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To cite this article: Silje Gaupseth (2023): The Mosaics of an Arctic Seamstress: Narrative Versions of Ada Blackjack on Wrangel Island, 1921–1923, Interventions, DOI: [10.1080/1369801X.2023.2190920](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2023.2190920)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2023.2190920>



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Published online: 20 Apr 2023.



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THE MOSAICS OF AN ARCTIC SEAMSTRESS: NARRATIVE VERSIONS OF ADA BLACKJACK ON WRANGEL ISLAND, 1921–1923

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Autoethnography
expedition diary
gender
indigeneity
self-representation
Stefansson, Vilhjalmur
.....
*This essay focuses on the narrative mosaics of Iñupiat Alaskan Ada Delutuk Blackjack, hired seamstress on an occupation colony on Wrangel Island in 1921–23, organized by renowned Canadian Arctic explorer and writer Vilhjalmur Stefansson. While the venture resulted in the tragic deaths of Blackjack’s four companions on the island, she became the expedition’s sole survivor and kept a diary during the last months of her stay. I read Blackjack’s narrative self-representation against some of the characteristics given to her in Stefansson’s official account of the expedition, *The Adventure of Wrangel Island*, highlighting differences in the two texts. Blackjack’s achievement is a disturbing element in Stefansson’s theory of the superior Arctic adaptability of the educated western male and his evolutionary understanding of the history of polar exploration. Her diary is a taciturn story of events on the island, of both drama and triumph in an environment of extreme isolation. By focusing on some of the narrative elements that form Blackjack’s characteristic perception of her surroundings, it is possible to read her autoethnographic and pluralistic narrative self-representation as a key feature of her narrative Indigeneity.*

Introduction

In March 1923, Ada Blackjack, hired member of an occupation colony on Wrangel Island in Chukotka in the Arctic Ocean, makes her very first inscription in a little notebook, thereafter serving as her expedition diary:

Made in March 14th, 1923. The first fox I caught was in feb. 21st and then second March 3 and 4th, 5th, that makes 4 white foxes and then in March 13th I caught three white foxes that makes seven foxes altogether. 14th I got headache all day I'm taking aspirin its seems didn't work. Oh yes in 13th I got new army pants. On 12th of Mar. I site eight places of traps two in each place. (Blackjack 1923, 1)¹

1 Quotes from Blackjack's diary are rendered in original spelling. While the handwritten diary consists of two manuscripts, this essay consistently refers to page numbers of the typewritten transcript, found in the Ada Blackjack papers, 1923–83 (Dartmouth Library, Stefansson Mss-8).

The entry reads like a record of catch; a list of seven white foxes caught in twenty-two early spring days. Whether Blackjack considers this a decent amount, her minimal text does not give away, although the fact that the foxes are there *on paper* probably is important in itself, making the entry a written claim to the skins. Presumably, in spite of feeling unwell, she hopes to increase this number in the weeks to come. Eight new locations have just been added to the trapline, with two traps in each location (1).

What kind of image of the writing self does this diary entry, in five short sentences, matter-of-factly, and devoid of any kind of descriptive language, convey? Through style and content, it is as if the brief text itself resists any kind of extraction of the writing subject as a distinctive narrative persona, leaving the reader with a sense of not being able to make out her contours. The aim of this essay is to demonstrate how Ada Blackjack's taciturn narrative self-presentation in the Wrangel Island diary complicates and challenges the subject position(s) given to her as Indigenous expedition assistant in the authoritative account of the venture, Vilhjalmur Stefansson's *The Adventure of Wrangel Island* ([1925] 1926), on which later narration of her life story generally has been based.

While self-representation was an integral part of the public image-building of Arctic explorers like Stefansson, the recognizable trope of the explorer-as-conqueror (of harsh climate, animals as prey, virgin lands or blank spaces) found in exploration literature from the time may be said to subsume an opposite; that of Indigenous peoples as helpers, savages or even children, all ethnocentric variants of the imaginary Arctic other (see Gaupseth 2017, ch. 6). A focus on narrative self-representation in Blackjack's diary complicates this simplified schema, and by reading the diary in terms of Mary Louise Pratt's ([1992] 2008, 9) contact zone autoethnography – a text constructed by the other “in response to or in dialogue with [...] metropolitan representations” – its potential as a counter-story of early-twentieth-century Arctic exploration comes to the fore. In this sense, the diary may

be conceived as a microhistory of the Arctic which challenges some of the dominant discourses of space, gender, and the want of Indigenous agency in western narratives from the contact zone.

A discussion of the Wrangel Island diary as autoethnography necessarily brings to light concurrent western representations of ethnographic others. Deconstructing cultural stereotypes in the literature of the contact zone entails revisiting some of them and describing how they have been produced and upheld by narrative means (tropes, genre requirements, features of characterization) in concrete texts. My “re-reading” of the colonial cultural archive for a potential counter-story of Indigenous agency therefore takes the form of a close reading of *both* Ada Blackjack’s diary and Stefansson’s *The Adventure of Wrangel Island*. In my discussion of the latter, I also zoom in on another text; the preserved diary of one of Blackjack’s companions on the island, Errol Lorne Knight, on which Stefansson’s narration of events in 1921–23 is largely based.² More specifically, I examine some of the conflicting features of narrative (self-)representation of Blackjack in these source texts, on which later media pieces and popular literature on the expedition generally has been based (see Niven 2003; Caravantes 2016; Healy 2017; Cawthorne 2019; Braun 2020). Unlike some of these later accounts, however, my intention is not to provide an exhaustive biography of Blackjack. This I leave for later scholarship which I hope also will examine how Ada Blackjack is represented through new formats and narrative schemata. Instead, inspired by recent scholarship on Arctic literary discourses, I examine the source texts’ distinctive narrative means and strategies to find out how they accentuate particular topics, relate to particular discourses, and thereby produce their respective images of Ada Blackjack.³ The main purpose of my essay is not just to display these three texts’ narratively constructed mosaics of Ada Blackjack, but to highlight the pieces that never quite fit together – to open up for dissonances between them and identify potential omissions in the master narratives of Arctic exploration, which Stefansson’s account, the official and (until recently) only audible story of the expedition, represents.

