

Piety, Pageantry and Politics on the Northern Great Plains: An American Indian Woman Restages Her People's Conquest during the Era of Assimilation (1879-1934)

Susan Gardner, Associate Professor of English, The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Abstract

A study of the early career of Dakota Sioux scholar Ella Cara Deloria (1889-1971). Better known male figures in her family, forced to relinquish their traditional leadership roles, strategically extended these by converting to Christianity during the nineteenth century US federal policies of allotment of lands and assimilation. Deloria's first opportunities for professional leadership took place under the auspices of the YWCA and the Episcopalian diocese of South Dakota. This paper argues that, despite paternalistic surveillance, and by surreptitiously adapting contemporary American community historical pageantry to their own agenda, Ella Deloria and the Dakota actors she directed encoded resistance to the church's "official story" of their conversion and salvation.

The theatrical imperatives that normally prevail in situations of domination produce a public transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear... In the short run, it is in the interest of the subordinate to produce a more or less credible performance, speaking the lines and making the gestures he knows are expected of him. The result is that the public transcript is—barring a crisis—systematically skewed in the direction of the libretto, the discourse, represented by the dominant... [A]ny analysis based exclusively on the public transcript is likely to conclude that subordinate groups endorse the terms of their subordination and are willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination.

James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*

I think pageantry is great. You can show so much that you would not dare to talk about.

Ella Deloria to Bishop Hugh Latimer Burleson, 16 December 1927

Introduction

Native North American Indian peoples have been subjected to policies ranging from genocide to self-determination, first under the British Crown and then the federal government of the U.S. The mostly dismal catalogue of "solutions" to "the Indian Problem" includes outright invasion, conquest and extermination; biological warfare and ecocide (e.g., the intentional distribution of smallpox-infected blankets, deliberate destruction of the buffalo herds necessary for Plains Indians' survival; sterilization of American Indian women, often without their knowledge or consent; "nuclear colonialism," disposal of toxic wastes on Indian lands); forced removal from tribal lands east of the Mississippi; treaties between tribes recognized as sovereign and the

Forum on Public Policy

federal government, Indians granting land cessions in exchange for becoming dependent “wards” of the latter; assimilation/forced deculturation; the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887, which all but smashed the tribes’ remaining communal land bases after the Treaty era; one-way relocation to urban areas; tribal termination... The catalogue is endless and ongoing. Over several generations in the historical record, Dakota Sioux scholar Ella Cara Deloria’s family survived wildly varying and contradictory policies, including somewhat more benevolent ones such as the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (“the Indian New Deal”) and Bureau of Indian Affairs-managed “self-determination.” None of these policies, it is probably unnecessary to say, was initiated by Indians.

Ella Deloria (1889-1971) was an outstanding scholar and cultural broker who came from one of the best-known American Indian intellectual families. Her grandfather Saswe (1816-1876) was a renowned traditional healer and visionary, as well as a tribal headman, who converted to Christianity late in his life. For him there was little contradiction between adapting to some of the mainstream culture’s ways and also representing his tribe’s interests to President Andrew Johnson in 1868, attempting to renegotiate the 1858 treaty defining the Yankton Sioux reservation land base. Her father, the Rev. Philip J. Deloria (1853-1931), became a Native Episcopalian missionary to “wild” “hostile” Sioux peoples on the Standing Rock reservation straddling the western boundaries of present day North and South Dakota, while maintaining the family project of political advocacy and cultural preservation. Her brother, the Rev. Vine Deloria Sr. (1901-1990), also became an Episcopal priest, albeit an unwilling and unruly one. As the first Indian to direct that denomination’s national Indian mission work, he eventually resigned to protest its racially discriminatory practices. Her nephew, Vine Deloria Jr. (1933-2005; emeritus professor of history and religious studies at the Univ. of Colorado at Boulder) was one of the

most famous and provocative American Indian public intellectuals of the last four decades. The family's tradition of cultural translation, mediation and interpretation continues with Miss Deloria's great-nephew Philip J. Deloria, professor of history and Director of the Program in American Culture at the Univ. of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Ella Deloria is the only woman immediately related to these remarkable men to leave her mark on the family's multi-generation tradition of cultural brokerage.

