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NEWSLETTER ON AMERICAN INDIANS IN PHILOSOPHY

FROM THE EDITORS, KATY GRAY BROWN & LORRAINE MAYER

REFLECTIONS ON VINE DELORIA, JR.

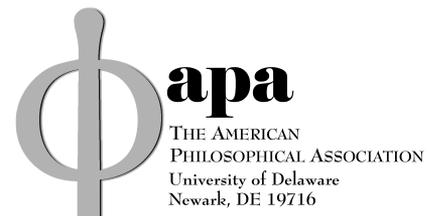
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“Persons in Place: The Agent Ontology of Vine Deloria, Jr.”





FROM THE EDITORS

“Western civilization, unfortunately, does not link knowledge and morality but rather, it connects knowledge and power and makes them equivalent.”

-- Vine Deloria, Jr.

Vine Deloria, Jr., political theorist, philosopher, legal scholar, activist, and prolific writer, died November 13, 2005.

My mother introduced me to Vine Deloria when I was just a kid, in the 1970s. So many times coming down from bed late at night, I would find her, a cigarette in one hand and a book by Vine Deloria in the other. Those were some intense and heady days, after Alcatraz and before the Wounded Knee incident. Without reading anything he'd written, I thought of Vine Deloria as our spokesperson to the non-Native world. He was as smart as their best political theorists, and funnier (naturally, since he was an Indian). I thought Vine Deloria *was* the guy in the sunglasses and headdress on the original cover of *God is Red*.

As I grew up, and more and more of his titles lined my mother's shelves, I quickly appreciated myself the path that Deloria created. His work defied conventions, crossed disciplines, and inspired us to reflect critically upon Native perspectives and experiences. Vine Deloria transcended academic categories and fundamentally shaped our understandings of Native American life and thought.

This issue of the *Newsletter* offers examples of how Deloria's life and work have expanded our understanding of philosophy in both content and character. Illustrating the remarkable influence he had upon individuals—both Native and non-Native—working in philosophy, Lorraine Mayer and John Powell contribute memories of Vine Deloria. Scott Pratt's article, *Persons in Place: The Agent Ontology of Vine Deloria, Jr.*, is an example of how Deloria's work can provide rich opportunities for dialogue, conversations which develop that which we call the canon and work to bridge the chasm separating Native and Western philosophical views. We who dwell in those worlds, who navigate that bridge, remember Vine Deloria.

Katy Gray Brown

Call for submissions:

The *APA Newsletter on American Indians in Philosophy* seeks articles, syllabi, and book reviews. We welcome readers to volunteer to review books and materials.

Deadline for submissions for the Spring edition is December 1, 2006. Please send submissions to both editors:

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REFLECTIONS ON VINE DELORIA, JR.

Lorraine Mayer
Brandon University

Once in a great while, someone comes into our lives who will, in ways unknown to us, significantly impact our future. For me that person was Vine Deloria, Jr. I was pursuing a Master's degree at Lakehead University when I first came into contact with the name "Vine Deloria, Jr." My degree was in Native and Canadian Philosophy, the first of its kind in Canada, and since I am an Aboriginal woman I wanted my thesis to be on the Native side. There is a plethora of books out there in philosophy, but the literature for Aboriginal students is minimal. I clung tenaciously to anything I could find written by Native people.

I was introduced to Vine's work through his book *God is Red*. Finding his work not only inspired me but also gave me the belief in my own ability to succeed. As Aboriginal students, we too often are forced to use literature about Aboriginal peoples written by non-Aboriginal peoples—work that more often than not distorts our history and achievements. Therefore, finding a scholar who is both Native and successful provides Aboriginal students with the opportunity to experience a different perceptual reality. If we never see our faces reflected back at us, how can we ever begin to perceive an alternative reality? For me, that first meant either finding books written by Native scholars or meeting Native scholars. These encounters were what I needed to show me that there was a place in the world for Aboriginal scholars. I had not considered the possibility that some day I would become a scholar. That was a reality far removed from my experience and even my desires and life goals—that is, until I began to meet people like Vine Deloria, Jr.

I began to consider furthering my education and, with *God is Red* in mind, I knew the direction I would take with my education. Indeed, after reading *God is Red*, I often dreamed I could meet the man whose words reflected so many of my own beliefs. However, I was living in Canada, so I thought that was an impossible dream. Still, Vine's writings were like a guiding lifeline during my difficult years at university. His truth was

my truth and so I persevered against tremendous opposition, racism, and discrimination.

When I completed my Master's degree I went on to tackle a Ph.D. at the University of Oregon. I was willing to sacrifice my time and being with my family because of scholars like Vine. By the time I read *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*, I was fully aware of the difficulty of trying to do anything like Native philosophy in an institution known for its bias toward Western philosophy. Nonetheless, I wanted to show philosophers the value in my Cree ancestry's worldview. I wanted to be able to emulate scholars like Vine Deloria, Jr.

Without mentors like Vine I would not have thought it possible. He became my hero and I had placed him as high as possible on my academic pedestal. As with every graduate student, I was expected to write and present conference papers. I remember how excited I was the day I found out I would be attending a conference session designed to honor Vine. I had been asked to meet him in the morning and escort him to his session. I was excited beyond belief but I had no idea what he looked like, so I figured if I just hung around the hotel lobby eventually I would recognize him. I had been told many things about this man including that he had little patience, he was gruff, and could be very rude if he did not like you. I am not sure how much of that particular gossip I had believed; however, I do know I was apprehensive of finally meeting him.

Worse was the fact that I was supposed to escort a man I had never seen in my life. I was sure that if I said the wrong thing to him he would dismiss me immediately. Fortunately, my advisor was in the lobby of the hotel where the conference was being hosted and he knew what Vine looked like, so together we walked peering among the crowds. I kept looking for an imaginary giant, a man who would stand out among everyone. I fully expected a power to radiate his presence. I was watching a grandfatherly looking man walking with a cane when my advisor pointed to the man and said, "That's Vine Deloria. Do you want me to introduce you to him?" I was surprised at how different he looked from what I had expected. I very quickly said no to my advisor about meeting Vine right then. I was so overwhelmed with nervousness and filled with the gossip I had heard about him that instead of approaching him I spent the evening carefully studying him each time he walked near me. Once he even sat on a couch next to me. I remember listening to him talk to his companion and still I could say nothing. After all, he was the great Vine Deloria and I was nothing but a lowly student. I merely sat listening to his voice and when he smiled at me, I wondered if he knew I was Aboriginal. Maybe he would accept me after all. I began to wonder what kind of man he really was, this man I had made my hero for so many years, this man so many were afraid to upset.

