

The First Inuit Autobiography: Text and Context(s)

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An extended book review of *The Diary of Abraham Ulrikab: Text and Context*. Hartmut Lutz, editor and head translator (Alootook Ipellie, foreword and cover art; Hans-Ludwig Blohm, photos).
Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2005. xxvii & 100 pp. \$29.95 sc.

The diary of Abraham Ulrikab is thought to be the first autobiographical text by an Inuit author (p. 72). This academic edition provides diary and context by documenting the journey, in 1880, of eight Inuit from Hebron, Labrador, to Europe to be displayed in zoos and ethnic shows. The Inuit were transported by Adrian Jacobsen, a Norwegian mariner employed by Carl Hagenbeck, the owner of “Hagenbecks’s Thierpark,” a Hamburg zoo. The Inuit were exhibited in replica huts and they gave performances of traditional activities, such as snowshoeing, sledding, kayaking, and harpoon hunting. Tour stops included Hamburg, Berlin, Frankfurt, Prague, and Paris, and the Inuit were displayed to audiences numbering in the thousands (almost 7,000 in Berlin, the *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* reported on 21 October 1880; p. 14). As the book’s shapers briefly point out, the tour was an iteration of earlier Hagenbeck enterprises; in 1877, Jacobsen had gathered Inuit from Greenland, and in 1874, Hagenbeck had brought in Saami people and reindeer for display (p. 77); a journalistic mention of Hagenbeck introducing to German audiences “children of the south, the Nubians,” appears, but is not explained by the editors (p. 46).

A book such as this encourages one to see the engagement of the Labrador Inuit as a racist event in a then systemically racist Western world. (So the episode is, but as a cultural-capitalistic venture, it can be seen as lineal with an infinitude of examples of racial or linguistic—idealistic *or* tokenistic—hiring of, say, dancers or actors or musicians or civil servants or teachers across the world today). Really placing the Labrador Inuit in the context of

constant, ongoing racial exploitation would diminish entirely the thrust of this work, which is emphatically self-congratulatory in its appreciation of its own right-thinking. The journalistic notice of the Nubians, seemingly beyond the interest or the ideological control of the editors, suggests that Hagenbeck had a sophisticated socio-cultural and personal program at least as developed and nuanced as that of many current academics—and entrepreneurs. These two professions—the often pseudo-public academic and the more frankly private but often publicly-reliant entrepreneur—may be different in many respects, but they are united in the sense that they both want to *convince* others about something, whether it's an idea or a product.

“Hagenbeck's Eskimos” from Greenland were exhibited in major cities in Denmark, France, and Germany throughout 1877, and returned in health and wealth. This “group” (number of participants is unspecified) received “600 crowns” (xvii). What kind of sum this was for the Greenland Inuit, or as against profits reaped by the Europeans, or in terms of today's value, the text editors do not discuss. The 1880 Labrador Inuit venture, by contrast, was blighted, with Jacobsen encountering bad weather and Danish “authorities” in Greenland who would not let him re-hire Inuit, despite the fact that some Inuit wished to return to Europe (xvii). The text offers no explanation for why permission was withheld, though the reason may be that the comparative wealth the prior Inuit travellers had amassed threatened social and economic disruption in their Native lands. This is what an article from the *Frankfurter Nachrichten* of 3 December 1880, included in the edition, frankly suggests. The article notes that “England does not care much for ‘Her Majesty's subjects,’” and that the stewardship of the Inuit as given over to the Hudson's Bay Company and Moravian missionaries may not involve the Inuit's best interests (p. 46). The journal argues that, if European-bred missionaries and officials in countries such as Denmark and Canada didn't want Inuit to travel to Europe, it was precisely because they didn't want the Inuit to learn about how badly they had been exploited in trade matters (p. 47). Curiously, the modern editors do not remark on the insight of the Frankfurt paper into the exploitation then going on—notice of that seems limited mostly to apprehension by scholars 125 years later.

