

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Playing Indian by Philip J. Deloria.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9tb859x6>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 23(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Kamper, David

Publication Date

1999-09-01

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/>

Playing Indian by Philip J. Deloria. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 241 pages. \$25.00 cloth.

The name Deloria means so much to American Indian studies that it would be just as artificial to ignore the father-son connection between Vine, Jr. and Philip as it would be laudatory to consider Philip's achievements independently. In fact, *Playing Indian* follows the critical trajectory launched by *Custer Died for Your Sins* and simultaneously offers new perspectives on the complex interactions between Natives and Euramericans. Philip Deloria's chronicle of historical representations and performances of Indianness by Euramericans refocuses a scholarly gaze back onto the practices of white Americans and exposes the complex relationships that contribute to the formation of both Native and Euramerican identities.

Deloria is certainly not the first to consider representations of American Indians, but his book is perhaps the most thorough to date, as it presents a longitudinal study of the performance of Indianness in America. While previous studies have focused on movies and television, and more recent attention has been given to brand logos and team mascots, Deloria broadens the scope of what qualifies as Indianness by examining political demonstrations, social clubs, youth groups, hobbyists, and New Age spiritualists. However, Deloria's most distinctive achievement is not his range of topics, but his investigation of the producers of these representations of Indianness. His concentration on performance allows him to move beyond a cursory critique of negative stereotypes and locate the construction of Indianness in the political and socio-cultural agendas of both Euramericans and Native Americans.

Deloria begins with one of the most defining moments of the American Revolution: the Boston Tea Party. He asks why "the notion of disguised Indians dumping tea in Boston harbor has such a powerful hold on Americans' imagination?" (p. 2-3) This question is thoroughly answered in his 200-odd-page exploration of the intercultural performance of Indianness. Deloria presents far too many insightful observations and too much meaningful analysis to recollect here. Instead, I will sketch *Playing Indian's* historical narrative. Deloria sees performance as a generative process that allowed early Anglo Americans to construct a distinctly American identity. Participants in the Boston Tea Party and other early public protests used Indianness not only to signify unbridled rebellion and free-spirit, but also to differentiate themselves from Britons by marking themselves as indigenous. Deloria explains that playing Indian permitted American revolutionaries "to *invent* the American customs they so sorely lacked" (emphasis added; p. 25).

Deloria next uncovers the origins of American anthropology, focusing on Henry Lewis Morgan's performance of Indianness through participation in the mid-nineteenth century "New Confederacy of the Iroquois." This "New Confederacy" dedicated itself not only to learning and writing about the customs of putatively "vanished" Indians, but also to maintaining these traditions by donning homemade costumes and enacting rites. Morgan and his intellectual circle saw themselves as critics of American industrialism. *Playing Indian* allowed nascent ethnographers to fully align themselves with the culture they thought they were trying to praise and salvage.

Deloria chronicles similar dynamics at the turn of the twentieth century in the activities of youth groups such as the Woodcraft Indians and the Camp Fire Girls. Youth reformers and educators took urban children into the woods and enacted recreational Indian life ways in order to instill morals and values into children who were being corrupted by modern society and urban blight. After World War II, Anglo American Indian hobbyists regularly attended and participated in powwow, priding themselves on their knowledge of the event's dances and their possession of dance regalia (either purchased or self-made). Deloria explains this subculture in the context of Cold War America, suggesting that many white American who felt anxious "about the meaninglessness of the individual Self" forayed into the world of racialized Others (p. 130). Hobbyists engaged in a complex process of border-crossing to search for and establish a sense of authenticity in their lives, and playing Indian provided them with an easy set of rules by which they could achieve this presumed authenticity. Deloria insightfully and sensitively unpacks the complex web of power relations produced by these intercultural performances of Indianness.