The next morning I went searching for him. I had to get over my nervousness since I was scheduled to escort him. I found him at the restaurant eating breakfast with two women. I approached his table and with my hand extended to shake his I asked, "You're Vine Deloria?" I was stunned when he replied, "No, I'm not." My response surprised me even more. Without faltering I said, "Yes you are." I then told him my name and where I was from. With a laugh, he stood up, shook my hand, and in a welcoming voice told me to join him and his companions. I was amazed by my audacity but I realized later that my response was exactly the response he respected. Vine was not a man to suffer idiots. He respected courage and strength. I still laugh when I think back to how scared I was of actually meeting him.

Today I know why I was so afraid of meeting him. I had been so used to people making fun of me for wanting to do philosophy that I was terrified he would reject my efforts as well. That day,

however, I met a friend and mentor. I no longer had to rely on just his books to sustain me. He said he was happy to meet a student trying to make her way in philosophy and encouraged me completely. He became an e-mail correspondent and when I had difficulties or just needed support, his letters helped me through rough times.

Vine did not suffer fools. One time he tore a strip off me because he said I should not have to validate my Aboriginal identity simply because I also identified as a philosopher. At the time I had been part of an online dialogue when it had been decided that Native people needed a safe place to engage in their philosophy. Unfortunately, within a short space of time the debate turned on whether there was such a thing as Native philosophy and who had the right to do it. Some people believed only academics should be doing Native philosophy. Others thought such philosophy was a way of life and could not be approached through educational institutions. Such bickering led to the question of who was really a Native philosopher. Challenges to identity are common among Native people and this is especially true if the Native person is academically trained. We too often are charged with being "white" simply because of our education. At the same time, scholars are forced into defending their credentials against charges that we are not "traditional." Some Native people thought we were inauthentic and that what we called Native philosophy was nothing more than Western philosophical jargon. Authenticity debates infuriated Vine, and when he found me caught up in them he was quick to chastise me. He would caution me that engaging in fruitless dialogue to prove an authentic "Indian" identity detracted from our scholarly endeavors.

If there was anything Vine believed in, it was that Native scholars need to confront distortion and do so with the utmost scholarly vigor. He did not think we should simply make claims about our culture without having the skill to prove them. At the same time he fully endorsed the belief that some things should not be discussed. Vine himself constantly critiqued Western ways of knowing and doing, and he said we could and should draw on our cultures to demonstrate alternative ways of viewing the world. But we must do so with scholarly vigor.

Toward the end of his life we had a falling out, and I am sure I am not the first to experience difficulty with disagreements and Vine Deloria, Jr. In the past, such a difference of opinion would have devastated me. Today I can accept that we saw some things differently. But we shared a belief in a changing world and that, as philosophers, we do not have a static truth that is universal and unchanging. For me, Vine will always be the wonderful man who supported me and believed in me during my graduate years. Others will have different opinions of this man but that is as it should be, and he would be the first to say so.

For many of us, students, scholars, and activists, the works of Vine Deloria, Jr., and his memory will continue to motivate and sustain us regardless of the different fields we chose to pursue. I am where I am today because of people like Vine Deloria who paved the way for generations to come.

John W. Powell
Humboldt State University

Vine Deloria, Jr., the most visible and influential American Indian elder of the twentieth century, and for many Indians arguably the most visible American academic, died on November 14, 2005, at the age of 72.

An astounding number of people, Indians and white, claim friendship with Deloria. Lots who I'm sure have never read any of his twenty books or shaken his hand call him Vine to others.

It makes me wish Indians would roll their eyes more. I know some who really are his friends, who kept track of his failing health. Some of those have said privately what made Deloria remarkable, but I haven't seen much so far in print. I expect this will be remedied in the years to come. Of course, for his real friends there is no need. I, who was not his friend, will try to say some of what made him remarkable to me, and why I think we should not just hear stories but should read his works.

Deloria tells a little story on anthropologists and himself in his concluding response to a collection of essays, *Indians and Anthros*. The essays in the collection mostly claim the discipline has reformed itself after Deloria lit into it in 1969 in *Custer Died for Your Sins*. After some gracious acknowledgments, his second paragraph begins:

The twenty-eight years since the publication of *Custer* have been memorable in that predictable responses to my diatribe have been forthcoming from the anthropological community. At first it was quite humorous to find anthros speaking to me in confidence, like Nicodemus approaching Jesus secretly by night, telling me that they had been saying the same things all along but no one had listened. ... Each secluded conversation ended with the anthro confiding to me that he or she had always been an ethnohistorian anyway and did not much truck with anthros unless academic protocol demanded it.

Lessons in this comparison? One is that you should not think Deloria is going to go easier on you after you claim to be on his side. Another, spelled out in what follows, is that the convulsion and soul-searching anthropology went through (and is still going through, with the dawning realization that abjuring claims to authority and denying the existence of authority shows the field still doesn't get it) is mostly still predictable and superficial. Another: anthropologists are like Pharisees, the archetypal stumbling blocks from the Christian story—and, oh, yes, that Deloria and Jesus are alike. Watch out.

Deloria excelled as a translator. He listened to Indians talk and he listened to whites and then could say what had been said. Many of his twenty books consist in large measure of telling Indian stories and putting them in terms that are easy for the broadest of audiences to identify with. Those pieces often read like the work of a skilled journalist, straightforward summaries and interviews and quotes and historical background, pieces that accumulate as one reads until one finds one's understanding has changed. Wisecracks and ironic phrases often illuminate those understandings—there's an in-joke, but hey, we get it, we must be in more than we thought. One finds the sale of home lots to be an odd institution, and the idea that one can buy rights to water a piece of insanity, and supposes next we'll have meters on our lungs and will learn to breathe in a more shallow way. He reminded his white readers of massacres, and while he did not sensationalize them, the terms in which they got summarized had a peculiar weight because of his irony and yet his sometimes plain, almost Amish prose. From *God is Red*, after noting missionaries who had understood and helped Indians:

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the Reverend John M. Chivington, an infamous Methodist minister from Denver, Colorado. Chivington served briefly as a colonel in the Colorado Volunteers during the Civil War. Finding no Johnny Rebs to fight, he turned his attentions to the Indians. He planned, led, justified, and celebrated the massacre at Sand Creek, Colorado, in an unexpected dawn attack on a friendly band of Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians in which hundreds

of helpless people were needlessly slaughtered (—as opposed to those other *needed* slaughters?).

