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# Introduction

## I Am Of This Land

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JEREMY FIVECROWS

*I am of this land.* Growing up on the Nez Perce reservation, I often heard this simple phrase and believe that it captures the essence of who the Nez Perce are. The rivers and valleys, mountains and forests of Nez Perce country hold my heart and connect me with my past. Living on the land where my culture was born, was almost destroyed, and is now recovering makes my history take on a much more real sense—it presents a reality impossible to capture in any way other than actual experience. For example, photographs of the Camas Prairie never capture the awe I feel when standing in that world of green camas stalks, with blue blooms stretching as far as I can see. Amid the sea of camas flowers I can see the wind turning the plants into a sea of gentle waves, and I realize that the preservation of this place is inextricably tied to the preservation of my culture, for they are one and the same. For my tribe this land is both a source of strength and its greatest responsibility. I truly am of this land.

The stories and legends of the Nez Perce, passed down from generation to generation, are the repository of our collected knowledge and wisdom. I grew up hearing stories about Coyote and other animals, learning from their mistakes and marveling at their deeds. What child wouldn't be impressed to learn about the fight between Ant and Yellowjacket, or how Coyote turned them to stone as punishment? I can still remember my amazement the first time I actually saw the basalt arch mentioned in the story, realizing that those weren't just words—I could see with my own eyes the place where the two warriors were locked in battle! The stories of my childhood not only explained the world around us but also taught us how to live.

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My father's grandmother always told him never to fall asleep near a stream or a pond because Dragonfly would come by and sew his eyes shut. This simple reminder—much more effective than “be careful near the water”—is reinforced every time he sees a dragonfly.

The Nez Perce legend of how humans came into the world links the Nez Perce people to their homeland. The story begins with a monster intent on consuming every living thing on Earth. Just before the monster can finish eating every animal in the world, Coyote takes advantage of the monster's pride and arrogance and slays the beast. Coyote then cuts the monster into pieces and flings the pieces to the four corners of the world, spawning the various tribes of mankind. When the other animals point out to Coyote that he has forgotten to place any people where he killed the monster, he asks for some water. He uses the water to wash the blood from his hands and sprinkles the bloody wash water throughout the region, saying, “You may be few in number, but you will be powerful. Even though you will be few in number because I have deprived you, nevertheless you will be very, very, strong.” In this way Coyote played a role in the creation of the *Nimí-pu·* (the people). The identity of my people lies in the ground from which we sprang; we were placed here with a special promise from Coyote himself. Near Kamiah, Idaho, visitors can still see the basalt knoll called Heart of the Monster and know that when the Nez Perce say we are of this land, we mean the very earth beneath us. Just as the dragonfly story has a deeper message, the story of Coyote slaying the monster has an important implication: humans sprang from a monster that was willing to consume the Earth, and pride and arrogance proved to be his downfall—traits still manifest in humanity. This is a message, and a warning, that is as true today as when the story was first told.

The Nez Perce connection to the land is not limited to our stories and legends. This land connection also defines our language, culture, and religion in fundamental ways. Growing up I often heard wind through the river maples combine with Nez Perce traditional songs, but it wasn't until I heard them sung along the Clearwater or Snake rivers that I realized that the drumming and singing were shaped by

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these particular places. The rolling hills of the Clearwater Valley, worn round over eons of time, or the surprisingly silent movement of a great river, or the rustling sound of wind through river maples all combine with our traditional songs to create the voice of this land. The strong, clear voices, the heartbeat sound of the drum, the warmth of the sun, the softness of the earth, and the smells of the *waweem* plants or Ponderosa pines harmonize into an orchestra of people and place.

The Nez Perce language, too, is a reflection of the sounds of this land. Here animals know their own names and freely tell all who will listen what those names are. The Nez Perce word for crow is impossible to spell with an English alphabet, but it can be closely approximated as “caw caw.” I wouldn’t expect anything different—every crow I have ever heard has told me the same thing. It should also come as no surprise, then, that as one other new animal became more common in their country, the Nez Perce assigned the name “moo.” By listening to the world around them, the Nez Perce created a language that was truly the voice of the land and its creatures—indeed, many tribal people see that as their special gift back to the place that sustains them. They also see it as their duty: because the animals gave up to humans their power of speech, they expect humans to speak on their behalf.

