

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

The World We Used to Live In: Remembering the Powers of the Medicine Men. By Vine Deloria Jr.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4wq7m1mt>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 31(1)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Irwin, Lee

**Publication Date**

2007

**DOI**

10.17953

**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/>

intent in ways that reject any notion of actual presences in the land. Studies cited, such as Nurit Bird-David's "'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment and Relational Epistemology" (*Current Anthropology*, 1999), provide further background for thinking through this cultural sense of an earth yearning for the human as seen by Native peoples and an objectivizing Western ethos that rejects nature as alive.

Nabokov does not clutter his experientially oriented text with footnotes, and they are not missed. His thirty-two pages of sources are closely related to his arguments by sentence references and page numbers. These sources are helpful in expanding his arguments in the sixteen case studies with informative ethnographic citations.

There is an increasing library of works and films on American Indian sacred sites. The film and Web site, *In the Light of Reverence*, visually illustrate several of the case studies that Nabokov presents such as the Hopi and Navajo loss of Woodruff Butte, the Lakota efforts to protect Native prayer bundles and activities at Bear Lodge Butte (Devil's Tower), and the Winemem (Wintu) Indians' resistance to multiple intrusions at Panther Meadows, Mount Shasta. Studies of sacred sites among specific peoples are available to expand Nabokov's broader discussions such as in the Navajo/Diné context: Laurance Linford, *Navajo Places: History, Legend and Landscape* (2000), Klara Bonsack Kelley and Harris Francis, *Navajo Sacred Places* (1994), and Douglas Preston, *Talking to the Ground* (1995). There is also the interesting approach to sacred sites implicit in Mark Warhus, *Another America: Native American Maps and the History of Our Land* (1997) that documents in a different way the resistance and survivals of Native peoples in relation to their homelands.

This is a remarkable contribution to our understanding of American Indian sacred places that highlights the most significant interpretive voice as that of Indian traditions. And that Native voice, Nabokov conjectures, is quite often silent, attentive to life in the region, and capable of unexpected humor in the gravity of landscapes.

*John A. Grim*  
Yale University

**The World We Used to Live In: Remembering the Powers of the Medicine Men.** By Vine Deloria Jr. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2006. 224 pages. \$16.95 paper.

Vine's death in November 2005 marked the passing of a gifted, remarkable human being whose many writings articulate a passionate affirmation of Native rights in a context of Native spirituality. Many of us will certainly miss his humor, critical spirit, visionary ideas, and honesty in confronting the limitations of non-Native intellectual attitudes toward Native religions. It is no surprise that one of his last works underscores the unique spiritual capacities of remarkable Native religious leaders, as he was one of those leaders.

Throughout the last fifteen years I had several conversations with Vine about this book. He told me that he was collecting stories of the old-time medicine men and their remarkable abilities and that he hoped to publish these stories. We discussed the various sources of these stories and shared some thoughts about the underlying significance of the sacred knowledge held by specific medicine men and women. He also expressed the conviction that Native spiritual leaders, in the context of their traditional life and in relationship to the powers of nature, had remarkable and profound abilities that went far beyond the acceptable paradigms of conventional Western science. Those familiar with Vine's writing will know that his views on Western materialism and deductive observation were highly skeptical and that he refused to acknowledge any limited theorizing that undermined or sought to discredit the spiritual worldviews of Native peoples. He also told me that he had hesitations about publishing this material because the observed ethnographic record and the direct testimony of various witnesses thoroughly challenge the norms of scientific thinking. My impression was that it was not the challenge to material science that concerned him but the possibility that Native spiritual leaders again would be discredited by hard-edged, non-Native resistance to traditional spiritual practices, stories, and sacred events.

This is a book assembled with deep and genuine respect, an attitude that is clearly evident in Vine's commentary throughout. It is also a book that should be read with appreciation for what it reveals about the traditional knowledge and capacities of gifted Native individuals. These are not ordinary stories, and they are not about ordinary people. I am reminded of the Lakota precept that *ikce'oyate* (ordinary persons) do not have the knowledge or ability of traditional medicine men (*pejuta wicasa*) or women (*wapiye'win*), or of the more renowned holy men (*wicasa wakan*) such as Horn Chips and Black Elk. This is not a book about the ordinary person but is about the extraordinary gifts, knowledge, and remarkable powers of rare individuals who epitomized the higher accomplishments of human beings living fully in contact with the natural world and all its inhabitants. Vine Deloria was no ordinary person. As a gifted writer, creative leader, inspired speaker, *Time* magazine nominee as one of the great religious thinkers of the twentieth century, and a foremost spokesperson for a multitude of Native people, he represents a unique voice in the midst of the whirlwind of contemporary agnostic deconstruction, calling us to nurture a more careful, receptive reading of the traditional wisdom and abilities of past Native spiritual leaders. To facilitate this reading, as a remarkable writer and teacher, Vine has assembled a unique collection of ethnographic descriptions that highlight the intimate interface between the human, natural, and cosmological.

