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Review Essay:

Men And Matriculture Among The Ho-Chunks

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Paul Radin, ed. *The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian*.
University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. 16, no. 7.
Berkeley: University of California Press, 1920.

Nancy Oestreich Lurie, ed. *Mountain Wolf Woman, Sister of Crashing Thunder: The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian*.
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961.

Two of the most celebrated and widely read works of American ethnography also occupy the literary genre of autobiography. The first, edited by Paul Radin, recounts the life of Sam Blowsnake, a Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) born in Wisconsin, likely in 1872. The second, edited by Nancy Oestreich Lurie, examines the life of Blowsnake's sister, Mountain Wolf Woman, born in 1884. The two works have much in common in addition to the fact that they present the lives of two Ho-Chunk siblings. Radin and Lurie heavily annotated the narratives of their respective works to provide ethnographic interpretations of the various facets of their informants' lives. The annotations make passages in the texts clearer to the non-Ho-Chunk reader who might be unfamiliar with the culture, and they afford additional context for events in which Blowsnake

and Mountain Wolf Woman participated that might be opaque to the lay person. Thus, the two works are valuable ethnographic sources, both the main narratives and Radin's and Lurie's copious annotations.

Researchers investigating the lives of males who hail from cultures that demonstrate strong matricultural elements can glean important ethnographic information about Ho-Chunk men who lived at a time when their society experienced the trauma of settler colonialism and westward removal from their Wisconsin homeland to a reservation in Nebraska. A central theme in both works is how the Ho-Chunk people retained much of their traditional culture despite the dramatic changes to their situation. In earlier works, both Radin and Lurie argued that the Ho-Chunks possessed a matrilineal system before the era of European contact, and while the Ho-Chunks transitioned to a patrilineal system afterward, their society preserved important matrilineal elements. Lurie, in particular, noted that the Ho-Chunks retained a strong avuncular tradition and that women's brothers often had stronger relationships with their sisters' children than with their own.[1] The two works provide clear evidence of this unusually tight relationship between brothers and sisters. Moreover, the dual traumas of settler colonialism and removal had a more dramatic effect on male Ho-Chunks, and men often came to rely on the stability that women provided for the Ho-Chunk nation as it navigated its new circumstances in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The publishing histories of these two works must be examined to understand how they complement each other as ethnographic sources. Radin had been a student of Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology. Boas and his students rejected the evolutionary theory of their predecessors and sought instead to research cultures from the Native perspective. Radin conducted his fieldwork among the Ho-Chunks of Nebraska between 1908 and 1913. His first attempt at employing autobiography as an ethnographic method appeared in a 1913 article in the *Journal of American Folklore*, edited by Boas, with a memoir penned by Jasper Blowsnake, Sam's older brother, written in the Ho-Chunk language along with the English translation on each page. Radin asserted that this autobiographic method provided "an inside view of an Indian's thoughts."[2] Seven years later, he published Sam Blowsnake's edited, 92-page autobiography in the *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, a periodical edited by Alfred Kroeber, another student of Boas. This work subsequently appeared as a separate monograph that retained the pagination of the original

[1] Paul Radin, *Winnebago Hero Cycles: A Study in Aboriginal Literature* (Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1948), 40, 43-45, 116, 123; Nancy Oestreich Lurie, "Winnebago," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 15, *Northeast*, Bruce G. Trigger, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978), 694-95.
[2] Paul Radin, ed., "Personal Reminiscences of a Winnebago Indian," *Journal of American Folklore* 26 (October-December 1913): 293 (qtd. 293). Also see Arnold Krupat, *For Those Who Come After: A Study of Native American Autobiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 77-83.

periodical in which it appeared. As in his earlier 1913 work, Radin wrote in the 1920 *Autobiography* that he sought "an inside view" of Ho-Chunk culture.[3]

