



Bishkiischaiishe/Parfleche envelopes for storage, 1890, hide, trade paints, Collection of Don and Liza Siegel

# letter to my people

joree | afrance

*I want Crow children to know they have a place under the sun. That place is that they are a Crow tribe of Indians. The material in their roots is as good or better than what's happening today. I think we are beginning to blossom from our roots. A blossom is growing, and I am glad.*

— Alma Hogan Snell<sup>1</sup>

We are the people made of mud who highly respect the stars. We are the people of the tallest peaks of the Bighorn Mountains. We are the people of the banks of the mighty ferocious waters that flow through our home. We are the product of our mothers and the answers to our grandparents' prayers. We are exactly who we were meant to be. We are few but we are mighty. We may be small like the duck that brought mud to the surface, the Chickadee who helped Plenty Coups, the shield that changed the weather, or the Little People who care for all the land, but we are powerful and mighty just like them. We are small in numbers but we have survived. We need to take the lessons from the small but mighty powers that have guided and assisted us. We have a way of understanding the world around us that sets us apart from any other people. We are fortunate enough to call where we live home. We are blessed to have a place like Crow Country and we must do all that we can to protect it.

We need to take better care of our mothers: Mother Earth, our homes, and our birth mothers. We need to care, protect, and uplift our women. We need to listen, show our love and appreciation for them. We must listen to our teachers, our mothers, fathers, the Big Horn Rams, stars, Little People, buffalo, rocks, and the water. We must intentionally listen so we can learn how to do and be better. We need to remember that this land is not ours to keep and we are simply borrowing it. We need to remember that the blood of our ancestors has infiltrated the land, demonstrating their gruesome fight to protect their way of life for

future generations, including us. We must not forget that we are also made of the same roots of the teachings of our mothers and Helpers, the strength and sacrifices of our ancestors, and the prayers that have been heard and prayed since time immemorial. We must remember that we are them in a different time and we have the same obligations to protect. Power was given from the land and prayers were said for our leaders to guide us to where we are today. Remember that the same fight and strength that was in them is also in us. I pray that we can continue living as Apsáalooke people for another millennium on the land where good is found, that our rivers will always flow and be named after the sacred Big Horn Rams, and that our mountains will continue to belong to our grandchildren's grandchildren. Everything in this life was created for a purpose and you are part of that purpose. Taking care of the earth is taking care of our people.

Notes

1

Alma Hogan Snell, Becky Matthews, ed., *Grandmother's Grandchild* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

# the land that raised us

joree | afrance

*The Crow Country is a good country. The Great Spirit has put it exactly in the right place; while you are in it you fare well; whenever you go out of it, whichever way you travel, you will fare worse... The Crow Country is exactly in the right place. Everything good is to be found there. There is no country like the Crow Country.*  
— Sore Belly, Apsáalooke Chief<sup>1</sup>

The land is reflected in every aspect of Apsáalooke thought, design, and way of being. Understanding how Apsáalooke people see and interact with their landscape is rooted in their language, knowledge, and stories, which have been given to them by lichiiikbaaliia/First Maker and his Helpers. Our way of being is passed on from generation to generation through the social fabrics of Ashammaláxxiia, our clan system. This exploration of the Apsáalooke landscape can only be understood with a fundamental understanding of how this world came to be, and how we came to be, where our strength comes from, and how we must draw on that fortitude to perpetually protect this way of being.