He reminded his red readers that symbols of oppression and suffering are not enough to solve problems—the Alcatraz occupiers kept perseverating on their symbols and their unrealistic demands cut off from any basis white courts could use, leading to the current division among Indians on whether that occupation was a victory like Popé's Rebellion or a failure to compromise. On his own account, Deloria and a group of other Indians almost got results by manipulating some of the hardliners into hopeful silence and negotiations by means of false phone calls claiming two buses of young Navajo men—and then two more filled with young Navajo women—were on their way through Oakland like cavalry to the rescue.

Not all of Deloria's prose is easy. His writing style is sometimes a barrier to people like me, intent on mining a formidably large territory for profundities. He is often like a particular kind of tour bus operator, garrulous to a fault and sometimes with the apparent organization of shoe boxes full of sticky notes. Some of his books take you by the elbow, take you for a walk you had not intended. Others require a paranoid alertness for irony. Sometimes I wish for more irony. I make students read his piece on uses of Indian humor, but I wish someone would do it over, use his own case to make the deeper points, to show how Indians use jokes to reach right down and grab God's balls (an image the devout Deloria would never use). In the face of unutterable sadness, Indians tell jokes. In the face of hypocrisy, there is a mild wisecrack that keeps resonating. Funerals are punctuated frequently with howls of laughter. Failed initiatives yield hilarious stories. Coyote and Raven keep getting updated into new salacious contexts (Deloria's commentary on Radin and Jung on trickster figures endorses some of their insights but remarks that Jung's tricksters build bridges that may be necessary for Europeanized whites but are less so for Indians). Deloria referred in a by-the-way manner to the battle of Little Big Horn as a sensitivity training session. Sherman Alexie's Indian protagonist in the short story "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" is asked by the cop who saves his life why Indians do what the protagonist does, that is, make wisecracks in the face of death. The reply refers to Jews as funny too, providing evidence for the "inherent humor in genocide."

Deloria remained an advocate and a trickster. He published a book, more cited than read, over-solemnly called *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*, consisting of summaries of several (some new-age) approaches to alternatives to a scientific worldview, told with a straight face. His attempts to rehabilitate Velikovsky (whose main lesson is that the existence of human beings is a mystery that overwhelms rational responses—take that, Kansas, Darwin, Intelligent Design) in the face of outraged scorn were partly motivated by the power of the name to push people's buttons. But he also had a goal of getting people to look at their own reactions, which he likened to the Catholic church's reaction to Galileo—a reaction summarizable as "Evidence? We don't need no steenking evidence," but with the pink-cheeked puritanical outrage as a clue something else is going on. A long-standing position which caused academics to shake their heads for decades involved his claims that the Bering land bridge hypothesis (as explanation of how Indians came to the New World) was laughably ad hoc, was unable to pass the most elementary of scientific standards, was motivated by a desire to make Indians into just more immigrants like the later European thieves of Indian lands, was inconsistent with known data on sea levels and dates of the earliest native sites, and finally had become an item of religious dogma rather than hypothesis. Those who took him to be claiming that some Indian

account of origins must literally be true because they could not suppose any other hypotheses than these two were bewildered when he refused to argue. Here's another place it would have helped if Indians had rolled their eyes more. But then that bridge is collapsing now, even without the rolling eyes.

Deloria was breathtakingly independent. In 1999 the Pacific Division of The American Philosophical Association held a special session of several papers on Deloria. The presenters and most of the attendees were Indians. It was in a big room off the lobby at the Claremont Resort Hotel in Berkeley, on one of a series of sunny days, the sounds of tennis from the courts audible from the meeting room's doorway. The papers struck me as *au courant*, with allusions to the rift between European and American philosophy, race theory, and critical theory, most of the topics centering on identity. I do not recall references to Deloria's commentaries in philosophy of science, especially on Feyerabend (strongly favorable on Feyerabend's call for honesty and maturity and his independence from other academics) and Kuhn (whom Deloria thought did not draw his own conclusions because he suffered from a failure of nerve). I do not recall anyone remarking that Deloria regards philosophy, main problems in philosophy, as important, though he clearly does, and thinks many social and political issues have to be attacked by deeper questioning than we are doing now. Deloria walked slowly up at the end, acknowledging proffered friendships with smiles, leaning on a cane. When the applause stopped people leaned back to receive his blessing and his encouragement, and perhaps some pointers on what might be next in our upward path. Instead he accused the audience (this is my summary, and not his wording except in fragments) of having forsaken callings as advocates in favor of issues in some sort of new medieval scholasticism or narrow concerns for policing Indian identity (*American Indian Quarterly* has since put a moratorium on mss. regarding identity). In the face of children being seduced away from their tribes by television, epidemics of diabetes, vast deserts of poverty dotted by weird oases of casino money, grave problems regarding how to translate tribal traditions to urban tribal members and to whites, understaffed schools, languages withering to death and religions undermined from within and without, psychological and sociological problems of self-hatred crying out for investigation and for remedies other than alcohol, wisdom and traditions besieged by fundamentalist missionaries of science, tsunamis of well-meaning whites offering wild visions of cosmic harmony as romantic projections of Indian identity—instead of paying attention, American Indian philosophers were apparently being seduced away by a music of the spheres only they could hear, seduced into pounding sand down ratholes.

After I heard of Deloria's death, I called a friend who had attended that session as an older, returning graduate student. We reminded each other of Deloria's response. There was such a pause I wondered if I'd lost the connection, and then he said, his voice carefully steady, "Yeah, we won't have Vine to kick us around any more."

ARTICLE

Persons in Place: The Agent Ontology of Vine Deloria, Jr.