Despite his setbacks, Jacobsen pressed on to Labrador, where he found German-speaking Moravian missionaries who were also unwilling to part with members of their Christian Inuit flock. The missionaries may have feared their Inuit converts might be corrupted by money, or drink, or, ironically, contact with European Christian (materialistic, dissolute, Catholic, and so on) civilization. Increasingly desperate, Jacobsen employed the Inuit Abraham Ulrikab to help in recruitment efforts as a pilot (or guide)

and translator. Abraham could write and draw and play violin, and thus was a favourite of the mission (music was an important teaching tool for the missionaries, with lyrics interpreting the Bible, for example). The missionaries may have thought, because of how they had trained him, that Abraham was incorruptible. When Jacobsen was able to persuade a family of three unconverted Inuit to join him, Abraham changed his mind and signed on, too, bringing with him his three family members and a teenaged nephew of his wife, named Tobias (p. xviii).

The two groups of Inuit—the Christianized and the un-Christianized—were very different. Terrianiak, about forty, and his wife, Paingo, of an unknown age either younger or older than her husband (the text rather slavishly accepts historical sources and suggests “30 to 50” and does not offer to comment on the cultural attitudes or circumstances or problems of recognition that would lead to such a wide and improbable estimation), were both apparently medicine people who had not joined the annual caribou hunt that year (p. xviii). They brought their teenaged daughter, Noggasak. When in distress during his family’s European travels, Terrianiak, especially, attempted to use his traditional spiritual powers. For his part, Abraham, thirty-five, brought along his wife, Ulrike, twenty-four, and their daughters, Sara, four, and Maria, only nine months. Abraham was indebted to the mission and wanted to buy nets; he needed money (Jacobsen, one assumes, would have been entreatingly sympathetic), and he also wanted to see the world—perhaps he wanted to see more of the Christian world that had been represented to him, spiritually and/or physically, by the Moravian brothers.

There were no doctors to perform vaccination in Labrador, nor was vaccination performed on arrival in Hamburg on 24 September 1880. After several deaths and despite futile vaccination attempts in late December, by mid-January 1881, all eight Inuit had succumbed, one by one, to smallpox.

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Abraham Ulrikab’s diary comprises fourteen single-spaced, translated and handwritten pages. Abraham may have been inspired to write his diary by the example of Jacobsen’s shipboard diary, and his text was translated from Inuktitut by Moravian Brother Kretschmer into German (x), then transcribed from Kretschmer’s old-style Sutterlin hand into modern German, then translated into English. The translated diary is widely spaced in a large font and takes up only part of each page it appears on, which is less than 40 percent of the book’s pages. A foreword, acknowledgements, introduction, Moravian letters, contemporary journalistic notices and advertisements, appendices, bibliography, and photos of the Hebron Moravian mission remains (as well

as a swimming polar bear, for good measure) engulf, subtext, and splice the diary so as to spread the edition out to 100 pages.

Running concomitantly through the pages of the text are Abraham's diary, letters and minutes of the Moravian missionaries, and journalistic and academic accounts of the European tour. A portrait of the Inuit-European encounter less complex and layered than annoying and disjointed is thus presented. Any interested reader will find it necessary to disentangle these narrative threads. Abraham Ulrikab's diary is shaped to a much greater degree by the edition, than the edition is shaped by Abraham's Ulrikab's diary. The black triangle points that bracket Abraham's diary, like pictures in old photo albums, enforce the sense that Abraham has passed from a live zoo to a humanist museum. The editors argue that their "focus was to present the voice of Abraham" (p. 75), and were it only the correspondence of the Moravian brothers (which often touches on the fortunes of "their" Inuit) going beneath Abraham's words, this aim might have seemed within reach. But the fragmenting of the diary yet further, through interruption with journalistic notices, sometimes massaged in their presentation by the modern editors themselves (headlines and fonts, for example), makes for a pyrrhic reading experience; and add to that an unclear (and not clarified) approach to textual disposition and chronology.

Had the editors wished to give full voice and dignity to Abraham Ulrikab's diary, they would have given it just as they could translate it, right at the start, and had the confidence of their own editorial convictions largely to add such paratexts as they deemed useful after. In this way, they would have shown respect both for Abraham Ulrikab and his potential readers. Perhaps the editors are so protective of Abraham's translated words and so desirous that he not be misunderstood that they wish to provide as much contextual material as possible. But the result is that Abraham is drowned out in a textual-academic babel that merely bears his name. The actual diary of Abraham Ulrikab is poignant both in spite and because of the handlings it has known. It *is* apparent that the translated text has been rendered as faithfully as it can be by the modern translators, and authors' royalties from this book are to go to an Aboriginal scholarship fund (p. xiv).

