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

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
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. — Sorey Belly, Apsáalooke Chief!

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 lichiikbaaliia/First Maker and his Helpers. Our way of being is passed on from generation to generation through the social fabrics of Ashamalixii/Relational 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

We are told of the time when the earth was covered with water. It was then that the creation of the land and Biliuku—Crow people—began. Lichiikbaaliia, 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. Lichiikbaaliia 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. There are varying sizes of land masses—continents and islands—because the small duck was only able to bring up what he could, but lichiikbaaliia used what he was given. Hishishidhuwila—Red Woman, wife of Old Man Coyote—was responsible for carving out streambeds for our waters to flow.4 Lichiikbaaliia molded Biliuku 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.5 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.6 When Biliuku were created, they were created equal; “neither man nor woman was made first, it is simply said that [Biliuku] were created.”7 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 lichiikbaaliia. They are only on earth for a while, then they return. Take care of them while they are here.”8 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 lichiikbaaliia, and we must do our part to protect them. It must be remembered that Apsáalookebika, 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 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.9 The middle layer is Aawé—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 Apsáaloke, Earth Holders—the Little People and other spiritual beings. The third layer is the home of the Binnuummaalakooke/ Water Beings and Aweewuutaalakooke/People Who Live Underground/ Under the Earth.10 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 Apsáaloke people—the tobacco planting ceremony, rock medicine, sweat lodge, and Sun Dance—are the gateways for communication between the layers of the universe.11 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 landscape is rooted in their language, knowledge, and stories, which have been given to them by lichiikbaaliia/First Maker and his Helpers. One of our most notable leaders, Chief Plenty Coups said, “Look at our country. It was chosen by Apsáalooke elders who 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.”12 For it was the might of Ihchihchia, the sacred Tobacco plant, that brought Apsáalooke to their promised land through visions. Alaxcheeousheish Ishehau/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.”13 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 may 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 to 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.1 On one of Plenty Coups’ earliest fasting journeys 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. To this day, we hear of Awakkulé visiting those you have a will. Learn to use it. Make it work for you. Awakkulé, were always standing next to him on the front lines of the battleground. When Plenty Coups was in combat, his Helpers, were his protectors. Grant Bulltail, an Apsáalooke elder, who has been approached his enemies. 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 they wished to see the sky was clear and then was thundering.” The natural world has 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 Ammillislisamanauu/Where They Fast, formally known as the Castle Rocks; Dapixcheeasaa/ Bear’s Lodge, known as Devil’s Tower; Bishtåxpe Allikuu/Where They Saw the Rope, known as Dry Head Overlook; Ishbhiaasaa/Mountain Lion’s Home, known as Pompney’s Hill; and Ashishpìpuu/Where the Sun Dance Lodge was Run Over, known as the confluence of the Clark’s Fork and Ichiilikaashahe/Yellowstone River. 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.

To receive help from the weather or the four elements or to have the ability to control them is an unparalleled gift to some people. Lisaaxtaalxuush/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.2 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 they wished to see the sky was clear and then was thundering.” The natural world has assisted Apsáalooke people, especially in their time of need, and for that we are eternally grateful.

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