

Danish Colonialism Revisited, Deconstructed or Restaged?

Review article of *Danmark og kolonierne [Denmark and the Colonies]*
(Copenhagen: Gad, 2017).

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The launch of the five volumes *Danmark og kolonierne* (*Danmark, Grønland, Indien, Vestafrika* and *Vestindien*), on the date of the centennial of the sale of the then Danish West Indies to the United States, is a textbook example that Danish colonial history is once again receiving considerable “domestic” attention. “Once again”, because 1946-1953 (Petersen 1946; Brøndsted 1952-53), 1966-1970 (Hansen 1967, 1968, 1970; Brøndsted 1966-68) and 1980 (Hornby 1980; Feldbæk and Justesen 1980) were other years where major publications engaged Danish history not only beyond the current border, but also beyond the borders of the earlier Danish state which at different times included Scania, Northern Germany and Norway. It is presumably the lack of attention to colonial relations from 1980 to the release of the five volumes that leads the main authors to observe, “it is more and more common to state that the colonies have been forgotten in Danish historiography” (5). It is less clear when, how and why, let alone who has produced this amnesia. The lack of historiographical attention is, of course, not the same as a complete lack of attention to colonial history or colonialism, as evidenced by a number of exhibitions dedicated to the former Danish colonies in the “tropics”, since the early 1990s and a rapidly growing number of Danish tourists visiting particularly the USVI. What the statement of repression or neglect does represent is an admission that Danish national historiography has been silent on the subject for decades. In fact, earlier histories did not seek to integrate colonial history into national history, but merely insisted there was also Danish history “out

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there” to be dealt with. Thus paradoxically, also the earlier histories speak at least indirectly of colonial historiography as a neglected area.

To speak of neglect is to see colonial history as an unfortunate omission leading to amnesia. To speak of repression is to address amnesia as something wilfully produced to prevent the nation from having to face up to its typically ugly past – otherwise why would it be repressed? The stated objective in *Danmark og kolonierne*, “to bring Danish colonial history out of its amnesia” (5), leaves the question of repression versus neglect unanswered. A broader question, which similarly remains unanswered, is how colonial historiography relates to colonial history – and to colonialism more broadly. Today, colonial historiography can no longer lay universal claim to colonial history as it did in earlier times. *Danmark og kolonierne* is inevitably situated in a far more contested international landscape made up of a broad range of overlapping approaches, such as memory studies, commemoration studies, oral and ethnic history, historical anthropology, and archaeological anthropology. The fault lines between various approaches are well noted in a number of scholarly works, particularly within the more recently established fields (see Samuel 1994). Parts of the academy of historians have taken a dim view of these rising challenges. This is probably not disconnected from an anxiety over a perceived honoured tradition of establishing – some critics would say defining - access to the past.

This review article discusses how *Danmark og kolonierne* can be situated inside these wider contested debates by discussing it from the perspective of critical, interventionist fields, all concerned with colonial history narration. Some of these critical approaches, including also historians, see traditional European colonial history narration as a relic of a now redundant nationalist and Eurocentric tradition. Some contemporary Western or European colonial historiography can be seen as trying to extract itself from this legacy, yet the prism of European superiority, and benevolent/Enlightened rule accompanied by disregard and downplaying evidence of colonial repression, also governs contemporary colonial history writing. Perhaps the most highly profiled example is British historian Niall Ferguson’s extensive work dedicated to representing British imperial rule in a benevolent light. *Danmark og kolonierne* places itself within the category of a critical revisiting of colonial history writing through its guarded - but at least not dismissive - references to critically informed interventions, as well as through its explicit desire to distance itself from Eurocentric and nationalist historiography (6). The question is to what extent the critical historiographical prism actually manifests itself through the narration of Danish colonial history that follows.

