

Response to Mark Godfrey's "The Artist as Historian"¹

In his essay "The Artist as Historian," Mark Godfrey highlights recent art practices whose points of departure are not only researching past events but also "the way in which such events have formerly been narrated or indeed ignored in received historical writing."² Godfrey himself, if briefly, uses history, linking the formal strategies of these contemporary practices (for example those of Jerney Deller, Francis Alÿs, Tacita Dean and Anri Sala) to the Conceptual Art of the late 1960s and early 70s as well as to the Pictures artists of the 1980s. While noting that a new generation of artists are using similar media when compared to the canon of conceptual and appropriation art (e.g. text and the indexical image— photos, slides, film and video), Godfrey distinguishes the former from the latter two movements by observing that today's artists are using these media to specifically critique modes of *historical* representation.³ He then focuses the remainder of his essay on analyzing the works of a current practitioner who exemplifies the "artist as historian"— Matthew Buckingham. Buckingham might seem a good choice to represent this movement in part because his interests span an eclectic range of American and European history and his work is produced in a wide range of media.

One of several works Godfrey appraises is Buckingham's *The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, In the Year 502,002 C.E.*, 2002. Its subject matter, the creation of Mount Rushmore in what is now South Dakota and the corresponding fate of the Lakota Sioux who lived in the region in which the monument was carved, is used to critique the patriotic master narrative that Mount Rushmore symbolizes as well as the corresponding

hegemony of linear narrative itself. Godfrey's analysis of the work's form and content seemingly compliments Buckingham's own theoretical approaches to historiography, which, according to the author, are informed by, among other things, Walter Benjamin's writings on history.⁴ One of the main ideas employed by both artist and critic is Benjamin's notion of history understood not as a set of events "disappearing behind us," fixed in a chronology, but as a "real-time" tool used for critical assessment in the present.⁵

Using theoretical models gleaned from Benjamin is a fairly routine practice in art criticism and much of today's politically minded art. It is difficult to overestimate just how much of an effect his work has had on contemporary art theory and practice. This is for good reason; Benjamin's writing in general and his ideas of history in particular continue to provide insight, helping us to imagine new and progressive ways of conceiving the here and now. Buckingham's work, and Godfrey's analysis of it are admirable in this regard. Yet, given the particular subject matter of *Six Grandfathers*— the critique of historiography within the context of the Lakota Sioux Indian— it would be unfortunate if the perceived and not insignificant link between Benjamin's historiography and Sioux conceptions of historical consciousness were not made more apparent. The two "philosophies" overlap in key respects: the social use of history and the questioning of chronological time as the assumed, natural metric for gauging historical relevance.⁶ I would therefore like to offer less a refutation of Godfrey's interpretation than an extension of its theoretical bases by understanding *Six Grandfathers* through native conceptions of history, which taken as a whole, share much with Benjamin's historical

materialism. I shall also like to conclude with a reappraisal of Buckingham's *Six Grandfathers* through a uniquely Native American concept: that of history as received through space/place. I believe doing so will not only expand the reading of Buckingham's piece but also help to move beyond the tendency of historiographical work to produce post-colonial, guilt-laden results while keeping its discourse comfortably within the confines built around stalwarts like Benjamin. But before proceeding to find common ground between the two approaches in the abstract, let us begin with the concrete: the actual forms that make up *Six Grandfathers*.

* * *

As Godfrey describes, *The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, In the Year 502,002 C.E.* consists of two main components: a fairly rudimentary historical text timeline installed along a wall, read left to right, culminating with a black and white photographic enlargement accompanying its last entry (see Fig. 1 and 2).⁷ All twenty-nine entries conform to a "natural history museum" mode of presentation: the year printed in bold followed by a brief description of events that occurred during that year underneath. The descriptions range from one sentence to four paragraphs and carry an "objective," matter of fact tone. Yet through the entries the viewer encounters an historical narrative very different from the one propagated by the U.S. Department of the Interior, which officially describes Mount Rushmore as memorializing the first 150 years of U.S. history, as "a symbol of America— a symbol of freedom and democracy and a hope for people from all cultures and backgrounds."⁸ Instead, the viewer learns, among other things, of the manner

and degree in which Sioux tribes were violently removed from the Black Hills area, the area they called Paha Sapa, and from the peak they called The Six Grandfathers, in order to make way for gold mining and other types of Western expansion. They learn that Mount Rushmore was named arbitrarily, and that the overseer of its construction was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. The viewer learns of the futile attempts made by Sioux communities over the last several decades to reclaim the territory. “The timeline recognizes,” Godfrey writes, again citing Benjamin, “that ‘there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of its barbarism’.”⁹

