

Book Review of Denise Low, Northern Cheyenne Ledger Art by Fort Robinson Breakout Survivors (2020)

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Northern Cheyenne Ledger Art by Fort Robinson Breakout Survivors (2020) was written Denise Low, Kansas poet laureate and scholar of Indigenous literature, in collaboration with Ramon Powers, former executive director of the Kansas State Historical Society and researcher of Cheyenne history and material production. Powers' research focuses on the Northern Cheyenne Exodus, in which the Fort Robinson breakout is considered the conclusive battle of the Northern Cheyenne's efforts to return to their homeland after forced relocation. En route back to the Northern territories, one of the escaping groups led by Northern Cheyenne chief, Dull Knife, was intercepted by U.S. forces and held at Fort Robinson from October to December 1878. On January 9, 1879, the group broke out of the military barracks; some individuals fled successfully but many were massacred.

Low's previous research on Plains poetry, storytelling, and land epistemologies involved both creative writing and scholarly essays. *Northern Cheyenne Ledger Art* synthesizes Powers' historicization of the Fort Robinson Breakout with Low's research in Plains pictorial writing through a distinctly Northern Cheyenne semiotic lens. The body of material they examine consists of Ledger art. Ledger art, as defined by Low and Powers, is the genre of Plains Indian art derived from late-nineteenth-century glyphic drawings.¹ Ledger drawings were predominately produced on paper—specifically on ledger books, which are lined notebooks used by Anglo settlers for indexing—and illustrated with pencils and crayons obtained via trade or collected from battlefields. For the Northern Cheyenne people during the Exodus Period (1877–1879), maintaining traditional symbols and methods of pictorial communication through colonial mediums, such as the ledger book, was a vital practice in cultural preservation. Effectively prison art, the ledger drawings created by the Fort Robinson Breakout Survivors are contextualized by the inherent necessity of discretion. Communication, even glyphic, needed to be encrypted from the surveillant gaze of the U.S. military authorities.

Northern Cheyenne Ledger Art primarily investigates ledger art examples from three named Northern Cheyenne captives held at Dodge City, KS: Wild Hog, Porcupine, and Strong Left Hand, along with other unnamed ledger artists (amounting to seven total artists). The identified artists were leaders in the initial flight northwards in 1877, condemned in the trial *State of Kansas v. Wild Hog et al.* The authors frame ledger art as *polysemic*, meaning that the pictures may bear different meanings depending on how the symbols are read together. The images are “read” as a codified sign where each individual symbolic picture elicits multifaceted meanings in conjunction with other pictures.² Thus, the ledgers are treated not only as individual works of art but as intentional historical documentation distinctly Plains in their method of storytelling and recordkeeping. The ledger book as an indexical tool was expanded upon in its form and utility by the Fort Robinson Breakout Survivors, falling not into “resistance” or “assimilation” practices (the common dichotomy in U.S. Indigenous history) but into a third space of cultural fluidity and sovereignty.³ Not only did the ledger artists track their own physical numbers, they also tracked battles and alliances during the Exodus through these European-style journals.

In examples such as the courtship scene depicted in a drawing by Wild Hog, visual signifiers paired with oral histories articulate how the Fort Robinson drawings differed from other Plains ledger drawings. (Figure 1) For example, most of the figures in this series are barefoot rather than wearing traditional moccasins. U.S. soldiers killed women and children and removed their footwear so it could not be salvaged by survivors. By adapting non-traditional tools for the traditional pictorial communication of Northern Cheyenne people, the ledger drawings offer a powerful Cheyenne eyewitness angle to the colonial Master Narrative present in most recollections of the Fort Robinson Breakout.



Figure 1. Wild Hog, *Courting: Water Bucket and Courting Couple*, c. 1878–1879, lead pencil, blue pencil, black ink, red watercolor, KSHS plate 6. (Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, kansasmemory.org.)

Low and Powers crafted *Northern Cheyenne Ledger Art* as a highly accessible art historical primer for anyone unfamiliar with historical discourses and theories in Native American Studies, complete with multiple visual and textual sources to detail the specific narrative of the Fort Robinson Breakout. A reader who has never encountered notions, such as cultural sovereignty, cultural syncretism, or visual literacy, would finish this book with a greater understanding of those scholarly concepts through the focused lens of Northern Cheyenne ledger art produced during the Northern Cheyenne exodus. However, such critical terms are not used consistently, even if relevant to note. Rather, notions such as sovereignty and syncretism are highly inferred in the generally critical approach to the Fort Robinson Breakout narrative, which posits the battle and its associated ledger drawings as a cornerstone event in the greater endeavor to develop a Northern Cheyenne legacy after colonialism.

