In 1970, Native American activist and scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. wrote “We Talk, You Listen,” an essay that critiques the popular depictions of minority groups, particularly Native Americans, in films and in ethnic studies courses. By 1970 the negative stereotypes of an earlier period were being replaced by more positive representations of minorities, but Deloria contends that even these more positive depictions are harmful because they are fashioned from the viewpoint of white Americans. For this reason, Deloria argues, they tend to brush over the differences between groups and the history of conflict that has generated problems that still need to be addressed within American society. According to Deloria, then, each minority group must struggle to “understand its own uniqueness” and tell its own history (210). These alternate histories of American experience, he argues, will foster a nationwide recognition that “we are engaged in a living process of intergroup relationships [and] that no one group [can] define the meaning of American society to the exclusion of any other” (210). Though Deloria’s essay is outdated in many ways, its vision of cross-cultural awareness remains relevant today, in part because it gives us insight into how to educate our children to live happily and responsibly within our increasingly multicultural communities.

Deloria begins his essay by describing the racist stereotypes through which minorities were depicted in films before World War II. Whether it was the “happy watermelon-eating
darky,” the shiftless Mexican, or the primitive Indian, these characters were depicted as outsiders, too ignorant, lazy, or willful to contribute to American progress (204). Deloria then notes that films made during and after World War II embraced a more inclusive vision of America as “one big happy family” united through a sense of common purpose (205). Focusing on war movies from the period, he explains that minorities in these films were generally relegated to minor roles as “cooks or orderlies serving whites” but that the 1950s saw the emergence of films featuring the “All-American Platoon” with each racial and ethnic stereotype represented: an African American, a Native American, a Pole, a Jew, and so on (206). Within the “All-American Platoon” narrative, each stereotypical character contributes something to the survival of the platoon before dying off so that the story can focus on the fates of the central white characters.

Deloria goes on to demonstrate that college courses in ethnic studies were similar to these post-World War II films in how they represented minority groups. In what he describes as the “cameo school” of ethnic studies, minority figures show up at key moments to play crucial roles within major historical events. In the “contribution school,” each ethnic group is valued for some contribution it has made to American wealth and culture. Deloria describes both of these approaches as dangerous because “they present an unrealistic account of the role of minority groups in American history” (209). When our histories of intergroup contact leave out the patterns of conflict and exploitation that generated the existing inequalities in American society, “we doom ourselves to decades of further racial strife” (208). The antidote to such continued strife, Deloria argues, is for each minority
group to take pride in its own identity and undertake the task of writing the story of its own American experience. Rather than having one “correct” history of America, then, we would each have access to “a series of histories about the American experience” (210). Through these histories each group would communicate to the others “the ideas and doctrines necessary to maintain it own sense of dignity and identity,” and this sharing would help us to establish intergroup relationships that do not privilege the needs or desires of one group over those of another.

Deloria’s essay might be a bit too optimistic. Unfortunately, minority groups have to do more than just tell their stories in order to convince those in power to actually change their practices. But the first step to changing practices is changing attitudes, and we can achieve a lot in this direction by sharing alternative histories of American experience. For this reason, it is important that we take steps to expose our children, from an earlier age, to books and other media that describe the experiences of other groups. This is particularly important in such a diverse city as Houston where we have large African American, Latino, and Asian minority groups. If children within the white majority and within each of these minority groups are raised in isolation from each other and with no understanding of or respect for the other groups’ struggles, needs, and desires, then we run the serious risk of intergroup conflict. As a diverse community, then, we must take Deloria’s insight to heart and have a serious discussion about what steps we can take to introduce our children to the experiences of others outside their own spheres.