Astonishingly, however, despite her exceptional contributions to American Indian intellectual and representational sovereignty, little of Ella Deloria's work is published (apart from scientific reports and her one novel, *Waterlily*, published posthumously in radically truncated form in 1988). Various circumstances—including her extensive and expensive kinship obligations, which prevented opportunities for graduate professional study, financial insecurity during the Depression and World War II years, and her insider/outsider position as a free-lance scholar in academe whose income was never guaranteed—kept her work from achieving the recognition it deserves. She is best known as a distinguished Dakota ethnologist and linguist, funded by Columbia University, the American Philosophical Society, the Bollingen Foundation, the National Science Foundation and the Doris Duke Foundation from 1929 to the early 1960s. Working with Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, some of the founders of American fieldwork anthropology, her contribution to the field was unique. In addition to laboring on an enormous Sioux-English dictionary, anthropologist Raymond J. DeMallie writes, “[S]he transcribed and translated an enormous body of texts in the Lakota and Dakota dialects...on a wide variety of topics, selected to represent...traditional myths, anecdotes, autobiographies, political speeches, conversation, humorous stories, and aphorisms. A written record of such

magnitude and diversity does not exist for any other Plains Indian language.”¹ Still, the bulk of Miss Deloria’s life work is unknown, unpublished and unanalyzed. Whatever Miss Deloria wrote—ethnology, translations and interpretations of oral traditions, her novel *Waterlily*, an unpublished manuscript of “Dakota Legends” intended for a younger audience, pageants produced between 1920-1940 for Indian communities, and her professional letters--was written so that “the People may live!” (*Waterlily* 116). Her scholarship was based on what she was told by Indian people in conversations and more formal interviews. She was, in effect, her People’s biographer, and her *oeuvre* is thus composite ethnic remembrance, revitalization, and advocacy. All of her writing appropriates and revises alien European narrative forms—fictive, dramatic and scientific.

This paper explores Deloria’s formative years during the decades (1879-1934) when federal government policy sought to “civilize” Indian peoples through assimilation: educationally, religiously, culturally, linguistically, politically. The policy is more accurately described as forced deculturation, exemplified by the policy of the founder of the off-reservation Carlisle Indian boarding school, Col. Richard Pratt: “Kill the Indian to save the man.” Yet Siobhan Senier’s *Voices of American Indian Assimilation and Resistance: Helen Hunt Jackson, Sarah Winnemucca, and Victoria Howard*, claims:

For all its ugliness, the Era of Assimilation also generated new opportunities for women to write and speak publicly—opportunities they seized with gusto. White women became public reformers, writers, and speakers... Indian women, some of whom had been forced to learn how to speak, read, and write in English in boarding schools...also capitalized on this wave of reform.... In other words, women and American Indians conceived of women and American Indians as uniquely qualified to confront assimilation.²

¹ Raymond K. DeMallie, “Afterword,” in Ella Cara Deloria, *Waterlily*. (1988; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press/Bison Books, 1990), 236.

² Siobhan Senier, *Voices of American Indian Assimilation and Resistance: Helen Hunt Jackson, Sarah Winnemucca, and Victoria Howard*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), ix-x.

Forum on Public Policy

Senier discerns a strategy of “evasive representations of indigenous culture” as characteristic of American Indian women’s writing at the time.

[F]or these women, resistance to assimilation could never be as simple as merely speaking (open protest) or not speaking (silent self-preservation). Rather, that resistance became deeply intertwined with the question of how to speak, whether to speak, and how one might—or might not—be understood. ³³

Ella Deloria’s very person embodied a mixed heritage. Her other grandfather, Brigadier General Alfred Sully, was a renowned Indian fighter who chose one of her Dakota grandfather’s daughters as his “winter companion.” The Deloria family has seen this liaison as a legitimate marriage in Dakota terms, involving gifts of horses and other valuable items to her family. Initially the couple lived together at Fort Randall, Dakota Territory. However, once Susan Deloria became pregnant, she returned to her own people for the birth, and so her daughter Mary, Ella Deloria’s mother, was born on the Yankton reservation. Mary Sully later recalled meeting her American father only once, at his instigation when she was three years old and Sully was being reposted out of state. He promised to return and bring her a present; little Mary requested a china doll. She never received it, and he never returned. ⁴

As an Episcopalian priest’s daughter and sister, whose Dakota grandfather and father were both celebrated converts to Christianity, Ella Deloria’s formative years were spent within that denomination’s clutching embrace. Her early formal education was at a reservation mission school, St. Elizabeth’s. Her father and a “consecrated churchwoman”/missionary, Miss Mary Sharpe Francis, who devoted 16 years to running that school, established it. Ella Deloria’s

