

Freda AHENAKEW and H. C. WOLFART, editors and translators, *Kôhkominawak Otâcimowiniwâma: our Grandmothers' Lives as Told in Their Own Words* (Saskatoon, Fifth House Publishers, 1992, 408 p.)

Régna Darnell

Volume 16, Number 1, 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083313ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083313ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Darnell, R. (1994). Review of [Freda AHENAKEW and H. C. WOLFART, editors and translators, *Kôhkominawak Otâcimowiniwâma: our Grandmothers' Lives as Told in Their Own Words* (Saskatoon, Fifth House Publishers, 1992, 408 p.)]. *Ethnologies*, 16(1), 213–216. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083313ar>

Louisiane, on se demande comment l'apport de la musique peut être considéré comme négligeable dans un lieu où les musiciens d'aujourd'hui se font ambassadeurs de leur culture de par le monde entier. De la même façon, les jugements de Martine Segalen sur la «mort» de la musique traditionnelle, qu'elle voit comme un folklore destiné à des productions publiques et touristiques, nous semblent ne pas correspondre à la situation actuelle. Il faudrait que les universitaires descendent, de temps à autre, de leur tour d'ivoire. Ils se rendraient compte que la culture populaire est encore bien vivante.

Il n'en demeure pas moins que cette collection de communications est une contribution importante aux connaissances sur la culture. Les textes se révèlent d'une «construction» savante et fort pertinente. Les commentaires des présidents du colloque, qui sont inclus, représentent un apport appréciable. Il s'agit d'un ouvrage qui a été bien conçu et dont on peut attendre un fort impact.

Juliette CHAMPAGNE
CÉLAT, Université Laval
Sainte-Foy, Québec

Freda AHENAKEW and H. C. WOLFART, editors and translators, *Kôhkominawak Otâcimowiniwâma: our Grandmothers' Lives as Told in Their Own Words* (Saskatoon, Fifth House Publishers, 1992, 408 p.).

This volume is the latest in a series of Cree texts, presented in Cree (Roman orthography and syllabics) and English, to result from the collaboration of Cree elder and Native Studies professor Freda Ahenakew and Algonquian linguist H. Christoph Wolfart. This collaboration represents one of the most innovative approaches to the intersection of disciplines (linguistics, anthropology, folklore) and audiences (both Native and non-Native) in contemporary Native Studies in Canada.

The commitment of the collaborators' home institution, the University of Manitoba, to the production of such materials for Cree and Ojibwe literary texts has been substantial over the last few years and makes a crucial contribution to the maintenance of these languages in both their spoken and written forms. Transmissions of traditional language speaking competence as a vehicle for the communication of traditional cultural knowledge is problematic even among the Cree, which has the greatest numbers of speakers of any Canadian Native language. Speakers of Plains and Woods Cree in the Prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba previously have had access to limited amounts of

reading material of a non-religious nature in their own language. One of the goals of the series is a conviction that new material will motivate young people to attain and utilize literacy in their traditional language.

Moreover, the content of the series of publications employs traditional Native styles of communication based in an oral tradition of face-to-face local transmission of knowledge from elders passing on what they learned from their own grandparents. Today, lamentably, many young Native people, especially in urban areas, grow up without access to elders, at least of the traditional kind. Written texts (and other innovative forms of communication like radio and television) transcend the boundaries of local communities and extend the potential audience, both Native and non-Native.

The texts collected and translated by Ahenakew and Wolfart explicitly maintain some of the context of their original performance. In *Wâskahikaniwiyiniw-Âcimowina: Stories of the House People* (1987, University of Manitoba Press), Freda Ahenakew recorded a series of ten texts of varied genres from two elders of her own community, who were appropriate teachers for her specifically. Glimpses of personal interaction frame the content of the stories, in which student/listener/linguist and the two old men speak among themselves. All is not solemn and formal. This sort of talk-fest would be virtually inaccessible to anyone without Freda Ahenakew's credentials in the Cree community.

Freda Ahenakew's credentials in the academic community are also impressive. Her 1987 *Cree Language Structures: A Cree Approach* (Winnipeg: Pemmican) claimed implicitly and illustrated pragmatically that a trained linguist working on her/his own language would employ a culturally-sensitive semantic intuition to enrich the description. In the *House People* volume, Ahenakew presented a considerable amount of linguistic apparatus to surround the texts themselves. The introduction focused on the storytellers and their stories — and the situatedness of the linguist in relation to them. Appendices included orthographic conventions, a Cree-English glossary, an inverse stem index and an English index to the glossary, as well as further references.

