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Manifest Meanings

*The Selling (Not Telling) of American Indian History
and the Case of “The Black Horse Ledger”*

BECCA GERCKEN

What is the value or perceived necessity—for an Indian or for a white man—of changing Northern Cheyenne history? How are a reader’s conclusions affected by her perception of the race of the person altering that history? Why is it acceptable to sell but not tell American Indian history? An examination of the visual and discursive rhetoric of “The Black Horse Ledger,” a Northern Cheyenne ledger book history recorded in the late nineteenth century and later defaced, gives us the opportunity to engage these questions.¹ Native American histories have long been contested ground in both the dominant culture and academia, but “The Black Horse Ledger” provides a rare opportunity to see that battle overtly waged on its pages as unknown parties disfigured the original images and made editorial remarks that serve to reinforce the marred history rather than the original record. The coexisting yet competing accounts contained within the ledger embody the unreconciled Indian and Anglo literacies and histories of the American West. The juxtaposition of these opposing literacies and histories forces readers to negotiate the competing economies of meaning that clash in both form and subject.

“The Black Horse Ledger” not only foregrounds conflicts within academia’s treatment of Native American history but also highlights key points of tension and debate in the study of ledger art. In a discussion of the so-called descriptive texts that have been added to some of the Fort Marion ledgers, Edwin L. Wade and Jacki Thompson Rand argue that multiple handwriting styles are present, many of which do not match known prisoner writing, and warn: “We must be vigilant in questioning whether these captions are relevant to the intent of the artist.”² Janet Catherine Berlo and Gerald McMaster take a similar position regarding

labels added to ledgers: “The non-Indian owner asserts his own possession of the book by inscribing *his* text. Increasingly it seems . . . that these texts are very problematic and get in the way of understanding exactly what sort of history is being presented.”³ “The Black Horse Ledger” embodies these concerns more overtly than most ledgers that have been altered due to the dual nature of the ledger’s textual alterations: the disfiguring secondary images and the redactor’s alphabetic script that actively comments on the manipulated history recorded in the ledger. Contemporary readers are thus left with the doubly defaced intent of the original historian.

As an English and American Indian studies professor, my research is primarily in literature and film, so undertaking an analysis of “The Black Horse Ledger” was no small decision. I am not an art expert, nor am I an anthropologist, but I am not interested in looking at this ledger in a formalistic or ethnographic way. I am instead interested in the rhetorical value of the altered text, in part because I read it as a literal representation of what contemporary Native American writers and artists are portraying metaphorically. The ledger has been doubly altered, first in the drawings themselves and then in the captions provided by an unknown hand. These changes are the focus of my argument, changes that tell us that Indians can kill each other but not whites and that whites are, in large part, devoid of culpability for the violence they have wreaked upon America’s indigenous peoples and their lands.

The title for this ledger was assigned by Newberry scholar Father Peter J. Powell, the Cheyenne authority (and honorary chief) who named the book based on his belief that Black Horse, the only warrior identified in the manuscript with a name glyph and the subject of many of its illustrations, created the text (see fig. 1). While Joyce M. Szabo persuasively argues that “the concept of the importance of the named artists or the artist who signs his work is a foreign-induced one,” it is useful and perhaps necessary to have a means by which to refer to texts, and attributing the ledger to Black Horse seems reasonable given the text’s singular name glyph and the fact that the warrior identified by name glyph as Black Horse dominates the text’s pages.⁴ There is no way to confirm if all of the events recorded in “The Black Horse Ledger” were witnessed by its author or indeed if Black Horse is the author of the ledger; however, I am operating from the assumption that the ledger is an official account of events witnessed by the author or reported to the author by

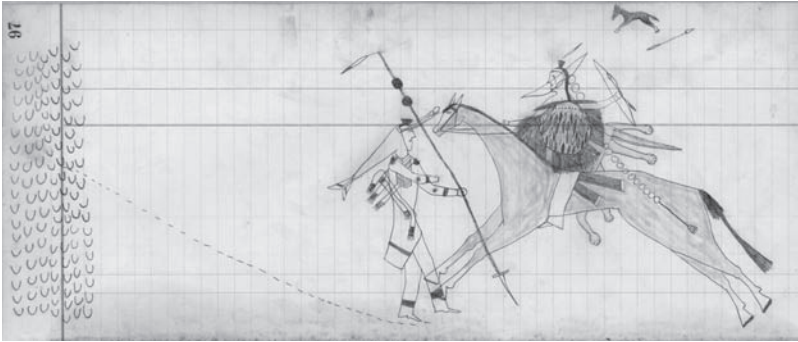


Fig. 1. “The Black Horse Ledger,” page 97. Ayer MS 3227. Black Horse’s name glyph is visible at the top right of the page. Photograph courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.

members of his band, an assumption grounded in the consistency of the images and the repetition of Black Horse himself as a participant in the recorded events as well as the ledger’s parallels to Northern Cheyenne oral historical accounts and Anglo-American historical records.

