ARTFUL LITERACIES: TRANSCULTURATION AND RESISTANCE
IN THE LEDGER DRAWINGS OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY PLAINS INDIAN
PRISONERS AT FORT MARION

by Ann Sutton Updike

This thesis examines the intersection of literacy, identity, and power within the nineteenth-century contact zone of Fort Marion, Florida, where from 1875-1878, a group of Plains Indian warriors underwent a compulsory assimilation program while being held as prisoners-of-war. The thesis begins by proposing a broader view of literacy that includes non-alphabetic forms and argues that pictographic ledger art was a literacy practice deeply integrated within Plains Indian warrior society. The thesis then argues that, within the Fort Marion site, several warriors transformed their centuries-old pictographic literacy practice into cultural autoethnographic texts to intervene in dominant modes of understanding. By negotiating this literary middle space, the prisoners were able to write themselves into the metropolitan discourse and mediate between the two cultures, providing alternatives to the dominant group’s often negative, paternalistic, and hostile representations of Native Americans.
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Dedication

This work is humbly dedicated to the seventy-two Plains Indian prisoners of war incarcerated in Fort Marion, St. Augustine, Florida, from 1875-1878 (* denotes ledger artist):

**Arapaho:**
- Packer (Nun-ne-ti-yuh)*
- White Bear (Huh-noh-uh-co-ah)*

**Caddo:**
- Choctaw (Huh-nah-nee)

**Cheyenne:**
- Antelope (Wuh-ah)
- Bear Killer (No-co-mis-ta)
- Bear Shield (Nock-o-yo-uh)
- Bear’s Heart (Nock-ko-ist)*
- Big Moccasin
- Big Nose or Nick (Pa-e-yis)*
- Broken Leg (Co-hoe)*
- Buffalo Calf (Mo-chi)
- Buffalo Meat (O-e-wo-toh)*
- Buzzard (Mo-he-wih-kio)*
- Chief Killer (Noh-hu-nah-wih)*
- Eagle’s Head (Minimic)
- Gray Beard
- Heap of Birds (Mo-e-yau-hay-ist)
- Howling Wolf (Ho-na-nist-to)*
- Lean Bear
- Left Hand (No-mohst)
- Little Chief (Ko-we-o-narre)*
- Little Medicine (Ma-ha-ih-ha-chit)
- Long Back (Cha-se-yun-nuh)
- Making Medicine (O-kuh-ha-tuh)*
- Matches (Chis-i-se-duh)
- Medicine Water (Mi-huh-yeu-i-mup)
- Rising Bull (O-to-as-tuh-hos)
- Roman Nose (Wo-uh-hun-nih)*
- Shave Head (O-uk-ste-uh)*
- Shaving Wolf
- Soaring Eagle (O-uh-oh)*
- Spotted Elk
- Squint Eyes (Quch-ke-i-mus)*
- Star (Ho-i-toich)
- White Man (Ow-us-sait)*
- Wolf’s Marrow (Come-uh-su-rah)

**Comanche:**
- Always-Sitting-Down-in-a-Bad-Place (Tis-chah-kah-da)
- Black Horse (Po-ka-do-ah)
- Buck (or Red) Antelope (Eck-e-nah-ats)
- Dry Wood (Wy-a-ko)
- Little Prairie Hill (Pa-voor-ite)
- Mad-a-with-t.
- Pile of Rocks (Quoi-yo-uh)
- Tail Feathers or Little Feather (Pe-eh-chip)
- Telling Something (Ta-a-way-te)

**Kiowa:**
- Ankle (On-ko-eht)
- Bad Eye (Ta-na-ti)
- Bear Mountain (Tsait-kope-ta)*
- Bear-in-the-Clouds (Sa-a-mi-a-da)
- Beef (Wo-haw)*
- Biter (Zo-tom)*
- Boy (E-tah-dle-uh)*
- Bull (or Buffalo) with Holes in His Ears (To-o-sape)
- Coming to the Grove (Ah-ke-ah)
- Double Vision (So-gau-se)
- Flat Nose (Mau-ko-peh)
- Good Talk (To-un-ke-uh)*
- High Forehead (Ohet-toint)*
- Kicking (Ko-ho)
- Lone Wolf (E-si-sim-ers)
- Man-Who-Walks-above-the-Ground (Mah-mante)
- Old Man (Beah-ko)
- Pedro
- Straightening an Arrow (Ih-pa-yah)
- Sun (Co-a-bote-ta)
- Teeth (Zone-ke-uh)*
- Toothless (Zo-pe-he)
- White Goose (Tsah-dle-tah)*
- White Horse (Isa-tah)*
- Wild Horse (Ko-ba)*
- Wise (Au-lih)
- Woman’s Heart
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The Art of Writing:  
An Argument for the Literacy of Nineteenth-Century Plains Indian Ledger Art

“The Mexicas put the accent on observing and telling out loud the stories of what they were looking at... The Spanish stressed reading the word rather than reading the world, and made the letter the anchor of knowledge and understanding.”
—Walter D. Mignolo, Writing Without Words

Traditional theories of literacy and writing have had a narrow focus, tightly coupling writing with speech and language while relying on an evolutionary model that places literacy on a continuum, moving from oral to pictorial representations to the abstraction of alphabetic systems. For example, in his seminal 1982 work, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, Walter Ong presents an evolutionary model of writing that places oral and pictographic forms prior to what he terms “true writing.” Such theories have dominated traditional thinking about literacy so that non-alphabetic systems, and, by extension, the cultures that use them, have been viewed as inferior, inefficient, cumbersome, and primitive. One such culture, nineteenth-century North American Plains Indians, have traditionally been considered an oral culture and their pictographic representations have been studied primarily as a primitive art form, rather than as a form of writing. In this chapter, I will argue that Plains Indian pictographs, rather than being only “art,” were in actuality a literate form. Then, within the following chapter, I will demonstrate that this literacy practice was highly integrated into Plains Indian culture, being highly suitable for the specific context and situation in which it was used.

I will begin by examining traditional definitions of writing, also what has been considered non-writing, and the reasons for both classifications, as developed by evolutionary theorists such as Walter Ong, Jack Goody, I.J. Gelb, and George Kennedy. By then exploring alternative, broader definitions of writing, I hope to carve out a space for non-alphabetic, representational systems in the realm of literacy. I would like to think that such broader definitions can expand our thinking and create an openness, a willingness, to learn from other cultures. With this knowledge, we might begin to see the validity and value of other ways of viewing human experience, to begin to dismantle the beliefs that, even in an increasingly interconnected and complex world, make us assume we can, or even should, impart our own traditions and ways of thinking on others. By understanding that literacy practices develop from specific needs and uses within a culture and, thus, are deeply integrated with and reflect that culture, we can more fully appreciate both the culture and its practices and understand that other
literacy practices may not be as appropriate or, in fact, could be detrimental. This implies that literacy policies need to be designed with a full understanding of the existing practices and needs of the groups for which those policies are being planned, that they should be more inclusive of other practices rather than ignoring or eradicating them.

As defined by Ong, “true writing” was developed by the Sumerians in 3500 BC when they created the first known syllabic system (84). Ong labels other methods, such as the Andean quipu system of colored strings and knots, as “tallying devices,” while he calls the pictographic winter count calendars of Native Americans “aides memoire” (see Figures 1-1 and 1-2). By stating that “[n]otches on sticks and other aides memoire lead up to writing” and that “[t]rue writing systems can and usually do develop gradually from a cruder use of mere memory aides,” Ong clearly places pictographs and other non-alphabetic forms lower on his evolutionary scale (85). Ong situates them in this lower position because he and other evolutionists privilege writing that mimics speech, for in such writing “a writer could determine the exact words that the reader would generate from the text” (84, italics mine). Such statements imply that phonetic systems are the most efficient means of written communication, but, as I will discuss later, this is not always the case.

Figure 1-1. Quipu, Inca 1300-1532 AD
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1 The Andean quipu is a system of cords that are colored, twisted, and knotted in various combinations to record information. According to Elizabeth Hill Boone, they “hold and convey knowledge separate from language” (“Introduction” 20).

2 Winter counts are pictographs traditionally painted on buffalo hide robes, though they may be executed on other mediums. They serve as tribal histories with one symbol (or in some cases two) depicting a significant event(s) for each year, such as the 1833 meteor shower, the 1837 smallpox epidemic, or a significant battle or victory, which helps the tribal historian to recount that year’s history.
I.J. Gelb, writing in 1963, defines writing rather broadly as “a system of human intercommunication by means of conventional visible marks” (12). This broader definition allows for the inclusion of non-alphabetic forms of writing, and he acknowledges that “what the primitives understood as writing is not the same thing as what we do” (12). The “needs of writing” of “primitive” cultures, such as Indo-Europeans, Semites, or Amerindians, “were fulfilled in a simple picture or series of pictures which normally had no clear connection with any linguistic form;” yet he then adds, “To us, […] writing is written language” (13). Although, clearly, he realizes that different cultures have different needs and ideas about what constitutes writing, and he seems to include pictographic forms in early stages of writing, he too discounts non-Western, non-phonetic forms and sets up an evolutionary scale with stages of writing development from semasiography (in which pictures communicate meaning, e.g., pictographs) to phonography (or language expressed in writing) (190). Pictographs, which he terms descriptive-representational devices, are “forerunners of writing,” or forms from which “true” writing developed, because “full writing” is the “vehicle through which exact forms of speech could be recorded in permanent form” (29, 12, italics mine). For Gelb, writing that captured speech, or phonetization, was “the most important single step in the history of writing” (194).

The early work of social anthropologist Jack Goody primarily focused on the ways in which the acquisition of literacy, specifically with the Greek alphabet, led to significant
developments in literate cultures such as the advent of philosophy, classification systems, rational thought, science, and bureaucracy. Such “great leap” or “great divide” theories (also seen in the work of Ong, Gelb, Havelock, and others) attribute significant cognitive changes to the acquisition of literacy in individuals, which then lead to broad cultural developments such as those noted above. These theories imply a great leap forward in literate societies over oral ones, setting up a divide or dichotomy between the oral and literate or an evolutionary scale with oral on the lower end and literate on the higher.\(^3\) In recent years, however, Goody has softened his great leap pronouncements about the revolutionary nature of the alphabet and his privileging of writing over speech (Brandt 27). Yet as recently as 2000, in discussing pictographic markings on Ojibway birch bark scrolls, he states that pictographs “do not systematically represent and develop speech forms in the way that a fully fledged system of writing does,” for a full writing system “enable[es] man to express in writing all (and at times more, but also at times less) than he can in speech” (Power 3). Here again, the term writing is reserved for phonetic forms, with the implication that other methods of communication are somehow inferior.

Why is this mimicking of speech so important to evolutionary theorists? Such views—that writing which captures speech is superior to other forms of writing—stem from the long-established Western tradition, beginning with Plato’s *Phaedrus*, that speech is closer to and can lead to transcendent Truth, whereas writing is a derivative form of speech, a mere approximation. Being once more removed from Truth than is speech, writing is not to be trusted. Alphabetic phonetic systems are deemed closer to speech, thus closer to Truth, and therefore superior to non-phonetic, non-alphabetic systems. If, as these theorists believe, speech is the highest form of human communication—the best and most efficient way to convey human thought—then writing that phonetically captures speech must be the highest form of writing. Ong clearly equates “true” writing with recorded speech when he states, “With writing or script in this full sense, encoded visible markings engage words fully so that the exquisitely intricate structures and references evolved in sound can be *visibly recorded exactly* in their specific complexity” (84-85, italics mine). Yet empirically we know this is not true because alphabetic writing does not, and cannot, exactly capture intonation, significant pauses, dialectical

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\(^3\) See, for example, Jack Goody and Ian Watt’s important 1963 work, “The Consequences of Literacy,” which explores the cultural differences between literate and pre-literate societies that the authors attribute to literacy acquisition, and Goody’s 1977 *Domestication of the Savage Mind*, which he wrote in part to move away from the ethnocentric binaries he saw in that earlier work and in the work of others; yet he then replaces it with an evolutionary model.
differences, or other verbal patterns. And anyone familiar with the pronunciation rules of French or English knows that our system of (supposedly) phonetic-alphabetic writing of words does not always record the actual sounds of those words. Even Gelb admits that alphabetic writing is not exactly speech: “Writing can never be considered an exact counterpart of the spoken language” for “[e]ven the alphabet, the most developed form of writing, is full of inconsistencies in the relations between sign and sound” (15).

Jacques Derrida breaks down the writing/speech binary (and, by extension, destabilizes the primitive/advanced evolutionary models) when he argues that speech is always already a form of writing for “oral language already belongs to this [generalized] writing” (Of Grammatology 55). Deconstructing the logocentric hierarchy that speech (as the signifier of the signified) is closer to meaning and truth than is writing (as the signifier of the signifier)—a concept that is part of what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence—he argues that “the signifier and signified are interchangeable” (Spivak lxv). According to the metaphysics of presence, speech is traditionally defined by presence (since both speaker and listener are present) and writing by absence (as a substitute for the absent speaker); speech is then closer, or more present, to the original truth (language), and the presence of speech is thus privileged over writing. But because speech and writing are in fact interchangeable, Derrida argues that neither speech nor writing is more present (nor absent) than the other to language; speech is both exterior and interior to writing and writing is both interior and exterior to speech:

Representation mingles with what it represents, to the point where one speaks as one writes, one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than the shadow or reflection of the representer. […] In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin. (Of Grammatology 36)

In her introduction to Writing Without Words, Elizabeth Hill Boone dismantles the evolutionary privileging of recorded speech as the highest form of written communication. Using music, maps, and scientific writing, which all have unique, non-alphabetic, non-phonetic notational systems best suited for their purposes, Boone shatters the assumption that alphabetic writing, as captured speech or written language, is always the best form for conveying human thought. Additionally, the modern development and acceptance of international symbols proves
that phonetic-alphabetic writing is not the most effective or most appropriate in all situations, as any non-native speaker in a foreign country quickly realizes. In fact, as Peter van der Loo argues, “a pictorial system is better suited to an environment where a multitude of often unrelated languages is spoken, allowing communication across language boundaries” (84, italics mine). Nowhere could this be more true than in the heterogeneous environment of the pre-contact North American plains where over twenty nomadic tribes, each with its own language or dialect, intersected and interacted. As I will discuss below and more fully in the next chapter, the development of cultural conventions in Plains pictographs allowed such intertribal communication to take place through non-phonetic representation and symbols.

Boone also discredits the straight evolutionary model, discussing how, in Mesoamerica, phonographic systems were developed early while later cultures used pictorial systems, contrary to the claims of evolutionary theorists that semasiographic systems preceded phonographic systems on the supposed writing continuum. According to Boone, phonographic hieroglyphs were developed at least by 100 A.D. in the Maya area and were known by many throughout the broader region, yet the Teotihuacanos between 200 and 750 A.D. and the Aztecs and Mixtecs in 1250 A.D. were using pictorial systems (“Introduction” 20). Highlighting how cultural differences can affect the types of writing systems that develop, Boone asserts that in the New World, “the need to record speech was not universally felt” (20).

Returning to Goody’s description of the Ojibway birch bark scrolls, he asserts that they “aim[ ] to communicate to other persons” but essentially they “serve as mnemonics” (Power 3). As Goody continues his discussion, it becomes apparent that, for him, this system is deficient because the mnemonics will not be interpreted the same way by two different interpreters (33). But this deficiency assumes, of course, that alphabetic texts will always be interpreted in the same way. I argue, however, that while reading either pictographic or alphabetic writing, people may read the same signs or words, but this does not mean they will interpret those signs or words in the same way. So, rather than being context-free, or autonomous, which is one of the “great divides” advanced by evolutionists to privilege writing over orality, written language is still contextual; for example, words such as lead, bow, or bear depend on their immediate context in order to understand their meaning. Derrida, in his essay “Signature, Event Context,” shows the limitless play of context and meaning that exists in both writing and speech—signs do not carry their context with them, and so, as a sign is moved from context to context through
speech or writing, meaning changes with it, unendingly (317-19). Even a sign that seems meaningless in one context, may have meaning in another (320).

In fact, while Ong asserts at one point that true (i.e., alphabetic) writing is “’context-free’ language,…autonomous [because it is] detached from its author,” he later contradicts himself by admitting that even the alphabet is “never quite perfect” for creating one meaning from the written words (78, 85). Using the word read as an example, he states that, “Even with the alphabet, extra-textual context is sometimes needed” (85). Rather than being wholly context free, he admits that context is dependent on other words within the sentence, within the text, or within other texts. But, by focusing only on the text, what Deborah Brandt refers to as “self-referential or text-bound,” Ong ignores the larger socio-cultural influences on literacy and meaning-making advocated by Brandt, Scribner and Cole, Shirley Brice Heath, and Brian Street, among others. Such text-bound thinking assumes that text can only be used and interpreted one way.

Rather than adopting the autonomous concept that one true and essential meaning exists within the text itself, we must instead consider language, or literacy, in the Bakhtinian sense of “a social act.” For Bakhtin, “[m]ultiplicity of meanings is the constitutive feature of word…This meaning is different each time, just as the situation is different each time” (1225). The understanding of those multiple meanings is determined through the social act of dialogue for “[i]n essence meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers; that is, meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding” (1226). Meaning is thus determined, not in the words or text itself, but in the dialogic interaction of speaker and listener or, in the case of writing, between writer and reader. Meaning derives from “utterance-in-context;” utterance is thus a social act, not an isolated one.

As one example of such a social act, George Catlin, the nineteenth-century artist who traveled among the Plains Indians between 1830 and 1836 to capture their way of life on canvas and text, describes the great Mandan chief Mah-to-toh-pa as “wearing a robe on his back with the history of all his battles painted on it, which would fill a book of themselves if they were properly enlarged and translated” (145). Catlin explains how the chief later came to his wigwam to relate those events “while sitting upon the robe, explaining each battle as represented” (154). If we consider those early Plains Indians wearing their autobiographies on their bodies for all to read and then recounting those stories aloud around the fire, I think we can understand what Bakhtin meant by language as a social act.
In another account, David Brumble, in *American Indian Autobiography*, provides reports by an early twentieth-century ethnographer of the coup stories told during a Cree sun dance ceremony. The performance he describes clearly demonstrates the intersocial nature—the telling by the speaker and affirmative response of the listeners—present in such a dialogue:

A number of select warriors, practically naked, with bodies smeared all over with white mud, picked out in red with signs of their brave deeds, file into the arena, singing and dancing. They ‘dance to somebody for somebody,’ and their aim is to enhearten the dancers. After a while they stop dancing and one or the other tells the story of some successful raid. His oration will run as follows: ‘We were camped at such and such a place. From there a war party went out. I was one. We numbered so many. Suddenly we felt the enemy. We sent out scouts. They found a large camp. We brought away twenty horses. I cut loose one tied to the door of a lodge. Three days we fled. They never overtook us.’ A tap or two on the drum at each sentence and a loud and long rattle at the end, show the appreciation of the audience. These accounts are usually greeted with deafening applause of drum beats. (Goddard qtd. in Brumble 24-25)

Though told within a ritual performance, the coup stories are unembellished and brief for, according to Brumble, they are not meant as entertainment; “they functioned […] as the warrior’s curriculum vitae” (Brumble 25).

Like Bakhtin, Deborah Brandt argues for the social nature of language and literacy, but she explores in detail the actual ways that readers and writers make meaning together. Brandt asserts that strong-text proponents, such as Goody, Ong, and Olson, focus on the end product (the static text) rather than on the act of creating or reading that text, and thus miss the highly social aspects of literacy. Text-bound thinkers define literacy “by working backward from the nature of texts” rather than how people create those texts, the processes of text creation (13). By focusing on process rather than product, Brandt shows that “social involvement appears as a fundamental basis of orientation during the tenuous enterprises of writing and reading, making literacy not the narrow ability to deal with texts but the broad ability to deal with other people as a writer or a reader” (14). In the process of creating a text, the writer must at all times consider the needs of readers and, while reading a text, the reader must understand the intentions of the writer. Thus, rather than the ability to create a detached autonomous text, Brandt argues that literacy development requires more, not less, social interaction by “heightening understanding of
how humans create reality together” (6). Brandt views text “not as a fixed artifact but as the public social reality (the public context) in which writing and reading unfold” (39).

Likewise, Brian Street criticizes Ong, Goody, and other great leap proponents for their autonomous, detached view of writing. Ong, for example, states “By isolating thought on a written surface, detached from any interlocutor, making utterance in this sense autonomous and indifferent to attack, writing presents utterance and thought as uninvolved with all else, somehow self-contained, complete” (132). By seeing writing as self-contained and free of extratextual (that is, social and political) context, Ong and others characterize literacy as inherently neutral (431). Street argues that such autonomous models attribute universal consequences to the acquisition of literacy, such as the restructuring of thought, consciousness raising, and the development of social systems such as law, religion, and modern bureaucracy, regardless of the particular social and ideological contexts within which that literacy will be used. More recent literacy studies, such as the Vai study by Scribner and Cole, “view literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society,” and Street’s own ideological model urges us to consider the power dynamics and tensions inherent in any society’s definitions and uses of literacy, concepts which I will be exploring more fully in later chapters (Street 433).

Theorists such as Ong and Goody consider writing as a technology that transforms individuals and cultures rather than as a technology used by those cultures for their own purposes; their view is broad, a “grand narrative.” The social turn in literacy studies, however, switched that focus around, inducing scholars to consider the impacts of social and cultural contexts on literacy usage within specific instances. This has given rise to the “little narratives,” or views into literacy events and practices within a particular community. Grand narratives, because of their larger, cultural focus, tended to find a great divide between oral and literate cultures, which led to an oral-literate dichotomy. The little narratives instead uncover “different mixes of orality and literacy” within actual practice (Street 436, emphasis mine).

