

Series Number Twenty-Three

Blackfoot Nation

Browning, Montana & Cardston, Alberta

Photographs 1995 - Essay 2025

Twenty Photographs

Michael Nye

Blackfoot Nation

What is life? It is the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.
Blackfoot Proverb.

Origin Language Myth:

After the flood, an old Man mixed water with different colors. He whistled, and all the people came together. He gave one man a cup of colored water, saying, "You will be chief of these people here." To another man he gave differently colored water, and so on. The Blackfoot, Piegan, and Blood all received black water. All the people that drank black water spoke the same language. All other people spoke different languages. This happened on the highest mountain.

NO ONE REALLY understands the life of another person. Too many days, too many moments, too much has happened. What room does regret and heartbreak rest in? In what drawers can we examine restitution and atonement? During heavy rains in Montana and Alberta some in the Blackfoot tribe failed to cross the Belly River in safety. Large trees on the river banks fell, limbs cracked and their branches and leaves followed the river's rooted trail.

Many of the histories written about the Blackfoot Nations by European Americans and Canadians are incomplete and the horrible injustices and discriminations are invisible to its readers. I feel certain that some of my ancestors participated in this collective nod toward territorial acquisition. I am aware that I have benefited from a system that my ancestors built at the expense of others. Memory is slippery, words are not images and emotions live in darker, deeper and private places.

The indigenous people occupied the North American lands for at least 20,000 years. The Blackfoot Confederacy, (Niitsitapi) is a historic collective name for three related groups, the Siksika (Blackfoot) the Kainai (Blood) and the Pikani (Piegan Blackfeet). All three shared a common language and way of life. Today, the Blackfoot Nations occupy regions in Alberta, Canada, and Montana in the U.S.

A story doesn't have to have an ending. It is the language (Blackfoot or Siksika) that gives context to a particular history. In 1995 I traveled to Browning, Montana and later to Cardston, Alberta to photograph during the North American Blackfoot Nations Indian Days festival. It was a celebration of remembering.

I read about their traditional territories, mythologies and nomadic life. I read about the consequences of smallpox epidemics, the role of alcohol and Christianity, the repatriation of language and the 1870 Piegan Blackfeet massacre of women, children and the elderly. The colonial encroachment was a trespass, like a tide filling a void.

When I was in Cardston, Alberta, I was the only non-Blackfoot native person present. A Blackfoot elder told me that the words, “transitory” and “permanent” have the same meaning. I was treated with such kindness. The celebration and drumming and dancing was in a large open field just outside of town. The sky had a window where the moon was watching. At one point the music stopped and a man walked up and handed me a stack of 50 or 70 one-dollar bills. Everyone turned and watched. This gift turned me into stone. I was told, “In every celebration we give money to someone. We do this for ourselves, not for you. It is our reminder that money is not important. What is essential is the holding-on and remembering our stories.”

This short series of portraits was a result of wanting to be there. To have conversations. To be closer temporarily and to know more. A cold wind blowing the leaves of the prairie grasses is an ancient song. What right did I have to be there making photographs? Can a photograph reveal a history of injustices or regret? History is suspended above and below us as it drifts and broods.

In every portrait one side is hidden. However, in these portraits everything is hidden except each person's willingness to be seen and to be present.

Essay - March, 2025



Blackfoot Nation - One



Blackfoot Nation - Two



Blackfoot Nation - Three



Blackfoot Nation - Four



Blackfoot Nation - Five



Blackfoot Nation - Six



Blackfoot Nation - Seven



Blackfoot Nation - Eight



Blackfoot Nation - Nine



Blackfoot Nation - Ten



Blackfoot Nation - Eleven



Blackfoot Nation - Twelve



Blackfoot Nation - Thirteen



Blackfoot Nation - Fourteen



Blackfoot Nation - Fifteen



Blackfoot Nation - Sixteen



Blackfoot Nation - Seventeen



Blackfoot Nation - Eightteen



Blackfoot Nation - Nine



Blackfoot Nation - Twenty