In a letter to a Labrador Moravian brother from December 1880, Abraham Ulrikab is apologetic for going to Europe, but he cites his debts to his missionary teachers and his desires to advance his family. The stormy trip across the Atlantic was fearsome, and the food and damp cold in Europe are unpleasant. Abraham is taken aback by the impiety he discovers in Europe, and senses the isolation of Labrador when he views all the commodities available on the European continent. Perhaps as a result of the Moravians'

teachings, he is apprehensive about meeting Catholics in such places as Prague. When he has a chance to go to church, or to see Moravian brothers who have returned to Germany from Labrador, he is most content. And while he may be amazed by the new technologies he is able to experience—as when the Inuit take trains between cities—what strikes him most, while he is in relative health, is the crush of people in Europe. At one point, when the Inuit are mobbed in their dwelling place in Berlin, Abraham writes that he had to become more or less a simulacrum, or an image of what he was supposed to be—or what he was put on display to be—in order to make the pressing throngs disperse: “... I did what I could. Taking my whip, and the Greenland seal harpoon, I made myself terrible” (p. 41). Meanwhile, the younger Tobias, Abraham’s nephew, appears to have been the favourite of the crowds, playing with the European children and having souvenir postcards made of him by his European hosts/exploiters. However, it may have been precisely Tobias’s exuberance and outgoingness that got him beaten by Jacobsen for his intractability. Then as now, stars must be managed.

As sickness and death begin to overwhelm the Inuit, Abraham senses that they will all soon perish. An especially excruciating moment in the diary is when he leaves his oldest daughter, Sara, in hospital in Germany, and travels through the day and night by train to get to the next stop in Paris, knowing that she will die at any moment while the locomotive pulls him inexorably away from her.

A January 1881 letter to Moravian Brother Elsner in Labrador is Abraham’s last correspondence, five days before his death. In it, he notes that even Terrianiak, now bereft of his wife and daughter, has taken, in desperation, to praying after the Christian fashion. Abraham’s most pressing desire is to *go home* and see his relatives once again. Witnessing the powerlessness of doctors to cure his people, he wishes to have “Jesus as our doctor, who died for us” (p. 63). He seems repentant for his material greed (a constructed sense of which may have been instilled in him by the presumably un-self-interested brethren in the first place), and he asks only that he be allowed to return to Labrador and spread the gospel as never before:

... I trust in God that He will answer my prayers and will collect all my tears every day. I do not long for earthly possessions but this is what I long for: to see my relatives again, who are over there, to talk to them of the name of God as long as I live. I hadn’t grasped this before, now I understand. I shed my tears fast, but the words uttered by Himself console us very much again and again. (p. 64–65)

The discussion of “the Eskimos” by the brothers (and Abraham’s writing has been translated by the brethren in any case) is at once both less and more rhetorical. They naturally rejoice in the Inuit people’s keen adherence to their taught faith, and, as emissaries, the brethren express satisfaction in their own and in their adherents’ observation of Christian ceremonies (p. 39). But it is ultimately difficult to find in the brethren’s airy reports much but complacent “faith” that God’s will, with respect to the Inuit, has been done. Based on what *The Diary of Abraham Ulrikab* tells us, it may be too much to say that the brethren felt, as the indoctrinated Abraham, above, may have, that the demise of the Inuit was a kind of divine recompense. Still, a kind of detached pedagogical disinterest, which sheds cold light on the brethren’s “faith,” does. When Brother Elsner writes that he cannot visit the Inuit afflicted by smallpox in Paris in January 1881, he chooses these (translated) words:

... it became easier for me to decide to abstain from the trip to Paris for the time being until the Lord would smooth the path of a journey which has been full of serious obstacles until now; but this does not mean at all that I had given up the journey altogether.

