

Book Review

***Life Among the Qallunaat*. By Mini Aodla Freeman. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015. 277 pp. Reviewed by Adriane Epprecht.**

Life Among the Qallunaat, Mini Aodla Freeman's memoir first published in 1978, is a seminal text of Indigenous writing in Canada. *Qallunaat* is an Inuktitut term for southerner or White person. As Freeman explains with her interesting emphasis on the nuances of translation, it means the "people who pamper their eyebrows," who "fuss with nature," or who are "materialistic" (86). On the most basic level, Freeman's memoir writes against dominant voices in literature about the North and Indigenous cultures. In place of the all-knowledgeable White man who imbeds himself in the isolated North to observe the habits of an Inuit community, we have an Inuk woman who turns her critical gaze on the contradictions of White culture in an urban setting. However, although framed as a kind of "reverse ethnography" (Martin, Dunning, and Rak, 262), *Life Among the Qallunaat* is more significant for its detailed descriptions of Inuit life in the James Bay area, and its observations regarding the devastating impacts of government northern policy throughout the twentieth century.

Freeman writes from a period when "everything was in upheaval" (232). During Freeman's lifetime, traditional Inuit economies and ways of life had shifted under the influence of the Hudson's Bay Company and were disrupted by the forced relocation to permanent settlements; the residential school system was impacting the psychological, cultural, and physical health of communities; and health issues like the tuberculosis epidemic, measles, alcoholism, dietary changes, and mental health crises were rampant and often exacerbated by poorly funded, misinformed, and colonial government policy. Freeman captures this highly fraught period with emotional sensitivity and a unique insider/outsider perspective. Her writing is complex, lyrical, and rich with historical detail. This sympathetic, if at times obscure, heroine cautiously and often cheekily reveals her opinions with flashes of self-deprecating Inuk humour that often pokes fun at the reader's assumptions.

This edition's editors, University of Alberta's Keavy Martin, professor of Native Studies; Norma Dunning, graduate student in Indigenous People's Education; and Julie Rak, professor of English and Film Studies, give valuable context to *Life Among the Qallunaat*'s troubled publication history, and in so doing attempt to right many of those failures. The original editor, Mel Hurtig, made a number of heavy-handed incisions and revisions to the original manuscript: he rearranged the narrative to unfold with a linear temporality, he cut out substantial sections that describe Freeman's life in James Bay, he modified syntax, and he even added sentences where he saw fit to alter the author's emphasis. The distribution of the 1978 edition was also rather dubious. Upon its release, the then federal Department of Northern Affairs prevented the book's eastern distribution by keeping over 3,000 copies in storage for close to eight months. Freeman suspects they "had feared that I might tell something [about] the residential school system," and therefore deliberately intervened in its release (xvi). Whatever their reasons, holding the book hostage had an adverse effect on its sales and critical reception (ibid).

This new edition restores the structure and content closer to Freeman's manuscript. Readers can now appreciate and study her impressive rhetorical performance that blends Inuit storytelling traditions like the "*innuusirminik unikkaat* (stories from life experience) or the *unikkaaqtuat* (stories that go on for a long time, or myths)" with Western forms of testimony and memoir (265). Besides its interesting structure, Freeman infuses beautiful imagery with mystical and impressionistic qualities. Distant horizons over flat ice play tricks on perspective, and human bodies and stories grow and shrink in significance against its backdrop. At times opaque, and at other times intensely relatable, Freeman's voice is lively, perceptive, and often humorously tempered by shyness. She writes to preserve her community's cultural memory; she writes against the threat that "[o]ne day, somebody is going to forget" (v).

In the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which released its final report at the close of 2015, this new edition of *Life Among the Qallunaat* comes at an important historical moment in our consideration of the residential school system's legacy. Freeman's memoir is a significant voice within the history of residential school survivor testimony. When compared to contemporary voices like *Up Ghost River* by Edmund Metatawabin, *Life Among the Qallunaat* is not as explicit in detailing systematic brutality. However, this difference may point to an interesting evolution in residential school survivor testimony. Put simply,

the euphemisms and subtleties of *Life Among the Qallunaat* speak loudly to the context of silence in which it was written.

Although this is changing with the ascendance of writers and activists like Leanne Simpson, Eden Robinson, and the women of the Idle No More movement, women's voices still tend to be overshadowed by the male heavy-hitters in Indigenous literature, such as Thomas King or Joseph Boyden. *Life Among the Qallunaat* is a major work of Indigenous feminist literature. It is a fascinating piece of careful criticism that demonstrates how women negotiate power within patriarchal systems. Freeman presents the complexities of gender relations in both the North and the South, with sharp observations about gender-based violence within marriage, venereal disease and its social and physical effects on women in her community, how "old fashioned" (171) approaches negatively shape women's sexual education, and the way gendered work marks women's bodies. She also explores intercultural gendered relationships, dwelling particularly upon the struggles women of different cultures face when trying to communicate with each other.

Life Among the Qallunaat is also key text to those interested in the history of health and health policy in the North. For example, Freeman offers a number of different perspectives on the tuberculosis epidemic: first, as a nurse-in-training caring for the sick; second, as a patient sent to Hamilton, Ontario for treatment; and third, as a translator working in various Inuit hospitals in Northern Ontario, Quebec, and Manitoba. Freeman sheds light on the practice of sending sick Inuit to southern sanatoriums that isolated them from their family (sometimes for years) in crowded, unclean, and frightening conditions. She offers keen insight into the racism and paternalism underpinning northern health policies of her time—many of which continue to inform current government approaches to health crises faced by Indigenous communities.

Cultural hybridity, to Freeman, is not empowering. On the contrary, her Qallunaat education and career ultimately alienate her from two cultures instead of one. Life in Ottawa "southernized" her mind and causes her "Inukism" to disappear (32, 17); this makes her feel "unwanted" and strange when she returns home to the James Bay area (30). But the South is not home either: there she encounters racism, hostility, and ignorance, and is made to feel simultaneously "invisible" and as if "everybody was staring" (259). Against this cultural alienation, Freeman asserts her humanity:

I am a plain human being with feelings, aches, hatred, the desire to cheat, lie, love, adore, understanding, kindness, humanity, pain, joy, happiness, gratitude, and all the other things that every other being was capable of having, doing, thinking and acting. (220)

This rallying cry echoes Frantz Fanon's final prayer in *Black Skin, White Masks*: "O my body, make me a man who always questions" (181). Freeman's stories of overcoming fear and humiliation through curiosity and the drive to learn are captivating and funny. *Life Among the Qallunaat* is a graceful and empowering survival story, the sense of which is captured by her grandmother's philosophy: every day, "Go out, look at the world" (10).

References

- Fanon, Frantz. 2008. [1952] *Black Skins, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press.
- Metatawabin, Edmund. 2014. *Up Ghost River: A Chief's Journey Through the Turbulent Waters of Native History*. Toronto: Knopf Canada.

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