



COME HOME NOW

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ATERONHIATAKON FRANCIS BOOTS

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Cover photograph by Art Kane

The first action I participated in was on December 8, 1968, literally in my backyard in Akwesasne. I was working in the shipping department of this big lacrosse stick factory on Cornwall Island, shipping sticks to England, Australia and Japan, and I was told that there was a roadblock just a half a mile away. They had started collecting tariffs at the border, and traditional people from the longhouse were opposing it. We're not supposed to pay taxes or tariffs. Not long after that I joined the roadblock, and I remember big fat policemen walking in unison towards us, and before you knew it they threw us in cars and drove us away. In jail, we asked what they had arrested us for. Is just blocking the road against the law? That was my first political activity, and it changed my life. I quit my job after that, and I became involved in *Akwesasne Notes*, which was born at that time. Shortly after we formed a communications group and started traveling to Vermont and neighboring high schools and universities. At the same time, I got involved in the traditional chiefs' council. People need to know that in this community we have an elected system of government that is imposed on us, and then we have a traditional government that is struggling to maintain cultural, treaty, environmental, and land rights. That's what traditional people are all about. I participated in what the traditional chiefs were doing. It was a newfound identity. When I joined the roadblock, the Indianness just hit me in the face; I walked right into it, and I've been involved ever since.

In its prime, *Akwesasne Notes* was the major Indigenous news journal, not just in the Americas but all over the world. It became a real hub of information. How it all started is that right after the protest of 1968, the local newspapers had a few articles about what happened, so we reproduced

them and made copies that we just distributed in the community. The next week we did the same thing. All the reservations were getting more active, and we were getting all this information. And then this man came to us, he was a federal government employee, and he was there to help people who were starting businesses. He quickly saw the potential there. He's the one who organized the information. He knew just how to write the articles, always on the typewriters. So Indian Affairs ordered him out of the reservation. But the women said, "No, he's going to stay here. We invited him to stay here, and we want him to stay here." Eventually the Bear Clan adopted him into our community, and he was given the name Rarihokwats.

The way we did it is that we sent the newspapers to the subscribers, but they had to send us a letter within a few weeks to confirm that they were reading it or send us a few bucks or send us some new information if they wanted to stay on the mailing list. We never charged a subscription fee, and we didn't have any advertisements. That's how it just kept getting bigger. Pretty soon, the post office in Rooseveltown was completely overwhelmed, they couldn't handle all the mail they received for us. People would send all kinds of things, a few dollars, information, recipes; it was a big job to open all that mail! Then all of a sudden, the universities, libraries, institutions, they all started buying the newspaper, so we received piles and piles of checks. I'll never forget how we had to make all the packages by hand in my mother's kitchen, thousands of them, sending all the bundles for the different zip codes. It was very hard labor, but we were really happy doing it. My mother had to move her kitchen to the other room! There were people coming from all over Indian country to see how our newspaper worked; they were sleeping in tents all around my father's house. It was the hub for the community; people were sitting around reading these letters from all over the world. Nobody ever got a salary, not even Rarihokwats. We gave out all the money we received to people who needed it, for funerals and other things. That's the way it was.

When I was twenty-eight years old, some forty years ago, I was designated as the Aión:wes. This is the title of the head of the Kanien'kehá:ka men's fire under the Kaianerehkó:wa —what they call the war chief in English. But the true role of the Aión:wes is to be the *keeper of the house*, meaning to protect your community, as much in the case of everyday fam-

ily issues as for emergencies, like when the territory has to be defended against an attack. According to the original instructions of the Kaianereh-kó:wa, the role of the Aión:wes is based on three principles: the power of a good mind, peace, and strength. Since our confederacy was established, there has always been a men's fire, the Rotihskén'rákéhte', whose responsibility is to organize the defense of the territory. There's a long history to it; it has been part of our way of life since time immemorial. In the past, whenever other Rotinonhsión:ni territories needed assistance our chiefs would counsel and send the Rotihskén'rákéhte' there if necessary. We would put up defenses and bear arms to defend ourselves. Throughout my time as head of the men's fire, I was called to give assistance to other Indigenous peoples all over the continent.

