
Denise Low. *Shadow Light*. Red Mountain Press, 2018. 72 pp. ISBN: 9780998514079.
<https://www.spdbooks.org/Products/9780998514079/shadow-light.aspx?src=RMP>

Denise Low. *The Turtle's Beating Heart: One Family's Story of Lenape Survival*. University of Nebraska Press, 2017. 200 pp. ISBN: 9780803294936.
<http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/bison/9780803294936/>

While Denise Low's two recent works certainly differ stylistically, they incorporate similar themes that contribute powerful messages about Native American identity and the influences ancestors can have on later generations of a family. Low beautifully juxtaposes human mortality with the permanence of nature, focusing on the inheritance of a concealed cultural identity, and exploring the long-lasting effects of generational and historical trauma. These books present Low's observations of her surroundings, as well as her thoughts about her position on this earth and the other people she is connected to. Readers will be drawn to these books for their emotional honesty and their discussion of topics that connect a complicated history to contemporary human experience.

Low's memoir *The Turtle's Beating Heart* is not a linear narration of Low's own life experiences—instead, it contains her reflections on those experiences after she learns more about her Native heritage that has been passed down through her late Lenape grandfather, Frank Bruner. Low explains that “The Root [her paternal lineage] and Bruner families presented themselves as European Americans and participants in American society, not Indians” because “Erasure of identity has costs, but survival trumps everything else” (43). This statement captures the intention of colonizers to remove or erase Native American legacy, though it also affirms the survival of these groups in the face of massive oppression and genocide: Low's grandfather was living during a time where the Ku Klux Klan was developing as a prominent group that would openly harm and humiliate minorities. Low addresses the generational problems that coincide with this attempted elimination of heritage, and her story powerfully uncovers memories while reclaiming her family's cultural identity.

Divided into four parts, the memoir focuses primarily on Low's Lenape lineage through her mother's side. Low writes about her grandfather, her mother Dorothy Bruner Dotson, herself, and contemporary life in Delaware. Rather than recording a history she is familiar with, Low recovers memories of a suppressed part of her family's past and discovers how this new information has actually impacted her throughout her entire life. She explains that “History is an imperfect construction, but it is essential to community identity” (6). While the recovery of her family's legacy is essential to her understanding of identity, her memoir also grapples with accepting the missing pieces of her grandfather's life story and the resulting, imperfect construction of a previously concealed history.

Low was born and raised in Kansas City, and she unpacks truths about her grandfather by investigating her family's past and connecting it to the history of discrimination against Native Americans. Unfortunately, Low can no longer ask her grandfather or her mother about this traumatic history, so she seeks answers through research, people in her Native community, and other, living members of her family. Her memoir outlines that her grandfather originally lived

“within a block of the original Delaware trading post” but “After the Ku Klux Klan invaded his hometown in central Kansas, his family moved to this haven [Kansas City]” (4). Despite the fact that this city was safer than Frank Bruner’s hometown, his family still chose to hide their Native identities. Low explains this when she states: “Discrimination against Native people has been so fierce that many people, like my family, suppressed their non-European ancestry as completely as possible” (5). It is this concealment that has prevented Low from growing up with a strong understanding of her Native heritage, and it is also what motivates her quest to find answers about her connection to the cultural identity that remained unspoken about for so long. As Low begins to unravel details about her family’s past, she highlights the positives of revealing more about her relatives, but also the negatives that inherently align with a majorly suppressed past. For example, Low explains that generational trauma has affected her family, and she explains that her mother “became isolated, like her parents before her. The habit of broken families is continued, in a pattern of unconscious behaviors. This is a continuing of internalized diaspora” (77). In this section, Low importantly highlights the continuous impact that cultural oppression can have on multiple generations of a family. Also, because she is telling this story to readers now, she also represents a story of survival while resisting colonial ideologies.

This book connects history to the present and recognizes the powerful influence it has on multiple generations of people and the ways that they choose to identify with or disassociate from their cultures. Low explains the effects that historical and generational trauma can have on Native descendants, and her firsthand experiences with these issues demonstrate the complex problems that colonization inflicts on those who are still under its influence. For these reasons, her work contributes a valuable perspective to readers and would be beneficial to scholars studying Native memoirs or other works that discuss topics such as historical and intergenerational trauma.