The Nez Perce homeland stretches from the Clearwater River Basin to the Salmon River Basin, and from the Bitterroot Mountains to the Blue Mountains. It is a land of deserts and rainforests, great rivers and healing hot springs. Both the highest and lowest points in Idaho are part of Nez Perce country; such is the unique place that my people call home. Each place supports me in its own way. The vast huckleberry fields in the Craig Mountains nourish me both physically and spiritually, reminding me of the bounty the Earth provides and my dependence on her gifts. The cedar groves along the Lochsa River instill in me a feeling of holiness. These groves are home to towering old-growth cedars that reach to heaven like pillars in a cathedral; luxuriant ferns that draw the pure water as it flows in murmuring brooks through the glades; animals who have made the groves their home and casually bask in the safety of the forest. The sacredness of

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this place rejuvenates my soul, just as the moist, fragrant air rejuvenates my lungs.

Quite different from the rainforests of the Lochsa Valley are the arid rolling hills near Simí-nekem—the confluence of the Snake and Clearwater rivers. These hills remind me that this place is very old. Newer, more rugged mountains are spectacular in their brash stance against the horizon, but the ancient hills of the lower Clearwater and Snake rivers suggest something more subtle, more defiant. Many of these hills have only grasses growing on them. With few trees to cover her here, the body of the Earth lies bare, revealing both her strength and her vulnerability. The smooth, sensuous connection between the Earth and the sky here feels harmonious and comforting. I often imagine these hills as my elders, hunched over from eons of life; tired, but with a singular beauty and dignity that only great age can impart. Indeed, these hills, rivers, creatures, and forests *are* elders—elders who taught and continue to teach the Nez Perce people how to live.

Finding meaning from and connecting with our past is something that makes us human. In today's world, and especially because we are a nation of immigrants, it is difficult for people to connect with their distant ancestors, particularly when those ancestors came from distant lands. Instead, people connect with their recent past in simple ways, like visiting a childhood home or returning to the town where their parents grew up. I consider myself extremely blessed to connect with my ancestors, both ancient and recent, through the common medium of the land. I marvel at being able to walk along the rivers and streams of Nez Perce country on the same paths that my ancestors used. I am awed to think of the generations of my forefathers and mothers who picked berries in the same patches that my family visits today, who fished for salmon out of the same rivers my family fishes each year, who enjoyed the lilting songs of the ancestors of the very red-winged blackbirds that sing here today. Nez Perce culture is based on a connection not only with the land but with the plants and animals, air and water. This is a connection both cherished and cultivated. Various assimilation policies sought to strain or even sever this connection. The strength of the Nez Perce culture and the

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importance of the way of life instilled in us by our elders ensured that our connection to the land survived—and thrived.

I have often heard the phrase “we are at a crossroads” being used to describe a tribe’s entrance into the modern world. I would like to think that the Nez Perce tribe passed that crossroads long ago and today we are firmly on the path of self-determination, advancement, and the perpetuation of our cultural heritage. The Nez Perce stories that I grew up with told about the Nez Perce War and the greed that precipitated it. They told about Chief Joseph’s plea for peace and justice, which fell on deaf ears. They told about missionaries beating any Nez Perce people who were overheard speaking their native language. As recently as one generation ago, children were routinely separated from their parents and taught that they weren’t as good as white children. My own grandfather was taught that white people are always right and their motives are never to be questioned. The hardships, indignities, and abuse that the Nez Perce endured didn’t end with the Nez Perce War; we continue to and perhaps will always feel their effects.

I am part of a generation of Nez Perce who are reaping the benefits of the toil, sacrifices, and work of our forefathers and mothers. We have begun to realize the benefits of higher education, increased wealth, and self-determination. However, the world that provides these benefits also presents the possibility of great problems. Racial discrimination, poverty, and alcoholism have exacted a heavy toll on the Nez Perce people. The demoralizing effects of poverty rob too many of our children of hope, stable homes, and opportunities. The number of youth who have been lost to alcohol-related accidents is frighteningly high. Many people would understand it if a group so battered by sorrow and hardship would simply give up. Fortunately, I am proud to say, the Nez Perce continue to strive for the betterment of themselves and their tribe. We have learned the rules of our modern reality and take pride in the fact that learning them did not cost us our identity, culture, or pride. In fact, therein lies our strength: by combining our traditional teachings with modern learning, the Nez Perce have begun to play an increasingly powerful role in shaping the destiny of the tribe, the region, and beyond. Tribal programs that

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support strong families, that foster wellness, and that promote traditional arts and crafts all play a role in the renaissance of Nez Perce culture. Exemplifying these efforts are the tribal efforts to restore the salmon, wolves, and Appaloosa horses.