Scott L. Pratt
University of Oregon

Vine Deloria, Jr., characterized the center of the conflict between European cultures and those indigenous to North America as philosophical. He begins his 1979 book, *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*, this way: "The fundamental factor that keeps Indians and non-Indians from communicating is that they are speaking about two entirely different perceptions of the world," that is, he says later, two radically different metaphysics.¹ This failure of communication leaves Native people in an intractable situation.

No matter how well educated an Indian may become, he or she always suspects that Western culture is not an adequate representation of reality. Life therefore becomes a schizophrenic balancing act wherein one holds that the creation, migration and ceremonial stories of the tribe are true and that the Western European view of the world is also true.²

Historically, this schizophrenic situation emerged as the philosophical views of the West came to frame Native people and their ways of life as primitive and, as such, "discredited by definition."³ The result of the conflict is that even as Native people face the confusion of conflicting worlds, non-Natives lose the possibility of understanding the scope and potential of Native knowledge because they begin from the perspective that Native knowledge is at best instructive myth and at worst simple falsehood. Despite the conclusions of "Western" philosophy, Deloria argues, non-Native people have over time come to realize that aspects of Native knowledge and practice are valuable and can provide important answers to pressing "new" problems. In *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*, Deloria sets out to develop a new philosophical ground between Native and Western worlds that is suited to responding to the crises faced by the world as it approached the twenty-first century. The central question is, "How can we incorporate the [Indian] modes of perception...into our understanding of the world, especially in a world now emerging from the Darwinian-Newtonian era of scientific absolutism?"⁴ His answer is that we search for a "new metaphysics."

In the co-authored work *Power and Place: Indian Education in America*, Deloria and Daniel Wildcat offer a case for an alternative indigenous metaphysics. Where the 1979 project aimed to find within Western science and philosophy the beginnings of a common metaphysics, this later work, written in light of the rejection of Deloria's earlier efforts, argues that while Western science moves closer to a Native view of things, he no longer expects Western people to join him in his search for the common ground. Instead, he and Wildcat offer *Power and Place* as an attempt to provide Native people themselves with a philosophical framework that will at once preserve their traditions and provide resources for negotiating the schizophrenia of their interactions with European-descended culture. Significantly, the project, though directed at Native people, is also a work intended to provide non-Native people with a philosophical opportunity. Wildcat writes: "For those non-Indians who choose to listen, the following is intended as

an invitation to discussion, even exploration of some ground literally and figuratively, seldom covered today.”⁵

The philosophical starting point for *Power and Place*, that is, the philosophical starting point for both conserving Native traditions and promoting co-existence with European culture is “the realization that the world, and all its possible experiences, [constitute] a social reality, a fabric of life in which everything [has] the possibility of intimate knowing relationships because, ultimately, everything [is] related.”⁶ According to this view, the relation of things is grounded in two “experiential dimensions”: power and place. Power, Deloria says, is defined as “the living energy that inhabits and/or composes the universe”; place is defined as “the relationship of things to each other.”⁷ In order to understand the world, Deloria’s “Indian metaphysics” begins with what he calls a “simple equation”: “Power and place produce personality.”⁸ This equation, he says, “means that the universe is alive, but it also contains within it the very important suggestion that the universe is personal and, therefore, must be approached in a personal manner.”⁹ On this view, the universe is at once the operation of power, a vital or life force, and, as a result of its operation, it is also a vast collection of persons made distinct through their interactions with each other, that is, they are persons through their interactions in place. Since they are power in place, the persons that are the universe, for Deloria, are also agents. “The personal nature of the universe,” he says, “demands that each and every entity in it seek and sustain personal relationships.”¹⁰ In effect, the universe has an *agent ontology* where its entities are persons whose particular character will be a matter of their interactions and where knowledge will be a matter of knowing their personalities. This view can be called an “indigenous philosophy” not in the sense of “Native American” (though this is an important part of the view) but in the sense suggested by Wildcat. “Indigenous,” he says, is “to be of a place.”¹¹ The metaphysics presented by Deloria, then, is a philosophy of place.

In the European tradition, views like this one are sometimes called “vitalist,” sometimes “panpsychist,” and sometimes, dismissively, “animist.” Animism, as David Skrbina has observed, is usually identified with “pre-Christian or tribal religions” in which “human-like nature or personality” is attributed to objects such as trees or lakes. The nature attributed typically includes “intelligence, belief, memory, and agency” and, since these are “high-level capabilities attributed to non-human entities,” “animism is thus taken as having little if any philosophical standing.”¹² Panpsychism, in contrast, claims that objects (in virtue of their ontology) have “experiences for themselves; that is, [a] mind-like quality” had by “singular” things.¹³ Vitalism, in apparent contrast, holds that the difference between animate and inanimate objects is the presence of a “vital force” or principle, which, as Elliot Sober suggests, is understood as the presence of purpose in the organism¹⁴ (Sober, 2000, 24). From this angle, Deloria’s notion of persons is best understood as a form of vitalism in that persons are characterized by their purposes relative to their places. The view is not panpsychism because it does not attribute a “mind-like” quality to the internal states of things, but a particular kind of activity in relation to other things. Deloria also proposes no simple attribution of a “human-like nature” to non-human others but, rather, argues for different “natures” in different forms of agency. Finally, it is important to note that Deloria does not hold that such vitalism marks a difference between what we view as animate and inanimate beings. Everything has its particular “vital force” manifested in its activities.

In the twentieth century, from the perspective of the dominant tradition in European and American science and philosophy, vitalism in its various forms was rejected as

a failed view. Moritz Schlick, in his paper, “Philosophy of Organic Life,” captures the spirit of the dominant tradition’s rejection. Human beings, he says, “naturally first explained inorganic matter in terms of concepts taken from organic life. ... This was the stage of the mythological explanation of nature which interpreted the objects of nature anthropomorphically, viewing the roaring winds and the babbling brook as living things and perceiving in a thunder storm the wrath of god.” He concludes: “Such explanation of nature does not, of course, fulfill the requirements of scientific thought.”¹⁵ Sober comes to a similar conclusion in his recent discussion of the philosophy of biology: “Vitalism is easiest to take seriously when science is ignorant of what lies behind various biological processes.”¹⁶ From this perspective, of course, Deloria’s agent ontology can get no serious consideration at all. Interestingly, Sober also remarks that “vitalism is held in low repute by biologists today because no strong positive argument on its behalf has ever been constructed,” not because vitalism has been proven false.¹⁷

