

## Speaking Out: Introductory

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Construire et habiter l'Inuit Nunangat  
Building and Dwelling in Inuit Nunangat

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Article abstract

Conference retranscription « Living in Northern Quebec: Issues and Challenges of Appropriate and Meaningful Living Environments for Inuit Communities », Special session "LINQ's Day-Long Special Session", *Inuit Studies Conference 2019*. October 3, 2019, Université du Québec à Montréal.

# Speaking Out: Introductory

Olivia Ikey<sup>i</sup>

## AUTHOR

Olivia Ikey is an Inuk from Kuujjuaq who has been involved in youth issues and politics for over 10 years. She has been involved in and has advocated for Inuit youth through many special youth programs, the Nunavik Regional Youth Council, and the Qarjuit Youth Council. A graduate of Nunavik Sivunitsavut, Olivia currently advocates for Inuit interests in many different fields such as housing, education, mental health, and identity and reconciliation.

## AUTEURE

Olivia Ikey est une Inuk de Kuujjuaq. Elle a été impliquée dans les questions relatives à la jeunesse et à la politique pendant une grande partie des dix dernières années. Olivia a travaillé et a défendu les droits des jeunes Inuit dans le cadre de nombreux programmes spéciaux pour les jeunes et du Conseil régional de la jeunesse du Nunavik, le Conseil de la jeunesse Qarjuit. Diplômée du Nunavik Sivunitsavut, elle travaille à défendre les intérêts des Inuit dans de nombreux domaines tels que le logement, l'éducation, la santé mentale, l'identité et la réconciliation.

## CONTEXT

Conference retranscription «Living in Northern Quebec: Issues and Challenges of Appropriate and Meaningful Living Environments for Inuit Communities», Special session “LINQ’s Day-Long Special Session<sup>1</sup>”, *Inuit Studies Conference 2019*<sup>2</sup>. October 3, 2019, Université du Québec à Montréal.

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1. “Habiter le Nord québécois: Mobiliser, comprendre, imaginer” (“Living in Northern Quebec: Mobilizing, Understanding, Imagining”) is a research project in partnership mainly housed at the School of Architecture of Laval University. The project’s subject is the culturally appropriate and sustainable development of the habitat of Innu and Inuit communities. It approaches the northern Aboriginal habitat in all its complexity, by examining the three dimensions that structure it, that give it meaning and that orient its development: communities, living environments and governance. “Habiter le Nord Québécois/Living in Northern Quebec” was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada-Partnership (2015-2021) (<https://www.habiterlenordquebecois.org/>).
2. “Habiter le Nord québécois: Enjeux et défis d’aménagements appropriés et significatifs pour les communautés Inuit” (Living in Northern Quebec: issues and challenges of appropriate and meaningful living environments for Inuit communities) (<https://www.habiterlenordquebecois.org/isc2019>).

## CONTEXTE

Retranscription de la conférence « Habiter le Nord québécois: Enjeux et défis d'aménagements appropriés et significatifs pour les communautés Inuit », Session spéciale HLNQ<sup>3</sup>, *Congrès d'Études Inuit 2019*<sup>4</sup>. 3 octobre 2019, Université du Québec à Montréal.

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Welcome everyone, thank you so much for being here. A very important topic! As most of you know, Nunavik is going through a very serious housing crisis. Having a home is among the most important basic human necessities. Having shelter is one of the bases of living your life and a lot of our youth are missing that one crucial foundation: having a place to call home. This situation has created a suicide crisis, an addiction crisis, and severe overcrowding in our homes. This has a huge effect on our youth.

Up North, we don't have apartment complexes, we don't have options. The only options we have in my own community is social housing. Social housing is for those who need help and have low-income jobs. So, for youth, like me, who are independent, who have been working since they were eleven years old, who did have a good job, and who did not have children. I was not able to get a house. It took me almost eleven years to get a house in my community because I was doing too well. Most of the time, these established requirements, these policies and procedures are copied and pasted from the South and pasted to the situation in the North, which simply does not work! Back home, these requirements are what's called a point system. If you make less money, you get points. If you have more children, you get points. If you are in a dire situation, you get more points. So, this point system is directly affecting the lives of our community's youth. I didn't have any children, so I had no points. I made too much money, so I had no

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3. "Habiter le Nord québécois: Mobiliser, comprendre, imaginer" est un projet de recherche en partenariat principalement logé à l'École d'architecture de l'Université Laval. Le projet a pour sujet d'étude l'aménagement culturellement approprié et durable de l'habitat des communautés innues et inuit. Il aborde l'habitat autochtone nordique dans toute sa complexité, en examinant les trois dimensions qui le structurent, qui lui donnent un sens et qui en orientent le développement: les communautés, les cadres de vie et la gouvernance. "Habiter le Nord québécois" a été financé par le Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada-Partenariat (2015-2021) (<https://www.habiterlenordquebecois.org/>).