We were in Alcatraz when it was occupied by Indigenous protesters. It had been chosen as a site of occupation, because as a barren prison it was a symbol of the oppression we were experiencing in reservations.¹ One of the leaders in Alcatraz, Richard Oakes, was from Akwesasne.² It wasn't easy to coordinate, because all the people who went there were from different backgrounds, and there was a lot of pressure from the media. I was there for about four months. I remember often being cold and hungry.

We were there when the Trail of Broken Treaties crossed the United States to occupy the offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which was disenfranchising Indigenous people across the country.³ There were hundreds of us from all over when we arrived at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington. When all the employees left the building, people broke into the office on the second floor. People were rifling through files, looking for documents related to their community, land easements, things like that. People were rightfully looking through all this paperwork; it was all over the place. The most militant were the Tuscaroras from the Carolinas. I don't know who let them in the building. Boy, they were mad, they were angry, they were hurt. They started taking all the equipment from the offices and putting it at the top of the stairs in case anybody were to come. There were medallions and certificates of all kinds all over the floor. The Tuscaroras started making weapons out of the table legs. To me that crossed the line, so I told my folks, "This is not going to have a happy ending. I think we better do something." We talked to the old Lakota people asking them what ceremony we could do to calm the people down. This

was supposed to be their building. Do they act like this at home? So there was a pipe ceremony, and everybody settled right down. The people came down from the roofs, and the cops were all outside. The ceremony was so intense, the Lakotas were able to quiet people down.

When we went to Wounded Knee in 1973, we would not influence the Lakota though, because they already had it right in our opinion. We supported them the best way we could, but they had everything. They had their pipe, they had their sacred hoop, they had all these beautiful things. And they had a clear negotiating position. It was the other side that wasn't interested in resolving anything, and the United States government, they were only interested in sending the army in. So we really didn't have a lot of influence. The only thing we could do was add maybe four or five people to the front, and we weren't prepared to do that, so we left. We tried our best to help them monetarily and in other ways, but I have to say that Wounded Knee is one of the saddest moments in American history. The first Wounded Knee and the second Wounded Knee: there were massacres at both.⁴ We always had good relationships with the American Indian Movement (AIM). It didn't have to do with our politics; it had to do with our spirituality. Most AIM people were not from reservations. They were from the cities, so Indianness was new to them. Wearing beadwork and Indian designs was all new to them. They didn't speak the language. They didn't know any of the songs. They were in the poorest part of cities. That in itself was quite a contribution, because it awoke a lot of people. The message of AIM was: "You better get out of this city and go back to your grandfather and maybe learn from him. Go home. There's no future in these cities for you." But as a national organization, there wasn't just AIM, there were the women, the Women of All Red Nations (WARN).⁵ They were just as political as AIM. They were organizing day care centers, birthing places, schools, food pantries. That made more sense to me than marching up and down the street with a sign. The leaders of AIM meant well, but they had such a gigantic opposition. They were going to be assassinated, and everybody knew it, so they had to operate in the shadows.

In 1977, we attended a United Nations conference on the rights of Indigenous people in Geneva.⁶ We took a very strong position there, saying that we owe no allegiance to anybody else except ourselves. It was accepted. Representatives from almost every Indigenous nation of North

and South America were there. We made a statement called *Basic Call to Consciousness*.⁷ I was selected as a delegate to travel to many parts of the world, including what was then called People's Republic of Jamahiriya, also known as Libya.⁸ We were invited there to partake in solidarity and an understanding about our right to live according to our own ways. We were well received and were invited to feast, the same way that we do here; when you're finished with words, you sanction it with a feast. The Libyans honored our traditional ways, and in return we honored them by offering sacred tobacco. I've been to many other countries, and original peoples understand each other immediately. No words are needed; there's an immediate sense of brotherhood, of unity.