On an overarching discursive level, I thus use the Wrangel Island diary as a means to revisit and challenge some of the standard literary representations of Arctic Indigeneity from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because the vast majority of texts concerning and coming out of the Arctic during this period were written by western explorers, scientists, traders, and settlers, such representations are by quantity inherently lopsided and disfavour the gaze of the colonized, to echo the seminal work of Edward Said ([1978] 2003). The same kind of unevenness also characterizes my source material. Blackjack’s diary has never been published in full and is presently contained in a single box in the far more extensive collection of written

2 The diary of Errol Lorne Knight consists of two volumes spanning the combined period of 14 September 1921–23 March 1923. In the following, however, I refer to dates in the typescript version of the diary, including previously missing pages (Dartmouth Library, Stefansson Mss-90).

3 On Arctic literary discourses see Ryall, Schimanski, and Wærp (2010); Ryall and Hansson (2017); Gaupseth (2017).

4 Apart from passages published in the already mentioned recent popular biographies of Blackjack, extracts from the diary have featured in selected magazines and in an anthology on Inuit writing in English (Noice 1923; Carlyle 1927; Petrone 1988).

5 *The Adventure of Wrangel Island* did not reach the same sales figures as some of Stefansson's other polar accounts; however, a new edition was published in London in 1926. My reading is based on the 1926 edition, a somewhat revised version of the New York edition from 1925.

6 Two other text fragments produced by Blackjack on the expedition exist: a handmade calendar and a statement/summary account of the expedition, dictated to E. R. Jordan in 1924 (Dartmouth Library, Stefansson Mss-8). In *The Adventure of Wrangel Island*, the statement is printed

materials from Vilhjalmur Stefansson's prolific Arctic career.⁴ *The Adventure of Wrangel Island* featured as the official account of the expedition, enjoyed a considerable readership, and was printed in two successive editions.⁵ While Blackjack's diary is her only written record from the journey and merely gives a glimpse of five months on the island, Stefansson was a public figure who made a living out of self-referential travel writing.⁶ His life, ideas, and ethnographic/geographic explorative journeys into the Canadian Arctic have been chronicled in multiple volumes, including several biographies.⁷ In contrast, written versions of Ada Blackjack's life story must be puzzled together from bits and pieces of published and unpublished source materials from a handful of archives and private collections. As expected, the asymmetry in the sheer amounts of words of these two main source texts, in their genres, intended readers, and scopes of circulation, therefore mirror not only their writers' different gendered, cultural, and social backgrounds but also the historical representation of the Arctic at large. Arctic history has often been equated with the history of Euro-American intrusion by exploration, exploitation, and settlement, a colonial encounter between the West and the Arctic other. Recent scholarship has demonstrated how this activity was legitimated and sustained through a myriad of textual and visual representations of the Arctic other, not only the human other but characteristically also Arctic nature itself (see Ryall, Schimanski, and Wærp 2010; Acta Borealia 2016; Hansson and Ryall 2017). As postcolonial scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012, 41) points out, "Much more is known about one side of [the colonial encounter] than is known about the other side." Arctic history is thus inherently incomplete. This alone makes Ada Blackjack's diary a worthwhile object of study. An indirect ambition of my essay is therefore to draw attention to the shortcomings of the colonial archive by suggesting other ways of envisioning the shared colonial past, invoking a previously silenced narrative voice and neglected subject position, and pointing to other co-existences with nature than those typically found in western exploration accounts of the time.

Ada Blackjack and the Wrangel Island expedition

in full, although in a somewhat revised and commented version. As a result, Stefansson's take on events is given precedence.

In September 1921, Iñupiat Alaskan Ada Blackjack Johnson, born Ada Delutuk in Spruce Creek, a village on Alaska's Seward Peninsula, signed on as a seamstress on the Wrangel Island expedition for 50 dollars a month.⁸ While the original plan was to travel together with other Inuit people, to assist in the Canadian-led occupation of the island, they withdrew before the expedition set sail. In retrospect, it is not only Blackjack's position as sole Indigenous member and woman of the Wrangel Island expedition

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7 Stefansson published one autobiography and several travel narratives from his journeys in the Canadian Arctic between 1906 and 1918 (Stefansson 1913, 1921, 1922, 1964), and his work is discussed in several biographies (see LeBourdais 1963; Diubaldo [1978] 1998; Hunt 1986; Pálsson 2001, 2005; Henighan 2009).

8 Blackjack was born in 1898. Biographical information from a letter to William S. Crosby from *Seattle Times* editor Stanton H. Patty, based on an interview with Blackjack's son Billy B. Johnson in 1974 (Dartmouth Library, Stefansson Mss-8). In this essay, unless she is specifically referred to by another name, I use the name Ada Blackjack which features in the Wrangel Island diary, where it is also spelled as Ada B. Jack. The info regarding Blackjack's salary is taken from her written statement to E. R. Jordan, 1924.

9 Apart from Ada Blackjack's diary, only the two-volume diary of E. Lorne Knight (1921–1923) from the expedition has been preserved in its entirety (Dartmouth Library,

which is worthy of notice, but also two other consequences of her decision to go. First, Blackjack was to become the expedition's sole survivor, and second, she kept a diary of her eventually involuntary and isolated stay on the island. The diary is Blackjack's tangible trace in the colonial archive, the textual means through which her voice is audible for posterity. Both the time span and the materiality of Blackjack's diary suggest that she did not plan to write about her experiences on Wrangel Island from the outset, however. Being a hired seamstress, Blackjack was probably under no obligation to document her work in the same way as her fellow colonists, who recorded the venture according to the generic conventions of the expedition diary: in terms of dates, whereabouts, milestones, and day-to-day operations.⁹ While the colony landed on the island on 16 September 1921, Blackjack's diary does not open until 14 March 1923, only five months before she finally returned to Alaska. It is written in two parts. First in a small notebook with no covers (14 March–9 June 1923) and then on collated shipping order papers from the Northwestern Photo Supply Company (10 June–20 August 1923), suggesting that once the decision to chronicle her stay was made, she made use of whatever extra paper there was to be found in camp. The fragmented form of the diary is thus in itself a testimony to Blackjack's achievement in spite of the by then greatly reduced material conditions of the colony.

