

In the Shadow of Wounded Knee

After 150 years of broken promises, the Oglala Lakota people of the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota are nurturing their tribal customs, language, and beliefs. A rare, intimate portrait shows their resilience in the face of hardship.

By Alexandra Fuller

Almost every historical atrocity has a geographically symbolic core, a place whose name conjures up the trauma of a whole people: Auschwitz, Robben Island, Nanjing. For the Oglala Lakota of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation that place is a site near Wounded Knee Creek, 16 miles northeast of the town of Pine Ridge. From a distance the hill is unremarkable, another picturesque tree-spotted mound in the creased prairie. But here at the mass grave of all those who were killed on a winter morning more than a century ago, it's easy to believe that certain energies—acts of tremendous violence and of transcendent love—hang in the air forever and possess a forever half-life.

Alex White Plume, a 60-year-old Oglala Lakota activist, lives with his family and extended family on a 2,000-acre ranch near Wounded Knee Creek. White Plume's land is lovely beyond any singing, rolling out from sage-covered knolls to creeks bruised with late summer lushness. From certain aspects, you can see the Badlands, all sun-bleached spires and scoured pinnacles. And looking another way, you can see the horizon-crowning darkness of the Black Hills of South Dakota.

One hot and humid day in early August, I drove out to interview White Plume in a screened outdoor kitchen he had just built for his wife. Hemp plants sprouted thickly all over their garden. "Go ahead and smoke as much as you like," White Plume offered. "I always tell people that: Smoke as much as you want, but you won't get very high." The plants are remnants from a plantation of industrial hemp—low-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) *Cannabis sativa*—cultivated by the White Plume family in 2000.

During World War II cultivation of hemp was encouraged in the United States, its fiber used for rope, canvas, and uniforms. But in 1970 low-THC industrial hemp was outlawed under the Controlled Substances Act. In 1998 the Oglala Sioux Tribe passed an ordinance allowing the cultivation of low-THC hemp, a crop well suited to places, like the "rez," with a short growing season, arid soil, and weather fluctuations.

"The people of Pine Ridge have sovereign status as an independent nation," White Plume said. "I take that to mean I am free to make a living from this land." So in spite of reportedly stern warnings from Robert Ecoffey, the superintendent for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) on Pine Ridge, who pointed out that Oglala Sioux sovereignty is limited and does not include the right to violate federal laws, the White Plumes planted an acre and a half of industrial hemp using seeds collected from plants growing wild on the rez. A few days before the crop was due to be harvested, in late August 2000, agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration, the FBI, the BIA, and the U.S. Marshals Service swarmed the place in helicopters and SUVs and shut down the hemp operation. The crop went feral. "It was an experiment in capitalism and a test of our sovereignty, but it seems the U.S. government doesn't want to admit that we should have either," White Plume said. Then he laughed in the way of a man who knows that he cannot be defeated by ordinary disappointments.

After that we spoke of the treaties made and broken between the U.S. and the Sioux, and that led naturally to a conversation about the Black Hills, which the Oglala consider their *axis mundi*, the center of their spiritual world. The 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty guaranteed the Sioux possession of the hills, but after gold was discovered there in 1874, prospectors swarmed in, and the U.S. government quickly seized the land. The Sioux refused to accept the legitimacy of the seizure and fought the takeover for more than a century. On June 30, 1980, in *United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld an award of \$17.5 million for the value of the land in 1877, along with 103 years' worth of interest, together totaling \$106 million. But the Sioux rejected the payment, insisting that the Black Hills would never be for sale.

And then White Plume asked me to consider the seemingly calculated insult of Mount Rushmore. "The leaders of the people who have broken every treaty with my people have their faces carved into our most holy place. What is the equivalent? Do you have an equivalent?" I could offer none. Then White Plume,

who punctuates his oddly unexcited view of history's injustices not only with laughter but also with pauses long enough to roll a cigarette, looked up and asked if I had extra time on my hands and extra fuel in my car.