Radin later expanded the 1920 *Autobiography* into his well-known book *Crashing Thunder: The Autobiography of an American Indian*, first published in 1926 and reprinted several times thereafter.[4] However, this later manifestation of Sam Blowsnake's autobiography is, in many ways, less useful and satisfying than the earlier *Autobiography*. Radin expanded the number of pages from 92 to 203 by including additional material he had collected during his fieldwork rather than limiting the text to that information received directly from Blowsnake. Moreover, Sam's Ho-Chunk name was Big Winnebago (Hoćáŋkxátega in Ho-Chunk); his older brother, Jasper, was named Crashing Thunder (Warudjáxega in Ho-Chunk). Radin decided to use Jasper's Ho-Chunk name as the main character of *Crashing Thunder* rather than Sam's (the actual subject of the narrative) because Radin believed 'Big Winnebago' sounded too pretentious and even fictional. This editorial decision alone makes Radin's 1926 *Crashing Thunder* unnecessarily misleading. Moreover, Radin's critics, particularly Arnold Krupat and Ruth Underhill, believe that many of the textual changes between the *Autobiography* and *Crashing Thunder* constituted rhetorical flourishes by Radin to make the latter work more dramatic and even artistic. Of greater concern from an ethnographic point of view was Radin's decision to whittle the 351 annotations in the *Autobiography* to a mere 32 in *Crashing Thunder*.[5] While no ethnographic text can be considered perfect, the 1920 *Autobiography* is the more useful of the two texts, as it better preserves both the 'emic' voice of Sam Blowsnake and the 'etic' observations Radin recorded in the annotations.

Less controversy surrounded the writing of Lurie's *Mountain Wolf Woman*. Lurie began her fieldwork among the Wisconsin Ho-Chunks in 1944 while still an undergraduate. In 1945, she met Stella Blowsnake Whitepine Stacy, whose Ho-Chunk name was Xehaćiwiŋga, or Mountain Wolf Woman in English. Ho-Chunk people possessed a variety of names during their lives. As infants, names were assigned by birth order, and later, as children, they received a more formal name in the Ho-Chunk language. In the late nineteenth century, Ho-Chunks adopted English first names and surnames for government enrollments. Unlike her brothers, Mountain Wolf Woman rarely used her official name, asserting proudly that "in English I just say my name is Mountain

[3] Paul Radin, ed. *The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian*, University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. 16, no. 7 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1920), 383 (qtd. 383).
[4] Paul Radin, ed., *Crashing Thunder: The Autobiography of an American Indian* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1926). For a later edition that includes a preface by Arnold Krupat, see Paul Radin, ed., *Crashing Thunder: The Autobiography of an American Indian* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).
[5] Krupat, *For Those Who Come After*, 80-92; Ruth Underhill, "Foreword," in Nancy Oestreich Lurie, ed., *Mountain Wolf Woman, Sister of Crashing Thunder: The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), *viii-ix*, 92-97.

Wolf Woman."[6] Whereas Radin had Sam Blowsnake provide the material for the 1920 *Autobiography* in two long, rather tortuous sessions, Lurie and Mountain Wolf Woman collaborated over a more leisurely five weeks in January and February 1958.[7] Lurie's edited work was published in 1961 by the University of Michigan Press, and the publisher reissued it as a paperback (without changes to the text or pagination) in 1966. The book has since enjoyed numerous reprintings and has been translated into Italian and Polish.[8]

The tone of the two books differs significantly, and this provides our first glimpse into the lives of men in Ho-Chunk society. Women retained a significant role in Ho-Chunk society in the two centuries bracketed by the period of the Ho-Chunks' initial contact with Europeans in the seventeenth century and the onset of removal and the reservation era in the nineteenth century. While the demands of the fur trade and the Ho-Chunks' increasing contacts with their Algonquian neighbors brought about the transition from a matrilineal to a patrilineal society, women retained significant economic, political, and even military roles among the Ho-Chunks. Thus, a strong matriculture remained evident and discernible even as the pressures of removal and relocation and a growing population of white settlers in both Wisconsin and Nebraska caused social and cultural dislocation. These forces proved detrimental to both men and women, but men in particular reaped the bitter harvest of consequences to a greater degree than their female counterparts.[9]

