

Origins of antimining resistance in the life of a grassroots American Indian leader: Prospects for Indigenizing psychobiography

Joseph P. Gone^{1,2} 

¹Department of Anthropology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

²Department of Global Health and Social Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Correspondence

Joseph P. Gone, Department of Anthropology, Harvard University, Tozzer Anthropology Building, 21 Divinity Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA.

Email: jgone@g.harvard.edu

Funding information

The College of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor

Abstract

American Indian communities have long been subject to environmental degradation, but successful “grassroots” struggles to end such exploitation are exceedingly rare. How is it that Joseph William Azure—my father and an unsung hero of social change—came to “notice” in 1985 that “our entire [reservation] mountain range was at risk” from destructive gold mining and, in response, to form “a small grassroots traditional society” that created “a lot of local and national publicity for our cause to save” these mountains? To address this question, I adopted and adapted the approaches and methods of psychobiography to trace shifts in his sense of self in response to midlife socialization into Indigenous traditional spirituality. In developing this brief account of his development as a social change agent, I propose that psychobiography may require “Indigenization” if it is to better represent American Indian lives. Specifically, some Indigenous life stories will perhaps require tellings that center on collective endeavors rather than individual ones, reconstruction of life experiences based on comparably limited (material) archives, deeper preservation of the conventions of orality, and curation by close kin rather than by “distanced” analysts.

KEYWORDS

American Indians, anticolonial resistance, ecocentric selfhood, indigenous spirituality, psychobiography

1 | INTRODUCTION

One day around 1985, I was coming back from work and noticed how large the holes in the mountain tops were getting [from gold mining adjacent to the reservation], and it stunned me.... Our entire mountain range was at risk of being taken down by explosives. These were the mountains where I grew up hunting, fishing, and gathering wood, [which] our Tribes used for fasting and other

ceremonies...for many generations. Then at our traditional ceremonies, we started to talk about how we noticed the fish and wildlife were becoming scarcer since the mines moved in, and [we] started to suspect them of having a negative impact on our way of life. We decided to...build a sweat lodge ceremony and pray about it and ask for guidance what to do.

—Joseph William Azure, Red Thunder, Inc.

This personal vignette is excerpted from a speech prepared by my late father, Joseph William Azure (1948–2020), for his appearance on a panel at the annual conference of the Western Historical Association in St. Paul, MN, in October of 2016. The panel resulted from our attempts to herald the lessons, challenges, and successes of a local Indigenous environmental movement situated on the Fort Belknap Indian reservation in north-central Montana for wider historical consideration and broader public awareness. My father, an enrolled member of the Assiniboine (*Nakoda*) Tribal Nation at Fort Belknap, founded and led Red Thunder, Inc., a grassroots community-based nonprofit organization that was established in 1990. The purpose of Red Thunder was to protect the sacred Little Rocky Mountains on the south end of the reservation, which were being destructively mined by the Pegasus Gold Corporation using newly introduced cyanide heap leach pad technology. After nearly a decade of activism during the 1990s, Azure and his fellow organizers were finally successful in proving that the mine was poisoning the lands and waters of Fort Belknap. The result was punitive government action against the mining corporation (an unusual outcome in such cases; for a typical but dispiriting counterexample that all but destroyed a non-Indian Appalachian community, see Erickson, 1976). In this instance, persistent grassroots contestation of corporate claims ultimately led Pegasus Gold to abandon the Little Rocky Mountains as a profitable site to extract gold.

Environmental exploitation is familiar to American Indian communities (Foxworth, 2020), but successful struggles to end such exploitation are exceedingly rare. How is it that my father—an unsung hero of social change—came to notice the devastating impacts of gold mining in the nearby mountains and, in response, to form a grassroots organization dedicated to stopping the mining? In this article, I propose to address this question by adopting—and, importantly, adapting—the approaches and methods of psychobiography (du Plessis, 2017; Elms, 2007; Ponterotto, 2014). I do so with respect to the three announced aims of this special issue (i.e., linking personal biography to social change, demonstrating innovative methods, and inaugurating first-time engagement with psychobiography). For the first aim, I will link aspects of my father's personal biography to his determination to enact social change by focusing on three galvanizing moments in his life narrative, events that he referred to as “turning points.” For the second aim, I will suggest certain methodological innovations that may be necessary if psychobiography is to truly become a “cross-cultural endeavor” (Ponterotto, 2014, p. 82) that can better capture, represent, and explicate the lives of people

like my father. For the third aim, I will contribute a fledgling effort to the published corpus of psychobiographies that presently includes very few American Indians as either subjects or authors.

Methodological adaptation may be necessary for addressing important questions in the study of American Indian lives. This is because most instances of modern psychobiography emphasize access to an expansive written archive, distance in the “objective” production of analysis (i.e., controlling for bias by aspiring to intellectual impartiality), allowance for the “data to reveal itself” (du Plessis, 2017, p. 227), and contribution to the “science” of life narrative studies. Yet, if psychobiography is to become a relevant form of knowledge production in cross-cultural terms, then the possible limitations of its common methodological commitments must be considered: an egocentric conception of selfhood, a preference for modern individualist self-life representations, a privileging of conventions associated with literacy, and a detached and objectifying gaze associated with the scientific endeavor. Some Indigenous life stories will require tellings that center on collective endeavors rather than individual ones, reconstruction of life experiences based on comparably limited (material) archives, deeper preservation of the conventions of orality (Gone, 2019a), and curation by close kin rather than by “distanced” analysts. In sum, psychobiography may benefit from an expansive “Indigenization.”

These issues will be challenging to address in a single journal article, but for this fledgling effort, I will structure an initial psychobiography of Joseph W. Azure into four sections. First, I will review the life and times of Azure. Second, I will explore three self-identified turning points in his life narrative—each concerned with the reclamation of Indigenous spirituality that gave rise to the influential activities of Red Thunder, Inc.—that illuminate the links between his personal biography and his contributions to social change. Third, I will reflect on these links with respect to Azure's developmental trajectory and four cultural configurations of the self—especially socialization into an ecocentric self-orientation—as summarized by Kirmayer (2007) in his review of the cultural underpinnings of psychotherapy. Finally, I will offer more general reflections on the prospects for Indigenizing psychobiography. The fourfold structure of this article is deliberately borrowed from the four “rounds” that comprise a sweat lodge ceremony that my father was ever eager to conduct. As with these ceremonies, the longest (and most difficult) rounds occur earlier in the ceremony. Before proceeding, however, the fire must be lit and the sacred rocks heated, translating here into a preparatory section on methodology.

2 | PREPARATIONS

To provide the context necessary for appreciating the life and times of an individual who hails from a less familiar walk of life, I review here various relevant aspects of the setting, my own positionality in relation to this project, a brief overview of the source materials, and a few reflections on scientific preregistration of this study.

2.1 | Setting

Established in 1888, the Fort Belknap Indian reservation is a trapezoid-shaped area of land in Montana that is bordered on the north by the Milk River and on the south by the Little Rocky Mountains. This remnant territory—stretching about 35 miles from north to south, and 28 miles across—is home to the *Aaniiih*-Gros Ventre and *Nakoda*-Assiniboine peoples, historical enemies that eventually banded together for protection against powerful rival tribes as the diminishing bison herds drew these rivals into the region. The reservation was created by an act of the federal government following a sequence of massive land cessions by the Fort Belknap tribes that transferred much of their original Treaty territory to the USA (Fowler, 1987). Longstanding efforts to promote a self-sustaining reservation economy through agriculture and ranching have proven futile for all but a minority of some 4000 residents (about half of the membership of the two tribes). An elected tribal council has long endeavored to identify alternate economic opportunities with little success, rendering the reservation one of the most economically strapped in Montana. The tribal government operates primarily on federal funds, and the majority of scarce reservation jobs are government-funded, whether through the tribal council, the local Bureau of Indian Affairs office, the Indian Health Service hospital, or the tribal community college. Many reservation residents contend with poverty and a raft of associated social ills, exacerbated by longstanding racial animosity from surrounding White communities.