Prior to signing on to the Wrangel Island expedition, Blackjack resided in Nome, Alaska. The extra income would probably provide her with the financial means of caring for her tubercular son Bennett, who was living in a mission home. In Blackjack's diary, the name of her former husband, Jack Blackjack, features twice, with an explicit message that he is not to be trusted with their seven-year-old son in case anything happens to her (Blackjack 1923, 5, 13). Presumably, Ada Blackjack was therefore Bennett's sole provider, a single Iñupiat mother living in a mining town a decade after the gold rush had subsided. The anthropologist Norman A. Chance describes the economic situation in Alaska at the time as both unstable and unpredictable. The population was in generally poor health, new diseases had ravaged through the area, and depleted game resources made it difficult for many Iñupiat to rely on the old subsistence economy (Chance 1990, 37–45). From the seventeenth century, several major fur trading companies established their trading posts in Alaska, taking out huge profits, and in her essay in this special issue, Maria Williams describes how two successive eras of Russian and American expansion, fuelled by large-scale game and mineral exploitation, forever altered Indigenous culture, subsistence, and religious practices in the area. By the 1920s the trade of fox skins equalled economic opportunity for trappers who sold them off for as much as 50–100 dollars per skin (Chance 1990, 45). This makes the inscription of seven white foxes in Blackjack's diary even more

Stefansson Mss-90). Due to the past years' global travel restrictions, I have not been able to access the papers and documents left behind by Milton Galle, held in private collections.

10 Historian Melody Webb asserts, however, that "it would be difficult to find a more implausible object of imperial rivalry than the remote and now largely forgotten Wrangel Island" (Webb 1992, 215). Beyond the scope of this essay is the "diplomatic tug of war" (215) which followed after Stefansson's venture, which in fact was the second colony on the island on a Stefansson expedition (see Webb 1992; Diubaldo [1978] 1998; Huggan 2016).
11 While Stefansson consistently uses the term "Eskimo", this language is colonial terminology and not preferred nomenclature by today's standards. In the present essay, unless directly quoted, the inclusive Inuit is therefore used.

significant, and demonstrates that by 1923, during the last months of the expedition, she worked not merely as a seamstress but also as an overwintering trapper on Wrangel Island, possibly expecting to make far more than the allotted 50 dollars a month from furs or skinwork upon her return.

The Wrangel Island expedition was a planned exploration and territorial acquisition of the desolate tundra island 85 kilometres north of Russia, organized by Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who stayed behind to ensure financial backing and convince the Canadian government that the political rights to the island were worth holding (Stefansson [1925] 1926, 15). He believed that a small colony under the nominal leadership of a young geology student from Toronto, Allan R. Crawford, would legitimize Canadian claim by occupation, and thereby provide Great Britain with a geopolitically advantageous site in the Arctic Ocean.¹⁰ The remaining members of the colony were the three Americans Errol Lorne Knight, Frederick W. Maurer, and Milton Galle. While Knight and Maurer had travelled with Stefansson on previous expeditions, Galle and Crawford had no previous experience in the Arctic. Ada Blackjack was the expedition's only woman and Indigenous participant, and her presence the result of Stefansson's insistence that the men should not forget to bring two things that were imperative to the success of any Arctic expedition: an *umiak* or lightweight skin boat for hunting and an Inuit seamstress to take care of the clothing (123).¹¹

After having chartered a schooner for the crossing, the colony disembarked on Wrangel Island on 16 September 1921 and made their symbolic claim to the territory on behalf of the British Empire. They then established a main camp for the coming winter. From this and an additional trapping camp they explored their new surroundings and added to provisions by securing fox, seals, walrus, and polar bears. During the first months of 1922 there were, however, few signs of animal life. When provisions dwindled and the supply ship scheduled to reach the colony the next summer encountered impassable ice, Crawford, Maurer, and Galle attempted to cross the sea ice to Siberia to get help. Tragically, all traces of the three end here, and they probably lost their lives somewhere along the way. Ada Blackjack and E. Lorne Knight, now alone on the island, were both affected by scurvy. Knight's condition was especially severe, and after only a short while Blackjack had to sustain them both. She nursed Knight until his death in June 1923, and then stayed on the island until a ship finally reached her in August. By then she had spent nearly two years on Wrangel Island, and the final two months in complete solitude. Her diary is a day-to-day record of this remarkable achievement.

Invaluable seamstress or hysteric female?

In the following, I focus on the characteristics given to Ada Blackjack in Stefansson's generically hybrid expedition narrative *The Adventure of Wrangel Island*, published only two years after the news of the tragic outcome of the expedition reached the outside world. As pointed out by Tuhiwai Smith (2012, 40), "the underlying code of imperialism and colonialism [...] is realized in the myriad of representations and ideological constructions of the other in scholarly and 'popular' works". Although Stefansson's combined polar work tells about a rich and inspiring Inuit culture in the Canadian Arctic, his portrayal of Indigenous peoples echoes the imperial-colonialist attitudes of many of his fellow western explorers of the region, who rendered Inuit as prehistoric people and often described collaborators in the field in collective terms or as nameless individuals (Pálsson 2005, 201; Gaupseth 2017, 209). His portrayal of Ada Blackjack is seemingly an exception to this general rule. In contrast to other named and unnamed Indigenous people in Stefansson's exploration accounts, Blackjack features as a distinct character with a life story extending beyond the two-year-long expedition. Also, her own (dictated and somewhat revised) version of the expedition is included in Stefansson's narrative, together with a seemingly sympathetic "character sketch" of her written by American novelist Inglis Fletcher for the 1925 publication of the book (in Stefansson [1925] 1926, 308–22).¹² These two narratives in particular give her agency and individuality. Still, at least initially, Ada Blackjack's role in the story is that of the Indigenous companion of the four white explorers of the island. Stefansson writes:

In an undertaking such as that of Wrangel Island, Eskimos are almost as necessary as boats or weapons. Not that they are wanted for hunting, for almost any white man can soon become as good a hunter as the average Eskimo. ... But their women are needed to sew clothes and keep them in repair. It is the testimony of many experts who have examined Eskimo sewing that it is unequalled in the world. (Stefansson [1925] 1926, 124)¹³

Elsewhere he states: "Seamstresses such as these we need so badly that we are willing to engage along with them comparatively useless husbands and families of several children" (Stefansson 1921, 391). Such characterizations, although written in an air of respect for Inuit garment manufacture, still reduce Ada Blackjack as an individual by generic denomination. It is the excellent needlework, the Indigenous and gendered knowledge she embodies, that gives her value. Here, according to Stefansson, and also as argued elsewhere in his text, Blackjack is merely part of the expedition gear, a piece of equipment every western explorer should bring along to ensure the success of

12 The phrase and the use of the term mosaics is my adaptation of Inglis Fletcher's introductory comments to her character sketch of Ada Blackjack in Stefansson's *Wrangel Island* ([1925] 1926, 297–322). Fletcher's text is not discussed in detail in my essay.
13 See previous note on terminology.

the venture. Those who do not have failed to grasp the essentials of Arctic exploration, Stefansson maintains.

While thus serving as a tool for the colony on a very practical level, through the narration of the story that unfolds, Ada Blackjack almost imperceptibly also becomes a tool on the argumentative level of Stefansson’s account. A main objective of *The Adventure of Wrangel Island* is to demonstrate how the expedition, despite its deeply tragic outcome, does not undermine Stefansson’s central message that the Arctic is not hostile but friendly; to show how even desolate Wrangel Island is part of the plentiful and habitable North, fit for exploration, development, and future colonization. Historian Melody Webb reads Stefansson’s book as a defense against bad publicity (Webb 1992, 231), and archivist and historian H. G. Jones describes it as “burdened by the extreme self-serving interests of the colony’s promoter” (Jones 1999, 92). Throughout his text, Stefansson explains why the colony indeed *failed* to live off the land and, consequently, it may be argued, why he is not to blame for the tragedy. Had the men brought the *umiak* as instructed (Stefansson [1925] 1926, 125); had they not demonstrated “a superabundance of faith” in the island’s animal life (180); had they stayed on the island instead of making the desperate dash for Siberia (247); had Knight and Blackjack only understood the true potential of fresh meat to cure scurvy (235); by implication: had these combined errors of judgement not been made, the colony would have lived in perfect harmony with their surroundings until the arrival of the supply ship – as prescribed by Stefansson’s characteristic exploration methodology (and hallmark public catchphrase) of *flowing with* instead of resisting the Arctic environment (see Pálsson 2001, 279). It may of course still be argued that Stefansson was indirectly responsible for the tragedy because he inspired, organized, and promoted the whole venture. However, somewhere along the line of Stefansson’s argumentation in *Wrangel Island*, the true antagonist of the story turns out to be neither hostile nature nor poor planning, but instead critical voices back home such as smearing journalists (168) or government officials refusing to back up the colony’s claim to the island (139). Although the outcome of the expedition on one level reads as a tragic comment to Stefansson’s professed belief that “the best material for polar explorers are ‘well brought-up’ young [Anglo-American] men” (1921, 65) and Inuit merely part of the expedition gear, Ada Blackjack’s survival nevertheless makes her living proof that Wrangel Island can indeed sustain human habitation, thus proving the feasibility of Stefansson’s original plan of colonization, albeit not with his original cast of main characters.

Still, by examining the narrative representation of Ada Blackjack in *Wrangel Island* in more detail, it becomes clear that Stefansson does not in any sense find her achievement to invalidate his professed belief in the unequalled adaptability of white men – an idea echoing the modern progress

narrative which informed many Euro-American explorative forays into the Arctic at the time. While Stefansson ([1925] 1926, 263) refers to Blackjack as a courageous little woman, “full of resource and initiative”, her imaginable position as the real heroine to come out of his tale is undermined by other and far less positive characterizations. She is rendered as childlike and attributed with “the superstitions of her people”, such as the crippling Inuit “fear of polar bears” which makes her flee instead of shoot. Moreover, “[it] is probable that but for this defect of training [Blackjack] could have saved Knight’s life, for we know [...] that a sufficient quantity of fresh, underdone meat will produce a rapid recovery” (264), Stefansson sums up from a position of eleven years’ field experience (166) – and with the benefit of hindsight – thus stressing Blackjack’s lack of basic survival skills while warding off potential criticism at the same time.

Other and more problematic characterizations of Ada Blackjack are found in passages of *The Adventure of Wrangel Island* based on E. Lorne Knight’s diary. Some of these passages are direct quotes; however, Stefansson’s ([1925] 1926, 181) narrative voice is the dominant one as he “read[s] between the lines” of Knight’s diary, offers his take on recounted events, and, as a result, provides the focal lens through which the story of the expedition is told. In the following, I use Knight’s diary as a direct source for my reading. Some of his entries show that in the early winter of 1921, during the very first months of the expedition, Blackjack did not behave according to the others’ expectations of an expedition seamstress. In the beginning of October, only a few weeks after their arrival on the island, Knight reports that “the woman has had several crying spells to-day”:

A few minutes ago she asked me to get my rifle ready and when she sleeps to kill her. In the next breadth she asks us to save her life and not let anyone harm her. This happens half a dozen times a day. The main trouble seems to be an infatuation for Crawford. She wants him to marry her and says hysterically that she would die for him. We treat her as nice as can be and one minute her spells look like sham and the next minute real.¹⁴