Similarly, his critique of hippie counterculture of the 1960s and New Age spiritualists of the 1970s and '80s does not partake of the aggressive and accusatory style deployed by some contemporary American Indian studies scholars. While Deloria does not apologize for white performers of Indianness, he does work to understand the contexts of playing Indian in order to view these instances as important and meaningful moments of cultural production. Deloria addresses the temporally disparate phenomena of hippies and New Agers in tandem because, as he observes, many individuals participated in both movements at different times in their lives. It is not surprising, then, that both movements play Indian in search of social and political change. But rather than following the model of early American Tea Party Indians, according to Deloria, these "countercultural rebels became Indians to move their identities away from Americanness altogether, to leap outside national boundaries, gesture at repudiating the nation, and offer what seemed a clear-eyed political critique" (p. 161). Hippies played Indian to metaphorically oppose United States imperialism in the form of the Vietnam War and New Agers take on Indian identities to restore the world's environmental balance and their own spiritual harmony. This final section is most relevant to contemporary concerns about New Age performances and the shortcomings of easily egalitarian multiculturalism. Deloria forces his readers to examine the construction of iconography and cultural knowledge in a society fraught with economic and political inequities. Perhaps this is what gives *Playing Indian* its sharp edge: Deloria considers the intersection of symbolic and material power.

What sets Deloria apart from his predecessors is his skillful treatment of complex intercultural negotiation and performance. He does not simply dichotomize all representations of Indianness as either savage warriors or noble savages; instead, he examines the texture of representations to expose their ambivalence and multiplicity. Furthermore, he neither simply rebukes Euroamericans for misrepresenting Indianness nor commends American Indians for setting the record straight. Rather, he looks at cultural actors who

collide (by choice and circumstance) to make meaning out of difference. Deloria efficiently applies the methods of post-colonial and cultural studies scholars who have heretofore ignored interactions between Euro- and Native Americans. American Indian studies is certainly improved by their notions of culture, history, and power; however, Deloria manages to circumvent and redirect the opaque and sometimes pedantic language of these fields to engage readers more successfully. I believe that many post-colonial studies and cultural studies scholars could learn from Deloria's ability to make very complex ideas intelligible. Scholars of culture and performance will also learn much from this brilliant book.

David Kamper

University of California, Los Angeles

The Politics of Second Generation Discrimination in American Indian Education: Incidence, Explanation, and Mitigating Strategies. By David E. Wright, III, Michael Hirlinger, and Robert E. England. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998. 192 pages. \$49.95 cloth.

Beginning with the monumental dictates of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, schools have been trying, with varying levels of compliance and success, to reverse the tenet behind the sweeping 1896 *Plessey v. Ferguson* ruling, which stated that separate can be equal. Since *Brown*, schools have implemented a variety of measures designed to assure that education would be integrated and, therefore, theoretically equal. Bussing, admission set-asides, and, the latest alleviator of educational disparity, vouchers, are a few of the ways in which educational disparity (read: discrimination) were to be remedied. These programs are not, both by ideology and design, race neutral. They were designed with the clear intention of assisting the typically unassisted—minority students. Historically, both the legislation initiated and the language professed concerning educational discrimination was most tangible within the context of the African American community (and justifiably so, as African Americans, to date, comprise the largest minority group in the United States). Yet there was, and is, another minority group that has suffered and continues to suffer its own brand of sweeping discrimination. Alternately ignored or forced to assimilate, American Indians have not escaped the discriminatory forces that impact their educational access and attainment. Long after the dust settled over both *Plessey* and *Brown*, the lingering aftermath, discrimination still affects many American Indian students. The remedies imposed in the 1950s are still fighting the effects of educational discrimination well into the 1990s, with abatement still a lingering ideal.

In order to situate the premise of *The Politics of Second Generation Discrimination in American Indian Education*, a definition of its theoretical underpinning is required. Second generation discrimination is defined as the continuance of policies and practices that, after schools have been desegregated, still serve to limit the educational equality of some students. With par-