But then, tonight, we were overwhelmed by the sad news of their departure from life, which has also afflicted Mr. Hagenbeck very profoundly. The news from Paris seems to be based on a wire telegram, and there are no further details. (p. 43)

A (presumably?) unsigned letter from the Hebron mission to brethren in Germany a year after the tour is more revealing. The writer says that many thought it was just as well that the Inuit left Labrador when they did, for there was great poverty that winter and Abraham’s group would have no doubt been resentful of missing an opportunity for emolument; besides, at least in Europe Abraham would “hear good music for the first time” (p. 85). The writer is aggravated that Inuit seem to think that money from Abraham’s tour was diverted to the brethren, and he notes that the “Eskimos are not the greatest people at numerical systems or the art of calculation” (p. 86). Ultimately, the fate of Abraham’s band “taught the locals—the ones lusting for Europe—a lesson; because if they had come back healthy and rich, the craving to go to Europe and to grow rich there would have become an epidemic among the other Eskimos” (p. 85).

Two things are plain about the plight of Abraham’s and Terrianiak’s families: the casual brutality of organized religion, and the terrible confusion and perplexity felt by both new (Abraham) and very new (Terrianiak) adherents. The diffusion of values and moral relativism that creeps into the

discourse of the Inuit, placed there by their European religious (re)education, emphasizes the ways in which European religious orders can destroy Aboriginal religious, secular, and cultural moral orders towards a theology that can rationalize smallpox as divine retribution.

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The reception of the Inuit, not only then, but also now, is disturbing. The edition notes how the Inuit were (standardly, one could interject, as with North American Indians) regarded in contemporary media reports as a “dying race” (*Abendausgabe*, p. 17) or as a race that wanted, apparently, to advance itself in European, monetary terms, such that, given the chance, all Inuit would move to Europe, “*in corpore*” (*Frankfurter Nachrichten*, p. 47). Either they would die of their own accord, or seek all the riches of Europe; the tight binary to denote immigrants from the immigrant (since we are all immigrants), as opposed to emigrant (since *we* live “here”), is perhaps un-selfconsciously plain. The *Magdeburgische Zeitung*, however, strikes a dissonant chord, observing that, “in their sealskin clothes they may seem a little clumsy to us. ... But who knows how we may appear to them?” (p. 14). It adds, of the Inuit women:

They know fully well that they are being exhibited, exposed to the curious, prying glances of old and young. Who knows what these children of the North may be thinking about their highly educated European fellow humans!” (p. 23)

The *Magdeburgische Zeitung* finally affirms that it is inappropriate to exhibit human specimens as if they were zoo animals, thus contributing to a spectrum of contemporary response and opinion about the Inuit visitors that this edition helpfully provides. Strikingly, though, the modern editors decide that, perhaps because of the foregoing quotation, the writer of the *Magdeburgische Zeitung* article must be female. At first they allude to as much, and then they assume as much. In British journals of the time, it is hardly uncommon to find feminist or leftist sentiments expressed by men, as well as women, nor is it difficult, with scholarship, to arrive at an educated, or more than educated, guess as to who the writer of a piece in a given periodical may be. The *Abraham Ulrikab* editors, however, seem satisfied to leave the matter as an unsupported statement. Whether or not they are right, their essential assertion belies in a patronizing way their entire task of representing faithfully the writings of a colonized figure.

The modern editors, moreover, reserve some of their most vigorous umbrage for predecessors they should interpret as much as indict, according

to the standards they might wish to be applied to themselves. They do observe that Hagenbeck was, for his time, unusually moderate, and modern, in his treatment of Thierpark animals. They do observe that Rudolf Virchow, a founding member of the German Anthropological Society who examined the “Eskimos,” was himself progressive in many public and social causes (p. 78). They justly align him with Freud. But when Virchow is “examining” Paingo, “asking her to spread her arms horizontally because [he] wanted to take her fathom length,” (p. 80) the editors jump in to note that

here Paingo refused a subaltern position in the hierarchical subject-object relationship of researcher and researched. She assumed agency and literally leapt out of her objectification, thereby resisting the violation of her human dignity and privacy. (p. 81)

