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PREVIEW

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THE WINNEBAGO NARRATIVES OF FELIX WHITE, SR.: STYLE,
STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln

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PREVIEW

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THE WINNEBAGO NARRATIVES OF FELIX WHITE, SR.
STYLE, STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

by

Kathleen A. Danker

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
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Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Paul A. Olson

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 1985

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The Winnebago Narratives of Felix White, Sr.

Style, Structure and Function

BY

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PREVIEW

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THE WINNEBAGO NARRATIVES OF FELIX WHITE, SR.

STYLE, STRUCTURE, AND FUNCTION

Kathleen A. Danker, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1985

Advisor : Paul A. Olson

In the years since Paul Radin collected and published Winnebago narratives concerning the Trickster and other figures, there has been little additional study made of the rich oral literature of this North American tribe. Only a small number of the tribal members now living on the Winnebago Reservation in northeastern Nebraska can still speak Hoočągra, the native language of the Winnebago people, and only a handful of the remaining speakers can narrate the traditional waiké or sacred stories concerning the Trickster or Foolish One and other supernatural beings created by the Winnebago Earthmaker.

It is, therefore, fortunate that as a young boy during the period of the First World War, Felix White Sr. had the opportunity to observe and learn from the performances of accomplished storytellers whose narratives were given in the traditional oral style developed and passed down through generations of Winnebago narrators. Today his storytelling still exemplifies the qualities of traditional Winnebago oral literature : adherence to an unchanging core configuration of characters, settings,

and situations which are narrated as dramatic scenes based structurally on the number four; use of traditional oral and visual stylistic techniques to enhance performance; and individual shaping and development of stories in response to audience and circumstance.

The present volume consists of Hoočógra transcriptions and English translations, both literal and free, of six waikó and an oral introduction narrated by White in 1981 and 1983. These narratives are presented in the form of dramatic verse in order to give a better sense of the style and poetic qualities of the original oral performance than prose translation would allow. Aspects of the style and inherent structure of White's narratives are discussed in a sixty page introduction to his stories, which also includes background information about White, a presentation of his analysis of the function of these stories in Winnebago society, and information concerning the transcriptions and translations.

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Publications of non-Western oral literature must be written out in terms of the total literary event in the native setting ... Until both the original version and the native responses to it are presented, we can know and appreciate little ... Melville Jacobs

INTRODUCTION

Winnebago Oral Literature

The narrator of these stories, Felix White Sr., resides in the town of Winnebago in Thurston County, Nebraska, on the Winnebago Reservation. In 1980, 1,140 Winnebagoes lived within the boundaries of the approximately 30,000 acre reservation, most of them inside the town limits. The tribe first settled this area in 1865, following over three decades of forced removals to reservations in Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota from their home in Wisconsin where they were living when first encountered by the French in 1634 (Radin 1972:113). A roughly equal number of tribal members continue to live in small communities in Wisconsin, while a few hundred have relocated to the West Coast.

On the Nebraska Reservation, there remain at present fewer than 40 people, mostly in their 60's and older, who speak Hoočə́gra, The Voice of Praise, the Winnebago term for their language.¹ Hoočə́gra, or Winnebago

as it is more frequently called today, is a member of the Siouan language family closely related to Ojibwa, Iowa, and Missouri. Five of the Nebraska Winnebagoes who can speak Hoočągra are able to write it using the syllabary developed by the tribe in the late 1880's,² and possibly a similar number are able to narrate traditional Winnebago stories in their native tongue (White, 1985). In Wisconsin, the Winnebago language remains in a better state of preservation (Rood 1978:2), being still spoken in some homes and constituting the first language of many older speakers.

The low ebb of oral traditions that exists on the Nebraska Winnebago Reservation today in spite of efforts in recent years to teach language and culture is in marked contrast to the situation that held earlier in the century when the noted anthropologist Paul Radin recorded Winnebago cultural information and oral literature.

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, the tribe underwent a period of profound and rapid cultural change accompanied by widespread religious conversion from membership in the traditional Medicine Lodge Society to affiliation with the pen-Indian Native American Church which combines Christian and native elements. Not everyone during this time chose to relinquish their old ways or their old religion, and even those who did had but freshly and incompletely turned away from them. They were still conversant in the most intricate

details of these matters and all the more willing to disclose these details to Radin as acts of loyalty to their new religion.