The review begins by considering how successfully the five volumes emancipate Danish colonial historiography from its colonialist legacy, characterised as any readers of the earlier Danish works will know, by a narrow and brazenly nationalist focus. What this means more concretely is that the gaze of traditional colonial historiography is saturated by nostalgia and governed by a view of Danish colonialism as explicitly or implicitly benevolent and exceptional. In cases where the brutality of colonialism is impossible to ignore – not only when enslavement is involved but particularly when it is involved - benevolence is substituted by a discourse of impervious (economic) rationalism – slave ship captains doing what it takes to secure their investment and cargo for example. Rationalism here serves to make morality an aberrant, irrelevant or “luxury” discourse where history perceived through a distancing lens produces colonialism as a different time incomprehensible to contemporary Danes and their “civilised lives”. This narrative conceptualises historical periods as segregated chambers of the past – history consisting of series of breaks. Paradoxically, however, this view coexists with a narrative about “domestic” Danish history during the same period as marked by continuity – and national identity as evolutionary. These two views are mutually exclusive, and it is not surprising to find examples contradicting this neat division.

In 1848 in the Danish West Indies, enslaved took their freedom – but failed to gain their economic liberty – the same year as constitutional reform in Denmark brought an end to absolutist rule. When Denmark was occupied by Nazi Germany 1940-45, Iceland took its independence, Greenland and the Faroe Islands escaped the Danish isolationist policy and the Faroese held a referendum in 1946, which found a narrow majority in favour of independence. The referendum was subsequently dismissed by the Danish government. What these examples show is that events in the colonial world do not necessarily originate in the metropolitan culture and that national and national-imperial histories are entangled. Yet within Danish national historiography events in the colonial world are devoted limited if any attention at all – and they are seemingly without repercussions in metropolitan Denmark. In this wider consideration of national historiography, *Danmark og kolonierne* represents an important recognition that the Danish colonial world is not only important to study in isolation, colonial history is interwoven with and hence influence Danish “domestic” history.

Danish Colonial History 2.0?

No volume on Danish history, including its now ex-territorial parts, exists in a vacuum. In this particular case, the release of a new history raises the question why a new colonial history now, and

most importantly, in view of the pro-imperial nature of earlier histories, how does the new history deal with this biased tradition? The authors are relatively silent on this aspect beyond their stated rationale that the time is ripe for an updated history, including the opportunity it represents to take on board the research that has been conducted over the last four decades. This research has been marked by radically improved opportunities to revisit the former colonial realms and accompanied by the establishment of more critical approaches to the colonies and the Danish archives – not least under the influence of international developments in colonial historiography.

The five volumes' lack of direct engagement with the established "(out?)dated" representational form makes it difficult to pinpoint how the insights of recent scholarship deviates from the earlier. To what extent are the five volumes an extension of existing scholarship, an improvement on existing inadequate knowledge, or a correction of earlier scholarship driven by a pro-imperial, Eurocentric vision? It is possible to argue the new colonial history is also intended for a wider audience not well versed in the technicalities of scholarly debate. Yet, the predilection for historical detail suggests *Danmark og kolonierne* has an ambition of becoming the new standard reference in colonial historiography, and as such a scholarly work. It is also possible to put the case that even for general readers it would have been extremely helpful to get a better sense of how the landscape of historical representation has shifted in recent decades to reflect the untenable position of Eurocentric historiography. *Danmark og kolonierne* situates itself in the border landscape between academic and "popular" readership – albeit not consistently so across the volumes – as did in fact *Vore gamle tropekolonier* – its dated predecessor.

To examine the relationship between the current and earlier histories raises profound questions concerning how the nation continuously reimagines itself as a former colonial power through the academic-popularised account of its colonial history. This becomes particularly obvious in the concluding chapters of the volumes written to examine the "postcolonial" legacy of the history of relations between Danes and their former colonial subjects. History is necessarily a contested field because it is *also* an account – or record – of who "we" are, as the descendants of the contested past. The present is a range of contested narratives and so is the past - unless we think the past is a less complex and hence more easily or authoritatively settled "reality". One curious aspect of national historiography in particular is its preference for producing narratives of singularity – a view or vision of the past that is comprehensive in its aspiration and less interested in the many competing narratives and interpretations of past events. National historiography represents an ordering of the nation's space and time. And if each historiography represents its own ordering, the types of orderings offered are quite limited.

