

“SLAYING THE SUN WOMAN”: THE LEGACY OF ANNIE MAE AQUASH

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Around 2:30 pm on 24 February 1976, local rancher Roger Amiotte walked along the fenced border of his property near Wanblee, South Dakota and discovered a woman’s body “lying at the bottom of an approximately 30 foot steep embankment.”¹ After two autopsies and a two-week long investigation, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) released the deceased’s identity as Annie Mae Aquash, who, according to investigative journalist Paul DeMain, was the “highest ranking female leadership member in the American Indian Movement” (AIM).² While the initial autopsy revealed the cause of death to be the result of “exposure” to winter weather, a second inquiry exposed a gunshot wound to the back of the head, which confirmed suspicions of foul play.³ At first, AIM accused the FBI of collaborating with the Pine Ridge reservation tribal chairman, Dick Wilson, and his vigilante police force (GOON squad) in Aquash’s assassination. Further, AIM alleged that the federal government conspired to cover-up the murder. The FBI, on the other hand, suspected that AIM was responsible for Aquash’s death. For the next three decades, the federal government and

¹ Special Agent in Charge (SAC) Norman Zigrossi, *Anna Mae Aquash Murder (Teletype)* to the Director of the F.B.I. (Rapid City, SD: 11 March 1976), 1.

² Paul DeMain (of Lac Courte Oreilles reservation, Hayward, WI), phone interview by author, Norman, OK, 29 October 2009.

³ Dr. W.O. Brown, *Anna Mae Aquash (Autopsy Report)* to S.A.C. Norman Zigrossi (Pine Ridge, SD: 15 March, 1976), 1-2.

AIM traded accusations over who was to blame for Aquash's murder.

As a consequence, Aquash's assassination represents a divisive issue within both AIM and North American Indigenous communities today. Yet in a search for the answer to who killed Annie Mae Aquash, one finds more than just conflict between the government and Indigenous peoples, or internal factiousness in Indigenous groups. By exploring the political activism of Aquash and AIM, one uncovers a hidden legacy of grassroots advocacy aimed at revitalizing and self-empowering Indigenous communities struggling against a colonial hegemonic system that imposed, and continues to impose, political and social constraints on Native peoples.⁴ As one journalist so eloquently put it, "[t]he legacy about Annie Mae goes back to what she said a long time ago, 'if someone follows carefully in my footsteps, they will learn what I know.'" ⁵ Following in Aquash's footsteps is partly about finding answers about who was responsible for her murder. The journey, however, can also illuminate the more important legacy

⁴ A note on terminology: I only use "Indian" when quoted from documents or source materials, otherwise I rely on American historians' terminology for Indigenous North American peoples as either "Native peoples" or "Indigenous peoples," which are both utilized interchangeably throughout the essay. In doing so, I hope to establish that Annie Mae Aquash, herself of Canadian Indigenous descent, shares a common history, kinship, and experience with the other Indigenous peoples from the United States and around the world who similarly encountered Western colonialism and continue to struggle with its legacy today.

⁵ Paul DeMain, Minnie Two Shoes, Robert Pictou-Branscombe, and Russell Means, "Native America Calling: Annie Mae Aquash," interview by Harlan McKosato, 3-4 November 1999, *Native American Public Telecommunications* (transcript: Denver, CO).

A note on methodology: I have predominately consulted the federal government documentary record (FBI files, transcripts of the Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud trial, and Congressional proceedings) and databases of investigative journalism supplied by *News from Indian Country* dedicated to the Aquash murder case. Further, oral interviews and testimonies conducted by investigative journalists, law enforcement officials, and those recorded for archival purposes have been employed to enhance the conclusions elicited from the documentary evidence. Just as importantly, autobiographies of the AIM leadership, Canadian and American film documentaries as well as TV investigative segments, scholarly monographs, newspaper editorials and stories, and independent findings (Ward Churchill's compilation of fatality statistics during the "Reign of Terror") are used to contrast and compare the findings from the documentary and oral record.

that she left behind for future generations: an inheritance of grassroots activism designed to empower Native communities and peoples.