Low’s memoir pairs well with *Shadow Light*, a beautiful collection of poems that experiments with various styles and structures while maintaining a consistent voice, exploring connections between nature, humanity, the past, and the present. Low’s considerations about her family and surroundings reappear throughout both of her texts. She alludes to family traditions, comments on Native American history and colonization, and her book concludes when she directly mentions her grandparents and the survival of Native cultures and traditions. These reflections provide understandings of cultural connections that are embedded in a family’s history and their physical space—and Low considers how those connections are fractured once the space is colonized. Throughout this book of poetry, Low frequently and overtly references the destructive nature of colonization—therefore presenting a strong position about Native tragedy and resistance to her readers. In “Before the Gnadenhutzen Massacre,” she writes “Wheeling is Wih link, ‘Place of the Head,’ a settler’s decapitated skull hung from a tree,” and then:

They talk

Some stole land already. Some are preachers . . . //

Come morning they will begin the slaughter” (63).

From this sample, readers can see that Low reverts to a historical perspective about the violence European settlers brought to Indigenous lands, and she describes their acts of entitlement that have resulted in cruelty and injustice towards generations of people. This text presents a clear snapshot of a single moment in time in order to demonstrate a constructed, historical perspective that challenges the dominant political narrative.

Along with poems that focus on conflicts, stolen land, and acts of violence, *Shadow Light* also touches upon important topics that detail a connection of cultural and personal history to contemporary life. For example, one of the most enjoyable convergences of the memoir and book of poetry is when Low talks about how she became a poet. In the memoir, Low writes about her experience playing cards with her grandfather:

“This is how I learned poetry, not as ornament, but as spells. By the time I was born, everyone except my oldest sister was tired of children’s books, and so card playing was my first exposure to verse, training for my future as a poet. Words created real consequences. We played for money, and any magic boost was allowed” (122).

The spoken words and verses she learned through card games with her grandfather and the written poetry she now produces demonstrate an integration of two communicative mediums that link the past to the present. Similarly, this excerpt highlights the major impact Low’s grandfather has had on her career, as well as the perspectives she maintains about the power of words to influence actions.

In “Too Many Green Leaves,” from *Shadow Light*, Low compares leaves to cards, alluding to her unique initiation into poetry through card games. The poem states:

I turn ten yours [sic] old
 I press scarlet leaves in wax paper
 flatten them with a hot iron.
 I turn sixty.
 Huckberries are spades. (43)

Here, the impermanence of earthly qualities contrasts with the natural human function of aging. Low’s metaphor intertwines natural imagery with human experiences and the life cycle, while skillfully incorporating details from her own memories. This poem is one that stands out because it relates to her other reflections about human relationships with the natural world in different poems and in the memoir.

A final poetry sample that couples with *The Turtle’s Beating Heart* comes from Low’s last poem, “Stomp Dance, Wyandotte County.” The poem reads: “My grandfather and grandmother lived on Lenape land near this / spot. Their footprints remain in the ground” (68). The words in this text and in *The Turtle’s Beating Heart* express the deep connection Low feels to her

grandparents after their deaths, and it also signifies the powerful presence people can maintain on this earth even after they leave it behind. This poem beautifully combines with Low's sentiments throughout her memoir—which is why *Shadow Light* further enhances the reading of *The Turtle's Beating Heart* and vice versa.

Works like Low's call upon readers to consider the impermanence of human life and the imperativeness of understanding and appreciating cultures and traditions that existed long before our present day. In *The Turtle's Beating Heart*, Low recalls "As long as people remember, my Cherokee friend taught me, they are not conquered" (131). If anyone might ask why they should read Low's work, the answer is in this line. Low writes to remember her Native family's legacy while simultaneously helping contemporary readers recognize the importance of historically oppressed voices. Stories and poems from Low's memoir and book of poetry contribute to the Native narratives that maintain an important role alongside voices from the dominant culture. These works allow readers to become more aware of a fragmented past and understand that, while memories or recordings of this past cannot be fully recovered, they also should not be neglected. *The Turtle's Beating Heart* and *Shadow Light* ultimately provide necessary observations and assertions that affirm there is danger in forgetting cultural histories and there is power in remembering.

Katie Wolf, California State University, Northridge