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A New Historicist Study of American Indigeneity in Deloria's *The World We Used To Live In*

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ABSTRACT

The nature of history is one of the interpretations rather than irrefutable facts. When historians interpret historical events, they simultaneously generate a range of ideas about that particular historical narrative. This is why history is deemed a text, not an absolute fact. New historicists assert that both primary and secondary sources of historical information are textual narratives. The primary source is the text, and history is perceived as text, while the secondary source comprises interpretations provided by other historians on a given text. This study focuses on the historical truths embedded in the cultural stories Vine Deloria Jr, a Native American historian, compiled in *The World We Used to Live In* to highlight the multiple perspectives of Native American primitive ways of being.

Keywords: culture, Deloria, history, indigeneity, Native Americans, new historicism

1. Introduction

In the 19th century, there were two opposing views on history. One school of thought depicted history as a sequence of distinct monuments and accomplishments of individual brilliance (Selden, 2004), while the other perceived it as an intrinsic component of the cultural accounts of

a given time and place. Regarding this perspective, many historians who were influenced by Hegel's idealism and Herbert Spencer's evolutionary naturalism explore literature in the context of social, political and cultural history, positioning history as the backdrop of literary texts. Conversely, new historicists argue that the literary text is positioned within the institutions, social practices, and discourses that shape the overarching culture of a specific time and place and that the literary text engages as both a product and a creator of cultural energies and codes (Abrams, 2004). Rather than isolating a text from its historical context, new historicists focus extensively on the historical and cultural contribution of literary texts. This approach marks a departure from traditional historicism, where scholars considered social and intellectual history as the setting for literary works, attempting to categorize history into distinct periods. However, new historicism perceives literature as a mirror reflecting the worldview of a particular era. According to this perspective, history is no longer seen merely as the backdrop for literature. Literary texts serve not only as reflections of ongoing cultural dialogues within a specific historical period but also actively contribute to those conversations. These texts function as both agents and outcomes of cultural transformation, constituting integral components of the documents that form the historical record.

2. Literature Review

According to Bauerlein (1997), cultural studies encompass a broad spectrum of subjects related to everyday life. This includes the analysis of cultural practices, economics, politics, geography, history, race, class, ethnicity, theory and practice, gender, sexuality, and power. As per Milner (2002), cultural studies are viewed as an interdisciplinary domain that draws upon scholars with backgrounds in the social sciences, history, anthropology, psychology, and literary studies. Kharbe (2009) defines cultural studies as an academic discipline that integrates political economy, communication, sociology, social theory, literary theory, film-video studies, and art history criticism to examine cultural phenomena within diverse societies (Kharbe, 2009, p. 412). According to Giddens (1986), a text's cultural, social, and political settings should be considered while interpreting it. To fully comprehend the meanings intended by those who created the text, it is essential to investigate the conditions that shaped their knowledge and capabilities (Giddens, 1986, p. 530). Ferguson (2010) argues that in the past, literature was perceived as a mimetic

representation of the historical world in which it was created. History was regarded as firm, direct, and retrievable—a factual narrative. Michel Foucault (1972), a French philosopher, views history as discontinuous and narrative. Foucault's perspective posits that history is marked by discontinuity, and his discourse theory is employed to underpin and substantiate these ideas. In social practice, discourse encompasses language that pertains to the expression and representation of social and cultural elements.

According to Hayden White (1973), history is presented as a narrative, inherently figurative, allegorical, and fictive. The authentic past remains inaccessible due to the rhetorical nature of narration. The intertextual relationship extends not only between literary texts and their cultural and historical context but also between literary texts and previous texts. Hayden White's (1973) challenge to the authoritative status of history as a scientific discipline prompted increased attention to the history-fiction relationship by postmodernists. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon argues that in postmodern writing, both history and fiction are considered discourses. Their meanings and forms are constructed as historical facts within the narrative system's rules. Hutcheon highlights the fictive nature of history and emphasizes that history and fiction, identified as linguistic constructs, share highly conventionalized narrative forms. While New Historicism does not constitute a singular practice, its practitioners typically share a common literary criticism approach. Initially, they unearth anecdotes from overlooked sources like historical events, poems, pictures, and architectural designs. Subsequently, they delve into the profound insights and meanings of these elements, interconnecting them with their research. Ultimately, new historicists concentrate on exploring the relationships among customs, cultural contexts, and ideologies prevalent during the composition period of literary works. Through this, they seek to uncover the authentic traces of events embedded in texts. Furthermore, the literary practices of new historicists serve the purpose of constructing histories that reveal the deceptive nature of grand historical narratives, often referred to as counter-histories.