The life of Sam Blowsnake makes this abundantly clear. As a young adult, Blowsnake rapidly sank into the abyss of alcoholism. Like many Ho-Chunk men, he engaged in temporary jobs such as logging, and he even joined a circus along with other Native people and participated in the 'Wild West' shows common at the time. What money he earned, he spent on alcohol. He also engaged in many short-term, casual relationships with Ho-Chunk women. In the period before removal and white settlement, divorce was not unheard of among the Ho-Chunks. However, the serial nature of sexual relationships described by Blowsnake was a new development, and while he called the women with whom he lived his 'wives,' the nature of the relationships indicated

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[6] Lurie, *Mountain Wolf Woman, xi-xii*, 6-7, 111-12 (qtd. 7). Also see Tom Jones, Michael Schmudlach, Matthew Daniel Mason, Amy Lonetree, and George A. Greendeer, *People of the Big Voice: Photographs of Ho-Chunk Families by Charles Van Schaick, 1879-1942* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2011), 245.

[7] Lurie, *Mountain Wolf Woman, xiii-xiv*, 92-93.

[8] For the Italian translation, see Nancy Oestreich Lurie, ed., *Donna Lupo di Montagna: autobiografia di un'indiana Winnebago*, P. d'Oro, trans. (Milan, Italy: Rosconi Libra, 1989). For the Polish translation, see Nancy Oestreich Lurie, ed., *Górska Wilczyca, siostra Grzmiącego Pioruna: autobiografia Indianki z plemienia Winnebago*, Aleksander Sudak, trans. (Wielichowo, Poland: Tipi, 2009).

[9] Patrick J. Jung, "Traces of the Feminine: Matriculture in the Traditional Ho-Chunk Life World," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 3 (Spring-Summer 2023): 118-39. For an essay that defines the concept of matriculture, see Marie-Françoise Guédon, "Introduction," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 1 (May 2020): 3-7.

otherwise, as these unions lacked the exchange of gifts and reciprocal family obligations that had earlier characterized Ho-Chunk marriage. Blowsnake noted:

> I then had two women staying with me as my wives, and, at one time I had as many as four, two at my parents' house and two staying with other relatives of mine. I wasn't serious with any of them.... On one occasion four children were born to me and each one had a different mother. Nevertheless, even after that I still courted women and kept on drinking.[10]

Blowsnake's narrative indicates he was not the only person who had fallen victim to the temptations of casual relationships, loose 'marriages,' and heavy alcohol consumption. Radin noted in an annotation that, "This saturnalia has developed only in recent times. I know of nothing to suggest that we are dealing with an old survival."[11]

What stands out in Blowsnake's narrative, and even more so in that of his youngest sister, Mountain Wolf Woman, is the strong bond that characterized brothers and sisters among the Ho-Chunks. This bond, Lurie argues, was evidence of an earlier matrilineal system that survived, in part, the transition to patrilineality. The Ho-Chunks possessed an Omaha system of kinship, common among many patrilineal societies in Native North America, but there also existed:

> respectful deference between brothers and sisters, which would include parallel cousins; actual male siblings and classificatory brothers arranging marriages for sisters.... Uncles, that is, ego's mother's male siblings and classificatory brothers and their male descendants, were called upon as needed by the mother to be official punishers during ego's childhood.[12]

Blowsnake frequently mentions his sisters in the context that Lurie describes. When he returned home drunk to Black River Falls, Wisconsin by train after dancing in a show, Blowsnake noted that, "My relatives saw me and saw that I was drunk. They were very sorry and an older sister of mine wept when she saw me. Then I again made up my mind that I would not do it again."[13] He had initially been reluctant to become a member of the Peyote cult that had been spreading among the Ho-Chunks, but his resistance waned after one of his sisters returned from Oklahoma as a follower of the new religion. He had promised his youngest sister, Mountain

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[10] Radin, *Autobiography*, 409-17 (qtd. 409). For Ho-Chunk marriage customs, see Paul Radin, "The Winnebago Tribe," in *Thirty-Seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1915-1916* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 138-39; and Nancy Oestreich Lurie, "Trends of Change in Patterns of Child Care and Training among the Wisconsin Winnebago," *Wisconsin Archeologist* 29 (September-December 1948): 133.
[11] Radin, *Autobiography*, 417n84 (qtd. 417n84).
[12] Lurie, "Winnebago," 696 (qtd. 696).
[13] Radin, *Autobiography*, 407 (qtd. 407).