14 Knight, 3 October 1921 (Dartmouth Library, Stefansson Mss-90).

As the narration over the next weeks progresses, Knight describes how Blackjack, whom he condescendingly refers to as the “seamstress”, works either too slow or not at all, how she refuses to talk, “nearly [goes] into hysterics” when Crawford leaves camp, and how she wanders off alone into the mountains on several occasions (20 November 1921). This unintelligible behaviour causes growing concern, and the men’s responses escalate in proportion. “Having tried coaxing but find that sternness is better”, Knight pragmatically comments on 1 October 1921. They put her on bread and water and make her go supperless to bed. However, when “that foolish female” yet again leaves the main camp for the trapping camp where Crawford is, she is

denied access to the tent and made to walk the long distance back home again (22 November 1921). On 23 November 1921 Knight writes: “The seamstress refused to patch a pair of boots today so I tied her to the flagpole until she promised to repair them. Kindness failing to accelerate, I am trying out some more forceful means.” The failure to comply with her assigned role elicits demeaning treatment, a physical reinforcement of the hierarchical structure and gendered divisions of labour of the colony. Although Knight does not explicitly use the term, his entries on Blackjack describe some of the assumed behaviours of nineteenth-century hysterics. In her essay in this issue, Renée Hulan shows how the Inuit affliction Europeans labelled *pibloktoq*, or Arctic hysteria, was closely connected to descriptions of female hysteria in contemporary Euro-American medical discourse, and how this term featured in the literature of exploration during the long nineteenth century. It is indeed possible that the Wrangel Island colonizers had heard of *pibloktoq*. They were almost certainly familiar with popular notions of hysteria and some of the treatments administered to patients believed to be suffering from it, such as forced physical restraint, which may explain their extreme response. Another way of reading their actions is as those of a parent disciplining an obedient child, mirroring allochronic conceptions of the other in contemporary ethnographic literature (Fabian 1983), and thus rendering an image of Blackjack as childlike; an undeveloped mind compared to her fellow non-Indigenous expedition members, and allegedly in need of discipline and instruction. There is however no other way of understanding their reaction than as disempowering and abusive, and tying Blackjack to the flagpole as akin to enslavement and violence. In doing so, the men followed a historical pattern of actions by colonial authorities and officials who felt entitled to treat Indigenous and colonized labour at their whim and solely on their terms. Ada Blackjack must have greatly distrusted her companions after such an instance.

Was Blackjack mentally ill or merely reacting to an unpredictable and traumatic situation, perhaps even actively defying the parameters of gender and ethnicity of her assigned role on the expedition? Was her reported desire for Crawford intimidating the men? Could Knight possibly have mistaken romantic feelings for an attempt to seek protection or form an alliance that could balance out the uneven social dynamics of the group? Did Crawford and Blackjack have intimate encounter(s)? Neither diaries give any direct answers to such questions. While there is a noticeable silence in Blackjack’s text regarding Crawford and the events described by Knight, which took place before her diary opens, it does however show that she is homesick. Knight, on the other hand, reports that Blackjack (now subdued?) works diligently after the flagpole incident. This contrast is a reminder of both the limitations of the Wrangel Island source material and the lacunae bound to exist in later historiography based predominantly on one side of a colonial

encounter. Examining nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century exploration narratives from the Canadian High Arctic, historian Lyle Dick reads the cases of *pibloktoq* reported by explorers as induced primarily by the stresses of early contact between Euro-Americans and Inughuit, pointing to a whole range of behaviours observed by outsiders which may be read as acts of resistance rather than medical disorder (Dick 1995). This is how I read the “difficult seamstress” in Knight’s diary. The entries reinforce the general impression that the narrative versions of Ada Blackjack in *The Adventure of Wrangel Island* are empty templates on which to inscribe the onlooker’s cultural perceptions of gender and Indigeneity.

The plurality of diary selves on Wrangel Island

Delving into the Wrangel Island diary entails shifting analytical focus from (external) narrative representation to what may be termed Ada Blackjack’s autoethnographic self-representation by examining two defining characteristics of her text: the diary’s functions and temporal pattern.¹⁵ Varying widely in style and content, the diary as a genre constitutes “a periodic form of life writing” structured chronically, often through day-to-day narration (Smith and Watson 2010, 266). Due to “the writing process [being] situated between the events of an ongoing story”, it is furthermore characterized by immediacy, seemingly near collapsing the gap between the time of writing and the time of chronicled events (Herman, Jahn, and Ryan 2005, 106). Blackjack’s entries are generally written on a daily basis, summing up the events of one day, and the fact that she has no certainty of when – or how – her existence on the island will come to an end adds an extra sense of immediacy to the text. Diaries are by definition incomplete; they do not conclude but simply stop, and such is the case with Blackjack’s account, where the last entry on 20 August 1923 in all probability precedes the arrival of the boat that eventually came to her rescue later that day, making her final words a general phrase of Christian thanksgiving.¹⁶ While the circumstances surrounding her text thus might be argued to heighten narrative suspense, Blackjack’s entries are brief, taciturn in style, and her diary a seemingly neutral logbook which continuously returns to the same topics. The narrating “I” seldom sheds detailed light on events. This is probably also because Blackjack writes in broken English, the result of her education at a mission school in Nome, instead of her spoken primary language, Iñupiatun.

A focus on self-representation opens for reading the Wrangel Island diary as a form of autoethnography, a hybrid form of writing which Pratt suggests is “a widespread phenomenon of the contact zone” ([1992] 2008, 9). The term itself implies a reversal of the familiar power dynamics of ethnographic

15 An earlier Norwegian version of this section has been published in the popular article “Fire menn og en ekspedisjonssyerske” (Gaupseth 2011).

