

## Postcolonial Denmark

Beyond the Rot of Colonialism?

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## Postcolonial Denmark: Beyond the Rot of Colonialism?

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‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.’

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 4

Denmark is often omitted from accounts of former European overseas empires, a fate it shares with other European empires, not least the lesser powers, whether in terms of geographical scale or temporal extension, such as the German, the Italian and the Belgian. One typical example of the tendency to omission is Anthony Pagden’s otherwise insightful article, ‘Fellow Citizens and Imperial Subjects: Conquest and Sovereignty in Europe’s Overseas Empires’.<sup>1</sup> While Pagden’s title suggests a survey article of all the European empires, in the end it settles for mentioning only a few, discussing some aspects of the French, but inevitably, like the vast majority of other approaches in English dedicated to Europe’s overseas empires, only dealing emphatically with the British. The British was, of course, the most extensive empire by far during the second modernity.<sup>2</sup> The problem lies in the implicit claim to cover the collective European imperial history through the British experience alone. This claim represents not merely an oversight, it quickly becomes an enormously problematic generalisation. Not only did the size and extension of the British empire set it apart from other European empires. The ‘culture of empire’ produced by its ‘contact zones’<sup>3</sup> also differed from those of the other European nation-empires. The warning about misreading the British imperial history as representative of all imperial experience needs to be equally heeded when looking at other imperial contexts. Here, however, the warning relates to the singularity of national imperial experiences, which can become trapped by narratives of singularity. The actuality of this narrow trap is clear from the many national imperial histories producing their imperial experience as governed by an always-

benevolent exceptionalism,<sup>4</sup> at times with reference to that particular empire's small scale or short-lived existence. Colonialism was a global phenomenon that not only defined the territories subjected to its rationales and destructive rule, but also shaped European history in profound yet still reluctantly recognised ways.

The scale of the Danish empire, in terms of territorial extension and, in particular, population size, is clearly limited compared to the major empires (the British, French, Spanish, Dutch and Portuguese). Yet scale seems an odd criteria given the point of discussing colonialism and its legacies is to understand it as a general phenomenon of cultural, economic, and social oppression. It was colonialism generally that granted license to a European state to rule in whatever ways it saw fit over peoples whose territories it had summarily taken over. A more pluralistic approach to the question of colonialism and postcolonial legacy begins with identifying the parameters of the various participating empires.

Danish imperial history<sup>5</sup> begins with early explorations in the North Atlantic in search of the Northwest Passage in the fifteenth century. These sporadic forays can be seen as precursors to the material launch of Danish colonialism with the large expedition sent by King Christian the Fourth in 1618 to seek a monopoly on trade with Ceylon. While the expedition failed to achieve its objective, it paved the way for the establishment of a fortified trading post on the east coast of India at Tharangambadi [Danish: Tranquebar], south of Puducherry [Pondicherry], in 1620.<sup>6</sup> A colony was established on the Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1658 to secure Danish participation in the slave trade, while colonisation of the Danish Virgin Islands (St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix) began in 1665. The colonies here were established as plantation societies based on enslaved labour.

In 1721, the Lutheran missionary, Hans Egede, arrived in Greenland to re-Christianise what he hoped would be survivors from the old Norse settlements. But they had disappeared centuries before and Egede instead embarked on the conversion of the local Inuit to Christianity. Iceland, the Faroe Islands

and Greenland had for centuries been overseas Norwegian territories, when the creation of the Danish-Norwegian kingdom in 1536 brought them under Danish-Norwegian rule. The settlement after the Napoleonic Wars forced Denmark to cede Norway to Sweden, while the North Atlantic possessions remained with Denmark. The end of absolute monarchy in 1848 introduced limited democracy in Denmark, but Iceland was the only overseas territory that was granted the right to a local, token parliament. The Napoleonic Wars had also weakened Denmark's status as a middle-sized European power, and the country sold its colonies in India and Ghana to the British in the 1840s. Slave trade was abolished in 1803 and slavery itself in 1848 after a riot that threatened the colonists in the Danish West Indies.<sup>7</sup> Plans to sell the West Indies to the U.S. were launched already in the 1840s, but the sale only took place in 1917. In the North Atlantic, mounting Icelandic nationalism towards the end of the nineteenth century led to demands for some form of self-determination. Eventually this pressure led to the creation of Iceland's *de facto* independent status in 1918, and to complete independence in 1944. The Faroe Islands – after a shock referendum found a slim majority in favour of independence in 1946 – was granted home rule in 1948. The islands along with Greenland became Danish shires in 1953 after amendments were made to the Danish constitution. Greenlandic protests in the wake of the modernisation programs introduced by Danish governments in the 1950s and 1960s led to demands for more Greenlandic influence over their own affairs. Home rule based on the Faroese model was introduced in 1979 and self-government in 2009.<sup>8</sup>

The cursory account above reveals a few specific characteristics of Danish imperial history. Denmark had one of the most protracted empires in European history with former colonies still today a considerable way from achieving their economic, political and cultural independence. The Danish empire was widespread rather than vast in terms of territorial extension, with a sprawl of colonial outposts from north of the Arctic Circle to the tropics. Some aspects of the Danish colonial intervention, such as the Danish participation in the onslaught on China, were more short-lived.

