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## North American Aboriginal Philosophy of History: A Historical Thick Interpretation of Deloria's *God Is Red*

### Abstract

*Native American history, for its ceremonial/cyclic time sequence, is often seen as a part of Native American mythology. Regarding civilization, Euro-American historians compare it with Reason, and hence, undermine the view of Native American history as the factual assessment of the aboriginal world. Deriving methodical approaches from the insights of Norman K. Denzin, this article aims to explore within the domain of Native American non-literary writings the nature of Native American history. The analysis of the methodical connection between historical thick interpretation and its praxis in Native American historiography illustrates the dynamics of Native American philosophy of history disregarded by Eurocentrism. This analysis employs critical techniques anchored in the historical thick inscription proposed by Denzin to understand the philosophy of Native American history. Vine Deloria Jr. represents in *God Is Red* concerning modern historiographical modes.*

**Key Words:** Historical Thick Interpretation, Historiography, History, Native American Literature, Philosophy

### Introduction

The practice of the western model of history in North American colonized territories led to “the epistemic violence” – the interruption into the aboriginal cultural history while ignoring its impact on the whole social order (Spivak, 1996, p. 251). The implementation of law and order in the promotion of civilization caused the reduction of aboriginal historicity – social, cultural, religious, political, and historical values. The Euro-American settlers appropriated the indigenous cultural values and gradually displaced North America's aboriginal peoples to hostile circumstances. Different disciplines of knowledge like philology, ethnography, economy, travelogue and philosophy also empowered the Euro-American colonial regime. However, philosophy remained prominent for its direct approach to the ideologies that working inside the cultural values of aboriginal society. During the colonial regime, the philosophy propagated the value of ‘reason,’ which was the locus of colonization. For post-Columbian philosophers, “history moves on a higher plane than that to which morality properly belongs ... The deeds of the great men who are the individuals of world history ... appear justified not only in their inner significance ... but also in a secular sense” (Hegel, 1975, p. 141). However, in post-Columbian time, historians or philosophers ignored the moral values of historiography when philosophers did not like the company of the monarchs. They defined the history of marginal culture according to the imperialist viewpoint (North, p. 473). They used philosophy to expropriate Native American culture, lands, and beings. This act of superseding morality with historicity in the Native American case is imperial that ignores even [Hegel's cautioning \(1975\)](#) about “the much discussed and misunderstood dichotomy between morality and politics” (p. 141). In this regard, Euro-Americans used philosophy politically and superseded high values of history: the colonial view of historicity marked the Native value system as statism (Guha, 2002, p. 74). The colonial-regime-historiography superseded the Native American high moral values that helped colonizers prove Native American tribes incapable of defining their history, and made settlers justify educating this savage part of the world by dissolving their knowledge, language and culture into modernism. This ‘act of superseding’

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made philosophy (an abstract entity) transcend Native American laws, tribes, art (the concrete entities) and convinced them of the blessing of the colonial phase that made them a part of world-history.

## Literature Review

[Gerald McMaster and Clifford E. Trafzer \(2004\)](#) point out the differentiating factor between Native American and Euro-American approaches to history, i.e. linear vs cyclic/ceremonial idea of time. Euro-American narratives “emphasize a sequential presentation of events or ideas”. In contrast, the Native American view of cyclic/ceremonial time assumes “the circular manner of perceiving past and present” (McMaster & Trafzer, 2004, p. 116). [Shepard Krech III \(2006\)](#) the anthropologist, defines this ‘polarization’ between the Native American traditional world that he illustrates “as qualitative, sacred, and non-materialistic, and the modern scientific world of non-indigenous people, which, in contrast, is quantitative, secular, and materialistic” (p. 567). Brown’s analysis of time in two epistemologies – cyclic in the traditional world and linear in the modern world – creates the difference between social and historical issues of the two worlds ([Brown, 1992](#), p. 115). [Robert H. Lowie \(1917\)](#) does not give any worth to native history – whether linear or ceremonial – and considers it valueless concerning Native American contribution to natural science. He argues that as Native Americans are directly concerned with their surroundings, their knowledge about animals like buffaloes and prophecies about the topography of the native flora and fauna is not strange. However, he severely refutes all these assumptions as part of Native American history, which is

definitely removed from the sphere of observation when they have once taken place, [for] the facts of what we call history are, as a rule, not facts which fall under primitive observation at all, but transcend it by their complexity and the great spans of time involved. ([Lowie, 1917](#), p. 163)