16 While the diary makes no mention of this incident, in Blackjack’s later summary account of the expedition, it is dealt with in more detail (Blackjack 1923, 5).

writing because it “refers to instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer’s terms”, according to Pratt ([1992] 2008, 9). Through the expedition diary, the colonizer’s generic form, Blackjack likewise represents herself. There are obvious similarities in content and style between Blackjack’s and Knight’s diaries, suggesting that the latter must have been available to her, and both read more like public records than intimate accounts. As mentioned, however, while the men may have been instructed to keep diaries for later documentation, Blackjack – from the position of Indigenous assistant or “expedition gear” – was probably under no such obligation. Not only does Blackjack’s broken English, mixed with the occasional Iñupiatun term, mark her diary as different from and other than Knight’s (which generally adheres to the idioms and generic traits of the western exploration journal), the before-mentioned reticence of Blackjack’s writing style moreover makes it difficult to grasp the kind of self that her diary posits. A closer examination of the diary’s content, however, reveals its several functions, and the narrated “I” of the text, central to Blackjack’s autoethnographic self-representation, must be seen as closely related to these.¹⁷

17 The narrated “I”, as defined by Smith and Watson (2010, 73), is “the protagonist of the [autobiographical] narrative, the version of the self that the narrating ‘I’ chooses to constitute through a recollection for the reader”. Although Blackjack’s diary contains few passages through which a narrating “I” actively objectifies herself through recollections or interior monologue, I still use the term “narrated ‘I’”, which is key to the kind of self-representation that her text constitutes.

First of all, the diary is Blackjack’s social space and structures her time on the island, marking the passing of days and months in an environment of extreme isolation. Her choice of intended reader(s), conscious or not, also reflects the gravity of this situation. While Knight seemingly addresses *his* report of events to Stefansson, Blackjack’s implied reader seems to be a hypothetical member of a relief expedition. It is hard to tell whether she imagines this kind of reader to be someone who finds her alive or must bring the news of their deaths to friends and family at home. The first part of the diary certainly suggests the latter. Only a week after the others have left, Knight faints from the exertion of chopping wood, and for the rest of Blackjack’s (1924, 2) chronicled time he is too weak to do any chores around camp. Blackjack seldom describes his scurvy in detail, and never by name; however, some of her entries still provide an indirect journal of a rapidly advancing disease, starting with fatigue, which soon confines him to the sleeping bag – where he eventually has great difficulties even taking food. With no animals in the traps, Blackjack (1923, 9) collects roots for nourishment; however, on 12 May she writes: “I fry one biscuit for knight thats all he eat for 9 days he don’t look like he is going to live very long.” It seems clear to her that Knight’s prospects of surviving are bleak, and the situation appears to trigger frictions between them:

Apr. 20th. I was today and haul sled load of wood and then chop wood didn’t go to the traps. And when I come in build the fire knight started to cruel with me. I cannt count how many times he started to cruel at me every time he say something against me. ... And saying I wasn’t good to him he never stop and think how much its hard

for women to take four mans place, to wood work and hund for something to eat for him and do waiting to his bed and take the shiad out for him. ... This is the woset life I ever live in this world. (Blackjack 1923, 5)

Knight despondently accuses Blackjack of poor treatment. Her own desperate response can be gathered from an unusually long diary entry where concern over Knight's deteriorating health runs parallel with the fear of being left alone: "If knight happen to die what will I do here in this island all alone he is laying in bed since February 9 and now April 21st he is looks very skinny. And its long time yet till we might see ship come" (5). While the entry first reads like a documentation of the situation, potentially written to give *her* side of events for the future, Blackjack ends with a direct appeal to the implied reader though which her own death also seems imminent: "If I be known dead, I want my sister Rita to take Bennett my son, for her own son and look after every things for Bennett", she writes, adding the signature "Ada B. Jack", marking the gravity of the situation (5–6). In a later entry, in June, she opens the second part of her diary with the same careful instruction, specifying that: "This is very important noted in case I happen to died or some body fine out and found that I was dead" (13). In addition to pointing to her sister as Bennett's primary caregiver, she now goes through her financial situation, stipulating how much of the wages from the expedition her family will inherit. The profit is to be shared between Blackjack's mother and sister, leaving her sister with the largest sum to take care of Bennett (13). Although seldom stated directly, Bennett seems to have been on Blackjack's mind through the whole chronicled period, and his presence in the text is especially visible in times of adversity and despair. In passages like these, the functions of Blackjack's diary oscillate between formal record/continued narration of events after all other voices are gone, documentation of own actions (and thus innocence, in case of potential blame), and reminder to her employers of their debt to her or to her family, should she pass away.

A common denominator for the passages in which the implied reader is addressed directly is that they follow entries concerning Knight's or Blackjack's own deteriorating health. Isolated in the high Arctic, disease is bound to be a reminder of death, and both Blackjack's reader instructions and her careful documentation of Knight's passing in a typewritten letter to Stefansson dated 23 June 1923 show that the diary matter-of-factly and undramatically also functions as her last will.¹⁸ Reading passages like these with the tragic deaths of her companions in mind, it is not a stretch to say that the Arctic shows itself from a far from friendly side in Blackjack's diary.

It is however possible to read the diary as more than a narrative of despair, and some entries even introduce a beam of hope into Blackjack's chronicled stay on the island. The diary is organized around the linearity of the calendar,