The ledger, believed to have been illustrated between 1877 and 1899, includes scenes of warfare, hunting, and courtship. There are 124 drawings as well as two incomplete pencil sketches on the back endpaper and the front and back pastedowns. The drawings are done in varying combinations of graphite and colored pencil, crayon, and watercolor wash. “The Black Horse Ledger” documents significant moments in Northern Cheyenne history, including the infamous Powder River attack of 1876 during which an entire village was destroyed, largely in revenge for Custer’s defeat at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. There are also images of 1878 raids on white settlers as the Northern Cheyenne fled captivity at Fort Robinson, Nebraska.

While the original drawings in “The Black Horse Ledger” are compelling in and of themselves, I am most fascinated by the defacement and editorializing of the martial images: twenty-seven scenes depicting Indians attacking whites have been altered by an unknown hand. Twenty-three of these defaced images have been captioned by a presumably different person, whose comments suggest that he is not the same person who altered the original document. The tension of the visual rhetoric of the original ledger art with its revision and the captions that serve to validate the defacement of the ledger are the focus of analysis here.

The original narrative is put at risk first through the superficial effort to transform the history by overwriting the images and then through the alphabetic script. Yet the effacement here is rhetorical; it lies more in the language of the captions than in the altered images. The trace of Black Horse's record that clearly remains allows readers to engage the doubleness of the drawings; it is the language of the second redactor that works to fix the images' meanings. While it is true that by addressing the alterations to the ledger the alphabetic script directs readers to some degree to the original record, the redactor's rhetoric consistently serves to overwrite the Northern Cheyenne historian's intent even as it points to the doubleness and potential undecidability of the distorted images. Indeed, the cursive ink labels work precisely to try to decide the ledger's history. The hegemonic language of the pen and ink labels' alphabetic script does not function to incorporate the ledger book's nonalphabetic semiotic system into American literacy, nor does it work to inscribe Northern Cheyenne history into the American narrative; instead, it attempts to alter Northern Cheyenne history to better fit within the colonial fantasy of Manifest Destiny.⁵ Thus "The Black Horse Ledger" manifests concerns in the alteration and circumscribing of Indian warrior society and martial history.

Questions about this history are compounded by the lack of information regarding the ledger itself. It has no provenance; it is unclear when it passed from the hands of the Northern Cheyenne to a private owner. Powell offers commentary about the changes to the ledger ("[it] is especially interesting in that, before its owner allowed it to pass into white hands, most of the drawings of dead soldiers or civilians were altered to make these whites appear as Indians, especially Crows or Shoshones, who were among the bitterest foes of the Northern Cheyennes"), but he seems to have little interest in the source of the changes.⁶ I am uncomfortable with Powell's contention that the original warrior-historian altered the images, primarily because I find it difficult to believe that the crude and rudimentary pencil revisions are his work.⁷ Moreover, Powell says little about the cursive ink labels that accompany the images, and in his original notes on the ledger (which now comprise the majority of the Newberry Library's bibliographic record) he makes no mention of the alterations to the manuscript. Thus, while we know approximately when the ledger was produced and we assume we know the warrior-historian who produced it, we do not know who made the initial changes to the drawings in the ledger or who then captioned the altered ledger.

Before I begin my analysis of the visual and discursive rhetoric of “The Black Horse Ledger,” it is useful to consider a brief history of ledgers, their treatment in academia, and what separates this Northern Cheyenne history from other ledger histories, in particular the most widely known and studied, the ledger art produced by southern Plains Indians imprisoned at Fort Marion, Florida, from 1875 to 1878. Plains Indians have a long tradition of recording their lives pictorially, first on deer and buffalo hides and later on paper, yet consideration of these accounts as important historical records was often precluded by Western culture’s privileged treatment of literacy as the only appropriate method of documenting history. Native American oral histories and winter counts were long ignored or, at best, treated as creative exercises rather than as historical records by both scholars and the general public. At worst, the army used ledgers as evidence against “hostile” Indians, giving credence to these records’ accuracy only when it allowed the military to punish Indians in the aftermath of the final battles waged for the American West.⁸ Ledger art—histories produced between 1865 and 1935 on the pages of ledger books obtained from U.S. soldiers, traders, missionaries, and reservation employees—encountered resistance similar to that faced by oral histories and winter counts in many respects for the same reason: ledger books offered a rendering of history not recognized by the dominant culture. If the resistance to serious treatment of ledger art ended here, we could simply say that the response to these records was typical of academia’s initial treatment of Indian histories. However, other factors, most notably the notion, introduced as early as the turn of the century, that ledger art was not an historical document but a product, a piece of merchandise, must be considered in any serious analysis of ledger book histories. White consumers’ interest in ledger art, which immediately influenced its content and even style, has complicated scholars’ response to these historical texts. As Szabo reminds us, within ten years of their origin ledger books were transformed in both function and form to adapt to the demands of a consumer audience as imprisoned southern Plains warriors at Fort Marion produced ledgers for white buyers: “Many Fort Marion drawings were created directly for outside sale, which affected their subject matter: imagery other than that of specific battles encounters was more marketable.”⁹ The fact that the ledgers, which functioned in Plains Indian cultures as historical records, entered the dominant culture primarily as art has negatively