With colonial history, that is, colonial history that deals with European intervention into what they produce as the colonial world, this is quite different to national historiography in one crucial aspect. Colonial history is simultaneously regarded as “of” and “outside of” national history. There is no single instance amongst any former European empire, where colonialism has been integrated as a central aspect of the national history. Where colonial history is entertained in a displaced national frame, it typically focuses on administrative-military entrepreneurial figures; examples across the European colonial domain include figures such as Raffles, von Scholten, Lyautey, Pieterszoon Coen, Lettow-Vorbeck, Norton de Matos and Graziani. The emphasis on such figures is partly the result of colonial archives being skewed towards the colonial administrative culture and establishment leading to the neglect of colonial subjects as agents in their own history. But the administrative-military entrepreneurial figures also occupy a liminal space, a positioning that enables the inclusion of their “benevolent” acts and visions (including their entrepreneurial “skills”) as part of a national narrative on the one hand, while ostracising from the national narrative their “non-benevolent” acts – such as brutal assimilation, suppression, enslavement, genocides and military campaigns against civilian populations. In the latter case, they come to represent figures beyond the pale of the nation.

The earlier Danish “postcolonial” histories, that is, histories written after the colonies ceased to be Danish colonies are characterised by this approach. It resulted in unproblematised narrations of colonial history through the perspective of the Danish colonial administration and the white colonial establishment leading to whitewashing and national self-glorification. Yet, these accounts were also based on historical “best practice” at the time. Hence revisiting them involves identifying a skewed ideological framing of the colonial world and its subjects. This raises the question how a new colonial historiography, identifying itself as critically informed, differentiates its practice and vision from an earlier compromised Eurocentric whitewashing that made use of the same archives.

Danmark og kolonierne, while not addressing the question of altered ideology versus altered practice, is evidently defined by a broader approach to what constitutes the archive, but remains unconcerned with the earlier nexus between historical practice and colonial nostalgia. Hence there is no place where the five volumes discuss the timeliness of the new history in terms of the need to cast a far more critical self-reflective light given the romanticised glow cast over Danish colonial rule in the earlier accounts. It was precisely a counter-narrative to the romanticising colonial histories Thorkild Hansen produced by making enslavement itself the rationale of Danish colonialism in his trilogy on the Danish slave trade (1967-70). Through this, he managed partially to demonstrate the direct links between the colonial world’s atrocities and oblivious existence back in metropolitan Copenhagen. Even if Hansen also produced his own entrepreneurial heroes and failed to reject colonialism in its entirety. Hansen’s remarkable achievement, given the general climate of nostalgia

saturating accounts of Danish colonial history at the time, represents one opportunity missed in the five volumes for situating the new colonial historiography between indictment and romanticisation.¹

Expanding the Danish colonial world

Danmark og kolonierne differ from earlier histories by not limiting themselves to exploring the colonies in the Caribbean, West Africa, and South Asia, but adding a volume on Greenland and a volume on “metropolitan” Denmark. On the one hand, their treatment of Greenland as a colony arguably breaks new ground, because of an entrenched Danish resistance to accept the colonial reality of the relationship between Denmark and Greenland – in particular when it comes to exploring parallels with other colonial relations. On the other hand, their “inclusion” of Greenland is hardly new. Already in 1953, Brøndsted’s title for his two edited volumes *Vore gamle tropekolonier (Our Old Tropical Colonies)* more than suggests that if these colonies are designated as tropical, there are other colonies that are not. Applying the term “colonies” in 1950s Denmark was a “technical” issue derived from the question whether the colonies had been physically colonised, that is occupied/taken over by Danes. Hence, the trading posts established by the Danes were referred to officially as colonies (for example in *Loven om Styrelsen af Kolonierne i Grønland (Law Pertaining to the Ruling of the Colonies in Greenland)* (1908)).

Since then, as postcolonial European critiques have become inescapable reference points, it has become widely recognised that “colony” is not simply reducible to a technical occupation of land somewhere “overseas” followed by the imposition of colonial rule characterised by benevolent and Enlightened governance. Colony has to be understood in relation to the much broader term “colonialism”, referring to an asymmetrical power relation, controlled and defined by the European power to service its self-interests (see Loomba 1998, and Santos 2016: 26). Seen from this perspective, adding Greenland to the list of colonial domains would appear inescapable. What is far more striking about *Danmark og kolonierne* is the omission of Iceland and the Faroe Islands from the inventory list of Danish colonies. The volume on Denmark devotes considerable energy to rationalise the exclusion of two of the three North Atlantic colonies from the volumes:

¹ Hansen is discussed towards the end of the first volume, but is read as a non-historian, rather than as an unconventional history narrator, exploring the border territory between an archival-based documentary style, journalistic reportage and fiction. While it is pointless to argue for his position in a broader historiographical tradition, his vision of what drives narratives of Danish colonialism is an obvious reference point for a more critical departure. How did he manage to produce what so many historians had failed to produce with all the sophisticated tools of historical method at their disposal?