I said I had both, and we drove out onto his cathedral land. Sitting by a cottonwood-lined creek, in a dark pool of shade, we spoke of the ways in which lives are lost on the rez and about the suicide, earlier that summer, of a 15-year-old Oglala Lakota girl. Partly because time is not linear for the Oglala Lakota but rather is expressed in circular endlessness and beginnings, and partly because many can recite the members of their family trees, branch after branch, twig after twig, vines and incidental outgrowths included, it does not seem to me too big a historical step to go from the bodies piled in the snow at Wounded Knee in 1890 to the body of Dusti Rose Jumping Eagle lying in shiny mannequin perfection in an open coffin in a tepee in Billy Mills Hall in the town of Pine Ridge in early July 2011, a scarf draped over her neck to conceal the manner of her suicide.

"The whole Sioux Nation was wounded at that last terrible massacre, and we've been suffering ever since. It's true we have our own ways of healing ourselves from the genocidal wound, but there is just so much historical trauma, so much pain, so much death," White Plume said, and he would know. There is a flat plateau in the center of his ranch, he told me, where some of the historic Ghost Dances that precipitated the Wounded Knee massacre are supposed to have taken place. Participants in these ritualized spiritual ceremonies danced themselves into an altered state and claimed to have communed easily with their dead, become mentally untethered from the Earth, and touched the morning star. Then there is the unavoidable fact that three of his relatives were killed on that winter day.

In 1890 a bad drought brought more than the usual deprivation to the reduced reservations of the Great Plains. (The Great Sioux Reservation had been chopped up into six smaller reservations.) At the same time, agents of the BIA got jumpy about an upswing in the number of Ghost Dances being performed by the Sioux, who were gathering with increasing desperation and frequency on the open prairie, petitioning for advice and guidance from their ancestors and spirits.

On December 15, 1890, U.S. Indian policemen arrested Sitting Bull in an effort to quell the "messiah craze" of the native ceremonies. The arrest turned unintentionally violent in ways that retrospectively seem inevitable. Sitting Bull was killed, along with seven of his supporters and six of the policemen. Fearing a backlash, another leader, Big Foot, fled south with his band under cover of night to seek asylum with Red Cloud on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Nearly two weeks later, on the morning of December 28, 1890, a nervy U.S. Seventh Cavalry unit found Big Foot's band at Porcupine Creek and escorted them to Wounded Knee Creek. The following morning the cavalry attempted to disarm the Indians. What happened next on that frozen-prairie morning isn't entirely clear. It is said that a medicine man, Yellow Bird, began to perform a dance, throwing handfuls of dirt in the air. A scuffle ensued, a gun was discharged, the Army opened fire, and by the time the smoke cleared, Big Foot and at least 145 members of his band had been killed (the Oglala argue many more), including 84 men and boys, 44 women, and 18 children. A reported 25 U.S. soldiers also died, some possibly as a result of friendly fire.

Testifying to the commissioner of Indian Affairs in February 1891, the Oglala leader American Horse said of that day, "There was a woman with an infant in her arms who was killed as she almost touched the flag of truce ... Right near the flag of truce a mother was shot down with her infant; the child not knowing that its mother was dead was still nursing, and that was especially a very sad sight ... Of course it would have been all right if only the men were killed; we would feel almost grateful for it. But the fact of the killing of the women, and more especially the killing of the young boys and girls who are to go to make up the future strength of the Indian people, is the saddest part of the whole affair and we feel it very sorely."

"They tried extermination, they tried assimilation, they broke every single treaty they ever made with us," White Plume said. "They took away our horses. They outlawed our language. Our ceremonies were forbidden." White Plume is insistent about the depth and breadth of the policies and laws by which the U.S. government sought to quash Native Americans, but his delivery is uncomplainingly matter-of-fact. "Our holy leaders had to go underground for nearly a century." It wasn't until Congress passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, in 1978, that any interference in native spiritual practices was made a crime. "And yet our ceremonies survived, our language survived," White Plume said.