18 Stefansson Mss-8, Dartmouth Library.

but by plotting the various topics covered – hunting and harvesting, signs of animal life, ice conditions, needlework, diet and health – against the greater rhythm of the shifting natural seasons, a pattern of change can be detected in the otherwise monotonous narration. As argued by literary scholar Béatrice Didier, a diary’s “movement from day to day repeats the same and at the same time introduces difference into it” (Rendall 1986, 63; referring to Didier 1977, 123), and this is true of the Wrangel Island diary, especially when read in light of the natural cycles. As the diary opens in mid-March, the pitch dark winter months have started to give way to the Arctic spring, which, in turn, points forward to summer and, from late June, the midnight sun. With the light comes the visible return of animal life on the island. While only one animal – a raven – features in Blackjack’s diary entries from April, in May she notes the return of more birds: first snow birds, then a flock of ducks flying west of camp, followed by eider ducks, a seagull, a white owl, brant and long neck ducks, and then, in late May, a whole flock of geese. As the snow finally lets go of the ground around the same time, a caterpillar and spider on the sand make their way into her text (Blackjack 1923, 7–11). In June, with the return of larger animals such as the *shadurk*¹⁹ and polar bear, entries on hunting become both more frequent and more detailed than before. On the 7th Blackjack gets a seagull “dead shot” and promptly turns him into her next meal, exclaiming: “Oh my! it good and I eat no meat for a long time” (12). Later that month she gets the “[first] seal I ever got in my life” (15), and from this point on nature seems to be more than generous to the two remaining colonists. Birds, eggs, roots, and seal end up on the table, and on the evening of 8 July, as Blackjack puts dried meat in the box for storage, she notices that “the box is full” (17). Although the return of animal life apparently has come too late to cure Knight’s advanced illness, these entries show that Blackjack’s own health is restored during the late spring and summer months. On 4 July she describes a failed attempt to shoot a seal on the sea ice close to camp:

19 Original spelling. Although I have not been able to identify this animal, the term might possibly refer to an *ugjuk* or bearded seal.

July 4th. I was after a seal that was on the mouth of the harbar they were two and one on front of camp so they went down on me those two seals so I went after the one that was right front of camp and I got the rifle already and wait for him to put his head up and rifle was already hammer was ready and so I look some thing and move around boam it went and the seal went down and I stand up and say fourth of July. I was surprised rifle boan so I had my fourth of July. (Blackjack 1923, 16)

Back home in Alaska, Independence Day is probably being celebrated at the very same time as her rifle misfires on Wrangel Island. More importantly, however, when reading for Blackjack’s self-representation, at this point in the text she can afford to express amusement rather than despair at the failed attempt to procure dinner. This and similar passages from the latter

part of the diary show that now Blackjack is more on top of the situation than in the early spring months on Wrangel. A new and more confident narrative tone demonstrates that with the return of animal life her spirits are simultaneously lifted.

Whereas Blackjack reports symptoms of scurvy in March, April, and May, in June only a case of snow blindness and the monthly keep her from hunting (13–15), and – conspicuously – July and August contain no entries at all concerning her own health. Instead, Blackjack continues to hunt, uses empty cans for target practice, takes photos of herself and her surroundings, and, when she discovers three eggs in one seagull nest in late June, she has a nice egg and tea lunch all by herself (15). A similarly noticeable change in focus and tone can be gathered by studying the entries concerning knitting, sewing, and skinwork. The majority of these describe how Blackjack prepares the seal and fox skins; chewing and soaking, stretching, cleaning, and scraping the skins, and then turning them into boot soles, mittens, or parkas. In early July, however, a “fancy skin” makes its first appearance in her diary, soon turning into a new “fancy sewing” project; a seal and reindeer parka with wolf skin trimmings around the sleeves and the hood. “[M]y new parky is all finished today”, Blackjack (18) notes on 21 July, after having logged her needlework over the last ten days. Whereas other sewing projects have resulted in more practical equipment such as a sleeping bag, a belt, boot soles, and gloves, there is a sense of superfluousness in her new project and in the repetition of the word “fancy”, used to describe both the skin quality and the sewing process. Comparably, in late July and early August, she hides away seal flippers to take home to her sister “in case ships comes” and fastens beads onto a new pair of “[curious] looking” slippers for Bennett “if I should got home so he ... can put sleepers on”. She now thanks “living God thought Juses that help me every day and night if God be with me till I should get home again” (19–20). Thus, in the last part of her diary, gratefulness, and plans for a future off the island, have taken the place of careful instructions regarding the distribution of earthly possessions. Indirectly, and in line with Pratt’s autoethnography, therefore, the diary is in reality heterogeneous on the reception end; its addressees are not only western or metropolitan readers (such as Stefansson or the relief expedition), but more importantly, members of Blackjack’s own family and community in Alaska (cf. Pratt [1992] 2008, 9).

The gradual change in both tone and content of the five chronicled months on Wrangel Island affects Blackjack’s narrative self-representation, and with the expanded focus towards the end of the diary, her narrative persona seems to come more alive. Here Blackjack uses a more personal style, allows herself to digress on new subjects, and, as a result, appears with more agency than before. Also noteworthy is the impact of the colony’s altered fate on Blackjack’s role on the expedition. As the diary opens, Crawford, Maurer, and

Galle have already left, and Knight is soon incapacitated. By this point, therefore, Blackjack's scope of work has widened. Now she takes on chores previously done by the men. "I told [Knight] I was use to chopping wood and doing that kind of work down home, so he finally consented to let me", she states in the later summary account of the expedition, suggesting that up till then gendered divisions of labour had been maintained (Blackjack 1924, 2–3). Some of Blackjack's diary entries, however, effortlessly span traditionally gendered tasks, such as the one from June 16, where she "finish [her] knit gloves and got see gall in the trap" (Blackjack 1923, 14). She mended clothing, cooked, washed and nursed her companion, and also hauled wood, fixed equipment, tended the traps, and shot seals and larger animals. Versatility was apparently key to Blackjack's survival. In order to succeed alone she had to embrace both the routines of Arctic housekeeping and the typical domains associated with the male hunter-trapper, and thus cross western boundaries of gender and conceptions of ethnicity.