## Creation Story, Our Mothers, Water, and Layers of the Universe

*Red Woman appeared and pulled out her root digger and started scratching the earth and made the springs, creeks, and rivers. As the water flowed from the riparian areas, plants started to grow. Red Woman said...“If you are sick take the roots of the plants and eat and you will be healed.”*  
— George Reed<sup>2</sup>

We are told of the time when the earth was covered with water. It was then that the creation of the land and Biiluuke—Crow people—began. lichiiikbaaliia, First Maker, instructed four ducks to dive into the deep waters in search of mud. The first three ducks failed, but the last duck—a mud duck, which was

the smallest of the ducks—succeeded and brought a small amount of mud to the surface. lichiiikbaaliia took the mud, sang his creation song, then breathed into the mud, spreading it onto the water, and created the land on which we stand.<sup>3</sup> There are varying sizes of land masses—continents and islands—because the small duck was only able to bring up what he could, but lichiiikbaaliia used what he was given. Hisshiishduwiia—Red Woman, wife of Old Man Coyote—was responsible for carving out streambeds for our waters to flow.<sup>4</sup>

lichiiikbaaliia molded Biiluuke from the mud and breathed life into them, thus teaching us that the breath we use to speak our words is sacred and that we must always be mindful of what we speak into this world.<sup>5</sup> Our people were originally called Awakiiwiluupaapke, which translates to “People on Top of the Ground” and references the creation of the Apsáalooke people, who come from the materials of the ground itself.<sup>6</sup> When Biiluuke were created, they were created equal; “neither man nor woman was made first, it is simply said that [Biiluuke] were created.”<sup>7</sup> We are made from the elements of the earth. We are taught that the earth is our first mother, the tipi (lodge or home) is our second mother, and the third is our birth mother. We are instructed to treat our mothers with high regard and reverence, for they are the ones who unapologetically provide, shelter, teach, and care for us even at our lowest. An Apsáalooke elder stated, “Treat your mother well, for our mothers are only on loan to us by lichiiikbaaliia. They are only on earth for a while, then they return. Take care of them while they are here.”<sup>8</sup> Everything in this life that sustains us is not ours to possess or keep. Just like our birth mothers, we are borrowing the earth and our homes from lichiiikbaaliia, and we must do our part to protect them. It must be remembered that Apsáalookbia, Crow women, have always had agency and a significant purpose in sustaining the Apsáalooke way of life. Just as we must protect our

women, we must protect our land and all that comes with it.

Our universe is made up of three layers. The highest layer, known as Baakuukutaawaa Alakoole/Where People Live Up Above, is the place where the old ones, Isaahkaxaaliia/Sun and Kaalexaliia/Moon, ihké/stars, and weather make their home. Baakkaawiile/Water Up Above also reside in the first layer and are known to be the five sacred waters—rain, mist, sleet, snow, and hail.<sup>9</sup> The middle layer is Awé—the land on which we stand and from which we are made. This is where Apsáalooke and all of our relatives live as well as Awakkulé, Earth Holders—the Little People and other spiritual beings. The third layer is the home of the Bimmuummaalakoole/Water Beings and Awewuutaalakoole/People Who Live Underground/Under the Earth.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to highlight that there is communication and transcendence between these interconnected layers of the Apsáalooke universe. The four sacred medicines given to Apsáalooke people—the tobacco planting ceremony, rock medicine, sweat lodge, and Sun Dance—are the gateways for communication between the layers of the universe.<sup>11</sup> These medicines are not only ways of expressing deep gratitude through sacrifice, intention, and prayer; they are also gifts given to us that should always be respected.

## Power from the Apsáalooke Landscape

*The ground itself is respected and held “sacred” not only because of past events that happened on the landscape, but for the simple fact that the Apsáalooke come from the ground and are made from it. Apsáalooke are part of the ground, made from the same elements, and given the same powers. Therefore, in this traditional society, land is held in the highest regard.*  
— Aaron Brien<sup>12</sup>

No Vitals respected his fasting vision, split from the Hidatsa, and led the Mountain Crows on a strenuous yet incomprehensibly rewarding multigenerational journey to their promised land.<sup>13</sup> It is because of the great reverence and respect for lichiiikbaaliia and his Helpers that we are able to thrive and continue our way of life. Within the Apsáalooke landscape, there is a dynamic and constant synergy between

Apsáalooke people and all those that make up the different layers of the universe. As Lanny Real Bird stated, “Apsáalooke elders will often refer to the uniqueness of this land as the heart of the reason of who they are...visions were attracted to this country and it is blessed with many sacred, mystical, and holy places.”<sup>14</sup> For it was the might of lhchihchia, the Sacred Tobacco plant, that brought Apsáalooke to their promised land through visions. Alaxcheehuush Ishbahee/Chief Plenty Coups told author Frank B. Linderman, “Look at our country. It was chosen by my people out of the heart of the most beautiful land on all the world, because we were wise. And it was my dream that taught us the way.”<sup>15</sup> There is authority and reason in the way things have been done by Apsáalooke people, and we are fortunate to come from their wisdom and power.