Buried deep within the pages of the 2010 Defense appropriations bill, signed by President Barack Obama in December 2009, is an official apology "to all Native Peoples for the many instances of violence, maltreatment, and neglect inflicted on Native Peoples by citizens of the United States." The resolution commends those states "that have begun reconciliation efforts with recognized Indian tribes," but there is no mention of reparations, nor of honoring long-broken treaties.

White Plume lit one of his rolled-up cigarettes and squinted at me through a ribbon of smoke. “Do you know what saved me from becoming a cold-blooded murderer? My language saved me. There is no way for me to be hateful in my language. It’s such a beautiful, gentle language. It’s so peaceful.” Then White Plume started to speak in Lakota, and there was no denying the words came softly.

Above us, in an otherwise empty sky, two small clouds touched each other and melted into nothing. White Plume got up and walked toward the creek, and then I heard him exclaim in surprise—“Aha!”—as if greeting someone revered, and deeply known. He had found the cottonwood tree for his Sun Dance ceremony. Although most Pine Ridge traditions are off-limits to outsiders, I gathered that the following would occur: The tree would be brought down by White Plume and some of the men in his family and carried to the Sun Dance grounds with the kind of reverence due a holy being. There it would be fixed with prayer ties—bundles of tobacco and other offerings wrapped with cloth of various colors—and set in a hole in the ground, where it would remain until the following year.

In 1974 White Plume joined the Army and was deployed to Germany. (Native Americans are disproportionately represented in the armed forces.) “The year I left to join the Army, there were only three Sun Dances on the whole reservation,” he said. “Now there are scores.” White Plume still holds his own family and extended family’s Sun Dances in the traditional way. “It’s just us,” he said, in a way that sounded less exclusive than it looks in print. “It’s so beautiful, so spiritual.”

The vigorous resurgence of Sun Dance ceremonies owes much to the passage of the 1978 act but also to the widespread Indian activism that began earnestly in the early 1970s. Now every year during the summer there are more than 50 separate Sun Dances across Pine Ridge, up from the few held in secret decades ago. At each ceremony scores of invited participants dance, meditate, pray, are purified in sweat lodges, and fast for days at a time. Men who are deemed spiritually equipped to withstand this symbolic act of communal self-sacrifice are pierced with bone pegs at the end of ropes tied to the branches of ritually harvested cottonwood trees. They then jerk themselves free, tearing their skin in the process. A mantle of ancient-feeling, sacred humidity settles over the rez.

It says a lot of what you need to know about Alex White Plume that an imperfect yet contagiously optimistic 38-year-old woman named Olowan Thunder Hawk Martinez considers him a mentor. At one time or another, Martinez has been almost everything you might despair of in a person, but she is also an irrepressible spirit and a courageously outspoken, self-appointed youth leader. “You want me to be that drunk Indian woman in the corner?” Like her mentor, Martinez has an unsettling habit of laughing when she is most serious. She laughed now. “I’ve been there, done that. I snapped out of it.”

On the night she heard of Jumping Eagle’s suicide, Martinez said, she could feel the victim’s pain—as if the body of the dying girl had briefly broken its bounds and inhabited her own. “I know why a lot of young girls try to kill themselves on the rez,” Martinez said. “We’re all in constant danger of losing ourselves, losing our identities. It’s a daily struggle for each and every one of us to be fully Lakota. And sometimes we lose the struggle, and then the men take out their feeling of worthlessness on the women, the women take out their feelings of worthlessness on themselves, and everyone takes out their feelings of worthlessness on the children.”

In Martinez’s case, an uncle had molested her when she was six and again when she was ten. “Afterward he used words—he told me I was useless. I remember feeling such a deep pain that nothing and nobody could reach inside to take it away.” Soon after the second defilement Martinez found herself standing alone in the kitchen of her mother’s house. “Just like today, it was hot outside and building up for rain,” Martinez said. “I remember looking down at the kitchen counter and seeing a knife. And suddenly that knife seemed like the only way to cut out every pain inside me. So I picked it up and started to saw through the skin on my wrist.”