Yet the last entry in the timeline concludes the tale using a different register. It provides, like the first entry, a geological account of Mount Rushmore, but locates it in the very distant future. Together with its corresponding photograph— a “documentary style” but digitally retouched print that projects what Mount Rushmore might look like in the year 500,002 (its presidential faces long since having eroded away due to the earth’s changing material conditions)— this last entry seemingly subverts the trap the timeline format initially sets for itself: namely the replacement of one authoritative voice with another, albeit revisionist, one. It does this by contrasting the linearity of the text with an image that collapses past and future into a unified moment. The viewer sees simultaneously the “truth” the camera has captured (what “has been”) and what “might be” 500 millennia from now.¹⁰ Beginning with the tropes of chronological narrative, Buckingham ends by opening historical interpretation up, allowing it to take on new possibilities. This is a device that, as Godfrey suggests, echoes much of what Benjamin writes in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. One of the passages from *Theses* Godfrey

does not cite nonetheless follows this logic, and is useful for our purposes. “Historicism,” Benjamin states, “gives the ‘eternal’ image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique *experience* with the past.”¹¹ In this experience then the viewer is allowed room not just for remembrance but also for imagination, for reflection on the relationship between an event and its record. As they negotiate their own sense of history’s frame (and indeed the architects who built that frame), the chronology within it decreases in significance, eventually replaced by an historical meaning always in flux, always open for negotiation. Historical consciousness becomes political consciousness, and happens in “now-time.”¹² And as will become more apparent, this notion takes on added weight when it is understood that the concept of history as it is applied in “now-time” is one shared in Lakota Sioux tradition. It is shared because a more general, “relational” view of reality itself, a reality that informs historical consciousness, is likewise common to both dialectical materialism and Lakota life.

* * *

It may seem that a scientific worldview such as historical materialism and a spirituality-based worldview like that of Lakota Indian make for strange bedfellows, if only because orthodox materialist thinking tends to consider any religious belief as just more “opiate for the masses.” Yet as Sioux writer Frank Black Elk suggests, the two seem to share a fundamental characteristic: that of the belief in the world being composed of and analyzed as a system of “relations.” “Lakota spirituality,” he writes, “is— in perhaps the only translational terms comprehensible to Marxists— the pursuit of a true

understanding of the dialectical nature of the universe.”¹³ Indeed, for Black Elk, Lakota spirituality is in some ways akin to historical materialism because the two share the initial premise that all aspects of reality are related, that is, they can only be understood when set in relation to one another. Sioux belief includes the idea that the universe is the total sum of its perpetually shifting parts. Explaining any local or particular part through the linearity of cause-and-effect does not explain the broader universe itself; moreover, when neglecting the “interaction” – the relational– that is always present in the universe, no particular part of it can be fully grasped. Marxist doctrine calls this shifting, constantly transforming state of nature’s matter and the eventual unity of its tensions “dialectical materialism,” and it is dialectical relationships upon which Benjamin’s philosophy of historical materialism is based. The Lakota have their own term for such a concept: *Metakuyeayasi*. Roughly translated as “all relations,” the very spiritual notion of *Metakuyeayasi* nevertheless allows contemplation of materialist consciousness– one from a distinctly Sioux standpoint.¹⁴ An understanding that Sioux reality is one where “all processes in the universe are related” can offer a natural transition into how Sioux conceptualize time and consequently evaluate their past, into how they operate as historical, if “theological,” materialists.¹⁵