shaped the ledgers' current ethnohistorical value. McMaster argues that ledgers' "original identity has been distorted and/or lost" and attributes this "distortion" or "loss" to what he calls a "palimpsest," "an interest on the part of art historians and museologists in questions of who owned a work, how it changed hands, what price was paid, and so on," concerns I contend are foregrounded by the literal palimpsest of "The Black Horse Ledger."¹⁰ Moreover, academic discussions of ledger art, discussions that tend to address aesthetics or material culture rather than historical value, have focused primarily on the Southern Cheyenne and Kiowa art produced by the Fort Marion Prisoners.¹¹ And while the Fort Marion ledgers raise interpretive questions about the production of history in a colonial and commercial state, "The Black Horse Ledger" raises different questions and requires different methods to address.

Perhaps the most important distinction that must be made between the ledgers produced at Fort Marion and "The Black Horse Ledger" is the context of their production. Powell writes that while the Southern Cheyenne had "increasingly frequent" contact with whites after 1845, "the Northern Cheyennes still freely roamed the great game lands above the North Platte River, stretching between the Black Hills and Big Horn Mountains, and continuing as far north as the Yellowstone River in Montana—the lands known as the Powder River country." He goes on to argue that from 1825 to the 1860s the Northern Cheyenne "had only rare contacts with white artists"; their "comparative isolation" was "in marked contrast to the tribes of the Upper Missouri River" as well as the Southern Cheyenne, who were largely confined to reservations by the 1880s.¹² The Northern Cheyenne's limited contact with whites separates "The Black Horse Ledger" from the majority of ledgers currently available for study; it records a story of ongoing resistance to white encroachment at a time when that resistance was nearing its end. But what most distinguishes this historical text from other ledgers is that it has been violently mediated through defacements of the original record.

It is precisely these violent mediations that demand an interpretation of the efforts to manipulate the text. Szabo argues that "a wide range of . . . picture-writing conventions carried inherent messages of time and space that were readily understood by members of Plains societies and were, therefore, included in Plains representational paintings as part of a precise communications system between artists and audiences who shared the same views and expectations of art."¹³ The disruption

between the warrior-historian and his audience is why changes to “The Black Horse Ledger” are so damaging, and yet the relationship between historian and audience is not entirely severed. The alterations to Black Horse’s original images are made almost exclusively in graphite pencil, with isolated use of color. The result is that while the changes are easily read (one can clearly see tipis drawn over houses and headdresses added to soldiers’ heads), they do not, in fact, obscure the original records, which remain visible. The original images are under erasure but not literally erased. Thus the captions become increasingly important, as they provide interpretations in a format valorized by the dominant culture. These notations, which serve to distinguish between the original image and its alteration, most frequently work to validate the revisionist history, undermining the ledger’s original purpose and, consequently, attempting to place Northern Cheyenne history under erasure.

There is precedent for both changes to ledgers by Indian historians and for labels added to ledgers after the fact, but what is unique to “The Black Horse Ledger” is the way in which the cursive ink labels work to reinforce a revisionist history of the Northern Cheyenne people and to undermine Northern Cheyenne epistemology in the assertion that only a written text can give meaning to the ledger’s image-based rendering of tribal history. Thus, while collectors, ethnographers, and historians—both Indian and non-Indian—have a history of “supplementing” ledgers, their commentary must be read as a disruption of the visual history ledgers offer, colonizing the ledgers through discursive strategies of domination.¹⁴ I suggest here that the second redactor of “The Black Horse Ledger,” the writer of the cursive ink labels, is white; historical facts about Indian alphabetic literacy, in particular the Northern Cheyenne’s late adoption of alphabetic script given their limited contact with whites, support this conclusion.¹⁵ The first redactor offers a more complicated puzzle, but I contend that he is most likely Indian given his knowledge of subtle differences in Plains Indians material culture as well as his knowledge of the conventions of ledger art. It is crucial to examine the different implications of the redactors’ identities as well as the diverse consequences of Indian versus white displacement of the original documents.

It may at first be difficult to imagine a white hand revising the ledger: why alter images that show Indians attacking whites? What is the value—for European Americans—in changing these depictions? Im-

ages of Indians attacking whites would fit America's notion of Manifest Destiny and the courageous struggle to settle the vast, underpopulated West. And yet the defacements fit with one of the dominant nineteenth-century narratives regarding Native Americans: they were uncivilized savages bent on violent destruction. I contend that a white person vandalizing the Northern Cheyenne images is working to reinforce notions of Anglo-American superiority. Records of Indians fighting other Indians strengthen the notion of white civility in contrast to Indian savagery and, in the era of reservation confinement, confirm the government's assertion that Indians need whites to supervise them, since, left to their own devices, Indians will kill each other. An examination of nineteenth-century government documents, from Andrew Jackson's letters to the Dawes Act of 1887, reveals repeated assertions that Indians are being isolated not for the protection of whites but for the protection of Indians from whites and from traditional indigenous enemies. There is also the omnipresent commentary that Indians need to be saved from their own savagery. In his first annual message to Congress, President Jackson argued that "the Indians in general, receding farther and farther to the west, have retained their savage habits."¹⁶ The Indian Removal Act (1830) promised that "it shall and may be lawful for the President to cause such tribe or nation to be protected, at their new residence, against all interruption or disturbance from any other tribe or nation of Indians, or from any other person or persons whatever."¹⁷