Wolf Woman, that he would not succumb to the peyote religion, but the blandishments of his other sister and her husband resulted in his participation. Afterward, he stopped drinking alcohol; he also married permanently. Another man approached him one day and said, “Come home with me. I have a younger sister. I want her to marry a good man; I would like to have her marry you.”[14] Sam Blowsnake remained a teetotaler, a member of the peyote religion, and a committed husband thereafter.[15]

His descent into alcoholism and sexual dissipation resulted in often-strained relationships with his sisters and other relatives. Nevertheless, he never forgot what the ideal relationship with his sisters should be. At the end of his narrative, he recounted the teachings he received from his father, tenets that expressed the principal contours of Ho-Chunk culture. One of them concerned sharing the spoils gained through a war party with his sisters, even though the Ho-Chunks could not go to war as they had done in the era before the advent of white settlement, which began in the 1830s. Particularly interesting are Blowsnake’s ‘Precepts Concerning Marriage’ in his autobiography because they privilege a man’s relationship with his sisters over that of his wife. Blowsnake recounted, “When you get married do not make an idol of the woman you marry; do not worship her…. If you keep on listening to a woman in this way, all your relatives will scold you. In time even your sisters will not think anything of you.”[16] In his annotation of this passage, Radin added, “Respect for sisters was a fundamental fact among Winnebago [Ho-Chunks].”[17] Indeed, the body of Blowsnake’s narrative, while mentioning his sisters in only a few places, indicates he held them in the highest regard, and, despite his flaws, he did his utmost to retain and maintain their respect throughout his life.

Mountain Wolf Woman’s narrative tells a very similar story, albeit from a female perspective. Her story presents far less drama than that of her brother. Her most poignant story involves her first marriage, which her brothers arranged. This was a common cultural convention among the Ho-Chunks, as Sam Blowsnake’s final marriage illustrates. Just as he married his wife at the behest of her brothers, Blowsnake and his brothers arranged the first marriage of their youngest sister, Mountain Wolf Woman. When one considers that Ho-Chunk men often had stronger relationships with their sisters’ children than their own progeny, it would be logical that they would have a significant say concerning whom their sisters should marry. While she was still a young girl, likely in her teens, Mountain Wolf Woman’s brothers arranged for her to marry. The control her brothers exercised in this matter was evident when her mother told her, "My little daughter, I prize you highly. You alone are the youngest child. I prize you highly but nothing can be done about this matter. It is your brothers’ doing… if you do not do this they will be

[14] Radin, *Autobiography*, 430-446 (qtd. 446). Also see Lurie, *Mountain Wolf Woman*, 102-3.
[15] Radin, *Autobiography*, 446-49.
[16] Radin, *Autobiography*, 451, 463-64 (qtd. 463-64).
[17] Radin, *Autobiography*, 464 (qtd. 464).

disgraced."[18] If Mountain Wolf Woman's mother was resigned to her daughter's fate, she also provided her with the means to escape her situation when she told Mountain Wolf Woman on her wedding day, "When you are older and know better, you can marry whomever you yourself think that you want to marry."[19] After having two children, a boy and a girl, with her first husband, that is exactly what she did. Mountain Wolf Woman justified the divorce by the fact that her husband was a jealous man. In her annotation, Lurie noted that divorce on the grounds of jealousy was "eminently acceptable" among the Ho-Chunks, and a woman had a significant degree of autonomy when it came to staying in a marriage or choosing to leave, even a marriage arranged by her brothers.[20]