When the Faroe Islands and Iceland are not treated as colonies, this is due to the fact that while trade and other contacts with these North Atlantic possessions were organised for long periods in similar fashion to the colonies, we find it decisive that colonisation took place long before the modern European colonialism, and that the population here cannot be said to the same extent to be ethnically and culturally different from the inhabitants in Denmark. When Greenland, by contrast, is treated as a colony this is due to the fact that we emphasise the actual colonial relation from the end of the eighteenth century (*Danmark. En kolonimagt 2017: 6, my translation*).

The distinction here is curious in a number of ways. First of all Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands were originally settled by Europeans within the same period – the Viking Age – by the same people – Norsemen from Norway. The Norse settlers in Greenland had died out way before the second Scandinavian colonisation in 1721 – again enacted by a Norwegian, Hans Egede. While colonisation may be said to begin during the Viking Age, when we speak of colonialism – which the authors claim is how they want to look at the North Atlantic – we are looking at how Europeans generally, and in this case Danes more specifically, sought their share of the spoils of the colonial-capitalist nexus (a form of primitive accumulation) (see Hage 2017: 55-60 for a discussion of the relationship between capitalism, colonialism and racism).

The sponsorship of Hans Egede’s mission to Greenland by the king and Bergen merchants follows directly from the desire to secure profits from whaling along the Greenlandic coast and later on fur trade for the Danish-Norwegian state and economic establishment. The Danish monopoly trade, the missionaries and priests, and the colonial administrative apparatus operated as a colonial tripod ensuring the profits from the trade went through Danish(-Norwegian) hands. This was parallel to the rationale governing monopoly trade in Iceland and the Faroe Islands.

What does differentiate the various relations between Denmark and its possessions in the North Atlantic is the nexus between racism and colonialism. Given the racialised hierarchies established in Europe to justify the repression of colonial subjects (first through brutal regimes of displacement, later on through the more complex project of the “civilising mission”), the Inuit/Greenlanders’ status as non-whites and non-Europeans placed them differently on the scale of peoples ripe for colonial intervention than the Faroese and Icelanders. Yet, the critique of the racialisation regime surrounding the perception of indigenous peoples can at times also lead to a form of blindfolding. To understand the nature of colonialism is to understand how a system of exploitation rested upon another system of produced cultural difference articulated through racialized ideas. It is not difficult to prosecute the case that Greenlanders, as an Inuit people, could easily be placed alongside other peoples considered unable to adapt to European “superior” culture. Yet, in relation to both the Faroese and Icelanders, a similar discourse of differentiation operated, based, in this case, on their questionable “whiteness”, supported, for example, by narratives about them as white lost tribes, who paradoxically were deeply

connected to an original state of Viking Scandinavianness. In some ways this placed them closer to the qualities of organic Scandinavianness (including their language), and as such more “pure” than the “contaminated” populations of Scandinavia who were not protected by isolation (an argument parallel to Edward Said’s in *Orientalism*). Yet, like the descendants of the ancient Indians, Faroese and Icelanders’ original status was seen as evidence of their static nature and hence betrayed their inability to help themselves to become modern as defined by the European metropolitan culture. Hence, producing a discourse on visible racialised difference can become a way of neutralising invisible racialised difference, apart from the fact that it rationalises the view that races produce racism, rather than racism producing race.

Danmark og kolonierne reveals an awareness about characteristics of Danish colonial suppression in Iceland and the Faroe Islands, which is probably why the verdict whether relations are colonial or not continues to vacillate. The volume dedicated to Denmark itself and to its lost “territories by extension” (Northern Germany and Norway) includes the relationship with Iceland and the Faroe Islands, which produces them as component parts of the Danish conglomerate state (finishing with the 1864 defeat which saw the annexation of Northern Germany (and current southern Jutland until 1920) to Germany)). It is very difficult to see why all the North Atlantic colonies would not have been better placed in volumes of their own, and why the positioning of Icelanders and Faroese was more comparable to that of Northern Germany than to that of Greenlanders. The irresolution regarding their position is not the only loss this choice produces. The erasure of the Faroe Islands and Iceland as colonies also remove their national historiographies as alternative points of orientation. The limited attention that is after all granted to them would have benefited immensely from Icelandic and Faroese perspectives that would have marked a stark contrast to some of the assumptions governing the approach in the volume – not least the inexcusably dismissive attitude that characterises the view of the Faroese response to the Danish colonial presence.