A more recent development, neo-vitalism, is described by Carl Hempel as the view that living systems (as opposed to *all* systems) “cannot be explained by means of the concepts and laws of physics and chemistry alone; rather, they are manifestations of underlying teleological agencies of a nonphysical kind.”¹⁸ This view, which can be associated as well with a wide variety of idealisms as well as neo-Lamarckian evolution theories, has maintained more interest in recent science but seems most often to be set aside as well for a variety of reasons including those given by Anthony O’Hear. He concludes that when “new types of stuff” are offered to account for the “emergent properties” of living things, they must be taken up for consideration in fields outside of science. But “our topic,” O’Hear reminds us, “is *scientific* reductions, and life spirits or souls may well evade the scientific net.”¹⁹

Most philosophers of science, when they talk about vitalism at all, seem to agree that the view has not been proven false. So why reject the view? There are two common arguments in recent literature. The first is that vitalism can be rejected on the strength of the hypothesis that the behavior of living things can be “reduced” to explanations in terms of chemical and physical laws. After his survey of vitalisms, Schlick concludes, “The assertion of vitalism is not proved. Quite to the contrary, the facts of biology encourage us throughout to pursue the reduction of biological to physical laws further and further with fresh hope.”²⁰ Hempel provides an argument for what this sort of reduction of biology to physics and chemistry might involve. On one hand, he argues that the terms and claims of biology can be reduced to those of physics and chemistry if each element of the biological account can be shown to have the same extension as a claim in terms of physics and chemistry. The reduction is therefore a matter of empirical research where common extensions are sought. On the other hand, the reduction will involve showing that “behaviors of living organisms... can be explained by means of physico-chemical laws and theories.”²¹ Again, the reduction will be a matter of empirical research that shows that physico-chemical conditions are both necessary and sufficient for the behavior of organisms. Hempel concludes, “in general, the question of whether a biological term is ‘definable’ by means of physical and chemical terms alone cannot be settled by just contemplating its meaning, nor by any other non-empirical procedure.”²² As a result, “mechanism,” or the expectation that living organisms can be accounted for in physico-chemical terms alone, becomes a “heuristic maxim,” “a principle for the guidance of research.”²³ In this way, neo-vitalism can be set aside for the present since its proof will turn on the failure of a program of research that assumes the opposite and itself shows no signs of failure. Williams’s rejection of vitalism follows the same pattern: the behavior of agents—human and

otherwise—can be reduced to explanations in terms of the activity of God.

The second argument, most succinctly put by Hempel, is that vitalist accounts simply have little predictive value. “The assumptions made by a scientific theory about underlying processes,” Hempel argues, “must be definite enough to permit the derivation of specific implications concerning the phenomena that the theory is to explain.”²⁴ He compares neo-vitalism with Newtonian theory to illustrate the point. Even though both theories posit non-material forces (life on one hand and gravity on the other),

Newton’s theory includes specific assumptions expressed in the law of gravitation and the laws of motion which determine (a) what gravitational forces each set of physical bodies of given masses and positions will exert upon the others, and (b) what changes in their velocities and, consequently, in their locations will be brought about by those forces.²⁵

It is the theoretical assumptions of Newton’s theory that give it the ability to “explain previously observed uniformities and also to yield predictions and retrodictions”²⁶ (1966, 72). The assumption of a life force, on the contrary, provides no particular laws and so no means of prediction. These conclusions give further support to the “heuristic maxim” that assumes the priority of mechanistic explanations. “Adherence to this maxim,” Hempel concludes, “has certainly proved very successful in biophysical and biochemical research—a credential that cannot be matched by the vitalistic view of life.”²⁷

Deloria gives an example of an indigenous version of vitalism that seems to confirm these objections in his paper, “If You Think about It, You Will See That It Is True.” Quoting a 1919 letter from A. McG. Beede, a missionary on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, Deloria offers a typical conclusion from the perspective of the Native conception of person: “*The Western Sioux*,” writes Beede, “*believed that each being, a rock for instance, is an actual community of persons with ample locomotion among themselves, and such locomotion not regarded as circumscribed or restricted, save as the maker (oicage) of the whole gives to each species his own sphere. And, they reasoned, this limitation is merely in body (tancan), the mind, intelligence, and spirit of each is privileged to range, through and blend with totality by gaining a right attitude toward Woniya (Spirit).*”²⁸ As a community of persons, a rock that remains in place without moving is behaving in accordance with its communal personality, just as it would be if it found itself on a steep slope and commenced to tumble downhill. Rocks, in this sense, are complex agents behaving in characteristic ways. Yet, the example appears to illustrate the two objections from the Western tradition. Any claim about the “behavior” of the rock as an agent could also be reduced to a claim about the rock in terms of its mass and velocity. The additional posit of the presence of a vital force in the rock community would contribute little to the description. At the same time, the presence of a living force makes no claims on how the rock will behave in the future. Since it is an agent and exerts choice, it would appear that any prediction about the future choices of the rock will be little more than a guess. In this case, the ontology of the rock as community (unlike the laws of gravitation and motion) permits no derivation of specific implications and so has no predictive value. From this perspective, the agent ontology of Deloria’s vitalism would seem to have little predictive value. If Indian metaphysics leads to claims that rocks are alive, it is, one might easily conclude, no wonder that European-descended culture rejects such indigenous philosophy.

I want to argue that the dismissal proposed here is mistaken and that a better understanding of Deloria’s notion of an agent ontology can provide a viable alternative to the physico-chemical ontology of the dominant society. As an alternative philosophy, Deloria’s ontology provides also a starting place for the “new metaphysics for our time” he sought in 1979. By beginning with an agent ontology we gain, he thinks, the perspective required to understand and evaluate the practices and conclusions of science while maintaining other ways of understanding and evaluating our experience. In the remainder of my discussion, I will develop in more detail Deloria’s conception of person and its implications for knowledge. I will conclude by returning to the objections to vitalism and suggest that they do not provide reasons to reject agent ontology.