3. Research Methodology

New historicism sets itself apart from other critical theories by its unique incorporation and deliberation of cultural, political, societal, and scientific perspectives and anthropological perspectives that shape a specific historical period. This all-encompassing approach connects new historicism closely with cultural analysis and materialism in culture. According to Collette (2012), new historicism is a contemporary literary theory that focuses on the impact of events, locations, and cultural elements within a community on a written text. New historicists frequently explore references to the specific qualities of the time era in which a literary work was composed. Wiedenmann (2007) views the purpose of new historicism as exposing power dynamics that may be apparent yet concealed within a text. She contends that all texts are products of specific historical circumstances, thus containing components of culture, politics, and society.

Stephen Greenblatt (1992), the founder of new historicism, aims to uncover the episteme of cultural history as the multiple perspectives that shape the historical reality through a text. Greenblatt rejects history as a Meta narrative, which emanates from a single perspective, implying it is the sole accurate history. Consequently, master narratives no longer dominate historical comprehension. The focus of new historicism is directed toward bringing attention to marginalized communities (Tyson, 1999). The diversity of historical narratives raises questions about the crucial role ideology plays in shaping individual and group identities, influencing a culture's perception in its political, legal, and social policies, and customs, as well as how power circulates within a culture. Greenblatt refrains from fixating on the factual content of historical accounts and foreground instead. His focus lies in examining how history is interpreted by various cultures to fulfill their ideological requirements within their power structures (Greenblatt, 1992). So, new historicism cannot be strictly defined as history but rather as “representations of history” (Tyson, 1999, p. 284). In light of this explanation, new historicists find themselves in a marginal position about technocracy and performance, and this position may influence their selection of texts. Their resistance to authority and dominant ideology implies the existence of residual power within society (Wayne, 1990, p. 800).

4. Text Analysis

Deloria places a strong emphasis on the reliability of his sources, offering thorough justification for the tales and documents he utilized to reconstruct Native American cultural history. To make the history of Native Americans believable and understandable, he "truthfully" searches through diverse documents and eyewitness accounts and critically assesses them. He carefully evaluates and compares these sources with other historical and cultural traditions, including the Bible, to explain the celestial components present in Native people's folk tales. Deloria also challenges Westerners' belief that tradition is purely the West's development, arguing that the notion was used to promote colonial agendas and suppress colonized cultural histories. He draws on reports from white settlers living near Native American reservations and tribes to verify the accuracy of different ceremonies and practices. In addition, Deloria references the writings of non-indigenous sociologists, researchers, composers, artists, and singers who traveled to Indigenous American cultures to gain a deeper understanding of their traditional ways of life. He critically examines and evaluates stories and reports from other scholars, using this information to uncover the past truths of Native American history. Deloria also exposes the contemporary commercialization of certain ceremonies and spiritual practices. He explores the ecological and environmental significance of various rituals, linking them to the modern understanding of these issues. Deloria argues that the ceremonies and practices of Native Americans were based on systematic observation, measurement, and experimentation, a procedure similar to modern scientific methods. He also delves into the biological conditions of the pre-Columbian era and the scientific knowledge of medicine women, demonstrating the superiority of their understanding of medicine over modern scientific exploration. Deloria also explores interspecies relationships and cultural representations of legends and customs related to scholars' observations of indigenous practices. Ultimately, Deloria's authentic efforts offer a rich and nuanced understanding of the historical information preserved in Indigenous American folktales.

Deloria (2006) advocates for a cautious approach by his fellow historians toward the dissemination of dominant ideology. He encourages them to contrast the direct experience of Native Americans with the secondhand knowledge of Euro-Americans. Deloria emphasizes that Indian tribes should be wary of allowing non-natives with evil intentions to take part in their sacred rites and activities. These tribes' sole known ceremonies are open to dances and anyone