It is not lost on tribal members that the frequently desperate straits of reservation life are not accidental in origin but rather were orchestrated by Euro-Americans through historical processes of colonization and dispossession. Perhaps no land cession represents this bitter history more than the Grinnell Agreement of 1896. During the early years of the reservation, gold was discovered in the Little Rocky Mountains, including on reservation lands. Local Indian agents during the 1890s were powerless to prevent White prospectors from besieging the area in search of gold. Instead of enforcing the rights of the Fort Belknap tribes, the government's solution to this blatant theft was to send three commissioners in 1895 to meet with the

tribes and advocate for the cession of a small patch of reservation land in the mountains where gold was being mined. Highlighting local poverty and threatening future starvation, the famed naturalist George Bird Grinnell pressed for the sale of these lands. In response to divide-and-conquer tactics, the resulting tribal votes were split, but a slight majority of those participating (women were not polled) voted to cede the land (Fowler, 1982). Since then, gold has been periodically extracted from the nearby Zortmann and Landusky mines until technological limits are reached, only to resume when new mining technologies emerge. It is estimated that gold valued at hundreds of millions of dollars has been extracted from the Little Rockies over the past century (Bryan, 1996).

In the 1970s, a new technology emerged for extracting gold from low-grade ore known as open-pit cyanide heap leach pad mining (see Nelson, n.d.). The Little Rocky Mountains were one of the first places that this experimental technology was implemented in the USA by the Pegasus Gold Corporation. The process entails massive excavation of earth that is placed on leach pads and soaked with cyanide solution. The solution separates out precious metals for recovery, but the runoff must be contained to prevent environmental damage. A second source of potential contamination results from exposing sulfide within the mountainous ore to open air and water, which then oxidizes, creating acid rock drainage. Both federal (e.g., the Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], the Bureau of Land Management) and state (e.g., the Montana Department of State Lands, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality) regulatory agencies require mining interests to manage these risks in accordance with the law and to prevent discharge of poisonous substances, which are especially dangerous in mountainous regions that are the source of both surface and groundwater for downstream human consumption. Additionally, the visible alteration of the landscape that results from a literal razing of the mountains for purposes of recovering gold is what “stunned” Azure on his way home from work in 1985.

2.2 | Positionality

This psychobiography entails an interpretive methodology. All interpretation is a function of perspective, and perspective is grounded in positionality. As a result, qualitative inquiry privileges transparency in position and perspective (Levitt et al., 2018). Moreover, this psychobiography of my own father requires additional reflexive attention. I am the firstborn child of Azure and my mother, Rowena Gone, who met at a fair in Dodson, MT, in June of 1966. Azure was aged 19 and my mother (also a Fort Belknap tribal

member) was aged 20 when I was born in 1967. They were unmarried at the time. My mother could not care for me, and so I was born in Helena where she placed me for adoption (for more detail, see APA Award, 2021). I reunited with my reservation relatives during my junior year of college in March of 1991 (at age 24). I learned then that I have three younger siblings from my parents, each of whom also had three younger children from subsequent partnerships. Although Azure was not listed on my birth certificate, my mother requested that he acknowledge paternity in tribal court shortly thereafter. Thus, I first became acquainted with Azure during the years in which Red Thunder was actively campaigning against the mine. I lived and worked on the reservation intermittently between 1991 and 1996, participating occasionally in Red Thunder's activities. I learned to appreciate the retiring habits of my father, who was as gifted in thought and word as he was modest in his demeanor, though his flair for humor and way with words were widely recognized. His perspectives on modern American Indian life were reflective, insightful, and cogent. As someone with Indigenous traditional knowledge and the right to conduct certain ceremonies, he adhered to values and conduct that stood out to me as exceptional even among various spiritual leaders I encountered (and occasionally interviewed). In fact, he was the only person I ever deemed worthy of spiritually following with respect to Indigenous ceremonial practices (though future time away from home largely precluded this). His death from Covid-19 in October of 2020 was an immeasurable loss to our family, in part because of the knowledge he took with him.

2.3 | Sources

This effort is based on a limited set of documents. These include a two-page Red Thunder brochure from the early 1990s (when Azure was in his early 40s); a two-page press release concerning Red Thunder's activities dated February of 1993 (at age 45); a 14-page, single-spaced transcript of a 1999 interview I conducted with him about reservation mental health concerns (at age 51); three brief autobiographical papers (totaling 11 double-spaced pages) that he wrote as an adult student for a college psychology course in 2002 (at age 54); a 38-page, single-spaced transcript of a 2015 interview I conducted with him about Red Thunder's history (at age 67); the two-page text of his 2016 speech at the Western Historical Association conference (at age 68); excerpts from 68 single-spaced pages of transcript of recorded sessions at a 3-day gathering in July of 2016 to preserve the oral history of Red Thunder (at age 68); an undated three-page tribute that he wrote about his midlife mentor, Ojibway Indian spiritual leader Robert Gopher (likely after the 2016 oral history gathering); my brief handwritten notes from

a 2018 family phone call concerning his reservation land; and his two-page 2020 obituary, written primarily by my sister and her son (he died at age 72). All quotations in this article are excerpted from these source materials (which I will cite throughout, but since these are unpublished, often unpaginated, and subject to reformatting, I will not refer to specific page numbers). These documentary sources are supplemented by my own memory, although I will take care in this article to center my analysis on these textual materials (and overtly acknowledge when memory is the source of additional information). The biographical account included here is an ordered synthesis of information from these materials, while my analysis of his three self-designated "turning points" is best construed as (relatively uncomplicated) narrative analysis.

2.4 | Preregistration

Contributors to this special issue were asked to preregister these studies as an experiment in integrating the preparation of our respective psychobiographies with ascendant practices of knowledge production in psychological science. We have been asked to comment in our articles about this experience. Although I generally value the importance of preregistration for psychology research as an endeavor to protect the integrity of scientific methodology and to preserve the validity of disciplinary findings within variable analytic research designs, I believe that this study (and much of psychobiography more generally) is best conceived as a form of human sciences inquiry that privileges interpretive analysis of situated and meaningful human experience (i.e., an expression of "historical-interpretive psychology"; Runyan, 2005, p. 20). Thus, for me, the validity of one's interpretive contributions lies not in predetermined methodology, mechanistic systematicity, or ultimate reproducibility, but rather in the persuasiveness of one's interpretations. My goal in such analysis is to produce a "great reading" (i.e., to offer a coherent account comprising compelling arguments and illuminating insights, which might depend on the utterly unique perspectives of a given analyst; for further elaboration on these methodological contrasts, see Gone, 2011). Thus, for human sciences-style interpretive analysis in psychology, I struggle to find value in preregistration.

3 | ROUND 1: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOSEPH W. AZURE

My name is Joseph W. Azure. I was born on January 30, 1948, at the Fort Belknap Indian Health Hospital, in northcentral Montana.

My mother's name was Inez Brisbo and my dad's name was William Azure, both deceased. I am a member of the Ft. Belknap Tribes, the home of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine [peoples]. I lived there most of my life except for a few absences to go away to school and work. (2016 Speech)

Presentation of Azure's biography is challenging because my father was reluctant to put himself forward by directly talking about his own life at length or in detail (which reflects, in part, widely shared Indigenous communicative norms; cf. Darnell, 1981). Instead, in his speeches and interviews, he would offer a brief personal story to introduce or illustrate a topic of interest. These vignettes are essential for constructing his biography, which also benefits tremendously from brief autobiographical papers that he submitted as an adult student for a college course. Additionally, any narrative reconstruction of a life story necessarily draws on reigning cultural templates for recounting personal history. In this presentation of Azure's life, I draw on an *Aaniiih* traditional conception of the complete human life span as associated with four "ridges" or buttes (i.e., salient landforms on the northern Plains) that represent four stages or periods of one's life (Cooper, 1957).