* * *

Sioux scholar Vine Deloria, writing on the preoccupation with historicism, states that the difficulty within Western European (and presumably American) identity, “involves the assumption that time proceeds in a linear fashion...further it assumes that at

a particular point in the unraveling of this sequence, the peoples of Western Europe [become] the guardians of mankind.”¹⁶ Originally written to introduce Deloria’s exposition of Sioux spirituality, this passage might be thought of as a prelude to a historical materialist viewpoint, adding, in broad terms, a moral dimension to the problem of historicism. In more specific terms applicable to Buckingham’s *Six Grandfathers*, Deloria’s analysis resonates with the issues the work raises in relation to Mount Rushmore, i.e. it being historicized as a symbol of freedom “for all cultures,” to the detriment of the Lakota Sioux people. For Deloria, this march towards emancipation, as conceived by the West, follows two intertwining paths: the very rigidly linear narrative of Christian redemption augments the ideals of the burgeoning democratic state.¹⁷ Morality dovetails historicity. A Sioux relational view of history rejects this, finding itself unable to “accommodate the rather stupid notion that the universe was somehow designed as the playground for human exploitation.”¹⁸ This is not to say, however, that morality is forfeited within Lakota historical consciousness. In fact it is just the opposite.

Using “what has come before” as a barometer for reflection or moral self-correction is certainly not the exclusive domain of Western thought. Many cultures have and continue to use insights gained from history to help guide their conduct in the world, and the Lakota Sioux are no exception. According to anthropologist Raymond DeMallie, “Lakota History is at foremost a moral endeavor.”¹⁹ However, the Sioux approach to the process by which history functions as moral compass contrasts greatly with history as it conditions morality within a Western teleology. Reiterating both Benjamin and Deloria, DeMallie writes, “In Western culture, time is conceived of as an invariant aspect of

nature, ceaselessly progressing from the beginning toward eternity...Lakota traditional concepts relating to time [lack] the invariant and quantifiable nature of Western time concepts.”²⁰ In other words, Lakota concepts pertaining to time are, as might be deduced, relational, dialectical. Measuring events within an increasingly demarcated linearity is much less important for the Sioux than the nature of the events themselves and their moral relevance to Sioux people.²¹ Quality of relationships is privileged over their quantifiability, or, for that matter, their verifiability. From an historical point of view that privileges the temporal (i.e. a Western time schema), this has the effect of blurring any clear distinction between past and present. It is then the circumstances of the past that continually inform the present, because they are, in some sense, still part of the ever-changing condition of the present. Furthermore, they provide a moral equivalent to what Benjamin, as noted earlier, calls “experiences” in the present. “[The] past is preceded, accompanied, and followed,” writes DeMallie, “by an ever present...dimension which is outside the realm of human time.”²² We may take the reference to “human time” being the received convention of Western time keeping characteristic of historicism. Finally, DeMallie writes, “For [the Lakota], history is *sacred* history.”²³

* * *

With Sioux notions of the relational nature of existence found seeming to share much with the fundamentals of dialectical materialism, and with the Sioux idea of past and present commingling to form a heightened moral consciousness “in the moment” appearing remarkably similar to Benjamin’s “experiences,” there is as yet a significant

difference between Sioux belief and a Western materialist perspective of history. That difference lies in the concept of the sacred. Dialectical materialism's adherents have championed it as a more comprehensive worldview because of its stress on the secular, rational explanation of man's material existence, away from any false consciousness that spirituality— a man-made psychological construct— may provide. Theoretically, dialectical materialism should take into account all the basic ingredients of material existence, including the “raw stuff” from which the world is made: the land. It makes sense that man's condition *within a landscape* should influence a materialist interpretation of history. Yet, as anthropologist Adam T. Smith writes, Western philosophical systems since the Enlightenment have tended to neglect such environmental variables. “As Marxism came to be elaborated in the twentieth century,” Smith notes, “space, as a dimension of social life, came to be not simply of marginal importance but in some cases explicitly counter-revolutionary...”²⁴ With the onset of modernization the articulation of dialectical materialism itself had often fallen prey to another man-made psychological construct: that of temporocentrism.²⁵ Despite its critique of a linear, forward-pointing, cause-and-effect conception of history brought about by idealist thinking, the actual deployment of dialectical materialist ideology has nevertheless tended to hinge on describing man's social transformations as still occurring *within time*, that is, within the hyper-quantified time required by industrialization. Dialectical materialism (in all its implemented forms— Leninism, Communism, Socialism with “Chinese characteristics,” and so on) measures, allocates and validates *within time* just as its nemeses, religion and capitalism, do. It anticipates a moment *within time* when revolution brings the end of class distinctions. Understanding historical materialism as temporocentric is important,

