From Qallunaat to James Bay

An Interview with Mini Aodla Freeman, Keavy Martin, Julie Rak, and Norma Dunning

In this interview, we (three graduate students and one lecturer at the University of Alberta) discuss the republication of Mini Aodla Freeman's memoir *Life Among the Oallunaat* with the author and the editors of the recently revised edition. Addla Freeman is a poet, playwright, and short story and nonfiction writer who has worked as a cultural advisor, broadcaster, producer, and editor. Born in 1937 on Cape Hope Island in James Bay, Nunavik (Inuit territory in northern Québec), Aodla Freeman grew up on the land, raised by her father and grandparents. She began training as a nurse at Ste. Therese School in Fort George, Québec, at the age of sixteen. 1 It was at Ste. Therese that Aodla Freeman contracted tuberculosis and was subsequently sent to a sanatorium in Hamilton, Ontario. During the three years that she spent in this sanatorium, Aodla Freeman worked as a nurse and translator for patients and staff, which led to a job with the federal government. At the age of twenty, she moved to Ottawa, where she was immersed in the unfamiliar world of "the South." In the context of the memoir, "the South" is a geographic location below the treeline, where non-Inuit modes of perception and action create unfamiliar codes and rules of decorum. Aodla Freeman continues to live in the South and is now a prominent elder in the Edmonton Inuit community.

The four interviewers joined Aodla Freeman and the editors of the new critical edition on June 9, 2015 to discuss the 2015 republication of *Life Among the Qallunaat*. The interview was initiated by the International Auto/Biography Association Students and New Scholars network (IABA SNS) as part of their *Public Dialogues* interview series, which shares conversations between scholars, artists, pedagogues, and writers. *Public Dialogues* explores cutting-edge

approaches to research of life narratives, alongside the ethical and political questions that surround them. In the spirit of collaborative research in the Humanities, "From Qallunaat to James Bay" brings together the author and editorial team for a conversation with four researchers from diverse fields: Katherine Meloche studies contemporary Indigenous genre fiction in Canada; Brandon Kerfoot engages with Inuit literature and animal studies; Rebecca Fredrickson focuses on the land and literature of the North; and Orly Lael Netzer studies life narratives. In the interview, we unpack the disparate priorities that go into writing, editing, and researching a text as we discuss the personal and material relationships that shape our various investments in *Life Among the Qallunaat*.

Aodla Freeman first published Life Among the Qallunaat with Hurtig Publishers in 1978. The memoir interlaces vignettes about her childhood in James Bay with her adult life in Hamilton and Ottawa. The 1978 edition excluded many stories about James Bay from the original manuscript while introducing an organizational frame that divided the text into three sections: "Ottawamillunga: In Ottawa," "Inullivunga: Born to Inuk Ways," and "Oallunanillunga: Among the Oallunaat." Perhaps the most significant revision made by Hurtig was the title, Life Among the Qallunaat. Though Aodla Freeman originally proposed a title that focused on James Bay, Mel Hurtig insisted on the title *Life Among the Qallunaat* as a response to Bernhard Adolph Hantzsch's ethnography My Life Among the Eskimos ("One Day" xiv-xv). Qallunaat is often translated as the Inuktitut word for "white people," though Aodla Freeman clarifies that the term does not refer to race but to behaviour and perspective: "the word implies humans who pamper or fuss with nature, of materialistic habit. Avaricious people" (Life Among the Oallunaat 2015, 86). The 1978 edition ultimately emphasized Aodla Freeman's experiences with gallunaat at the expense of her stories of home.

This editorial reframing of the memoir is but one example of the regulatory practices that have been imposed on the 1978 edition of *Life Among the Qallunaat*. The book's reception was hindered when the federal government concealed over half of the original print run in the basement of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development ("One Day" xvi). Aodla Freeman speculates that the government erroneously feared she had written explicitly about the residential school system (xvi). With so many copies removed from circulation, *Life Among the Qallunaat* fell into relative obscurity.²