This Indigenous developmental concept has been most expansively described by the Northern Arapaho people of the Wind River reservation in Wyoming (who are close cultural kin of the *Aaniiih*-Gros Ventres; see Anderson, 2008). In figurative terms, life is a journey across four buttes,



Joseph W. Azure sitting in front of his sweat lodge in the Big Warm district of the Fort Belknap Indian reservation in May of 2017

which entails a steep ascent to a relatively wide flat top prior to a steep descent before climbing again to the flat top of the next butte (indeed, the symbol of the four buttes is depicted in traditional painting or beading as a row of four trapezoids in a line, each with steep sides and wide flat tops). The idea is that settling into one's developmental role and fulfilling one's associated obligations changes across the life course, with transitions between these roles being especially arduous. Moreover, beyond Gros Ventre and Arapaho recognition of the four ridges of life, many modern American Indian traditionalists recognize and promote a similar four-stage model of the human life span, commonly represented through the symbol of the sacred medicine wheel (cf. Gone, 2022; Pomerville & Gone, 2019). There is no space here to fully explicate the sacred and psychological significance of this Indigenous "organizing paradigm of theories of human development" (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010, p. 139), but by adopting this developmental structure, I aim to further signal the substantive alter-Native orientations provided by Indigenous cultural psychologies for the crafting of American Indian psychobiographies.

3.1 | Childhood

Then, as now, reservation residents contended with the challenge of earning a living and supporting a family. This was especially difficult for larger families. Azure's mother, Inez (1926–2009), was one of 14 children who went on to have 10 children (five sons and five daughters). As her firstborn, Azure described his childhood during the late 1940s through the mid-1960s as routinely punctuated by family relocation in search of employment. An early example included their obtaining work when Azure was age two on a ranch near Chinook, MT, some 75 miles away from their reservation community. On receiving his paycheck, Azure's father, William "Billy Rose" Azure (1924–2002), went into town to cash his check, began drinking, and did not return, leaving his wife to find her way home to the reservation. This incident reveals another facet of reservation life: intermittently heavy alcohol consumption. Intoxication affords temporary respite from the stresses of unremitting poverty, but it also occasions family disruption and chaos. Heavy drinking and trouble with the law led to Azure's father being sent to prison while his mother was pregnant with her second child. Azure's father was absent for the remainder of his childhood, which yielded additional financial pressures.

Fortunately, Azure's mother could rely on her own mother and siblings to care for her children as needed. Azure's *Aaniiih*-Gros Ventre grandmother, Annie White Cow Brisbo (1901–1986), maintained a home on her land in the Big Warm district of the reservation in the foothills

of the Little Rocky Mountains. Amid family moves and disruptions, Annie's place remained a bastion of consistency and care: "I was always looking forward to going stay with my grandmother, who lived way out in the country and had horses to ride. It seemed fun to me even though she had no modern conveniences, such as electricity, indoor plumbing, or gas heat" (2002 Autbio). His grandmother benefited from his help, too, "especially after her husband got sent to prison" (2002 Autbio). American Indians are overrepresented in Montana's criminal justice system, and incarceration of a relative is not unusual. Back at home, Azure increasingly shouldered "a lot of responsibility helping my mother with my younger brothers and sisters" (2002 Autbio). A source of stability for Azure's family may have been his mother's faith: "I was raised in the Mormon Church and my mother...forced me to be a Christian when I was a young boy" (2015 Interview). About his early childhood, Azure wrote: "My family had a hard life, not only with the needs of basic survival, but also with the alcohol-related problems and the hardships of overcoming the society's stereotypical image of the American Indians" (2002 Autbio).

3.2 | Youth

Azure started school in the reservation border town of Harlem. He noted that once he adjusted to school routines, he came to enjoy learning. He routinely referred to himself throughout our interviews as an inquisitive person. His favorite subjects in school were music and physical fitness, but he looked forward to breaks from school when he could visit his grandmother, who "always had a lot of kids staying with her so we had fun playing together":

She lived in a beautiful country setting right by the mountains and a warm freshwater creek ran close by. We spent a lot of time swimming around in the creek and exploring wildlife along the creek. We also did quite a lot of fishing, with homemade fishing poles and hooks made out of safety pins because we were too poor to afford to buy them. We spent most of our day outdoors and only came home long enough to eat and let our grandma know where we were playing. (2002 Autbio)

Azure's uncles used to take him hunting in the mountains. When he was aged 12, one uncle left home to work on a farm, leaving his rifle behind. Without permission, Azure took the gun, set out alone to hunt, and killed a deer: "I felt like I had become a man after I killed my first deer and I felt very proud of myself" (2002 Autbio). At age 13, Azure

relocated with his mother and stepfather to Great Falls, MT, where he started junior high school. He disliked life in Great Falls and, because no one had oriented him, the changes of puberty "traumatized" him: "I went into a great depression because no one had warned me about...what to expect. Suicide even crossed my mind as a way out of my misery" (2002 Autbio). Instead, however, Azure "opted to run away" by hitchhiking to his grandmother's house, "some two hundred miles away." During these years, he described learning two important lessons: never take things without asking (his uncle had been angry that Azure borrowed his gun without permission) and always respect old people (his grandmother impressed upon him that he should never interrupt adults while they were talking).

Then, in the early 1960s, "my oldest uncle came and took me to a bus, and sent me away to boarding school, many miles from home, where I had to get used to a whole new environment again" (2002 Autbio). Azure commenced his high school education at Flandreau Indian School in South Dakota, a boarding school operated by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Although Azure's elementary school had included a mix of American Indian and White students (Great Falls would have comprised mostly White students), Flandreau enrolled an all-Indian student body. Despite its "strict routines," Azure had positive experiences at Flandreau, where he "learned a lot about how the other Indian children lived and where they were from" (2002 Autbio). Still, by age 17, completing school at Flandreau was not his topmost priority:

I came from a very poor family. My mother and grandmother had to bum for rides all the time, because they could not afford a car... I was tired of this poverty and made myself a vow that as soon as I was old enough to work, I would do so and buy myself the things I never had, mainly a nice running car. So, I dropped out of high school in the 12th grade so I could go to work on the farms and ranches around Montana. (2002 Autbio)

The U.S. War in Vietnam was escalating during this time, and Azure was sent to the military entrance processing station in Butte, MT, to prepare for the draft. He was released, however, and had to hitchhike home. For various reasons (e.g., escaping from community poverty, embracing patriotic values, fulfilling a warrior tradition), American Indians have long served in the U.S. military at disproportionately high rates, including in Vietnam (Holm, 2010). Thus, Azure subsequently tried to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps, but "they said I did not qualify, which was very disappointing to me" (2002 Autbio). He relocated to Anaconda, MT, for employment in a copper

mining smelter, work that was important to the war effort. When his draft notice finally arrived, this job led him to be “reclassified so I did not have to go overseas to fight a war I knew nothing about” (2002 Autobio).

3.3 | Adulthood

Azure met my mother, and I was their firstborn child in 1967 (when he was age 19). After placing me for adoption, their relationship continued, and they were married later that year. They decided to participate in the BIA relocation program, which resettled American Indian families off-reservation in large cities, providing transitional support for housing and education:

Shortly after I met my first wife, we decided to go to Dallas, TX, on a special BIA-run relocation program. There she went to school to be a legal secretary and I went to trade school to become an auto-mechanic. At the time, I thought this was the greatest opportunity of my life and that “the American Dream” had finally come to my doorstep. We lived good and were happy raising a family and working there. (2002 Autobio).