Blackjack's diary as a microhistory of the Arctic

Literary scholar Graham Huggan stresses the current need to "*unscramble* the Arctic", to wrest "it away from its persistent status as a fixed object of western control and knowledge", and to do so by holding up "micro-histories of Arctic space and territory" which complicate this general picture (Huggan 2016, 7). One of Huggan's examples of a microhistory is the story of Stefansson's failed attempt to colonize Wrangel Island in 1921. Ada Blackjack's diary from Wrangel Island contains another microhistory of the Arctic because it presents a counter-narrative from the colonial contact zone through which conventional literary representations of the Arctic and Arctic Indigeneity are negotiated and challenged. In fashioning her own story, Blackjack not only overcomes concrete material obstacles (by writing on scraps of papers), but also assumes a non-privileged narrative subject position available only after the other – male, western, and official – voices have fallen silent. When her story later is given a place in *The Adventure of Wrangel Island*, Stefansson's official account of the expedition, it is edited or narratively "controlled", and her voice therefore only partially included.

My reading has shown that while Stefansson uses Blackjack's Indigeneity strategically to serve his public agenda, a reading of her diary as autoethnography opens for a more complex understanding of Indigeneity and potential co-existences with Arctic nature. Blackjack of *Wrangel Island* is primarily the Indigenous companion of white explorers – valued for her unequalled sewing skills, but still confined by her culture and gender. Stefansson's

representation of her as the colony's assistant or "equipment" undermines her individuality and agency in a rhetorical manoeuvre which at the same time bolsters Stefansson's own expertise and his undisputable position in the Arctic (and, consequently, the western colonial enterprise, which the Wrangel Island expedition is part of). In Knight's diary, Blackjack's "disobedience" is explained by resorting to depictions of her as a "foolish female", childlike, and even an Arctic hysteric; all Indigenous stereotypes found in textual and visual representations of the Arctic from the time (Knight, October–November 1921). By contrasting central pieces of the narrative mosaic of Ada Blackjack in Stefansson and Knight's texts with her own diary, other and conflicting versions of Indigeneity appear. As my own analysis of her text has shown, Blackjack's Indigeneity is perhaps best expressed through her persistent and heterogeneous *being* in the world: through her very survival when others perish; through the multiple subject position(s) she assumes on the expedition; and through her own narrative resistance to the colonizers' versions of her story. Although Blackjack never thematizes her own Indigeneity as such, it is still represented through her empirical account.

A reading of the diary as contact zone autoethnography has shown it to be a fragmented and linguistically hybrid text with a double set of addressees, both metropolitan and Indigenous. Blackjack's diary deviates from western narrative scripts not in adhering to the chronology of day-to-day narration, but because of the extent to which its narrative tone and pace follow another kind of rhythm, perhaps best described as the ebb and flow of the natural seasons, and the gradual return of light and animal life on the island in 1923. By plotting the diary's several functions against such a larger temporal pattern I have demonstrated that the kind of optimism that characterizes the latter part of the diary is strikingly different from the diary's initial function as a last will and testament. This disparity alone suggests that it is difficult to align Ada Blackjack's autoethnographic self-representation with the one-dimensional images offered of her in Stefansson's book. As a diary persona Ada Blackjack is far from easy to define – at least not in terms of conventional western scripts of gender and Indigeneity. The kind of movement that Blackjack's narrated "I" is caught up in through her text can perhaps best be characterized as producing a *plurality of selves*, ranging from a forlorn castaway facing illness and death, to someone who not only barely survives against all odds but also "flows" with her environment (see Pálsson 2001, 279). While Stefansson's version of the Wrangel Island seamstress generally resonates with contemporary western representations of the colonial other, the functions of Blackjack's diary – as calendar and social space, last will, expedition documentation, record of animal life, hunting and sewing, and (importantly) proof of own innocence in the tragic events that took place (and which she indirectly

20 Stefansson
 ([1925] 1926, 264).

was blamed for by Stefansson through her so-called “defect in training”²⁰ – demonstrate that Blackjack assumes diverse subject positions through her writing. Here, she is a concerned nurse and mother, an ambitious trapper, a devout Christian, a curiously inclined explorer, a versatile craftswoman, and a chronicler of the mutual colonial past. Through autoethnographic writing Ada Blackjack not only actively creates a subject position for herself within an already established discourse from the heroic age of Arctic exploration. She also challenges this discourse by deviating from the characteristic script of the male, masculine, western explorer-hero as protagonist. Blackjack’s own self-fashioning produces a narrative persona which seems to be a fully developed character, a resilient individual who learns from her companions and the natural environment; someone who makes Wrangel Island her home, but whose real home is in Nome with her family. As a counter-narrative, her diary also show the futility of the Wrangel Island colonization project. The ironic fact remains that the closest we get to a friendly Arctic in these two texts is in Blackjack’s diary – after she has been left alone on the island. Perhaps, in the absence of the others, she could exercise *all* her abilities and was freer to assume other roles than the ones she had been assigned through her gender and Inuit background.

In past years, especially since the publication of Jennifer Niven’s popular biography *Ada Blackjack: A True Story of Survival in the Arctic* in 2003, there has been a resurgence of interest in the story of Blackjack’s experiences as a castaway on Wrangel Island, and it has been the topic of an increasing number of books and popular media pieces, as well as blogposts, cruise handbooks, YouTube videos, historical guided tours, and even a comic book (see, for instance, Caravantes 2016; Healy 2017; Braun 2020). Niven’s biography must in many ways be seen as paving the way for this laudable reinscription of Blackjack into public awareness. What is still to be examined is what versions of Ada Blackjack appear in contemporary historiography. As her story is told and retold in new formats, some pieces in the mosaic of her narrative will be favoured while others will not. In Niven’s biography, for instance, Arctic hysteria is offered as a plausible diagnosis and explanation for Blackjack’s so-called erratic behaviour on the island (Niven 2003, 89). This kind of representation echoes the problematic images of her as a hysteric female given in Stefansson’s book and is a reminder of the carefulness with which writers, artists, and researchers alike should approach source materials from the history of Arctic exploration, especially when those sources – by quantity or perspective – invite modern reappropriations of the Arctic Other. As argued by Mary Louise Pratt ([1992] 2008, 7), who addresses another but comparable colonial context, “If one studies only what the Europeans saw and said, one reproduces the monopoly on knowledge and interpretation that the imperial enterprise sought”.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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