³ Senier, 9, 28

⁴Langdon Sully’s biography of his grandfather makes no reference to Sully’s Dakota family at all. Langdon Sully, *No Tears for the General: The Life of Alfred Sully, 1821-1879*. Foreword by Ray Allen Billington. (Palo Alto: American West Publishing Company, Western Biography Series, 1974). Other information in this paragraph is from Renee Sansom-Flood (Papin), *Lessons from Chouteau Creek: Yankton Memories of Dakota Territorial Intrigue*. Dakota Ser. # 1. (Sioux Falls: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 1986).

obituary in 1937 for “the vibrant, happy, gentle and kind yet strict, selfless Christian woman that was Miss Francis” recounts with candor but without judgment an early childhood education whose intention was to transform “backward” Teton (Lakota) Indians into clean, civilized Christians and prepare them for second-class occupations in the white world:

The school opened in 1890 with children from primitive homes and surroundings, and because...hardly any of these knew any English words, and she and her staff knew no Dakota, communication was quite difficult at first.... From the start, Miss Francis required the pupils not only to do their assigned industrial work but to tell of it in English.... Miss Francis, always fair, always impartial, uncompromisingly firm for the right, never failed to punish wrong-doing. You stood in the corner till excused; with hands behind you for the first offence, and with hands on your head for later ones. There were even instances when a child had to be whipped—and was!

Yet for all that, Miss Francis was loved and respected, and for the most part, carefully obeyed.... Miss Francis inspired her pupils to learn how to work correctly... [E]ven in scrubbing the halls, she required not only hot water and soap but also, and especially, a nail with which to get every bit of dirt from the corners!... Mary S. Francis [was] a true Christian, and dedicated, self-effacing servant, a friend of the Dakota people, a happy soul to whom her small stipend was unimportant compared to the privilege of serving her Lord. ⁵

Deloria attended the school as a day boarder (her father’s rectory was only a few yards away), and was fully bilingual in her parents’ Dakota and in English. Since her family had already become Christian some years before her birth, a reservation mission school may have seemed strict to her, but not coercive. And there was another side to the story of her early formation. Her parents, while espousing the white culture’s non-negotiable imperatives to become monogamous, English-speaking, land-owning Christian farmers, also maintained a reverence for many of the traditional life ways:

⁵Ella Deloria. “Miss Mary Sharpe Francis. (In Memoriam)” (typescript), 1937. Deloria Family Collection, Dakota Indian Foundation, Chamberlain, South Dakota, “Publications and Miscellaneous Material,” Folder 11, 5-7. For more information about Miss Francis (who recited “The Lord’s Prayer” in perfect Dakota on her death bed, with Deloria at her side), see William McK. Chapman, *Remember the Wind: a Prairie Memoir*. Drawings by Douglas Corsline. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1965), 202-214.

Forum on Public Policy

My father and mother, while always helping the people to acquire skills and knowledge for the alien life that was coming, nevertheless were completely in sympathy with the tribal life, and were related to everyone, in social kinship. And so I was related to everyone too; and I always knew what kinship obligations were required of me, towards each different kind of relative. I grew up that way; nobody had to tell me. ⁶

Her father, moreover, was also a hereditary chief of Band A of the Yanktons—“chieftain, prince, legend” ⁷ as Episcopalian churchwoman and historian Owanah Anderson (Choctaw) refers to him. He was also a mesmerizing storyteller. As his grandson Vine Deloria Jr. wrote in his introduction to the 1998 reissue of his aunt’s *Speaking of Indians* (1944), for many years Ella Deloria served as her father’s surrogate son, his inheritor of traditional and familial stories.⁸ She also learned these from her paternal grandmother who pitched her tipi in the rectory grounds when visiting, and from female relatives of her mother.

Deloria’s childhood education was thus by no means limited to her formal Euramerican schooling. Decades later she wrote to Margaret Mead of her fascination with the Tetons, Black Feet, and Hunkpapaya, “those most hostile and backward of all the Teton Bands—Sitting Bull’s own people.... I kept my eyes and ears open and remember pretty much all I ever saw and heard of Teton life in the past. That was the foundation on which I based my subsequent interest in Dakota linguistics and ethnology.”⁹ Indeed, when visitors from the rugged outlying areas came to visit their children at St Elizabeth’s, draw [food] rations (which her family refused to accept), and to attend church and other meetings, Ella vanished for hours at a time. When an alarm

⁶ E. Deloria to Margaret Mead, 17 July 1952, 2. Margaret Mead Papers, Box 158, Publications and Other Writings, 1952. Writings by Others. Deloria, Ella, “Dakota Family Life” (c. November 1948). Washington DC: Library of Congress.

