Review of *Life’s Journey—Zuya: Oral Teachings from Rosebud* By Albert White Hat Sr. Compiled and edited by John Cunningham

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Old-style, mainline anthropologists will probably not like this book. It is certainly not old-style anthropology. It is much, much more important than that. That White Hat fails to cite any of the pertinent literature on Lakotas is much beside the point; indeed, he indicates clearly that he does not much care for all of that literature as a means for finding meaning in Lakota life. White Hat is Sicangu Lakota and writes from deep within the Sicangu Lakota traditional knowledge. That is the importance of this book. Others have also written from within the Lakota world, even interpreters or so-called medicine men like John Fire Lame Deer or Peter Catches, but again, this volume is different.

Most importantly, White Hat writes as an extremely proficient linguist who has dedicated his life to understanding the linguistic intricacies of what is, after all, his Native Lakota tongue. He not only grew up speaking the language but also dedicated much of his adult life to listening to fluent elders talk the language and talk about the language. In particular, this book records his learning about the richness of the Lakota culture and its ceremonial traditions and the intricacies of the language, learning he gained from listening to a broad array of interpreters (medicine men).

Throughout the volume, White Hat the linguist engages in a persistent process of challenging many of the conventional categories of cognition that anthropologists, missionaries, government functionaries, journalists, and others have made second nature in any interpretive discussion of Native traditions. He starts in the introduction by debunking the common modern Lakota usage of the term Wakaŋ Taŋka, which typically “translates as ‘Powerful Being’” as a Euro-Christian insertion into and imposition on Lakota culture, a device for describing the Euro-Christian god. At the same time, he would disabuse the reader of any idea that wakay means sacred. The word is far
readily argued that in the century since this time, no other photographs have become as ubiquitous in histories of the American West. And yet, in comparison, very little has been written on these photographs explicitly or on their maker. Nancy Plain’s *Light on the Prairie* joins a handful of other publications to remedy this omission.

Plain has an enviable gift for storytelling; conveying an empathetic sense of just who Butcher was and what his world was like is a remarkable strength of this book. Descriptive passages quietly transport readers to any number of singular, solitary moments that were, until our reading, muted by the distance of time. Such passages beautifully evoke the environment of the Plains, the communal world that settled there, and Butcher’s somewhat misfit character as its recorder. Plain’s story stays close to the participants, with ample quotes from and references to the actual settlers in Butcher’s photographs.

This very strength also contributes to the book’s limitations. *Light on the Prairie* would have benefited by a more critical analysis of the story of settlement it tells and the reason Butcher’s photographs are important to this story. Butcher would be no more notable than any other of the thousands of settlers in Custer County except for his photographs. They deserve, therefore, a more active role in the book than they receive—as nearly unremarked upon, unscrutinized illustrations. The vignettes of human content they capture—a child hugging his muddy dog, a family squinting into a gust of Nebraska grit, a row of flowers proudly displayed in a soddy window—are visual “descriptive passages” equal to Plain’s writing. Including a few select details would have greatly enriched the story. Plain’s narrative and many of Butcher’s photographs tell the story of the winners, of those pioneers whose names and histories we still know because they managed to remain through the drought of the 1890s. The photographs also show the rarely conveyed story of those who didn’t “win,” of those whose names are lost, whose tattered clothing and lack of implements and livestock reveal the cost of settlement even though they weren’t able to remain to tell their story. As evocative and honestly compelling as Plain’s story about Butcher is, it could more powerful than that simple Euro-Christian designation of something related to divinity.

Missionaries used the word *wačekiy* to signify the Euro-Christian idea of prayer; White Hat counters that the word actually means “to acknowledge or embrace a relative with honor and respect.” As he further explains, the missionary mistranslation of *wačekiy* describes “bowing and kneeling to a supreme power, which is much different from the original meaning of acknowledging or meeting a relative.”

Even the title of the book, *žuya*, is a word that stands to be corrected in White Hat’s linguistic analysis. As most Lakota dictionaries and many Lakota people themselves might tell us, *žuya* means war, warpath, or warrior. This is another hypermilitarization of Indian peoples, in this case Lakota people, and it is an imposition of the Euro-Christian colonizers’ malignant fantasy that Lakotas themselves have internalized. White Hat reports a very different traditional meaning of the word: life’s journey. As such, it describes the typical journey of a young man investigating the world.

There is much to be learned from this book about *Sicangu* Lakota traditional knowledge, and by extension, about Indian people more generally—even though White Hat is very careful to insist that he is speaking only about his own people.

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