I recall my father mentioning that in Texas they had steady jobs, a mortgage, and a savings account worth thousands of dollars. Still, the good life did not endure for them, as loneliness set in due to the long distance between them and their extended families, “especially when we heard about one of our relatives dying and we could not make it to the funeral” (2002 Autobio). He speculated that this was one reason why “we turned to drinking alcohol to kill the pain and sorrow” (2002 Autobio). Indeed, my three siblings and two cousins who were born in Dallas and grew up there during this time recall significant disruptions to their family life wrought by alcohol. Finally, after 7 years in Dallas, Azure realized that “my American Dream was shattered and I had to wake up to reality: I was lonely, [with] many family problems from drinking, my older relatives were dying off, and I was thousands of miles from home and very unhappy” (2002 Autobio).

Azure decided to return home. When my mother refused to leave Dallas, they separated in 1973 (though their divorce was not finalized until 1978). He returned to the reservation alone:

The inhumanity and rat-race life of the big city was just too much for me to bear anymore, and I moved back to Montana and the reservation where I was born. Here I got to

visit the graves of my lost relatives and get to know the ones that were still alive. I decided to stay with my grandmother and help her to survive.... I was home and it felt better, although life was hard, and jobs were hard to find except for seasonal firefighting. (2002 Autobio)

The federal government recruited American Indian crews to fight wildfires throughout the American West, and this was Azure's primary occupation for the next 25 years. He became a respected crew chief, teaching many younger tribal members how to fight wildfires safely and effectively. During the off-season, he landed miscellaneous jobs for income. He commenced a long-term romantic relationship with an American Indian woman from a North Dakota reservation, where he lived and worked for a time, and to them, my sister was born in 1974. They later ended their relationship. He also had a son with a Fort Belknap woman in 1981. During this time, Azure met an Ojibway Indian man from Great Falls, Robert Gopher, who introduced him to Indigenous traditional spirituality. Between their first meeting in 1979 and Gopher's death in 1998, Azure came to take him as his spiritual leader (i.e., apprenticed to him with respect to sacred activities). This coincided with three significant events. First, in 1983, Azure was driving while intoxicated and crashed his truck. His passenger, my mother's youngest brother, was thrown from the vehicle and killed. Second, in 1986, Azure lost his beloved grandmother. Finally, between these occurrences, Azure “noticed” that the mountains were being destroyed by mining. Perhaps the disruptions and losses of his early adult life catalyzed his spiritual development at this time.

Prior to her passing, Azure's grandmother gift-deeded 30 acres of her land to him in the Big Warm district of the reservation (the remainder of her land presumably went to other relatives). A three-bedroom HUD home was built on this land in the late 1970s, and he moved in in 1981 (at age 33), eventually securing ownership of the house after paying rent for 25 years. Azure partnered with a Latina woman, to whom my youngest sister was born in 1987; they lived together on his land during the time when he founded Red Thunder in 1990 to fight the nearby mining interests. Red Thunder was most active during the 1990s (described in the next section). By the latter part of this decade, smoke from the wildfires had damaged Azure's lungs, he was diagnosed with chronic asthma, and he retired from the work that he loved. Because of his Red Thunder activities, he was employed for a year by the tribal government in the new Tribal Environmental Protection office. During the late 1990s (in his early 50s), Azure participated in the Tribe's vocational rehabilitation

program, where he obtained support to pursue a college education at Montana State University-Northern in Havre. Returning to school as an older student was intimidating for him. The opportunity coincided, however, with a need to care for his disabled brother (who had suffered a traumatic brain injury after being beaten by a bartender as a young man) in Havre. This move also afforded some relief from the burdens of rural life in Big Warm, where he hauled his own drinking water and contended with a broken septic system and seasonably impassable roads. He enrolled in classes in the early 2000s, aspiring to obtain his bachelor's degree in education so he could "teach about the positive aspects of Native American culture and traditions if the opportunity ever arises, in my future. If not, I will still enjoy teaching my children and grandchildren about it, past retirement, if they will listen" (2002 Autbio). His bid for a college degree did not pan out, however, and after college, he subsequently worked for an antipoverty program in Havre until he was eligible to draw Social Security benefits.

3.4 | Elderhood

During the final stage of his life (all based on my memory), Azure was finally able to settle into a peaceful, quiet retirement, no longer harried by the lifelong search for employment. His disabled brother died in 2011, and so, instead of living rent-free with him, Azure now rented his own apartment. He partnered with a woman from the Rocky Boy Reservation, and legally adopted her young son as his own. After many years together, however, she was overcome by addiction and their partnership ended. In apprenticing himself to Robert Gopher for so many years, Azure had earned the right to carry a sacred pipe and to conduct various traditional ceremonies; in his later years, he sponsored seasonal fasting and sweat lodge rites, mainly for close family members, on his land in Big Warm. He was also concerned about what would become of his land after his passing. He consulted his children about possibilities, expressing the desire for his land to become a nonprofit retreat center for Indigenous spiritual practices and environmental protection. The reservation land, however, is held in trust by the federal government, and so it remains challenging to make this dream a reality. Azure lost three sons during these years, one to murder, another to cancer, and a third to alcoholism (any reservation resident who lives long is no stranger to such losses). During the pandemic of 2020, my father was diagnosed with COVID-19 on Labor Day and hospitalized for breathing difficulties 2 days later. He was subsequently placed on a ventilator and transferred from Havre to a hospital in Great Falls prior to being medically evacuated to Seattle. After weeks of ventilation, his

surviving children agreed to the removal of breathing support, and he died on October 2, 2020 (at age 72).

4 | ROUND 2: THREE "TURNING POINTS" IN AZURE'S LIFE

Robert Gopher was a great man. He was kind, loving, and understanding, and I truly miss him. He passed on to the Spirit World in 1998, but I know he is in a better place. One of the greatest gifts that he shared with me was the Memorial Feed Ceremony, where we...smudge the food with sage and sweetgrass and offer the food to our relatives (such as him) that passed on to the big Spiritual Camp of Souls close to the Creator's lodge. (Gopher Tribute)

Beginning in 1985, when he first "noticed" that the mountains were being destroyed by mining, Azure embarked on a journey that was to consume his energy and attention for over a decade. This journey culminated in the 1998 bankruptcy declaration by the Pegasus Gold Corporation, which abandoned its mining operations in the Little Rocky Mountains and forfeited its surety bonds. Unfortunately, these bonds were woefully inadequate for mitigating the environmental damage from the mining, and expensive reclamation efforts continue to this day.

Azure's efforts emerged from his earlier interactions with Robert Gopher, whom he met in 1979 at a gathering of the International Indian Treaty Council in the Big Warm area of the Fort Belknap reservation. The Treaty Council was the international arm of the American Indian Movement (AIM), which was founded in Minneapolis as a militant Indigenous rights organization in 1968 (Smith & Warrior, 1996). Following this Treaty Council, explained Azure, "I was spiritually guided to study with Robert Gopher to try to learn more about the sacred teachings and the sacred ceremonies that he had been carrying on" (Gopher Tribute).

In the sources for this article, my father identified key "turning points" that bore directly on his galvanization as a social change agent through the reclamation of an activist-oriented, traditional Indigenous spirituality. Attention to turning points has featured prominently in the narrative study of lives, and direct solicitation of turning points is part of McAdams's Life Story Interview (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). In the present study, however, Azure's reference to turning points was not solicited; instead, he adopted this phrase extemporaneously to characterize three (and only three) events that significantly shaped his own life experience. In consequence, these seemed ripe for analysis with respect to his midlife emergence as a social change agent.

4.1 | First turning point: Wounded Knee II

In 1890, the U.S. Army massacred 150-300 Lakota non-combatants near Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota (Ostler, 2004). A mass grave and memorial to the dead exist today on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation. In 1973, reservation residents and armed AIM activists seized control of the Wounded Knee settlement, declared independence from the USA and demanded that the federal government resume treaty talks. Armed federal agents soon surrounded the occupied area, resulting in a 71-day standoff in which two activists and one federal agent were killed. The occupation was broadcast by national media and attracted other American Indians and supporters to the site of the standoff. Thus, the second altercation at Wounded Knee (WKII) was a transformative moment for the Red Power movement as American Indians sought greater protection of their dignity and rights (Smith & Warrior, 1996). For Azure, who returned home to the reservation that year from his time on BIA relocation in Dallas, the significance of WKII pertained to the current state of reservation life: “There was a big gap in our traditional ceremonies in Fort Belknap because of the United States government...and the churches with their...rules and regulations to rid us of our heathen ways, of traditional ceremonies and values and languages” (2015 Interview).