Concise visual analyses of the Fort Robinson Breakout ledger art comprise the bulk of *Northern*

Cheyenne Ledger Art. The authors effectively detail each visual element within an individual ledger example, reading for potential symbols based on Northern Cheyenne visual culture and related histories dealing with literary, military, and even spiritual histories. (Figure 2) For the study of Plains ledger art, Low and Powers laid an expansive foundation for the further study of the Fort Robinson Breakout within the sphere of Northern Cheyenne and Native American art history broadly. Compared to similar works in the study of Plains ledger art, such as Joyce Szabo's *Howling Wolf and the History of Ledger Art* (1994) and Colin G. Calloway's edited anthology *Ledger Narratives* (2012), the early history of incarceration and Native Americans is prominent across these texts. Szabo focuses primarily on the Fort Marion ledger drawings, while Calloway includes ledger drawings collected broadly and nonspecifically to any historical event or group of artists. *Northern Cheyenne Ledger Art* provides valuable visual and historical material from the Fort Robinson Breakout, which had not been covered in the same depth before. However, for the reader seeking a broader understanding of Plains ledger art with a multitribal historical dialectic, *Northern Cheyenne Ledger Art* only provides a focused sample of that.

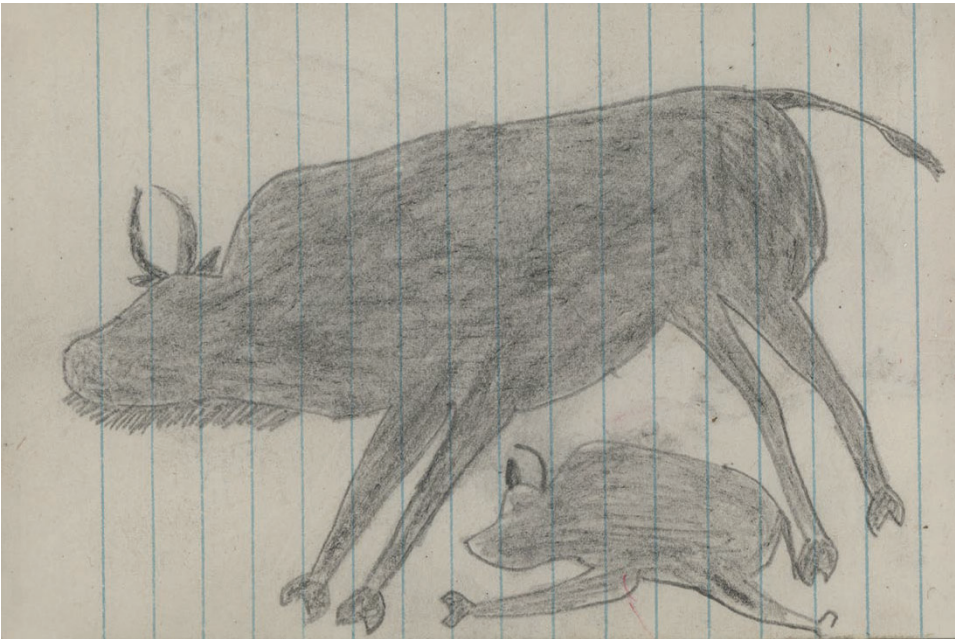


Figure 2. Strong Left Hand, *Bison, Female, with Calf*, lead pencil, black ink, Northern Cheyenne-KSHS, plates 17, pt. 2. (Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, kansasmemory.org.)

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¹ Low and Powers. "Preface" in *Northern Cheyenne Ledger Art by Fort Robinson Breakout Survivors*: xv.

² Low and Powers. "Provenance" in *Northern Cheyenne Ledger Art by Fort Robinson Breakout Survivors*: 29.

³ "Cultural sovereignty," as defined by Beverly Singer (2001), involves the practice of adapting indigenous traditions and methods to imported or colonial technologies, securing community-determined futures for indigenous material culture.