Yet even after these later studies and theories, rhetorical historian George Kennedy, in his 1998 book Comparative Rhetoric, continues the traditional oral-literate binary and evokes the orality-literate evolutionary model by splitting the book into two parts, “Rhetoric in Societies Without Writing” and “Rhetoric in Ancient Literate Societies.” His reason for doing so was because the “invention of writing systems” was “a major stage in cultural evolution” (4). (Note that Kennedy places Native Americans in the “societies without writing” group.) Kennedy’s
book is innovative in that he considers the communication of animals as a type of rhetoric, but he then makes a “connecting link between animal communication and rhetoric as practiced in non-literate societies” (2). As Scott Lyons is quick to point out, this essentially equates “non-literate” or oral cultures with animals, placing them just above those rhetorical animals on Kennedy’s evolutionary scale (459-60). Further, continues Lyons, by calling Native Americans a “traditional oral culture,” Kennedy stereotypes them in two significant ways: first, this oral marking disregards Indians who were writing during the nineteenth century, the period from which Kennedy takes his oral rhetorical examples (and, I would add, it ignores contemporary Native American writers, such as critic Gerald Vizenor, memoirists/novelists N. Scott Momoday and Leslie Silko, poet Wendy Rose, and Scott Lyons himself); second, by ignoring this modern writing and by marking Native Americans as an oral culture, Kennedy situates Native Americans historically rather than considering them a living people (459). To view Native Americans only in an historical past rather than as a living, thriving culture perpetuates a highly damaging stereotype for it negates their very existence, while echoing the late nineteenth-century misguided perception that Native Americans were a dying race. Even more relevant to my own purposes, however, by including Native Americans in the non-writing group, Kennedy apparently disregards their pictographs as a form of writing.

I argue that this common stereotyping of Native Americans as an oral culture, as a culture without writing, has much to do with the exclusion of pictographs from considerations of writing. Walter Mignolo, in “Signs and Their Transmission: The Question of the Book in the New World,” argues that the concepts of writing and reading are culturally specific and that the colonial’s entrenched Eurocentric view of writing, which was tied to paper and the book form, affected the colonials’ understanding and recognition, or non-recognition, of indigenous forms of writing. To show how the colonial view developed, Mignolo traces the material and ideological history of the book and writing in Western thought through the Renaissance period. To the sixteenth-century Spanish, the Holy Bible was the divine word of God captured and expressed in the human form of the book; thus, books, conceived materially as alphabetic writing on bound paper, were viewed as “container[s] of knowledge” for understanding God’s ultimate truth expressed in the natural world (220). As such, books were the pathway to interpreting and understanding the world and God’s truth. The Spanish and the Amerindians, therefore, had different ways of knowing: “The Mexicas put the accent on the act of observing and telling out
loud the stories of what they were looking at (the movements of the sky or the black and the red ink). The Spanish stressed reading the word rather than reading the world, and made the letter the anchor of knowledge and understanding” (253, italics mine). Thus, the Spanish put their faith in the written, alphabetic text and judged (or misjudged or ignored) all other forms of writing by those standards. According to Mignolo, these Western conceptions of what constituted the book and writing led New World colonials to ignore non-paper markings, and so they did not recognize stone carvings or paintings on wood bark and pottery vessels (and I would add buffalo hide) as writing (227). Because of this rigid material and ideological understanding of writing and the book, colonials did not “inquire into different writing systems and sign carriers” and therefore did not recognize these other forms as legitimate (234).  

Today, this view still pervades strong-text theories of literacy and writing, and explains why strong-text theorists continue to ignore indigenous forms of writing: by focusing on the product, as Brandt shows they do, rather than on the sociocultural uses and intentions of writing, strong-text theorists disregard pictographs as a literate form and consider the cultures who used them as illiterate. In a similar vein, I would argue that Native American pictographs are overlooked as a form of writing because the stereotype of Native Americans as an oral culture leads to the conclusion that they would not have need of writing; they would instead require a mnemonic to help with oral recitation. For a culture viewed as oral, any such markings, especially markings that don’t fit the Western paradigm of alphabetic, speech-driven writing, will simply be dismissed as mnemonics without further study. Thus, Native American pictographs are never examined in detail by Goody, Ong, or others because they are assumed to be mnemonic devices for an oral people.

Yet, rather than being Ong’s “aides memoire” or Goody’s “mnemonic graphemes,” Native American pictographs were a conventionalized writing system that could be read and understood by others besides the text’s author. Art historian Karen Petersen, in Plains Indian Art from Fort Marion, recounts the picture-letters written and received by Plains Indian prisoners-of-war incarcerated in Fort Marion, Florida, from 1875 to 1878. These letters related such events as family births and deaths, the battle of the Little Big Horn, migrations, trips taken, and a final...

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4 As one example, to the Spanish, indigenous pictographs were considered illustrations for indigenous writing, but the Amerindians saw no distinction between writing and painting (Mignolo, “Signs” 223-225). According to Elizabeth Hill Boone, the Aztecs used the same word, tlacuilolizti, for “paint” and “write,” and Mignolo quotes Reent-Budet who states that the Mayans used the same verb stem, ts’ib, for painting, drawing, and writing (“Introduction” 3; “Afterword” 294).
buffalo hunt, all told through pictographic means. She quotes several times from Colonel Pratt’s memoirs about the “crude picture letters from home which, to them, were full of information” (qtd. in Petersen 28). Pratt elaborates on the picture-letters, “The contents were quite acceptable to us all, but more particularly to old Minimic. The letters were understood at once, by all the Cheyennes,” and “The Cheyennes have kept up a constant interchange of information in their rude picture way” (qtd. in Petersen 28-29). Sculptor Clark Mills, visiting the fort at the request of the Smithsonian, was present when several letters were received, and he reported that “The Indians have no letters [i.e., alphabet], their communication on paper being entirely by objects such as a house, horse, field of corn, buffalo hunt, &c. Each one of these objects signifies something, and the Indian reads it fluently and rapidly…” (qtd. in Petersen 53).

The form of this communication greatly interested Pratt, and, to illustrate their detail, he included in his memoir an 1877 newspaper article describing a picture-letter received by three of the Fort Marion Cheyenne prisoners (the chief Minimic, his son Howling Wolf, and Making Medicine). The letter was sent by Minimic’s wife who was living in Indian Territory. The newspaper article was written by a female Caucasian visitor to the fort who had conversed with Minimic and obtained the letter from him; it describes in detail the meaning of each symbol in the letter, including depictions of various family members, foot tracks, graves, and other conventionalized symbols (see Figure 1-3):

Manimic [sic] is informed that his son, (5) Buffalo Head, desires to come to him, but is held back by his mother (4) Shooting Buffalo. The olive branch in his hand conveys assurance of his love. Manimic’s [sic] daughter (6) Flying Dove and her young child Arrow, join in the greeting; also his daughter (7) Big Turtle, the belle of the tribe […]. Curly-Head (8) wife of Howling Wolf, has a young child, Little Turtle, named after his handsome aunt. Running Water (9) is the daughter of Manimic [sic] by another squaw, Shield (12) whom he afterwards repudiated, or in his own expressive words, “threw away.” […] Shield’s daughter, White Feather (13) is buried by her side, and the frequent tracks about their grave show that Running Water—whose attitude also betokens grief—goes often there to weep, though the single track which leads to the spot shows that she goes alone. Making Medicine’s two wives (10, 11) with his children go together to mourn at the grave of his dead child, exhibiting a state of harmony between his squaws which
must be very gratifying to the feelings of an absent husband. (Steele qtd. in R. Pratt 182-183)

After explaining each item, the article sums up the contents of the letter as follows:

Thus it will be seen that this letter conveys intelligence of three births, two of them males, as the faces are painted red; gives the names of the little ones; reports the ability to walk of Making Medicine’s oldest child, as her little tracks accompany the others to her sister’s grave; announces three deaths and the honors paid to the memory of the lost ones; gives assurance of the good health of the remaining parties represented; mentions particularly Buffalo Head’s desire to greet his father, and every face being turned in that direction, expresses a general desire on the part of the writers to see the distant prisoners.

(Steele qtd. in R. Pratt, 183)

By comparing this description to the picture-letter itself, shown in Figure 1-3, it becomes apparent that a great deal of information is compacted into a short space, and the native reader is able to abstract the appropriate meaning based on known conventions (for example, foot tracks, olive branch, red faces, position of figures).

Smithsonian ethnographer Garrick Mallery’s tale of a picture-letter received by Little-Man from his father Turtle-Following-His-Wife (Figure 1-4), clearly shows the ease with which these letters were understood by the Plains Indians:
The letter was evidently understood by Little-Man as he immediately called upon Dr. V. T. McGillycuddy, Indian agent at Pine Ridge Agency and was aware that the sum of $53 had been placed to his credit for the purpose of enabling him to pay his expenses in going the long journey to his father’s home in Indian Territory. Dr. McGillycuddy had by the same mail, received a letter from Agent Dyer, inclosing [sic] $53, and explaining the reason for its being sent, which enabled him also to understand the pictographic letter.

(K363)

Karen Petersen also recounts the use of pictographs by differing tribes to communicate with each other on the plains where “the conventional pictographic devices were, for the most part, universally employed and understood” (27). In one such incident, a band of Pawnee left a detailed pictograph on a log describing the “complex story” of how they wiped out a group of Cheyenne. A Sioux band, which later happened upon the log, read and understood the story and informed another group of Cheyenne who then went to read of the incident.

Clearly, then, in each of the above uses, the pictographs cannot be classified as memory aides since the person(s) reading and understanding the text was not present at the events discussed. Rather, non-authors could read them because the texts followed a set of conventions, or a syntax—conventions that were known by others sharing the same culture and awareness of that syntax. As a conventionalized means of communication, then, the pictographs must be classified as writing, but writing that is defined more broadly than the traditional Western-based
concept of writing as captured speech. Elizabeth Hill Boone, referring to the Nahuatl word, *tlacuiloliztli*, which means “to write” and “to paint,” asserts that “art and writing in Pre-Columbian America are largely the same thing” (“Introduction” 3). Her description of meaning making in Mesoamerican writing could be used to describe Plains Indian pictographic communication as well: “meaning is carried by pictorial and conventionalized images, by their relative placement, and by the contexts in which they participate” and the drawings “are intelligible to those who share a general cultural base even though they might speak different languages” (18-19). Based on this understanding, she then provides an expanded definition of writing as “the communication of relatively specific ideas in a conventional manner by means of permanent, visible marks” (15).

Though I find her definition quite helpful in broadening our concept of writing, the term “permanent” does not seem to apply when one considers black boards, writing in sand, and modern day deleted email and vanishing websites. Rather, building on Boone’s concepts as well as Bakhtin’s, I offer my own definition of writing for consideration as “conventionalized marks or signs whose meaning is understood within a particular social context.” With this broader definition, I attempt to highlight writing’s role in meaning making between people who share a standard set of rules and sociocultural contexts for conveying and negotiating that meaning. Clearly, then, as discussed here, Native American ledger art falls within my own or Boone’s expanded definition of writing and literacy.

But what are some of those rules, those conventions that helped diverse peoples convey and negotiate meaning on the nineteenth-century plains? Several art historians, anthropologists, and archeologists have described these pictographic conventions, a few of which I will detail here.\(^5\) The purpose of pictographs was first and foremost to communicate events, so, most importantly, realism and aesthetics were subordinate to communication of the message. Thus, as seen in Figure 1-5, items are not to scale—more important items are larger, less important ones smaller—and unnecessary details are excluded from the composition. Details of dress rather than facial features are used to identify individuals or tribes, so faces, often featureless, are drawn in profile, while torsos are given prominence through a full frontal view, which provides more room for recording the details of a person’s attire. Traditionally, pictographs are read from right

\(^5\) In addition, the Fort Marion prisoner Koba created a five-page dictionary showing the relationship between the English words he was learning and their pictographic counterparts.
to left, the hero being placed on the right, enemies or prey on the left. Name symbols above or below a figure, usually with a connecting line, specifically identify individuals, as do details of clothing and battle armament; similarly, dress and hair design indicate membership in a particular tribe. Tracks are used to show motion, relative numbers of animals or people, and even tense. Placement of objects can indicate distance or past tense. Wounds are indicated by blood pouring from the contact site. The extended legs of an animal indicate speed. Shorthand elements were also developed, including the drawing of horse’s heads (rather than entire bodies) to indicate a herd, while groups of arrows, bullets, or guns show relative numbers of people engaged in battle.

While many of these conventions derive from representations of what is being communicated, others—such as the indication of tense, number, and speed—approach more symbolic abstractions. As Derrida reminds us, all writing, including phonetic alphabetic writing, has representation at its roots:

The representative character of written communication—writing as picture, reproduction, imitation of its content—will be the invariable trait of all the progress to come. The concept of representation is indissociable here from the concepts of communication and expression that I have underlined in Condillac's text. Representation, certainly, will be complicated, will be given supplementary waystations and stages, will become the
representation of representation in hieroglyphic and ideographic writing, and then in phonetic-alphabetic writing, but the representative structure which marks the first stage of expressive communication, the idea/sign relationship, will never be suppressed or transformed. ("Signature" 313)

But for strong-text evolutionary theorists, the idea of abstraction is one element that sets “true” writing apart from representational forms. In discussing his evolutionary model, Gelb places mnemonics above pictographs (remember that he calls these descriptive-representational devices) because they are more conventionalized and abstracted. Since there is not a one-to-one correlation of object to symbol, mnemonics are not as representational as they move toward the abstraction of signs, wherein words are signified by symbols, rather than direct representation. And for Ong, Goody, and others, the phonetic alphabet is the highest form of writing because of its abstraction; for them, such abstraction removes language from the concrete world, rendering it objective and autonomous, decontextualized, thus providing the technological breakthrough that allowed the invention of logic, bureaucracy, and science (Brandt 23).

Though not a fully abstracted system such as the alphabet, Plains pictographs do contain a level of abstraction that goes beyond object representation, allowing higher-level concepts to be communicated. In *Plains Indian Art from Fort Marion*, Karen Petersen has compiled an extensive glossary of the symbols and conventions used by the Fort Marion prisoners in 1875-1878. While many of these indicate everyday objects, animals, and particulars of dress to identify tribal designation or non-native persons through more direct (though conventionalized) representations, other conventions fall in the realm of symbol and abstraction, and it is these I want to focus on here. As seen in Figure 1-6, consecutive footprints or hooves depict action in the past tense, while grouped footprints or hooves represent many men or horses, or standing in one spot a long time; a wavy line signifies something sacred or mysterious; an arbor indicates summer; a half circle indicates a defensive position in battle; lines coming from a mouth designate speech, while a drawing at the end of those lines represents the subject of that speech; and a tipi with the flaps partially raised designates a hot day.
In discerning pictures from “full” writing, or representation from convention and abstraction, Ong comes close to admitting Native American pictographs in his concept of “true” writing:

Pictures represent objects. A picture of a man and a house and tree of itself says nothing. If a proper code or set of conventions is supplied, it might; but a code is not picturable, unless with the help of another unpicturable code. Codes ultimately have to be explained by something more than pictures; that is, either in words or in a total human context, humanly understood. A script in the sense of true writing, as understood here, does not consist of mere pictures, of representations of things, but is a representation of an utterance, of words that someone says or is imagined to say. (84)

As shown above, Plains Indian pictographs even when representational are conventionalized, containing codes understood by tribes across the plains. More then “mere pictures,” the pictographs definitely represent utterance as we saw when Mah-to-toh-pa sat on his robe explaining the deeds represented on the hide. Since the pictographs are a conventionalized, “representation of an utterance,” Ong appears to come enticingly close to considering them as “true” writing; yet it is apparent from other statements that, for him, utterance most likely means “the exact words that the reader would generate from the text,” i.e., that the script recreates
speech exactly, which these non-phonetic pictographs obviously do not (84). Even so, the conventions and abstractions so obviously apparent in Plains Indian pictographs complicate Ong’s evolutionary theories and his placement of differing systems along a continuum.

Given this evidence of a conventionalized pictorial writing system co-existing with a Western alphabetic one, we must seriously consider Walter Mignolo’s concept of “coevolutionary histories of writing” (“Afterword” 293). Rather than holding to one Western-based evolutionary model of writing that culminates in the Greek alphabet, Mignolo asks us to accept that alternative literacy practices—not necessarily tied to speech yet equally appropriate and suited to the needs of those cultures—developed and existed alongside the Western alphabet and book; further, during the colonial period, these non-Western forms both coexisted and “coalesced” with alphabetic ones, eventually transforming or even disappearing under colonial pressure (293, 300). Following Brian Street’s argument that “[a]n understanding of literacy requires detailed, in-depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings,” we must, as Street says, “be wary of assuming a single literacy where we may simply be imposing assumptions derived from our own cultural practices onto other people’s literacies” (430). Rather than privileging phonetic-alphabetic systems and ignoring the socio-cultural contexts of literacy usage and development, we must step out from behind our Western lens and consider alternative forms of literacy, other literacies highly suitable for the specific context and situation in which they were used. By acknowledging and understanding such alternative literacies, we could, in the words of Mignolo, develop “alternative ways of knowing which may impinge on our current conceptions of knowledge, understanding, and the politics of intellectual inquiry” (“Afterword” 310). By thus broadening our understanding of meaning making and embracing other ways of knowing the world, we could perhaps learn to “read the world” as well as the word, which, in turn, might lead to a deeper understanding of our shared place in that world.

Within the next chapter, I will explore the ways in which this alternative literacy practice of pictographic writing was highly integrated with, and was used to make specific meaning within, the warrior culture of nineteenth-century American Plains Indians.
The Writing of War:
Ledger Art as the Written Counterpart to the Oral Coup Tale Tradition

“...an understanding of literacy requires detailed in-depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings.”

—Brian Street, “The New Literacy Studies”

During the 1980s, the social turn in literacy studies encouraged scholars to understand the “social meanings of literacy,” or the real uses to which literacy was being applied by “ordinary people in ordinary activities” and what that use meant to them (Szwed 422). This study of individual social practice, or “little narratives,” involves the examination of real cases and real examples, asking such specific questions as what are the literacy practices of a particular group or individual, who uses them, how are they used, when are they used, to what purposes are they applied, and finally what are the effects, results, or impacts of that use. On the other hand, theorists of the earlier, monolithic “grand narratives” (such as Havelock, Ong, Goody, and Watt), analyze broad historical and cultural data. They then generalize their findings to argue that the acquisition of literacy produces significant cognitive changes in the individuals of literate societies, and this frees up mental energy that leads to major cultural changes such as the growth of philosophy, classification systems, science, abstract thinking, and bureaucracy. Such “great divide” or “great leap” theories separate literate from preliterate cultures, setting up a dichotomy of written and oral on an evolutionary scale, which I described in Chapter 1.

However, scholars such as Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole take issue with such grand narratives, arguing that “[i]nferences about cognitive changes in individuals are shaky if they rest only on the analysis of cultural phenomena;” in other words, it’s not good science to impart specific consequences from general data (125). Instead, their study of the literacy practices of the West African Vai focused on the specific consequences of the specific practices of literate and non-literate individuals from the same community. Contrary to the great divide assertions that literacy leads to the development of generalized classificatory or logical skills, their study found “no evidence of marked differences in performance on logical and classificatory tasks between nonschooled literates and nonliterate” and “no evidence that writing promotes ‘general mental abilities’” (132, 136). Although their data showed that “reading and writing may in fact promote specific language-processing and cognitive skills,” these consequences are highly specific to the

6 For an excellent discussion of grand narratives vs. little narratives in the literacy debate, see Beth Daniell’s “Narratives of Literacy: Connecting Composition to Culture.”
particular script and its particular uses. In other words, “specific uses promote specific skills” and, therefore, cannot be generalized to all individuals or to explain major cultural phenomena (134, 136).

Shirley Brice Heath’s detailed ten-year study of an all-black community in the Piedmont region of North Carolina refutes the oral-written dichotomy of the great divide for she discovered that this particular community mixes oral and textual practices within the same literacy event. For this group, reading is a social act in which text is verbally dissected and debated with other community members in order to arrive at understanding; in other situations, most notably in church, text serves as the jumping off point for spontaneous oral improvisations. Heath concludes that this community’s literacy practices do not exist somewhere on a continuum from full literacy to non-literacy, but rather could be viewed as being on “two continua, the oral and the written” (460-461). Echoing Szwed, Heath argues it is necessary to look at a community’s particular situation and its actual uses of literacy in various domains or spheres—including work, family, religion, legal, and economic domains—in order to determine how literacy is viewed, used, and valued within that culture.

These and other “little narrative” studies, by their focus on individual practices in specific settings, have shown that different cultures use literacy in different ways and have different values and expectations regarding their use of literacy. In short, people use literacy to fit their own cultural and social needs. Since the uses, values, and effects of literacy are specific to each culture, it is important to examine specific instances of literacy use for, as Brian Street asserts, “an understanding of literacy requires detailed in-depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings” (430).8

Following in this tradition, I wish to examine Native American pictographic literacy practice within its specific cultural context to show how that practice was integral to and reinforced Plains Indian culture and identity. Because that culture is rich and complex and because it transformed over the years—most dramatically and rapidly from the mid-seventeenth to late eighteenth centuries, the period I will be exploring—my review of the culture and its

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7 Heath defines a literacy event as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes” or as “any action sequence involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or comprehension of print plays a role” (445).

8 Street pushes us even further to examine not only these individual social practices but to become “more sensitive to social context” in order to uncover the ideological nature of literacy, to “recognize the central role of power relations in literacy practices” (430). I will be examining power relations in the following chapters.
history must be regrettably brief. I will begin with an overview of the Plains pictographic
tradition to about 1850, followed by a description of the geographic area and the groups under
discussion. I will then provide background on those elements of the culture most integral to the
nineteenth-century pictographic literacy practices of the Plains Indians—the horse, intertribal
warfare, and the warrior. Against this background, it will then be possible, by examining
individual pieces of ledger art, to discuss the ways in which these literacy practices reflected and
reinforced that culture.

The Plains Indians have had a long tradition of pictographic writing, beginning at least as
eyear as 1000 AD, which has changed and transformed over the centuries along with their
culture. Archeologist James D. Keyser, who has extensively studied rock art of the Northwestern
Plains and Columbia Plateau, has shown a transition in rock art drawing traditions from
ceremonial to more biographic forms during the period from 1000 to 1850 AD. His more recent
work with the *Five Crows Ledger*, a collection of thirteen pages of ledger art drawn by two
Flathead Indians in the early 1840s, indicates a connection between those rock art traditions and
eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Plains Indian hide painting and ledger art; from that evidence,
he asserts that hide painting and ledger art “emerged” from the rock art tradition (5).