Annie Mae Aquash's introduction to AIM came in the aftermath of the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz Island by Native peoples from around North America, often identified as the beginnings of "Red Power" activism and Indigenous civil rights organization in the late twentieth century.⁶ In the year prior to Alcatraz, AIM had coalesced in St. Paul, Minnesota, under the leadership of Dennis Banks and George Mitchell, who sought to monitor police brutality against the local Indigenous community.⁷ After Alcatraz, AIM expanded its political influence among Indigenous peoples and communities (primarily in urban areas, but also reservation populaces). AIM's far-reaching influence represented an unprecedented political mobilization and activism by Native peoples around the nation. By 1970, AIM had become one of the leading civil rights organizations for North American Indigenous peoples in the assertion of their sovereignty and treaty rights.⁸ Led by Banks and other charismatic leaders like Clyde and Vernon Bellecourt, Russell Means, and John Trudell, by November 1972 AIM claimed to have organized and/or participated in more than 150 political demonstrations.⁹ AIM's confrontational style of political activism garnered the support

⁶Among historians of twentieth-century American Indian history, the origins of "Red Power" activism is currently undergoing scholarly revisionism. Both Daniel M. Cobb (in *Native Activism in Cold War America: The Struggle for Sovereignty* published by the University Press of Kansas in 2008) and Bradley G. Shreve (in *Red Power Rising: The National Indian Youth Council and the Origins of Native Activism* published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 2011) extend the beginnings of a distinct "Red Power" consciousness and political activism back to the mid twentieth-century, nearly three decades before the Alcatraz occupation, spearheaded by the National Youth Indian Council and its predecessor(s), the Workshops on American Indian Affairs.

⁷ Russell Means with Martin J. Wolf, *Where White Men Fear to Tread* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 163.

⁸ Dennis Banks and Richard Erdoes, *Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and the Rise of the American Indian Movement* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 108.

⁹ Chairman James O. Eastland, *Report of the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and other Internal Security laws of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate 94th Congress Second Session* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 7.

(and sometimes ire) of Native peoples throughout the nation, while capturing the national media spotlight through protests such as the ones at Mt. Rushmore and Plymouth Rock in 1970, the Treaty of Broken Trails and subsequent takeover of the Washington D.C. Bureau of Indian Affairs headquarters in 1972, as well as the Custer, South Dakota courthouse riot and the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973.¹⁰

Whereas the AIM leadership concentrated on political issues of sovereignty, treaty rights, and reparations, Aquash felt that other, more pressing issues deserved attention, including rampant poverty, poor health conditions, and lack of medical treatment, along with high rates of drug, alcohol, spousal, and child abuse. Many in AIM, and most particularly the female membership, were supportive of Aquash's grassroots undertakings, and viewed her efforts as a positive strike against the "hurdles...[of] machismo" or sexism that pervaded the organization.¹² Others in the AIM leadership, however, were hostile to Aquash's grassroots goals – a reflection of their resentment towards her growing prominence in the organization. As she struggled to balance her loyalties to the grassroots and national agendas of AIM, Aquash encountered internal jealousies, leadership divisions, and pervasive rumors that denigrated her as an FBI "informant."¹³

¹⁰ Banks and Erdoes, *Ojibwa Warrior*, 111, 144; Leonard Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes, *Crow Dog: Four Generations of Sioux Medicine Men* (New York: Harper Perennial Press, 1996), 170; Means and Wolf, *Where White Men Fear to Tread*, 246.

¹² JoAnn Tall, "Interview with JoAnn Tall," interview by Denise Pictou-Maloney, *News from Indian Country*, January 2004; Tim Lame Woman, "Who Profits from the Murder of Annie Mae Aquash?" *News from Indian Country*, 1999-2004 <http://indiancountrynews.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=871&Itemid=74>. The comments of Russell Means, one of AIM's most vocal and public leaders, reflect the misogyny entrenched in the organization. Means described a "woman's role is *different* than a man's [a "natural" distinction]." Women should not feel the "need to be anointed publicly with leadership ... [and] not try to become something they weren't." Means and Wolf, *Where White Men Fear to Tread*, 265.