Specifically, Azure noted that “AIM was...more or less the spearhead of bringing back the cultural values because they wanted the Black Hills of South Dakota protected against mining as one of their sacred sites...and also, in bringing attention to Wounded Knee number one” (2015 Interview). He explained that WKII mobilized many American Indian people:

Other tribes came and supported them when they found out that they were surrounded by the FBI.... They had their elders there, their spiritual elders helping them to bring attention to their cause,...which eventually became all our causes because we didn't want to [enter] the mainstream melting pot of modern society. We wanted to hold on to what little traditions and cultural ceremonies we had left. (2015 Interview)

Importantly, he attributed a resurgence in Indigenous traditional spirituality to WKII:

We were pretty well wiped out until AIM brought on the resurgence of WKII. And that's...*a turning point* where a lot of the tribes decided to go back to their Indian

ways, to learn how to do the sweat lodges and the pipe ceremonies and the smudging ceremonies and the fasting ceremonies and protection of the sacred sites. (2015 Interview)

Azure linked this historical moment to his future participation in an AIM event at Fort Belknap.

4.2 | Second turning point: Sweat lodge ceremony

With respect to this return to “Indian ways,” then, Azure explained that “I just happened to be lucky enough to be here when they brought the first sweat lodge back” to Fort Belknap (1999 Interview). Azure's uncle was a vocal and visible AIM member at Fort Belknap, and in 1979, Azure agreed to join his uncle in sponsoring a gathering of the AIM-affiliated Treaty Council on his grandmother Annie's land. It was there that he first met the Ojibway spiritual leader Robert Gopher, who was invited to conduct a sweat lodge ceremony for the attendees, which included AIM members and “a lot of international Indigenous people.” Azure and his cousin were invited to assist with the ceremony from outside the lodge: “One of us watched the door and one watched the fire. And we were helping them.... And there's a bunch of people in the sweat lodge. I don't know who all was in there but it was pretty packed” (1999 Interview).

What most struck Azure was the response of two participants who emerged from the heated interior of the lodge at the conclusion of the ceremony:

[There were] two guys that were enemies, lifelong enemies, this Israeli and this Palestinian. One guy's name was Mordechai, and one guy's name was Abraham. And they came out of there and, by golly, they were hugging each other. Calling each other brother when they came out of that sweat lodge, as they staggered to the creek...to cool off. That really was kind of *a turning point* in my life. I thought, well, there really must be something to these Indian ways, these spiritual ways, because these Israelis and Palestinians were killing each other for a long time over there...and these two guys were calling each other brother when they came out of the sweat lodge. (1999 Interview)

Azure observed that the incident “sure changed a lot of people around [to] the Indian ways” (1999 Interview).

In response, Azure began his personal quest to learn as much as he could about Indigenous spiritual practices by apprenticing with Gopher “because he seemed to be in touch with something that was from the Spirit World and was real. Before that I was a lost Christian, but I decided to study with Robert and learn more about his ceremonies” (Gopher Tribute). He elaborated:

That’s when I became really interested,...asking questions about the sweat lodge and fasting. I myself really wanted to fast, so I went fasting. After I fasted, that’s when I started becoming open minded to a way of life that was lost for a long time here on this reservation. The U.S. government’s attitude was to abolish Indian culture and religion from the reservation and [to] Christianize and “civilize” everybody, [but] from that point on, that’s when I really realized that we had something good there. (1999 Interview).

This turning point fundamentally prepared Azure to lead the future fight against the mines.

4.3 | Interlude: Red Thunder, Inc.

On the day in 1985 when Azure first noticed the impacts of destructive mining in the Little Rockies, he was sufficiently committed to Indigenous traditional spirituality to respond by sponsoring a sweat lodge ceremony to “pray about it and ask for guidance what to do” (2016 Speech). When Gopher learned that the miners were using cyanide to leach gold from the mountains, he reportedly quipped, “Isn’t cyanide what they use to kill people?” (2016 Gathering). Gopher, who traveled extensively around the region, met an African American man named Ali Zaid during a lecture on traditional spirituality in Boulder, CO, at some point during the late 1980s. He invited Zaid to sweat with him after the lecture. The following year he introduced Zaid to Azure, declaring them to be brothers. As they organized for action against the mine, Azure enlisted a handful of other local tribal members to participate (including his cousin, David Healy, Sr., and elder Virgil McConnell). He also recruited a White attorney from Chester, MT, named Donald Marble. Meanwhile, Zaid recruited a White environmental attorney from Boulder named Paul Zogg. Both attorneys were willing to contribute to the cause pro bono. With this multi-racial core organizing group (which also included Azure’s partner, Nadine Alvarado, Zaid’s partner, Karen Robertson, and Gopher’s partner, Dorothy Gopher, as well as several progeny), Azure founded Red Thunder, Inc., which achieved nonprofit status in 1990.

As a tribal member (i.e., reservation citizen) with legal status and standing at Fort Belknap, Azure led this group as its President and CEO. Like most grassroots organizations, Red Thunder operated informally in almost all respects (though the attorneys helped to prepare official documents for submission to regulatory agencies). Except for the principal players just mentioned, membership was casual and evolving, meetings were called as needed, and documentation was limited primarily to official filings (almost no other records from the organization have survived). Importantly, though, as a Fort Belknap-based nonprofit, Red Thunder could not have existed (and would not have endured) without my father’s leadership, especially because the preponderance of the group’s most active participants were not tribal members. In close collaboration with these core members, Azure led in all respects, setting the group agenda, coordinating group activities, delegating necessary tasks, and communicating with others on behalf of the group (for more detail, see Nelson, 2017). Interestingly, he never revealed to me a reason for their adopting the name Red Thunder for the organization. Given the sacred role of the Thunder Being in many Plains Indian cosmologies, it is likely that the name originates from personal sacred experiences (e.g., dreams and visions) that are traditionally kept secret.

Thus, building on support and guidance from people and groups extending well beyond the reservation, Red Thunder learned to collect and send for testing their own water samples, to press the relevant regulatory agencies to better monitor potential environmental damage on the reservation, to partner with environmental activists and experts from throughout the region for strategic purposes, and to harness the power of media to promote their cause. For example, Zaid sold his sports car, bought a camera, and created a documentary film about the antimining campaign at Fort Belknap entitled *Indian Tears of Love*. Throughout this struggle, Red Thunder came to realize that the mining interests were nearly untouchable with respect to environmental accountability, that regulatory officials were indifferent or even hostile to their efforts, and that the tribal government was initially more concerned with preserving mining jobs for tribal members than with exploring the possibility that the reservation waterways were being poisoned by the mine (for more info, see redthunderoralhistoryproject.org). This situation set the stage for Azure’s final turning point.

4.4 | Third turning point: Mission Canyon flood

In the summer of 1993, Red Thunder sponsored a ceremonial gathering at the powwow grounds in the Mission

Creek Canyon near the southwestern reservation community of Hays, MT, just prior to the annual summer celebration. As Azure recalled, “One of the big *turning points* of our struggle...was [when] we got together with a new group [from the reservation] called Island Mountain Protectors.” He described this group as “an association of [American Indian] ranchers [that] started up after we did, and we worked together with them quite a bit” (2015 Interview).