Hoočágra was the first and only language of many of Radin's storytellers, and he typically worked with them through translators. Some of these storytellers were able to narrate whole cycles of tales: story after story about the same supernatural characters and cultural heroes. Just about everyone in the tribe, in fact, knew the way that many of these stories went,³ though only a few individuals were recognized as storytellers and paid for their services with tobacco and other gifts (Radin 1972:112,122,146-7).

Among the numerous factors contributing to the decline of oral traditions among the Nebraska Winnebagoes since the time of Radin's early fieldwork, one of the most significant was a government policy begun in the 1870's of sending reservation children as young as five and six years old to off-reservation government industrial boarding schools for many years of training in order to force their assimilation into white society. The reservation Indian agents were in charge of enforcing attendance and would sometimes withhold rations and annuities from parents who did not turn over their children (Fuchs 1972:225).

These schools were run on a military basis with compulsory uniforms, drills, and chapel; and the training consisted largely of the three R's, and vocational labor in such areas as farming, carpentry,

cooking, and sewing. Children were not usually allowed to return home for visits to their families, but were farmed out as laborers to white families during vacation periods and after graduation.

Between 1884 and the early 1930's, a large number of Winnebago children attended the Grant Institute at Genoa, Nebraska until the tenth grade, after which time some of them went on for further education at other boarding schools including Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas, Carlisle Training School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Hampton College in Virginia, and schools in Pipestone, Minnesota, and Santee, Nebraska. Students at Genoa and the other boarding schools were forbidden under threat of punishment to speak Hoočǫgra or other Indian languages and were unable to participate in the lifestyle of their older relatives or learn their traditions. (North:1978:60-4).⁴ This is one reason why many of the generation of Winnebagoes who are now the elders on the Nebraska reservation know little about their traditional language and customs to pass on to younger members of the tribe.

The Storyteller. Felix White Sr. was born in 1907 in a Čiipóorokè, or bark lodge, in the Big Bear Hollow area of the Timbers, a wooded area of bluffs on the reservation bordering the Missouri River to the east of the town of Winnebago. He was given the Wolf Clan name of Mǫq Warúužǫ Hóomjǵnǫk(g)a 'Dweller in an Incomparable Land', which refers to a wolf

making observations from a high point of land. After 1911 he lived with his grandparents, parents, and eventually, two younger brothers and a sister, in his grandparents' log cabin on allotted land in the Timbers.⁵

His mother was an Oneida woman who met his father while both were attending Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. Young Felix was raised to speak both Oneida and Winnebago and acted as interpreter between his mother and grandmother. When he was quite young, his father converted to the Native American Church and, because of White's grandmother's strong disapproval, left Nebraska and eventually remarried in Wisconsin. White's mother would not consent to his being sent to Genoa, but taught him herself at home using borrowed readers and math books, and then had him attend the primarily non-Indian public elementary school in Winnebago. His grandparents took charge of his education in traditional Winnebago knowledge.

His grandfather, actually step-grandfather, was Louis Priest, Kills-Many, the son of the great Winnebago leader, Little Priest; and was himself a major leader in the tribe. Little Priest, who died in 1866 of wounds sustained while fighting with the U.S. Winnebago Scouts,⁶ had led the Winnebagoes in a policy of peaceful coexistence and cooperation with the American government. Both a legendary shaman-healer and a famous leader in war and peace, Little Priest instituted significant changes in Winnebago ceremonies and, at the time of his death, was

attempting to reintroduce a traditional Winnebago code of religious behavior known as the *Hirúušgà* 'The Untied' or 'Free Ones'.

Because of his relationship, through Louis Priest, with Little Priest, White was raised by his grandparents to be a leader in the Winnebago tribe. This meant that his instruction in tribal traditions and personal development and leadership was more thoroughgoing than that of most children at the time, even among those few not away at boarding schools.

He was taught to speak 'just like an old-timer and old person' and to eschew childish expressions. He says, '...they were making an old man out of me before I even got started.' (White, 1984:3). He was admonished to observe the natural world closely, to blacken his face with charcoal, to fast for knowledge and blessings from the spirits, and to be a leader with a 'good heart' who would love his people and look out for their welfare by thinking ahead and planning for them. Like Little Priest before him, he swallowed a beating turtle heart in a ritual intended to teach young boys bravery and discipline (White 1975).