4. "Habiter le Nord québécois: Enjeux et défis d'aménagements appropriés et significatifs pour les communautés Inuit" (<https://www.habiterlenordquebecois.org/isc2019>).

points. I was not in a dire situation, so I had no points. So, it was impossible for me to obtain a house in my own community. I want to help my people, I want to help our Inuit youth get housing.

But it has been a challenge. I have been working independently on this housing problem for over 10 years. I'm just a loud-mouth youth that never shuts up. So, I've been fighting. I've been invited to speak at these conferences. I am not a professional. I am just here to tell you the truth about how we are living in our communities. And the truth is a powerful thing that will hopefully change the eyes and hearts of those who decide the policies and procedures for us, for my community.

What I want to say is that this point system is killing our youth; these requirements are killing my cousins and my aunts and my uncles. It is not about money, it is not about having amazing board meetings: It's about keeping people alive. So, when we talk about housing and we talk about requirements, when you listen to everything that is going on during this conference, what it really comes down to is ... saving a life! You will save lives and it will even inspire Inuit youth to get involved in making new policies. We want to help make these policies. It is a very important contribution that we want to make. I know in the South it is very important to have diplomas, to be a professional, and to have a degree, but we are professionals in truth, we want to share our truth so you can better understand the negative effect your policies and procedures are having on our lives and the lives of those who are not even born yet.

I am going to read a small part from *Life among the Qallunaat*. This book is by Mini Aodla Freeman (2015) and she talks about the very small thing, about the differences between living in the North and living in the South. She was a translator for the Federal government and has moved to Ottawa at an early age. She talks about the differences between the treatment of Qallunaat and the treatment of Inuit. So, when you guys come South, there is some hotels booked, cars booked, you have everything booked for you, everything is taken care of, brings you where you need to go. As Inuit they tell you: "the conference is at UQAM". Scary ... I had to find my way here. Because the Inuit are visually inclined, I needed to find something visual to find the building. It was very scary for me, coming here: that's something that's taken for granted because down South, everybody just knows which way is North, which way is South! Me, right now? I have no idea! I was lost.

So, this author talks about how housing is given to us in the North and how no one ever asks us what kind of housing we actually need. We have been working on this very important project for many years and it is the most truthful project that has ever happened for our communities. People are coming to our communities and asking us to share our ideas. We were never asked by SHQ, were never asked by KMHB, we were never asked

what kind of houses we wanted. This is the first time that our realities, our truths, our culture and everything has been implemented into a house, into a basic human need. I was never asked what kind of house I wanted, I never thought I would have a say in that, being a young Inuit, a high school dropout, someone who's just trying to survive. So, thank you so much to Geneviève<sup>5</sup>, to the program, and to her amazing students for giving us this space, as Inuit, to share our ideas.

I am going to share this part (Freeman 2015, 64):

When anybody goes north, nobody can miss these wonderful houses put up by the Department. They are most colourful—blue, red, brown and some even orange. One would think the Inuit had a choice of colour, which they did not. The material for housing arrives by ship, already painted, to the communities of the North. There are no questions asked about where the Inuit would like to have their permanent homes erected. The Department does all the choosing. When an Inuk puts up a tent or an igloo, he does not put it where it will be most colourful. He has to think about the wind and be very careful which way his door will face. He examines the ground so he won't sit in his tent sinking everyday. I have been in these colourful houses which were put up without consideration of the weather. My parents have lived in them. In the winter, during snowstorms, the doors are piled up with snow which has entered through the cracks of the door, and the door gets stuck, iced in from condensation which forms all around the walls.

This is what is happening in the North: There's a lot of mold issues, there's a lot of ice damage, and as a result of this damage, the houses have to be renovated over and over and over, because people from the South, with all their well-meaning innovative ideas are coming to our communities and putting up houses for us without asking for our input, without asking anything, without asking us important questions like which direction the wind comes from... Right now, they are building houses in swamp areas, which we, the Inuit, have been fighting and talking about: that's no place to build a house! We have no diplomas, we have no degrees; so who's going to listen to us? Yes, we have amazing architects, amazing people building our houses for us. But us we know the truth because we live there. We have been living on this land for many many generations. Our truths, together with your diplomas, will build better houses, which will not only last for many many years but will also be passed on to the next generation of Inuit.

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5. Geneviève Vachon is the director of the research project in partnership "Habiter le Nord Québécois/Linving in Northern Quebec".