for it reminds us of the difficulty with which Western consciousness in general has had in conceiving history outside of a time-based model. Moreover, I believe it is this same, deeply embedded model that limits historiography's criticism (even if only within the domain of art) to theories rooted in the assumed privileging of temporal indices. The Sioux notion of the "sacredness" of history, on the other hand, allows for an alternative paradigm to emerge: the formation of history in terms of the landscape, of the *spatial*.

Metakuyeayasi— "all relations"— is a term often recited during Lakota prayer ritual. It being the "conceptual essence of Lakota spirituality," it pays homage to the "Great Mystery of the Relations," including Sioux relations to "four legged animals, the animals which crawl and swim and fly, the plants, the mountains, lakes, plains, rivers, the sky and sun, stars, moon, the four directions...in short, everything."²⁶ Sioux dialectical spiritualism is all-inclusive, encompassing man's relations not only to other men but also to their surroundings. Man's environment becomes a dialectical catalyst, and physical locations especially act as primary agents in Sioux belief and ritual. Consequently a sense of place is central to Sioux notions of history; *when* an event happened becomes much less important than *where* it happened. Historical consciousness is one set in relation to sacred places. History as it provides "experiences in the present" does so not in time, but in place, which helps explain why the actual mountain peak called Six Grandfathers, over and above any temporal cognition of its existence, is so venerated by the Lakota Sioux. Its rocky, elevated surfaces provide continual access to the Six Grandfathers, spiritual beings at the center of the Lakota world: the First Grandfather, the Power of the West; the Second, the Power of the North; the Third, of the East; the Fourth, of the South; the Fifth,

of the Sky, and finally, the Sixth, the Power of the Earth.²⁷ It is through this access to the place of the Six Grandfathers that keeps history in the present, that informs morality, and reinforces the relational meaning of existence. Vine Deloria summarizes this phenomenon succinctly: “American Indians hold their lands– places– as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind.”²⁸

* * *

History as expressed through place opens up historiographical readings of Mathew Buckingham’s *The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, In the Year 502,002 C.E.* beyond those that rely on the metric of chronological time for their evaluative criteria. And while Godfrey’s Benjamin-influenced analysis of Buckingham’s work is by no means a theoretical long shot, perhaps it is precisely because it is “conventional” in its address of the temporal that hampers its attempts at an expanded examination of Western historiography. All political correctness aside, Buckingham’s choice of title– *The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, In the Year 502,002 C.E.*– assigns just as much importance to the place called The Six Grandfathers as it does to the timeframe in which it is located. The work’s primary visual component, its photograph, ultimately shows us a place that, regardless of its seat within a real or imagined historical timeline, continues to exist *as a place*. And its continued existence as a place, even 500,000 years from now, could likewise continue to provide a relational, sacred, historical consciousness for the Lakota Sioux people. Another reading of Buckingham’s work could thus suggest that the place, The Six Grandfathers, outside of any temporal construction, *remains*.

Mark Godfrey's mention of *The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, In the Year 502,002 C.E* is but one example within a larger analysis that elucidates the ways in which artists today are using history as a tool for critical engagement in the present. His essay spends most of its words specifically unpacking the variety of artistic strategies Matthew Buckingham has employed over the last several years on a wide range of subject matter. As such, it delving into the details of a gamut of approaches to historiographical critique—such as the idea of reading history spatially—may be outside its scope. Nevertheless, I would like to believe that the initial impetus for such essays arises not just from the desire to apply sensible theory from well-trodden thinkers like Walter Benjamin but also to explore alternative models in the service of knowledge production. Doing so helps expand critical faculties, finding new ways to relate to those people and cultures that have been, in so many pages across so much contemporary arts writing, acknowledged only peripherally. It would be a shame if the Lakota Sioux, given the similarity between their conception of historical consciousness and Benjaminian materialism, remained understood only as characters within the admitted trope of the timeline format Buckingham employs. When Western historical constructs are critiqued solely through Western European critical theory itself, non-Western approaches, and the cultures they reflect, retain their marginal status. And in such a scenario, as the worn saying goes, history repeats itself.