We decided to organize this...seven-man pipe ceremony in that Mission Canyon area, right below the Landusky mine.... We did happen to get the seven elders there with their pipes to do that ceremony. And we told them what we wanted them to do: we wanted them to pray for these mountains here and...to stop [this mine from] poisoning and polluting the whole environment, and [to stop the harmful] health impacts to the people. (2015 Interview)

Azure recalled that participants in the gathering also included White supporters, such as an off-reservation Montana activist group known as the Environmental Rangers.

A gravel road leads from the Mission Canyon powwow grounds up to the reservation boundary, where a locked gate restricted entry to the mining area.

Right after that pipe ceremony, we were going to march from that Hays powwow grounds up to the gate of the Pegasus Gold [mine].... Right after we got done with that march..., it started to rain. A big thunderstorm came in. It started to rain, rain, and rain, and it just won't let up.... The rain opened up and flooded everything. And so, we had to evacuate that valley...because we were scared of the floods. (2015 Interview)

In fact, “it just kept raining so bad that it did flood out those leach pads [up at the mines, flushing toxic mining runoff]... down the creeks” (2015 Interview).

Meanwhile, near the Zortmann mine on the other side of the mountains, “it just so happened that the EPA was camped...at the Zortmann motel”:

They came in for investigation into that problem that we were creating so much havoc about. Anyway, as they came out...of their motel room, they noticed that [the] water running right down Main Street in Zortmann was orange. It was just rusty orange. And they looked at that and scratched their heads [and

said,] “I don't believe Pegasus is telling the truth about no pollution coming down. It's right here on Main Street!” (2015 Interview)

Azure added: “So that week, we kind of got them on our side, finally, [now] that they've seen it with their own eyes.... We got a big governmental entity on our side” (2015 Interview).

From there, according to Azure, the fight against the mines gained momentum. A major news outlet filmed the aftermath of the flood: “They were flying around [in a] helicopter, taking pictures and videos, and we got them on our side too, finally. We got international media attention.” In fact, “we finally got [the Tribal Council] on our side” (2015 Interview). Ultimately, as “traditional people,” noted Azure, they attributed these consequential occurrences to the pipe ceremony:

Our elders praying for help, and then the Thunder Birds (or the rain clouds) coming and starting a big rainstorm and flooding all of those leach pads and those leach ponds out. And them coming loose with their poison and their pollution in front of the EPA on both sides of the mountains.... And helping us. We [credit] that for helping us. Spiritual help.” (2015 Interview)

Red Thunder's struggle to end the destructive mining in the Little Rocky Mountains continued beyond this single incident, but as Azure allowed, the tide had turned. The EPA reported the mine to state regulators for violating the federal Clean Water Act, which then filed suit against the mine. In 1996, Pegasus Gold entered into a consent decree with the Fort Belknap Tribes and the controlling regulatory bodies for \$37 million. Eventually, the corporation's stock prices plummeted, and it filed for bankruptcy in 1998.

5 | ROUND 3: INDIGENOUS TRADITIONAL SPIRITUALITY AND RELATIONAL SELFHOOD

Consideration of Azure's brief biography, with a detailed exploration of three self-designated turning points that gave rise to his effectiveness as a social change agent, affords the opportunity to advance inquiry in cultural psychology (Shweder, 1991). In this analysis, I reflect on Azure's life to explore otherwise obscure cultural variations in self and personhood. These concepts are deeply embedded in psychological theory and research (often implicitly) even as they resist routine disciplinary acknowledgment and attention owing to their abstruse subtlety. In his discussion of the cultural concept of the

person presumed by psychotherapy in North America, Kirmayer (2007) described the Western view of the self as agentic, rationalistic, monological, and univocal. He then reviewed alternative configurations of the self that complicate the intercultural therapeutic endeavor. For this analysis, I propose that Azure's emergence as an effective grassroots activist who waged a successful campaign against the mining interests at Fort Belknap depended on shifts in self-configuration associated with his early adult restoration of a robust American Indian cultural identity and, especially, with his midlife adoption of Indigenous traditional spirituality in the wake of key life losses.

5.1 | Self-configurations

According to Kirmayer (2007), the predominant conception of the person in North America centers on individualism: "to be a person is to be a unique individual" (p. 240). Drawing on Bellah and colleagues (1985, as cited in Kirmayer), he traced the history of American individualism from the Puritan Biblical ideal through Republican individualism to two forms of contemporary individualism: expressive and utilitarian. Whereas expressive individualism reflects a person's "capacity to articulate and enact [their] unique experience, particularly expressions of taste and feeling," utilitarian individualism defines persons as "pragmatic agents who pursue private goals to maximize their wellbeing through instrumental control and the accumulation of material goods and power" (p. 241). Although these self-orientations are culturally constituted, most people do not recognize them as such and instead presume that they are natural and universal. And yet, "the egocentric self or person is not equivalent to the isolable biological organism" (p. 241). Instead, Kirmayer recognized that a "notion of a self that is defined in *relational terms* [italics added] is well articulated in many cultural concepts of the person, throughout...most parts of the world" (p. 243).

In contrast to individualism, then, relational forms of selfhood appreciate "the value of the self in its social embeddedness and connection to others rather than in its detachment and inviolability" (Kirmayer, 2007, p. 243). Kirmayer acknowledged that psychology had adopted *individualism* and *collectivism* to capture this distinction, but he asserted that this "mainstay of cross-cultural psychology involves caricatures drawn from a western point of view" (p. 244). Specifically, psychology's formulation of the sharp dichotomy reflected in this binary classification is too simplistic, failing to account even for forms of ensembled individualism (Sampson, 1993, as cited in Kirmayer). Beyond *egocentric* selfhood proper (associated with an individual locus of agency that emphasizes personal history and

accomplishments), Kirmayer described three other cultural configurations of the self: *sociocentric* selfhood (associated with a group locus of agency that emphasizes cooperation, family, and community), *cosmocentric* selfhood (associated with a spiritual locus of agency that emphasizes holism, ancestors, and cosmic order), and *ecocentric* selfhood (associated with a nature-based locus of agency that emphasizes harmony and animism within local ecologies). Importantly, "these ways of construing the self are not mutually exclusive" (p. 246); rather, diverse ways of life differentially afford dynamic shifts in self-configuration based on capacity and comfort in response to specific situations.

5.2 | Azure's shifting self-configurations

With respect to self-configurations, most people are unaware of the assumptions and orientations that shape this basic foundation of human life and experience. Analytical inferences about self-configurations stemming from biographical and narrative data are often indirect and open-ended. Azure was born into a modern reservation family, reared in the Mormon faith, educated in the public school system (usually alongside White peers), and conditioned by relentless parental mobility in search of employment. As a function of these experiences, Azure was presumably acquainted with mainstream American individualism. It is possible that he most strongly took up an egocentric self-configuration during his early adult years in Dallas, which he characterized as "the greatest opportunity of my life" when the "American Dream had finally come to my doorstep." It was during this time that he mastered a trade, secured ready employment, purchased a house, saved extra money, and supported a nuclear family. This mode of life depended on a predictable exchange of labor for income in support of a household.

5.2.1 | The hazards of egocentric individualism

As Adams et al. (2015) noted in their orientation to decolonizing psychological science, the "independent selfways" that are so familiar in psychology research depended on great affluence for their historical emergence. Indeed, for the WEIRD societies (Henrich et al., 2010) within which most knowledge in disciplinary psychology has been produced, the accrual of vast material wealth that gave rise to modal forms of egocentric individualism was only possible through centuries of colonial plunder (Witgen, 2019). Because Azure was reared in poverty (despite the great wealth in mineral resources lying just miles away in lands that had been coercively ceded), there is reason to suppose

that the egocentric individualism of his Dallas years was not especially familiar to or comfortable for him, given that his extended family had so heavily depended on one another and their community for support and assistance. In fact, his stated reason for returning home from Dallas reflects a sociocentric self-configuration: “the extended family relationships were missing, and we were far from home and felt very lonely.” Loneliness is perhaps the signature vulnerability of sociocentric selfhood.