In Nunavik, we spend millions of dollars renovating our houses, millions of dollars on building new houses that have a lot of problems. People from the South come, with really good ideas, but they do not understand the reality of what's going on in the North. So it is very important to listen to the Inuit who are here, who are here to speak the truth. They are going to tell you very simple things that your brilliant educated minds probably didn't think of! We can bring these very simple things into the conversation to help you understand and to help us pick the right home, because, like I said, these homes are not just shelters: they are saving lives, they are saving children, they are saving the lives of people going through a severe housing crisis. So, you're all going to play a role in saving lives, but you need an Inuk partner for that to happen.

We ask you to be open to some very different ideas, ideas that you may not have thought of, that you may not have learned in your school. Because many of us know that our history and our identity are not well taught in schools, you need to actually sit down with an Inuit. You need to know what we have been going through in order to understand how this housing crisis has affected our lives and how you can contribute to saving the life of an Inuk child. Today and tomorrow, in any work you do in Nunavik.

It is a hard thing to take on, it's a heavy thing to put saving a life in a house together, because in the South, the reality is very simple, very different. I could rent an apartment right now down the street if I wanted to, but back home it's not that simple. We need to change these rules. We need to break the different barriers we are facing in our communities and work together. Right now, there is a lot of tension and a lot of work needs to be done. I think that right now, we are fighting the wrong fights. We are fighting against each other instead of fighting together for this common goal. As Inuit, as Qallunaat, as French people, as cultures that live in different worlds, we continue to fight each other instead of working together and trying new ideas that cannot be achieved when we work separately. When we work together in a Southern context and in schools, you have to come to our community and visually see and spiritually experience what is going on in our communities, how housing is a vital necessity, and how it impacts the life of Inuit children of today and tomorrow.

So, I just want to say thank you to everybody for being here. I hope you are going to be open. You may hear some amazing ideas but sometimes you have to question these ideas and understand the whole picture and how they can really work in the North. You need to be more open and understand our reality. We have some amazing Inuit here who work in many different fields that will have an enormous impact on the next generation. So, ask them: How does education affect housing, how does mental health affect housing, how does justice affect housing? We need to understand how everything connects together. We are not working in silos,

we need to take them away, we need to explore other possibilities and make them happen to save lives now. So, Nakurmiik, thank you and merci beaucoup! (...)

Wow! This has been an amazing day with so many different ideas, so many things that I didn't think about. The topic of housing, like we see here, does not just include housing and land; it also includes education, technology, and even suicide prevention. So please understand the huge impact of your role, our role, in our housing and in saving lives: it's very important. Like Paul<sup>6</sup> said, Inuit youth, we can take on the challenge and we will. Right now, we're having a hard time fitting in both worlds. But we can succeed if we have the right support and the right tools. We can go further with Qallunaat, with Inuit, we can all move forward together, and I am just amazed about all the possibilities before us!

I have learned a lot, I have opened my mind to see housing in a different way and I have a little bit more hope for my daughter, for her future, her future as an Inuk in this city, her future as an Inuk when we go back home, after she becomes more educated. I think there are many possibilities for the Inuit in this world, on the world stage, not just in our communities, not just in the communities that have been created for us by the government. But us, to create our own communities within the directives that the government has given us. And to break these barriers and open up communication and share ideas...

I think that Inuit youth have more time, because in the Southern world, everybody has to have a "title". You have to have a job position. When I was asked to come and speak, I was asked what my title was. I don't have a title. I'm just a kid off the street who wants to help, you know. But I guess I titled myself as an advocate, because I speak the truth for my family, for my daughter, for Inuit youth and the communities. So, I think we have to take down these titles, change the bureaucracy and the ways of seeing people. Right now, if you don't have a title, our recommendations are not taken seriously, because "you're just a kid off the street". But it's very important that we break this cycle, change these policies and give everybody a chance in this scary situation we are facing here.

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6. Paul Parsons is assistant director of the Municipal Public Works Department, at Kativik Regional Government (KRG) since 2016. He works with northern villages and oversees implementation of infrastructure programs regarding drinking water and wastewater treatment, landfills, roads and buildings. For the past two years, Paul has been representing the KRG on the partnership "Habiter le Nord Québécois/Living in Northern Quebec" and remained involved in various community projects. In 2013, he was awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for his contribution to Canada. Previously, Paul was elected in 2009 as Mayor of Kuujuaq and occupied this role until 2012.

So, thank you all for coming, for speaking, for being open and for making the future a bit better for all of us. Not just for the Inuit, not just for the architects, but for the world. So, give yourself a round of applause! Thank you!

## **Reference**

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FREEMAN, Mini Aodla

2015     *My Life Among the Qallunaat*. Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press.