¹³ Dan Frosch, "The Price of Freedom: Two Members of the American Indian Movement discuss the Murder that Changed Everything," *Santa Fe Reporter*, 12 March 2004; Kenneth S. Stern, *Loud Hawk: The United States Versus the American Indian Movement* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 308; Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 186-187, 191; Brand, *The Life and Death of Anna Mae*

In the aftermath of Annie Mae Aquash's murder, many Indigenous women within AIM abandoned the movement in order to distance themselves from the organization's growing militancy and sexism. The male leadership of AIM, on the other hand, mounted an increasingly violent protest campaign on the Pine Ridge reservation against the tribal government, led by Dick Wilson, and the FBI. From 1975 to 1976, the Aquash murder served as a flashpoint for escalating tensions between AIM and the FBI. Dennis Banks, Russell Means, Clyde and Vernon Bellecourt, and other male activists publicly declared that an FBI conspiracy had led to Aquash's death. For the AIM leadership, her slaying epitomized the Pine Ridge reservation's so-called "Reign of Terror" between 1973 and 1976, a period during which fifty-seven Native people turned up dead – alleged murders that AIM blamed on the FBI and the Pine Ridge tribal government.¹⁴ Yet government officials and investigative reporters cautioned that AIM overinflated the "Reign of Terror" and its body count due to the organization's increasingly violent "anti-government, anti-everything attitude."¹⁵ Pointing to statements such as those made by Robert Robideau, one of AIM's more militant leaders, who declared "[w]e decided the time had come for armed resistance against the oppression on Pine Ridge," officials suggested that AIM made exaggerated claims of government intimidation in order to justify their own agenda.¹⁶ As a consequence of these confrontations, a growing paranoia seized AIM. They perceived a government conspiracy at every turn.¹⁷

Aquash, 122-123.

¹⁴ Ward Churchill, *Analysis and Refutation of the FBI's "Accounting" for AIM Fatalities on Pine Ridge, 1973-1976*, <<http://www.noparolepeltier.com/churchill.html>> (2000).

¹⁵ Special Agent Douglas J. Domin, *Accounting for Native American Deaths Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota* (Minneapolis: F.B.I. Field Office, May 2000) <http://www.fbi.gov/minneapolis/copy_of_report-for-pine-ridge-indian-reservation-south-dakota/>; DeMain, phone interview, 29 October 2009.

¹⁶ Stern, *Loud Hawk*, 97; Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 269; Hendricks, *The Unquiet Grave*, 223, 289-291, 299; Peter Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse: The Story of Leonard Peltier and the FBI's War on the American Indian Movement* 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 264.

¹⁷ *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, 2004, "Opening

Yet over the past decade, investigative journalists and law enforcement officers have uncovered potentially unsettling truths about the true nature of Aquash's assassination that finds AIM culpable for her murder.¹⁸ Despite the AIM leadership's vehement insistence that the FBI was responsible for her death, several reporters and federal agents argue that Aquash's murder was carried out by members acting on the order of AIM's leadership, who then concealed the identities of the murderers. While these same investigative journalists and law enforcement officers believe the FBI still bears some responsibility for Aquash's death (the FBI, they say, created the "atmosphere of paranoia" that pervaded AIM and allegedly spooked the leadership into acting irrationally against one of its own), they insist that, ultimately, responsibility for Aquash's assassination must be attributed to AIM.¹⁹ Indeed, in February 2004, the federal government arrested and convicted an AIM member, Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud, for Aquash's murder. Then in November of 2010, Theda Nelson Clark, also part of AIM and in poor health, signed a plea bargain with the state of South Dakota confirming her involvement as a co-conspirator in the assassination of Aquash. And most recently, in December 2010, the alleged shooter and AIM adherent, John "Boy" Patton Graham, was extradited from Canada for trial in South Dakota, where he was found guilty of murdering Aquash.²⁰

Statement of Jim McMahon," CR. 03-50020
 <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/openingstatement.html>> (January 27, 2006); Robert Weller, "AIM Members Point Fingers at Each Other in Aquash Murder," *News from Indian Country*, 3 November 1999; Banks and Erdoes, *Ojibwa Warrior*, 284; Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 269; Hendricks, *The Unquiet Grave*, 223, 289-291, 299; Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, 264; Brand, *The Life and Death of Anna Mae Aquash*, 143; Tim Lane Woman, "New Accusations in the Murder of Annie Mae Aquash," *The Circle* 16, 1 (January 1995); Dennis Banks, "Wounded Knee Liberation," in *We, the People of Earth and Elders Volume II*, ed. Serle L. Chapman (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2001).