Between 1000 and 1600 AD, a period which Keyser terms the Late Prehistoric
Ceremonial Rock Art period, Native Americans carved or painted figures on rock faces
throughout the northern plains and Rocky Mountain valleys. Keyser believes these works were
executed for ceremonial purposes related to vision quests for they depict animal figures and
human figures carrying large decorated shields, both important elements of a warrior’s vision
(Figure 2-1). The stylistic conventions that distinguish this period are V-shaped necks and
rectangular bodies for humans and curving boat-shaped forms for animals; humans hold
decorated shields or weapons and are drawn in full frontal view, often with upraised arms, a
posture which Keyser notes is “used in art throughout the world to indicate prayer, supplication,
or ceremonial dancing;” all figures are static, unmoving and unrelated to each other (Keyser 7-8).

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9 Given the perishable nature of hides and paper, I would prefer to state that, rather than evolving or emerging from
this earlier tradition, biographic writing on hides, and later on paper, more likely transformed with this ancient rock
art tradition. The earlier examples, having disintegrated, are simply no longer with us.
10 Prior to becoming warriors, young men would embark on quests of fasting and prayer to receive spiritual power,
or war medicine, in the form of a vision from a sacred helper or guardian who would strengthen, guide, and protect
them in battle. Symbols from that vision were drawn on the warrior’s shield and an animal sacred to the individual
was also often revealed. As seen in Figure 1, both of these elements are highlighted in the early Ceremonial period
rock art.
From 1600 to 1700, a transition period which Keyser calls Protohistoric, the content begins to include some action and event telling, but humans and animals are still drawn in their characteristic ceremonial period forms (V-shaped necks for humans and boat forms for animals).

By 1720, horses and guns are depicted (the same era when they began to appear more widely on the plains), and by around 1750, the Biographic tradition is firmly established—exemplified by a preponderance of horse and gun images, more naturalistic human and animal forms, and “story line” conventions involving interactive figures depicting acts of bravery such as hand to hand combat and horse stealing as shown in Figure 2-2 (Keyser 7, 10). A further modification within the Biographic tradition occurred after 1835, distinguished by more realistic and detailed figures; such changes reflect the influence of white artists with whom Native painters were coming into contact at that time, as well as the additional control provided by western artistic mediums such as pen and crayon. (This transition can be seen by comparing Figure 2-2 to Figure 2-3.) Citing thousands of biographic scenes found on the rocks of cliffs and caves, and on hides, leather, and paper, Keyser claims that “Biographic art became the predominant art form on the Northwestern Plains,” superseding the earlier Ceremonial style (71).
Besides rock art, this Biographic tradition is also found on hide paintings dating from approximately 1750—in the form of buffalo robes, shirts, and tipis—and then, after 1830 or so, on paper as well. These hide and paper pictographs follow the same transition seen in the Early to Late Biographic rock art period (that is, a move to more realistic, detailed figures). No examples of the earlier Ceremonial tradition exist on hide paintings; yet, since the early known hide paintings have conventions similar to those in the same period of rock art and because the transition from early to late biographic style on hide follows the same transition found on rock art (compare Figure 2-4 to Figure 2-3), it is reasonable to assume that Native Americans executed paintings on hide during the Late Prehistoric and Protohistoric stages as well, and that their absence is attributable only to their perishable form (Keyser 9). Following this line of reasoning, then, hide painting can be assumed to be as ancient a tradition as the earlier known rock art.

Native American artifacts were highly valued by western society, especially in the late nineteenth century when whites considered Native Americans “a vanishing race.” Therefore, artifacts from the eighteenth century and later were collected, often by soldiers or ethnologists, and preserved in museums or personal collections throughout the world. It is ironic, as Janet Berlo points out, that the material products of this culture were so highly prized, often by the very people—soldiers and well-meaning reformists—who were working to eradicate that culture (“Drawing” 13). Yet it is perhaps only because of this very paradox that we can study these historical artifacts today.
The evolution of this Biographic tradition with its new content coincides with major cultural changes among the Plains Indians, brought about by the arrival of horses and guns in the eighteenth century, which led to prosperity but also to a new style of warfare. It is exactly these cultural changes—guns, horses, and increased intertribal raiding—that are depicted in the content of the newer literacy practice. New content indicates a change in purpose. What was the new purpose reflected in the movement from static ceremonial to event-oriented depictions, and what caused it? To what ends was this newer form of literacy being applied? Specifically, who were the people who produced such writing and how did the writing affect them and their way of life? To answer these questions—to understand how these specific literacy practices were an integral part of this unique culture—it is necessary to examine the specifics of the culture, the cultural changes that occurred as the pictographic tradition changed, and the uses to which the culture applied this form of literacy.

Because the concept of place is so important in Native American culture, I feel this discussion must begin with a solid grounding in the geography and landscape of the Plains region. Against this backdrop, I will position another important concept, tribal identity, briefly

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12 For a discussion of place and its central importance in Native American spirituality, see Joel W. Martin’s *The Land Looks After Us.*
outlining the various peoples who called the Plains home. I think it is impossible to discuss Plains Indian culture without an understanding of two of its most important elements, both animals, so my discussion must include the buffalo and the horse. I will devote a major portion of this background discussion to warfare, the Plains Indian warrior society, and the importance of coup tales since biographic pictographs are, in fact, the written version of this oral tradition.

The Great Plains, that vast semi-arid grassland running through the middle of the United States and Canada, stretches on the east from the Missouri River down through Texas and westward across to the Rocky Mountain foothills. Zitkala-Sa, a Santee Sioux who lived in the Missouri River region of the Dakotas in the late 1870s, describes the “great circular horizon of the Dakota prairies” and “the tall grasses, over which the wind blew and rolled off in long shadowy waves;” it was a gently rolling land of “rugged bluffs and round-topped hills” full of “cloud shadows which drifted about on the waving yellow of long-dried grasses” (70, 87). Her description certainly fits the common perception of the open plains, yet the vastness of the Plains makes it a land of extremes: seasons of intense cold and heavy snow in the north, hot arid conditions in the south; tree-covered mountain foothills and valleys on the west transition into open, treeless grass-covered prairies, changing again to deep forests on the eastern edges, with bands of woods lining major rivers and tributaries throughout the region.

The Plains have been continually inhabited for over ten thousand years; archeological evidence indicates 11,000 year-old hunting camps in the southern and western plains, and some argue that humans lived here 28,000 years ago or even longer (Fowler 4). Through the eons, these big game hunters adapted to the evolving game and changing environmental conditions, migrating northward with the herds as the area became hotter and drier. Other groups settled in the woodland borders of the east in hunter-gatherer societies where they subsisted on various sources of game and gathered diverse types of wild vegetation and roots. Around 900 AD, the groups inhabiting the eastern borders of the Plains, on the rivers and nearer the eastern forests, began to develop a more sedentary hunter-farmer lifestyle than the nomadic bison hunters on the northern plains. They planted small fields of corn and beans along the streambeds and entered the nearby plains to hunt the bison in season. It was the descendents of one of these eastern tribes, the Caddo, who met and fought with De Soto, coming from the east, in 1541; Coronado, traveling from the Southwest with Apache guides the following year, encountered another of these groups, the Wichita.
The majority of modern plains tribes migrated to the area before or during the late seventeenth century. By the end of the eighteenth century, following a few additional migrations and displacements, the modern indigenous peoples whom whites would later classify as Plains Indians—and their distinctive way of life—were generally in place. After those initial encounters with the Spanish in the mid-sixteenth century, Plains Indians had little contact with whites until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Except for interactions with a few traders and trappers—French and Spanish in the south and French and English in the north—the Plains Indians were generally left on their own undisturbed. The impact of white culture, however, in the form of trade goods and deadly diseases, both of which entered the Plains through intertribal trade routes far in advance of whites themselves, was felt widely throughout the plains, usually with devastating consequences, from the late seventeenth century on.

Though vast and generally empty—in 1780, ethnologist James Mooney estimated a total Plains population of 130,000, and ethnohistorian John Ewers claims that in 1800 the density of the Indian population on the Plains “numbered considerably less than one person per square mile”—those wide plains were far from open, even in the days before EuroAmericans began arriving en masse (166). For the Plains was a volatile area—growing native populations coupled with EuroAmerican expansion in the east continued to push groups westward during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries just as white settlers were also beginning to move west. The result was a domino effect of movement, coupled with increasing hostilities. Beginning in the mid-1700s, eastern tribes such as the Sioux and Cheyenne began advancing westward, pushing existing Plains tribes such as the Shoshone and Pawnee further west or south. Tribes from the southeastern United States, the so-called Five Civilized Tribes of Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole, were forcibly removed from the East by the US government into

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13 For more on the early migrations and settlements of the tribes who would eventually make up the group known as Plains Indians, see Ewers and Fowler.

14 Manufactured trade goods, though they initially made life easier for indigenous people, eventually led to dependence and, in the case of guns, to more deadly warfare. The impact of disease on native populations and the resulting changes to the culture cannot be overstated. Some estimates of deaths during the widespread 1779-83 smallpox outbreak are as high as half the entire indigenous population. Utley provides an estimate of a 70% drop in total Native American population on the continent between 1492 and 1850, from 5 million to 1.5 million. For more on the impact of trade and disease on native populations, see Ewers and Calloway.

15 Mooney’s estimates are considered the most reliable, but as with other early estimates they are problematic because of their arbitrary nature; such estimates of Native American populations were developed through various models such as counting the number of lodges/tipis in a camp and then applying an assumed family size for each abode, or multiplying the number of warriors by an arbitrary factor (Ewers 84). It was not until 1875 that the first official census of Native Americans in Indian Territory was conducted in order to establish ration rolls.
Indian Territory (Arkansas and Oklahoma), crowding tribes who had been living in those regions for centuries.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, twenty-two to twenty-seven different tribes (depending on who does the counting), separated into multiple bands each with its own chief, vied for the choicest hunting grounds and most habitable landscapes. Figure 2-5 shows the general tribal territories in the early to mid nineteenth century. But those boundaries were certainly not hard and demarcated, as one group often encroached on another’s territory in search of game and buffalo, and the boundaries themselves changed over the years as stronger tribes edged out weaker ones. Soon the boundaries would change drastically by conditions largely outside the Indians’ control.

Figure 2-5. Map of Plains Indian Tribal Boundaries During Early to Mid-1800s

Although many of these tribes shared common cultural elements and spoke languages belonging to the same family group, variation in specific beliefs and practices among the tribes was, and is, significant; therefore, broad generalizations must be made cautiously. While it is not possible, nor desirable, to define a representative “Native American,” it is possible to state that the Plains tribes fell into two broad categories based on general outward lifestyle. The larger and more Western group, including the Sioux, Cheyenne, Blackfoot, Arapaho, and Kiowa, were nomadic hunters who followed the buffalo through the seasons (initially on foot, later on horseback) and lived in easily transportable tipis. The eastern group, which included the Mandan,
Hidatsa, Arikara, Pawnee, and Omaha who lived along river beds, were semi-sedentary farmer-hunters who had permanent summer and winter villages of large earthen lodges, cultivated extensively, hunted smaller game, and ventured out onto the nearby grasslands in the spring and fall seasons for fairly short periods to hunt the buffalo—sometimes moving only a day or two onto the plains as needed to replenish meat or for as long as a few months during the more productive fall hunt. This group, having been on the plains for hundreds of years, were well-established farmers; the Pawnee, for instance, grew eight kinds of beans, ten types of corn, and seven varieties of squash and pumpkin (Calloway 56).

Although many of the tribes belonged to similar language families (see Table 2-1), each tribe spoke its own dialect. Intertribal warfare didn’t recognize language families, for those from related languages were often at war (for example, Blackfoot against Cree, Sioux against Mandan and Crow), while alliances against common enemies often developed across language barriers, such as between the Assiniboine and Cree or Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara (Ewers 4). Additionally, tribes of different languages and dialects interacted for trade, and their nomadic lifestyles brought them into others’ ranges.

Table 2-1. Table of Plains Indian Language Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Family</th>
<th>Tribes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algonquian</td>
<td>Cheyenne, Arapaho, Gros Ventre, Blackfoot, Cree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athapaskan</td>
<td>Apache, Kiowa-Apache</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caddoan</td>
<td>Pawnee, Arikara, Wichita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiowa-Tanoan</td>
<td>Kiowa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salishan</td>
<td>Flathead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siouan</td>
<td>In 5 major groupings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sioux or Dakota—various dialects including Santee (Dakota), Teton (Lakota), Yankton, and Assiniboine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Hidatsa, Mandan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Crow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Chiwere (includes the Oto, Iowa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Dhegiha (includes the Ponca, Omaha, Kansa, Osage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonkawan</td>
<td>Tonkawa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uto-Aztecan</td>
<td>Shoshone and Comanche</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Britannica, Encyclopedia, Encyclopædia, Tonkawa

Obviously, some form of intertribal communication was necessary, which led to the development of Plains Indian sign language and the conventionalized system of pictographic writings under discussion here. While I am going to focus on a specific type of pictographic writing—biographic art painted on hide, leather, and paper—tribes also used pictographic

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16 Includes Piegan, Blood, and Blackfoot tribes.
17 Sometimes included in the Columbia Plateau rather than Plains Indian group. For a persuasive argument on including the Flatheads in the Plains Indian group based on their cultural similarities, see Keyser.
writing for other communication including letters to family and tribal members, rights of passage, histories, and notices to other tribes about events in the area (Petersen 27). The important point here is that conventionalized pictographic writing was perhaps the most efficient and effective means of written communication in an area inhabited by closely-interacting groups, speaking twenty-six different languages and dialects.

Regardless of whether a tribe had a nomadic or more sedentary lifestyle, regardless of the language family to which it belonged, the buffalo, *tahtonka*, was sacred to all Plains Indians and central to their life and economy. As the spiritual and physical lifeblood of Plains Indian culture and economy, this honored animal supplied not only their main source of food, but its hide provided clothing and shelter, the bones, sinews, and organs were used to make tools and weapons, and even the excrement was used for fuel and a ritualistic incense. As described by Old Lady Horse, a Kiowa,

Everything the Kiowa had came from the buffalo. Their tipis were made of buffalo hides, so were their clothes and moccasins. They ate buffalo meat. Their containers were made of hide, or of bladders or stomachs. The buffalo were the life of the Kiowas. Most of all, the buffalo was part of the Kiowa religion. A white buffalo calf must be sacrificed in the Sun Dance. The priests used parts of the buffalo to make their prayers when they healed people or when they sang to the powers above. (qtd. in Calloway 129)

For generations, the foot-bound Plains tribes prayed, sang, and danced to the Great Spirit to bring their life source, the buffalo, near. When they happened upon a herd, they would either surreptitiously kill a few outliers each day or stampede the entire herd over a cliff, depending on their need. Although the eastern farming tribes perhaps developed a more stable subsistence, and while tribes from both groups met to trade the spoils of the hunt for harvest goods, both were dependent on the buffalo for their main livelihood. When herds were not near, it was possible to go hungry for long periods of time, especially during the harsh winters or the following springs before vegetation had grown. Charles Eastman describes periods of famine among his people when snows were too deep to hunt or game could not be found, as in this example:

I once passed through one of these hard springs when we had nothing to eat for several days. I well remember the six small birds which constituted the breakfast for six families one morning; and then we had not dinner or supper to follow! […] Soon after this, we
came into a region where buffaloes were plenty, and hunger and scarcity were forgotten.

(17)

All this changed dramatically with the arrival of the horse. First introduced through trade during the seventeenth century, a wave of ponies moved from the Spanish southwest to the east and northeast and, by the mid to late 1700s, all tribes boasted at least a few of the animals.\(^\text{18}\) The horse made possible the “golden age” of the Plains tribes—that short period on the Great Plains between the arrival of the horse and the arrival of increasing numbers of white soldiers and settlers—from approximately 1750 to 1850. With the mobility provided by the horse, tribes were no longer dependent on the buffalo coming to them, but instead could follow the great herds and hunt at will. Since the buffalo was the mainstay of the Plains Indian lifestyle and economy, this ability to find the herds more easily transformed the Indians’ lifestyle from a cycle of feast and famine to year-round prosperity and plenty. With their most important natural resource now easily accessible, the tribes prospered, populations grew, and life was good. As one chief later remarked to a trader, “In my young days […] we knew no wants” (qtd. in Calloway 5). The horse not only helped bands follow and hunt the herds, but, as beasts of burden, they also made those moves easier, allowing families to build larger tipis, whose additional weight would have been impossible for the earlier pack dogs or people to tow. Such innovations certainly transformed and eased daily living. As Pretty Shield, a Crow female, described this period: “Ahh, I came into a happy world. There was always fat meat, glad singing, and much dancing in our villages. Our people’s hearts were then as light as breath-feathers” (qtd. in Calloway 37).

Increased mobility also meant larger hunting ranges and more interaction with other tribes, both friendly and hostile.

Up to now I have alluded to stronger tribes and weaker tribes, of migrations edging others out of traditional territories, of new weapons of war. Let me restate that, although the Plains were a vast region, by the end of the eighteenth century, the choicest areas were becoming crowded and resources were being depleted. The advent of the late eighteenth century hide trade caused Indians, for the first time, to kill more buffalo than they needed for their own subsistence and so the herds were being depleted even before the rapid and planned extermination of the buffalo by the US government in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The resulting contraction of

\(^\text{18}\) During the heyday of the horse period, it was not uncommon for a wealthy tribe to have twenty-five or so horses per family, including one per person to ride during camp moves; multiple pack animals to carry tipis, supplies, and food; one or more war ponies and hunting ponies per warrior; plus a few yearlings (Haines 113-114).
hunting grounds brought competing, “traditionally hostile tribes” closer together and increased competition for those depleting resources (Ewers 57). Tribes also attempted to move into favorable trading routes to obtain guns, horses and other commodities that added to their strength and wealth while keeping others out of those same routes (Calloway 38). The stage was set for increased conflict, and, indeed, war and raiding among the tribes accelerated. At the same time, the introduction of the horse and gun made such warfare faster and more powerful, increasing the number of casualties (Ewers 170). Ironically, as firepower increased with the possession of guns, body protection decreased as the shift from foot to horseback resulted in smaller, lighter shields and less body covering in order to reduce the load on the horse and increase speed and agility (Ewers 170). The overall result of these combined factors was that intertribal warfare increased while becoming more deadly.

Warfare had been an integral part of Plains Indian life for centuries; archeologists have found evidence of fortifications around pre-Columbian villages along the Missouri River, and the artists Catlin and Bodmer drew and described such defenses during their early 1830s visits among the Hidatsa and Mandan in that region (Ewers 167). The shield-carrying human figures depicted on late prehistoric rock art described earlier also indicate evidence of early combat. Over the centuries, the volume, intensity, and fallout from warfare increased as competition for fewer and fewer resources intensified, concurrent with the introduction of guns and horses in the eighteenth century.19

Although traditional hostilities ran deep and raids were often conducted for revenge of old blood, the reasons for most warfare were economic—tribes fought to secure better hunting grounds and trade routes, to capture women and children, and most importantly to steal horses and weapons. In fact, because of the horse’s great impact on a tribe’s standard of living and wealth, horse raids were the most common type of warfare in the nineteenth century (Ewers 171). Intertribal raids were such a reality of daily living that Native Americans learned from a young age how to react under surprise attack. Charles Eastman explains that his uncle used to

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19 Although both the horse and gun greatly changed and advanced Plains Indian culture, the gun’s relative importance to warfare can be seen from the following example. The Shoshoni—the first Northern Plains tribe to acquire horses—used their advantage to move eastward from the Rockies, driving back the horseless Blackfeet. The Blackfeet then obtained guns and began to win battles over the stunned Shoshoni who had never before seen such weapons; allied with Cree and Assiniboine who were also armed with guns, the Blackfeet were able to drive the Shoshoni back into the Rockies of Wyoming (Calloway 41-47).
give sudden war whoops over my head in the morning while I was sound asleep. He expected me to leap up with perfect presence of mind, always ready to grasp a weapon of some sort and to give a shrill whoop in reply. [...] Often he would vary these tactics by shooting off his gun just outside of the lodge while I was yet asleep, at the same time giving blood-curdling yells. After a time I became used to this. (57)

Robert H. Lowie, an anthropologist who worked extensively with the Crow—that tribe so embattled on every side that they made an early alliance with the US government for protection—said that war for the Crow was “not the concern of a class nor even of the male sex, but of the whole population, from cradle to grave” (qtd. in Calloway 78). Warfare was an act of tribal honor, of personal glory and prestige, and even at times of tribal survival.

By the late eighteenth century, Plains Indian culture had developed into a full warrior society with an extensive set of beliefs, customs, and rituals related to success in battle. Males were prepared for their warrior role from a young age. As Charles Eastman tells us,

All boys were expected to endure hardship without complaint. In savage warfare, a young man must, of course, be an athlete and used to undergoing all sorts of privations. He must be able to go without food and water for two or three days without displaying any weakness, or to run for a day and a night without any rest. He must be able to traverse a pathless and wild country without losing his way either in the day or night time. He cannot refuse to do any of these things if he aspires to be a warrior. (56)

Eastman also tells how, to test his courage in preparation for the warrior’s life, his uncle would send him off alone to find water whenever they reached a new, unknown camp area. Citing the possibility of wild beasts or hostile Indians in the area, or a myriad of other dangers lurking in the mind of a young boy alone in the dark, Eastman said, “Imagine how I felt! But I wished to be a brave man as much as a white boy desires to be a great lawyer or even President of the United States” (58).

Hardship and bravery, then, were the hallmarks of a fine warrior, and those qualities helped develop his reputation. Because leadership was achieved through personal influence and reputation rather than being conferred through familial or political lines, building one’s reputation was every warrior’s objective, and in a warrior society, reputation was built through acts of bravery. Because of the importance, the very criticality, of these brave deeds for
establishing rank, each tribe developed a highly regulated system for recognizing acts of bravery—the counting of coup.