In order for people to attain power from their Helper, they must show that they are worthy through sacrifice, such as fasting by means of the four medicines. When the vision seeker is given a Helper, it is necessary to carry out the Helper’s obligations and serve the Helper’s needs. At times when there is abuse of responsibility or ignorance of a Helper’s request, the weather might change in an instant or bad luck might occur. Power is given to chosen people who are deemed worthy enough to receive it, and this can come in many forms of natural elements, such as the rock-medicine bundle that saved Apsáalooke people from complete annihilation or the Chickadee that helped one of our greatest warriors protect the land from which his strength derived.

One of our most notable leaders, Chief Plenty Coups was driven by the power of the land and love for his people. Plenty Coups put his life on the line to protect all the mothers (earth, lodge, and birth) that raised him. From a young age, he yearned for the day when he was deemed worthy enough to go fasting in hopes of obtaining medicine. Even the smallest of things in this world contained so much power that could help and heal nations. Take the Chickadee, a small bird with an average adult height of about five inches, which carried strong medicine that provided guidance for a whole nation. The Chickadee was a Helper for Plenty Coups. “The Chickadee is small, so are we against our many enemies, white and red,” Plenty Coups said. “But he was wise in his selection of a place to pitch his lodge,” just as the Apsáalooke have been chosen

to live in the promised land and wise enough to protect it.<sup>16</sup> On one of Plenty Coups' earliest fasting journeys, he was taken to the lodge of the Awakkulé chief. Plenty Coups was told that he already possessed all that he needed and that it was up to him to make the right decisions to live a prosperous, long life. The Awakkulé chief told Plenty Coups, "We, the Dwarfs, the Little People, have adopted you and will be your Helpers throughout your life on this world. We have no medicine bundle to give you.... You have a will. Learn to use it. Make it work for you. Sharpen your senses as you sharpen your knife."<sup>17</sup> When Plenty Coups was in combat, his Helpers, Awakkulé, were always standing next to him on the front lines of the battleground.<sup>18</sup>

We are taught that the keepers of the land, who ensure that it is cared for and that the waters stay flowing, are Awakkulé, who reside in the second and third layers of the universe. The "Little People live under the earth and take care of the earth, make sure that the rivers flow and the grass grows and the trees...and they will take care of the Crows and they will be their Helpers so leave gifts at the Pryor Gap so that they know that you are thinking about them and in return they will help you."<sup>19</sup> This was told by Grant Bulltail, an Apsáalooke elder, who has been recognized with a National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship for his immense knowledge and ability to share stories. He tells a story of Little People warning those who fasted in Awaxaawissee, the Pryor Mountains, that because the earth was being mistreated, they were going to move to the north because "people were polluting the land and it was not fit for them to live [t]here anymore and they were not mindful of the energy that was flowing here."<sup>20</sup> There are those who are silently suffering as a result of our decisions, and this is a stark reminder that one must act upon the responsibility to care for and protect the land. Gratefully, Awakkulé have always taken care of and assisted their Apsáalooke relatives while receiving honor and gifts in exchange. To this day, we hear of Awakkulé visiting those on their fasting journeys or of the casual comical encounters that remind us of our humor, humility, and, most importantly, our responsibilities. We are appreciative of our relatives who helped us during the triumphant times of Chief Plenty Coups' warfare and negotiating days and the demanding yet sunlit days we are blessed to live.