The defacements of "The Black Horse Ledger" clearly resonate with and reinforce these federal characterizations of Indians and their cultures. This reading is supported by the ledger itself, in which scenes that show Indians attacking other Indians have not been changed. Consider, for example, the image that depicts a Northern Cheyenne warrior attacking Pawnee women and children (see fig. 2). A caption has been provided ("Pawnee man Pawnee woman all killed by Cheyennes"), but the image itself has not been altered.

In contrast, and of particular note in terms of my interest in the motivation behind the changes made to the ledger, is the event recorded on page 120 in which a white hunter is attacked by a Northern Cheyenne warrior (see fig. 3). This image is unusual in that an attack on an Anglo-American has not been changed by either the first or the second redactor, but look more carefully at the white subject. He is wearing buckskin with a long fringe typical of Plains Indian clothing; indeed, it is virtu-



Fig. 2. “The Black Horse Ledger,” page 91. Ayer MS 3227. Photograph courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.

ally identical to the shirt of the Northern Cheyenne attacking him with the exception of missing bead or quill work. The man is carrying what appears to be a traditional trade cloth bag, an item more likely to be owned by an Indian than by a white man. Moreover, his hair is long. In other words, his appearance compels readers to view him as an Anglo man who has assimilated to Plains Indian culture. The alphabetic script labels this man as a “white hunter,” but visually this attack is not an Indian attack on a white man. It is an Indian attacking another Indian. This conclusion is bolstered by the fact that the image of the hunter has not been defaced; there is no need to alter the image because the man already reads as Indian.

Events like those recorded on pages 91 and 120 do little to disrupt America’s narrative of western settlement. Significantly, pictures that offer an alternative to the story of Manifest Destiny have been defaced and rhetorically altered, rewriting the struggle for land and resources. The original drawing on page 67 shows a Northern Cheyenne warrior attacking miners in the Black Hills. The men are clearly westerners, as is indicated by their pant style and footwear, but the record has been altered with the additions of feathers and long hair to the men under attack.¹⁸ The cursive ink label for this image reads “originally intended for Black Hillers.” The captioner’s rhetoric here, while acknowledging the original record, serves to undermine the action of the Northern Cheyenne warrior, placing it under erasure by describing the confrontation as intent rather than as accomplished feat; in short, the label privileges the accounting that disrupts Northern Cheyenne history and safeguards

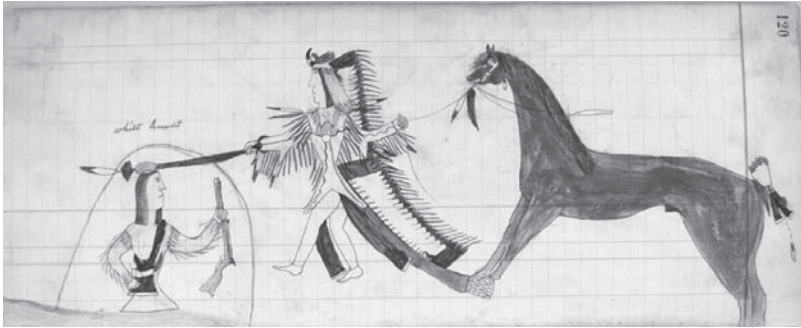


Fig. 3. "The Black Horse Ledger," page 120. Ayer MS 3227. Photograph courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.

Anglo-American narratives of movement into the Black Hills in violation of treaty agreements between sovereign Indian nations and the U.S. government.

The attack recorded on page 173 reveals a similar scene of a Northern Cheyenne warrior defending his land from white encroachment, with similar disruptions to the Northern Cheyenne historical record; the changes made to this account underscore the government's message that whites, not Indians, have a natural right to the American West (see fig. 4). Here one can see that the white settlers, wearing western hats and riding in a wagon, a typical white transport, have been altered to look like Indians, and their wagon's wheels have been changed to look like shields. The cursive ink label reads "First intended for white men in wagons. Afterwards changed to appear like Indians and wheels changed to shields." Again the redactor's word choice here, that this scene was "intended" for white men, elides the history of the attack itself. It replaces action with intention, making the attack not an accomplished undertaking but rather an objective that can be overwritten by a (presumably) white hand and thus erased from history.