In his book *God is Red*, Vine Deloria wrote of the increasing challenges Western culture would face as the instantaneous nature of telecommunications causes time itself to disappear. Since being published in 1973, Deloria's words, in light of the dizzying

acceleration of our modern, global culture, have only become more prescient. Going “forward,” perhaps historiographers, critics and artists might do well to explore the spatial possibilities of how we express and assess the past, towards a more profound grasp of our current trajectory.

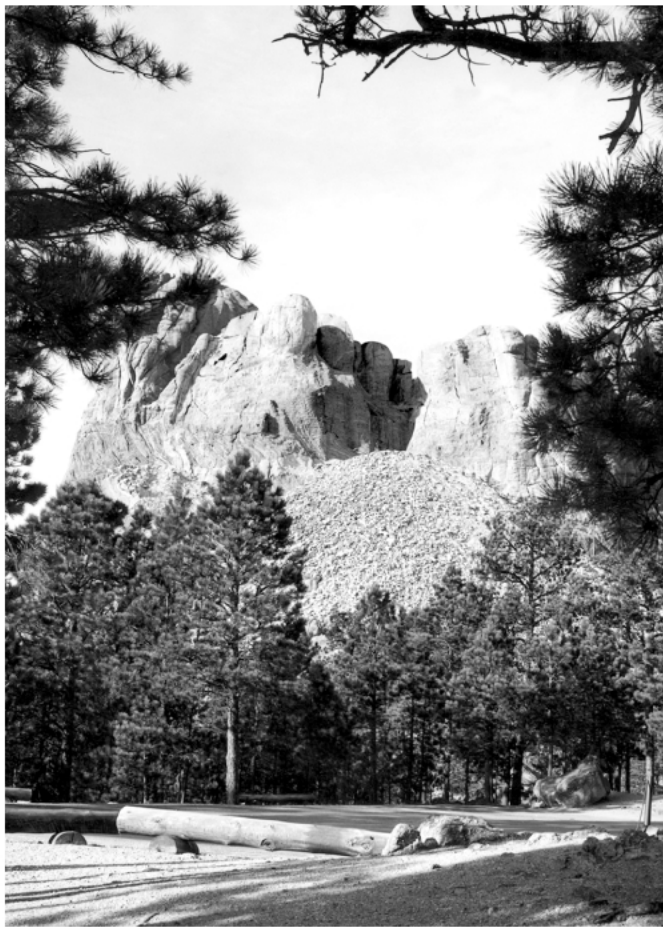


Fig. 1 and 2. Matthew Buckingham, *The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, In the Year 502,002 C.E.*, 2002.

Notes

1. Mark Godfrey's original essay appeared in the journal *October*. See Mark Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," *October* (Spring 2007): 140-172.

2. *Ibid.*, 149.

3. Godfrey determines, and I concur, that, with a few exceptions, the 1960s conceptual artists did not take specific historical events as their topic but rather examined critically the naturalized processes of creation, dissemination and reception within the realm of modern art itself. Nor did the 1980s appropriation artists have much use for history; they instead used indexical media to point to contingencies of authorship and ownership as well as to the "opacity" and distance brought about by the mass produced image.

4. Godfrey mentions that Buckingham's ideas of historiography are taken more specifically from Susan Buck-Morss' reading of Benjamin. Godfrey also states that Buckingham's work is informed by queer and feminist theory. See Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," 147-149.

5. In his essay Godfrey mentions an artist talk at the Slade School of Fine Art, London in 2006 in which Buckingham speaks of using a Benjaminian framework when approaching historical projects. See Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," 147.

6. I use the term "philosophy" loosely but delicately here, knowing that I am linking on the one hand a way to conceptualize human social relations handed down by Marx, and on the other a spiritual way to conceptualize human social relations handed down by many Native American cultures. Nonetheless I hope to make the similarities clear in my forthcoming argument. I also use the term knowing that labels like "philosophy," "religion," "worldview," "spirituality," "praxis" and the like are embedded western distinctions that may or may not have exact equivalents in Sioux culture.