The 2015 edition was republished as part of the University of Manitoba Press' *First Voices, First Texts* series. This series republishes Indigenous

literature that has fallen out of wide circulation, and it resituates editorial practices within the protocols of the communities involved. The editorial team, which works out of the University of Alberta, consisted of settler scholar Julie Rak, who researches life writing, Canadian literature, and book history; Keavy Martin, a settler scholar of Inuit literatures and reconciliation; and Norma Dunning, an urban Inuit writer and PhD candidate in Educational Policy Studies. They learned that Aodla Freeman still possessed the original typescript, which allowed them to compare it with the 1978 edition and to revisit the episodes that were removed or changed significantly. Their restoration illustrates the changing priorities of editorial work, particularly with regard to texts by Indigenous authors. While the 1978 editing process emphasized concision and appealing to a primarily non-Inuit readership ("One Day" xiv), the 2015 editorial process prioritized Aodla Freeman's voice and her original focus on James Bay.

The interviewers met with Aodla Freeman and the editorial team to talk about the release of the 2015 edition. What set out to be a scholarly interview became an afternoon of laughter and storytelling in the Edmonton home of our generous host, Julie Rak. We discussed the conditions of visibility and the relationships that brought the 2015 edition into being. This conversation highlights the importance of understanding texts within their evolving material, cultural, and political contexts, as well as the ethical imperative to maintain accountability between author, editors, and the book that brings them together.

Rebecca: We're really interested in the idea of memory. Is there anything in the first edition that you remember differently and told differently in this book?

Mini: Not really, because when I first wrote it, I wrote it right out of memory and the way we used to travel and live in Cape Hope and trade in Old Factory or East Maine or Moose Factory. Those are true places. We used to trade. And the ones that were added on, it has just made the continuation of what I thought about the South and what I thought about how I grew up, and comparing them both.

Keavy: There's a passage about when you were studying to become a nurse and your teachers were always annoyed that you never wrote anything down, because you always had that ability just to remember.

Mini: Yes, I started in Fort George under a doctor named—I can't remember her name—she's a nun doctor. She was testing me in every way. How was I going to cope with that mentally ill man [one of three patients]? She would get me

to bring his tray for breakfast, lunch, or supper. But the first time she did that, she came with me and watched how he reacted. He didn't do anything because he saw her, and then she got me to go by myself with nothing, with no uniform on. And he started going like this [Mini demonstrates a forward motion with her torso] at me and I didn't like that. So I just put this tray down and closed the door real fast [laughter]. I told the nun and she said, "Okay, we'll see about that." She put me in a uniform and he didn't do that anymore. I thought it was strange that he would respect the uniform at that time. So, when I started at Fort George, while working there I got TB [tuberculosis]. At least that's what they told me, but I didn't feel sick. The whole school got sick, even the nuns and priests, except me. And they put me in another room, so I wouldn't catch whatever was going around. The following summer, I was the only one who got sick and they brought me to Moose Factory, and they did absolutely nothing except take x-rays and take your cough, take your sputum. Finally, when there were eleven Inuit going to Hamilton, I was put in, and here I was to be a translator for them. I never stayed in bed for those three years in which I was supposed to be sick. I went from one building to another, from one doctor to another, to translate for them. I got to the point of thinking, "Oh, I'm not sick. They're pretending I'm sick." I got to that point. Three years later they came to me, they said, "You can continue nursing here and we will guide you here, but you also have to translate when we need someone." So I did that and I moved into the nursing station—nursing home—where the nurses live [laughter]. I staved there, translated, and took nursing, and worked everywhere: in the children's pavilion, adults, men, and women. And suddenly the truck of the hospital would come: "Oh Mini! You're needed to be translator," and off I would go. That's how it went in Hamilton. Finally, my aunt (who was from Cape Hope) was my roommate. She went home. Not long after, I got a letter from my father saying, "You have to come home. You have responsibilities to come home." That's when I told the head nurse that I had to go home. She said to me, "You can leave some of your things here and we'll put them in storage and you know it will be here when you get back." I never got back, and I don't know what happened to my stuff.

Keavy: I brought something to show you guys, if you want to see it [places box on table]. There was a point in our proceedings where we were asking Mini if she had her original typescript and she did. She had it in the original box. We were so excited when that original version was made available. This is a photocopy, if you want to look at it.

Mini: I kept that everywhere. I kept that original everywhere we went, everywhere we moved.

Keavy: Thank goodness you kept it!