The early 1970s were really amazing times. We had communication between many Native communities throughout the Americas through *Akwesasne Notes*. There was a lot of networking going on, and our people really came together. We had something called "Unity Conventions," with Native people from many different areas traveling around and visiting each other, reviving our spirit of "Indianness." We went to many places—Oklahoma, Florida, New Mexico—developing our relationships as nations, not as tribes or reservations, as well as our spiritual connectedness. We did it by talking of our continent as one and of all Native peoples as sharing a responsibility to the universe and the environment. That's when we started using the term *Turtle Island*, which has become very common now. The same with caretaking the land for the "seven generations" that are coming towards us: we realized that we have to think in those terms. That was an amazing transformation, when you consider that we were confined on reservations, where there were so many things we couldn't do. We broke out of that. We liberated our thinking. We liberated our hope. We sensed that hope in our unity. It was an amazing time. Our chiefs, the Rotiianérshon, had very clear minds and were acting in ways that immediately inspired the other nations that met them, and the women, the Ka'nisténhsera', understood their role and made sure that they would be listened to. We were able to get back what we believe to be our way of life, not according to what somebody else believes to be our way of life, you see. Before that we used to behave like Hollywood portrayed us; we bought into that. So it was a big transformation at that time, to use what really belongs to us. And our leaders were up for it. It was amazing.

We had the sense that somebody was listening to us; that's what made the difference. Before that nobody wanted to hear from those Indians on the reservation, but now we had an audience. Lakota people were speaking up, talking about the Sundance again. The Ojibwa were coming back to their Seven Fires ceremonies. The fire became a symbol of requickening and lovingfulness, what we call *Kanoronbkwáhtsbera'*.⁹ It became trans-Indian; it was everywhere! The fire is what brings people together. When you think of it, a fire is warmth, light, sparkle, but when you don't think of it, it's just a fire. Once somebody puts tobacco in the fire, it becomes a sacred fire; it's very different. That's what we were experiencing. We were seeing everything that was happening, and we wondered what our role was in that context. Should we start traveling to meet all those people, or should we weave the fabric of our life stronger first as Kaianerehkó:wa people? That was a critical decision. You have to understand who you are before someone asks you to explain it. We couldn't go there empty-minded; we had to have the fullness of our own ways. We've had conflicts since the Europeans have come here to take our land, our resources and our spirit away. We always had to defend ourselves against these attacks, basing our defense on the Kaianerehkó:wa. We have to maintain the vision of our original instructions in order to defend our people. Our language is key for remembering these instructions; it was given to us to access our own identity. When we do our ceremonies, our festivals and our thanksgivings in our language, with our children listening, it's the words of our ancestors from time immemorial that we are reviving through our ceremonies.

Akwesasne appears to be the focus of every destructive force associated with American government policies. I remember that when I was a young boy I lived in a pristine area. The rivers were natural and beautiful. Today, it has all changed; it has all become man-made. We live in a complicated geographic location, straddled between Québec, Ontario and the United States, on the Saint Lawrence River. But since I can remember we've always declared ourselves an independent people. We are not American or Canadian citizens; we are Kanien'kehá:ka people. The defense of our sovereignty is something that we have always advocated for very strongly. The elected systems of government which they call tribal councils in the US and band councils in Canada have been imposed on us. Akwesasne is a prime example of the governments' oppression of Native peoples. All of

the examples are very clear here. When you cross the Canada-US border that passes through our community, you have to present a foreign government's identification card. They won't even accept our own documents. The foreign border brings us to experience economic and psychological oppression every day in Akwesasne. We raise our children to be very aware of this, and not to buy into their Canadianization and their Americanization. We are sovereign Kanien'kehá:ka people, and we should proudly stand up and declare so at every opportunity.