¹⁸ Including Paul DeMain, Kevin McKiernan, Steve Hendricks, Richard LaCourse, Minnie Two Shoes, Tim Lane Woman, Abe Alonzo, Candy Hamilton, and Robert Ecoffey.

¹⁹ "Silenced: The Execution of Anna Mae," *CBC News Fifth Estate*, prod. Diane Ngui-Yen and Linda Guerriero, Canada, 27 June 2001; DeMain, phone interview, 29 October 2009.

²⁰ *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, 2004, "Testimony of

The conclusion that AIM bears responsibility for Aquash's murder raises an important question: why did the leadership feel that she needed to be silenced? The answer lies in the war between AIM and the FBI on the Pine Ridge reservation between 1973 and 1976. Allegedly operating under the highly controversial and illegal Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), the FBI created a permanent climate of fear and suspicion on the reservation and within AIM itself.²² As one journalist noted, the FBI's attempts to "infiltrate the American Indian Movement with informants bred paranoia in a group already paranoid," which further fueled AIM's growing militancy.²³ Through the mid-1970s, the FBI launched a disinformation campaign designed to cripple AIM's effectiveness in organizing social (and increasingly violent) protest. One facet of the campaign was "snitch-jacketing," whereby the FBI spread the false intelligence that many of AIM's activists and supporters operated as FBI informants. As a consequence of this snitch-jacketing, Aquash at one point fell under suspicion. Six months prior to her murder, it is alleged, a group of AIM members, under orders from the organization's leadership and led by Leonard Peltier (who stands a symbol for social justice for Indigenous peoples around the world today) interrogated Aquash at gunpoint during a national AIM conference in Farmington, New Mexico. According to Troy Lynn Yellow Wood, one of Aquash's closest friends, "[Annie Mae] said that Leonard had held a gun to her head and had asked her, and told her that everybody was saying she was a snitch."²⁴ While Peltier and AIM's leadership denied this confrontation ever took place, activists close to these leaders,

Cleo Gates," CR. 03-50020 <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/gates.html>> (January 27, 2006); Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud, interview by Abe Alonzo and Robert Ecoffey (Denver: Bureau of Indian Affairs Office, 27 March 2003) <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/arlo.html>>; *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, 2004, "Testimony of John Trudell," CR. 03-50020 <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/trudell.html>> (January 27, 2006); Hendricks, *The Unquiet Grave*, 314-315, 317-319; Maximillian Potter, "Broken Treaties," *5280: Denver's Magazine*, October 2004, 138-139.

²² COINTELPRO was a diluted form of the Operation: Phoenix Program utilized by the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War.

²³ DeMain, phone interview, 29 October 2009.

²⁴ *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, 2004, "Testimony of Troy Lynn Yellow Wood," CR. 03-50020 <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/troytest.html>> (January 27, 2006).

including Kamook (Darlene Nichols, Dennis Bank's ex-wife), John Trudell (AIM's national spokesman), and Martina White Bear (Aquash's confidant) insist that this encounter took place in June 1975.²⁵

By late 1975, AIM had grown increasingly unstable and began to more closely resemble a paramilitary-oriented movement than a civil rights organization – again, largely fuelled by FBI snitch-jacketing and fear of government infiltration. Indeed, immediately prior to Aquash's death, the leadership's suspicion was exacerbated when Native rights activists Douglas Durham, Darryl Blue Lake, and Bernie Morning Gun confessed to infiltrating AIM as FBI operatives. In this climate of mistrust, and with her insider knowledge of AIM's activities, Aquash ultimately became a target of the leadership's paranoia. FBI special agents William Wood, David Price, and Norman Zigrossi (all of whom spearheaded the federal offensive against AIM) all denied that the Bureau had ever employed Aquash as a mole. Nevertheless, contemporary investigators argue that the AIM leadership was convinced of Aquash's role as an informant and that their suspicion and paranoia ultimately led to her assassination.²⁶

²⁵*United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, 2004, "Testimony of Darlene Nichols [Kamook]," CR. 03-50020 <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/kmtest1.html>> (January 27, 2004); *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, "Testimony of John Trudell," <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/trudell.html>> (January 27, 2004).

