example, of UC Davis, with its hemispheric emphasis, or Michigan, for that matter, which has a faculty interested in the kinds of broad, cross-cutting questions that characterize our program. I had at least a bit of a hand in building that program, and I was explicitly interested in bringing in faculty members with those kinds of intellectual profiles. Of course, this kind of unit then produces a distinct type of curriculum. For us that means breadth in an introductory “Native Studies” course, tighter methodological focus in upper level courses on Indian history, literature, religion, and then a series of more precise specializations: the upper Midwest, Native/African American relations, Native feminisms, indigenous community psychology, law and politics, and so on.

Mace: As an educator, what is your pedagogical philosophy? What do you want to impart on your students?

Deloria: I have different goals for different kinds of students, at different levels, and in different kinds of classes. I teach an introductory “first year” seminar, for example, in which my goals tend to the pragmatic and old-fashioned. I want my students to know not just electronic resources, but also the library system, to have worked with primary sources, to be able to read a difficult piece of writing, to interact with one another as thinking intellectuals rather than just people with “an opinion,” to be able to write well and to speak articulately.

Of course, these skills have to be put to use, which I suppose leads to broader and more abstract questions of educational philosophy. Basically, it seems to me that most (not all!) college and university students are at a moment when they have permission to reorganize their ways of thinking and seeing. As teachers, we need to create an environment in which that can happen, and that means that, before you do any damage to their structures, you have to give students the tools—and I'm talking about basic critical thinking skills—to rebuild. I learned this lesson the hard way the first time I taught environmental history. Historicizing concepts like “nature” and “wilderness,” I left some of my students completely uprooted. I hadn't thought about preparing them to think in new ways (I was mostly fascinated by the deconstructive aspects), and I found myself scrambling to deal with the very real, and very tragic, void I'd created in some of their lives. Imagine that situation around a more dangerous concept like race—so firmly rooted in our consciousness that students often end up simply rejecting any opportunity for rethinking. Indeed, a significant number of students can't imagine re-imagining their worlds at all. Our current political, social, and cultural discourse actually discourages this, because it is so often based upon simply shouting loudly what you think you already know. In that sense, good undergraduate pedagogy is a seduction that unfolds over long periods of time—not a seduction in the sense that I want students to think like me, but that I want them to think. In the end, they'll think like themselves, and that's the whole point.

I think we fail to think broadly about the ways in which teaching is a long-term collaborative enterprise. Too often, collaboration means team teaching, guest lecturing, sharing resources, co-moderating electronic discussion groups, etc. But it also means being cognizant of the possible trajectories for any student over the course of a four-year (or longer!) period. Teaching is temporally collaborative, in the sense that I have to prepare my younger students for the work that they'll do next year and the year after that. And I have to rely on my colleagues doing the same kind of work in all of their classes. That's tough, because it implies agreement and commonality among faculty members around curricular issues and approaches—and that's not easily come by! It's in that sense that I think about having different goals for different students. With seniors, and particularly with graduate students, one has to hope that previous teachers have done their job well... and that one can begin at a higher level and push harder. With first year students, one has an obligation to prepare them for what one hopes is to come.

Mace: You mention Elizabeth Cook-Lynn in your article, “American Indians, American Studies, and the ASA.” Elizabeth Cook-Lynn is noted for saying that there needs to be stronger presence of Native American teachers in Native American Studies. Is this why you say you feel more conscious about your identity as an academic than you did in other positions you held throughout your life? How does your identity influence your teaching and writing?

Deloria: When you're a middle school music teacher no one cares very much about your identity. Same thing when you're a video technician... or a mediocre musician playing in a

wedding band... or a warehouse guy... or a retail clerk. I come with a family background in which, in an academic context, it is simply impossible to avoid identity issues... and particularly if one is engaged in areas of scholarship where that identity seems to have a direct bearing. If I were a physicist, maybe it wouldn't matter so much. I would like to avoid making my identity any kind of issue, but it's just not possible. Just like my grandfather—a well-known Dakota Episcopalian minister and the son of a well-known Dakota Episcopalian minister—and possibly like my father as well, we carry our immediate family history with us into the classroom and into our writing. In an academic context, I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. Am I a full-blood reservation-raised, native speaker teaching in a Native Studies program (the question lays bare the assumption that those are the vectors that matter most, which may well be true)? I am not those things, but I am something. And if my presence is inadequate for some people (that is, "his father was such a presence; he's such a disappointment!"), for many others that something is better than nothing. And for still others, I actually function as a kind of role model, both for negotiating the institutional politics of the academy and for trying to maintain a complex yet politically pointed identity.

Mace: Since Elizabeth Cook-Lynn has "attacked mixed-blood writing for accommodating Western colonialism" how do you, or do you feel it is important to separate your native and non-native identity when you write or teach?

Deloria: It's worth drawing a distinction between subjectivity—which is the subject of a good deal of "mixed-blood writing" (I don't even know that that term—"mixed blood writing"—means anymore, by the way!) and identity. I think it's fraudulent and intellectually dishonest to think that one can separate out this or that element from one's subjectivity, but maybe that's just a stubborn Foucauldian streak in my makeup. All our subjectivities, it seems to me, form in complex and multiple relations to colonialism, different cultural formations, interpersonal and psychological situations, and so on. They are under constant influence, and they are hybrid and transformative. If mixed-blood writing is an exploration of subjectivity, then how can it not engage colonialism—and in complicated ways? Is such an engagement necessarily a capitulation to it? I'm not so sure that it is.