To receive help from the weather or the four elements or to have the ability to control them is an unparalleled power gifted to some people. lisaatxaaluash/Chief Two Leggings was given medicine that could change the directions of the wind and, more extremely, cause it to hail as he approached his enemies.<sup>21</sup> Apsáalooke warriors' shields also hold the unique ability to change weather. Apsáalooke warriors painted depictions of night and day, the landscapes, sky, and their Helpers on their shields. One such shield contained so much power that ethnographer Stephen Chapman Simms, the former director of the Field Museum of Natural History, wrote in his 1900–1903 field notes, "On occasions when asking to see shields, the old man declared if they exposed the shields it would rain and hail and on both occasions it did—the sky was clear and [then] was thundering."<sup>22</sup> The natural world has always assisted Apsáalooke people, especially in their time of need, and for that we are eternally grateful.

As a result of these powerful experiences, place names are the backbone of Apsáalooke land knowledge and our sense of place. The descriptive names create images of the experiences that once occurred at specific places or tell how the names were given by a spiritual being. The true names of places known to Apsáalooke represent the immense connection they have to the natural world. These names and the locations can be seen on the interactive maps in the *Apsáalooke Women and Warriors* exhibition: places like Ammilishíissaannuua/Where They Fast, formally known as the Castle Rocks; Daxpitcheeasáau/Bear's Lodge, known as Devil's Tower; Bishiáxpe Alíkuua/Where They Saw the Rope, known as Dry Head Overlook; lishbáassaa/Mountain Lion's Home, known as Pompey's Pillar; and Ashísshípuoo/Where the Sun Dance Lodge was Run Over, known as the confluence of the Clark's Fork and lichílikaashaashe/Yellowstone River.<sup>23</sup> Each descriptive name represents a common understanding of the significance of the place and is implicitly shared through the transferable knowledge of language. Our identities are embedded in the land that has raised us, and we are fortunate to call Apsáalooke country home.

## Notes

- 1 Rick Graetz and Susie Graetz, *Crow Country: Montana's Crow Tribe of Indians* (Billings, MT: Northern Rockies Publishing Company, 2000).
- 2 Emerson Bull Chief, "Belief Ways of the Apsáalooke: Development of a Culture Through Time and Space" (PhD diss., Montana State University, 2016).
- 3 Grant Bulltail and Gary Wortman, "Crow Stories: The Little People," YouTube video, accessed September 12, 2019, <https://youtu.be/3SjBQ1-lfcE>.
- 4 Lanny Real Bird, "Ashammalíaxxiia, the Apsáalooke Clan System: A Foundation of Learning" (master's thesis, Montana State University, 1997).
- 5 Daniel Old Horn and Timothy McCleary, "Apsáalooke Social and Family Structure," 1995, cited in Little Big Horn College Library reference guide, at <http://lib.lbhc.edu/about-the-crow-people/history-and-culture/creation-story.php>.
- 6 Aaron Brien and Kelly Dixon, "From the Land: An Indigenous Perspective of Landscape and Place on the Northern Plains" (in progress).
- 7 Old Horn and McCleary, "Apsáalooke Social and Family Structure."
- 8 Real Bird, "Ashammalíaxxiia."
- 9 Old Horn and McCleary, "Apsáalooke Social and Family Structure."
- 10 Timothy McCleary, *Crow Indian Rock Art: Indigenous Perspectives and Interpretations* (London: Routledge, 2016).
- 11 Peter Nabokov, *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior* (New York: Crowell, 1967).
- 12 Brien and Dixon, "From the Land."
- 13 Joseph Medicine Crow, *From the Heart of the Crow Country: The Crow Indians' Own Stories* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).
- 14 Real Bird, "Ashammalíaxxiia."
- 15 Frank Linderman, *Plenty-Coups: Chief of the Crows*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Bulltail and Wortman, "Crow Stories."
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Nabokov, *Two Leggings*.
- 22 Stephen Chapman Simms, *Crow Indian Culture Field Notes* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History Archives, 1900–1903).
- 23 Linderman, *Plenty-Coups*.