Which returns us to the point of how to ensure the new historiography avoids the reproduction of the views of the old when the limitations of the older volumes are not singled out as integral to such a process. The authors insert a number of caveats to demonstrate their desire to step away from an existing, albeit ultimately unidentified and hence unexamined, Eurocentric colonial historiography. This includes a better understanding of the history from the perspective of the colonised; treating the colonies as part of a region rather than defined exclusively through the relation with the colonial power; and a more specific engagement with the colonial encounter. The authors conclude:

Despite the asymmetrical relations... colonial history cannot be reduced to issues of active colonisers and passive colonial victims – it is about ‘resistance, negotiation, adaptation and fusion’ (*Danmark. En kolonimagt* 2017: 6, my translation).

The summary represents a clearly defined and far more dynamic and self-conscious approach to colonial history – and to Denmark’s involvement in it. But is it also how it is executed? So, far I have dealt with the framing of the colonial history. In terms of the more contextualised discussions about the handling of the colonial archive, this is for historians to tease out – which hopefully they will. Even if engaging with the volumes as a non-historian eliminates certain aspects of the discussion – such as ways of dealing with the extensive colonial archive and its whiteness – there is no way of doing detailed justice to the five volumes here. So, the following section aims to briefly reflect on the differentiated takes on Danish colonial history and colonialism in those parts of the Danish colonial world that are covered in the four area specific volumes, *Vestindien (The West Indies)*, *Grønland (Greenland)*, *Vestafrika (West Africa)* and *India (Indien)*.

Vestindien

This volume is clearly marked by its different authorships. Some chapters are characterised by broader descriptions of the Caribbean and the search for African roots in the Caribbean, which are then more specifically contextualised in relation to the USVI. Other chapters are marked by an absence of this discourse. The difference in approach is manifest in the choice of vocabulary – not least in Simonsen’s work where racism is used as a prism through which European and Danish attitudes to the Afro-Caribbeans can be understood – a reading demonstrably influenced by discourses of whiteness partly stemming from (Afro-)American discourses. Other chapters adopt a far more descriptive tone, though, of course, the language used betrays the subjectivity behind. This creates a tension between an internationally framed examination of colonialism and enslavement in the Caribbean and narratives leaning towards entrepreneurial Danes sailing to the end of the world.

The overtly different approaches reveal how the history of representation is divided between a national examination of Danish colonial history in the USVI and a more critically informed international approach making use of the vocabulary from whiteness and critical race studies whilst remaining in the zone of historical representation. The unevenness of the volume as a whole might productively be described as revealing different priorities, and certainly different subjectivities. Yet, it is difficult to put the tension to productive use because of the overall approach of the five volumes – not to engage and openly deliberate how the white colonial archive may be unpacked to open for a post-Eurocentric reading. The post-1917 afterlife of the USVI is a welcome extension of the otherwise “archived” colonialism informing former approaches to Danish colonialism in the tropics. But there

is too little reflection on the resurrection, or the restaging – quite literally in the case of the 1998 bungled re-enactment of von Scholten’s declaration of the end of slavery - of the colonial in contemporary Danish engagement with the USVI. One can argue Denmark is a lesser preoccupation for the USVI, which are obviously more concerned with the subsequent century of US colonialism. Thus the fact of writing this volume in 2017 - other than as a(n undeclared) corrective account - means the idea is *also* to engage with how the USVI come to *mean* to contemporary Danes, who are after all the only intended audience. The volume shows that von Scholten is a marginal figure to the USVI, having been replaced by narratives of “we took our freedom”, and this narrative has clearly influenced the rewriting of the Danish traditional portrait of the enlightened and benign governor *granting* emancipation.