As Martinez was telling this story at her kitchen table, there was a rumble out of the sky, as thunderclouds massed—Wakinyan, the Oglala Lakota call them, Thunder Beings. “The sixth time I was trying to cut, the floor beneath me rumbled,” Martinez said. “Wakinyan were speaking to me. They were telling me I had to live. I dropped the knife.”

For a moment we sat in the sultry, fly-buzzing silence. She lit a twist of sage, and we took turns wafting the cleansing smoke around our hair. A small commotion erupted outside. Although money is always tight, and Martinez has three children of her own (who are 19, 11, and 5), there is often a posse of unrelated or half-related youngsters hanging around, participants in Martinez’s somewhat haphazard youth-leadership endeavor. Today was no exception. Several boys, ranging in age from 14 on up, were running in circles around her humid, overgrown garden, shooting at each other good-naturedly with pellet guns. One of them had been shot in the rear and was wailing. Martinez laughed and got to her feet. “Oh my warrior youth,” she said. “Let’s find out who did

what to who.”

It is perhaps only natural that Martinez, who grew up on the rez in the 1970s and early '80s, has radical tendencies. “Those were crazy times,” Martinez told me. Unseen people walked at night, heavily armed; houses in the more remote towns were frequently shot at after dark; there were scores of killings. “You can dance words around it, but what was happening back then felt a lot like a war to the people who were in it,” she said. In February 1973, 200 members of the American Indian Movement (AIM), a pro-native group that included Martinez’s young parents, occupied the site of the Wounded Knee massacre to protest broken treaties and corrupt tribal governance. In response the tribal government formed its own private militia—Guardians of the Oglala Nation, they called themselves (GOONs for short)—and along with dozens of National Guard troops and FBI agents, faced down the activists. By the time the siege was over, 71 days later, 130,000 rounds had been fired, and authorities had made more than 1,200 arrests.

Martinez and I were talking about this one late afternoon at the Wounded Knee Cemetery, not far from her house. “I am a direct result of that revolution,” she said. We had spread out in the shade of a tree that also sheltered her father’s grave. Angelo “Angel” Martinez had died in a car crash in 1974, when Martinez was a baby. It is a measure of the esteem he was held in by AIM members that his funeral included an elaborate procession from the village of Porcupine and burial in this highly significant cemetery. “Right here at Wounded Knee,” Martinez said, digging her finger into the ground. “This is where the idea of me happened.”

Looking at it head-on, the 1973 siege did not achieve its goals. Broken treaties between the U.S. and the Oglala Sioux remained broken, the tribal government remained as corrupt as ever, and those rebellious days had a long and violent afterlife. Between March 1, 1973, and March 1, 1976, the murder rate on the Pine Ridge Reservation was more than 17 times the national average. But the AIM activists had made two things abidingly and indelibly clear. The U.S. government could never again dismiss Indian people as a bothersome obstacle to an otherwise perfectly executed manifest destiny, and being native, resisting colonization and assimilation was something to which people could proudly dedicate their lives.

One afternoon a few weeks later Martinez and I drove two hours northwest to deliver a birthday cake to a niece by marriage, who had recently been raped on the rez and had fled to a women’s shelter in Rapid City, South Dakota. On the way Martinez pointed out several unmarked state police cars. When I asked her how she could tell, Martinez said, “I can spot a pig a mile off. It’s the way I was raised by my mother.”

It’s true that Victoria Thunder Hawk had presciently prepared her child for jail, because whatever else was up for grabs in Martinez’s future, incarceration was inevitable. “I grew up on marijuana money,” Martinez said. “It’s how my mother took care of us and funded her work in the resistance. So she always used to tell us, ‘Just remember, when they come for you, keep your head up and mouth shut.’” Martinez said the whole rez community seemed to come through their doors to buy marijuana when she was a kid, “teachers, cops, neighbors. I thought everyone smoked.” But Thunder Hawk never got rich on the trade, sharing her profits liberally with the community. Also, she viewed marijuana as a medicine that would allow her people to heal from oppression and to tap into a creative, contemplative frame of mind. By the time Martinez was 30, she had been involved in selling drugs for most of her living memory. “It was just a matter of time,” Martinez said. “You know? You get selfish, you get careless, you get caught.”