In the case of Native American history, he stresses the understanding of dissimilarity between facts and historical truths and argues the lesser capability of the primitive people of America to understand the historical truths: the “primitive man is endowed with historical sense or perspective: the picture he is able to give of events is like the picture of the European war as it is mirrored in the mind of an illiterate peasant reduced solely to his direct observations” (Lowie, 1917, p. 164). He claims history was not an issue for Native American society as the Native Americans ignored the dates, time, and the chronological proceedings; they only remembered the emergence of cultural heroes, the medicines, and ceremonies. He dismantles all Native American ‘calendar counts’ and other traditional ways of recording happenings like storytelling as history and whips critics for assigning “extraordinary importance ... to trivial incidents” ([Lowie, 1917](#), p. 164).

[John D. Loftin \(1995\)](#) claims that Native American tribes “have always possessed a capacity for historical and critical thought” (p. 686). The storytellers express the nature of their tales that is “either wutsi (make-believe) or antsa (true), although both are important religiously” ([Loftin, 1995](#), p. 686). [Ekkehart Malotki \(1978\)](#), a German-American linguist, argues: “when a Hopi storyteller relates an actual occurrence in Hopi history, such as a clan migration, ‘I ‘hapi pas qayaw’i, pas antsa (This is not hearsay; this is really true.)’ will be his closing words” (p. xiii). [Edward S. Curtis \(1970\)](#), the American ethnologist and photographer, perceives that Native American tribes describe the cultural tales either “my story” or as a “true story” (p. 163). ‘My story’ tells the subjectivity of the storyteller while ‘true story’ explicates the objectivity. Even ‘my stories’ or fictional tales, says [Mircea Eliade \(1963\)](#), are not untrue as with a symbolic or moral message they taught the social and religious beliefs to the children. They were usually for children, hence “relate to the adventures of the trickster figure(s)” ([Eliade, 1963](#), p. 8). These stories, adds [Loftin \(1995\)](#), do not tell the historic events, but metaphorically they are correct; they “teach children about the limitations and tensions of this world to which every child must resign himself in order to live as a human being” (p. 687). Euro-American scholars only look for the rational side of Native American myths and metaphorical images and ignore the symbolic side. They also miss what [D. R. Woolf \(1988\)](#), an English historian, calls the “common voice” – shared faith of a community about its past: one must not overlook “what people who had lived in an area all their lives agreed on, unless [one] had external evidence which contradicted or clarified” (p. 358). West argues that the culture wherein a person is born and raised inspires him; hence it becomes his belief. A man from outside eventually comes and may see this civilized experience “as a kind of myth, essentially

fictitious in that it does not portray the whole of life, but also undeniably impressive as a saga to live by” (West, 1960, p. 1).

### Research Methodology

To interpret *God Is Red* (1973) as a representative Native American culture, this study employs Denzin’s ‘historical thick interpretation’ (1989) that considers the past as a source of the understanding present. According to Denzin (1989), this “attempts to bring an earlier historical moment or experience alive in vivid detail” (p. 92) to understand the current practices. The analysis and interpretation of old methods of historiographies serve as the context (history) of the text. The ‘historical thick description’ describes the foreknowledge or pre-understanding that is rooted in someone’s experiences. In the historical thick description, this study brings Deloria’s experiences of the Native American past historiographical methods to understand the Native American past in present consciousness. This study uses Deloria’s experience as an American Indian and a modern scholar to explain his efforts to understand Native American history. In this regard, this study explains his great concern and grip on Native American historiography to understand his presentation of American Indian history. Also, this study incorporates his view of history, politics, law, and education to explain how his critical understanding of the “unimpeachable sources hidden in diaries, biographies, commentaries, and scholarly writings” (Deloria, 2006, p. xviii) is valid. The historical thick description explains that Deloria’s presentation of Native American culture in *God is Red* (1973) is not, as it is for Euro-American scholars, based on second-hand knowledge rather on his firsthand experience of the American Indian rituals.