was welcomed at the event, thus he honors the Southwest tribes that have succeeded in keeping their rites secret. However, the actual religious ceremonies remained concealed from the public's knowledge (Deloria, 2006, p. 21). Deloria's narrative resonates with a belief in the veracity of sacred folktales among Native Americans, affirming that these stories are recognized by the church due to their spiritual essence. Deloria stresses the importance of agreed-upon authenticity that offers approval for collective action and possesses apparent advantages for survival. Absent such societal cohesion, any group cannot sustain its existence for long. That is why, alongside the exception of clerics, the majority of Indigenous people in American society do not forbid people from performing their rituals. Even white settlers residing in adjacent reservations, such as traders, visitors, and workers for businesses, were permitted to see Native American groups' spiritual activities. Deloria argues that this common white group did not have a political objective and just characterized the rites as something to be amazed at without giving them a holy, self-justifying, or religious meaning. Deloria remains adamant that American Indian tribes should be cautious about allowing nefarious non-natives to participate in their ceremonies. However, he also acknowledges that reports from the white population that highlight the impact of these ceremonies provide insight into the social and cultural significance of Native American customs. These stories depend on first-person tales of non-indigenous people who have traveled to the mysterious mythological land that is thought to be home to American Indian communities. In addition, numerous non-indigenous people authors have discussed the Pawnee's ceremonial medicine tent in their writings which was accessible to everyone. Because they trusted the veracity of their medicine men, to their rites, the Pawnee individuals themselves extended invitations to outsiders and members of other tribal groups.

Major Frank North's account of the frontier scouting encampment of the Pawnee army is used by Deloria (2006) as an illustration of a non-native person's firsthand encounter with Native American rites. While visiting various ceremonies, North talked to George Bird Grinnell about his experiences. Grinnell claimed that North witnessed the "corn planting ritual", in which as per Deloria (2006, p. 127), a healer excavated a patch of soft soil inside his dwelling and hid a handful of corn seeds in it. Afterward, he commenced singing, and the earth began to shift, revealing a small green shoot that gradually sprouted and matured into a full-grown corn plant.

Finally, the healer clutches an ear of corn and shares it with those observing the ritual. Deloria cites a report of Charles Lummis, about an occasion, during the 1890s, when a Navajo physician man showed off the prodigious ability of his own in transforming maize fruits into whole plants very quickly. Lummis mocked these medicine men's skills, calling them jugglers and magicians, and expressed skepticism about their abilities, but he was unable to explain how they performed these feats. Despite this, a lot of medicine men competed and encouraged spectators to see their abilities because of winning these tournaments. According to Deloria (2006, p. 127), this was not a question of faith or deception, but rather a demonstration before a discerning crowd. Individuals who professed to possess abilities but could not exhibit them in front of the community would face irreparable shame.

According to experts, non-indigenous eyewitness accounts of sacred rites were based on their limited comprehension and were unable to perceive the deception employed by medicine men. Deloria, however, argues that this criticism is a diversion from a factual strategy. He cites the writings of non-indigenous researchers in anthropology, experts in history, composers, artists, and singers who traveled to Native American communities to comprehend authentic traditional practices of Indigenous Americans. The nature of Indigenous American ceremonies, according to non-Indigenous researchers is explained, providing rebuttals to arguments about the influence of medicine men. Deloria (2006) cites *The Medicine Men* by Thomas Lewis, as an explanation of the local Yuwipi idea of medicine men, similar to the perspective of the Indigenous people of America. In this work, to examine the custom of rituals, Lewis defines Native American "old faiths in an altered aspect". In the late 19th century, Standing Rock Reservation visitor, Frances Densmore diligently recorded the Sioux rites, which is also valued by Deloria (2006). Indian culture is thoroughly described in her book *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*. Deloria commends Densmore for her efforts in gathering information on Native American traditions as well as encourages contemporary experts to delve into writings for the sake of finding solutions to existing concerns. Deloria (2006) uses Walter McClintock's *The Old North Trail* to better comprehend the characteristics of medicine men. McClintock documents his experiences with the Montanan Blackfeet, including descriptions of recurring competitions

between medicine men that took place in society. The above-mentioned competitions clarify how people, as well as the environment, interact to make better conditions of life.

Methods in which medical professionals and medicine men are portrayed in various novels demonstrate how highly regarded they were among Indigenous people of communities of America. James W. Schultz's *My Life as an Indian*, which recounts the manner of life of the Blackfeet of Montana, is quoted by Deloria (2006). To provide light on the Native American spiritual realm, Schultz elaborates on the ceremonial practice called the "sacred tent ritual" which was carried out by a healer named Old Sun. The information in the book is trustworthy since it was written by Schultz, who went to great lengths to comprehend Native American rites. He even married into the tribe to have permission to closely study the spiritual activities. Deloria (2006) also mentions Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail* to shed light on the use of vision quests. Although some of the images may be recognizable, Parkman acknowledges that these dreams have the power to reveal the secrets of nature. Some visions, however, may be startling or even embarrassing. Deloria contends that these works by well-known white authors respond to those who dismiss Native American rituals as fraudulent by confirming the accounts of the larger white population, which frequently shares comparable experiences.