In contrast, the original image calls into question land rights, in particular treaties signed for the Black Hills. The metaphoric wheels of western progress and capitalist advancement, here represented by the actual wheels of the white men's conveyance, have been distorted into the "savage" shields of Indian warriors. The altered scene offers a literal overwriting of capitalism and thus removes white culpability in the violence of the American West, while the alphabetic script reinforces the

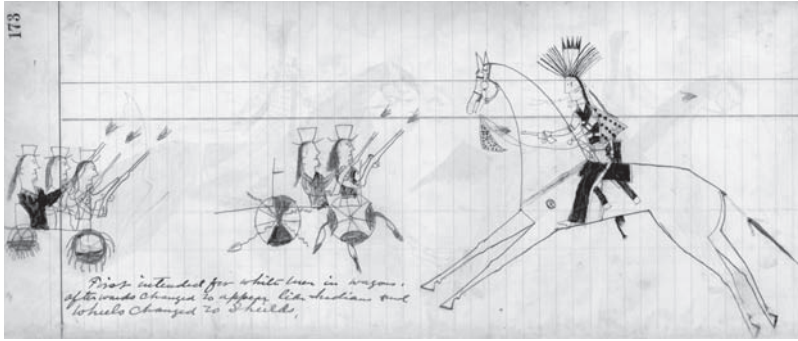


Fig. 4. “The Black Horse Ledger,” page 173. Ayer MS 3227. Photograph courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.

alteration. The changes are not all that surprising, given that the picture must be revised to protect America’s notion of itself as a nation of positive progress. What would a viewer learn from an unaltered image? If Indians are fighting miners in the Black Hills, a treaty must have been broken.¹⁹ Therefore, Indians cannot be fighting miners in the Black Hills; they can only be fighting other Indians and thus continuing in their failure to understand the value of the very land they are fighting on.²⁰ Only the disfigured version of the image, with its ensuing valorizing caption, resonates with white American history.

Readers again find signs of white encroachment into Indian space and expansion that is elided by the caption in an attack recorded on page 29 (see fig. 5). The Northern Cheyenne warrior here is clearly meant to be attacking American soldiers, easily identified by their uniforms. Moreover, this image, like Black Horse’s ledger as a whole, clearly speaks to a well-established white presence in formerly Native territory: the soldiers appear to be in a permanent encampment, as the houses in the original record indicate. The ledger speaks simultaneously to whites’ fear of Indians and Indian bravery, as, following Cheyenne ledger art convention, a lone Northern Cheyenne warrior approaches and appears to best three U.S. soldiers.²¹

The revisions to this picture by both redactors are astonishing and again work to transform the history recorded in the ledger. The secondary sketch maker used pencil to draw tipis over the soldiers’ houses and to lengthen the soldiers’ hair, working to create the illusion of headpieces. Yet the effort to transform the original image here is minimal, as

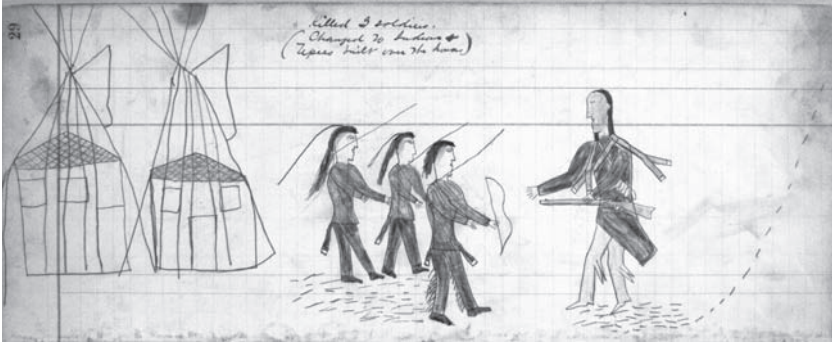


Fig. 5. "The Black Horse Ledger," page 29. Ayer MS 3227. Photograph courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.

is the initial comment of the caption writer, who notes only that the soldiers have been "changed to Indians" without the usual commentary on tribe or band. Most compelling is the editor's comment regarding the structures, which reads "tipis built over the houses." The rhetoric here, as on page 173, alters the history of the event, giving agency not to the Northern Cheyenne warrior originally depicted but rather to the defacing secondary editor. The more appropriate word choice here would be "drawn": tipis have been drawn over the houses. The word "built" implies a host of ontological certainties that are, in fact, nonexistent. Indeed, it is a gross reversal of actual events in Northern Cheyenne territory. Tipis were not being built over houses; houses were replacing tipis. The captioner's word choice creates a false history in which Indians attack other Indians and in which white participation in the violence of western settlement is overwritten.

A more subtle transformation in the changes made to a pursuit scene of a Northern Cheyenne warrior and an American soldier can be found on page 21 of the ledger (see fig. 6). As the alphabetic script writer notes, the soldier's appearance has been altered "with Crow head dress." The caption does not address the bow and arrow placed in the soldier's hands, an observation also missing from other similarly altered pictures. The fact that the redactor spent time addressing tribally significant markers rather than general visual markers of "Indianness" such as a bow and arrow is an interesting detail, especially when considering the racial identity of the captioner and his purpose in labeling the ledger. Does his failure to comment on the martial elements of the scene result