Salmon are a cornerstone of Nez Perce culture, and to call the salmon a staple of the Nez Perce diet would be an understatement. Yet their steady decline has made the once-unimaginable prospect of rivers without this sacred fish into an almost unavoidable reality. Historically, a typical Nez Perce ate almost a pound of salmon every day. But salmon represented much more than a source of nutrition—the salmon shaped our society and our religion as well. From an ancient legend we learned that when the Creator was preparing to bring forth people onto the Earth, he called a grand council of all creation. From them he asked for a gift for these new creatures—a gift to help the people survive, since they would be quite helpless and require much assistance. The first to come forward was Salmon, who offered his body to feed the people. The second to come forward was Water, who promised to be the home to the salmon. In turn, everyone else gathered at the council gave the coming humans a gift. But it is significant that the first two gifts were Salmon and Water. In accordance with their sacrifices, these two receive a place of honor at traditional feasts throughout the Columbia Basin. Ceremonies always begin with a blessing on and the drinking of water, followed by a prayer of thanksgiving on and the serving of the salmon. Each time I take part in this ceremony I am reminded of the central role that salmon and water play in the health of the Nez Perce people and their culture.

Fishing for salmon is just as integral an aspect of Nez Perce culture as consuming it, and the hundreds of fishing trips I have been on with my family throughout Nez Perce country have shaped my appreciation for the land, the waters, and the salmon. These trips have always been a learning experience, from playing as a child in the pristine waters of the south fork of the Salmon River to witnessing the armed conflict between Nez Perce fishers and officers of the Idaho Fish and Game Administration over the right to fish in Rapid River. On the rivers and streams of my homeland I realized that, without

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question, salmon are worth risking our time, our energy, and our lives. That is why it was so troubling when the number of salmon that returned to Nez Perce country each year became fewer and fewer. Declining water quality and agricultural diversions played a role, but the full-scale conquest of the rivers brought about by the hydropower system was an obstacle that the salmon could not surmount. Between 1937 and 1974 eight major dams were built between the Pacific Ocean and Nez Perce country. By the mid-1900s the salmon numbers had dipped so low that general concern turned into outright alarm that we might lose our sacred fish. At that time the Nez Perce did not have the political voice or power to oppose the dams, and in the course of a single generation they watched as the once mighty rivers of the region were turned into a series of lakes. The builders of many of these dams tried to accommodate salmon passage, but others knowingly sacrificed the fish as a cost of development. That any such dams were built was a tragedy, but, adding insult to injury, one of these dams was built on the Nez Perce reservation itself. Dworshak Dam, near Orofino, Idaho, towers almost eight hundred feet above the valley floor; its reservoir extends over a hundred miles into areas almost untouched by the modern world. Upon seeing the completion of the dam and the destruction of the valley and the salmon run that had so many times returned to it, my grandfather, having grown up fishing for salmon on the banks of Kelly Creek and the North Fork of the Clearwater, could never bring himself to return. He could not bear to see those rivers and streams—pristine enough to drink from—devoid of salmon. While the waters above Dworshak Dam may never see salmon again, the Nez Perce are doing everything in their power to make sure that salmon return to as many of their traditional waters as they can. Once extinct in the Clearwater River Basin, coho salmon are again return annually—thanks to the efforts of the Nez Perce. The Nez Perce tribe's new fish hatchery on the banks of the Clearwater River has combined state-of-the-art science with traditional knowledge to create an environment that produces hardy salmon ready to swim to the ocean and return to the wild streams of Nez Perce country. Enormous amounts of resources are being poured into this effort,

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and tribal youths are joining the fight to save the salmon in incredible numbers. Every year we have more and more Nez Perce fish biologists, environmental engineers, and other scientists who are offering their minds as well as their hearts for the protection of the salmon, the water, and, ultimately, the Nez Perce way of life.

The Nez Perce Wolf Reintroduction Program, which reflects the importance that the Nez Perce people place on the land and all its inhabitants, is a success that will have far-reaching effects throughout the Pacific Northwest. To the Nez Perce people the wolf has always been a symbol of strength, hunting prowess, and power. The wolf's haunting calls were often heard in the forests of our homeland and their exploits were recounted in our stories. As the human population of Nez Perce country grew, however, the number of wolves declined, due to a combination of active eradication and simply being pushed out. By the late 1900s there were no wolves in Idaho or Oregon, but promising findings from reintroduction efforts at Yellowstone National Park have opened a window of opportunity to return the wolves to Nez Perce country. While other agencies and governments shied away from the controversy surrounding the issue, the Nez Perce, out of duty and honor to the wolf, took it upon themselves to restore this important part of the ecosystem. They proved themselves capable and dedicated to the challenge. Today the wolf population is growing and the benefits to the land are evident. Now, on clear moonlit nights in the remote wilderness lands at the heart of Nez Perce country, the resonant, soulful howls of the wolf can once more be heard as it echoes in the draws and canyons—reminding us all that they are home.