The experiential dimensions of Deloria’s notion of person are, as I said, power and place. The first of these, power, is at once a unifying force and, at the same time, an individuating one. The notion of power in native traditions has often been discussed. In an early formulation of the idea for a Western audience, William Jones, a Mesquakie Indian and a student of Franz Boas at Columbia University, argued that the notion of power, here called “*Manitou*,” is an idea held by traditional Algonquian people that marks both what is common among things and what makes things different from one another. Jones observes that *Manitou* is “an impersonal essence”²⁹ that exists “everywhere in nature,”³⁰ while at the same time it marks “the quality of self-dependence” and “rests on the perception of a definite, localized personality.”³¹ The idea of *Manitou* provides a ground for fostering diverse personalities even as it makes understanding and unification an ongoing possibility. In a way, the notion of power is like the notion of continuity in the American philosophical tradition.³² While continuity marks the connections between things, it also implies the possibility (and serves as the medium) in which differentiation occurs. At the same time, power seems to be more than continuity alone in that it also marks a motive force that gives direction to the process of differentiation. As Wildcat observes, power “moves us as human beings” and “inhabits or composes” “all of the connections or relations that form the immediate environment.”³³ From this perspective, power is its own activity, the exercise of power, and the bonds or relations that constrain and enable that activity. At the same time, in action, power also takes on the character of particular beings so that relations are interactive with other agents, not self-action alone.

The notion of *orenda* helps to illustrate the implications of power. Writing a few years before Jones, Tuscarora ethnologist J. N. B. Hewitt identifies a notion comparable to *Manitou* in Iroquoian thought, which he calls “*orenda*.”³⁴ Like *Manitou*, *orenda* is understood as a kind of unifying notion. Everyone has *orenda*, but it is also differentiating in that different people have different *orendas*. One way to understand this concept is suggested by the linguistic root for *orenda*, *-ren-*, which is also the root for the terms for “song,” “to sing,” and “voice,” or “speech.” From this angle, *orenda* marks the song or voice of particular things.³⁵ While my voice and yours are distinctively our own, they also are similar in important ways. One can distinguish between individuals on the basis of their characteristic song or voice, and one can also link individuals together through similarities of voice—much as one might link the sounds of several drums, where each makes its own sound, but together the sounds are like enough that they literally resonate. Listening to the sound together, the resonating drums are a unity of sound; listening for the characteristic expression of a single drum makes individuals emerge from the collective sound. It is important to note that while each drum has its own sound, it is both a sound dependent upon the drum’s origin (the skins and wood of which it is made) and its interaction with

other agents—the drummer, the listeners, even the other drums in its hearing. In this sense, the distinctive character or power of a given individual is also dependent upon a host of relations and other persons. The bond with others is an indissoluble one in that the characteristic expression of one person is what it is only in a complex of relations. This complex is called place.

The choice of “place” as the term to characterize the relations that frame power is important. “Place,” as Wildcat observes, “is not merely the relationship of things, resources, or objects, it is the site where dynamic processes of interaction occur—where processes between other living beings or other-than-human persons occur.”³⁶ On this view, a person *is* how she or he acts or, rather, interacts. The point is that there are, in this view, no “inner” or “real” essences that determine what a thing is. Just as the distinctive voice of a particular thing is an interactive process among things, so what a thing is cannot be either an essence in isolation or a particular in relation to an abstract category. The result is that, on one hand, individuals are instances of kinds, that is, their characteristic expressions are similar to the expressions of others. A human being is a human being in that she or he has characteristic expressions like those of other humans and not like those of bears or fish. To the degree that a person has the expressions characteristic of a bear or a fish, she or he is literally partly bear or fish. On the other hand, individuals are truly individual in the ways in which their characteristic expressions are unlike those of others, or the ways in which their combination of characteristics is distinctive. From this perspective, who one is becomes a matter both of similarities in the exercise of power and the ways in which one’s power is not just human or bear or fish. A person is who she is neither in isolation nor in terms of abstract relations and so, in this sense, a person *is* only in place.

“Place” is also an important term in that it implies the importance of land among the others who form the context of a person. From one angle, land and sustaining environments are simply a necessary condition for the existence of any particular beings on earth. From another angle, land, rivers, ecosystems, even farm fields, hills, and mountain ranges are also persons in their own right in interaction with other persons, human and otherwise. In a universe of interaction, a particular land is understood to be another characteristic expression of power, different from the expressions of animals or plants, so an agent in its own right.

A further implication of this view is that persons are not *only* persons in their own right. A person, in Deloria’s sense, can at once be an individual and a part of a “larger” agent such as tribe or nation. One can be a human person and part of the personality of an ecosystem. As a result, Deloria offers us a world that is not compositional in the usual sense. On many traditional Western accounts (most forms of scientific realism, for example), the universe is made of atoms of one sort or another that, taken together, form the macrocosm that we experience. Deloria’s universe does not rule out a macrocosm composed of “smaller” elements (tribes are composed in part of people, rocks are “communities”), but there are no smallest units or largest ones. As a result, each person is always both a person in his or her own right and bound up in the personality of something else. Such relations are not fixed and unchangeable but emerge and disappear as their relations (and so their personality) changes. Wildcat identifies this notion of emergence as “a model of change or development where change is not reducible to a discrete factor or factors, but rather the interaction of multiple factors or causes that are understood as processual in character as opposed to mechanical.”³⁷

The implications of the resulting ontology are significant. If, as Deloria argues, the universe is made up of persons, and if

interactions among persons are moral relations, then all relations in the universe have a moral character. When interactions are considered morally, the operative standard Deloria and Wildcat each argue for is one drawn from the nature of personhood itself. “There is,” Deloria concludes, “a proper way to live in the universe: There is a content to every action, behavior, and belief. ... There is a direction to the universe, empirically exemplified in the physical growth cycles of childhood, youth, and old age, with the corresponding responsibility of every entity to enjoy life, fulfill itself, and increase in wisdom and the spiritual development of personality.”³⁸ Put another way, actions and agents that promote growth and development are good and those that do not are bad. The standard is clearly a relative one in that actions will be evaluated according to their potential to promote growth in terms of relations in which they stand, that is, in terms of their places. Since persons, in this model, include human beings, individuals other than human beings, as well as unified systems like tribes and ecosystems, moral relations occur at every scale and evaluations of actions and agents will occur at every scale as well.