Counting coup—striking or touching a live enemy rather than killing him—was considered by many tribes as the bravest deed and highest honor for a warrior. Although the word *coup* itself comes from the French “to strike a blow,” other forms of bravery such as shooting the enemy, stealing horses, and scalping also counted as coup, and, in some tribes, being the first, or one of the first four, to touch a dead enemy counted as well (Brumble 23). Figuratively or literally, then, all of these forms struck a blow to the enemy. Each tribe had their own ranking system. For example, the Cheyenne ranked coup in the following order: (1) tapping an enemy with the coup stick, (2) capturing a shield, (3) capturing a gun, and (4) scalping; while the Omaha ranking was slightly different: (1) tapping with the coup stick, (2) killing, (3) scalping, and (4) decapitating (Brumble 25-26). The Ponca included horse stealing in their list of acceptable coup, and they differentiated between various types of coup taps—touching an unwounded enemy was the most honorable act, but tapping a wounded or dead enemy also counted, though with decreasingly less honor (Brumble 25-26).

The number and type of coup gave a warrior his status, and thus coups were the basis for achieving leadership positions. In many tribes, such as the Kiowa, accumulating coup helped a warrior move up within four established ranks of honor (Brumble 27). Because of the strong belief in personal freedom, a value found in all tribes, warriors could choose whether to join a raid or not; therefore, it was a leader’s personal influence, rather than force or a sense of duty, that led a warrior to follow him into battle. And, it was only a leader who had previously performed bravely and successfully who could win the trust of others to join his war party (Brumble 27). Therefore, to gain that trust and influence, it was essential to every warrior that his deeds be known and recognized by all.

Yet, because of a coup’s significance to establishing status, a warrior could only count what had been “recognized and graded” as coup by the tribe (Brumble 25). Strong social mores stopped warriors from claiming coup they had not rightfully earned, and specific procedures were followed for recognizing and grading each coup. When a raiding party returned, the village crier would announce each warrior’s coup and these warriors would be invited to the tribal council to recount their feats; there, others would vote whether the coup counted and to which grade it belonged, or in some cases whether the coup was actually someone else’s. Because
coups were sometimes hotly contested, warriors had to have proof of the coup, either a witness or a trophy such as a scalp or weapon. Older warriors continued the witness practice well into the reservation period—white ethnologists taking down stories from elders noticed that a companion was always present to corroborate the story, to add to or correct it if wrong. This cultural defense against fraudulent claims was so ingrained that evidence can be seen in later first-person written accounts in which an author includes statements such as “The Hunkpapas saw me do this” or “These are my deeds, as recognized by the Dakota warriors” (Brumble 51-52, 54). The tradition also applies in biographic pictographs in that no one would draw an exploit upon their robe or in their ledger that was not verifiable for, as George Catlin remarked, “it would not be reputable, or even safe to life, for a warrior to wear upon his back the representations of battles he never had fought; professing to have done what every child in the village would know he never had done” (148). Once a coup was accepted by the tribe, however, the warrior was free to document his coup both verbally and in writing, and this was done through the coup tale.

Not meant as entertainment, coup tales were recited to gain prestige, to accumulate social capital. As a list of accomplishments, they served as the warrior’s resume, his res gestae (Brumble 28). To that end, the number and type of coup, not the person’s storytelling abilities, are what mattered, and so only those details significant to identifying the coup were included, making the tales spare and brief. The few details provided delineate one act from another and help to identify the grade to which the coup belonged. Superfluous information was removed, as shown in the following example taken down in 1919 by anthropologist Pliny Earle Goddard from Eagle-Ribs, a renowned Sarsi warrior:

The two tribes, Blackfoot and Sarsi, went to fight the Cree who had built and were occupying a fort. During the fight a Cree was seen lying (dead). Then I with a Blackfoot old man caught hold of the body. I tore one side of his scalp and stabbed him in the back many times, [sic] while I was stabbing him with a knife the Cree were shooting at me [sic] they did not hit me. On this account I am called a chief. (qtd. in Brumble 24)

This unemotional straightforward account is not embellished with the sound of bullets, shouts, or chaos in the middle of the melee, nor a description of the Cree fort, dialogue, or even the day’s
weather conditions, which one might expect to hear in a story told for entertainment purposes.\textsuperscript{20} The storyteller informs us only of those elements most important to identifying and grading the coup: (1) the players involved—Blackfeet and Sarsi against the Cree; (2) the situation—the Blackfoot and Sarsi attacked the Cree who were living in a fort (this point was likely included to indicate the Cree’s superior defensive position in the battle, thus increasing the dangerousness of the feat); (3) the actions important to the grading of the coup—scalping and stabbing an enemy who had already been killed, done in the midst of heavy enemy fire without being wounded; and (4) the significance of the coup—the conferring of chiefly title to Eagle-Ribs.

A warrior’s coup established his identity in his tribe and his personal identity as well. David Brumble, who has made an extensive study of Native American autobiographies, claims that Native Americans of that period “conceiv[ed] of their lives as the sum total of their adult deeds” (15). When asked to describe their lives for as-told-to narratives, warriors typically recited only their list of coup tales; childhood memories and stories were excluded and only supplied at the white amanuensis’ prompting, or in some cases not at all (Brumble 49-53, 59). To the warrior, it was only the adult deeds that mattered, that created identity. As Yellow Wolf said of his youth, “It is not right for me to tell of my own growing-up life. That does not belong to history” (qtd. in Brumble 49). A warrior, then, was known by his deeds, specifically his adult deeds. In fact, a brave feat was often the impetus for bestowing a warrior’s name, as in the case of the chief Mah-to-toh-pa, or Four Bears, who in one battle was said to have charged his enemy like four bears, thus earning his new name (Catlin 154).\textsuperscript{21}

In a warrior society, where the career choices for men were limited to warrior or medicine man, most men’s reputation and prestige, their very identity, depended on their prowess and courage in battle. Thus, the necessity to proclaim one’s coup was strong—and so proclaim they did. The Cheyenne, for one, had more than a hundred ritualized occasions for ceremoniously recounting coup tales (Brumble 29). In various tribes, coup tales were often recounted and performed during the Sun Dance ceremony, as described in Chapter 1. Warriors sometimes recited coup to taunt the enemy before battle, and, at least in one case, coups were the

\textsuperscript{20}David Brumble includes examples of more embellished tales under his category of “Informal Autobiographical Tales” which were told for entertainment or oral histories. These tales are longer, and include dialogue, emotions, minor characters, and activities leading up to the main point of the story.

\textsuperscript{21}A Plains Indian’s name often changed throughout his or her lifetime to reflect particularly telling events. For more on this tradition and its significance in the culture, see Hertha D. Wong’s “Plains Indian Names and ‘the Autobiographical Act’.”
criteria for settling a legal dispute when one warrior recited his long list of coup causing the other person to defer to his higher status (Brumble 29). A great warrior’s reputation was often well-known in other tribes, and so it was possible for a warrior to obtain more prestige by counting coup on an especially respected enemy, someone who had accumulated a great deal of coup himself (Brumble 29).

Besides recounting one’s exploits to others through the recitation of coup tales, what better way to advertise than to wear those accomplishments openly for all to see? And warriors did just that through their literacy practice of pictographic writing: as another way to declare their brave deeds to others in the community, warriors painted their exploits onto hide shirts or buffalo robes which were then worn—with the exploits on the outside—for others to read and be reminded of their brave accomplishments. Because, as Brumble has shown, ‘life’ for a warrior was defined as the accumulation of his brave deeds, Plains warriors literally wore their lives on their backs in the form of these exploit robes, emblazoned with the pictographic writings of their coup tales. The warrior literally wore his life, his resume, upon his back (Figure 2-6).

Figure 2- 6. Chief Wearing Pictographic Robe (“Ee-åh-sá-pa, Black Rock, a Two Kettle Chief” by George Catlin) Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

Besides recounting one’s exploits to others through the recitation of coup tales, what better way to advertise than to wear those accomplishments openly for all to see? And warriors did just that through their literacy practice of pictographic writing: as another way to declare their brave deeds to others in the community, warriors painted their exploits onto hide shirts or buffalo robes which were then worn—with the exploits on the outside—for others to read and be reminded of their brave accomplishments. Because, as Brumble has shown, ‘life’ for a warrior was defined as the accumulation of his brave deeds, Plains warriors literally wore their lives on their backs in the form of these exploit robes, emblazoned with the pictographic writings of their coup tales. The warrior literally wore his life, his resume, upon his back (Figure 2-6).  

22 Personal narrative exploit robes should not be confused with a similar form of Plains Indian pictograph—the winter count robes (Figure 1-2). Although both are executed on buffalo hide, they serve highly different purposes for different owners and audiences, and they follow different conventions. Winter counts serve as tribal histories with one mnemonic symbol depicting a significant event for each year, such as the 1833 meteor shower recorded by most tribes, the 1837 smallpox epidemic, or a significant battle or victory. Exploit robes, on the other hand, describe
While David Brumble’s association of oral coup tales with a resume, res gestae, or curriculum vitae seems to apply equally well to pictographic depictions, Hertha D. Wong considers this pictographic art as autobiography because it relates specific incidents from a particular person’s life. Although I will be discussing Brumble’s, Wong’s, and others’ theories of Native American autobiography more thoroughly in the final chapter, I want to point out an important difference between the Native American and Western sense of autobiography—the episodic nature of Plains Indian autobiography—because of its relevance to this discussion of pictographic literacy practice. In Native American Autobiography, Brumble discusses the episodic quality of Native American oral autobiographical tradition—discrete events are described without the causal relationships one expects in Western autobiography. Each event is self-contained, stands alone, and is generally not presented in chronological order. And, as was discussed above, childhood events—so important as the formative years in Western autobiography—are excluded as being unimportant (Brumble 49). These same notions are reflected in the autobiographical pictographs—the events depicted are discrete, given in no particular order, are exclusive to adult scenes, and, except in a few cases, are wholly unrelated except for their recognition as tales of bravery. As with the coup tales, it is the sum total of the deeds themselves that defines the warrior whose bravery is being depicted. No other reasons or analysis are needed to shape this identity.

Just as the horse and gun affected Plains Indian culture (though perhaps more profoundly), another western import—art supplies—brought changes to the exploit robe tradition. As advancing EuroAmericans increased contact with Plains tribes, paper and drawing tools entered the Native American culture through capture or trade, and so around 1830, the pictographic medium began to change from buffalo hides and paint to paper, pen, pencil, watercolor, and crayon. The ready-to-go nature of these and other Western, manufactured goods simplified life, and so traditional native crafts began to change or disappear. For example, beads replaced porcupine quills for decorating, and metal pots and pans eliminated pottery (Ewers 47-48). With the introduction of pen and paper, the laborious task of preparing hide—skinning, scraping, drying, stretching—and mixing natural paints could be eliminated. Additionally, paper
was considerably more transportable, an important consideration for nomadic peoples. Hide robes were also becoming less fashionable, appearing outdated in favor of prestigious European trade blankets, and hide was becoming more difficult to obtain as the herds were being depleted and later slaughtered by the thousands (Petersen 22).

Much of this captured or traded paper was in the form of accounting ledger books, often previously used, and so the genre was later given the name ledger art. The name has now been generalized for Plains Indian pictographs written on any form of paper, not just accounting ledger books. Examples of ledger art have also been found in drawing books, small autograph books, and on loose leaf paper. Fresh new paper or books were often given as gifts or supplied to Native Americans to create souvenirs; however, on the Plains in the mid-1800s any form of paper was considered valuable, and so used books or paper were often taken as war booty, especially from soldiers. Although not all ledger art was created on previously used paper, what resulted when a warrior wrote his own coup tale over existing EuroAmerican records—including inventories, army musters, and other record keeping-related to US western expansion—was a poignant palimpsest of clashing cultures. For example, the Cheyenne artist who created the drawings of Figures 2-7 and 2-8 chose to ignore, or perhaps even “bury” the white man’s writing, completely superimposing his own tales atop the previously written records. In Figure 2-7, a group of mounted warriors gallop over a record of carefully dated and tallied sales transactions, firing their weapons in a heated charge across the calculations.

Figure 2- 7. Plains Indian Pictograph on Used Ledger Paper (Unknown Cheyenne)
Original from John Gregory Bourke Collection, US Military Academy Library, West Point, New York
In Figure 2-8, dismounted warriors walk stealthily across a landscape of accounting figures, guns and bows at the ready for an attack.

![Figure 2-8. Plains Indian Pictograph on Used Ledger Paper (Unknown Cheyenne)](Image)

Original from John Gregory Bourke Collection, US Military Academy Library, West Point, New York

Other artists, such as the one who drew Figures 2-9 and 2-10, chose to use only the available blank spaces of the used page, resulting in a shared compositional space in which the writing of both cultures participates in the depicted story. Figure 2-9 presents a side-by-side composition of diverse cultural writing—western text and numbers on the left, Plains Indian pictographs on the right. Presumably, the artist intended only to use the available space rather than make a symbolic statement; yet, with the position of the text on the left side (a space traditionally reserved for the enemy), this drawing could be read as the Plains warrior counting coup upon his foe, the white man’s culture.

![Figure 2-9. Plains Indian Pictograph on Used Ledger Paper (Unknown Lakota)](Image)

Photo Courtesy of the South Dakota State Historical Society – State Archives
In Figure 2-10, the decision to use available blank space results in a deeply intertwined cultural composition—Lakota warrior Okicinintawa, under attack by a large band of Crow warriors, takes cover among a grouping of bare trees and columns of EuroAmerican names.

Figure 2-10. Plains Indian Pictograph on Used Ledger Paper (Unknown Lakota)
Photo Courtesy of the South Dakota State Historical Society – State Archives

The earliest extant example of biographic art on paper was created in 1834 by Mah-to-toh-pa after receiving a gift of paper and watercolors from his friend, the artist Karl Bodmer. Within just a few decades, by the 1860s and 1870s, the ledger form was prevalent across the Plains as painting on hide became less and less common. Indicating the ubiquitous nature of ledger art within the culture during this period, John Gregory Bourke (who, as a military officer in the 1870s, collected a thousand books and drawings), wrote in 1877 that his Indian scout had said of the books: “...pretty nearly every boy has one which he keeps as a memento of his own progress” (qtd. in Berlo and McMaster 19). In another example, Colonel Richard I. Dodge, serving on the Plains from the 1850s through the 1880s, remarked, “Almost every warrior makes a picture of each prominent event of his life, and many of them keep a book in which their acts are thus recorded” (qtd. in Szabo 176). The scout’s description of the book being used as a record of one’s “progress” and Dodge’s reference to recording prominent life events emphasizes the important use of this literacy practice among Plains Indian males—to record their resume of brave deeds in order to attain prestige, honor, and status—or in other words, as the written version of the oral coup tale.

By the mid-1800s, this new medium also began to change the content. Pens, pencils, watercolors, and crayons allowed more control than coarse bone brushes, and so ledger art became more detailed than hide paintings. But, staying true to the purpose of their literacy practice, Native Americans applied this detail only to the important facts of the event—that is,
the coup and the people involved. Contact with white artists and their realistic drawing
techniques also influenced the renderings, as seen by comparing Mah-to-toh-pa’s earlier hide
drawing and his depiction of the same event on paper after he had observed the realistic drawings
of George Catlin and Karl Bodmer (Figure 2-11). In the newer drawing (in which the position
of the actors is reversed), the additional detail applied by Mah-to-toh-pa is clearly evident: Mah-to-
toh-pa is now in full headdress as he was often depicted in Catlin’s and Bodmer’s drawings, and
the detail of the feathers is highly defined; he has included the detailed fringes on his leggings
and the intricate body paint and feather adornments of his foe.

Figure 2-11. Mah-to-toh-pa’s coup tale painted on hide (left) and painted on paper with watercolors (right)
Left image: Bernisches Historisches Museum, Ethnographic Collection, N.A. 8 (detail)
Right image: Permission not granted for online publication; original in Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.

Yet, even with the opportunity to add new details, Plains Indian authors continued to
exclude superfluous information such as backgrounds and landscapes, leaving the focus on the
action as shown in Figure 2-12 below. Note the extreme care taken to paint in the details of Heap
of Birds’ dress and armaments, including his choker, breastplate, leggings, shield, and lance, as
well as the detail on the headdress of one of his opponents. The rounded hill-like objects in this
drawing may appear to be superfluous landscape, but in fact were common pictographic
conventions indicating fighting from behind a hill or fortification. All of these detailed elements
are important for identifying the warrior hero, the status of his opponents, and the grading of the
coup—specifically, the warrior on foot identified through his name glyph, dress and shield,
advancing and counting coup against a force superior in number and defensive position. It is only
when the pictographs became commodities for a white audience, as I will discuss in the final
chapter, that such aesthetic details as landscapes, layout, and even attempts at perspective began
to transform the compositions. In its original form, rather than being primitive or unrefined as
some have called it, this style of writing shows an economy, efficiency, and directness in communication most fitting for its purpose of relating factual, unadorned coup tales.

As the visual, written counterpart of the oral coup tale tradition, exploit robes and ledger art closely follow the coup tale conventions. Biographic pictographs were drawn exclusively by males; usually the warrior depicted his own exploits, but occasionally a warrior commissioned someone else to draw for him or an artist might memorialize an especially brave comrade who had fallen in battle. Just as the recitation of a coup tale is brief and to the point, so too is pictographic writing minimalized in order to highlight only the most relevant facts needed to understand the importance and grade of each depicted coup. Similar to the oral version, in the pictographic coup tales, unnecessary details are omitted so that important points can be highlighted, resulting in a spare composition meant to inform and persuade rather than entertain.

First and foremost, the coup participants—warrior and enemy—must be clearly identified so there is no uncertainty about whose coup is being depicted. The usual convention was to handle this through placement and dress: to quickly identify the warrior hero from the enemy, the warrior subject was normally positioned on the right with the enemy or prey on the left. A name symbol or personal shield was also usually included in order to leave little doubt as to the
warrior’s identity. Personal and tribal identification were supplied through details of dress and adornment rather than facial features, so faces were shown in profile and were usually featureless (or at least all faces looked the same), while torsos were turned fully to the front providing more room to draw in the details of one’s attire. If a warrior was a member of a special warrior society, this would be shown by carefully drawing his sash or society banner. Sometimes hairstyle was used to denote a tribe, such as the Crow’s “pompadour.” Many of these conventions for identifying personal and tribal details are evident in Figure 2-12 above.

Figure 2-13, a drawing from the ledger of the Sioux warrior Red Dog, provides an excellent example of several pictographic coup tale elements, especially the depiction of brave deeds and conventions for action and tense. In the normal placement for hero and enemy, note that the hero Red Dog is on the right while his Pawnee opponent stands to the left. The single line of foot tracks next to the horse indicates that Red Dog has dismounted hurriedly (Keyser 43), and his running stance also adds to the swiftness of the scene. Fighting on foot was considered an act of bravery, though it would be braver still if the foe were mounted (Keyser 54-55). To further demonstrate his bravery, Red Dog, who has been wounded (arrow with blood flowing from his shoulder), is still able to shoot the Pawnee (indicated by the muzzle blast and

\[\text{Figure 2-13. Pictograph Depicting Brave Actions in a Coup Tale ("Dismounts Kills a Pawnee," Red Dog) Original in the Nordamerika Native Museum Zurich}\]

The design of shields, representing the warrior’s spiritual helper as revealed through a vision quest, was unique to each person and generally well-known by others.

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23 The design of shields, representing the warrior’s spiritual helper as revealed through a vision quest, was unique to each person and generally well-known by others.
blood flowing from the Pawnee’s chest), on whom he then counts coup with the butt end of his rifle. Note Red Dog’s name glyph attached by a line to his head. The enemy is indicated as Pawnee by his distinctive high-top black moccasins, and the horse is adorned with a scalplock or some other device of power (as indicated by the wavy lines) attached to its mouthpiece.

Besides the important function of recording a warrior’s bravery through coup tales, ledger art also recognizes the cultural significance of the horse. The horse’s prized position in Plains Indian culture as both weapon and plunder of war is reflected by its inclusion in most pictographs, its large size relative to other objects in the composition, and its often central placement. As seen in Figure 2-14 below, horses were usually drawn with great care including such accoutrements as decorative scalplocks indicating the horse had previously been victorious in battle, distinctive braiding or trimming of manes to identify tribal affiliation, tails tied with ribbon to indicate battle, and notched ears to indicate a race or war pony. Wounds to a horse signified the bravery of both the horse and rider, as shown in Figure 2-15 on the next page.

The coup tale depicted in Figure 2-15 honors the bravery of a horse and its Cheyenne rider. The horse tracks starting in the upper left indicate the path of the horse and warrior, first dashing in front of the line of Pawnee, then turning to face the enemy in preparation for a charge. The flying arrows and bullets behind the warrior indicate the previous barrage of shots (that is, past tense), while the Pawnees with arrows at-the-ready and the explosions from the guns depict
the current action. The horse has already taken several wounds indicated by the blood flowing from its mouth and various locations on the body, and, though not moving quickly—speed would be indicated by outstretched legs—it still stands, supporting its rider, ready for the charge. The warrior, with lance and quirt in hand, is unharmed, which elevates his status, while his willingness to face overwhelming odds attests to his extreme courage. Notice too the horse’s notched ears, which indicate a race horse.

![Figure 2-15. Pictograph Showing Horse’s Bravery (Unknown artist)](Image)

*Original from Francis Horton Pope Collection, US Military Academy Library, West Point, New York*

Even though it might seem the change in form from robe to book would have ended the tradition of wearing one’s deeds upon the body, it was repeatedly documented that US Army soldiers found and retrieved pictographic books from dead Indian warriors’ remains after military skirmishes (Berlo and McMaster 20). And so, warriors continued to wear their coup stories on their bodies in some fashion, even into battle. One can assume, given the long tradition of ritual preparation for battle and the importance of war medicine to military success, that these pictographs were considered strong medicine indeed. Given that I have not read any accounts of pictographic robes being worn into battle, and indeed they would have been

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24 It is interesting, even ironic, that the original books sometimes came into Indian hands initially in this same fashion—from the bodies of dead US military soldiers—thus completing the circle.