In our interviews, Azure had plenty to say about the competitive individualism that led to “the inhumanity and rat-race life of the big city,” and he decried the competition as unfair. He offered the metaphor of a rigged race between American Indians and White Americans as instructive: “It’s like a race. They put us in a horse race, and they gave themselves the most long-legged, slimmest, fastest thoroughbred...and then they gave us an old beat-up plug that’s probably just barely walking, much less can’t run.” In sum: “we’re in a race with them, they gave us the worst horse, we’ll never catch up” (1999 Interview). He went on to attribute heavy American Indian substance use to this structural inequity, in which Euro-Americans set up and ultimately control dominant societal institutions: “[Intoxication] makes you forget that you can’t compete with the White man, to their standards, because they’re always changing their standards” (1999 Interview). Beyond an inability to compete in the White world, however, Azure also recognized the cultural dissonance and psychological anomie that gives rise to American Indian substance abuse: “It makes you forget that you don’t know your identity, you don’t know where you come from” (1999 Interview).

5.2.2 | The promise of sociocentric relationality

For Azure, knowing one’s identity and purpose as an American Indian person came to entail a rejection of extreme egocentric individualism and a return to sociocentric forms of self-configuration that characterized tribal life long before colonial subjugation. According to him, these traditional preferences for sociocentric self-fashioning persist today, which he observed firsthand as a crew chief leading American Indian firefighters:

We usually take...big crews of maybe three, four hundred Indian people out on wildfires. And they like working together... You can sit back and watch them. They really like it. It’s good. Because they’re [going] back to their tribal ways and [doing] things together as a tribe. And I think Indian people

like that. And once they lose that, like when they come home and they’re disbanded from their fire crews, once again they don’t feel important. They don’t feel part of the group. And they can’t compete in the White man’s world, so they don’t want to go out there because they know they’re gonna lose. (1999 Interview)

It thus appears that Azure associated egocentric selfhood with competing in the rigged race of White society and sociocentric selfhood with a return to tribal ways based on collective action and group harmony.

Following his return from Dallas, his divorce from his first wife, his acquaintance with Robert Gopher, his culpability for the death of his brother-in-law, and his development as an adherent to Indigenous traditional spirituality, Azure seems to have become more familiar with additional forms of self-configuration. Importantly, Gopher’s spiritual guidance with respect to Ojibway religious understandings and ceremonial traditions would likely have entailed for Azure midlife socialization into associated Indigenous concepts of the person. In this respect, Kirmayer (2007) explained that “most Indigenous concepts of the person encompass both ecocentric and cosmocentric views, in which the natural world is only part of a larger cosmos, and in which ancestors may become spirits” (p. 246). While it is not possible to fully represent the extent to which Azure invoked and explained his spiritual understandings in our interviews, there can be little doubt that these encouraged greater facility with cosmocentric and ecocentric self-configurations. For example, his gratitude to Gopher for sharing with him the Memorial Feed Ceremony was fundamentally concerned (in cosmocentric terms) with offering food “to our [deceased] relatives (such as him) that passed on to the big Spiritual Camp of Souls.”

5.2.3 | The development of ecocentric selfhood

Given that Azure’s primary contribution as a social change agent emerged from his sustained campaign against destructive mining in the Little Rocky Mountains, it is his development of ecocentric selfhood that is most relevant for this analysis. In this respect, Azure affirmed that, from an Indigenous perspective, “everything is interconnected... Everything is connected by the Creator. And we try to live within that sacred circle to be respectful of the rest of nature... not...as humans to be superior to nature, but to be part of nature” (1999 Interview). There is perhaps no greater testament to an ecocentric relationship with “nature” than Azure’s routine reference to the earth as a “mother”: “We call the earth ‘The Mother’ because she provides food... We build our...

houses out of the trees that grow in the Mother Earth. Our clothes come from the Mother Earth. Cotton and different textiles come from the Mother Earth.” For this reason, “we have a lot of love and a lot of respect for the Mother Earth” (2015 Interview). In fact, according to Azure, the Great Spirit taught “our ancestors in the beginning of time, in this continent, how to live in peace and harmony with the environment. So that’s actually His teachings that we’re talking about. Our Indian ancestors got their teachings from Him” (2015 Interview).

This view was fundamental to Azure’s outlook: “[These] cultural values are not a religion, but the way of life...our ancestors used to live with the clean environment. Never take more than you need, like the old Indians.” For this reason, he considered mining to be a “cancer on the Mother Earth” (2015 Interview). The emergence of an eccentric self-configuration through Azure’s midlife spiritual development eventually altered his perspective on a cherished childhood practice:

I quit hunting. I thought to myself, there’s something killing our wildlife and our fish here. And...I don’t really have to do it anymore..... I feel sorry for the animals and the plants. They’re disappearing. They’re dying just like the old Indians used to be hunted and tortured by the White man’s army,... hunted down and shot and massacred just like Wounded Knee number one. Well, the animals probably feel the same way. We shouldn’t [hunt] anymore if there aren’t that many of them left. So, I quit hunting about that time. (2015 Interview)

In summarizing Red Thunder’s efforts, Azure noted, “we grew from just a little [group] of people in a sweat lodge, maybe ten or twelve of us with our little ideas [trying] to do something about a major problem.” He ended on an encouraging note: “It can be done with a small group of strong-minded people that won’t be intimidated.... I think [this] is the most important [lesson]” (2015 Interview).

6 | ROUND 4: INDIGENIZING PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY?

In this initial psychobiographical exploration of Joseph W. Azure’s contributions to social change, I have undertaken a reconstruction of his personal life history, focused on three turning points that he designated as consequential in Red Thunder’s successful campaign against powerful mining interests at Fort Belknap, and interpreted certain aspects of his life narrative as expressive of relational self-configurations that may have emerged (or that may have

become more salient and adaptive) through his personal reclamation of a more robust cultural identity and profound Indigenous spirituality. It is worth noting here that psychobiography is the scholarly integration of psychology and biography, both of which emerged from and depend on modern modes of life. Thus, it is revealing that neither psychology nor biography (in the usual psychobiographical sense) appears at all salient in prereservation Indigenous lifeways.

That is, the psychological mindedness that is required by certain forms of expressive psychotherapy (Kirmayer, 2007) is still comparably muted among traditionally oriented American Indians (cf. Gone, 2021; Hartmann & Gone, 2016) and the impetus to fashion coherent (and especially written) life stories of American Indians was first introduced by Euro-American interlocutors such as Christian missionaries (focusing on conversion narratives) and anthropologists (focusing on cultural practices and orientations). Thus, it is tempting to attribute the cultural ascendance of both psychology and biography to the rise of (affluence-driven) egocentric individualism that prevails in WEIRD societies. This raises the question of whether and how psychobiography might be undertaken with American Indian persons, especially those that retain and express more traditional self-orientations.

Expert knowledge in disciplinary psychology has originated primarily from populations in WEIRD nations, including a high proportion of university undergraduate students (Henrich et al., 2010). As a subfield within the discipline, psychobiography would thereby be expected to privilege and prioritize the interests, assumptions, and orientations of disciplinary psychology (and of academia more broadly). And yet, interpretive cultural psychology (Shweder, 1991) or constitutive sociocultural psychology (Kirschner & Martin, 2010) has invited the discipline to explore the alternate cultural foundations of psychology among non-WEIRD populations. cursory explorations of Indigenous psychologies have revealed strikingly alternative perspectives on mind and behavior, such as a four-part model of human persons (i.e., body, soul, spirit, and heart) among the Northern Cheyenne (Straus, 1982), or the connection of human mentality to the “greater harmonious mind of the entire creation” among the Cree (Junker, 2003, p. 188). Such alter-Native psychologies persist for some contemporary American Indian people in an influential fashion even as they remain underappreciated within a culturally myopic discipline.