Mini: Yes, and do you know [laughs]; I have to say this; I have to confess [laughter]. When Keavy phoned me and said to me that she would like to talk about my book, I didn't believe what I was hearing. I said to myself, "We'll see. We'll see what she says." And I still didn't believe it right up until you guys sent it to the publishers. Finally, when she brought six of them into my place, I got excited [laughter].

Keavy: That was a two-year period. It was a long time.

Julie: And you didn't tell us anything about that.

Keavy: This new version is not so much an "updated" version as it is a "restored" version, I would say, because that was a lot of our work, going through [the original manuscript] and comparing it to the 1978 version, and seeing these large sections that had been cut or had been drastically changed. Our work was really just to try to restore those in the best way that we could.

Katherine: Since you got to read the original manuscript, were there episodes that you were surprised were excluded? In the afterword you said you learned so much from those episodes. Could you elaborate?

Julie: The one I always tell—and Mini, I just went to a conference and I talked about your book there.³ I told one of those stories and I couldn't believe it was gone [from the 1978 edition]. It was the one where you say you went to a movie and you were never so scared in your whole life. It was the worst! You had nightmares for weeks! The movie was called *Oklahoma!* [laughter]

Mini: The thing was, my cousin put me right in the front and everything seems to come at you [laughs]. But I'd never seen fighting before at that time.

Julie: This was one thing that was strange. But there were other things. There were a lot of stories about Nunaaluk [Cape Hope] that were gone. And they were important things. There was a very good story about Weetaltuk and how he was a leader. It's connected to another place where Mini has to—she doesn't know it—but she's supposed to help sell Canadian bonds. These two stories go together. In the first version, one of these stories about Weetaltuk was taken out and the other story [about *Oklahoma!*] was moved, so it didn't mean the same thing. There were a lot of times when that happened, where you had part of the story and you didn't have all of it. Once you could see how Mini was thinking it made so much sense.

Mini: By the way, the next book I would like to write is about Weetaltuk and

the other one is about the murders that happened in Sanikiluaq in 1942. But I have to ask permission from the community on that, because it may be very sensitive to that community, because a lot of people were related to those people. The reason why I'm interested in it is the difference between religions: Qallunaat religion and Inuit religion. At that time they were so mixed up. When I was four years old in school, one of the supervisors took me out of the girls' room and brought me to the hospital. I thought I was sick and she was holding my hand. We went down to the basement and there was this woman behind bars. She said something in Inuktitut. She said, "Inupiuvit?" And I would hide behind the supervisor. You know what she said, "You little Inuit. You little Eskimo." That's Akeenik. Her name is Akeenik. She was involved in that killing, and the reason why that got me really fascinated about her: her hand was *all* bandaged up from that killing.⁴

Julie: No wonder you want to work on that.

Mini: Yes, I do, would like to, but as I said, I'm going to have to get permission from the community. Because a lot of it has been written here and there, and there's no real story on Inuit religion. Because that's when the first missionaries went there. They have understood some, but they didn't get it all together what religion was at that time, and that's what I'd like to write about.

Norma: What I really appreciate about what Mini did is her opening where she talked about, "I'm glad that I grew up around Indians." And to me, that was a very important point to bring forward and address immediately. That's something that I really appreciate in your book, Mini.

Keavy: For me, it was the Inuktitut terminology. A lot of that was cut out. As an interpreter, I think you're always thinking about language. When you're writing in English and you're thinking about Inuktitut, and you're working between those two languages, you see a lot of that discussion here. There are passages in the original where you [Mini] explain some of the different terminology, the way that you would say something in Inuktitut. I think, when they published this in the Seventies, they probably thought, "Well, no one's going to read that," or, "No one will be able to follow that." But, this is a very different time.

Brandon: I'd like to ask about this new edition. One of the things that changes is that it's now a scholarly edition. It's published through a university press and it contains a couple of things like the works cited and some contextual information that's standard in scholarly texts. What kinds of opportunities or

obstacles come from this being a scholarly oriented book that might be taught in classrooms?

Mini: I didn't believe at the beginning that it is being published [laughter]. So, as I said, I'm excited now and I'm happy about it because for one thing, there's no more Cape Hope. All the Inuit from there were moved by government to Great River in 1960. About five years ago, they gave that land to Cree Indians of James Bay, and the James Bay Cree have turned it into tourism. That's the meeting I'm going to in July. Because I was there two years ago to start them off, and they want me to come back and have a meeting with them in East Main, which is not far from Cape Hope. And today, as I say, I'm happy as it turned out. That answers your question, I hope?