7. This describes the work as encountered in an exhibition space. It has also been printed as a series of consecutive pages, with the photo being the last page. See Matthew Buckingham, "The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, in the Year 500,002 C.E.," in *We All Laughed at Christopher Columbus* (Frankfurt Am Main: Rolver, 2007), 37-267. In both formats, the piece reads in a conventionally Western linear manner.

8. See <http://www.nps.gov/moru/historyculture/index.htm> (accessed 11/13/07). The nationalist narrative continues into recent events, with George H.W. Bush officially dedicating Mount Rushmore for its 50th anniversary in 1991. See Jesse Larner, *Mount Rushmore: An Icon Reconsidered* (New York: Nation Books, 2002), 274.

9. Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," 156. See also Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 258.

10. In an addition to an overall critique of historiography Godfrey also claims that the photo element in *Six Grandfathers* questions the authority of indexical images themselves (and their use in substantiating the "facts" of history) by subverting the spectacle of straight photography in favor of an image that while, operating in a similar mode, is heavily manipulated. Given our post-indexical condition and the ability of images of all kinds to continue to effectively produce the spectacular, Godfrey's proposal seems to be one of diminishing returns. One need only look at the myriad of ways retouched or outright manufactured images continue to be presented and consumed as if conveying their subject matter "accurately," if "hyperreally." Take for example the seemingly objective yet computer-generated images that project potential doomsday scenarios in Al Gore's recent film *An Inconvenient Truth*, and their capacity to help convince a new generation of environmentalists of the looming dangers of global warming.

11. My emphasis. See Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, 262.

12. Like Godfrey, I am referencing Benjamin through Susan Buck-Morss and her term “now-time.” See Susan Buck Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 339.

13. See Frank Black Elk, “Marxism and Lakota Sioux Tradition,” *Marxism and Native Americans*, edited by Ward Churchill (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 148.

14. Ibid., 148.

15. Author Russell Lawrence Barsh attributes the term “theological materialist” to early 20th century Marxist philosopher Plekhanov. See Russell Lawrence Barsh, “Contemporary Marxist Theory and Native American Reality,” in *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 3. (Summer, 1988): 195.

16. See Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1973), 76.

17. Ibid., 61-69.

18. Frank Black Elk, “Marxism and Lakota Sioux Tradition,” 150.

19. See James R. Walker, *Lakota Society*, edited by Raymond J. DeMallie (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 113.

20. Ibid., 111.

21. Ibid., 113.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid. My emphasis.

24. See Adam T. Smith, *The Political Landscape: Constellations of Authority in Early Complex Polities* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 13.

25. Ibid.

26. Frank Black Elk, "Marxism and Lakota Sioux Tradition," 148-149.

27. See Nicholas Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks, Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux, As Told Through John G. Neilhardt (Flaming Rainbow)*, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 20.

28. Deloria, Jr., *God is Red*, 75.

Bibliography

- Barsh, Russell Lawrence. "Contemporary Marxist Theory and Native American Reality." *American Indian Quarterly* Vol. 12, No. 3 Summer, (1988): 170
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.
- Black Elk, Frank. "Marxism and Lakota Sioux Tradition." *Marxism and Native Americans*, edited by Ward Churchill Boston: South End Press, 1983.
- Black Elk, Nicholas. *Black Elk Speaks, Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux, As Told Through John G. Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow)*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000.
- Buck Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991.
- Buckingham, Matthew. "The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, in the Year 500,002." *We All Laughed at Christopher Columbus*. Revolver, 2007.
- Deloria, Jr., Vine. *God is Red*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1973.
- Godfrey, Mark. "The Artist as Historian." *October* Spring, (2007): 140-172.
- Larner, Jesse. *Mount Rushmore: An Icon Reconsidered*. New York: Nation Books, 2002.
- Walker, James R. *Lakota Society*. Ed. Raymond J. DeMallie. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982

Smith, Adam T. *The Political Landscape: Constellations of Authority in Early Complex Polities*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003.

United States Department of the Interior. <http://www.nps.gov/moru/historyculture/index.htm>
(accessed 11/13/07).