The book is organized into eight chapters: dreams, powers of medicine men, various sacred ceremonies, interspecies relations, land and cosmos, stones and places, unusual exploits, and the spiritual universe. The structure of each chapter is based on quotations from older ethnographic sources with very brief introductions and commentaries on the selected quotations. There are only a few references to his direct observations of remarkable events as he expresses the belief that contemporary Native people do not

have the same degree of knowledge as the older generations of traditional spiritual leaders. The sources he uses are a mix of Native and non-Native ethnography, with prominence given to classic anthropological works of John Cooper, Edward Curtis, George Bird Grinnell, Robert Lowie, Walter McClintock, Morris Opler, William Powers, John Swanton, and James Walker. By way of contrast, he cites many Native ethnographers, such as Andrew Blackbird, Ella Deloria, Edward Goodbird, Charles Eastman, Francis La Flesche, John Lame Deer, Luther Standing Bear, John Stands in Timber, Gladys Tantaquidgeon, and John Wooden Leg. It is primarily the early to mid-twentieth century that is the heart of the ethnography cited and, although a wide range of Native spiritual leaders are highlighted, the Lakota are referenced most frequently. Although sources from as early as the 1630s are cited, the late-nineteenth-century way of life reflects the “powers of the medicine men.” A principal source for Lakota material is Frances Densmore, particularly *Teton Sioux Music and Culture* (1918), a work Vine notes as “the best account of spiritual feats” among the Lakota (xxi).

Through special dreams, Native medicine men and women are empowered to demonstrate remarkable knowledge and unusual powers—the entire book is a collection of narratives about those visionary powers and abilities. Higher powers, manifesting often as special animals, plants, and natural objects such as stones, are common to these narratives. Though he uses the term *medicine man or woman* throughout the book, he writes that a better description would be “holy ones or people who lived a more rigorous, disciplined life” (xxvi). Through dreams and visions, and often in a waking state, these gifted individuals would receive teachings and ritual instructions from those powers for healing, hunting, warfare, improved communal relations, warnings of future events, and success in life. Vine also subscribes to a theory of medicine power that is nondeterminative and based on medicine people as “co-creators with the ultimate powers of the universe” (xxx). The mothering power of the earth, according to Luther Standing Bear, could only be learned by living in intimate contact with the ground, in nature, in communion with nature spirits. Many dreams and visions are related throughout the book of that contact, which resulted in strange, at times incredulous, powers given to the medicine person as a sacred responsibility to his or her community (13). Medicine women accounts, though rare, are also present, such as those of Catherine Wabose and Pretty Shield (31ff.).

The powers of the medicine man range from Navajo (Diné) hand trembling and star gazing, to reviving those thought to have died (Saulteaux), buffalo healing among the Omaha, the Pawnee “doctor’s lodge,” healing of animals, locating lost objects, various forms of intuitive knowledge conveyed by means of sacred objects, predicting the future, “prophecy” or finding of lost persons, foretelling the exact location of people or animals, and other abilities. The chapter on communication with spirits is particularly interesting and gives detailed accounts of eyewitness observations of shaking-tent or spirit-lodge rites, *yuwipi* (tie him up) ceremonies, and various forms of eyewitness “conjuring” that left observers amazed and befuddled in searching for a “rational” explanation, including the direct witness of corn and other plants

being grown from a seed to a mature plant in a single day (126ff.). Another ability of the medicine person is animal communications, which includes knowing the “language of the birds” and other species, as in the case of Black Elk being told where to find buffalo in the winter by the coyote (111). Animals and plants gave protective and healing powers, including invulnerability to being shot (117), various forms of remarkable healing, and an ability to control weather (135ff.) by calling upon or driving away storms, rain, or snow. Medicine men are shown to be centered uniquely in a spiritual and cosmological world as cocreative agents capable of impacting the environment, soliciting special knowledge, demonstrating miraculous abilities, and offering guidance and rituals for the health and well-being of their communities.