Keavy: What about our essay? What did you think about our essay?

Julie: Mini, did you read our essay that the three of us wrote at the end?

Mini: Which one?

Julie: The one at the end.

Mini: Yes, I did.

Julie: What do you think of it?

Mini: I think you just went through what you read, and wrote it and printed it out. It's something that has to go with the book, that's what I thought.

Julie: When we were making [the essay], Mini said to us, "Oh, that's too long," and we said, "We'll put it at the back where no one will read it," and she said, "That's okay" [laughter]. [The University of Manitoba Press] asked us to write a context introduction, but we did not want to do that. In the beginning, we wanted to interview Mini. That was our idea, so that Mini could tell her own story the way she wanted to tell it. That's part of the critical apparatus of the book. It's not just the essay at the back; it's what you have to say about how you did it.

Katherine: Could you elaborate on some of the challenges that you came across that surprised you about trying to make your jobs as editors transparent and visible? Julie: One of the things that was really shocking to me was that from the first line, the editor had done all sorts of things to the manuscript that were beyond just making sure that there was subject-verb agreement or something like that, some kind of grammar thing. There was material that got added that Mini never wrote. Whole sentences. The stories had been pulled apart and made into three sections. We couldn't understand why—keep in mind that none of us had any idea that this had happened. We had to do sentence-by-sentence comparison and think through every single

one of them. That was something I was not expecting that we would have to do. Mini had said sections were cut out, but when I started to read, I realized how much was cut and that things had been added as well. We did not want to just reprint the text. We didn't always agree, but we talked a lot with Mini about how the text should look. Some of the things we do are like what any editor does—there are compromises. We wanted to make it visible because, as Keavy says, this isn't the last word on this. Mini has the last word. Whatever she wants, right? But also other readers will come and have other ideas. Fifty years from now there might be a different way to do this, or you'll have Inuit editors who are from a different context. Something will happen that will be different.

Norma: I will say the only thing that ever mattered to me is that Mini's book came back for the next generations. Mini has devoted her life to serving Inuit people. That's been her entire life. To know that future generations would get to read her words and experience her life was what mattered most in all of it. That was my only focus, to have it come out so she could see it and enjoy it.

Keavy: Something that I think about a lot is my position vis-à-vis the work that I'm doing. But as I said, I'm trying to work in a way that prioritizes relationships. One question you get asked sometimes in Indigenous studies is, "Who is your work responsible to?" And sometimes you don't have a clear sense of who that is, but in doing this work, in spending those two years trying to get this book to publication, it was always clear who we were responsible to: it was Mini. I always wanted to make sure that Mini was happy with the version, which was why I kept showing up with new versions, and she'd say, "Oh dear" [laughter]. So it was a long process that way. But again, we had a clear idea in mind that this is a real, live person who happens to live not too far away, who's a phone call away, who's in the same city—that just seems to be fate. I think all of us just wanted to make sure that Mini was happy with it, and that was our motivation.

Mini: I am happy with it. As I said, I've read it; I'm still reading it [laughter]. I have a copy on my coffee table. Every now and then I pick it up and start reading again and put my bookmark and continue again. And the reason why I'm happy about it is it's finally in full as Keavy said and Julie. It's like they said: you read this and then suddenly there's something else. It's finally in full, the way I meant it to come out in the first place.

Keavy: And that, to me, is a successful edit: if the author reads it through and recognizes their voice and feels that ownership over it. But anyway, time will tell.

Julie: Sometimes in literary studies, people forget that there's a publisher and an editor, and I have done a lot of work on that in other contexts. It made me very attentive to that, and I think that was a good thing because I really want to see other people work on that. I wonder what happened with the Seventies' edits for other books. I wonder if other books got stored in that basement [of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development]. That's a story I would like to know about.

Brandon: What made you choose this particular piece for the new edition's cover art [Elisapee Ishulutaq's "Downtown Vancouver"]?

Mini: That's a very nice cover, and I think it goes well with what I saw in the South for the first time.