By now we had delivered the birthday cake and were driving through Rapid City’s downtown, with its once-we-were-cowboys-and-Indians public art. But as Martinez kept insisting, the past wasn’t neatly done and dusted, as the bronze statues of cowboys would suggest. It was here and now. A day earlier, on August 2, a 22-year-old Indian man originally from the reservation, Daniel Tiger, had shot and killed a police officer in an altercation at a bus stop in the city. Tiger too had been shot and died of his wounds, another officer had died, and another was recovering in a hospital. “White people always say there’s nothing racist about it,” Martinez said. “But that’s because they’re not native. Maybe it’s time we made the boundaries around the rez impenetrable. Keep the Indians in, keep the crackers out. Then we can just get on with it. No more cowboys and Indians.”

Martinez pointed to a stark, square building to her right. “Pennington County Jail,” she said. “That’s where I spent my 11 and a half months in hell.” She looked over at me. “They got me for conspiring to distribute. But I didn’t snitch on anyone. I did my time. Head up, mouth shut, just like my mother told me.”

Martinez said the worst part of her died in that jail. “The greedy, selfish Martinez died in those walls. She’s buried there.” She reached over, patted my arm, and laughed. “Don’t you think that’s a good place to bury a colonized Indian ass? In a white man’s jail.” Encouraged to participate in sobriety classes, Martinez was unequivocally clearheaded for the first time in decades. “Then when I was having revelations, when I was feeling the spirits, I knew I wasn’t hallucinating. I started to trust my visions.” Sitting in a windowless cell, Martinez said, she saw her future. “I could see dozens of tipis set up in a meadow

and young warriors everywhere, flags and braids and camouflage flying. I was in the middle of them, and my children were with me.” Martinez shut her eyes, and for a moment all the hurt and the fight went out of her face.

In the early spring of 2011 Olowan Thunder Hawk Martinez briefly caught the edge of the vision she had had in jail. For a few weeks in that unkind South Dakota season, she borrowed a tepee and set it up on land she had inherited from her mother, who had died while Martinez was incarcerated. Martinez was not permitted to attend her mother’s funeral. “She died with an outstanding warrant for her arrest hanging over her head, for the same thing that landed my ass in jail,” Martinez said.

By conventional Western mores, Martinez’s vision would seem unambitious to the point of meaninglessness. Still, her mother would have approved of Martinez’s setup on her land. And it’s something Alex White Plume would respect too. “Everything in the U.S. is designed around money,” he had said to me. “So how do we live in that mode—with the white man’s houses, the white man’s pickup, the white man’s currency—and still keep our traditional Lakota culture?”

In the tepee Martinez heated baked beans over an open fire surrounded by her two young daughters, her son, and half a dozen coming and going Oglala Lakota youth. As in her vision, the youngsters were dressed in camouflage, many of them wore their hair in long braids, ribbons were flying. For a few sacred weeks Martinez wasn’t in mold-infested, government-issued housing. She was off the grid. (She can rarely afford her electricity and water bills when she isn’t.) She woke up early and walked out of her tepee and directly into the grace of the morning star, to which she gave her Lakota thanks.

And outside the tepee, against the restless Great Plains sky, bleak with heavy spring snow clouds, Martinez raised an American flag, union down. According to the Flag Code of the United States of America, the flag should never be displayed union down, except as a signal of dire distress or in instances of extreme danger to life or property. “That’s almost right,” Martinez said. “We’re in dire distress, but we don’t need anyone to come and save the Indian. When we honor our customs, and when we perform ceremonies, and when we listen to our ancestors, then we have everything we need to heal ourselves within ourselves.” Martinez thought for a moment, and then she added, “Write this: When the lights go out for good, my people will still be here. We have our ancient ways. We will remain.”

Alexandra Fuller wrote in June 2010 about [reconciliation in South Africa](#). Aaron Huey spent seven years documenting life on Pine Ridge Reservation.