More recently, in 2009, we had problems with the Canadian Immigration Customs building on Cornwall Island, which is right in the middle of our territory. The Canadian border agents wanted to have a sidearm, a gun. They didn't have guns on the Canadian side up until that point. We had a long history of conflict with border agents, and we thought that if those people were armed they were going to shoot somebody. Our people said that we couldn't allow them to have guns on our territory. We set up a camp near their offices, and the border control officers' response was to run away and leave the building. The bridge that passes through our territory was simply shut down altogether, so we had no way to circulate through our own community anymore. Today, their building there is still vacant. They set up a different office on the south side, in what they call Cornwall, which they use now, and they ended up keeping their guns, so we only half won. At least they're not in our territory, but they're still harassing us on a daily basis. Our people used to go shopping for groceries on the American side, and some of them were so poor that they bought their groceries on credit for the week. Then the border agents wanted them to pay taxes on their groceries when they crossed the border. How the hell are you going to pay a tax on groceries if you barely have the money to buy the groceries? We also shut down the bridge, and the government finally acknowledged that those tariffs don't concern us Indigenous peoples on our traditional territory. We're always in conflict with oppressive laws here. It's because we understand our freedom, and we're ready to defend it.

We have so many different so-called "law enforcement agencies" trying to control us in Akwesasne, because it is divided between New York State, Ontario and Québec, with all their different federal, provincial, state and county police departments. One time, it was Franklin County that tried to impose its county police here in Akwesasne. Those cops started harass-

ing our people all the time, ticketing us for having bad signal lights and stuff like that. So we went to them and said, “Look, from what we understand, the police department is supposed to be there to help people, but here you are harassing them for things that we don’t think are necessary.” They would not listen. They had a badge on their chest and a gun on their hip and thought that it gave them some authority. We occupied their building, and we threw them right out, as a symbol that we mean business.

In 1990, before anything happened in Kanehsatà:ke, there was already a conflict relating to casinos in Akwesasne, and the army was already there with the state police. They had all the roads blocked and controlled the waters both on the Canadian and the American side. There had been two men killed there, and there was an investigation. I got a phone call from a friend, David Gabriel, asking me to go to Kanehsatà:ke to perform songs for the graduation of the seniors’ adult education program, which happened to be happening at the time. So four or five of us grabbed drums and rattles; we jumped in my van and went there. We went straight to the Pines of Kanehsatà:ke, where ceremonies usually take place. There was a dirt pile at the entrance, but everything seemed normal. We sang, and, meanwhile, people told us what was happening, that the city of Oka wanted to cut trees in the cemetery in the Pines of Kanehsatà:ke to expand their golf course. We said, “What? Why don’t they build it on their side?” So we decided to stay, and on the morning of July 11, 1990, at 5:30, we woke up to burn tobacco and say a thanksgiving address. We were waiting for the city people to come for the Pines, and suddenly there was this massive percussion grenade that went off, and you could see this whole sea of tactical police coming at us with tear gas. That’s how it started, you know; we were just burning tobacco. There was a seventeen-second exchange of gunfire, and that’s when Corporal Marcel Lemay got shot. There was a long investigation about that, and they never discovered who shot him. We think they did; they think we did. That’s a long story, but it was over the principle of how much land you can give up for a golf course. Should you give up your ceremony for a private golf course? Should you give up these pristine pines where people have been coming for hundreds of years to celebrate all the small things that they’re happy about in their community?

In all these difficult times, the guiding flame has always been my un-

derstanding of the Kaianerehkó:wa. We were given these instructions; we were given a way to have a good mind, a way of peace and a way of strength —plus our four original ceremonies. That has been the guiding light, and the pleasure and the resolution for any internal hardship, the solution when one is scared or anything like that. That's how I've been able to continue. And my family, they have been the strength for everything I have done. In the last fifteen years, the people started coming back to the Kaianerehkó:wa. At one time, in the 1950s, there were almost only Christians in Akwesasne. The longhouse people were underground; they would practice their way of life in the privacy of their homes with the windows curtained off so nobody could see. Today, it's wide open; our young people are coming home in droves, and they know their songs and their ceremonies. I believe that we're going to survive. There was a time in my life when I had some doubts about that, but today I'm confident that we're going to survive. In the future, I believe that we will not allow our way of life to be tampered with by the colonial powers. The settler peoples also have got to come back and understand that they too have those instructions to be kind to Mother Earth, to be kind to the rivers, to be kind to the trees and all life. They seem to have forgotten that, and that's where the conflict is. They too have to come home now.