25 I have encountered a few references to ledger books being wrapped in leather, so it is possible they were carried into battle encased in parfleches slung over a warrior’s shoulder or horse’s pack.
cumbersome and a hindrance, it is possible that the wearing of one’s coup tales while raiding or fighting was a new tradition introduced by the lighter portable medium of paper. If so, it would indicate a new purpose for ledger art—as a type of war medicine—that perhaps brought the strength and protective power of those earlier victories into the current encounter. Further study to uncover references to the wearing of robes or ledger art in battle, or their use as war medicine, could be an interesting endeavor.

In summary, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Plains Indian literacy practices, in the form of biographic rock art, hide paintings, and ledger art, served as a record, a resume, of a warrior’s brave deeds and allowed him to advertise his exploits to others, an important purpose given the significance of bravery in a warrior society ruled more by consensus and influence than heredity or politics. As the visual counterpart to the oral tradition of reciting one’s coup tales, this unique literacy practice helped to establish a warrior’s reputation and worth, the only means he had to advance in leadership and importance within his tribe. Drawn by warriors to be read by other warriors and members of the tribe, this autobiographical writing, as an accumulation of one’s brave exploits, defined a warrior’s identity. As will be seen in the next two chapters, the purpose, content, and meaning of this literate practice begins to change as Plains Indians came into closer contact with EuroAmericans.
### Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>900</td>
<td>Sedentary farming villages established along streams in the eastern Plains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000</td>
<td>Beginning of villages on Central Plains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1492</td>
<td>Columbus lands in West Indies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1535</td>
<td>Eastern Canada claimed for France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1541</td>
<td>DeSoto battles Caddoans in the Red River valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1542</td>
<td>Coronado travels across southern plains to Wichita villages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1540-1750</td>
<td>Horses spread from Southwest throughout the plains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1668</td>
<td>British Hudson’s Bay Company formed; sells guns to Northeast Indians who trade to Plains tribes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1675</td>
<td>Apache farming villages well established in southern plains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1684</td>
<td>French traders begin trade with tribes on lower Missouri River (coming up from Louisiana) and establish a post in Canadian Assiniboine territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1686</td>
<td>French trading post established at mouth of Arkansas River; gun trade expands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1690</td>
<td>Most of Plains tribes have reached the plains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1699</td>
<td>French trading post established in lower Missouri region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1700</td>
<td>Cheyenne enter northeastern edge of Plains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1706</td>
<td>Comanche enter Southern Plains; eventually displace the Apache</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1720-1780</td>
<td>Sioux enter the Plains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1776</td>
<td>US Declaration of Independence; American Revolution begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1779-83</td>
<td>Smallpox epidemic throughout the Plains; death toll estimates are as high as half the indigenous population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>late 1780s</td>
<td>Blackfeet displace Shoshone from northern Montana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1787</td>
<td>US Constitution adopted; Congress given power to regulate trade with Indians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1801-02</td>
<td>Smallpox decimates tribes in Missouri River region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1803</td>
<td>Louisiana purchased from France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1804-06</td>
<td>Lewis and Clark expedition begins in St. Louis; explores the Upper Missouri</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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26 Though compiled from general reading as well, this information is predominately dependent on timelines provided in Fowler 193-207 and Calloway 209-210.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1816</td>
<td>Smallpox epidemic wipes out an estimated 4000 Comanche</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1818</td>
<td>Agents appointed by government to deal with Indian tribes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820s</td>
<td>Government begins moving southeastern tribes west of the Mississippi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1824</td>
<td>Bureau of Indian Affairs created (within the War Department)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>Indian Removal Act—tribes from east of the Mississippi are required to move west to Oklahoma and Arkansas in areas designated by the president</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>early 1830s</td>
<td>Artist George Catlin travels among tribes on upper Missouri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1837</td>
<td>Smallpox epidemic breaks out on upper Missouri; decimates Mandan tribe whose population is reduced from 1600 to 147 (90%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1838</td>
<td>Cherokee Trail of Tears—forced removal from east to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi [include number moved, number dead]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1839-40</td>
<td>Smallpox epidemic kills large numbers of Kiowa, Kiowa-Apache, and Comanche</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1846-1848</td>
<td>US-Mexican War; huge troop movement across southern plains along Santa Fe Trail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td>Widespread cholera epidemic in Southern Plains kills half the Cheyenne, less than half of Kiowa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>Fort Laramie Treaty with Northern Plains tribes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1862</td>
<td>Sioux “revolt” in Minnesota; Charles Eastman’s tribe moves beyond Missouri River to British Columbia Canada after army retaliates and captures his father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1864</td>
<td>Sand Creek massacre (peaceful Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho camp killed by Colorado militia); Indians retaliate, starting 1864-65 Indian War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1867</td>
<td>Treaty of Medicine Lodge Creek with Southern Plains tribes; Start of widespread buffalo extermination by hide traders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1868</td>
<td>Second Fort Laramie Treaty—Great Sioux Reservation is created and US abandons the Bozeman trail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1869</td>
<td>Transcontinental railroad completed; splits the great buffalo herd in two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>Marias River massacre (friendly Piegan village wiped out by US Army)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>Congress stops formal treaty making with Indian tribes; no longer considered independent nations, they become wards of the US government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1874-75</td>
<td>Angry at commercial hide hunters and settlers encroaching on their government-sanctioned hunting grounds, Southern Plains tribes attack white hide hunters at Adobe Walls, beginning the Red River War in the Texas panhandle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1875 An especially harsh winter, starvation, and continual harrying by the US Army causes many Southern Plains tribes who were engaged in the Red River War to surrender.

Of those surrendering, 72 Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, and Kiowa warriors were taken as prisoners of war and shipped to Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida; 26 of these were ledger artists.

1876-77 “Great Sioux War;” huge gathering of Sioux and Cheyenne wipes out Custer’s army at the Little Big Horn.

1877 Crazy Horse killed.

1878 Southern herd of buffalo exterminated.

1878 Fort Marion prisoners released; twenty-two stay with Capt. Pratt for continued education at Hampton Institute in the East; others return to reservations.

1879 Carlisle Indian school established by Capt. Pratt in Carlisle, Penn.

1881 Sitting Bull surrenders.

1883 Buffalo herds gone from the plains.

1887 Dawes Allotment Act passed by Congress.

1889 Oklahoma opened to settlement.

1889-90 Influenza kills large number of Cheyenne and Arapaho; Ghost Dance spreads through the plains.

1890 Sitting Bull killed; Massacre at Wounded Knee; “Closing of the West.”

1924 Indian Citizenship Act is passed, granting Native Americans US citizenship.
The War of Cultures:
Transformation of the Great Plains and the End of Warrior Life

“...when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened. There was little singing anymore.”
—Plenty Coups, Crow chief, qtd. in Calloway

“...their only safe course was to quit being tribal Indians, go out and live among us as individual men, adopt our language, our industries and become a part of the power that was fast making this country so great and was sure to make it vastly greater as the years rolled on.”
—Captain Richard L. Pratt, Battlefield and Classroom

In the previous chapter, I discussed ledger art as a longstanding Plains Indian literacy practice that was fully integrated into the Plains Indian warrior culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But by the mid-1800s that culture was under attack; in fact, it was close to disappearing under extreme Western pressures for assimilation. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the effects of these cultural changes on the ledger art literacy practices of a group of seventy-two Plains Indian prisoners of war at Fort Marion, St. Augustine, Florida. These warriors and chiefs, viewed as the instigators of recent uprisings on the Plains, were forcibly removed from their homes in Oklahoma to the Florida prison, where they underwent an experimental compulsory assimilation program from 1875-1878. Before discussing these changes to the prisoners and their literacy practice, however, I feel it is important to understand the cultural pressures and events leading up to the Fort Marion prisoners’ surrender and exile with an explanation of the context, events, and attitudes prior to and surrounding the warriors’ capture and removal. To do so, I will pick up Plains Indian history where I left off in Chapter 2, from around 1850, and continue through the prisoners’ surrender and trip east, followed by a review of the “reforms” enacted upon their arrival at Fort Marion.27

Beginning in 1851, the first bands of Plains Indians were restricted to reservations through treaty agreements, and with each new treaty those reservations became increasingly smaller and smaller.28 Confined within the boundaries of the reservation, the free-roaming life of the Plains warrior was becoming contained, constrained, and static. Traditional roles for males as protectors and hunters for their families were turned upside down as they were encouraged instead to become sedentary farmers and herders. Instead of wealthy tribes of nomadic hunters

27 My use of the word “reforms” here is strictly from the nineteenth-century white conqueror’s viewpoint. These “reforms,” in fact and execution, constituted a program of enforced assimilation into white culture.
28 This excludes the Indian Territory, which was established earlier for the removed Eastern tribes.
fully in control of their lives, Plains Indians were now subsisting on agency handouts, living as
government dependents on reservations, which they could not leave without permission.
Traditional gender roles and activities were gone, and this new way of living stressed the
individual over communal values. Most devastating for those who had not received special
hunting rights, the source of their spiritual and physical sustenance—the buffalo—was denied
them. The words of the Crow chief Plenty Coups poignantly express the way many Native
Americans must have viewed this new life: “...when the buffalo went away the hearts of my
people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened.
There was little singing anymore” (qtd. in Calloway 123).

While these changes had been put into motion during the seventeenth century with the
first contact of white trappers and traders on the Plains, the pace of change accelerated greatly in
the mid-1800s when several events coalesced to spur US western expansion, precipitating the
attempted eradication of indigenous culture in the name of “civilization” and “progress” (Utley,
*Indian* 2). In 1845, editor John L. Sullivan coined the term *manifest destiny*; the phrase was
quickly taken up by politicians and internalized by most Americans as justification for expanding
westward and bringing American democracy and Western ideals to the entire continent. By
1848, that destiny was possible, for the US had annexed, or was given, the remaining Western
regions and now laid claim to the entire land mass that would eventually make up the contiguous
forty-eight states.

Prior to this expansion, in 1823, the Great Plains had been labeled “The Great American
Desert” by Army Corps of Engineer Major Stephen Long, so for several decades most settlers
were happy to simply pass through on their way to a better life in the Northwest or California.
But, given the relative numbers between the native and Euroamerican populations and given
America’s continued belief in its manifest destiny to bring American democratic ideals to the
entire continent, it was perhaps only a matter of time before the push westward overtook the
Plains as well. In 1850, the total Native American population was roughly 1.5 million;\(^{29}\) in
contrast, the total US population, which had been growing at a staggering rate of more than thirty
percent per decade since 1790, stood at over twenty-three million (Utley, *Indian* 4; US Census).
Of those 1.5 million Native Americans, only 184,000 resided on the Great Plains—75,000

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\(^{29}\) This represents a seventy percent reduction, mostly through disease, from the estimated five million Native
Americans living here in 1492 (Utley, *Indian* 11). Conversely, the US population had increased from fewer than
four million in 1790 to roughly twenty-three million in 1850.

52
resided on the Central Plains (Canada to northern Texas), another 25,000 Comanche, Apache, and Lipan lived in central/southern Texas, and 84,000 transplanted eastern bands were settled in Oklahoma (Utley, Indian 4). Much fewer than 100,000 of the Plains Indian population were part of what the Army considered hostile tribes.

Table 3-2. Population of Selected Western States 1850-1870

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>1850 Population</th>
<th>1860 Population</th>
<th>1870 Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>39,864</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>192,214</td>
<td>674,913</td>
<td>1,194,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>107,206</td>
<td>364,399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>28,841</td>
<td>122,993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>212,592</td>
<td>604,215</td>
<td>818,579</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Geospatial & Statistical Data Center, University of Virginia Library

Although western expansion had eased somewhat during the Civil War, at the war’s conclusion a new urgency to expand westward took hold. In 1860, 1.4 million whites lived in the west, but by 1890 that number had grown to 8.5 million (Utley, Indian 4). Still, at mid-century, except for increasing numbers of soldiers, whites were fairly sparse on the Plains, mostly cattle ranchers in Texas and settlers scattered on the eastern edges and in Kansas. But after 1850, several events spurred expansion into the region—land on the west coast became more expensive; the Transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869; more railroad lines reached remote areas, allowing people to come in and goods to ship out; government regulations such as the Homestead Act provided an incentive, giving 160 acres to anyone who lived on and improved the parcel for five years; and technological innovations such as barbed wire for fencing in place of scarce wood, improved windmills to bring up water, steel plows to turn the virgin soil, and the introduction of hardier winter wheat more suitable for the extreme weather conditions, finally made agriculture on the inhospitable Plains more feasible. The Plains were suddenly desirable, bringing poorer Eastern farmers, immigrants, and freed slaves to the area. Within a decade, Kansas tripled in size from just over 100,000 in 1860 to almost 365,000 in 1870; Texas shot up from 213,000 in 1850 to 604,000 in 1860, then to 819,000 in 1870; Nebraska went from less than 29,000 in 1860 to 123,000 in 1870 (“Historical Census”). In 1870, even remote Colorado had almost 40,000 whites while Iowa, which had seized all Indian lands

30 The majority of Plains tribes were Sioux, living in the north (Mooney cites 25,000 Sioux in his 1890 report on the Ghost Dance).
31 Note that this also includes the areas west of the Rockies where many foreigners and whites from the East had emigrated during the California gold rush and the opening of the Northwest.
by 1851 and pushed the tribes west of the Missouri River, had a population well over one million ("Historical Census"). Once the Plains had been proven to be hospitable and, more importantly, desirable, Americans’ sense of destiny and entitlement pushed the government to open up more and more land for settlement. That land had to come from somewhere.

To open up western territories for white settlement, the US government began establishing treaties with Plains tribes in 1851. Within the terms of most treaties, Indians ceded their traditional lands and agreed to live peacefully in exchange for a smaller parcel reserved exclusively for them, protection from white intruders and hostile tribes, and an annual annuity of goods and money. Some were also given rights to traditional hunting grounds during the seasonal buffalo hunts as long as the buffalo still remained. Ceded lands were then made available for Euroamerican settlers. Although settlement of the Plains didn’t begin in earnest until the 1870s-80s, American territorial space continued to grow as native lands receded, which is quite evident from a comparison of the maps in Figures 3-1 and 3-2. In 1830, the unorganized territories (Indian lands unclaimed by the US) reached from Canada to Texas; in 1870, the unorganized territories were reduced to the region in the current state of Oklahoma.

Figure 3-1. Map of American Territories and Tribal Lands (i.e, Unorganized Territory) in 1830
Credit: Department of the Interior

Figure 3-2. Map of American Territories and Tribal Lands (i.e., Unorganized Territory) in 1870
Credit: Department of the Interior
The government’s original plans for the Indians, dating back to Jefferson, had been removal, that is, to give the Indians lands in perpetuity away from white interference; thus, Indians from the East were forcibly moved west of the Mississippi, and Indian Territory was created because it was considered to be land that whites would never want (Utley, *Indian 33*). By 1870, however, the government’s plans had changed—reservations were now intended to be temporary until Indians assimilated into the mainstream, for the real goal of the reservation system by this time was to eradicate Native American culture (Calloway 15). Nomadic hunter-warriors were to convert to sedentary farmers and herders, learn English, be Christianized and then enter white society, just as the waves of immigrants were then doing successfully (Calloway 16). The distinction most reformers and politicians seemed not to be making, or which they didn’t want to see, was that immigrants generally were coming here out of choice, while Native Americans were being forced into a lifestyle they neither wanted nor fully understood.

The reservation system was fraught with problems from the beginning. Treaties were signed, tribes agreed to be peaceful with each other and with whites; then the government either didn’t provide annuities or didn’t protect the Indians, and so the Indians, starving and angry, would leave the reservations to hunt or, more and more often, to raid the ever-increasing wagon trains and ranchers. Within a few years, another treaty would be signed and the cycle would continue. The US Army, stationed on the Plains to keep the peace by preventing hostilities of
Indians against whites, whites against Indians, and Indians against each other, found their efforts at cross purposes with the Indian Bureau agencies who were in charge of providing for the Native Americans. Indian Bureau incompetence, graft, and lack of action led Indians to break their treaties by going off reservation to follow the herds for food and also moved them to anger and rebellion (R. Pratt 31). As Captain Richard Pratt of the 10th Calvary\textsuperscript{32}, stated:

The dual system of civil and military control over the Indians was full of vexatious complications and lack of harmony. The army was witness that the government through its Indian Bureau was sadly lacking in keeping its treaty obligations, which goaded the Indians to rebel against being reservated [sic]. These reservations and the destruction of their game resources further aggravated them, plainly portending disaster to them, for the white man’s advantage. Why should not they enforce some retaliation? The white man did not keep his promises. Why should they keep theirs? (31)

In 1867, at Medicine Lodge Creek, the US signed a treaty with every southern Plains tribe (Comanche, Kiowa, Cheyenne, and Arapaho, among others) in which the Indians gave up their traditional lands in exchange for tribal reservations in western Indian Territory, reservation schools, and training in farming practices; the Indians reserved the right to hunt buffalo in designated areas. With this and the Fort Laramie treaty of 1868 (which established the Great Sioux reservation in the Dakotas), the US had effectively separated and segregated the tribes into large northern and southern regions, leaving the middle Plains open for expansion to the west (Calloway 111). This was one of the last major treaties, for in 1871, Congress approved the Indian Appropriations Act which effectively ended treaty making and designated Native Americans as “wards” of the government. Indian national sovereignty was summarily dismissed.

The peace established at Medicine Lodge didn’t last long. Between 1869 and 1873, an escalation in raiding and outbreaks of fighting occurred on the Southern Plains as tribes resisted assimilation, confinement to reservations, and ever-increasing numbers of settlers. Due to the incompetence, graft, and greed of the Indian Bureau agencies, promised government supplies of goods and food were either non-existent, late, or of inferior quality, which only added to Native American frustrations, as the following excerpt from Pratt’s memoirs illustrates:

\textsuperscript{32} Pratt was officially a lieutenant, but had earned the brevet rank of Captain during the Civil War, and thus he is normally referred to as Captain. This is the same Captain Pratt who would be in charge of the prisoners at Fort Marion and would later establish the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania.
Comanches and Kiowas who had proved their intention to be friendly by camping and remaining at their agency at first had been constantly hungry and irritated because kept away from the buffalo under the care of the agency all winter and fed the inferior quality and less quantity of food provided by the Bureau. […] I soon detected that, while good merchantable beef came to the army, unmerchantable, scrawny, and even diseased beef was being issued to the Indians. […] It happened that some of these beefes were so poor and diseased that the Indians rejected the meat. […] The sugar and other parts of the Indian ration were also of a greatly inferior quality. This inefficient Bureau handling of the friendly Indians provoked hatred and more trouble. In a few days’ ride from their camps to the west they could be among the buffalo, where they could select the fattest and best and then have the hides which made their clothing, beds, and lodges, and thus resume their former industries and independence in caring for themselves. (82-83)

The tense situation on the Plains escalated as a drought in the summer of 1874 worsened the condition of the already starving Indians, many of whom also bristled at being confined to reservations. Government agents and Native American chiefs counseling peace were losing control. Finally, on June 27, 1874, starving and frustrated because Euroamerican settlers were invading their reservation lands and white hunters were encroaching on their buffalo grounds, two-hundred and fifty Comanche, Kiowa, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors attacked thirty white buffalo hunters at Adobe Walls, Texas. Then in July, a war party raided into Texas to avenge the death of a chief’s son. The two closely timed events set off a brutal retaliation by the US Army in what has come to be called the Red River War of 1874-75. As was common in such situations, the army told friendly bands to come in and camp close to their agencies; those not doing so would be considered hostile and open to attack (R. Pratt 65). About half the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Comanche, and Kiowas remained hostile, continuing to raid and hunt off the reservation, setting up camps in the rugged terrain of the Staked Plains in the panhandle of Texas.

During that fall, winter, and spring, the commanding officer of the Plains troops, General Philip Sheridan, launched a five-pronged campaign across the Staked Plains, intended to

33 The Indians were eventually repulsed because of the white hunters’ superior long-range guns. For more on the Red River War and events leading up to it, see the University of Texas at Austin website Texas Beyond History: Red River War.

34 Many of the warriors in these bands would eventually be in the group of seventy-two Fort Marion prisoners and artists.
“pursue, attack, and compel [the Indians’] surrender, when they were to be deprived of their horses and arms and held by the army as prisoners of war until their cases were determined” (R. Pratt 66). The goal of the campaign was to keep the Indians moving so they would have no time to hunt or raid, and to destroy their food, supplies, shelter, and horses so eventually they would become too exhausted and hungry to resist. As he had done in the brutal but successful 1868 campaign, Sheridan also attacked in the winter, surprising the Indians for it was an untraditional raiding time when food stocks and forage for the horses were already low. The Cavalry killed few Indians but methodically burned and destroyed camps and food stocks, and killed or captured hundreds of horses. After a summer of drought followed by an especially harsh winter coupled with this relentless harrying by the US Calvary, “most of the hostiles were compelled, by the severity of the weather and the constant vigor of the campaigns, either to surrender to the troops in the field or to come into the several agencies and surrender under the terms General Sheridan had arranged” (R. Pratt 91). By November of 1874, starving and freezing, the first bands of resisters began to straggle into the agencies; the last group capitulated in June 1875 and the war was over (Figure 3-4). For the survival of their people, the Comanche, Kiowa, Cheyenne, and Arapaho would remain on their reservations.
The government had intended that everyone captured would be investigated, and, if found to have taken part in hostile activity in the last several years, they would be confined, charges would be pressed, and eventually they would be tried; it was assumed that at least those accused of murder would be executed (R. Pratt 66). Although several hundred captured or surrendered Indians were held prisoner awaiting a military trial, the US Attorney General ruled that “a state of war could not exist between a nation and its wards,” making such a military trial illegal (qtd. in R. Pratt 105). An impartial civil trial was deemed impossible since the “frontier feeling against the Indians was so intense,” and so it was decided that “the worst of the offenders” were to be removed to a remote prison in the east where they would be unable to incite more unrest and would act as hostages against the good behavior of their tribal members back home (R. Pratt 105, 97).