### Native American Philosophy of History

Native American historiography – oral tradition, literature, and nonfiction – that define the native concept of history are ignored or influenced by the Eurocentrism that interprets Native American myths and history with its own yardstick (Deloria, 1973, p. 97). Modern academia claims that history was not an issue for Native American society. They ignored the date, time, days, and the chronological proceedings; only the emergence of cultural heroes, the medicines, and ceremonies were remembered. For that matter, Euro-Americans argue the lesser capability of the aboriginal people of America to understand the historical truths and whip the critics for giving so much importance “to trivial incidents” (Lowie, 1917, p. 164). They propagate that Native Americans are unreliable and the information provided about their past “is considered credible only if it is offered by a white scholar recognized by the academia” (Deloria, 1973, p. 35). They feel their responsibility to re/write Native American stories for Native Americans and categorize the Native American historical and cultural stories into variations according to their themes. It is usually for them to mock at the accounts for their non-sense happenings that would be coincidental or delusional or trickery. Such thinking has made Euro-American scholars “excuse each story or anecdote describing the exercise of spiritual ceremonies” (Deloria, 2006, p. xx). On the other hand, they also define Native American history with the validity of some stories over others that result in the loss of many accounts.

Vine Deloria Jr’s interest in history, politics, law and education, and in modern teaching techniques helped him textualize Native American historiography. Graduating in general science from Iowa State University (1958 – a college at that time) provided him an extensive background to argue the politics of science. In 1959 his admission to the Lutheran School of Theology showed his interest in philosophy and theology. “He trained himself in history, law, politics, and education, and he learned the ways of the American academy. All of these things he did to advance the place of Indian people in the world” (Deloria, 2006, p. xiv). Such a wide range of understanding of different studies enabled him to make a bridge between the Native American traditional and western modern values. Even then, it was not simple to textualize and legitimize Native American history. However, the executive director of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) in 1964 provided Deloria with an ample opportunity to talk on Native American policies and politics in various political and literary forums. This responsibility initiated his literary journey with political movements (*Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* 1969) and later passed through history (*God is Red* 1973 and *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties* 1974), philosophy (*Red Earth, White Lies* 1995), theology (*For This Land* 1999) and

ended in metaphysics (*The World We Used To Live In* 2006). [Phillip Deloria \(2006\)](#), his son, states that all his journey, political and literary, “had both spiritual origins and spiritual consequences” (p. xiv). *The World We Used to Live In* (2006) was his last endeavor for Native American rights published after his own spiritual journey to death in November 2005. His discovery of Native American history that started from *God is Red* (1973) and ended at *The World We Used to Live In* (2006) was a journey to explore his spiritual heritage. This journey related to a “complex kind of *coming home*, a weaving together of the many strands of his life and work” ([Deloria, 2006](#), p. xv, emphasis added).

[Deloria \(1973\)](#) highlights that the Native American community has its own understanding of the historical stories; supremacy or the validity of these stories is/was not an issue. No doubt, these stories were told generation after generation by different storytellers, but they remained credible, for it was neither a matter of supremacy nor a search for ultimate truth. In the political alliance for the battle against a mutual enemy, the consequential controlled matters but did not influence the weak in recording these matters for their benefit. The coalition of the Creek and the Iroquois, mentions Deloria, does not show any coercion of the strong to the weak ([Deloria, 1973](#), p. 99). [Deloria \(1973\)](#) ([1973](#)) argues that determining the chronology of Native American stories is not a big issue because Native American scholars and tribal figures with complete geographical knowledge of the sacred places can trace a chronological presentation of the Native American socio-cultural events. He argues that the American government does not provide the same opportunity of education at the graduate and post-doctoral level to understand the Native American natural world as it does to the other social projects ([Deloria, 2006](#), p. xxxi). Thus, the lack of educational opportunities for the Native American ways of being leads to the misperception of indigenous rituals or ceremonies.