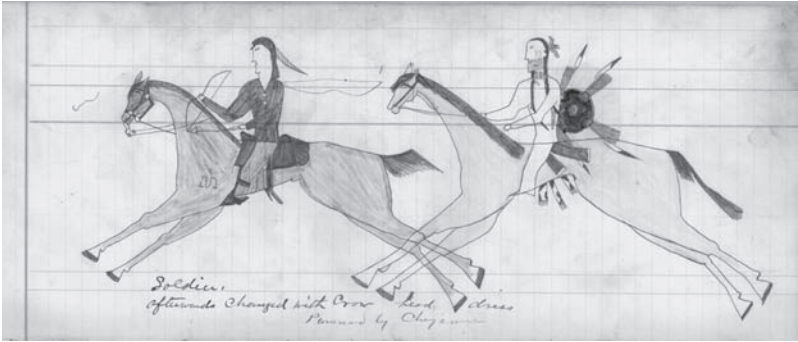


Fig. 6. "The Black Horse Ledger," page 21. Ayer MS 3227. Photograph courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.

from a belief that Indian versus Indian violence is so commonplace that it needs no commentary? But it is the syntax of the caption that is most crucial in reading this page; the cursive ink label reads "Soldier. Afterwards changed with Crow head dress. Pursued by Cheyenne." If the desire of the final redactor were to keep the history of the ledger intact, the logical syntax here would be "Soldier pursued by Cheyenne. Afterwards changed with Crow head dress." Unlike changes to pages 29 and 173, this revision merely disrupts rather than alters the event as it was originally recorded, with the writer's syntax forcing the reader to backtrack to understand the initial document. However minor, the defacement of the original and its corroboration by the language of the captioner stand as rhetorical violence against the history of the Northern Cheyenne people and the American West.

It is both more and less troubling to imagine an Indian altering the ledger. Clearly, an Indian warrior-historian could have defaced the original record to protect himself from prosecution at the hands of the U.S. military. I can imagine the drawn changes made to the ledger as a trickster turn in the grand tradition of lying to the anthropologist. It is also possible to reduce these defacements to an economic transaction: an Indian seller meeting a demand for Indian artifacts. With this reading, the graphite and colored pencil changes are merely market changes, made to create a product more appealing to a white buyer. The ledger works in this model as a proxy, affirming an Anglo-American understanding of the West: Indians only attack other Indians, not whites, and therefore

whites are not in danger at the hands of Indians. Indeed, whites can be entertained by Indians. This argument gives us another trickster turn in which the Indian benefits from white ignorance or complicity in the changes to the ledger. In this reading of the ledger, capitalism has created and contained its own subversion.

The most problematic result of the revised history of the ledger is that it risks placing Plains Indians' martial history under erasure. Was Northern Cheyenne warrior culture, as it was brought to bear on the United States, expunged from the dominant culture by Indians themselves? "The Black Horse Ledger" certainly suggests this possibility. In this history Indians are not—cannot—be shown as victorious over whites, even in the face of factual historical victories. If indeed an Indian altered the ledger, he participated in perpetuating an inaccurate record of Northern Cheyenne history and, by doing so, was complicit in the extermination of that history as it would be read and understood by the dominant culture.

The question of whether a white or an Indian changed the history recorded in "The Black Horse Ledger" is further problematized by the specificity of the changes: the person(s) who altered the ledger's images and captioned the pictures had knowledge of the Crow and Pawnee as traditional enemies of the Northern Cheyenne and knowledge of dress and hair styles of these different tribes. While these details may lead one to conclude that an Indian must have modified the images, the person who captioned the drawings—a person who is most likely white, given the history of Indian alphabetic literacy—clearly had such information. In their analysis of texts added to ledgers, Berlo and McMaster indicate that "sometimes there are texts in Lakota, or even in English, that clearly were written by the artist. . . . In other cases, captions were written later, by the white owner who often claims that 'an Indian interpreted the images for him,'" an explanation that could explain the depth of knowledge indicated by the labels in "The Black Horse Ledger."²² Powell believes that the original warrior-historian of "The Black Horse Ledger" helped label the book's images, although he acknowledges that the position is speculative.²³ This historical context for changes made to ledgers by non-Indian owners sets precedent for the claim that the labels analyzed here were made by a non-Indian, most likely the owner of the ledger, but the unknown provenance of "The Black Horse Ledger" further complicates the issue, as the redactor provides no explanation for his knowledge of Plains Indians material culture.

Berlo and McMaster and I see the alphabetic texts added to ledgers as playing a crucial role in our contemporary understanding of the ledgers; they argue that the issue is “not unrelated to ownership of image and ideas.”²⁴ The discursive additions to “The Black Horse Ledger,” through their rhetoric, attempt to displace the feats of the warrior-historian who created the ledger, and yet the original record has not been subsumed by the hegemonic language of the alphabetic script; Black Horse’s images still dominate the text. Thus while we are left with more questions than answers about the changes to the ledger, even with these distortions of the record, we can still read Black Horse’s compelling history of the Northern Cheyenne’s experience of colonialism.