⁷ Owanah Anderson, *400 Years: Anglican/Episcopalian Mission among American Indians*. (Cincinnati OH: Forward Movement Publications, 1997), 97.

⁸ Vine Deloria Jr., introduction to the Bison Books re-issue of *Speaking of Indians* by Ella Deloria (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), ix-xix. Ella Deloria dedicated the book, originally published by the Christian Friendship Press in New York (1944) “To the memory of MARY SHARP [sic] FRANCIS, a beloved teacher and a great missionary.”

sounded for her, she was usually downhill in the Teton camps, adding Lakota to her repertoire of Sioux dialects, forsaking the rectory's kitchen for the campfires, her intimate knowledge of Bible stories temporarily superseded by those of the People.

At the age of 12 Deloria began boarding at a prestigious Episcopalian all girls' college preparatory school in Sioux Falls, SD. The few Indian students came from her social class, "preachers' kids," and all were on scholarship. Founded by the Episcopalian bishop William Hobart Hare in 1884 for the daughters of white missionaries, it emphasized their duty, as well as that of daughters and future wives of army officers, ranch owners, mine owners in the Black Hills, and state officials, to "civilize" the West. More bluntly, these young women were a roll-call of daughters of a white supremacist, colonizing patriarchy. Deloria's transcript testifies to a neocolonial, pseudo-classical, pious education.

Yet All Saints allowed Deloria to bloom in novel, unpredictable ways. Her senior essay attracted the attention of several prominent white women: one a local representative from the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the other, Edith Manville Dabb, director of the Indian Department of the National Board of the YWCA since 1909. Through the Federation, "the world's oldest nonpartisan, nondenominational women's volunteer service organization,"¹⁰ founded the same year as St Elizabeth's, a Mrs. Dexter of Philadelphia funded Deloria's post-secondary education at Oberlin and then at Teachers College in Columbia University. There she was awarded a B.Sc. degree in 1915 with a special honor for "exceptional ability." (She later

⁹E. Deloria, "Ella Deloria's Life," 1. Mead, Margaret Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁰General Federation of Women's Clubs, "About Us." http://www.gfwc.org/about_us.

11. Edith Manville Dabb, "Beyond the Camp Fire" (New York, NY: National Board of the Young Women's Christian Assoc., 1916), 5. Dorothy Stevenson Hale Collection, Dakota Indian Foundation. Miss Dabb was an idealist among members of Friends of the Indian organizations. As Francis Paul Prucha writes, such organizations "set out with good intentions to stamp out Indianness altogether and to substitute for it a uniform Americanness, to destroy all remnants of corporate existence or tribalism and to replace them with an absolute rugged individualism

downplayed her Columbia teaching degree as inadequate, but it bolstered her, and her family's, reputation in Indian country.) Notably, at this time neither women nor Indians could vote, nor had Indians yet been acknowledged as US citizens. (Some, however, like her father, had become citizens because they had proved themselves individually "competent" through farming and improving land acquired from the Dawes Allotment-in-Severalty Act of 1887, which drastically reduced the size of the Great Sioux and other reservations.) After her mother's death in 1916, Deloria taught at her alma mater, All Saints, where she served as director of physical education and was also in charge of school plays, from set construction to direction. She taught 7th and 8th grade English and Latin, as well as Virgil for the seniors; at the time she aspired to teach the classics.

In that same year, 1916, Miss Dabb published a pamphlet, "Beyond the Camp Fire," where she stated her philosophy of "Indian work," particularly among girls and women, succinctly and authoritatively:

How much of our interest in the Indian is based solely on their picturesqueness? Do we study carefully before we condemn the unprogressiveness of a people whom we are urging to enter the mad rush which is sweeping us along? The history of the children of Israel we accept and we are not astonished at God's patience. But the slow development of the primitive people in our midst we treat with impatience.¹¹

As a leader in one of the organizations known collectively as "Friends of the Indian" (the Philadelphia-based Indian Rights Association the most pre-eminent), Miss Dabb described their

that was foreign to the traditions and to the hearts of Indian peoples" (*The Great Father: the United States Government and the American Indians*, abridged edition. Lincoln NE: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1988), 207.