²⁶*United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, "Testimony of Cleo Gates," <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/gates.html>> ; *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, "Opening Statement of Jim McMahon," <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/openingstatement.html>> ; *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, 2004, "Testimony of Don Dealing," CR. 03-50020 <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/deal.html>> (January 27, 2004); *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, 2004, "Testimony of William Wood," CR. 03-50020 <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/wood.html>> (January 27, 2004); *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, 2004, "Testimony of Candy Hamilton," CR. 03-50020 <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/candy.html>> (January 27, 2004); *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, 2004, "Testimony of David Price," CR. 03-50020 <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/price.html>> (January 27, 2004); S.A. Joe Trimbach, "Anna Mae Awaits Justice," *News from Indian Country*, 30 June 2007; Stern, *Loud Hawk*, 95; Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 194; Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 269; Hendricks, *The Unquiet Grave*, 360-361; Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, 125, 252; Brand, *The Life*

Yet to conclude that FBI “snitch-jacketing” and AIM paranoia resulted in Annie Mae Aquash’s murder only tells part of the story. Investigations by reporters and government officials alike have unearthed mounting evidence for the complex motivations held by the AIM leaders that could explain their reasons for wanting Aquash dead. One of those alleged motivations stemmed from the Jumping Bull shootout of 26 June 1975, which resulted in the deaths of two FBI agents and one AIM member, as well as the imprisonment of Leonard Peltier. While Peltier and the AIM leadership maintain his innocence to this day, investigative reporters and former AIM activists argue that Aquash’s slaying was an AIM cover-up to protect Peltier. According to these accounts, the AIM leadership feared that Aquash was an FBI informant who could implicate Peltier in the deaths of the two FBI agents. Details emerged at Arlo Looking Cloud’s trial in 2004 that support this version of events. In her testimony, Kamook, Dennis Bank’s ex-wife, confirmed that Peltier had bragged to her and Aquash about shooting the FBI agents, one of whom “was begging for his life, but [Peltier] shot him anyway.”²⁷

Besides Peltier’s role in the death of two FBI agents, Aquash was privy to several other pieces of dangerous information about AIM. As Peltier admitted to his biographer, “[Annie Mae] was involved in a lot of stuff, and she could have done a *lot* of damage if she was an informer.”²⁸ Investigators argue, for example, that Aquash had knowledge of AIM members’ involvement in drug and gun trafficking with other civil rights organizations (the Chicano movement’s Crusade for Justice, for one) and the Communist Party USA, which suggests an alternative motivation for eliminating Aquash as an AIM threat. On several occasions (documented by the FBI and

and Death of Anna Mae Aquash, 109; Eastland, *Report of the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and other Internal Security Laws*, 5, 7.

²⁷ Trimbach, “Anna Mae Awaits Justice”; *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, “Testimony of Darlene Nichols,” http://www.jfamr.org/doc/km_test1.html; “Silenced,” *CBC News Fifth Estate*; Weller, “AIM Members Point Fingers at Each Other in Aquash Murder”; Hendricks, *The Unquiet Grave*, 305; Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, 146; Frosch, “The Price of Freedom.”

²⁸ Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, 141, 221-223.

California AIM activists), money raised by AIM, supposedly for Indigenous aid programs in Los Angeles, was actually used to buy "arms to strike back at the government," a covert action of which Aquash had knowledge. In a federal probe of the suspected ties between AIM and domestic communist organizations in 1976, a Congressional subcommittee identified avowed Communists (and convicted "gun-runners") George C. Roberts and Beverly Axelrod as the intermediaries for AIM's illicit activities, both of whom Aquash worked for in Los Angeles.²⁹ In addition, several AIM members testified at Arlo Looking Cloud's 2004 trial to the intimate relationship between the Crusade for Justice and AIM in funneling weapons and drugs into the United States for AIM's use, which included offering advice for "what they do to informants...[T]hey do away with them."³⁰

Indeed, the evidence of AIM's motivation to "do away with" Aquash grows as more information is uncovered. Paul DeMain, Carson Walker, Barbara Deming, Richard Two-Elk, Steve Hendricks, and (only recently) federal law enforcement officials suspect the alleged murders of Ray Robinson, an African American civil rights activist present at the Wounded Knee occupation in 1973, and AIM advocates Johnny Moore and Jeanette Bisonnette by members of AIM during the "Reign of Terror," also suggest motivations for killing Aquash.³¹ As the above reporters contend, the "investigation into [Aquash's] death has revealed the murders of...[potentially] a dozen people at the hands of the American Indian Movement," which "has been successfully repressed all these years."³² Finally, one last piece of

²⁹ Eastland, *Report of the Subcommittee...Revolutionary Activities within the United States by the American Indian Movement*, 18, 34-36.