White accompanied his grandmother when she attended Medicine Lodge ceremonies, slipping under the canvas from outside to sit behind her. And he went with his grandfather in his wagon to welcome contingents of Santee Sioux to attend dances and ceremonies on the reservation. Enemies of the Winnebagoes when they had both lived in Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota, the Santee had been forbidden to hold

dances and ceremonies on their own reservation in north central Nebraska as continued punishment for the Minnesota Uprising of 1862.

From his grandparents and from other older people who came to visit them, including one of his grandfather's assistants or messengers named Héenq Woošéga, White heard the traditional stories of the Winnebagoes, the woorák or tellings. At night, in the dim light of the flickering wood stove in his grandparents' log cabin, he would lie on his bunk, listening and watching as the storytellers punctuated their narrations with exclamations and gestures.

During the winter months, when the snakes were below ground, they would tell the woorák wakqčák 'the sacred stories' called waikq, stories about supernatural characters, primarily the five sons of Maq'úñq, the Earthmaker. The heroes of the other woorák are human beings, though their adventures often take them beyond the natural realm of things and assume mythic consequences for the human beings that live after them. Storytellers typically went on speaking until the children listening fell asleep, but the narrators who were invited to his grandparents' cabin used to complain to young Felix's grandmother that they couldn't quit because he stayed awake. He says that he seldom fell asleep on these storytellers because listening to their tales 'was really something for me' (White 1983).

White's traditional education came to an abrupt end in 1918 at the

age of eleven, when his mother and grandmother died in the worldwide flu epidemic of that time. His two year old sister was taken in by a cousin who shortly thereafter moved to Oklahoma, and White did not see her again for 15 years. His two younger brothers became boarders at the St. Andrews Episcopalian Mission school in Winnebago. White, himself, was taken to 'visit' the Grant Institute at Genoa by an older cousin who slipped away without him. He had no opportunity to say goodbye to his grandfather who died four years later.

White attended school in Genoa from 1918 to 1926. There he spoke English in the classroom with his teachers and learned Lakota on the sly from his Sioux classmates. He enjoyed being in class more than many new Indian students, having become accustomed to attending school in Winnebago. At Genoa, he had classes for half the day and worked the other half in the dairy barn, the bakery, the power plant, etc. He played trombone, mellowphone, sousaphone, and cello in the band and orchestra, and went out for football, baseball, basketball, and track.

White finished his last year and a half of high school at the public high school in Winnebago, graduating in 1928. He attended Bacone College in Oklahoma for two years, returning to the reservation in Nebraska in 1930 where he married and spent several years farming. During World War II, he worked as an electrician wiring airplanes in a bomber plant in Omaha, and later he was employed for twenty years in

that city by the Union Pacific at their repair yards. After retiring from the Union Pacific in 1972, he returned again to Winnebago where he now lives. He has served for many years as a member of the Nebraska State Indian Commission and as a board member of the Eastern Nebraska Legal Aid Society. He has two children, ten grandchildren, and one great-grandchild living in Nebraska, Oklahoma, and California.

While living in Omaha, White helped found the Hoočók Nation Brotherhood, a self-support organization for off-reservation Winnebagoes. He was called on during meetings of this organization to tell the woorák and waiké he had learned as child in both Hoočógra and English, since the members of the Brotherhood believed that listening to these stories would help them learn to think more clearly and, therefore, participate more effectively in politics on and off the reservation.

His experiences with the Hoočók Nation Brotherhood started White thinking again about the stories and other traditions of the Winnebago people, and in recent years he has taught Winnebago language and culture classes at the Community College in Winnebago and at Western Iowa Tech and Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa. He has also taken classes in linguistics and other subjects from Morningside College, and in 1983 that college awarded him an honoray Ph.D. in Humanities. He has spoken on Winnebago oral literature at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln and the University of South Dakota at Vermillion. In 1975 he was videotaped

telling Winnebago stories and history in English during a project sponsored by the Junior League of Lincoln, Nebraska.