Elsewhere I have described a facet of traditional *Aaniiih* psychology in which persons are understood as capable of exercising *thought-wish*—or intense mental concentration on one’s desires—to create reality (Gone, 2019b). I sketched eight properties of Gros Ventre *thought-wish*, interpreted interview responses about reservation mental health problems using this

concept, and revealed plausible alternative meanings of these responses based on this understanding. In this respect, Azure's reference to Red Thunder members as "strong-minded people" stands out as especially noteworthy. Additionally, in recounting Azure's biography, I invoked an *Aaniih* concept of human development: the four ridges of life. I further noted that the medicine wheel is even more widespread as an Indigenous model of the human life cycle. These Indigenous psychological constructs are nuanced and complex and worthy of elucidation beyond what is possible here. Nevertheless, progress in the overarching endeavor to diversify psychology may lead to psychobiographical inquiry that is strikingly novel in origin, idea, implication, and impact. This analysis of Azure's life suggests certain intriguing possibilities.

6.1 | Four possibilities

First, in contrast to psychobiographical practices that presume or require extensive records and archives about a given individual, an Indigenous approach to psychobiography might require accounts that center on a reconstruction of life experiences in the face of comparably limited (material) archives. Obviously, most human beings throughout history have left no material evidence of their existence, and this is true even if we limit our consideration to just the twentieth century. This is even more so for American Indian people to the degree that Indigenous presence in the USA has been systematically erased as a function of settler-colonial subjugation (Witgen, 2019). Moreover, the records that do exist are grounded in governmental regulation and control, and thereby yield little information with respect to the lived experiences of American Indian people. Thus, one wonders whether the usual conventions of psychobiography are elastic enough to afford a practicable approach for exploring Indigenous lives when the details of those lives have yet to be documented or recorded. Perhaps the dependence of this account of Azure's life on sources that I and my collaborators actively created for preserving Red Thunder's history might suggest a shift toward future psychobiographies that are based primarily on the creation of new archives. This creation of new archives to better represent the life experiences of Indigenous people, however, raises the question of which qualities might ideally characterize these new materials.

Second, in contrast to psychobiographical practices that privilege the attributes and features of literacy, an Indigenous approach to psychobiography might require accounts that center on the conventions and traditions of orality. In his classic treatise on primary orality and modern literacy, Ong (2002) noted that literacy displaces the immediate and situated tellings of life experiences with fixed abstractions. This entails a distancing of many sorts:

it distances speakers and listeners (across time and space), knowers and the known (affording distinctions between interpretations and data), words and experiences (requiring new kinds of verbal precision), academic knowledge (book learning) and practical knowledge (wisdom), etc. Interestingly, Indigenous Studies scholars are currently promoting Indigenous Research Methodologies that would ground research in the conventions of orality (i.e., with relevant "data" being personal, holistic, experiential, and storied; see Gone, 2019a). Thus, one wonders whether the usual conventions of psychobiography are elastic enough to preserve experience-near accounts that are represented beyond the distancing conventions of literacy while still remaining "scientific." Perhaps, these methodological developments might suggest a shift toward future psychobiographies that employ "creative alternatives for conveying spoken knowledge beyond written words" (e.g., curated websites with audio/video recordings) for Indigenous lives (p. 55). This curation of oral accounts to better represent the life experiences of Indigenous people, however, raises the question of who might ideally produce these new materials.

Third, in contrast to psychobiographical practices that depend on a detached and objectifying gaze associated with the scientific endeavor, an Indigenous approach to psychobiography might entail curation by close kin rather than by outside analysts who are strangers. Absent the existence of an extensive material archive, it may be that an American Indian individual's relatives—including close individuals who are taken as (i.e., declared to be) relatives—are most likely to know whether an otherwise unpublicized life story is a candidate for wider circulation, celebration, and contribution. Beyond this, it is the close kin of an American Indian person who maintains access to the individual's relevant life history and who can most effectively participate in the creation of an archive when one does not exist. Additionally, an American Indian person's relatives often have a deep stake in preserving the memory and contributions of the individual, in part because a sociocentric self-configuration anchors personal identity in family relationships. Thus, one wonders whether the usual conventions of psychobiography are elastic enough to produce ample knowledge about consequential American Indian lives without the distanced "objectivity" that frequently characterizes detached scientific knowing. Perhaps, this article might suggest a shift toward future psychobiographies that reflect unapologetic studies by close kin whose commitment is born of relational intimacy. This emphasis on relational intimacy to better represent the life experiences of Indigenous people, however, raises the question of what focus should ideally structure these innovative accounts.

Finally, in contrast to psychobiographical practices that center primarily on the life and experience of an influential individual, an Indigenous approach to

psychobiography might benefit from accounts that center on collective endeavors to reveal selves-in-relation. That is, if individuals who express and enact sociocentric self-configurations can be conceptually represented as points connected by lines, then it would be interesting to shift the focus of analysis from the points (i.e., individual persons) to the lines (i.e., relationships between persons). Doing so might overcome certain challenges associated with psychobiographical inquiry with Indigenous people, such as sociolinguistic norms that prescribe overall reticence with respect to reflexive self-expression (Darnell, 1981), which can limit access (especially by nonintimates) to the psychic interiority of a given individual. For many traditionally oriented American Indian people, psychological mindedness (i.e., engagement in searching introspection, self-observation, a pursuit of hidden motivations, a casting of feelings into words, etc.) is not especially comfortable or familiar (Gone, 2021). Consequently, strategies of inquiry that indirectly assess personal orientations, dispositions, motivations, and behaviors primarily through relationships with others may be in order. Thus, one wonders whether the usual conventions of psychobiography are elastic enough to focus on Azure's self-in-relation as he led Red Thunder's improbable grassroots defeat of powerful mining interests. Perhaps, a more expansive interest in mutual relationships (e.g., attending to the women in their lives who played crucial roles in Red Thunder activities despite limited acknowledgment of their contributions by these men) might suggest a shift toward future psychobiographies that draw productively on collective endeavors.

6.2 | Limitations

This article is my inaugural attempt to produce a psychobiography, and I am acutely aware of its limitations. Azure's life experience is not reflected in existing archives, and the primary sources for this psychobiography are interviews and recordings I made with my father. Azure was reticent when it came to details of his personal biography, and so the life narrative I have constructed here is fragmentary and partial. Moreover, because the source material was mostly created in 2015 or later, Azure's views on his life and actions reflect only his perspectives in midlife or beyond. As his son, I feel an obligation to represent and reflect on Azure's life in a positive manner that celebrates his worthy contributions. As I prepared this article, I was ever mindful of potential future reactions from my siblings and relatives when they encounter this study. In response, I can only convey that I would not have undertaken this effort if I did not maintain deep admiration for my father and believe that any of his personal limitations described here are thoroughly offset by the import of his contributions. Despite these constraints,

I believe that Azure's example not only illuminates the potential for cross-cultural psychobiography but also inspires great hope for the possibility of social change.

7 | CLOSING

American Indian communities have long been subject to environmental degradation, but successful “grassroots” struggles to end such exploitation are exceedingly rare. How is it that Joseph William Azure—my father and an unsung hero of social change—came to notice the impacts of destructive gold mining in the nearby mountain range and, in response, to form a grassroots organization dedicated to stopping the mining? To address this question, I adopted and adapted the approaches and methods of psychobiography to trace shifts in his sense of self in response to midlife socialization into Indigenous traditional spirituality. In developing this brief account of his development as a social change agent, I proposed that psychobiography may require “Indigenization” if it is to be properly tailored to representing American Indian lives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to Tiya Miles for feedback in response to a draft of this article. All opinions expressed are those of the author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author was solely responsible for preparing and revising this article.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All ethical standards and conventions were adhered to in conducting this research.

ORCID

Joseph P. Gone  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0572-1179>

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How to cite this article: Gone, J. P. (2023). Origins of antimining resistance in the life of a grassroots American Indian leader: Prospects for Indigenizing psychobiography. *Journal of Personality*, 91, 68–84. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12718>