The message of “The Black Horse Ledger” is that it is acceptable to sell American Indian history but not to tell it and that even when it is sold as entertainment for a private collection—for one person—it cannot chronicle the events as originally recorded. It cannot tell of a people’s struggle against an encroaching dominant culture whose understanding of the land and its value so differed from that of the Northern Cheyenne. It teaches us instead that Indian histories can be overwritten to reflect the values and beliefs of the dominant culture. And while the academy and Anglo-American culture have for many years recognized that the histories of minorities have been underreported or even ignored, it is rare to see the literal manipulation of indigenous historical narratives as that which “The Black Horse Ledger” reveals.

“The Black Horse Ledger” provides both primary and revised history even as it forces us to question what we consider an historical record. The ledger gives us the original documentation, a visually altered version of events, and a rhetorical version of events that editorializes the meaning of the pictures, working to stabilize the manipulated version of Northern Cheyenne history created by the defaced drawings. In particular, the alphabetic script works to reinforce the deformation of Northern Cheyenne history and to decenter the meaning of the nonalphabetic semiotic system of ledger art.

I contend that this effort fails and that the script in fact serves only to expose and undermine the colonial impulse to overwrite indigenous histories. The slippage between the original record and the validation of the altered record ironically reveals neither colonization nor erasure but rather ledger art’s ability to denaturalize the hegemonic power of al-

phabetic script. Clearly, the historical record of the ledger was mutually intelligible for a white or an Indian audience, or the changes evidenced on its pages would not have been necessary.

The visual and rhetorical alterations to “The Black Horse Ledger” foreground the power of rhetoric to transform meaning and to shape events. Most important, the changes position Indian history and identity as a product that can be defaced and consumed by the highest bidder. Whoever altered the pictures of conflict between whites and Indians in “The Black Horse Ledger” believed that a particular story—the story of Indians defeating whites in a pitched battle or raid—was not a story that should or could be told.

Ledger art in general, and “The Black Horse Ledger” in particular, speaks profoundly to scholars’ ambivalence in regard to Native American identity and history. In *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* Gerald Vizenor argues that “natives have endured centuries of separation, proscription, removal by treaties, and *disappearance*, but the tragic wisdom of their survivance has been converted by many academics to an aesthetic victimry.”²⁵ “The Black Horse Ledger” offers scholars a singular embodiment of the concerns raised by Vizenor; it can be read literally and metaphorically as both an assertion and an attempted erasure of Indian ontology and epistemology. This ledger presents readers with a Northern Cheyenne understanding of the consequences of federal Indian policies and Manifest Destiny, but its value extends beyond its historical record. Through the changes made to the ledger, changes that map shifts in attitudes toward Indians and our western history, we can better understand how America reads—or wants to read—Indians and their histories. Thus “The Black Horse Ledger” is interesting not only for what it can tell us about the past but also for what it can tell us about contemporary Native American texts and histories, the study of them, and audience response to them. Only by decolonizing academic approaches that privilege abstracted, alphabetic literacy over nonalphabetic semiotic systems can scholars ensure that early indigenous texts like “The Black Horse Ledger” will not be subsumed by Westernized methodologies.

NOTES

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1. "The Black Horse Ledger," Ayer MS 3227, Newberry Library, Chicago.

2. Edwin L. Wade and Jacki Thompson Rand, "The Subtle Art of Resistance: Encounter and Accommodation in the Art of Fort Marion," in *Plains Indian Drawings 1865–1935: Pages from a Visual History*, ed. Janet Catherine Berlo (New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with the American Federation of Arts and the Drawing Center, 1996), 48.

3. Janet Catherine Berlo and Gerald McMaster, "Encyclopedias of Experience: A Curatorial Dialogue on Drawing and Drawing Books," in Berlo, *Plains Indian Drawings*, 24, emphasis in original.

4. Joyce M. Szabo, *Howling Wolf and the History of Ledger Art* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 38.

5. In her study of the wampum and alphabetic script records that played a part in the negotiations between the Iroquois and the French, Birgit Brander Rasmussen argues that "wampum and alphabetic script intersect in a space where neither is hegemonic. Indeed, this treaty council represents a mutual attempt by French and Iroquois delegates to enroll and enscribe each other in their respective textual systems" ("Negotiating Peace, Negotiating Literacies: A French-Iroquois Encounter and the Making of Early American Literature," *American Literature* 79, no. 3 [2007]: 445–46). The same cannot be said of "The Black Horse Ledger"; at the time that the pen and ink labels were applied, the hegemonic power of alphabetic script was clearly established, giving the labels greater meaning and import than the original drawings for a dominant culture reader.

6. Father Peter J. Powell, "They Drew from Power: An Introduction to Northern Cheyenne Ledger Book Art," in *Montana Past and Present*, ed. Peter J. Powell and Michael P. Malone (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 27–28.

7. Powell indicated to me in an interview that he believes that Black Horse himself made the changes to "The Black Horse Ledger" to protect his identity or to make the ledger more appealing to a white buyer (Father Peter J. Powell, interview by the author, August 15, 2009).