Vestafrika and Indien

These two volumes deal with the smallest of the Danish overseas possessions, the forts in coastal Ghana (and the abortive attempts to gain a long-term foothold inland) and the trading posts in Serampore (near Kolkata), Tranquebar (south of Puducherry) and the Nicobar Islands. The titles of the volumes strike a paradoxical grandiose chord given the small-scale Danish presence in the larger scheme of European colonialism. Contemporary difficulties by Danish visitors – from tourists to academics – in explaining to the locals that “we” (not just the British or the Dutch) were there, is an acute reminder of the many paradoxical aspects of restaging the colonial world, now with postcolonial subjects as the recalcitrant collaborators. The broader area designation presumably stems from the authors’ stated objective to view Danish colonialism as part of a broader European colonialism and to identify the Danish colonies as part of a local regional history – not merely as the recipient of Danish colonial subjugation.

The Indian volume emphasises the cultural encounter aspect of colonialism throughout – partly one suspects because of the very limited Danish presence there and its status as far from omnipotent. Hence, rather than nuancing an omnipresent Danish colonialism, such as in Greenland and the USVI, the argument seems instead premised on situating Danish colonialism within a broader European colonialism in India, and Denmark as participant in an intricate network of local power balances and interests. There is an at times overwhelming amount of detail concerning specific events, episodes and figures, where the main difference from *Vore gamle tropekolonier* resides mainly in the emphasis on both Danish and Indian sources. Scant attention is devoted to the discussion of what it means and meant to the Danes to be there. And colonialism as a project of subjugation is largely absent. On the one hand, this can be defended with reference to the circumscribed Danish presence. On the other hand, India is one place where an enormous historiography including subaltern historians writing

history from below could have offered interesting thoughts on the production of anticolonial narratives. This could again have been connected to similar anticolonial historiographical approaches in West Africa and the Caribbean.

The volume on West Africa represents the most traditional form of history writing of all the volumes, brimming with traditional source based extensive accounts of episodes in the life of Danish colonial administration. It does interest itself with the same level of detail in the regional African inter-tribal conflicts and recognises the “modern” nature of “state”-like arrangements that have been documented by African historiography since the 1960s. But its difficulties in extracting itself from the detailed accounts result in descriptive language, repetitious episodes and a neglect of the broader pattern. The “achievement” of seeing Danish colonialism as part of a broader European colonialism is impossible to avoid, given the nature of the Danish vulnerable position. Enslavement is recast in similar distanced language that characterises *Vore gamle tropekolonier*. No whiteness, no race or racism discussion, no reflection over the colonial nature of the Danish involvement, and the final chapter “Spor i ord og mursten” [*Traces in words and bricks*] shows a very limited interest in the legacy of colonialism as an ideologically informed debate about how to interpret the “common” past.

Grønland

This volume also seeks to place Denmark’s colonial intervention in the North Atlantic in a wider European context. It begins, however, with an almost inexcusable *faut pas*: To argue in favour of the timeliness of a new history of Greenland, because the previous was published in 1984 and only reached the year 1808, is clearly an absurdity. The new material that has since then “seen the light of day” (8, *my translation*) clearly relates overwhelmingly to the period post-1808. This opening also misses the opportunity of discussing the relevance of other books on Greenland and how they relate to its history generally, including Mads Lidegaard’s *Grønlands historie* (1991), which after all is a general history. The volume itself follows the pattern of the other volumes with long descriptive passages interspersed with shorter comments that reveal an interpretation of the relationship between Denmark and Greenland. One productive example of this is where Rud draws attention to the early twentieth-century Greenlandic and Danish critique of the “token inclusion of Greenlanders in the decision-making process” (238, *my translation*). The volume as a whole never really gets a grasp on the Danish presence as an actual form of colonialism, though Danish colonial thinking is referred to. The concluding chapter which lists events and processes in recent years is a largely descriptive affair with few analytical insights. In contrast to the final chapters of the other volumes, which engage – some more successfully than others - with the “postcolonial” re-encounter between Denmark, Danish

institutions, Danes and the “postcolony” the history simply continues until the present day with only a few paragraphs discussing the Danish-Greenlandic relationship today.

