



Ella Cara Deloria

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When the last song died away, it was the Dakotas' turn to act. Nor did they hesitate. The ceremonial give-away was fundamental to all plains life. For the Dakotas, it was their particular pride and glory. And now here it was to be elevated to its sublime height, in one concerned act. Not from person to person, as usual, but from tribe to tribe. The men who were men were ready to give their horses. Their wives, standing behind them, could hardly be seen for the great packs of other gifts that they proudly bore on their backs. The Dakotas were all rather shabbily dressed. They had in fact come just as they were, in commonplace daily garb, for that was the custom: the host must be plainly dressed so as not to shame the guest by seeming competition. But the guest was free to be as elaborate as he could afford. It was expected of him.

— Waterlily

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Quick Facts

- * 1889-1971
- * Native American ethnologist
- * Her novel *Waterlily* was published posthumously

Biography

Ella Cara Deloria (Yankton Nakota), whose translated Dakota name means Beautiful Day, was born in 1889 on the Yankton Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. She was a member of a prominent Dakota family (her grandfather was a tribal leader; her father was a deacon in the reservation's Episcopal mission church; her nephew is the historian Vine Deloria, Jr.).

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Biography continued

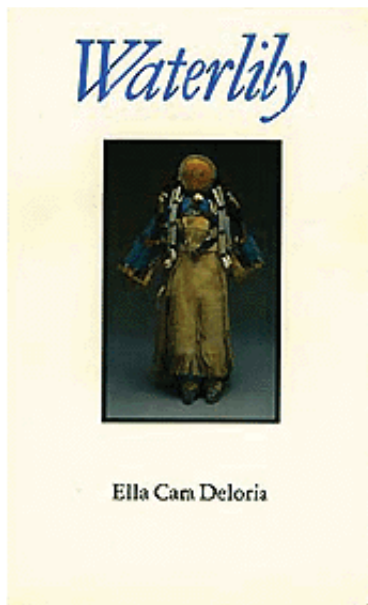
Her Protestant upbringing and the strong ties of her traditional heritage were apparently the two greatest influences upon Deloria's personal and professional development. Preparing to become a teacher, she enrolled first at Oberlin College in 1910 and then at Columbia Teachers College in 1913. There she met and later began work for the preeminent anthropologist of the time, Franz Boas, first as a translator and later as a field researcher studying the language and culture of her own Dakota people. Her collaboration with Boas, and later with his student Ruth Benedict, lasted off and on until his death in 1942 and Benedict's in 1948, and resulted in Deloria's production of a number of valuable published and unpublished manuscripts (see below) -- all concerning aspects of Dakota language, storytelling, social relationships, or cultural life.

From the 1950s until her own death in 1971, Deloria maintained her ties to her home places and her community, continuing her work as a lecturer, researcher, and consultant and building upon her reputation as a leading authority on Dakota culture. Her most remarkable contribution to the emerging body of American Indian literature, however, came seventeen years after her death, with the posthumous publication in 1988 of the novel *Waterlily*.

Deloria is the author of several books concerned with traditional and contemporary Dakota language and cultural life. Some of these were published in her lifetime, some have appeared posthumously. *Dakota Texts*, published in 1932 after Deloria had begun working as a field researcher for Franz Boas, is a collection of traditional stories that, as Agnes Picotte has noted, "stands today as the starting place for any study of Sioux dialects, mythology, or folklore." She later collaborated with Boas on *Dakota Grammar* (1941), still a foundational linguistic resource for the study of Dakota language. *Speaking of Indians* (1944), her important and largely neglected ethnological examination of the history and contemporary status of Dakota society at the critical turning point represented by the end of World War II, adopts an objectively anthropological voice and perspective to argue both the viable traditions of a "scheme of life that worked" and the need for adaptation, motivated by concern for future generations, on the part of her Dakota people. Additionally, Deloria calls for empathy and acceptance by whites, and especially by the church, as Indian people confront the accelerated changes taking place in post-war America.



Biography continued



At about the time of the publication of *Speaking of Indians*, Deloria was apparently also drafting *Waterlily* (1984), which deals with some of the same subject matter but uses story rather than anthropological description to present the complexly sophisticated kinship relations and social systems which formed the basis of civilized conduct within traditional Dakota camp life. The narrative follows the childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood of a young woman growing up in the middle of the 19th century in a pre-contact Dakota community at just the moment before white settlers -- and their diseases -- will change that community forever. The story's real core, however, centers on the kinship rules and complex balance of individual and social responsibilities that make one a good relative--and make possible the interdependent communality which undergirds successful Dakota society. Although *Waterlily* might appear to some readers to be an idealized or romanticized account, it is more accurately an exemplary one--figuratively re-membering the personal/communal and cultural/spiritual values of an undisrupted functional past in the service of a more functional present.

Since *Waterlily*'s publication in 1988, Julian Rice has edited several books which present and examine in cultural context some of Deloria's bi-lingual translations of traditional stories (see bibliography below).



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Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

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Selected Bibliography continued

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- "Encircling Ikto: Incest and Avoidance in *Dakota Texts*" (*South Dakota Review*, 1984).
- *Lakota Storytelling: Black Elk, Ella Deloria, and Frank Fools Crow* (Peter Lang, 1989).
- "Narrative Styles in *Dakota Texts*" in *On the Translation of Native American Literatures*, ed. Brian Swann (Smithsonian Institution, 1992).
- "Ella C. Deloria" in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 175: Native American Writers of the United States, ed. Kenneth Roemer (Gale Research 1997).
- "'It Was Their Own Fault for Being Intractable': Internalized Racism and Wounded Knee" (*American Indian Quarterly*, 1998).

Archives and Special Collections

J.R. [James Riley] Walker [Papers]: 1865-1984. Colorado Historical Society's Library (DNH) in Denver, Colorado. This collection includes written and recorded materials in Lakota, and translated into English by Ella Deloria, on Sioux mythology and ceremony, as well as photographs and historical records, from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

1904-1937, Papers. Burleson, Hugh Latimer, et al. Augustana College Library in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Episcopalian missionary work and cultural material collected on American Indians that include correspondence with Ella Deloria, among others.



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Works in languages other than English

French

Nénu Phar, trans. Évelyne Chatelain (SCE, 1989).