8. Joyce M. Szabo cites Donald J. Berthrong's study of the Southern Cheyenne on this point: "Captured ledgers were used as after-the-fact evidence against Plains warriors, including those from Black Kettle's camp at the Battle of Washita" (*The Southern Cheyennes* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963], 329, quoted in Joyce M. Szabo, "Shields and Lodges, Warriors and Chiefs: Kiowa Drawings as Historical Records," *Ethnohistory* 41, no. 1 [1993]: 3). A similar argument is offered by Szabo in her discussion of the labels that frequent

reservation era ledger art: "Frequently reservation drawings include handwritten identification of the character portrayed, sometimes placed there by the artist himself but more frequently by scouts or military personnel who provided interpretation of the scenes" (*Howling Wolf*, 28). Marilee Jantzer-White analyzes the "interplay" between Doanmoe's ledger and the typed textual annotations added by Capt. Richard Pratt ("Narrative and Landscape in the Drawings of Etuahdleuh Doanmoe," in Berlo, *Plains Indian Drawings*, 50).

9. Szabo, "Shields and Lodges," 6.

10. Berlo and McMaster, "Encyclopedias of Experience," 20. A palimpsest is a writing surface on which the original text has been erased (at least partially) and then overwritten, leaving a trace of the original writing. This word has historically described writing surfaces that were designed for this type of effacement and reuse. The term's contemporary meaning refers more broadly to the often metaphorical imposition of a different cultural will on an existing text, the usage that best fits McMaster's discussion of ledger art and the changes to "The Black Horse Ledger."

11. Two Southern Cheyenne artists in particular, Howling Wolf Honanisto and Tichkemaste, or Squint Eyes, have garnered extensive interest in large part, as Szabo argues, because they continued to produce ledger art once they were allowed to return to their reservations. Szabo also points to Howling Wolf's participation in "many of the last great military battles to maintain traditional life on the southern Plains," his superior talent, and his imprisonment with seventy-eight other southern Plains warriors at Fort Marion, where his work became popular with "an admiring audience of inquisitive non-Indian visitors" (*Howling Wolf*, xv), as an explanation for the extensive interest in his work.

12. Powell, "They Drew from Power," 10.

13. Joyce M. Szabo, "Howling Wolf: A Plains Artist in Transition," *Art Journal* 44, no. 4 (1984): 369.

14. A fascinating inversion of the changes to "The Black Horse Ledger" is found in Battiste Good's ledger. Janet Catherine Berlo notes that Good was "particularly interested in dates and numbers, and he filled his book with careful chronological notations," but when Garrick Mallery published the Good ledger as part of *Picture Writing of the American Indians*, "he omitted all written text and numbers, so that it looks like 'pristine' pictographic imagery" (Berlo and McMaster, "Encyclopedias of Experience," 22).

15. Powell, "They Drew from Power," 10.

16. Andrew Jackson, "First Annual Message to Congress," quoted in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha, 3rd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 47.

17. "Indian Removal Act," quoted in Prucha, *Documents*, 53.

18. In their discussion of the conventions of Cheyenne ledger art, Jean Afton,

David Fridtjof Halaas, Andrew E. Masich, and Richard N. Ellis note that “white men are shown wearing hats and shoes with pronounced heels, and their horses generally have saddles” (introduction to *Cheyenne Dog Soldiers: A Ledgerbook History of Coups and Combat*, ed. Jean Afton, David Fridtjof Halaas, and Andrew E. Masich with Richard N. Ellis [Boulder: Colorado Historical Society and University Press of Colorado, 1997], xxii). The white men on page 67 of “The Black Horse Ledger” are wearing shoes with a visible heel.

19. For a comprehensive examination of the history of the Black Hills land dispute, see Edward Lazarus, *Black Hills White Justice: The Sioux Nation versus the United States 1775 to the Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

20. In *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987), Patricia Nelson Limerick offers valuable analysis of the struggle for western resources, arguing that American history depicts whites alone as understanding the value of the land and its resources. Land could not be left in the hands of Indians who would not “properly” manage its resources; thus, white Americans were “liberating” land and its resources: “The ends abundantly justified the means; personal interest in the acquisition of property coincided with national interest in the acquisition of territory, and those interests overlapped in turn with the mission to extend the domain of Christian civilization” (36). She continues her discussion of America’s “Empire of Innocence”: “It was an easy transition of thought to move from the idea of humans held in an unjust and resented [Indian] captivity to the idea of land and natural resources held in Indian captivity—in fact, a kind of monopoly in which very few Indians kept immense resources to themselves, refusing to let the large numbers of willing and eager white Americans make what they could of those resources. Land and natural resources, to the Anglo-American mind, were meant for development; when the Indians held control, the excluded whites took up the familiar role of injured innocents” (46).

21. See Afton et al., *Cheyenne Dog Soldiers*, for an extensive key to the conventions of Cheyenne ledger art. Denise Low also provides valuable analysis of the customs of Cheyenne ledger art (“Composite Indigenous Genre: Cheyenne Ledger Art as Literature,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 18, no. 2 [2006]: 83–103).

22. Berlo and McMaster, “Encyclopedias of Experience,” 24.

23. Powell, interview.

24. Berlo and McMaster, “Encyclopedias of Experience,” 24.

25. Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 21, emphasis in original.