¹¹ Edith Manville Dabb, "Beyond the Camp Fire" (New York, NY: National Board of the Young Women's Christian Assoc., 1916), 5. Dorothy Stevenson Hale Collection, Dakota Indian Foundation. Miss Dabb was an idealist among members of Friends of the Indian organizations. As Francis Paul Prucha writes, such organizations "set out with good intentions to stamp out Indianness altogether and to substitute for it a uniform Americanness, to destroy all remnants of corporate existence or tribalism and to replace them with an absolute rugged individualism that was foreign to the traditions and to the hearts of Indian peoples" (*The Great Father: the United States Government and the American Indians*, abridged edition. Lincoln NE: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1988), 207.

Forum on Public Policy

common aims as “desir[ing] above all else that these children of nature may have a chance to hold sacred the best of the old life, and to learn how to choose and adapt the best of the new.”¹² Noting that “Indian girls...are quite immature, reticent and as lacking in leadership as are most women of races in a primitive stage”¹³; that “It is hard for Indian women to take places of leadership and the teachers among them are still few, but we know that God can raise up leaders from among the weakest,” Miss Dabb concluded her account with the ringing claim that “No religion save that of Jesus Christ has brought truth, purity and fullness of life to women.”¹⁴

Quite a different, highly critical and tribally-focused perspective on the opportunities available for Indian female leadership at that time comes from Dakota academic, poet, short story writer, novelist and essayist, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn:

For the women who, after schooling, did not return to the reservations, for the women who ignored traditional marriage patterns by marrying nontribal men, for the women whose children no longer represented the bloodlines of the tribes, the matter of claiming intellectual, spiritual, or social leadership roles was complicated and difficult. They often only became useful as they served to further and support assimilationist views and were often regarded with suspicion by others in the tribe.¹⁵

Deloria did indeed become “active in the white man’s bureaucracies, churches, schools, governments, in order to have a modicum of influence over the inevitable changes which would occur with or without the consent of the people.”¹⁶ She also, however, learned to exercise an uncommon and shrewd ability to encode a rhetorical strategy of dissidence within hegemonic and canonical Euramerican narrative forms.

¹²Dabb, 7

¹³Dabb, 8

¹⁴Dabb, 16

¹⁵ Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Why I Can’t Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: a Tribal Voice*. (Madison WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 103-04.

¹⁶ Cook-Lynn, 103.

Forum on Public Policy

What was extraordinary in Miss Dabb's organizational and educational philosophy, however latently and probably unconsciously condescending, was her belief that selected Indian women should train other Indian women for leadership positions. (No such opportunity was available for single Indian women in the Episcopalian church at the time.) She recruited Ella Deloria in 1918-19 for the YWCA's national training school in New York, where the graduate curriculum emphasized religious and social subjects. From 1919-25 Deloria, along with Susie Meek (Sax and Fox from Oklahoma) and Miss Dabb herself, was a secretary for the national board of the YWCA's Indian Department, based in New York city. As a field representative earning \$2,500. per annum (a salary Miss Dabb hoped to increase), Deloria traveled to federally-run off-reservation boarding and reservation schools all over the country. A description of her work appears in a fund-raising application addressed to one of the board's most substantial donors, Mrs. C.M. Hyde:

Miss Ella Deloria is the daughter of Rev. Philip Deloria, a native minister among the Sioux.... Early in September [1920], [during] the convocation of the Episcopal Church among the Dakotas, she staged a pageant, "The Fifty Years' Trail"—the history of their church missionary work in that tribe. Now she is helping with health and recreational work on one of the reservations in South Dakota. Her training, together with her knowledge of Dakota and English, makes her invaluable.... Many requests have come in from schools and reservations for her help...¹⁷

Ella Deloria, then, became an agent of "ecclesial colonialism."¹⁸ Yet I believe that her church-sponsored education, and experience with a variety of church-run organizations—all

¹⁷E. Dabb, "SUGGESTIONS WHICH MIGHT BE INCLUDED IN A LETTER TO MRS. HYDE OF A DESCRIPTION OF OUR INDIAN SETUP," 2-3, typescript, 11 November 1920. Dorothy Stevenson Hale Collection, Dakota Indian Foundation