Identity, though, is a different thing. If you think of identities as being fluid, intentional, and situational, then it is indeed possible to think of claiming a Native (or non-Native) identity at certain moments and for certain purposes. Those moments and those claims are strategic and political. And I suppose that in that context, the boundary lines that define "identity" can be pretty rigid... such that working in a "mixed-blood" nexus can indeed be seen to accommodate western colonialism. So really, the question may be: can you live always already in an identity, without being crossed by a subjectivity that will inevitably complicate that identity? Maybe some people can pull that off, but I've never been able to. I think that a great deal of "mixed blood" writing explores exactly this difficult relation between the structural/political and the personal/subjective... which incidentally, suggests that "mixed blood writing" doesn't necessarily have an exact correlation with "mixed blood identity." I wonder if that's what Elizabeth Cook-Lynn is really suggesting in the end, even

as she calls for a greater attention to the structural/political (although of course I could be completely wrong on this!)

Mace: You mention the binary nature of life and the opposition possessed therein as exemplified through your denotation of Iktomi and Walter Benjamin; do you feel this why white America both romanticizes and demonizes perceptions on the identity of Native Americans? Is this duality a motivation for your examination of the preconceptions and stereotypes you examine in *Indians in Unexpected Places*?

Deloria: It seems to me that embedded in the Iktomi stories—as well as other philosophical embodiments such as the *heyoka* and the *winkte*—is a Dakota epistemology that understands the power of simultaneity... of rejecting the binary that takes form as “either/or” and instead asserting the centrality of “both/and.” So *Playing Indian* is about how the formation of the United States created exactly this dynamic around questions of identity. It was creative and powerful, this simultaneous romanticization and demonization, but it created difficulties for white Americans—who in turn created difficulties for Indian people. As Richard Slotkin has always understood the dynamic: kill the Indian/be the Indian; be the Indian/kill the Indian. I want to be clear that I’m *not* saying that this identity play *produced* American colonial and imperial practice, but I *am* saying that such identity play existed in a productive relationship to those common practices of domination and dispossession. In that sense, *Playing Indian* might be said to function from an indigenous critical position.

Indians in Unexpected Places comes more directly out of my sense that “family” matters in thinking about Native histories. That book started with the third chapter—on my grandfather as an athlete—and it essentially makes an argument for the importance of the large number of Indian people who lived in his cohort, making sense of the new worlds that followed military defeat, and figuring ways to continue to struggle for survival. The problem with *Playing Indian* as many people love to point out, is that there are relatively few Indian people in it. In *Indians in Unexpected Places*, I wanted to remedy that, by placing Native people in direct relation to the same kinds of ideologies that underpinned *Playing Indian*. So the question in that book, at least in this regard, is: what kinds of things did Indian people do in relation to white expectations (the word I use to try to avoid either the simplistic language of “stereotype” or the theoretical density that underlies “ideology”).

Mace: You mention the difficulties in forming an intellectual home for Native American scholars at the AMA, and that “Native America generates fewer academic intellectuals” have you seen any improvements since you wrote this article? What do you think can be done to secure the future of Native American studies and scholars?

It's always getting better... incrementally. Many Ethnic Studies programs were founded in a certain political moment, in which outside grassroots pressure could accomplish great things. It still can, but it also seems to me that this particular moment is much more guarded, much more institutionalized... and that institutions are less responsive today to outside pressure, and more responsive to internal constituencies. In that sense, it remains critically important to build cohorts of individuals who can push from within, in partnership with those who may be pushing from without. Of course, the creation of that cohort implies a willingness to play by certain institutional rules, namely those of scholarly production and the tenure game. My own sense is that it's worth doing this—acquiring tenure, building institutional capacity, and then going to work from within. But I may well be a minority in holding this view, and it may well reflect my own present moment, serving as an academic administrator and trying my best to build political capacity and put it to use. There are lots of Native Studies faculty members who quite legitimately hold a different view—that instead of being willing to meet institutions on their terms—at least for seven years—we need to force institutions to meet our terms, whatever these may be, sooner rather than later. I think we ought to think of Native Studies as being a big tent, able to hold everyone, and willing to support one another despite our internal differences. I think that's where the future of NAS, and of NAS scholars rests. In that sense, I guess I'm a gradualist, and of course many would call me accomodationist. Big tent.

Mace: Both of your earlier texts, *Playing Indian* and *Indians in Unexpected Places* have been very well received in the academic community. Are you currently working on a new text?

Deloria: I'm working on a number of things right now. I'm doing a critical cultural geography essay on Mount Rushmore, which will anchor a collection of various essays on culture and representation, including a fun little piece called "They Knew Me By My Vibe; Not By My Tribe." I've got an article in process that tries to knit together the cultural geography, federal policy, and ideological formations that characterized four specific forms of colonial/imperial practice in U.S. history. That's for a collection being put together in honor of the great cultural historian Larry Levine. I'll be starting work soon on a short essay on guitars for a very cool collection on "Western Things," that's working in tandem with the Autry Museum. And I'm gathering material for an environmental history of two counties, one in Colorado; the other in Michigan. I have a family history project that I've had shelved for almost a decade, and I'm thinking about dusting that off. And I have a very long term project that I work on periodically, examining the responses of different groups across North America to the meteor storms of November 1833. Of course, I've just signed up for another year directing the Program in American Culture, so the truth of the matter is that I'm not likely to get to *any* of these projects in a significant way until the summer of 2007!