³⁰ *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, 2004, "Testimony of Angie Janis," CR. 03-50020 <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/janis.html>> (January 27, 2004); *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, "Testimony of Troy Lynn Yellow Wood," <<http://www.jfamr.org/doc/troytest.html>>.

³¹ Carson Walker, "Slain Activist had Roots in Civil Rights Movement," *Associated Press*, 16 January 2004; Domin, *Accounting for Native American Deaths*, May 2000. For further information regarding the life, activism, and murder of Ray Robinson, look to Barbara Deming's *Prisons That Could Not Hold* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

³² DeMain, phone interview, 29 October 2009; Richard Two Elk, interview by Minnie Two Shoes and Paul DeMain, *Native American Journalists Association National Conference*, Fort Lauderdale, FL, 16 June 2000; Hendricks, *The Unquiet Grave*, 111, 221-223, 290, 340-342.

(speculative) evidence points to a motive for Aquash's murder: former AIM activists report that internal jealousies between the AIM leadership over Aquash's role in the organization, as well as her reported romantic involvement with Dennis Banks, contributed to her designation as a potential threat.³³

These insights into Aquash's murder have fostered contentious battles between AIM leaders that continue today.³⁴ In 1999, under mounting pressure from federal and civilian investigations into Aquash's murder, Russell Means publicly accused fellow AIM leaders Vernon and Clyde Bellecourt of engineering Aquash's death.³⁵ While the Bellecourts vehemently denied these charges, the AIM Grand Governing Council severed all ties with the Bellecourts' Minneapolis AIM chapter after an internal tribunal uncovered evidence of illegal drug operations. In response to their exile and Means's charges, Vernon and Clyde Bellecourt established the National American Indian Movement and retaliated with their own allegations that Means (who formed an opposing organization, the International Confederation of Autonomous AIM chapters, based in Denver, Colorado) had issued the orders to eliminate Aquash. In the midst of these leadership crises, Dennis Banks, another AIM founding member, though seemingly remaining separate from the controversy, has nonetheless also had accusations leveled at him. According to AIM spokesman John Trudell, who testified at Arlo Looking Cloud's trial in 2004, Banks confided to him on 25 February 1976 that a body discovered near the Pine Ridge reservation only days previous belonged to Aquash, even though the FBI failed to discover, let alone release, the deceased's identity until two weeks

³³ Denise Pictou-Maloney, "Interview with Denise Pictou-Maloney on the Death of her Mother, Annie Mae Aquash," interview by Paul DeMain, *News from Indian Country*, 24 November 2004; Brand, *The Life and Death of Anna Mae Aquash*, 139.

³⁴ *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, "Testimony of Darlene Nichols," <http://www.jfamr.org/doc/km_test1.html>; Hendricks, *The Unquiet Grave*, 361; Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, 252; "Silenced," *CBC News Fifth Estate*; Leonard Peltier, "Anna Mae Pictou Aquash," in *We, the People Volume II*, ed. Chapman.

³⁵ Branscombe, Means, Two Shoes, and DeMain, "Native America Calling"; Weller, "AIM Members Point Fingers at Each Other in Aquash Murder"; Lame Woman, "New Accusations in the Murder of Annie Mae Aquash."

later.³⁶

While the AIM leadership continues its divisive feuds, the organization's membership base, and indeed the broader activist movement for Indigenous rights, suffers. Ongoing battles about the truth of Annie Mae Aquash's death serve as a catalyst for the power struggles that have trickled down into the larger North American Indigenous community.³⁸ Many remain convinced that the FBI should be held primarily responsible for Aquash's murder; others continue to point the finger at AIM leaders Looking Cloud, Graham and Clark, insisting that they killed Aquash because she represented a threat to AIM's goals.³⁹

Yet many more Indigenous peoples are left questioning the truth of what happened, and wonder whether or not Aquash's killing will ever be fully resolved. As a result, as Indigenous communities throughout North America watch former AIM leaders and members devolve into pointing fingers and leveling accusations at each other, some contemplate the integrity and inheritance of their activist past. Contemporary commentators