Keavy: I believe [Professor Christopher Trott from the University of Manitoba] was consulted on the cover image, and he was the one who said that it would be a good possibility. As someone who has met Elisapee Ishulutaq and also has been camping with the family, I was happy to have that image there as well. It's really beautiful.

Rebecca: Mini, speaking of the cover, could you tell me a little bit about how your name changed spelling? "Mini." "Minnie." The two spellings of "Mini."

Mini: It should have been spelled M-i-n-i, right at the beginning.

Rebecca: So, why was it spelled n-n-i-e?

Mini: Mini means in my language "gentle rain."

Rebecca: Miniuq?

Mini: Yes and that's the way we spell things in our orthography. M-i-n-n-i-e meant nothing to me, even though that's how Mini is spelled in other languages. I know that part, but Mini, as I said, is spelled properly in our orthography. It hasn't been legally corrected, but to me it's M-i-n-i.

Keavy: So when did it first get spelled the old way, M-i-n-n-i-e?

Mini: Right from my birth.

Keavy: OK, so some qallunaat wrote it that way.

Mini: My birth certificate is spelled like that. My marriage certificate is spelled like that. Everything is spelled like that.

Keavy: And in the film *Nunaaluk*, made by Louise Abbott, that's where you were credited with the proper spelling. When I was talking to Louise about this book that was the one thing that she said to me: "Make sure you spell her name properly." That was when we kind of clued in.

Julie: That's because there was no way to know from the first book, and you had not told us. Then we knew that and it was very important.

- Katherine: In the episode "Language Was Pulling," you described your trip to Québec City and you wrote that you felt very isolated because everyone was speaking French and you felt like there was a cellophane shield all around you. You then heard English speakers and you were physically drawn to them.
- Mini: Yes, it's like suddenly being put here with a totally different language. Even though you heard it here and there in Ottawa, when I went to Québec at that time, just hearing French, French, French, and walking on the street, I'm hearing French, French, French. Usually, in Ottawa, I'm hearing the other way—all English. It's just so sudden, it seems. Even though I understood French at that time. We had to learn French in school, in residential schools, because most of the nuns didn't speak English at that time, so they spoke to us in French.
- Katherine: I liked your description about how language can have a physical effect for you. I was curious about the inclusion of more Inuktitut words and meanings. Does it change your relationship with the text?
- Mini: I think it all depends on what you grow up with. I grew up with four languages [Inuktitut, Cree, English, French]. My father, when I was about seven or eight years old, used to push me to go play with Cree kids so I could learn their language. We learn at a very early age how to speak Cree, and by the time you're an adult you speak like a Cree. That's how I was. Today, I've been living here for 38 years. That's how long ago I've heard Cree. I've heard them here and there, the different ways of saying things.
- Julie: One thing I think is really good is that in the book Mini will tell you a word and then she'll tell you what it means. But she said, when she edited, she wanted a dash after, an em-dash.
- Mini: Yes, because sometimes I couldn't say, I couldn't remember a word, how to say it in English, so I would put the Inuktitut word, or to emphasize more of my language [laughter].
- Julie: But we originally had the Inuktitut words in italics, and we took them out at one point because Keavy read something—it was a poem.
- Keavy: Alice Te Punga Somerville writes about the way that Indigenous languages should not be italicized in academic writing, and she does the same in her poetry.⁵ That has been a convention in the past, as I'm sure you've seen, because it's the way that we try to mark "foreign" words, but what's the foreign language here? I remember saying to Mini, "Is it okay if we take out the italics of the Inuktitut?" And she went, "I already told you that!" [laughter]. It was like, take it out!