In a chapter on sacred stones, specific medicine men are presented as having a unique ability to “send the stones” for knowledge and information requested by community members who actually witness the stones disappearing and reappearing (155). Pictures (Lakota, *wowapi*) written by “little birds of every color” are described as appearing on certain cliff faces to which medicine men went for information and guidance to foretell events (152). Stones were also used to call the buffalo and make sacred pipes, and the stones of the sweat lodge could convey information and healing to ritual participants. Extreme accounts of medicine men include narratives of eyewitness accounts of men such as the Cheyenne holy man Ice simply disappearing after being put in a hole that was sealed with limbs and stones. When the hole was uncovered, while constantly surrounded by Natives and non-Natives, there was no one in the hole; a few minutes later, Ice walked into the tipi and told the observers that his medicine father had moved him outside (169ff.). Other abilities included handling red-hot stones, making feathers dance, extending the experience of time and reshaping the nature of space/location, and, perhaps most remarkable of all, making a set of clay figures come to life and hunt clay buffalo (witnessed by frontiersman and Indian agent D. D. Mitchell among the Arickara in 1831).

The final chapter is a remarkable discourse by Vine on the congruity between the abilities of Native medicine persons and research in modern physics covering topics such as Buddhist philosophy, the biology of DNA, Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, and a general affirmation of matter as “frozen thought in a universe of mind-stuff” that would allow human agents to shape and change the visible world through a unique and empowered resonance with that mind stuff (197). He passionately advocates that Native medicine people clearly had an awareness of the interpenetration of mind and matter, drawing directly on Native testimonies on the “invisible spirit” that pervades nature and is energetically influenced by certain gifted individuals. The epitome of this influence is the sacred song—a gift from the higher powers that can shape and influence the immaterial structure of matter, the body, space-time, and human health and well-being (200). Discussing the Navajo (Diné) creation of a miniature storm inside a hogan, he writes: “The bowl of the pipe contains worlds we have never dreamt existed.” Perhaps some readers will find it ironic that Vine, a memorable critic of anthropology, uses primary anthropological sources for this book. However, I remember another

conversation with Vine on this very topic in which he said, roughly, “There was a lot of good information in the old ethnography; the problem is, the people who gathered it do not understand what they are reading!” Hopefully, this unique collection of ethnography by a Native writer and leader will spark greater dialogue, respect, and appreciation for the authenticity of the spiritual worldview expressed in these writings.

*Lee Irwin*

College of Charleston

**The Year the Sun Died.** By Kenneth Lincoln. Baltimore: PublishAmerica, 2006. 271 pages. \$21.95 paper.

“You’ve got to listen real hard to know these people, all kinds of Skins and breeds. And the way they tell it *is* the story, my friend. They all cross and connect kind of strange like, or they don’t. That’s an unspoken story, no talk across the railroad tracks, you know, Indian Town, and up-town” (25). That is, this book is written in “Indian structure”—things connect or they don’t, and that’s supposed to give us a complete picture. The book has a huge number of characters, and each one gets his or her moment on stage, often interrupting other characters. If Lincoln thinks that the character has something to offer, he shows up and tells his story; it doesn’t matter if this follows directly or not. In this way, Lincoln gets the best of the Indian world.

The book is the story of a town—Alliance, Nebraska—and, especially, Ed Striker, Emma Flambeaux, Rosie Red Star, and Josef Lone Dog. The story takes place in 1969, the year of so much foment, so much progress. That’s the year of Alcatraz, the formation of the American Indian Movement (AIM), and the successes of the black civil rights movement. But these things are hardly heard of in Nebraska. They do not impinge on the action. The action is all its own; it plays out without benefit or menace of the wider world.

The book is also the story of the culture—Winnie Lone Dog and Mamie Warrick, the grandmothers; Will Knott, the draft-dodging college kid; Easter Montgomery, the black garbage man; Louie Kazin, the Jew who has no synagogue to go to; the Reverend Thomas “Dutch” Frieman and his wife, Tillie; the police chief, Patrick Irish, and his deputy, Gideon Jones; Charlie Weed and his sidekick, Delbert Jenkins, the city road-maintenance squad; Slim Red Star, Josef’s stepfather, and his wife, Sophie Kisicki, a Polish immigrant; Sol Harden, the black owner of the Pick-a-Rib brothel; H. A. Tottle, the newspaper owner; and their wives, children, uncles, aunts, grandfathers, and grandmothers . . . especially the grandmothers and grandfathers. And add Buffalo Bill, George Armstrong Custer, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Buffalo Calf Woman, Billy Red Star, Martin Luther King, and Tunkáshila.

It is not a pretty picture. “When we came here after the war, they [Indians, Negroes] lived in canvas army tents and burned winter coal oil along Potash Avenue. We would hardly ever see one of them. They’d have military passes to come up town and then a curfew after dark” (31). In this milieu, Sol Harden