According to [Deloria \(1973\)](#), Native Americans and Euro-Americans view history differently as the Native American scholars, especially in pre-Columbian and Euro-settlers regimes, were not careful about the chronological documentation of the records of past happenings (p. 97). However, in Central America, historiography methods like ‘winter count’ practiced by North Dakota expressed the Native American tribes’ interest in the chronological documentation of their happenings ([Deloria, 1973](#), p. 98). For this purpose, they had painted specific images on large animal hides like the buffalo that had symbolic significance as they comprehend, represent, and interpret the particular past year of a particular tribe ([Deloria, 1973](#), p. 98). These images were arranged chronologically and used as metaphors of particular happenings in the Native American life cycle ([Risch, 2000](#), p. 27). Some tribes like the Kiowas developed these ‘winter counts’ by opting for two images every year – “one for the winter and one representing the summer Sun Dance” (Joyce qtd. in [Greene & Thornton, 2007](#), p. 24). One of the methods ‘calendar sticks’ was followed by Tohono O’odhams and Pimas of Arizona to record the social proceedings chronologically. They stamped sticks with various signs. Each sign was a metaphor of specific happening(s) ([Deloria, 1973](#), p. 98).

The winter counts and calendars claim the validity of these documentations for Native American tribes to maintain Native American history. The paintings and images about various historic ceremonies and socio-political events describe Native Americans’ interest in history. For the maintenance of documentations, every community had specific persons to whom the community selected for his “sincerity and credibility ... and the world outlook of the recorder of events” ([Mallery, 1877](#), p. 12). For [Deloria \(1973\)](#), this criterion is equally significant for modern historians (p. 235). The Native American ways of documentation of their social and political affairs in prehistoric times explain that Native American historians while selecting a specific image or two for defining the past year’s happenings, did ask the group of wise men. He, the historian, could not include any image or metaphor without the nod of the council of elders of the Native American community ([Deloria, 1973](#), p. 245). This activity shows that the documentations of the socio-political affairs were not an individual exercise. On various occasions, the appointed historians on the council’s order “unroll the calendar and retell the events of his people’s past” ([Mallery, 1877](#), p. 12). Thus, the people recalled their past and even could tell their date of birth. Oglala famous medicine man, Black Elk, for instance, tells John Gneisenau Neihardt, an American historian and ethnographer, that he was born in the moon of the popping trees (December) on the Little Powder River in “the Winter When the Four Crows Were Killed (1863) on the Tongue Rive” ([Neihardt, 1932](#), p. 6).

In the post-Columbian era, Delaware’s ‘Walum Olum’ was also a way of recording events that explained the chronological location of the numerous political proceedings. Such documentation

chronologically located the numerous political proceedings and the borders issues of various tribes and political matters in detail (Deloria, 1973, p. 98). Another type of recording event was Biographical Drawings that were – unlike winter counts, which were social – used to draw individually for one’s understanding of the surrounding world and showed the Native Americans’ interest in history on the individual level. The aboriginal tribes drew drawings to record battles among tribes. However, instead of describing the whole event, it was delimited to the brave men and their war deeds or honors (Deloria, 1973, p. 98). These drawings also recorded hunting events and one’s spiritual experiences of communication with the spirit. “Most ledger art images revolve around warfare and continual striving for status, including scenes of battle and the capturing of horses, weapons and other goods” (Greene & Thornton, 2007, p. 45).

Certain tribes have had thought of the world’s age as equivalent to the South Asian view of the world’s age. Flood stories of different times, even the most distant ones, favor the idea of an eternal life cycle as the earth has periodically faced birth and death due to natural disasters: fire, water, earthquake, and hurricanes. The ancient Native American stories also explain the same kind of destruction and renewal of life. The metaphors used in these stories idealize the perception of historicity. Deloria (1973) recounts a general perception about the world’s destiny among the Sioux people who believe in an oral tradition story of a prodigious buffalo that protects the world by holding the water back at the western gate of the universe. It is related that every year the buffalo loses one of its hairs and it causes the flood. Also, at the end of each century, it loses a leg, causing great floods and destruction. For the native people, the world will come to an end due to floodwaters when the buffalo loses all its legs (Deloria, 1973, p. 101).

The Book of the Hopi, observes Deloria (1973) , defines the concept of world ages more comprehensively. In the book, says Deloria (1973) , the accounts of White Bear, a Native American tribal figure noted by Frank Waters, an American ethnographer, made the natives intrigued about their past. These stories highlight the common beliefs in Native American communities that they are the people who survived three destructions of the world, and each time, the conditions would be different. Those experiences were transferred to the next generations for the next expected phase of destruction. For Deloria (1973) , each phase of destruction ended with a new beginning that brought new ceremonies and cultural songs and stories until the ending of a circle. However, the common principles remained similar to the native tribes documented and handed them over generations after generations. The stories in the book, Deloria (1973) claims, have had similar experiences of the legends who survived the doom-days, hence define the similar nature of cultural living in different parts of American territory. Likewise, several pre-Columbian cultural stories say Deloria, define settlers’ arrival from outside the land (Deloria, 1973, p. 101).