The Danish-Greenlandic relations, in contrast with the tropical colonies, have never been broken completely, because Greenland became first annexed to Denmark in 1953, then a home rule territory in 1979, and since 2009 a self-governing territory. This sets the relationship apart from the clean break with other former colonies (except for the Faroe Islands). Yet, similarly to the other postcolonial relations, the contemporary also marks an opportunity to identify how to characterise the relationship historically as well as currently. If, as the authors conclude “Denmark and Greenland have put the colonial relations behind them” (420, *my translation*), this requires a definition of what the colonial relations were. It would be pointless to argue that the relationship is statically colonial. Yet, to argue that it has been replaced with one that is postcolonial, requires a definition of what is entailed by a colonial relation.

Although the volume does discuss Greenland’s importance to Danish ambitions to be recognised as an Arctic power, it is less clear to see what tools are at the disposal of the Greenlandic and Danish governments respectively. If Greenlanders have a bargaining chip, it is their own country, their own society. Denmark wields its considerable power from a safe distance – and that constitutes an unquestionable asymmetrical power relation. Posed as a question, does anyone seriously believe that if Greenland had had the means they would not already have become independent? To better unravel the status of the relationship would entail unpacking the convoluted negotiations between Denmark and Greenland that remain hinted at rather than staged as part of a historical-political process of entanglement and disentanglement.

Reflections on nostalgia and European colonial historiography

In this last section of the article I would like to consider what might have been, instead of what became the five – and not seven - volumes on Danish colonial history. I want to situate a different approach by drawing attention to some interesting scholarship on colonial historiography and the tricky issue of memorialisation. In his ground-breaking study of the Haitian Revolution, *Silencing the Past*, the Haitian historian, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, examines the historiography surrounding the revolution as part of a broader set of questions addressing the premises of colonial historiography. He discusses how European colonial and local historiography become curiously parallel in their conceptualisation of the revolution. This could open for a discussion of how *Danmark og kolonierne* understands the relationship between Danish colonial historiography and local history production. But what I am more

interested in here are the repercussions of Trouillot's work for the decolonisation of European historiography, which most historians appear to recognise, but for many convoluted reasons find difficult to execute.

Trouillot points out that European historiography employs two strategies when examining the Haitian Revolution; "formulas of erasure" (96) and "the trivialisation of facts" (96). According to Trouillot, the first trope belongs to the generalists, while the second relates to specialists. The first reflects the European view of the Haitian Revolution as a non-event, hence by implication other revolts in the Caribbean (including those in the Danish West Indies) could be rubricated under the same category. Trouillot's point is that history writing produces narratives that are informed by power "that precedes the narrative proper, contributes to its creation and to its interpretation" (29). The former strategy relies on the silencing of resistance that is constitutive of European colonial historiography, while the latter "recalls the explanations of the specialists of the times, overseers and administrators in Saint-Domingue, or politicians in Paris. Both are formulas of silence" (96).

What Trouillot points to is the erasure or trivialising of colonial history as a structure inside which colonialism as a phenomenon is situated. A structure that originally did not accommodate narratives of racism, brutal repression, systematic exploitation and so forth, but where accommodating such elements (as is to a limited extent the case in *Danmark og kolonierne*) does not amount to understanding colonialism as a structure, and fails to recognise racism as structural. As Trouillot points out "none of these themes [racism, slavery and colonialism]...ha[ve] ever become a central concern of the historiographic tradition in a Western country" (Trouillot 1995: 98).

If *Danmark og kolonierne* demonstrates a shift in terms of accommodating the brutal aspects of colonialism (which is debatable since Hansen already did this unequivocally in the late 1960s) and argue for their incommensurability with a Western ethical stance, Danish colonial historiographers never come close to conceptualising colonialism as an intrinsic feature, say of Western modernity. And why not? It is not difficult to trace the links between modernity and the Holocaust, why is it so much more controversial to link the Holocaust with the Herrero genocide and other forms of colonial genocides as intrinsic to Western modernity. Can it be the task of a Danish colonial historiography to enter into this space? Yes it can, given the volumes already take the first steps to see Danish colonialism as part of a broader European colonialism, and the Danish colonies as part of a broader colonial world. Or, as Trouillot points out, drawing the connection between the grand narratives of historiography and the concise work in the historical archive: "What we are observing here is archival power at its strongest, the power to define what is and what is not a serious object of research and, therefore, of mention" (Trouillot 1995: 99).

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