In fact, Ho-Chunk men lived in a society that afforded women a great deal of personal freedom and individual choice, and they had to respect the opinions and decisions of their wives and sisters. Radin noted that children received a rather formal education from their parents concerning proper behavior and ethical conduct in Ho-Chunk culture. These *hok'i'ku*^{n} ('teachings' or 'precepts') included instructions on how men should treat their wives. According to one of Radin's informants, fathers warned their sons, "Women can never be watched. If you try to watch them you will merely show your jealousy and your female relatives will also be jealous."[21] Sam Blowsnake recorded similar teachings he received from his own father and wrote, "Finally, after your jealousy has developed to its highest pitch, your wife will leave you and run away (with someone else)."[22] A man who favored his wife over all other persons or became overly jealous of his wife risked not only losing her but also jeopardizing his relationships with his sisters and other female relatives. Thus, the autobiographies of both Sam Blowsnake and Mountain Wolf Woman illustrate the delicate balancing act that Ho-Chunk men experienced in both their consanguineous and affinal relationships with the women in their lives.

Radin tended to be less cognizant of the experiences of Ho-Chunk women than Lurie, a fact noted by one of Radin's biographers, Jack Glazier, who writes, "Radin built strong relationships with several of the Winnebago [Ho-Chunks] with whom he worked, but none of those relationships was with women. His viewpoint was highly gender-constricted. He had little to say about Winnebago women, as informants or otherwise."[23] Lurie, a female anthropologist working during the latter half of the twentieth century, was much more attuned to the roles of women among the Ho-Chunks and other Native societies. She noted in an appendix to Mountain Wolf Woman's autobiography that the stresses and traumas of American settler

[18] Lurie, "Winnebago," 696; Lurie, *Mountain Wolf Woman*, 29 (qtd. 29).
[19] Lurie, *Mountain Wolf Woman*, 30 (qtd. 30).
[20] Lurie, *Mountain Wolf Woman*, 30, 122n5-23n5 (qtd. 122n5).
[21] Radin, "Winnebago," 166, 175 (qtd. 175).
[22] Radin, *Autobiography*, 464 (qtd. 464).
[23] Jack Glazier, *Anthropology and Radical Humanism: Native and African American Narratives and the Myth of Race* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2020), 45-46 (qtd. 46).

colonialism had had a far greater effect on Ho-Chunk men, whose traditional roles as hunters and warriors had been seriously disrupted during the course of the late nineteenth century. Ho-Chunk women, on the other hand, were much more able to fulfill the roles that had always defined their lives. Lurie wrote, "Mountain Wolf Woman's autobiography is a predictable reflection of the greater self-confidence enjoyed by women in comparison to men in a culture undergoing rapid and destructive changes. As was true of many American Indian groups, the roles of wife, mother and homemaker for which the Winnebago [Ho-Chunk] girl was prepared could be fulfilled in adulthood despite the vagaries of acculturation."[24]

In a well-known essay, Michael Allen argued that matrilineal societies in Melanesia were better able to weather the forces of colonialism than patrilineal societies.[25] A corollary to this conclusion might be that women in societies with strong matricultures are better able to adapt to the changes wrought by colonialism than men. Of course, such a conclusion requires more research, but the evidence culled from the autobiographies of Sam Blowsnake and Mountain Wolf Woman is intriguing and worthy of additional investigation. In a review of this length, it is not possible to examine all the facets of matriculture that are manifest in the autobiographies of these two Ho-Chunk siblings. Nevertheless, the examples presented here adequately demonstrate the rich ethnographic information that can be gleaned by reading both works together. What emerges is a picture of a society undergoing a rapid series of changes, but also the retention and maintenance of earlier cultural practices that found new functions and expressions. These included the relationships between men and women, particularly consanguineous relationships within nuclear and extended family groups. The two works are particularly useful in reconstructing the roles of women in Ho-Chunk society and the matricultural elements that defined women's lives. Ho-Chunk men not only lived within this matricultural system, but they also helped to define it.

[24] Lurie, *Mountain Wolf Woman*, 100 (qtd. 100).
[25] Michael Allen, "Elders, Chiefs, and Big Men: Authority Legitimation and Political Evolution in Melanesia," *American Ethnologist* 11 (February 1984): 20-41.