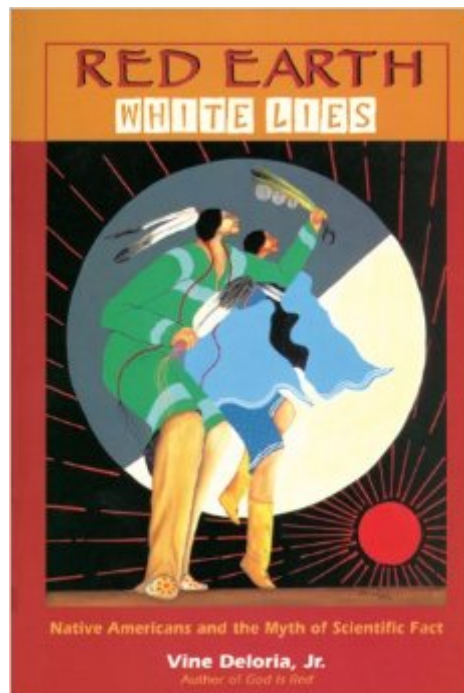


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Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans And The Myth Of Scientific Fact



Synopsis

Claiming that science has created a largely fictional scenario for American Indians in prehistoric North America, Deloria offers an alternative view of the continent's history as seen through the eyes and memories of Native Americans.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If "science" is defined as a technique for gaining an understanding of the world around us, many "scientific" disciplines are in fact profoundly unscientific. In "Red Earth, White Lies," Vine Deloria, Jr. clearly demonstrates how conjecture can attain the status of fact, even in the face of overwhelming contradictory evidence. Perhaps even more condemning is Deloria's depiction of how alternative ideas, most notably indigenous traditions, are frequently (typically) cast aside without any investigation whatsoever, simply because they conflict with currently accepted norms. "Red Earth, White Lies" is a wonderfully provocative indictment of how historical sciences, such as anthropology, geology, and ecology (my own field) frequently fail in practice. Nevertheless, perhaps without realizing it, Deloria relies on the very hallmarks of modern science; alternative hypotheses, critical analysis, and crucial evidence, to make his case. Here, unfortunately, is where "Red Earth, White Lies" loses much of its power. While Deloria succeeds in casting doubt on many beliefs cherished by entrenched academics, he typically does not subject his own hypotheses to the same treatment. Even more unfortunate, Deloria himself employs some of the techniques he most violently condemns in academics, including the selective use of information (the most obvious

example is on page 58) and summary dismissal of entire world-views on the basis of a superficial understanding (his entire discussion of evolutionary biology, for example).

A few others here have commented on the author's outdated understanding of evolutionary theory. I'd like to add that Deloria's view of contemporary (sociocultural) anthropology follows suit. Just as with physical anthropologists and evolutionary biologists, social anthropologists are accused of clinging to 19th century theories of social evolution-- ideas one of my anthropology professors described as "Old, crappy anthropology." If anything, social anthropologists are allies when it comes to defending Native American beliefs and traditions-- I know of no one in the field today who has less than total respect for the people they study and learn from, no scholar who feels themselves superior or better understanding of his or her informants' world. More than any other field of study, sociocultural anthropology seeks to understand and validate the wide variety of human culture, without creating hierarchies or privileging one society over another. Words like "advanced" "civilized" and "primitive" make us green about the gills. The condescension and controlling nature the author accuses anthropologists of having are precisely the attitudes that I was trained to avoid; further, I was trained not to believe in my own objectivity, but to be reflexive and aware of my own subjectivity. Reading this book is like reading someone slamming doctors for using leeches. Deloria seems shocked and frustrated that scientists are human, even expressing disappointment and disillusionment when colleagues in a political science department discussed office politics rather than theory during their lunch break. (Who talks shop on a break? Does it really discredit their work that it's not something they think about 100% of the time?

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