The final group of seventy-two prisoners included thirty-three Cheyenne, twenty-seven Kiowa, nine Comanche, two Arapaho, and one Caddo. Except for one Cheyenne, all were male and ranged in age from young warriors in their late teens and twenties to elder warriors and chiefs in their late forties and fifties; the oldest was sixty-two, the youngest nineteen (R. Pratt 138-44). Charges against the prisoners included ringleader, “willful and deliberate murder,” kidnapper, stealing mules, stealing horses, participating in a killing, being a member of a war party, robbing a store, “a bad man,” “constantly stealing horses or on the warpath;” some were only accomplices or raiding party participants; one prisoner had no charge (R. Pratt 138-44). 35

Note that these “crimes” are the basic cultural practices of Plains warriors—horse raids, capturing women and children as slaves or hostages, coup counting including scalping and killing, revenge raids. By resisting Euroamerican pressures to give up their traditional ways and settle on reservations, these warriors continued to live their lives as they had always lived them—protecting and providing for their families and other tribal members, building their wealth through raiding, building their status with the counting of coup. The difference was that the

35 Although the selection of “the worst offenders” at Fort Sill was apparently methodical and thorough, at the Cheyenne agency the selection process was not so meticulous. According to a report by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, it was decided that thirty-three of “the ring-leaders and desperadoes, who were known to have committed crimes, should be selected from among these captives;” but when night fell and only fifteen had been selected, the officer in charge “ cut off eighteen from the right of the line,” without regard to name or character, intending at a future day to proceed with the identification, and to release those of the eighteen against whom no charges could be found, substituting therefor [sic] other proven offenders.” Unfortunately for those so arbitrarily selected, that further investigation and substitution never came about (Smith 49-50).
adversary involved was increasingly white, rather than Native American, and the response of the whites to these activities was decidedly different. The game had changed.

The prisoners were gathered at Fort Sill, then moved in eight army wagons and imprisoned temporarily at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, while the military awaited orders for the move east. The orders finally came, and their destination was about as far from home in distance and spirit as it could possibly be—Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida. The remainder of the trip was made by train and, since the fate of the prisoners was well known from newspaper reports, masses of people came out to gawk at each major city along the way including Indianapolis, St. Louis, Louisville, Nashville, Atlanta, and Jacksonville (R. Pratt 112).

The prisoners were heavily chained and padlocked throughout the trip to inhibit escape or rescue, and most assumed they were going to their deaths. Two of the chiefs, Gray Beard and Lean Bear, took matters into their own hands by attempting to commit suicide along the way. Several of the prisoners later documented the journey through pictographs as seen in Figures 3-5, 6, and 7.

Lean Bear finally succeeded by refusing to eat or drink once reaching the fort. Gray Beard was rescued while trying to hang himself at Fort Leavenworth, and then was fatally shot later in the trip while trying to escape. While on his deathbed, he told his Cheyenne friends that “he had wanted to die ever since being chained and taken from home” (R. Pratt 115).
On May 21, 1875, the group arrived at their destination—Fort Marion, St. Augustine, Florida—a thousand miles from home and light years away from anything with which they were familiar (Figures 3-8 and 3-9). Used to the wide vistas of the plains, the prisoners were now enclosed behind twelve-foot thick, twenty-foot high coquina limestone walls in a courtyard barely one hundred feet across, their only open view being upwards towards the sky (Figure 3-10).
Figure 3-8. Group of Prisoners Soon After Arrival
*Yale Collection of Western Americana, Richard Henry Pratt papers, folder 745*

Figure 3-9. Aerial View of Fort Marion (Castillo de San Marcos), St. Augustine, Florida
*Photo courtesy of National Park Service*

Figure 3-10. Interior Views of Fort Marion (The current grass courtyard was crushed shell at the time of the prisoners’ incarceration.)
*Photos by the author*
The view from the top of the fort, or terreplein, upon which the prisoners were permitted to walk under guard several times a day, must have seemed even stranger—surrounding them on the east stretched the large expanse of open water known as St. Augustine Bay with the endless ocean clearly visible beyond nearby Anastasia Island (Figures 3-11 and 3-12).

Figure 3-11. View Eastward from the Terreplein
Photos by the author

The prisoners’ initial sleeping quarters were cold, dark, and damp—the casement rooms contained a narrow window ten feet above the ground which faced outward, while two barred windows and a bolted door faced the interior courtyard (Figure 3-13). Still in shackles, dirty and exhausted from the long trip, still expecting to be executed, the prisoners began an even stranger journey than the one they had just concluded.
The army officer in direct charge of the prisoners at Fort Marion, Captain Richard L. Pratt, had also accompanied the prisoners on their cross-country trek and had served in Indian Territory for eight years, both fighting against and working with Plains Indians. Rather than adhering to the infamous phrase “The only good Indian is a dead Indian,” which arose from the deep seated racial prejudice and hostility surrounding the Plains Indian wars, Captain Pratt thought the Indians’ salvation was to be found through assimilation into white society. He believed it was possible to “Kill the Indian in him and save the man.” Today, we see the fallacy and terrible cost in such policies aimed to forcibly eradicate a culture, but in the 1870s most reformers, even those with the best of intentions, held strongly to this belief though they were deeply divided in how best to accomplish it. One group felt the reservations were best for protecting the Indians while they learned to farm and become Christians; others considered the corrupt agency system the worst place Native Americans could be. Pratt was in the latter group, believing that segregating the Indians from white society, while simultaneously trying to civilize them into that society, was ludicrous and impractical. As he states in his memoirs: “…reforming a drunkard by keeping him in a saloon would be quite as sensible as our method of trying to civilize and Americanize our Indians by keeping them separated in tribes on prison reservations excluded from all contact with our civilization and the advantages of our American life” (153). Based on these beliefs, Pratt would later champion the off-reservation school system as a way to

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37 This phrase, or the similar one “the only good Indians I ever saw were dead” is usually attributed to General Philip Sheridan, commander of the Plains region from 1869 to 1884, though he unequivocally denied it (“New Perspectives”).
remove Indians from tribal influence while totally immersing them in Western culture.\footnote{Given public and reformist thinking at the time, Pratt’s solution makes sense for what he was trying to accomplish, yet what he was trying to accomplish is indefensible and his methods brutal by today’s standards. And, while Pratt’s philosophy and motto were perhaps more humane than the former one espousing total annihilation, the devastation of the Indians through the destruction of their way of life was no less complete. On the flip side, Pratt’s humane penal reforms indicate his compassion, and, as Robert Utley claims, Pratt’s lifelong advocacy kept the plight of Native Americans in the government’s and nation’s conscience, and, for many of his fellow countrymen, he transformed the view of Native Americans as “savages” (Utley “Introduction” xvii).} Pratt, who would later found the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, believed in the Indians’ humanity and was convinced, from his previous work with Indian scouts on the Plains, they could be “reformed” to become stable and productive members of white American society.\footnote{Pratt’s initiatives at Fort Marion were, in effect, an experiment in “reforming” and “civilizing” the Indians to become productive members of white society. The apparent success of his project led to government funding and creation of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, started by Pratt in 1879. Robert Utley comments that the timing of the Fort Marion experiment was fortuitous since, during this period, most tribes were being forced onto reservations, and thus the “Indian problem” was moving away from how to subdue the Indians towards what to do with them now that they were conquered. For their part, the Indians, who by now had no recourse but to give up their old way of life, were more open to taking “the white man’s road” than they had been in the past. Public opinion from both whites and Indians, then, was behind Pratt, allowing him to implement his plans for the off-reservation school (Utley “Introduction” xiii).} As he wrote to General Sheridan before receiving the commission to oversee the prisoners:

Most of the young men being sent away have simply been following their leaders, much as a soldier obeys his officers, and are not really so culpable. As, under the changes of administration, public opinion, etc., they will be returned to their people sooner or later, much can and should be done to reform these young men while under this banishment.

(107)

Thus, even before receiving his commission to command them, it is apparent that Pratt was already considering the unprecedented measures he would undertake in Fort Marion. After arriving at the fort and seeing the stark conditions of the prison and the low spirits of the prisoners, Pratt almost immediately requested of his superiors to be allowed “more liberty of judgment in methods of care,” which was granted (118). And thus began the series of reforms that would transform these prisoners, at least to outward appearances, from fierce Native American chiefs and warriors into copies of disciplined white soldiers and obedient schoolboys.

Some of the reforms were for the prisoners’ comfort and health. Sensing the Indians’ depression and their ill health from the hard travel and unfamiliar hot humid climate (several Indians had become sick and died in the early weeks), Pratt soon removed their shackles and gave them more freedom of movement around the fort; eventually, they would be allowed to go into town. To get the prisoners out of the fort’s damp casements, a barracks was built on the
northern terreplein (or roof) where the prisoners could have light and fresher air, and during the oppressive summer months, the Indians camped on the ocean beach of Anastasia Island just across St. Augustine’s harbor. The immense masses of water in the harbor and nearby ocean, which could be seen from the fort’s roof, must have been astonishing to these residents of the arid Plains; yet the prisoners took to seaside activities readily, learning to sail, catch sharks, and harvest and eat oysters (Figure 3-14).

Figure 3-14. Catching Sharks on the Beach (Zotom, March 1877)

Pratt’s other set of reforms, reflecting his belief in the benefits and necessity of assimilation, were more extreme. To “get them out of the curio class,” he had the Indians cut their hair and wear western clothes (in the form of army-issued uniforms) instead of their breechclouts and blankets (R. Pratt 118). As an army officer who believed in discipline, Pratt ensured the prisoners were taught to keep their uniforms clean, creased, and polished; the prisoners soon began a daily routine of drills, including inspection, calisthenics, and marching, just as cavalry soldiers did (Figure 3-15).
Because he often found the regular army guard remiss, either sleeping or drunk, and based on his positive experience with loyal and highly competent Indian scouts on the Plains, within the first six months Pratt asked for and was given permission to let the prisoners guard themselves, pledging his own army commission on its success. He quickly organized fifty of the prisoners into sergeants and corporals and trained them as guards. Pratt never had to give up his commission—the prisoners guarded themselves for the next three years “without a material mishap” (120). To break down prejudices on both sides of the racial barrier, Pratt encouraged freedom of contact between the prisoners and visitors, who were allowed in the fort every day but Sunday. St. Augustine, a resort town, had many tourists especially during the winter months, and the prisoners soon became a required stop on the round of local tourist attractions. The prisoners occasionally put on shows to raise money, including two performances of Indian dances and one “buffalo” chase (it was actually a Western bull), archery demonstrations, and later, recitations of English poems and Indian love songs (Figure 3-16). But on a daily basis, the morning drills were a favorite activity of the tourists who came to the fort to buy souvenirs and interact with reformed “savages.”
Believing the prisoners needed to learn marketable trades which they could use once released, but also realizing St. Augustine “is not a good place to advance them [for…t]hey are only curiosities here,” Pratt requested the prisoners’ removal to a location where they had more appropriate opportunities such as agriculture (168). Although the War Department was reluctantly willing, the Indian Bureau repeatedly denied his requests, stating lack of funding. However, soon after the prisoners arrival, two trinket salesmen gave the prisoners sea beans to polish, a popular souvenir of Florida, and this quickly became a major source of income, earning the group $1600 for their personal use within the first few months. During the next three years, Pratt found whatever jobs he could to keep the prisoners busy and to earn a little pocket money, with which they purchased personal items in town, often sending gifts home. Some jobs were potentially useful after prison, most were menial labor. Two prisoners became the prison’s cooks and one became their baker. Others helped clear fields, assisted with an archeological dig, picked and crated oranges in season, helped to move a church building, taught archery, handled baggage at the train station, and otherwise tried to be helpful, upstanding citizens in accordance with Pratt’s design to remove negative stereotypes. Many of the prisoners also created bows and arrows and other “curiosities” for sale to the many tourists who came into the fort on a daily basis (see Figure 3-17). Among these handmade souvenirs, one of the most popular quickly

40 Sea beans, also called drift seeds, fall from various types of trees and vines in rain forests and tropical shores. They then float through ocean currents until they wash ashore on beaches, often thousands of miles away. Collected sea beans were polished and painted as souvenir items in Victorian Florida.
became small books of drawings. These colorful books developed from the earlier tradition of coup tale hide painting and ledger art, but, as I will discuss in the next chapter, the subject matter changed dramatically from tales of courage in battle to domestic scenes of camp life, portraits, the trip east, and life at Fort Marion.

Pratt wanted the prisoners above all to learn English so they could interact with whites and continue to break down racial stereotypes. Several women from the town volunteered to teach them English; soon, four to six classes of English, with eight to ten students each, were held every day in the fort’s casements. The young warriors were eager to learn; some of the older prisoners, who at first had refused, also began coming to classes. By March 1876, Pratt could state that about fifty of the younger prisoners were making adequate progress with the language. English eventually became the prisoner’s common tongue, replacing Comanche which had been the diplomatic language on the southern Plains.

Harriett Beecher Stowe, who visited the fort several times, wrote two articles for the *The Christian Union* in 1877. Stating that two years ago these were “the wildest, the most dangerous, the most untamable of the tribes,” she then describes her visit to a classroom:

> We found now no savages. […] The bell soon rang for school hours, and hurrying from all quarters came more dark men in the United States uniform, neat, compact, trim, with well-brushed boots and nicely kept clothing, and books in their hands. […] There were
among these pupils seated, docile and eager, with books in hand, men who had been the foremost in battle and bloodshed. Now there was plainly to be seen among them the eager joy which comes from the use of a new set of faculties. When they read in concert, when they mastered perfectly the pronunciation of a difficult word, when they gave the right answer to a question, they were evidently delighted. […] when a meaning was made clear that had been obscure, the bright smile on the swart faces showed the joy of a new idea. […] There was not a listless face, not a wandering eye, in the whole class. (qtd. in R. Pratt 157) 41

As seen in Figure 3-18, the transformation seems complete: the prisoners sit in uniform rows at desks, attentively facing their white teachers. Dressed in white man’s clothing with hair cut short and English names above their heads, they study new words such as “God” and “man” on the blackboard. The next chapter will explore this apparent conversion by examining the ways in which this newly acquired western literacy practice of English and other forms of assimilation intersected with and transformed the prisoners’ ancient tradition of ledger art coup tales.

Figure 3-18. Drawing of Prisoners in School (Chief Killer, Southern Cheyenne)
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire; purchased through the Robert J. Strasenburgh II 1942 Fund

41 It was reports such as this one by Beecher Stowe and other reformers that helped to convince the Interior Department and other government officials that Pratt’s system was working, and that it could work on a larger scale, to solve “the Indian problem” through the institution of the off-reservation school.
The Writing of Culture:
Fort Marion Ledger Art as Autoethnography

“...their only safe course was to quit being tribal Indians, go out and live among us as individual men, adopt our language, our industries and become a part of the power that was fast making this country so great and was sure to make it vastly greater as the years rolled on.”
—Captain Richard L. Pratt, Battlefield and Classroom

“Despite whatever conflicts or systematic social differences might be in play, it is assumed [by the dominant group] that all participants are engaged in the same game and that the game is the same for all players.”
—Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone”

Autoethnography is “expression aimed specifically at intervening in the discursive economy of a dominant group; a subordinate group asserts an alternative to the dominant group’s representations of them, in part by transculturating the latter’s own discourses.”
—Mary Louise Pratt, “Transculturation and Autoethnography”

In the previous chapters, I have argued that pictographic Plains Indian ledger art is a form of writing, a literate form that follows accepted conventions and contains a level of abstraction allowing communication both within and across tribal lines. I also discussed ledger art as a longstanding Plains Indian literacy practice that was fully integrated into the Plains Indian warrior culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the written counterpart to oral coup tales, ledger art acted as a warrior’s resume; it served to establish a warrior’s place within his tribe by providing an accounting of his brave deeds, thus providing status and honor, helping the warrior move up within the tribe’s recognized warrior ranking system. In this final chapter, I will explore the ways in which this literacy practice transformed over a three year period in a unique contact zone—the military prison at Fort Marion, St. Augustine, Florida, in which seventy-two Plains Indian warriors were held as prisoners of war from 1875-1878. Mary Louise Pratt defines a contact zone as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (“Arts” 34). It is difficult to imagine a place with more “asymmetrical relations of power” than a prison for the recently subjugated under the rule of a conqueror who is compelling them to change their very essence. Thus, this contact zone of Fort Marion provides a rare opportunity to explore the ways in which subjugated and conqueror “clashed” and “grappled” as they negotiated a new relationship and, specifically in this case, developed a new literacy practice.

Through an examination of Fort Marion ledger art and its transformation during the Native Americans’ captivity, this chapter will explore the intersection of literacy, autobiography,
identity, and power within this unique contact zone. Because I will argue that these modifications to the ledger art form were related in part to the warriors’ changing sense of identity, I will begin with a brief review of current theory regarding Native American autobiography and sense of self, as well as ledger art’s place within that genre. That theoretical background will lead into a discussion of the changes in subject matter and conventions of the ledger art produced at the fort. I will conclude by discussing possible reasons for those changes: by examining how these self-representations were altered through the influences of Western attitudes and Western artistic and literacy practices within the Fort Marion contact zone, I will argue that this Plains Indian warrior literacy practice changed to meet the needs of new purposes and new audiences.

My use of the term autobiography for pre-contact Native American personal narratives may seem problematic, especially if one is familiar with arguments by scholars, such as Frank Chin, that autobiography is a Western, Christian form; when written by converted non-Westerners, such autobiographies perpetuate “cruel” and “perverse” racial and cultural stereotypes of the unconverted and advance “racial extinction” through acculturation based on social Darwinist themes (Chin 11-13, 24-25, 50). Indeed, some of the first published Native American autobiographies, such as those written by Samson Occom, William Apes, and Charles Eastman, generally viewed as Christian conversion narratives, could support Chin’s argument. However, I am applying the term autobiography to ledger art, a pre-contact, non-Western form of personal narrative, told in its native language, uninfluenced by Western morality or thought. To state that autobiography is a Western-only form implies that non-Western, non-Christian cultures had no desire or no means to record their personal narratives. Although arguments such as Chin’s may imply that applying the term autobiography to non-Western forms somehow privileges the Christian form, I argue that autobiography as traditionally defined by Westerners is a specific form of personal narrative coming out of the Christian tradition, and that alternative, co-existent forms developed in other cultures. Therefore, I use the term autobiography partially for convenience but mostly in the spirit of Native American scholars, such as David Brumble and Hertha Wong, who argue that pre-contact, non-Western forms existed alongside European Christian ones. I use the term to indicate, as Wong argues, that pre-contact Native Americans had

42 See for example, “Charles Eastman’s Indian Boyhood: Romance, Nostalgia, and Social Darwinism” in H. David Brumble’s American Indian Autobiography, pp. 147-164. For a discussion of Apes’ Son of the Forest as salvationist literature, see Arnold Krupat’s The Voice in the Margin, pp. 143-149. Note, however, that Apes’ later works, though still written from a Christian perspective, increasingly criticized white racism in America (Krupat Ethnocriticism 224-229).
many forms for telling their life stories—including dance, recitation, and pictographs. I use the term to argue for a broader view of autobiography beyond the Western ethnocentric one. However, major differences between the Western autobiographical form and Native American life stories do exist—differences regarding personal identity pertinent to my argument—which I will discuss below.

According to Hertha Wong, ledger art is a form of preliterate personal narrative, or autobiography. Although Wong shows that Native Americans created autobiography in many forms prior to Western contact—spoken, danced, written, painted—she argues that the Eurocentric insistence on the individual and writing when defining autobiography (that is, self-life-writing) has caused scholars to argue that Native American autobiography was non-existent before white contact, when Anglo-Indian collaborations and life stories written by Western-educated Native Americans were first produced (Wong, Sending 4, 12). This closed and limited thinking parallels in unsettling ways a point made in Chapter 1—that Western concepts of the book and writing caused sixteenth century New World colonizers, and indeed later scholars, to ignore non-alphabetic forms of writing executed on a medium other than paper (Mignolo, “Signs” 234). In the same way that Walter Mignolo, Elizabeth Hill Boone, and others (myself included) ask us to expand Western notions of writing, Wong asks that we expand Western notions of autobiography to include additional forms such as oral and pictographic personal narratives, claiming that “it is Eurocentric theory, not Native American autobiography, that is lacking” (Sending 6). Stating that self-narration is the “fundamental act” of autobiography, Wong argues that other forms which exist outside the narrow Western sense of literary autobiography must be included in our definitions and scholarship in order to “acknowledge[] differences in modes of self-narration due to culture, gender, and historical period” (Sending 6).

To promote inclusivity, Wong proposes that, instead of autobiography, we use alternative terms when discussing Native American personal narratives. She suggests communo-bio-oratory (community-life-speaking), which recognizes a non-individualistic communal sense of identity expressed through oral literacies, or autoethnography (self-culture-writing), which describes a

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43 In 1985, Arnold Krupat stated that “Indian autobiographies are not a traditional form among Native peoples but the consequence of contact with white invader-seekers, and the product of a limited collaboration with them” (For Those Who Come After xi). But writing in 1992, he includes coup tales and vision stories as “autobiographical forms (such as they were),” indicating an acceptance, even if a qualified one, of recent arguments for pre-contact, pre-literate Native American autobiography espoused by scholars such as David Brumble, Lynn O’Brien, and Hertha Wong (“Synecdochic Self” 216).
sense of self in relation to one’s culture (Sending 6). However, I am not sure that such semantic moves are necessary. If we agree, as I argued in Chapter 1, that Plains Indian ledger art is in fact a form of writing, the graphy suffix of autobiography should not be contested; and if we agree that autobiography is self-narration used to construct an identity, then whatever that sense of self or identity may be—either tribal or individual—it should be accommodated by the prefix auto. Rather than the terminology, then, it is the narrow Western concepts of self and writing in the definition of autobiography that need to be changed.