Thus is the objectified person re-objectified, this time re-inscribed within identity-erasing academic jargon. Virchow, in one of his papers, actually refers to the criticisms leveled against him by the *Magdesburgische Zeitung*, but he, *pace* the modern editors, thinks it is a man who is attacking him (p. 61). “Literally leapt”? What can that mean? This is an edition that contains a number of grammatical infelicities, which, for the most part, can be overlooked. But still, this is also an edition that presents translations after translations after translations and quite self-consciously refers to the difficulty of rendering those translations into English. Much is made of the difficulty of the translation of the so-called impossible perplexities of the “Sutterlin hand” (p. xi), but Germans of my acquaintance insist to me that this is merely an old kind of handwriting that many educated old—or young—Germans of the present would not have much difficulty deciphering at all. The edition is at pains to point out that it is, through a complex process of earnest investigation, trying to make the heretofore unrevealable more or less apparent. Any translation process is difficult and unique, but the difficulty of the process does not absolve one from attempting to use words with accuracy. In a case such as *Abraham’s Diary*, it does, in fact, behoove it. Did Abraham, or his wife, “literally leap” from the pages of a supposed journalist’s enlightened accounts in Germany in 1880? We owe history, then, now, and in the future, better than that. Why it is that academics of today can usually regard the contemporary media they consume with skepticism, but accept with ruthless and literal uninterpretive certainty, if it suits their present purposes, media of the past? It is as though history becomes truthful simply by virtue of being historical.

Setting all such matters aside, is it possible, when reading Virchow's papers, to grasp how offended Paingo may have been? She was a human being who objected to being treated like a science project. However, when reading the present text, and when once she is enshrouded yet again, by terms such as "hierarchical subject-object," "assumed agency," and so forth, one grasps just how much she has been used and used and will be abused again. She has become a kind of test case for twenty-first century academic missionaries to assume their agency over unenlightened Others, but there is no end in sight for her objectification, because her utility for the aggrandizement of others is, perhaps, eternal, if not, in fact, essential.

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The Hebron Mission closed in 1959, yet the Moravian Church remains active in Canada and in Newfoundland and Labrador. To this day, its goal is to "facilitate the development and training of Native leadership for ministry" so that those tutored will be able themselves to preach the tenets of the Church (www.moravianmission.org/partnerprovinces/nf_labrador.phtml).

The theme most emergent from this edition is that of manipulation—of the Inuit by the Moravian missionaries, Jacobsen, and Hagenbeck; of European audiences by advertisers and journalists; of knowledge by academics of the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries; of morality by every party to suit capitalist ends. (To the *Frankfurter Nachrichten's* aside about treatment of "Her Majesty's subjects," one could obviously rejoin that Canadian history has shown that Crown / Canadian officials have shown a great deal of "care" for Inuit peoples, not least in their frequent forcible relocation of them en masse to places within Canada that are further away, and possibly even more foreign than Europe.) But crucially absent entirely from this academic edition, an edition quite remarkably lavish in its paratexts, is any discussion whatsoever of *audience*. The editors show us advertising (just like any twenty-first century advertising) from clothiers who intended to synergize with and piggyback on the Eskimo exhibition. But the editors never ask: "who were these Europeans who attended the exhibition?" Who were the people who were gathered about (and who may not have even been really looking at) Abraham and his family when Abraham just wanted to get to bed and instead had to make himself terrible? Who were the men and women and children who gathered around Tobias and asked for his autograph and bought postcards of him (no CDs being then available)? Who were the people who offered tips, and even food, maybe places to stay or invitations to engagements, to the visiting Inuit? Probably, they were middle- and upper-middle class Europeans of precisely the same stamp as North Americans who attend cultural festivals, or ethnic food fairs, or Arab

movie marathons, today. Probably they were educated, curious, enlightened people who took it upon themselves to regard another culture and who felt somewhat self-congratulatory about their access to and “knowledge” of that culture. They probably looked down on other, usually poorer people who did not have the time or leisure or wherewithal to see or even know of “Hagenbeck’s Eskimos.” Whatever one thinks about such questions and their answers, the fact that this edition so blatantly compares another era and other deceased people to a presumed enlightened present makes this edition ultimately affirmative, and not transformative, of our humanist dilemmas. Our jargon, only, changes.

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