It is perhaps easy to see that interactions between human beings and animals will be treated as interactions that are subject to moral judgments. For traditional Native people, Deloria observes, “killing an animal or catching a fish involved paying respect to the species and the individual animal or fish that such action had disturbed.”³⁹ The interaction of hunting or fishing would involve paying respect, but it would also involve better and worse practices. Hunting with practices that interfere with the survival of a population or that lead to hunting a species to extinction would clearly be instances of practices that violate the principle of growth. It is more difficult to see how one might treat a mountain or a stone or a river as an agent in moral relation with human beings or other persons, but from the perspective of Deloria’s agent ontology, they also count as real agents. If this is so, then human interactions with ecosystems and other large systems as well as so-called inorganic things would also be fundamentally moral relationships and actions can be evaluated in terms of the ways in which they foster or undermine aspects of personhood on the part of these other agents. From this perspective, technologies that destroy ecosystems or other systems such as salmon runs or forests, as well as technologies that destroy environmental structures such as wetlands or river basins would be violations of the ethic inherent in the ontology. At the same time, it is important to recognize that agent ontology does not necessarily prohibit hunting or technologies. Instead, it requires that these practices be carried out in ways that relatively sustain the agents involved in the process. The flourishing of life requires death on this view, but there are ways in which death fosters growth and ways in which it does not.

It is useful to observe that agency, on this view, does not necessarily imply that all agents are conscious in the human sense.⁴⁰ Human beings live in distinctive ways that include the development of technology and behavior often characterized by reflection. “Our [human] uniqueness,” Wildcat explains, “is found in the ability to use technology to live in environments that would otherwise be largely uninhabitable by humans and the societies on which we depend.”⁴¹ While consciousness is a key aspect of human life and in fact may be important in the lives of some other animals, the agency of trees, ecosystems, rivers, or rocks may operate in other ways. In these other cases, interactions may reflect a larger role for chance or the dominance of well-established habits or even very slow moving processes of judgment. Rocks, in this sense, represent a particular form of agency.

Indians knew that stones were the perfect beings because they were self-contained entities that had resolved their social relationships and possessed great knowledge about how every other entity, and every species, should live. Stones had mobility but did not need to use it. Every other being had mobility and needed, in some specific manner, to use it in relationships.⁴²

Deloria holds that even the actions of stones or trees, as agents, are not reducible to necessary laws but, rather, always include the possibility of an uncharacteristic action.

Deloria's agent ontology connects directly with questions of knowledge and explanation. The process of knowing in a world full of persons is radically different from knowing in a world of inanimate objects. This should be apparent from the start. It is our practice even within the Western academy to treat the knowledge practices around organic beings, so-called higher animals in particular, as subject to different standards of evaluation than those in botany or geology. In experimentation involving animals, universities have special committees to ensure that the treatment of subject animals is appropriate. While geology departments do not convene committees to judge the appropriateness of doing scratch tests or of crushing rock samples, the social sciences establish committees to evaluate how human subjects are treated. The difference, of course, is bound up in how we understand the subjects of our experimentation. For Deloria, the "machine" ontology that underlies most Western science is fundamentally committed to coercive experimentation and can carry out such experimentation without raising moral questions. When agent ontology provides the context, however, knowledge practices must be reconfigured along the lines of the practices we use to know other people and less along the lines of experimenting on inorganic beings. The change is dramatic.

Early in *Power and Place*, Deloria frames the contrast between Western knowing practices and indigenous knowledge as the difference between knowledge in search of causation and knowledge as a matter of correlation. Causation, understood here largely as causation within Modern science, is the idea that events are the products of law-like causes. If some event, *B*, takes place, we are confident in this model of the existence of some event, *A*, such that when *A* occurs, *B* follows either by necessity or by some determinate probability. Even if our knowledge of the events is incomplete or mistaken, it is still the case that if there is *B*, then there is an *A* that caused it. Here, both the nature of the relation between *A* and *B* and the process of knowing are distinctive: the relation is law-like and so necessary to some degree. The process of knowing, even if it begins in experiment, leads to conclusions beyond the ken of experimentation. Correlation, in contrast, is a view that concludes that while *B* is often caused by *A*, there is no necessity in *A*'s causing *B*. For Deloria, however, this is to make a stronger claim of connections than, for example, David Hume made in his notion of constant conjunction. Correlation in Deloria's sense does not lead to a "lesser" form of knowledge nor is it grounds for skepticism with regard to causation. Rather, correlation holds that *B* is indeed caused, but its cause will be the action of some agent. If *A* causes *B*, it does so because *A* has taken a particular action. The knowledge relation expressed in knowing that *A* caused *B* is correlation (that is, not a relation of necessity) because the nature of agent causation includes choice and chance on the part of the agents involved. Events are correlated because they are neither framed by laws of nature nor, if you will, by the habits of an observer, but by the actions of agents.

As a result, the process of knowing in agent ontology is more like the process of knowing other people than that of knowing things.⁴³ Just as in the case of people, knowing amounts to an ongoing process of observation (as well as other interactive processes) that teach us patterns of behavior that are more or less stable over time. Knowledge gained by this means of knowing other people does not, of course, mean that we cannot make predictions. It means, rather, that our predictions will be like those we might make about whether a good friend will like a particular movie. Such knowledge is grounded in experience, but it also recognizes the role of choice and chance in the outcome. Just as a friend might surprise me by not liking a particular movie, so the actions of a river might surprise me by flooding despite my long acquaintance with the river in quieter days when it stayed in its channel. Both actions, from Deloria's perspective, are the actions of agents involved in processes of choice and chance. The "better" we know the river (by living beside it for years and paying attention to its behaviors over longer cycles) the better able we are to predict its behaviors, including its angrier moments. While the causal model of Western science seeks laws that will be certain against a background where all actions are necessary (or in some cases, the view that all actions are ultimately a matter of chance alone), the indigenous model seeks better and better acquaintance with agents in place. Both lead to the possibility of prediction, but only the latter preserves the character of agency in the subject of study.