The colonial regime has a different understanding of time that makes Native American tribes conscious of the chronology. The native tribes had to record diverse announcements, speeches of notable white personalities, and communications at treaty meetings to prove their so-called promises that Euro-Americans often broke. These chronological allusions were for whites. Regardless of the imitation of the Western mode of recording events, these recordings are not acknowledged since they are evidence of colonial brutality superseding the morality of the time (Deloria, 1973, p. 100). The settlers negated Native American social values regarding their civilization; thus, the culture, languages, political affiliation with other tribes and religions became marginalized and inferior. Deloria (1973) refers to Chief Seattle’s remarkable speech at the Medicine Creek Treaty (1854) to express the Native Americans’ condition and approach to colonization. Duwamish Seattle, realizing the suffering of the land and the people, states gloomily:

It matters where we pass the remnant of our days. They will not be many. A few more moons; a few more winters – and not one of the descendants of the mighty hosts that once moved over this broad land or lived in happy homes, protected by the Great Spirit, will remain to mourn over the graves of a people once more powerful and hopeful than yours. But why should I mourn at the untimely fate of my people? Tribe follows tribe, the nation follows nation, like the waves of the sea. It is the order of nature, and regret is useless. Your time of decay may be distant, but it will surely come, for even the White Man whose God walked and talked with him as a friend with a friend, cannot be exempted from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We shall see. (qtd. in Deloria, 1973, p. 98)

This speech is more than the description of colonial hegemony and describes the native concept of ceremonial history as it articulates the eternal life cycle. However, both linear and cyclic methods of recording events in the Native American traditional world explain that America's native tribes also fixed their social and political affairs in a chronological sequence of documentation ([Krech, 2006](#), p. 576). [Deloria \(1973\)](#) argues that Native American history sees both dimensions of time: linear and cyclic/ceremonial, but he argues that the linear mode of Native American history is integrated with its ceremonial mode: the linear perception of time in Native American documents cannot be explicated without recognizing the awareness of cyclic or ceremonial or time; without ceremonial/cyclic time sequence, Native American linear record loses its worth ([Deloria, 1973](#), p. 98).

## Conclusion

The historiographical modes of description adopted by native tribes of North America cannot be related to the Western style of history where all entities are recorded with detailed chronological references. The native perception of history is a description of how people survived, where they were located, and why they migrated at different times. Regarding the migration, the *when* is again under cover of 'a long time ago'. Similarly, the cartography regarding pre-Columbian America is another hard target for the tribal way of running affairs that are considered vague and haphazard. The Iroquois stories, for instance, describe the tribe's migration from the plains towards the east; the *when* is not important. The only important things are *how* and *why* that define the prosperity and benefits in this migration ([Deloria, 1973](#), p. 101). Western scholars and historians reject the Native American pre-Columbian historiography and historical stories that are not valid in the post-Columbian world. They argue the limitation of the history-methods of 'winter count', 'calendar sticks', and 'Walum Olum' as only a particular group of Native Americans knew the real sense of the symbolic image it represents and interprets in the particular year. A particular year, for instance, might be marked with the arrival of horses in the Native American community; the next would-be year is remembered, say, for the extraordinary cultivation of berries, the next one might be documented in the memorandum of a peace treaty among Native American tribes or migration to some strange place or river. In all of these cases, it is difficult to comprehend these incidents in their true essence without the help of some Native American legends. On the other hand, these historiography methods cannot define significant events, treaties, and political activities. For example, "[o]ne recent Sioux winter count does not mention a number of important treaties, and ... does not even mention the battle with Custer" ([Deloria, 1973](#), p. 98). However, proper funding in higher education of Native American historical issues, argues [Deloria \(1973\)](#), may locate *when* of these past events: "By identifying the *before* and *after* of the stories and then arranging them on a time scale, one could project a chronology" (p. 102).

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