¹⁸ "Ecclesial colonialism" is Anderson's term in *400 Years*, ix. For other responses to the mission work of the Episcopalian church in South Dakota, see Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve (Dakota), *That They May Have Life: The Episcopalian Church in South Dakota 1859-1976* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977) and her memoir, *Completing the Circle* (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Dakota), "A Centennial Minute from Indian Country; or Lessons in Christianizing the Aboriginal Peoples of North America from the Example of Bishop William Hobart Hare," in *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner*, 41-59; and Mary E. Cochran, *Dakota Cross-Bearer: The Life and World of a Native American Bishop*, introduction by Raymond A. Bucko and Martin

Forum on Public Policy

assimilative in nature—prepared her to use these organizations to benefit her people in ways their founders did not envisage. So did her secular education, providing an arena where she mastered stage-craft, production, and direction. The 1920 pageant—the first of three major ones she produced over a 20-year period—provided her with an ideal forum, form and stage for Indian people to voice their hardly consensual “take” on policies devised and forced upon them by their colonizers. She never deviated in her dramaturgical work from the formula she devised then: take refuge under the protective cover of institutions founded to ‘uplift’ Indians, so as to reclaim, with pride, the cultural resources of their past. In this first pageant, she was intended to play an auxiliary role in collaborative production. Earlier in 1920 Bishop Burleson, in a letter brainstorming the pageant’s structure to the Archdeacon Edward Ashley, had asked: “What would you think of Ella Deloria as the writer of the pageant? Of course with the help of innumerable suggestions from others,”¹⁹ implying that, although he respected Deloria’s talents he did not intend to give her free rein.

Pageantry, Deloria wrote to Margaret Mead in the 1950s, was a means to engender group integrity and pride. The secret of her success was as simple as it had previously been unthinkable: Indians should perform themselves, and they should be free to improvise their parts, in the process producing a usable past. The 1920 pageant, Deloria explained to Mead, “ was

Brokenleg (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000). Native theologians George E. Tinker (Osage) in *Missionary Conquest: the Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1993) and *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2004) and James Treat in his edited *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996) debate such issues as “What does it mean to be native? What does it mean to be Christian? Should Christian identity be subordinated to native identity, or vice versa? Is it possible to be both native and Christian in any meaningful way?” (2).

¹⁹ Hugh L. Burleson, Bishop of South Dakota, to the Venerable Edward Ashley, Archdeacon of Niobrara, May 29, 1920. Hugh Latimer Burleson, Bishop of South Dakota, papers, March 24, 1883–November 19, 1923, folders relating to the Deloria family. Episcopal Diocesan Archives for South Dakota. Sioux Falls, SD: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College.

written by Bishop Burleson and I was ‘borrowed’ from the National YWCA...to direct and stage it:

It was at one of the annual convocations where two thousand Indians from all the Sioux reservations came together... It was written in blank verse in English, and I translated it into Dakota, in the same meter, so that two readers could give it, for the benefit of those who understood only one language. It was staged out on the open prairie, in the center of the camp circle, where every bit of the settings and costuming had to be improvised....

The actors were remarkably apt. Since there was little time for hum-drum rehearsals, each group was told what they must act out—and they did, working out their own stage business with amazing originality. They did not act; it was not make-believe. It was spontaneous scene-living—and very good.... The Dakotas love pageantry. If you let them express themselves, they may surprise you!....

Professional producers would never call it ‘good theater’ but it was good. And, too, they did not come to me for every little problem. They solved them; they got their own costumes,...their own everything! I may have been at the helm, but everyone was at his battlestation. It was quite thrilling to me. I do think there is a wealth of opportunity in Indian pageantry, but it is not recognized. I didn’t know what the costuming would be; I only told them what it should be, and they improved on it. I did not tell them minute bits of stage-business; it was enough that they first understood the exact story their scene should represent and they went off in groups and decided who should do what; and the ensemble was perfect. You should have seen it. About a hundred took part—including singers.

From this vantage point of three decades later, Deloria confided, “I still rate my prairie pageant as outstanding.”²⁰ It is, in fact, an excellent example of what Mary Louise Pratt, in *Imperial Eyes*, calls “autoethnographic expressions,” defined as “instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer’s own terms.... [A]utoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with... metropolitan [colonial] representations... [A]utoethnography involves partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror” (emphasis hers).²¹

²⁰ E. Deloria, “Other Activities of Ella Deloria,” 1-3. Margaret Mead Papers, Library of Congress.