The stories are presented first in syllabics as continuous reading text. This is followed by a Roman transcription of the Cree on one side of a page and a fairly literal English translation on the other. Linguistically inclined readers can thus work their way through the Cree in detail. Because of this multiple format, Native readers with a range of linguistic competencies, both spoken and written, have access to the texts. This is an ideal formula and is maintained in the *Grandmother* volume (except that the syllabic versions follow the Roman and English ones and linguistic apparatus is limited to a series of notes, both linguistic and ethnological, by H. C. Wolfart).

Seven grandmothers tell their life stories in the present volume, which begins with their pictures (including one of Freda Ahenakew) and a brief biographical introduction to each of them. The women are almost all relatives or

students (very much like relatives in the new systems of relationships set up within universities) of Freda Ahenakew's. Minnie Fraser and Glecia Bear are relatives, Rosa Longneck a long-time acquaintance, Alpha Lafond a former neighbour. Irene Calliou and Mary Wells were her students at Grouard, Alberta; Janet Feitz was a recent acquaintance with an unusual experience as a woman on a trapline (where Freda Ahenakew joined her before presuming to present her story). The women appear to have been chosen explicitly to reflect a range of personality and personal experience; humour, outspokenness, reticent dignity, bare-bones narrative left to the listener to fill in, rhetorical flourishes — all abound.

These women are authors as well as collaborators who have chosen to speak to Freda Ahenakew, and through her to a larger audience. The life stories are told in the words of the seven speakers, with limited comments from Freda Ahenakew or others present (always identified so that the reader will share the context of performance). There is a sense of listening in on a conversation. As is appropriate when Native elders speak, most of the talking is done by the grandmother who is telling about her life. But the listeners occasionally encourage further elaboration, ask for more information, add their own identities to the particular occasion of telling.

All of the women are fluent first-language speakers of Plains or Woods Cree (dialect variations are discussed in the notes). Three of the women (in four segments) talk about life in the bush; they are the last generation to have had such childhood experiences. One of these traditional women contributes two segments of the four on reserve life. Four is the Algonquian ritual number; the word for eight in Cree means twice four.

The final section is entitled "Dialogue". Alpha Lafond and Rosa Longneck recall their life at Muskeg Lake in an extensive conversation, illustrating the style of their interaction (which includes, of course, Freda Ahenakew, who cannot always opt out of comment on issues about which she is well informed) as well as their individual life experiences.

These are incredibly rich texts, amenable to analysis for everything from morphophonemics to ethnohistory/ethnography to conversational analysis. They are fun, leading the reader into the give and take of leisurely talk about earlier times, confirming the respect Cree culture pays to the knowledge of its elders.

Although Freda Ahenakew does not address explicitly the extent to which her agenda in this volume is a feminist one, the singling out of women talking to women about the nature of their experiences provides a view of Cree culture quite different than the one provided when men talk. There is an underlying collusion in these conversations—Freda Ahenakew is herself a grandmother and thus a potential contributor to this project. The women's stories reflect the rhythms of everyday life, the raising of children and the making of a living, not always easily.

It is to be hoped that there will be more such texts. Freda Ahenakew's dream — though it is only implicit in this volume — is to establish collaborations with Native linguists in other parts of Canada to produce similar life stories of the grandmothers among the Ojibwe, the Inuit, the Dene, and perhaps others. All of this will not be done through the work of a single person or within a short time span. More and more of it is likely to involve collaborations between Native people and academics, with the centre of gravity increasingly shifting toward the former. Usefulness of the products to Native communities and individuals is already crucial but will undoubtedly become increasingly so. Whatever the specific things to come, Freda Ahenakew has shown the way and others are already following.

Regna DARNELL
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario

John C. O'DONNELL, *"And Now the Fields are Green": A Collection of Coal Mining Songs in Canada* (Sidney, University College of Cape Breton Press, 1992, xii+299 p., ISBN 0-920336-43-4).

This is a generous anthology of coal-mining songs, compiled by the long-time musical director of what has often been described as North America's only coal miners' choir. The Men of the Deeps were established in 1966, in conjunction with the construction of the Miners' Memorial Museum in Glace Bay for the Canadian centennial year celebrations of 1967. In the earliest days they performed a mixed repertoire, including Broadway show tunes as well as local compositions, but since that time they have achieved a national, even international, reputation as performers of songs rooted in the experience of the industrial community. It is hard to think of a better instance of their appeal than the television broadcast of the Canadian music industry's Juno Awards in 1989, when millions of Canadians were moved by the spectacle of these working men, dressed in pit clothes and lighted helmets, moving through the darkened aisles of the O'Keefe Centre in Toronto to take their place on stage to sing, with Rita MacNeil, "It's a Working Man, I Am".

For more than 25 years the Men of the Deeps have remained amateur performers in the best sense of the word; they range in age from men in their 20s to those in their 80s; all of the members of the group have worked in the coal mines, some for only a few years, others throughout their working lives; although