Scholars such as Brumble, Wong, and Krupat widely acknowledge that the Native American sense of autobiography differs inherently from the Western concept. This difference may be difficult to see in much of what has come down to us as Native American autobiography—the collaborative or as-told-to narratives—for these forms were generally tainted, some more so than others, when white collaborators molded Native American words for white audiences through rearrangement, omission, and prodding for events the Native American storyteller might think unimportant. Therefore, although as-told-to narratives can provide a sense of native life and although traces of native forms can be found within them, scholars such as Brumble and Wong look to the earlier forms—including oral tales captured verbatim by interpreters and ethnographers, pre-contact accounts written onto exploit robes and ledger art, or naming practices—for clues to Native Americans’ original conceptions of autobiography.

From such scholarship, a sense of Native American autobiography emerges that focuses on discrete events in a person’s life such as brave deeds and visions. Rather than a unified and cohesive whole that makes connections and causations between life events (conventions generally expected in Western autobiography), Native American autobiography tends to be episodic, brief, non-chronological, and void of introspection or analysis of motivations (Wong, Sending 17, 23-24; Brumble 14-16). Rather than covering an entire life—in fact, childhood events were considered unimportant—these episodes focus on adult deeds, and the stories never build to a moment of truth or revelation (Brumble 14-18; 49-50). Wong compares the native autobiographer to a diarist who captures the immediate experience of a given moment rather than

44 Wong’s definition of autoethnography differs from the one offered by Mary Louise Pratt, which I will be examining in detail later in the chapter.
45 See, for example, David Brumble’s American Indian Autobiography, Hertha Wong’s Sending My Heart Back Across the Years, and Arnold Krupat’s “Native American Autobiography and the Synecdochic Self.”
46 Pictographic exploit robes and ledger art, because they were created exclusively by Indians for Indians (at least prior to 1850 or so), are perhaps the purest unaltered form of Native American autobiography available.
a memoirist who looks back, reflects, and shapes one’s life into a unified whole (Sending 17). Western autobiography, on the other hand, focuses on the individual, is told chronologically, and expects an examination of turning points in one’s life building to climactic moments; there is a sense of unity, causality, and closure (Wong, Sending 23; Brumble 14-18). According to Brumble, if a Native American autobiography appears unified or chronological, as many of the as-told-to narratives do, it is because the ethnographer/editor directed the speaker to these topics or arranged the material to meet the expectations of a white audience (6; 10-11).

Another important distinction between Western and Native American autobiography is the sense of self constructed through its telling. Western autobiography (except perhaps most women’s autobiography47), and the sense of self expressed within it, focuses on the individual—as in, who am I and how did I get to be this way; what makes me unique? (Wong, Sending 6; Brumble 46). Native American identity, on the other hand, is communal as well as individual (Wong, Sending 12-15). As argued by David Brumble and discussed in Chapter 2, nineteenth-century male Native American identity consisted of the sum total of one’s brave deeds, and the coup tale (both oral and written) was used to remind others of those accomplishments; this form of autobiography, therefore, created a warrior’s identity by honoring his bravery in war. But that personal sense of self was also bound up with, indeed could not be separated from, the warrior’s tribal identity. Native Americans are first and foremost what John Ewers calls “tribocentric;” Native American identity is more inclusive than the Western sense of self—the Native American considers the individual only after the family, band, and tribe (23). So, rather than an autonomous individualistic self, “the focus is on a communal self who participates within the tribe;” and, since Native American identity is first tribal rather than individual, personal narratives are told to provide a link to the tribe or to “become more fully accepted into […] his or her community” (Wong, Sending 14, 16). As discussed more fully in Chapter 2, the recounting of oral and pictographic coup tales fulfilled this cultural function by establishing one’s place and status within the tribe.

The form of oral and written coup tales is also communal, for a coup story cannot be told until it is accepted according to the rules of the tribe; then, once accepted, it is worn or shown publicly and recounted orally. The tribe participates in those public tellings by responding and

47 For a discussion of similarities between Native American and women’s forms of autobiography, see Wong’s Sending My Heart Back Across the Years, pages 22-23.
acknowledging through singing, dancing, and drumming (Wong, *Sending* 18). The communal, dialogic nature of oral and written coup tales thus affirms and honors both the individual and the tribe. It is this communal, oral mode of communication that prompts Arnold Krupat to classify Native American autobiography and sense of self as synecdochic, “as a self [defined] only in relation to the coherent and bounded whole of which [it is] a part” (“Native” 210). Western autobiography, on the other hand, is designed to make an individual unique, to stand apart from others, that is, metonymic (Krupat, “Native” 212). The coup tale, through its public telling or display, is a communal act; it has no significance until it is shared. In fact, it gains its significance because it is shared. In essence, a coup tale states, “I win honors not only for me…but for us, the tribe” (Krupat, “Native” 217, italics mine). Therefore, a warrior’s victory or vision is for the tribe’s benefit as well as the individual’s: the coup tale affirms and reinforces both tribal and individual identity as powerful protector and provider to the tribe.

As the written counterpart to these oral coup tales, ledger art acted as a warrior’s resume; it served to establish a warrior’s place within his tribe by providing an accounting of his brave deeds, thus providing status and honor, helping the warrior move up within the tribe’s recognized warrior ranking system. Thus, the autobiographical literacy practice of ledger art, by affirming and reinforcing tribal and individual identity, was integral to Plains Indian culture and life of the nineteenth century. But by the mid-1800s that culture was under attack, and the literacy practice it supported, and was supported by, was beginning to change as well. Within the confines of Fort Marion, Colonel Pratt’s experiments in cultural interaction and assimilation would have major effects on the ledger art literacy practice, providing a microcosm for studying identity transformation and resistance in the uneven power structures of an imposed contact zone.

Upon their arrival at the fort, several of the prisoners had begun drawing almost immediately, and Pratt, noting their interest, encouraged the work and provided more materials. From extant drawings, twenty-six prisoners are known to have drawn, mostly the younger warriors as was the custom on the Plains. The artists were predominately Cheyenne (fifteen artists) and Kiowa (nine artists), with two Arapaho artists. Soon the prisoners were selling scores of these books to avid tourists for two dollars each. However, very little of this work could be considered Brumble’s resume or Wong’s personal narratives of brave deeds. Among

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48 Apparently, no drawings were done by the Comanche or Caddo. For a detailed discussion, including a summary of each artist and examples of their work, see Karen Petersen’s seminal work *Plains Indian Art of Fort Marion*. 
drawings of their trip east and others of their new life at Fort Marion—which certainly can be considered autobiographical but definitely not traditional coup tales of bravery in battle—the content of the drawings quickly changed from raiding scenes to camp scenes, courting, dancing, hunting, celebrations, and spiritual ceremonies—in short, scenes of everyday tribal life. Whereas on the Plains, subject matter was restricted to coup tales and the occasional hunting or courting scene, the Fort Marion artists expanded their themes to include a range of subjects, which I have grouped into the following categories: surrender and trip east, life at Fort Marion, portraits, battle scenes, and tribal life (including camp scenes, hunting, and ceremonies).

Scholars have speculated several reasons for the expanded subject matter in Fort Marion ledger art. A common explanation is that the Indians, transplanted a thousand miles from home and family, living in a strange and foreign environment, were nostalgic for their old way of life, their family, and friends—and so drawing scenes of home made the prisoners feel closer (Berlo and McMaster 21). Drawing, then, became a kind of therapy. There is no doubt, the prisoners missed their families. On the trip east, Grey Beard, who had earlier attempted suicide and later was fatally shot trying to escape, had told Captain Pratt about his despair over being away from his wife and young daughter. Less than a month after their arrival at the fort, the prisoners approached Pratt with a request to ship their families east to join them for “they were distressed about being separated from their women and children;” Pratt wrote a letter to his superiors in Washington with an impassioned plea from the Indians’ spokesman, Kiowa chief Mah-Mante, but the request was denied by the Bureau (R. Pratt 122). Related to the idea of nostalgia, it has been suggested the prisoners wanted to capture a vanishing way of life before it disappeared; as art historian Dorothy Dunn claims, by 1870, ledger art had become “an urgent personal record of dying days” (7). Art historian Karen Petersen, one of the first to study the Fort Marion artists, states that because the prisoners’ “old societal structure [had] shattered,” drawing became personal “self expression” rather than social or heraldic in nature, that is, it became art for art’s sake (64). The artists certainly experimented with artistic form and technique during this period as evidenced in a breaking away from traditional ledger art conventions, including the addition of landscape and other superfluous information which I will discuss below. It has also been noted that the drawings of the Kiowa warrior Wohaw, many of which are symbolic in nature, do have a sense of art created as personal expression. However, I believe something deeper is going on in these transformations, not the least of which is related to the commodification of the works.
Since most of these drawings were produced for sale or as gifts to others, they lose the sense of personal records or mementos of “back home.” Instead, I would agree with Plains Cree artist and curator Gerald McMaster, who argues against Berlo’s view of nostalgia, that these artists were first and foremost narrators. According to McMaster, “their tradition was narration, articulating truth to others; to falsify (make up, pretend, perhaps romanticize) was not virtuous. I think the discourse of nostalgia is misleading, or inappropriate” (Berlo and McMaster 22). Carrying on centuries of Plains Indian tradition, these artists were communicators telling a story. But as I will argue below, that story was modified for a new situation and audience.

Given the change in purpose from personal story to commodity, it is also quite possible the artists simply drew what their sponsors requested. It is known that Eva Scott, for example, gave suggestions to Zotom and Howling Wolf when she commissioned books from them. Yet, of course, the prisoners didn’t have to comply, especially if their skills were in demand; according to Scott, Zotom more or less complied with her wishes but Howling Wolf chose his own subjects (Szabo 106). Given this evidence, it is likely that other patrons, Pratt included, requested specific subjects for the books they commissioned. Yet the prisoners also created books of their own design for general sale, which implies they would be less influenced by a sponsor’s request; however, it is also likely that, since they had “gone commercial,” the prisoners drew what they knew was selling.

The artists’ captive situation probably had much to do with their change in subject matter. Karen Petersen, after analyzing three hundred Fort Marion drawings, found that only ten percent were warlike, and even fewer depicted aggression against whites; yet on the Plains, battles would have been the predominate subject (72). While Petersen conjectures that Captain Pratt may have discouraged such violent depictions, it was also certainly to the prisoners’ advantage, as POWs, not to represent themselves as warriors. As prisoners of war under US Army control, they were less likely to depict themselves fighting and killing US soldiers, or even to depict themselves as warriors fighting and killing other Native Americans. They almost certainly felt the need to find safer, less threatening subjects, a form of self-censorship. In fact, examples have been discovered of Plains ledger art that had been modified to hide transgressions against whites and soldiers as shown in Figures 4-1 and 4-2.
In Figure 4-1, which originally depicted a warrior in combat with five white men in two wagons, the wagon wheels have been re-drawn to look like shields and the whites have been given long hair to resemble Indians, though they still retain their Western hats.

In Figure 4-2, the covered wagons in a defensive circle have been drawn over to look like an encampment of tipis, while the white men enclosed in the circle have been given long hair and breechclouts. Such “cover-ups” were most likely made to hide incriminating evidence should the books be captured (Berlo, “Drawing” 16). Even acts such as stealing horses—the prevalent Plains ledger art subject of horse raids, which most tribes counted as coup—are often whitewashed at Fort Marion, as in one drawing by Howling Wolf labeled “Hunting wild horses.” With such pressures to suppress tales of warfare, then, it is understandable why hunting scenes became a favorite subject at Fort Marion, replacing the coup tales of battle honors.
All of these speculations are probably true to some extent or another, and it is likely that each type of new subject had a different reason for coming into existence and served a different purpose. For example, drawings of the trip east (Figure 4-3) and events at Fort Marion (Figure 4-4) documented events in the prisoners’ personal histories, continuing that Plains autobiographical tradition but with a new purpose (as commodities) and expanded audience (white tourists).

Figure 4-3. Drawing of Nashville During Trip East (Zotom, March 1877) *Warrior Artists*. © 1998 National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C.

Figure 4-4. Events at Fort Marion, Indian Prisoners and Ladies’ Archery Club (Making Medicine, 1876-77) *National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution (MS39B neg 55055)*
Thus, these drawings served to capture the events as a personal and tribal history—Wong might say as a diary would—and perhaps, as suggested by Berlo and others, with the additional therapeutic purpose of helping the transplanted prisoners work through an understanding of this strange new world in which they found themselves.

Yet, given the current scholarship discussed previously—that Native American autobiography is both personal and communal—and building on Hertha Wong’s statement that “[p]ersonal narratives that affirmed one’s place within the community now [at Fort Marion] became self-narrations to explain one’s culture to others,” I claim that what we see within the specific group of Fort Marion drawings depicting tribal life is a move away from personal exploit narratives to the emergence of a cultural autoethnography that arose to fill a new purpose for a new situation (Sending 58). Since nineteenth-century Native Americans thought tribally as well as personally, the move from personal scenes to cultural ones would not have been that difficult because, as discussed earlier, personal narratives were already in a sense tribal as well. In this new culture which rewarded peaceful, compliant behavior, the original purpose of the ledger art literacy practice—advertising the brave exploits of a warrior in order to establish his status within the tribe—no longer held meaning. Within the tribe, the depiction of coup tales was a type of social capital, but that capital wasn’t worth anything in this new environment; here at Fort Marion, it had lost its cultural significance. Within this new society, exploit tales and the depiction of them were no longer needed since the lifestyle that made them relevant, and which they supported, no longer existed. No longer required, the older coup tale literacy practice died out and a different literacy practice replaced it—an autoethnography.

For the sense of autoethnography claimed here, I am using Mary Louise Pratt’s definition, not Wong’s (which is related to tribal identity, as in “self-culture-writing” or writing with a sense of self in relation to one’s culture). Rather than “explain[ing] one’s culture to others” as Wong suggests, Pratt defines autoethnography as “expression aimed specifically at intervening in the discursive economy of a dominant group” whereby “a subordinate group asserts an alternative to the dominant group’s representations of them” (Wong, Sending 58; Pratt “Transculturation” 43). While ethnographic texts are created by the dominant culture to represent Others to themselves, autoethnographic texts are made by Others “in response to or in dialogue with those [ethnographic] texts;” an autoethnographic text, then, is one “in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of
them” (Pratt, “Arts” 35, italics mine). Autoethnographic texts are not simply indigenous texts, such as ledger art, but indigenous texts that are merged with appropriations from the conqueror’s mediums in order “to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding” (“Arts” 35).

In this way, Pratt ties her sense of autoethnography to Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz’ term transculturation, which Pratt defines as the “processes whereby members of subordinated or marginalized groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (“Arts” 36). More involved than the ideas of assimilation and acculturation, transculturation implies that, rather than passively taking on the dominant culture’s characteristics, the colonized group selects and uses what it desires from the conqueror in order to create something new. Thus, although a subordinate, dominated culture may not be able to control what comes toward it from the dominant culture, it can control what elements it will take from that culture and how it will apply them (“Arts” 36). By merging with the conqueror’s idioms, the messages in the modified indigenous texts are more likely to be accepted into the discourses of the metropolis where they can then fulfill their purpose of intervening in metropolitan understandings. Thus, rather than assuaging feelings of nostalgia, I believe the Fort Marion prisoners, through the process of transculturation, developed autoethnographies to create alternative representations of Native American culture which could be disseminated and understood within the conqueror’s modes of discourse. Rather than creating art for its own sake or capturing “an urgent personal record of dying days,” the prisoners used this ready market for their artwork to disperse their cultural messages as commodities within the dominant culture.

If transculturation is the process of appropriating and adapting “idioms of the metropolis,” what then was appropriated and adapted from Euroamerican culture? Certainly, as discussed previously, as early as the 1840s Native Americans adapted art materials and artistic techniques into their indigenous medium, allowing them to include finer detail and increased realism. As seen in Figure 4-5, the majority of this detail was added to the figures and their clothing in order to identify the subjects more clearly. For the most part, superfluous information such as backgrounds and landscapes was still excluded, leaving the focus on the action and the actors. Figures almost always lay within an empty background, and little was done in those earlier drawings to anchor the figures within the space or otherwise render the drawings more
aesthetically pleasing. Function was not sacrificed to form—the message was still paramount and detail was added only to improve communication of that message.

In the Fort Marion works, however, many of the drawings are filled with landscape and more realistic settings as seen in Figures 4-6 and 4-7. This appropriation most likely resulted from the artists’ contact and familiarization with Western painting styles seen both at the prison and in town, as well as photographs. As evidence of this influence, it is known that various paintings were hung around the fort as teaching devices at Pratt’s request, including religious scenes and Euroamerican technologies such as trains and ships, many of which appear in Fort Marion drawings (Szabo 103). The prisoners were also photographed formally for Pratt’s promotional purposes, and they most assuredly saw photographs circulated at the prison by tourists or on postcards in town. It can also be assumed that white artists at the fort who drew realistic portraits and scenes influenced the prisoners’ techniques, much as Bodmer, Catlin, and others influenced the styles of Mandan artists during the early part of the century. By adapting their forms to these Euroamerican standards, the artists’ messages were more readily accepted and understood in the non-native, dominant culture.
The artists (or their sponsors) also appropriated English to interpret ledger art for a non-native audience. They adapted these elements into the indigenous form by removing name symbols and shorthand conventions, which their Anglo audience didn’t understand, and replacing them with English equivalents. In many drawings, the need for conventions is eliminated altogether by generalizing and simplifying the subjects so they could be understood more readily by the non-native audience. In fact, unlike earlier ledger art, which tells a story and is full of action with present and past tense represented through conventions such as foot tracks
and floating weapons, many of the autoethnographic depictions of tribal life are static, the figures caught in mid-motion, frozen in time, like actors in a tableau vivant, for that is exactly what life at Fort Marion and on the reservation had become—tableau. Life was now static, unchanging, repetitive, and dull. This new life with its confined boundaries, dependence on government handouts, and long days with little activity was antithetical to the free-roaming, autonomous, and dynamic traditional culture. Two Leggings, a Crow, whose amanuensis repeatedly asked him to describe life on the reservation for his autobiography, said only this of reservation life, “Nothing happened after that. We just lived. There were no more war parties, no capturing of horses from the Piegans and the Sioux, no buffalo to hunt” (qtd. in Brumble 59, Calloway 78).

This loss of story-telling conventions and a movement towards more static depictions is clearly evident by comparing the earliest known Fort Marion works (from a sketch book by Making Medicine created in August 1875, less than three months after arrival) to works created later in his incarceration. In Figure 4-8, a drawing of an antelope hunt from the 1875 book, C-shaped horse tracks leading to the horse indicate the hunter has come upon the herd from the lower right, then moved downward where he dismounted and tied up his steed; a line of looping foot tracks (long dots) leads to his current position where he has set up crossed sticks to steady his weapon. The tracks of the antelope show their movements; at one point, many tracks come together at a spot where they had stopped momentarily, presumably to graze (Petersen 30).

Figure 4-8. “Hunting Antelope” (Making Medicine, 1875)
National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution. MS39A neg 55028
In a sketchbook created in August 1876, Making Medicine is still drawing stories, but, in many cases, they have actually become more complex and detailed, reflecting the addition of landscapes and more realistic animals. As seen in Figure 4-9, the second drawing in the 1876 book, various sets of tracks and conventions indicate the action of the story—the Indians are camped at a fork in the river and it is summer (indicated by arbors in front of the tipis); above the wavy blue line of the river, hunters on horseback (backward C-shaped tracks) have been hunting buffalo (pairs of C-shaped tracks) chasing them from left to right across the page and then crossing the river. One buffalo has been killed, lying wounded on the right side of the page, its tracks indicating its flight, the red flowing from its mouth, leg, and side indicating wounds. Another wounded bull, however, has been charging after a mounted hunter who looks back toward the racing animal in the lower portion of the scene (horse and buffalo tracks show their movement from the top right to the middle bottom above the lower river). Residents of the camp observe the commotion and one warrior has grabbed a bow. Another warrior has ridden a horse into the fray and now pursues the buffalo (set of tracks coming out of the village and turning), attempting to kill the rampaging animal before it can attack the fleeing hunter or harm the village (interpretation by Viola 20). Throughout the rest of this 1876 book, in eight of nine hunting scenes and in nine paintings overall, Making Medicine has included foot tracks and other conventions to tell an elaborate story.

Figure 4- 9. “Camp Scene” (Making Medicine, August 1876)

Warrior Artists. © 1998 National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C.
However, one year later in an 1877 drawing of an antelope hunt (Figure 4-10), Making Medicine has depicted the hunter patiently sitting on a hillside but without any indication of how he got there; the picture contains no foot tracks or other conventions. Similarly, no tracks are shown for the antelope which are depicted in various realistic positions grazing, resting, and peering at the hunter. Though depicting the same type of hunt as the 1875 example (Figure 4-8), this static scene, drawn two years later, captures a moment in time, becoming a tableau rather than story. Compared to this motionless illustration of an antelope hunt, the earlier depiction is full of energy and life.

Figure 4-10. “Shooting Antelope” (Making Medicine, May 1876 - March 1877)
National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution. MS39B neg 55068

The name symbol, another Plains convention, alters and in fact almost disappears from the Fort Marion works—Karen Petersen found them in only twenty of the four-hundred-sixty Fort Marion drawings she studied (53). By comparing Howling Wolf’s new name symbol (Figure 4-11) to the one he used on the Plains prior to Fort Marion (Figure 4-12), we can see several changes which this one artist made to the convention.
The Fort Marion signature is realistic—the wolf is seated with his head raised as he howls, just as he might look in nature; his coat and facial features are more detailed with an eye, nose, teeth, and fur carefully illustrated. The earlier drawing is more simplistic—a simple line drawing showing an elongated running wolf with voice lines issuing from its mouth indicating a howl. A line connects the symbol to the figure of Howling Wolf. But the new symbol sits alone, unattached to the figure of Howling Wolf the man. Thus, the name symbol has become its own entity. No more a symbol used to identify a figure within a drawing, the howling wolf appears as a true signature as one might sign a painting or legal document, and thus the symbol stands in for Howling Wolf just as a written name would do. In most other Fort Marion drawings I examined, the name symbol is occasionally replaced by the person’s English name or, more often, is not used at all. Sometimes, in a combination of traditions, a line attaches the English name to the
person’s head similar to the way the name symbol convention was matched to its figure (Figure 4-13); more often, there is no line as shown in Figure 4-14 and 4-15.