Deloria (2006) asserts that several reliable Western periodicals offer impartial assessments of Native American spiritual traditions. These journals include accounts from missionaries, visitors, and business people who have acknowledged the sincerity and sensitivity of these customs. For instance, a clergyman allegedly claimed to have seen what in Deloria's account, Cooper describes a vision of a group of buffalo descending from the heavens. The community perceives such occurrences as sacred events, indicating that such events may have been prevalent among the Native American population. The clergyman perceived this miraculous occurrence as diabolical, yet his religious background allowed him to comprehend its importance. Deloria (2006) brings up the Roman Catholic newspaper report from 1922 that was published in "The New York Times." According to the article, medicine men had supernatural abilities that allowed them to alter the pace at which time passes for another being and various entities. Deloria notes that the authenticity of the report is unquestionable because the journal is globally renowned and would not publish anything without validating it through

critical judgment. There have also been reports of this happening in other places of the world. Deloria draws attention to a newspaper article about the "grain hay ceremony" in Boise, according to William E. Curtis. Deloria insists Curtis was right since his definition of the event was neutral because he did not know the ritual's aim and had no preconceived political goal. Deloria displays paintings by Paul Kane depicting spiritual locales and Indigenous American ceremonies in addition to several books, essays, and reports that have appeared in legitimate Western journals. Kane traveled to the western regions of Around thirty artworks depicting their tribes' ceremonial attire as well as customs, were created in 1848 in North America and Canada (Deloria, 2006, p. 93).

The similarities between the numerous American Indian tribes are attested by non-native artists' and writers' publications about Native American rites. Native American methods of life have been researched by historians and academics who have visited various tribes. They put together the stories to show the historical facts that persisted within society even after those who told them or spectators who have died by connecting the living with the deceased (their narrators or researchers) and the dead (their witnesses). Greenblatt (1992) proposes that the "rhetorical, audile, and ocular" remnants extending above a particular person to a collective can be examined to investigate the "authenticity" present in these customary narratives, including past or historical truth (p. 6). Deloria (2006) commends tribes in the Southwest who did not disseminate their customs by forbidding outsiders from participating in their festivities, while also urging scholarly academics to travel in Indigenous American communities because the higher knowledge white people have about Indian rituals, the better their chances exist for "developing a connection among the tribes" (Deloria, 2006, p. 91) and their constructive criticism contributes to the creation of Indigenous American societies (Cox, 2014, p. 108).

Native American ceremonies are commonly criticized by Euro-Americans for being meaningless, with the most common defense being that the camp is shaken by the medicine man personally. But, occasionally the camp will shake for a long time, which will undoubtedly be lengthy enough to wear down anyone attempting to move the structure in such a forceful manner while the shaking happens (Deloria, 2006, p. 89). The reason why the tent's sturdy poles soften and bend as spirits enter the space during the ceremony is commonly demanded by detractors.

They also charge the medicine men with impersonating conversing spirits by making various noises. Deloria claims that they don't even consider Deloria (2006, p. 90) delineates how non-indigenous persons appreciate the uniqueness of the voices and participate in dialogue with them, aware that some voices emanate from the apex of the tent while others are deafening at the ground level. Deloria contends although, the existing authoritative papers about facts of that traditional festival, the critique of these acts demands that these mystical acts be explained by current science.

Several academics as well as detractors call charges against the involved medical practitioners with "dexterity trickery" for the rituals by hiding objects to reveal them in front of the spectators after the ceremonies to demonstrate the practitioner's triumph. Deloria contends that it is more difficult than it seems to pull off a trick in front of skeptical spectators who are already inclined to doubt one's abilities because Deloria (2006, p. 127) explains that any individual asserting supernatural abilities would be irreparably shamed if they could not substantiate their claims before the community. As a result, Deloria (2006, p. 133) contends that anytime one attempts to visualize, it is essential to remember that the medicine men do their performances near their viewers and purposefully wear little clothing to allay any concerns that they might be employing dexterity tricks. Since they were unable to provide evidence of their deceit, some scholars acknowledge the power of medicine men but dispute that it is mystical. Some claim that medical practitioners have they've put a lot of effort into mental training thus they're capable of hypnotizing anybody. They claim that as a result, the medical practitioners deceive every one who is watching them., preventing them from understanding the rituals' secret meanings or limiting their ability to perceive what the medicine men want them to see. Deloria finds such arguments amusing because it seems even less conceivable that one might enchant the crowd. The real trick there was going to be entralling the audience and getting them to watch anything they intended people to witness, if any group of people can be hypnotized that simply, moreover, the ability to confer such power is not granted easily. Some academics connected the ceremonies' manipulations with a legitimate form of hypnosis since they were unable to demonstrate how the rituals worked.