This brings us back to the question of whether or not indigenous vitalism ought to be ruled out from the beginning. I argue that it should not be. The first argument against vitalism holds that the claims of vitalism can be reduced to explanations in terms of physical and chemical laws. From this angle, Native vitalist accounts that are successful will converge with the conclusions of Western science so that, in fact, reducibility is borne out empirically. For example, one might argue that Native traditions of ecological knowledge turn out to be the same conclusions reached by Western science (the use of routine burning as a means of fostering healthy forest growth, for example).⁴⁴ If, however, the meaning of these conclusions is taken to include the claims and actions that follow from them, it is clear that the conclusions of science with regard to forest management, for example, are in fact not reducible to the claims made from an indigenous perspective. While conclusions about selective logging and controlled burns implies the utility of such practices for economic development and conservation for the purpose of human enjoyment, the same conclusion about logging and burning in indigenous thought calls into question both economic development and the standing of purely human enjoyment. While the conclusions of Western and indigenous science lead to certain common conclusions, the implications of the conclusions diverge dramatically and in a way that suggests that indigenous thought cannot be reduced in the usual sense.

The second argument against vitalism, that it fails to make predictions, is false on its face. If knowledge from the indigenous perspective is analogous to knowledge we have about other human beings, then it is clearly the kind of knowledge that can be used to make highly accurate predictions about people's behavior. One may respond that these predictions do not rise to the level of accuracy attained, for example, by predictions that use the laws of gravity and motion. Deloria would accept the idea that science does in fact produce stunningly successful accounts of various aspects of the world. Such conclusions do not undermine the agent ontology proposed but, rather, serve to illustrate its range. Some relations among agents, as we know even among human agents, are remarkably stable and predictable. Long-established friendships are marked as

much by their steadiness and predictability as by their value for human flourishing. In a similar fashion, the relations among agents such as a particular land and those things dependent upon it also follow well-established practices of interaction. The conclusion suggests that agents are in large measure the habits that they acquire in their interactions. Physical laws are simply expressions of a broad category of well-established interactions. Deloria even argues that physicists find their own conclusions moving closer to an indigenous viewpoint. As quantum theory, for example, becomes the more or less standard way of understanding the physical world, Western science comes close to a model where even the most stable relations can break down. The argument that vitalism has no predictive value leads us to recognize that vitalism, or, rather, Deloria's agent ontology, can include the accounts of Western science as claims about very stable relations. At the same time, agent ontology rejects the separation of moral judgment from the work and claims of Western science. The stable relations described are relations among agents and so require that the practices and conclusions of science be subject to moral consideration as well. From this perspective, at least two of the common arguments against vitalism seem, rather, to lead us to important limitations in dominant philosophy and science and so direct us toward the possibility of a new philosophical common ground.

In the end, then, if at least some of the standard objections to vitalism can be called into question, it seems reasonable for philosophers in the European-descended tradition to engage or, rather, reengage Native philosophical traditions and, in particular, consider again the agent ontology of a universe of persons. On one hand, philosophers will gain resources to understand our present world and its problems of war, environmental destruction, and intractable cultural differences. On the other hand, the resulting environment for Indigenous people both in the dominant society and within American higher education may become more welcoming and familiar. Wildcat concludes:

Indigenous metaphysics offers insights into many of the most troubling problems modern or postmodern societies face, by recognizing the world as having living physical and spiritual dimensions, not as a fast and fixed thing. Space, places, ecosystems, and environments are not the "final frontier" waiting to be conquered and controlled by modern ideologies; rather, they constitute the context through which we escape the abstract relativism of postmodern thought and find what it means to be self-determining.⁴⁵

Endnotes

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Personalist Discussion Group, APA Eastern Division meeting, December 2003, and as the Thomas J. Howell Lecture, May 2006, at Rhode Island College.

1. Vine Deloria, Jr. *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), vii.
2. *Ibid.*, viii.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 160.
5. Vine Deloria, Jr., and Daniel R. Wildcat. *Power and Place: Indian Education in America* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Resources, 2001), 19.
6. *Ibid.*, 2.
7. *Ibid.*, 22-23.
8. *Ibid.*, 23.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 31.
12. David Skrbina. *Panpsychism in the West* (Cambridge, MA: A Bradford Book, MIT Press, 2005), 19.
13. *Ibid.*, 16.
14. Elliot Sober. *Philosophy of Biology*, second edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 24.
15. Moritz Schlick. "Philosophy of Organic Life." In *Readings in the Philosophy of Science*, edited by Herbert Feigl and May Brodbeck (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1953), 523.
16. *Op. cit.*, Sober, 24.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Carl G. Hempel. *The Philosophy of Natural Science* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 71.
19. Anthony O'Hear. *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 197, emphasis in the original.
20. *Op. cit.*, Schlick, 536.
21. *Op. cit.*, Hempel, 102.
22. *Ibid.*, 104.
23. *Ibid.*, 106.
24. *Ibid.*, 71-72.
25. *Ibid.*, 72.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, 106.
28. A. McG. Beede. Quoted in *Vine Deloria, Jr. Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr. Reader* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999), 42.
29. William Jones. "The Algonkin Manitou," *Journal of American Folklore*, 18 (1905): 70, 185.
30. *Ibid.*, 190.
31. *Ibid.*, 184.
32. See Charles S. Peirce's discussions of continuity in *Reasoning and the Logic of Things*, edited by Kenneth Lane Ketner (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
33. *Op. cit.*, Deloria and Wildcat, 140.
34. J. N. B. Hewitt. "Orenda and a Definition of Religion," *American Anthropologist*, 4 (1902), 33-46.
35. See Scott L. Pratt. "Ceremony and Rationality in the Haudenosaunee Tradition." In *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate*, edited by Cynthia Willett (London: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 401-21.
36. *Op. cit.*, Deloria and Wildcat, 144.
37. *Ibid.*, 15.
38. *Op. cit.*, Deloria (1999), 46.
39. *Op. cit.*, Deloria and Wildcat, 24.
40. See Josiah Royce, "Self-consciousness, Social Consciousness, and Nature," in *Studies of Good and Evil* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), 198ff, for a discussion of consciousness in other-than-human beings. Also see Charles S. Peirce's essay, "The Law of Mind," in *The Essential Peirce*, Volume 1, edited by Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), for another version.
41. *Op. cit.*, Deloria and Wildcat, 74.
42. *Op. cit.*, Deloria (1999), 34.
43. See Lorraine Code's notion of an ecological model of knowing in *What Can She Know?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 269ff.
44. *Op. cit.*, Deloria (1979), viii.
45. *Op. cit.*, Deloria and Wildcat, 150.