Figure 4-13. Zotom’s Connected Name Symbol in Classroom Scene (Zotom, 1877)
*Courtesy of the Autry National Center/Southwest Museum, Los Angeles. Photo# 4100.G.1.30.*

Figure 4-14. Zotom’s Unconnected Name Symbol in Wedding Scene (Zotom, 1877)
*Courtesy of the Autry National Center/Southwest Museum, Los Angeles. Photo# 4100.G.1.12.*
Related to these considerations of audience, and especially to the loss of name symbols, is the most striking development in the subject matter of Fort Marion ledger art — anonymity. Pre-Fort Marion ledger art carefully delineated the actors depicted in the scene; specifics of dress, rank, tribal affiliation, and usually a name symbol were used to accurately identify the protagonist, sometimes other participants, and at least the tribal identity of the foe depicted in the coup tale. But fewer of the Fort Marion drawings depict scenes involving a specific person. Although the drawings may be autobiographical in nature, as in Zotom’s two 1877 sketchbooks which depict events he participated in, the subject himself (Zotom in this case) is the protagonist in very few of them. While I agree with Hertha Wong that Zotom’s books can be seen as “cultural conversion narrative[s],” documenting his journey from tribal warrior on the open plains to soldier-student in a regimented white culture, few of the drawings specify Zotom as an actor in the scene (“Plains” 304). In the Eva Scott sketchbook of twenty-nine drawings, for example, Zotom is identified only in a portrait of his wedding (Figure 4-14), an 1871 meeting of truce with Pratt (Figure 4-15), and the final page in the sequence, which depicts Zotom and six other prisoners sitting in a regimented line in a classroom before a white female teacher, hair shorn, bodies clad in army uniforms (Figure 4-13). Figures 4-16 through 4-19, however, are representative of many drawings in the book, showing anonymous tribal life tableaus and scenes of the trip east and the fort, which are populated with either unidentified groups of soldiers and prisoners or void of all people.
Figure 4- 16. “A Kiowa Camp” (Zotom, 1877)
*Courtesy of the Autry National Center/Southwest Museum, Los Angeles. Photo# 4100.G.1.2.*

Figure 4- 17. “Cooking and Eating” (Zotom, 1877)
*Courtesy of the Autry National Center/Southwest Museum, Los Angeles. Photo# 4100.G.1.11.*

Figure 4- 18. “Arrival at Caddo” (Zotom, 1877)
*Courtesy of the Autry National Center/Southwest Museum, Los Angeles. Photo# 4100.G.1.21.*
This tendency for anonymity is especially apparent in Howling Wolf’s 1877 sketchbook created for Eva Scott. Except for the first two scenes, which depict first him and then his parents and himself as a young boy, the book is filled with anonymous depictions of tribal life. Any Cheyenne could replace another in the drawings, for that is what they depict—representative Cheyenne, no one in particular. No longer do the pictographs depict events from a specific warrior’s life; these are simply pictures of any warrior, any Indian, not a particular one. The convention has changed because the purpose and audience have changed. The tradition of carefully identifying the warrior is no longer necessary because these are no longer coup tales—no one’s status is at stake. No one’s identity within the tribe is being reinforced, so no identity is necessary; the figures can remain faceless, interchangeable.

Figure 4-19. “Exterior of Fort Marion” (Zotom, 1877) 
*Courtesy of the Autry National Center/Southwest Museum, Los Angeles. Photo# 4100.G.1.28.*

Figure 4-20. “Council of War” (Howling Wolf, 1877) 
*Courtesy of the Autry National Center/Southwest Museum, Los Angeles. Photo# 4100.G.2.24.*
Howling Wolf then takes anonymity to a whole new level by including six scenes showing people only from the back view (Figures 4-20, 21, and 24). Shown only from the rear, these are truly anonymous individuals—effaced—individuals without identity. It is possible that Howling Wolf used this rear view technique to better show the details of elaborate dress, yet he certainly has strayed from the traditional ledger art convention of showing a full front torso view with the head in profile. Even though those earlier profiles were often featureless, they provided the sense of an individual who was then identified through dress and accessories. A face indicates a presence, an identity. A face invites the viewer in, sets up a dialogic, while a person’s back effectively shuts down communication. A person with their back towards the viewer indicates a closing down. There is a sense of keeping the (white) viewer out—as in, I will draw these scenes for you, but you, the white viewer, are not invited in; you cannot fully participate in these events you wish to see. Since many of these scenes involve ceremonial events such as warrior society gatherings and sun dance ceremonies, it is likely the artists were reluctant to allow whites fully into this sacred world. The line of backs in each of these three drawings creates an effective barrier to the important activity that is happening in front of them, activity to which the white viewer is not given access.

Figure 4-21. “Pow Wow” (Howling Wolf, 1877)
*Courtesy of the Autry National Center/Southwest Museum, Los Angeles. Photo# 4100.G.2.10.*
The result of this transculturation in the Fort Marion contact zone—a transformed ledger art with English translations and the elimination of culturally-bound name symbols and storytelling conventions through anonymous and generalized scenes—permitted Native American cultural messages to be accepted, dispersed, and understood within the metropolis. Circulating within Euroamerican culture, these autoethnographic texts could then “intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding” by providing alternative representations of Native American life and identity, alternatives that declare, *We are not what you say; we are this. You call us bloodthirsty murderers, but we are gentle lovers and benign hunters providing for our families* (Figures 4-23 and 4-24).
You call us savages, but we have deep spiritual beliefs and hold ceremonies similar to yours, such as weddings and funerals (Figures 4-14 and 25).

You call us wild, but we have highly organized communities and we engage in the everyday activities of life such as cooking, game playing, and celebrating, much as you do (Figures 4-17, 26 and 27).
In her article “Transculturation and Autoethnography,” Mary Louise Pratt describes a contemporary example of Andean autoethnography—*tablas de Sarhua*—that, in function and form, bear striking resemblances to the group of autoethnographic Fort Marion ledger art depicting tribal life. The *tablas de Sarhua* (boards of Sarhua) are a Peruvian art form painted on boards by artists in the Andean town of Sarhua, which depict traditional daily life events of
Andean culture. Each *tabla* illustrates one custom, event, or ritual such as sowing, marriage engagement, marriage ceremony, as well as punishments for social misconduct such as adultery (40). A short label, written in indigenous Quechua, is painted on the corner of each *tabla* explaining the activity portrayed, and a few more lines of Spanish are usually added to interpret the event for the non-native buyer. According to Pratt, “[t]he painters of Sarhua […] appropriated and adapted an art form indigenous to village culture to develop a commodifiable expression to sell to outsiders” (41). The similarities to Fort Marion ledger art are clear—depictions of traditional life, one custom or event per work, bilingualism with written interpretations for the non-Native audience, and commodification are all elements of ledger art’s transculturation at Fort Marion. As with ledger art, the purpose of the *tablas* changed from an ancient tradition—painted boards depicting a family’s genealogy which new homeowners mounted on their roof beams—to a commodified form as “an attempt to place messages into circulation in the metropolis” (41-42). Except for the form being known only by its generic name (rather than being identified by the artist), Pratt’s description of the *tablas* as folk art could be said of ledger art as well:

> the paintings are sold for money and seek a collectors’ market; works are identified only by the label ‘Artes de Sarhua’ (‘Arts of Sarhua’), not individual artists’ names; the style fits into the metropolitan category of ‘naive realism’, depicting rural life and an autonomous social world in a normalised, and sometimes miniaturised and idealised way that does not correspond to a lived experience thrown into upheaval by the penetration of capitalism and modernity. Indeed, modernisation is conspicuous in the *tablas* by its complete absence as a referent. Like Guaman Poma’s autoethnographic depictions of Inca life, the *tablas* depict life-ways understood to have been lost or threatened by radical change. (42, italics mine)

As with the *tablas*, ledger art transitioned from its traditional content of brave coup tales to scenes of village life which were then sold to Euroamerican tourists, thus circulating the prisoners’ vision of Native American culture within the metropolis. Similar to the *tablas*, the village life category of Fort Marion ledger art attempts to “document histories and life-ways subject to transformation, devaluation and misinterpretation by the metropolitan invaders” (42). And while the prisoners’ conversion to “white” soldiers and students certainly involved “a lived experience thrown into upheaval,” the drawings depicting this transformation generally do not
reflect any conflict. The prisoners had been active participants in the worst period of fighting on the southern Plains, their native culture was being exterminated under extreme pressures from the dominant group, and the prisoners themselves were undergoing an enforced assimilation policy that was beyond anything ever attempted by the US government before, yet almost all the Fort Marion ledger art that I examined avoids overt cultural critique of the dominant culture, and representations of white-Indian conflict are rare.

Discussing the nostalgia and extreme sense of loss felt by urban migrants displaced from village life, Pratt explains how these emotions are reflected in the tablas. I believe the same forces are at work in the creation of ledger art for it too expresses “idealised portrayals” “of life-ways […] singled out by the metropolis […] for suppression or for extermination” that are “received by outsiders as exotic and folkloric” (M. Pratt, “Transculturation” 44). For Pratt, 

[A]utoethnographic expression suggests a particular kind of cultural self-consciousness, an awareness of one’s life-ways or customs as they have been singled out by the metropolis, be it for objectification in knowledge, for suppression or for extermination. Autoethnography selectively appropriates some tools of objectification both to counter eradication (‘We are still here despite your/their efforts”) and to counter objectification (“We are not as you/they see us”). […] Autoethnographic art involves an assertion not of self-as-other, but of self-as-another’s-other, and of self as more-than-the-other’s-other. Reception of such art either in terms of assimilation and co-optation, or in terms of purity, authenticity or naivety, suppresses its dialogic, transcultural dimensions. (“Transculturation” 44-45, italics mine)

The urge to create such autoethnographic texts, then, comes from more than a sense of nostalgia, more than an attempt to capture a dying way of life. The urge develops from the “dialogic,” the interaction between cultures in the contact zone. Such texts are the indigenous people’s response to the dominant culture’s often negative, paternalistic, and hostile representations of them, as assertions of “self as more-than-the-other’s-other.” As such, autoethnography serves as a means of resistance against misrepresentation and prejudice, against pressures for assimilation and cultural extermination.

Not overtly critical, Fort Marion ledger art does not portray the intense struggles between whites and Native Americans occurring at the time; yet the prisoners were well aware of these tensions for their very captivity was a direct result of those struggles. As discussed previously,
the prisoners may have been afraid (for good reason) to depict covert acts of aggression, and thus they reverted to safer subjects to avoid conflict and reprisal. And yet, even though on the surface these sketches chronicle the conversion narratives of free-roaming warriors to docile, regimented schoolboy-soldiers, subtle acts of resistance can be seen at work within many of the drawings. As noted by art historian Janet Berlo, drawing itself is an act of resistance—capturing a suppressed way of life through art is a way of remembering and keeping that culture alive as an act of resistance against pressures for extermination (Berlo, “Drawing” 18). The Fort Marion autoethnographic texts themselves constitute acts of resistance, responding to biased and ignorant representations by offering up alternative images of self and culture.

*Creating an inside joke in the native tongue in order to laugh behind the conqueror’s back is an act of resistance.* Ledger art executed on ladies’ fans became another favorite tourist item, rivaling the demand for artists’ sketch books. Captain Pratt attested to this item’s popularity when writing to Harriet Beecher Stowe that the book of drawings she had requested was being delayed because of the backlog in requests for painted ladies fans (Petersen 66). One such fan, painted by the Cheyenne warrior Making Medicine and currently on display at the St. Augustine Historical Society museum, depicts a buffalo hunt across the outspread ivory blades (Figure 4-28).

![Figure 4-28. Painted Fan (Making Medicine, ca. 1877)](Original in the collection of the St. Augustine Historical Society)

Making Medicine, a Cheyenne, painted the fan for one of the prisoners’ teachers, Miss Annie E. Pidgeon, and inscribed it with the Indians’ name for her, “Mistohaih.” However, Karen Petersen explains that, rather than “pigeon,” mistohaih is Cheyenne for owl—a dreaded bad luck omen for most Native Americans—and therefore Petersen suggests the inscription is an Indian joke. In this
example of transculturation, the Indian artists’ names and the explanation of the scene are written in English, indicating the artists’ grasp of the language, but the inscription to Miss Pigeon/Owl is written in Cheyenne, indicating they wished to write in code, to provide a hidden meaning. Certainly they used this name when addressing her verbally as well. This inside joke, then, allowed the subordinate group to poke fun at the conqueror, in effect to “laugh behind the teacher’s back” without her comprehending.

Figure 4-29. Courting Scene (Chief Killer)
National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution. MS154064-C neg 8020921

Substituting a safer, innocuous cultural metaphor for an outlawed one is an act of resistance. As discussed in Chapter 2, the warrior whose coup is being depicted is usually placed on the right of the drawing with foe or prey on the left. However, anthropologist Candace Greene, who studied 1,700 Cheyenne ledger art works, claims that this right-left placement is more significant than the simple convention of “protagonist” on the right, foe on the left. According to Greene, the relative position of figures within a drawing reflects Cheyenne ideology and social relationships, in that the figure on the right possesses “greater energy or spiritual force,” dominating the figure on the left (26). This ideology is especially evident when normally portrayed roles are spatially reversed. For example, Greene found that eighty-four percent of depictions of Cheyenne defeats place the Cheyenne on the left and their victor foes on the right, contrary to normal convention; presumably the victors were seen to have possessed more spiritual power, or stronger war medicine, than the Cheyenne, and thus were deemed worthier of the right hand position. Greene found the same ideology reflected in hunting scenes
(in which prey is normally positioned on the left and spirit-filled hunter on the right) and in scenes involving both sexes (according to Cheyenne ideology, males possess spirit energy and therefore are usually shown on the right, while women, who do not possess spirit but can receive it from men, are placed on the left). Since this similar underlying structure sets up a consistent relationship between the three activities, Greene claims the relationship becomes metaphorical and thus one activity can stand in for another.49 Within the contact zone of Fort Marion, then, where scenes of coup counting and warfare were discouraged either directly or implicitly, Plains Indian warriors could replace this traditional cultural metaphor (warfare) with another, safer one (hunting or courting) while keeping alive the original symbolism that affirmed a warrior’s power. In conjunction with the prisoners’ protective self-censorship, this metaphorical substitution of content could explain more fully the low numbers of battle/coup counting scenes and the relative popularity of hunting and courting scenes in the Fort Marion artworks.

Figure 4-30. Soldier Shooting Buffalo in Reversed Position of Power (Howling Wolf, 1877) Courtesy of the Autry National Center/Southwest Museum, Los Angeles. Photo# 4100.G.2.5.

Drawing a US soldier in a symbolic position of lesser power is a form of resistance. In Figure 4-29, Howling Wolf’s fourth picture in the Eva Scott book, a soldier shoots a buffalo. However, the traditional positioning of hunter on the right and prey on the left is reversed. While there is a tendency by some Fort Marion artists to show action scenes moving left to right rather than in the traditional right to left flow, Howling Wolf was not one of those artists, and this is the only action scene in Howling Wolf’s book with a left to right orientation. Given that Howling Wolf is Cheyenne, we must consider Greene’s assertion that spatial positioning in Cheyenne ledger art reflects relative power in Cheyenne ideology; we could thus conclude that Howling Wolf was communicating the soldier’s lesser spiritual power relative to the buffalo, even though the buffalo has obviously been fatally wounded by the soldier and his gun. Applying Greene’s

49 Greene claims these metaphorical relationships were also expressed in battle songs and games. For more, see her article “Structure and Meaning in Cheyenne Ledger Art” pp. 30-32.
idea of metaphorical content, this conclusion could be taken a step further to interpret Howling Wolf’s drawing as a metaphor for a battle scene, the buffalo substituting for an Indian warrior, who, though wounded and perhaps dying, possesses a greater power than the US soldier.

Drawing Native American “schoolboys” sitting in regimented rows at desks before a white teacher, while a puzzling conflict goes on in the background, is an act of resistance. In Figure 4-30, all is calm in the front of the classroom as the prisoners in disciplined conformity mimic their female teacher holding aloft a pen. A painting of Jesus talking to his disciples hangs on the wall, a reflection of the prisoners’ new teachings and conversion to Christianity. Yet in the back of the classroom, the foreground of the drawing, there appears to be a confrontation: another prisoner points to the students with an outstretched arm and sad expression while talking with a seated officer, perhaps Pratt, who appears annoyed and reprimanding, his hand raised, head thrown back, eye angry. In this scene of apparent social transformation, in which warriors are reconfigured as docile soldier-schoolboys, this unidentified confrontation proclaims all is not smooth in the transition, all is not peaceful in the contact zone. Janet Berlo and Anna Blume contrast this “chaotic image” (both in content and layout) with Howling Wolf’s “elegant and gracefully rendered” depictions of traditional Cheyenne scenes to assert that the difference in style “reveals Howling Wolf’s commentary on his current life” (Berlo, Plains 130). By combining the culturally approved representation of converted warriors with his own enigmatic
message of discord, Howling Wolf effectively expresses his personal resistance to the transformation in ways he knows will be acceptable to his white audience.

![Figure 4-32. Native American Spirit (“Classroom at Fort Marion,” Wohaw) Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. MHS Art 1882.018.15](image)

**Drawing a classroom of transformed warrior-students with the ethereal spirit of a Native American watching over them is an act of resistance.** In Figure 4-31, Wohaw depicts the familiar Fort Marion subject of warriors with shorn hair and military dress sitting at desks before a white teacher, a scene that had become the common and socially acceptable representation of the prisoners’ cultural conversion. However, an otherworldly transparent figure in traditional Native American dress stands smiling to the right of the students, head level with the teacher, watching silently over all. It is as though this guardian’s very presence asserts, “You can change us on the outside, but inside our native spirit lives on. We will learn your new ways; we will adapt, but we will not forget who we are.”

**Drawing an enigmatic picture that implies the subject accepts a new culture, while in fact hidden cultural codes declare he has not, is an act of resistance.** “Wo-Haw Between Two Cultures,” shown in Figure 4-32, has become the classic representation of this tumultuous time and is generally interpreted as a poignant metaphor for Native American negotiation between the two cultures. Wohaw draws himself in long hair and native dress standing between a domesticated bull on his right and a buffalo on his left; he holds out pipes to both. Also on his left are a tipi and a group of dots representing a herd of buffalo. To his right, lays a plowed field
adjacent to a clapboard house. With a foot in both worlds, Wohaw is seen as attempting to sort out his relationship to this new reality. Since he faces the domesticated bull and Western house, his foot planted firmly on the field, it is often assumed Wohaw has accepted the dominant culture. Yet some have argued that cultural codes within the drawing make this statement of acceptance less clear.

Wohaw completed this drawing at Fort Marion while his hair was cut short and he wore the western garb of a soldier, yet he depicts himself here in long hair with a breechclout, a direct statement of non-conformity, of resistance to new ways. Additionally, the pipes he holds are different colors, as are the colors of the two beasts’ breath, these colors having symbolic significance in Native American ideology. The pipe in his left hand, which he holds out to the buffalo and his native culture, is red, the color of success. The buffalo’s breath is also red, indicating a flow of positive energy coming from the buffalo towards Wohaw. At the same time, the domestic bull breathes a black energy, the color of death, towards Wohaw possibly representing the demise of his native life. Yet Wohaw holds out a black pipe to the bull, defensively sending his own bad medicine towards it, perhaps hoping to fend off the bull or even kill it. If the Kiowa adhere to the Cheyenne ideology of spatial orientation relative to spiritual power, as identified by Greene, then the placement of the domesticated bull and Western culture
on the right could indicate they have the stronger spiritual energy and are winning out over the weaker buffalo culture—the reality Wohaw is certainly living through.²⁵ Yet Wohaw stands firm, confronting that stronger medicine with his own black spirit power and the combined positive energy of the buffalo spirit and red pipe, transforming this enigmatic drawing into a covert show of resistance against an unwanted life and alien culture that are being forced upon him.

Such covert acts of resistance are possible in the contact zone where heterogeneity, rather than homogeneity, is the norm. In the heterogeneous world of the contact zone, with its dissimilar languages, cultures, and power structure, messages will be given and received differently by the parties involved. In such an environment, therefore, the subordinated group can include messages that may not be evident to the metropolitan audience and so multiple messages are presented, are received, are misinterpreted, or are simply overlooked. The dominant group often sees what it wants to see—docile students, a view into the exotic, conversion narratives, a vanishing people—all messages that support its superiority—and it ignores what doesn’t fit that worldview.

In the Fort Marion contact zone, for example, white tourists and reformers appreciated the prisoners’ conversion narratives because they supported white convictions that the “civilized” way was superior, that the Indians wished to convert, and that their conversion was possible (Berlo, “Drawing” 16). Likewise, tribal life scenes were popular with the tourists as both a view into the exotic and as chronicles of a life the tourists envisioned as dying. As with the sarcasm exhibited in the homework assignment of Mary Louise Pratt’s son, messages of resistance included in such depictions often go unnoticed by the dominant group who assume the interactions are homogeneous; as Pratt asserts, the dominant group believes “the situation is governed by a single set of rules or norms shared by all participants” and “[d]espite whatever conflicts or systematic social differences might be in play, it is assumed that all participants are engaged in the same game and that the game is the same for all players” (“Arts” 38). On the one hand, this means the subordinate group can disperse their coded messages unhindered without fear of reprisal, a sort of underground in the open; on the other, it is a missed opportunity for true communication, shared understanding, and possible reconciliation. Rather than assuming or

²⁵ Although it is possible the convention of the right hand power position was known and followed across the Plains, as were many other conventions and symbols, I am hesitant to generalize the practice to other tribes without detailed study, which is outside the scope of this thesis. I think a study similar to Greene’s that examined the work of other tribes to determine if they too followed this spatial ideology could be important in determining, for example, whether a new subject position was being expressed in any of the Fort Marion or reservation drawings.
trying to create a “unified and homogeneous social world” out of a heterogeneous one, members of a contact zone must instead recognize and embrace the diversity of that contact zone by affirming what all participants bring with them, whether that contact zone lives in the classroom, the boardroom, or a nineteenth-century prison for Native American warriors (“Arts” 38).


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