His ability to alter the weather was one of the medicine man's most remarkable accomplishments and a source of much criticism. Newscasters were excited to report on the "rain dance" ritual, in which American Indian dancers made it rain, to highlight the ridiculousness of the Native American traditional belief system. The "rain dance" rites, according to Euro-American critics, are a kind of self-promotion by the Native American medical profession intended to make people rely on them. Some contend that the dance and rain were just coincidental events that benefited the medicine men's boasting. Deloria, for example, mentions, that in 1841, the federal government employed Jean N. Nicolet Notice, a French explorer, to perform an enumeration of the community in the Couteau de Prairie. He narrates the "rain dance" performance and calls it "a mere coincidence, also that a belief held by American Indians is only a superstition" (Deloria, 2006, p. 64). He also mocks the medicine man's dancing. Sometimes, experts from Europe and North America link this ritual to the medical practitioner's understanding of environmental science. Some experts contend that medical practitioners did their acts when they predicted rain yet acted as though they were the ones who were producing the falling of rain. Deloria refers to these misconceptions about the efforts of medical practitioners who manipulate the rain, skies, and storm as "rain dance" humor. Because the medicine man was asked to bring rain in a drought for the benefit of the entire community, he demands that "rain dance" stories should be critically examined or accounts that show the social impact of the event According to Deloria (2006, p. 137), the Chiricahua have "a ritual aimed at inducing rainfall during droughts" is mentioned in *An Apache Living Way* by Morris Opler, which Deloria mentions. It describes how the "rain dance" and the need for rain are related, and it also explains why it rained shortly after the medicine man danced. Conversely, it seems illogical for individuals to request a "rain dance" when the weather is already overcast and rainy. When individuals had prior knowledge that rainfall was probable or that the sky was already overcast, there would have been no requirements to request rain from medical practitioners.

5. Conclusion

History does not constitute a unified body of objective knowledge that can be straightforwardly imposed onto a literary text to unveil whether it mirrors or diverges from reality. Literature serves as a means for representing history and harbors insights into the shaping of historical

occurrences. It discloses the mechanisms and conflicts through which historical transformations unfold (Woolfreys, 2001, p. 170). The literary text inevitably becomes an integral component of a broader cultural, political, social, and economic framework. Instead of remaining unaffected by the historical moment of its creation, the literary text is directly entangled with history. Literature goes beyond merely reflecting power dynamics; it actively engages in the consolidation and construction of discourses and ideologies. This contradiction inherent in any historical moment is typical: i) initiate the exploration with specific details, anecdotes, and examples to evade an overly comprehensive version of history; ii) unfold progress from these specific details to demonstrate their connection with larger contradictory forces in a given period, even if the details initially appear inconspicuous; iii) maintain self-awareness regarding methodologies, resisting a historicism based upon faith in the transparency of signs and interpretative procedures; iv) exercise skepticism toward laboratory narratives, recognizing that everything, on some level, is entwined in the circulations of power within a specific period; v) acknowledge that all cultural products, whether high art, political documents, personal letters, or seemingly insignificant items, are integral components of broader discursive structures. Consequently, they can provide insights into the ideological contradictions of a given period (Felluga, 1999, 'Module on Stephen Greenblatt').

This research has delved into the literary and historical richness of indigenous voices in shaping Native American cultural landscapes. It serves as a testament to the power of storytelling and the enduring influence of authors and activists in reshaping cultural narratives. Deloria's work serves as a testament to his enduring commitment to the integrity of Native American history and culture. The meticulous pairing of each story he records with his insightful commentary reveals a deep engagement with the text, reflecting the incisive perspective that readers have long come to expect from him. This volume not only stands as an essential addition to any library concerned with American Indian issues but is elevated to indispensability by Deloria's commentaries, which shed light on the intricate nuances of the narratives, offering a vital interpretive lens.

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