Notes

- 1 When the Alcatraz maximum security federal penitentiary closed in 1963, the island in the San Francisco Bay where it had been built, nicknamed the Rock, had already been occupied once for four hours in March 1964, by Richard McKenzie and other Sioux protesters, who had argued that the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie between the US and the Sioux provided for the return of all federal lands if they were abandoned and out of use. On November 9, 1969, activists from the Indians of All Tribes (IAT), including Mohawk Richard Oakes, Cherokee Jim Vaughn and Inuit Joe Bill, attempted another occupation. They approached the island by boat, swam to the shore and claimed the island, before being removed the same day by Coast Guards. However, on November 20, hundreds of other activists, including actor Benjamin Bratt, returned to the island, avoiding a Coast Guard blockade. Even after the government tried to drive out the protesters by cutting the island's electricity, water and telephone lines, the occupation continued, only to finally be dislodged by a massive police operation that removed the last occupants on June 11, 1971.
- 2 Born in Akwesasne in 1942, Richard Oakes worked as a high steelworker before becoming a prominent leader in the 1970 occupation of Alcatraz Island. In 1972, at the age of thirty, he was brutally shot to death by a YMCA camp manager in Sonoma, California.

- 3 On November 3, 1972, as the Canadian Minister of Indian Affairs' offices in Ottawa were being occupied by Mohawk warriors, the American Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in Washington, DC, was simultaneously taken over by around five hundred Indigenous activists. Washington, DC, was the end point of the Trail of Broken Treaties, which had departed from the West Coast in October to raise awareness about the discrimination and inequalities faced by Native Americans, the theft of 110 million acres of their land and the past and ongoing violations of treaty agreements. The occupation of the BIA lasted for seven days before the lack of provisions convinced the protesters to leave the building, which was considerably damaged. As he was trying to get re-elected when the occupation was going on, Richard Nixon adopted a surprisingly favorable attitude towards Indigenous people's right to self-governance.
- 4 On February 27, 1973, two hundred Oglala Sioux and activists affiliated with the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupied the site of Wounded Knee, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, in South Dakota. They were protesting against Pine Ridge tribal council chief Dick Wilson's reign of terror and his violent persecution of his political opponents, including many traditionals. In response, within a few hours, more than two thousand FBI agents, United States Marshals and other police forces equipped with military-grade weapons, tanks, and helicopters, besieged the town. The siege lasted until May 8, with two Indigenous activists killed by police gunfire. Yet the bloodiest phase of this battle would happen after the police left, as an estimated sixty Native activists were killed in the aftermath of the occupation, allegedly assassinated by Dick Wilson's personal paramilitary forces, the so-called GOON (Guardians of the Oglala Nation) squad. Previously, on December 29, 1890, Wounded Knee had also been the site of one of the largest massacres in American history, when nearly three hundred Lakota people had been murdered by soldiers of the US Army.
- 5 The Women of All Red Nations was established in 1974, in Rapid City, South Dakota. It included more than three hundred women from thirty nations, many of whom had previously been AIM activists and had been present in Wounded Knee. WARN fought on many crucial fronts related to the experience of Indigenous women, including education, pollution, representation, health, and land issues. It notably revealed the widespread abuse in regard to sterilization procedures being practiced on unwitting Native women, bringing the United States Department of Health and Human Services to issue regulations on sterilization in 1979.
- 6 On September 20, 1977, a group of traditional Mohawk people participated in the first annual meeting of the International NGO Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas, in Geneva, Switzerland. The Mohawk delegation notably distributed the book *Basic Call to Consciousness*, edited by Akwesasne Notes.
- 7 Akwesasne Notes, ed., *Basic Call to Consciousness*, Book Publishing Company, 1991.
- 8 On June 11, 1991, a group of Mohawk traditionals, including Ateronhiatakon, traveled to Tripoli, Libya, to receive a \$250,000 award from Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi.
- 9 Requickening is a term used for when new Rotiianérshon are installed, following the condolence ceremony of a deceased Roiá:ner.

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