²¹ Mary Louise Pratt. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. (London: Routledge, 1992), 7. Although I quote from Pollock’s, Pratt’s and Scott’s work with admiration, I should emphasize that I am drawing upon their concepts suggestively rather than adopting them completely. This is because they were elaborated in geographical

Forum on Public Policy

The program for the pageant (“Ocimani Hanska Kin (The Fifty Years’ Trail), being a Pageant to Commemorate Fifty Years of Organized Christian Service by the Episcopal Church among the Dakotas” [Sept. 2-6, 1920]), is preserved in the archives of the Episcopalian Diocese of South Dakota. Bishop Burleson framed its presentation with hymns: “The Church’s one Foundation/Is Jesus Christ her Lord” at the beginning, and, at the end, “God Bless Our Native Land”, “Onward Christian Soldiers,” and a culminating Gloria in Excelsis. Its theme was “Indian progress” under the guardianship of the Episcopalian church, ranging from the Dakotas’ defeats in warfare to their introduction to the written [Biblical] “Word” and loyalty to the United States.

Presumably unrecognized as such by the Bishop, Deloria, by staging the pageant on the open prairie and enlisting 100 actors, recreated the communal, ceremonial context of a traditional Sun Dance gathering, the People’s most sacred community ritual. The “pagan” Sun Dance had been so threatening to Indian agents on the reservations that, in one form or another, it was outlawed between 1881 and 1978. Plains Indians continued to practice it covertly, while church convocations became one of the few legal corporate outlets for Indian people from all over the northern Great Plains to meet, as they had in pre-reservation days. (Even a Native missionary like Deloria’s father was not allowed to leave the reservation to attend a convocation or for any other purpose such as medical treatment, without permission from a reservation superintendent.) All people took part in the traditional Sun Dance, under the charge of an officiating shaman who, in Deloria’s version, became a “herald.” Thus she reclaimed traditional sacred ground for the purposes of a church conclave.

The pageant began with the brutal “banishment” (more precisely, ethnic cleansing) of Dakotas from Minnesota after younger members of the Santee chief Little Crow’s people

and historical contexts other than Native North America. Pratt’s work focuses on South America at the end of the

Forum on Public Policy

attacked white farmers and traders and fought a volunteer detachment of infantry in August 1862. Retaliation was swift and by year's end 38 of the insurgents were hanged at President Lincoln's order in Mankato, Minnesota. It was the largest mass execution in American history, and Dakota people honor their memory to this day. This confrontation was the very theatre in which General Sully met Francois "Saswe" Des Lauriers, recruited him as a scout for the U.S. Army, and married his daughter. The pageant then skipped to a scene of "the printed Word," highlighting the growth of a literate (male) Native clergy in English, and swept through World War I in which Indians demonstrated their loyalty through outstanding military service. (They were finally awarded American citizenship in 1924. They, of course, saw joining the military as another variant of the warrior role, defending their land, just as they no doubt sang "God Bless Our Native Land" without irony.) The finale was a procession, a kind of royal progress, of leaders of the Host: Bishops, Archdeacons, clergy, catechists, helpers. Among those celebrated was Deloria's father, who was allocated a speaking part in Dakota, a eulogy for Bishop Hare. The pageant did not include Burleson's "fanciful" proposal to Ashley that Bishop Hare be represented as a latter-day Moses on Mount Nebo, glimpsing the Promised Land. Intentionally or not, such an episode would have been ironic indeed, given that treaty after treaty had already dispossessed the Sioux of most of *their* land.

It was one event not on the printed program (although Burleson did envision it in his draft to the Archdeacon) that elicited the Indian actors' most passionate performance: the so-called "Battle of Wounded Knee" in December 1890, at which over 300 Indian men, women, and children under a flag of peace were murdered by Custer's former regiment, the Seventh Cavalry. This massacre was the death knell of the millennial "Ghost Dance," a revival movement

eighteenth century, and Scott's on peasant class relations in a twentieth century Malay village.

misinterpreted willfully by the American government as armed rebellion. (The Episcopalian church dubbed this tragic attempt to recover the past and create an idyllic future as “the Messiah Craze,” which is how it is referred to in the pageant program.) The slaughter was commonly regarded as signaling “the closing of the American frontier.” The “Indian Wars” were over. Perhaps even to Deloria’s surprise, the Dakota cast vividly re-enacted the horrific aftermath:

In the Wounded Knee scene...the wounded and dying made themselves up as maimed, or as suffering head wounds, with all manner of bandages.... [T]here in a church they were, in all stages of misery, in continuous melting of movements as they groaned and rolled. Then I saw a beautiful specimen of a casualty, but behind the scenes. ‘O, you are perfect!’ I exclaimed with distress, ‘But you are too late. The scene is playing right now!’ Two men stepped up. ‘No, he isn’t, Miss Deloria,’ they said. ‘We are going to carry him in right now!’ [I]t actually made the scene, and it did not come from me. Things like that happened all the way through.²²

“Things like that” were ingenious modes of concealing and revealing what political scientist James Scott refers to as “hidden transcripts” informing an official program. The actors, due to their considerable number, were anonymous, and would have been difficult to identify under layers of bandages and blankets. (Interestingly, photographs of the pageant in the Diocesan Archives show only the actors’ *backs*, focusing rather on the “heroic” deeds of the Episcopalian clergy, who occupy center stage.) They did not need a script and may well not have said anything at all, as their eloquent bodies re-staged historical grief and loss from 30 years before. It was if they anticipated how cultural theorists would later describe performance as “primarily something *done* rather than something *seen*. It is less the product of theatrical invention or the object of spectatorship than the process by which meaning, selves, and other effects are produced.”²³ Their improvisation negated the univocal, unified, ideally linear and progressive

²² E. Deloria, “Other Activities,” 2.

²³ Della Pollock, introduction, “Making History Go,” in *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*, edited by Della Pollock. (Chapel Hill NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 20. Emphasis hers

story that the church chose to believe about itself. The Bishop presumably applauded the role of his church in caring for the survivors; the actors probably were celebrating that anyone had survived at all. Thanks to them, the pageant became what Scott calls one of “those rare moments of political electricity when, often for the first time in memory, the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power.”²⁴ The Indians stole the show. “Indian progress” was re-interpreted as not about an inevitable “transition” from savagery to civilization, but surviving military conquest and forced relocation to earning the right to belong to an abstract, allegorical “Columbia.”

Unique to Deloria’s contribution was employing conventions of mainstream **American** community historical pageantry into a marginalized people’s vehicle for asserting *their* account of their history. Thus she transcended the limitations of a paternalistic, hierarchical institution, while redefining a dramatic genre originating, particularly in its processional form, from medieval Europe. How deliberately she set out to accomplish such subversion in her first pageant we can hardly know, But we can be certain that, inspired by the theatrical enthusiasm and innovations from her own Dakota people, she learned to represent and disguise what mattered to them, within the strictures of colonial narrative forms. In Mary Louise Pratt’s terms, Deloria and her people provided a “critique of empire” which “coded ongoingly on the spot, in ceremony, dance, parody, philosophy, counterknowledge and counterhistory, in texts unwitnessed, suppressed, lost, or simply overlain with repetition and unreality.”²⁵ Ella Deloria became an adept at what Pratt calls “transculturation:” a process by which “subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant culture. While subjugated

²⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1990), xiii.

²⁵ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 2

peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for.”²⁶

Soon Ella Deloria would no longer be confined to producing “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” (which she converted into a pageant!) or stale revisions of “Hiawatha” as she had to at government-run boarding schools through 1927. In 1929 she was to jettison her government position to become an ethnologist, a field where her narrative skills again functioned to provide a genre-bending transformation of official stories. No longer an acolyte, she was to become the People’s scholar.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the following individuals and organizations for allowing me to quote from material in their collections: Dr. Harry F. Thompson, Director of Research Collections and Publications, The Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, Sioux Falls, SD, for Deloria’s correspondence with Bishop Hugh Latimer Burleson; Ron Kjonggaard, Director of the Dakota Indian Foundation, Chamberlain, SD (the Dorothy Stevenson Hale collection); the Library of Congress and The Institute for Intercultural Studies (the papers of Margaret Mead). None of these organizations could have permitted quoting from Ella Deloria’s correspondence and other materials without the kind consent of her literary representatives: Vine V. Deloria Jr. and Philip J. Deloria.

I also acknowledge with gratitude curriculum and instruction grants from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in 1992 and 1993; travel grants from the Southern Regional Education Board in Atlanta in 1998 and 2000; a Lannan Foundation grant to participate in a four-week institute on American Indian autobiography at the D’Arcy McNickle Center on American Indian History, Newberry Library, Chicago, in 2002; and UNC Charlotte faculty research grants in 1998, 1999-2000, 2001-2002, 2002-2003, 2003-2004, and 2007.

Other participants in the Oxford Round Table’s 2005 session on women’s leadership provided suggestions and references, which I am glad to acknowledge.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2006.

²⁶ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 6.