The horse is not native to Nez Perce country, but its introduction had a deep and lasting impact on the tribe. Horses did more than modify Nez Perce culture—they transformed it, becoming our symbol of freedom and wealth. We welcomed them into our lives and our villages. Nez Perce horsemen, renowned for their skill in selective breeding, created the Appaloosa, a horse that was as much a reflection of Nez Perce country as the Nez Perce themselves. From the backs of these animals the Nez Perce were able to freely travel throughout the West—from the fabled buffalo hunts on the Great Plains to the

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incomparable salmon fishing site at Celilo Falls and everywhere in between. I cannot imagine Nez Perce country without the Appaloosa. Thinking of them conjures up images of a trail of Appaloosas, with their signature spotted coats glistening from the effort of carrying an entire village to its summer camp along trails as old as the Nez Perce themselves; or the awesome spectacle of a herd of horses thousands strong, grazing in meadows and prairies with the morning mist still thick around their legs; or Nez Perce men hunting buffalo with their unique bighorn sheep bows specially designed for use while riding. Today the Appaloosa remains a symbol of the Nez Perce. Our tribal herds graze in fields throughout the reservation and our children learn horsemanship—carrying on this defining aspect of our culture.

After living here for thousands of years, the Nez Perce know how to live in this place, they know the stories of this place, and they are forever tied to the place where our ancestors' bones eternally rest. It is a unique land and we are a unique people. We are the *Nimí-pu-*, and we are of this land.

It is my hope that as you read this wonderful book—especially if you do so in conjunction with a visit to Nez Perce country—that you will catch a glimpse into the culture and lands that make us who we are and gain a greater understanding of what it means to have a sense of place. As you learn about us, our history, and our connection to our homeland, think about how you can listen to and learn from the land where you live. The message that “we are of this land” is true for everyone on the Earth. I hope that what you learn from our history and our tribe will inspire you to make that phrase meaningful in your own life. *Qeʔyciyéw̓yeʔ*. Thank you.

## Editorial Note

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It is quite clear that Alvin Josephy had a good ear for the Nez Perce language. While not trained as a linguist, his transcriptions are quite faithful to the original Nez Perce. Though working largely from historical documents and thus having to deal with earlier recorders who often did not hear as well as he, it is clear that Josephy worked through the names in the historical record with his Nez Perce friends, teachers, and associates. In this edition of his work we have attempted to provide International Phonetic Alphabet-compatible transcriptions of the names as footnotes where possible, using the orthography for Nez Perce developed by Haruo Aoki. In some cases we are unable to provide such a transcription without undue speculation.

## Welcome to Nez Perce Country

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The Nez Perce Country of northeastern Oregon, southeastern Washington, and north-central Idaho is a land steeped in America's western heritage. Once it was home only to the Nez Perce Indians, but with the passage of time other people came to this land. The flow of new inhabitants began as a trickle with Lewis and Clark's "Corps of Discovery" in 1805–1806. The trickle grew in time as others came here for a variety of reasons. First came the trappers, traders, and missionaries, and then, after a discovery of gold, the trickle became a torrent of miners, loggers, farmers, and people just seeking adventure or running from some past adventure. The different interests, goals, and aspirations of these individuals and groups blended or came into conflict here as a young nation, the United States, expanded westward in the nineteenth century.

Today Nez Perce National Historical Park in north-central Idaho commemorates these people and their history. The park is like the story itself—a complex mosaic. Authorized by Congress in 1965 and expanded in 1992, it comprises thirty-eight sites—nine administered by the National Park Service and twenty-nine managed by state, tribal, local, or other federal agencies. The sites, like beads on a loosely strung necklace, are found throughout an area covering some 31,200 square kilometers (12,000 square miles). The thread linking these sites together is the history of the Nez Perce people, a people aware of their past, proud of their culture, and an active part of the present.

Whether you are traveling through this beautiful land in your automobile or vicariously in your armchair, both the Nez Perce and the National Park Service welcome you to Nez Perce Country.