- Orly: You were all mentioning that new readers will come to this. What would you like new readers to take from this? Because, Mini, it also sounds like when you're coming to the new edition, it's like a new book for you too sometimes.
- Mini: I think at a different age I see it differently than the way I saw it about ten years ago. So for that reason, maybe next year it will be different to me, and I'll say to myself, "My god that silly book!" [laughter]. Not just my book, I read a lot of books and each time it's different to me.
- Julie: I read this book when I was a very young person. I have had many things happen that have changed my life since then, but I remember at the time trying to understand a world I didn't understand. I think I only saw a part of the world she was trying to tell us about, and I feel like now you can see it. Especially how interconnected things are, that the North and the South are not separate. That's a really important thing for me. Right in the middle of the book, in the physical center, she talks about it. To me it's brilliant. I can't see what new readers will see. I know how much more I have to learn as I go on my own journey. And I will read, and I'll think, "Oh I see something else" [Mini laughs]. So that's a good book, right? When you can do that. That's probably the best thing about working with this, besides just working with Mini and with the other editors, because that's just been a gift that I didn't ever expect.
- Norma: I think what I would hope readers to take away is the spirit of love that Mini wrote with, and the spirit of adventure that her life has always been. That's what I would hope people take away is to not be afraid of things that are new or different and to always go out and see the world. That's what Mini advises young people all the time.
- Keavy: I've read the book so many times, and I've said so many things, and I probably will say more, but now it is the turn of the readers. It's your turn. I want to know what you think! I want to know what all the people out there think. I can't wait to see what people are taking from the book, so please tell us. Write your articles. Go. Get blogging!

NOTES

- 1 Fort George, now known as Chisasibi, is located in northern Québec in eastern James Bay. Aodla Freeman attended residential school in Fort George as a child.
- 2 Despite limited material circulation, academic engagement with the 1978 edition charts its movement across scholarly fields, gravitating to the relationship between anti-colonialism and Aodla Freeman's autobiographical persona. In *Canada and the Idea of North*, Sherrill E. Grace argues that Aodla Freeman reverses the ethnographic gaze on southern Euro-Canadians

to criticize their reduction of Inuit to caricatures (241-42). Shifting focus from gaze to voice, Heather Henderson writes in "North and South: Autobiography and the Problem of Translation" that Aodla Freeman develops an autobiographical voice that articulates a subject position not possible through translation work (62). In "Covering their Familiar Ways with Another Culture': Minnie [sic] Aodla Freeman's *Life Among the Qallunaat* and the Ethics of Subjectivity," Bina Toledo Freiwald adds that Aodla Freeman imagines alternatives to a colonial regime as she moves between individual and collective identity and between a preservation of Inuit culture and a critique of colonial domination (275, 285). Keavy Martin expands on this engagement in *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature*, arguing that the memoir contributes to Inuit notions of aesthetics and literary criticism (114).

- 3 Julie Rak presented "Inuit Vibrant Matter: Mini Aodla Freeman's *Life Among the Qallunaat* and Machine Ecology" at *Encounters Across the Americas: Archives, Technologies, Methods*, the inaugural Biennial Conference of IABA-Americas Chapter at the University of Michigan on June 4-7, 2015.
- 4 Aodla Freeman is referring to the murders that occurred in Sanikiluaq (the Belcher Islands) in the winter of 1941. Jane George summarizes the events in "Kuujjuaq teacher publishes Inuktitut book," a review of Ida Watt's Inuktitut-language book, the title of which translates to "Brought to court in Sanikiluaq for their mistaken beliefs." The incident occurred when two hunters believing they were Jesus Christ and God killed community members whom they accused of disobeying them (George n. pag.). Community members were coerced onto the ice to follow Jesus, and, though they eventually fled, several people died from exposure before reaching home (George n. pag.). Seven people, including Akeenik, were tried for the murders (*Qikiqtani Truth Commission* 16). The government held the trial in Sanikiluaq to assert Canadian law in the region (16). The accused contracted influenza while awaiting trial in Moose Factory and brought it to Sanikiluaq (16).
- 5 In Once Were Pacific: Māori Connections to Oceania, Alice Te Punga Somerville explains, "[t]he convention of italicizing foreign words is tricky in the place of Indigenous languages, and there are various schools of thought around whether Māori should be italicized in this kind of English-language text. Although I recognize the argument that italicizing Māori prevents it from being incorporated into the English language as a set of loanwords rather than retaining its integrity as a quotation from a distinct language, I prefer to follow the convention of leaving the Māori language in roman type as a recognition that, for this writer, and for many readers of the book, Māori is not a foreign (or to use the term of the Chicago Manual of Style, 'unfamiliar') language. In this way, the Māori language is unmarked in the same way as, for example, Latin is unmarked in predominantly English texts' (217-218). Many thanks to Keavy Martin for bringing this passage to our attention.

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