³⁶ *United States of America vs. Fritz Arlo Looking Cloud*, "Testimony of John Trudell," <<http://www.ifamr.org/doc/trudell.html>>. This controversial conversation between Trudell and Banks also appears in FBI records released under the Freedom of Information Act, in court transcripts from a 1976 trial of AIM members Dino Butler and Robert Robideau in Cedar Rapids, South Dakota, as well as Banks's autobiography (in which he disputes Trudell's relation and explains, "[i]t was during a meeting in Los Angeles, California [on 25 February 1976], that John Trudell came over to me and said, 'Annie Mae's body has been found'"). This contestation between John Trudell and Dennis Banks is also evident in the transcripts of the 1976 court case, *State of South Dakota vs. Robert Robideau and Dino Butler*, and the autobiography of Dennis Banks, *Ojibwa Warrior* (pg. 352).

³⁸ Many native peoples (especially former AIM supporters) remain convinced that the FBI, in collaboration with Dick Wilson and his vigilante GOON enforcers, murdered Aquash to encourage a culture of fear and suspicion of government infiltration in AIM in order to suppress its increasing militancy. These "AIM supporters" allege Looking Cloud, Graham, and Clark acted on their own initiative (yet at the instigation of the FBI's COINTELPRO and "snitch-jacketing" programs) to remove Aquash, who was a potential threat to AIM's work.

³⁹ While the truth seems elusive, Paul DeMain remains optimistic in the wake of several federal indictments against AIM militants for their roles in Aquash's execution (most recently Richard "Dick" Marshall) and hopes these trials in the near future "will go right to the top [leadership] of AIM." DeMain, phone interview, 29 October 2009.

have urged Indigenous peoples to move beyond these deep rifts and to work towards a more productive and positive activist movement. As Tim Lane Woman writes, “[y]ou [Native Americans] are the American Indian Movement; AIM does not belong to a handful of discredited leaders [and] murderers.”⁴⁰ There is a growing call within Indigenous communities to transform the legacy of Annie Mae Aquash; to move away from the bitter feuds that rage about her murder, and to remember, embrace, and promote her grassroots activism.

Aquash is best remembered, activists insist today, by her efforts towards “cultural revival, language revitalization, community outreach, and self-determination.”⁴² Before her death, Aquash had been involved in organizing Indigenous youth schools and outreach programs, anti-alcohol and anti-drug campaigns, had worked to combat native poverty with clothing, food, and employment fundraisers, petitioned federal agencies for housing aid, established legal and self-defense classes for battered women, and promoted cultural and religious revitalization on reservations in Canada, the American mid-west, and California. Aquash’s fellow AIM activists (JoAnn Tall, Minnie Two Shoes, Tim Lane Woman, Kenny Loud Hawk, Mary Crow Dog, Martina White Bear, John Trudell) today urge Indigenous peoples to remember and act upon Aquash’s selflessness and dedication to AIM’s grassroots objectives, undertakings that were seemingly abandoned following the standoff with the federal government at Wounded Knee in 1973.

There are indications that Annie Mae Aquash’s commitment to grassroots change can and will replace the divisive bitterness that has threatened to define the legacy of her life and death. Evidence of this is seen in portrayals of Annie Mae Aquash in popular culture, which characterize her as a martyr for Indigenous women’s rights and as a symbol for the pursuit of justice for Native peoples in North America. Since her death in 1976, commemorations in non-fiction print (Johanna Brand’s *The Life and Death of Annie Mae*), Hollywood cinema (*Thunderheart*), and popular media (poetry and song by Buffy St.

⁴⁰ Lane Woman, “Who Profits from the Murder of Annie Mae Aquash?”

⁴² Serle Chapman, “An Open Letter to News from Indian Country: It’s Murderers who make Headlines and Devastate Families,” *News from Indian Country*, 1 February 2001.

Marie) illustrate some of her contributions to Indigenous welfare. Combined with the growing voices of Native rights activists, these representations of Aquash offer an alternative way of remembering her place within Indigenous activist history. Her grassroots efforts to offer self-empowerment to Native communities best encapsulates Annie Mae Aquash's legacy for future generations of Indigenous peoples, a legacy that can and is increasingly being replicated throughout North America and around the globe today.