Although White's experience in telling Winnebago stories in Hoočógra has been limited compared to that of the narrators he listened to in his youth, comparison of his performances with those of other recorded Native American storytellers indicates that he does a masterful job of traditional narration. White attributes any value in his storytelling to his fidelity to the style and content of the tales as they were told to him when he was a child. To this I would add mention of his outgoing and expressive personality and his unusual interest in and knowledge of the subtleties of language.

White enjoys talking with people and frequently tells jokes and anecdotes to engage and entertain them. In this informal way, he tells stories constantly. As he does this, he often throws in expressions from languages he has picked up during the course of his friendships with people of varied ethnic backgrounds. He is fluent in English and Hoočógra and able to speak Lakota and Italian fairly well. He also commands considerable vocabulary in Omaha, Otoe, Iowa, Oneida, Czechoslovakian, French and Japanese, and can read Spanish and German. His primary linguistic interest, however, is in Hoočógra: the etymology of its morphemes, its fine shades of meaning, the changes it has undergone during his lifetime, the syllabary writing system, and how best to teach

the language. This knowledge and fluency combine with his concentrated exposure as a child to traditional oral literature to lend him rare narrative skill.

The Performances. White narrated all but one of the *waiké* which make up this volume in March of 1983. This performance was videotaped at Mr. White's home in Winnebago by Alan Yates of the UN-L English Department Media Center. Arrangements to bring in a Hoočógra-speaking friend of White's for the session fell through at the last minute, so that Yates and I made up the entire audience. Although there were no native speakers present, I was familiar with the stories from hearing them in English and able to pick up enough of the Hoočógra to follow along with and respond to White's performance to a certain extent. Moreover, he considered his main audience to be future Hoočógra-speaking viewers of the videotapes, and he directed his stories to them.

Along with some comments in English to Yates and myself, the videotapes contain an introduction, fifteen *waiké*, five *woorák* and a description of the creation of human beings and the gift of tobacco. The present volume contains transcriptions and translations of the introduction and four *waiké* featuring *Wakjákága*, the Foolish One or Clown, the first son created by *Mqó'úñq*, the Earthmaker, and one *waiké* about *Wášjígéga*, the Hare, *Mqó'úñq*'s fifth son. Also included for

stylistic comparison is another version of this same Wašŷjégéga story told by White in November of 1981 which I recorded on audiotape.

Etic Analyses. In 1912, using Winnebago go-betweens and translators, Radin collected stories about Wakŷŷkága and Wašŷjégéga, whose names he translated as The Trickster and The Hare. He published these stories, along with commentary and analyses, first in small private printings, then in a memoir to IJAL in 1948, and finally in a volume entitled The Trickster in 1956, of which a paperback edition came out in 1972. Over the years, western scholars have widely discussed and analyzed Radin's versions of these Winnebago waikó from the perspectives of structuralism, folklore, comparative mythology, and especially, psychoanalytic theory.

The Trickster includes an essay, 'On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure,' by Carl Jung, in which the famous psychologist equates the Winnebago Wakŷŷkága with the collective archetype of the shadow, 'an epitome of all the inferior character traits in individuals'(1972:209). Of the Wakŷŷkága cycle of tales Jung claims (1972:207):

like many other myths, it was supposed to have a therapeutic effect. It holds the earlier low intellectual and moral level before the eyes of the more highly developed individual, so

that he might not forget how things looked yesterday ...
 Because of its numinosity the myth has a direct effect on the
 unconscious, no matter whether it is understood or not.

Radin (1948:3-11) does not hold with what he sees as Jung's emphasis on the unconscious or subjective nature of the Wakȋkóga stories, believing, himself, that they are conscious literary constructions which must be understood in light of their cultural and historical context. Nonetheless, Radin, too, considers the plot of the Trickster cycle to be 'essentially psychological in import' (1948:25). He feels that Wakȋkóga can 'be identified with the undifferentiated libido' (1948:8) and that he serves 'as a mechanism for expressing all the irritations, the dissatisfactions, the maladjustments, in short, the negativisms and frustrations of Winnebago society' (1948:30).

Radin describes the theme of the stories as follows (1948:9):

We have a generalized and, if you will, a genitalized, figure, completely controlled and dominated by his appetite and obsessively ego-centered. Throughout, he exhibits the mentality of an infant. In his comportment he is a grotesque mixture of infant and mature male. He has no purpose beyond that of gratifying his primary wants,