Conversely, the colonies in Greenland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, the Danish Virgin Islands, coastal Ghana and Tranquebar in India were under Danish administration for centuries. If the imperial reign was long, so was the period of dismantling the empire, beginning with the sale of the colonies in Africa and Asia in the 1840s, and finishing with the sale of the Danish West Indies to the U.S. in 1917. In the North Atlantic, the process of decolonisation began with the granting of a limited parliamentary space to Iceland in 1848, home rule in the Faroe Islands a century later, and the accelerating decolonisation in Greenland from home rule (1979) to self-government (2009).

Certain aspects of the long phase of decolonisation have received some scholarly attention, not least the constitutional changes to the status of the Faroe Islands and Greenland in 1953.<sup>9</sup> Both colonies were annexed to Denmark in order to finish what the Danish government regarded as an embarrassing and superfluous UN pressure to force the remaining European empires to report annually on their progress towards ensuring self-determination for their colonies. The Danes were not alone in thinking along these lines. Fascist Portugal pursued a similar strategy when it declared its African colonies as overseas Portuguese provinces in 1951 to ensure the integrity of its empire. Of all the Danish colonies, Iceland was the only one that managed to forge its own path to independence. And significantly, independence took place while Denmark was occupied by Germany during the Second World War, a situation that disabled control of the colonial periphery from Copenhagen.

The reluctance to surrender control over subjugated peoples in the global South (which here includes the geographical Arctic and sub-Arctic North) is not particular to Danish colonialism, rather it is an intrinsic feature of colonialism. What does separate the Danish experience from that of other empires is the lack of physical violence in comparison with the transitions elsewhere (such as the estimated 100,000-150,000 Indonesians killed by Dutch police campaigns 1945-49 in their futile attempt to re-establish colonial rule,<sup>10</sup> the bloody Belgian departure from the Belgian Congo, the protracted wars in Italian North and East Africa, and the Portuguese colonial wars in Africa, which were instrumental

in bringing about the Portuguese 1974 Carnation Revolution). The ‘peaceful’ transition in the Danish empire arguably happened partly because the tropical colonies were sold at a relatively early stage - before the consolidation of colonial states and the rise of national anticolonial movements that came to dominate the process of political decolonisation in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean from the late nineteenth century onwards - and partly because the remaining colonies in the North Atlantic were thinly populated with a relatively limited Danish presence. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, a number of slavery-based and post-slavery poverty-based revolts took place, one of which led to the fall of the Danish government in the late nineteenth century. In Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland there were no armed struggles, except for a couple of episodes of Danish gunboat diplomacy. However, if the perspective is shifted from direct colonial and anticolonial violence to a broader notion of anticolonialism directed against Danish colonial rule, the situation appears very different. Anticolonialism combined with a nationalist movement was an important feature of all colonies in the North Atlantic. And, as was the case with anticolonial movements in other empires (of Caribbeans and Africans in London, of Africans, Asians and Caribbeans in Paris, of Africans in Lisbon), Copenhagen was an important metropolitan hub for the anticolonial and nationalist movements in the North Atlantic – from the Icelandic and Faroese nationalists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the rise of Greenlandic political parties in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

Within the Nordic region (Scandinavia, Finland, Iceland, Faroe Islands, Greenland), Denmark occupies a unique position as the only empire with long-term overseas colonies. Sweden was a predominantly European based empire,<sup>12</sup> Norway ceased to be a junior partner of an overseas empire when it was passed from Denmark to Sweden in 1814, and for centuries Finland was a colony of Sweden and then of Russia. This deeply differentiated experience, even as the Nordic countries generally participated in the economy of colonialism, marks the Nordic countries’ experiences as deeply heterogeneous, in contrast to the outside perception of them as contemporarily and historically

homogeneous.<sup>13</sup> The heterogeneity of the Nordic experience is further complicated by the fact that they have, until recently, been neglected by colonial historiography and postcolonial studies.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, acknowledging Nordic heterogeneity also invites the question whether Danish colonialism has more in common with other European colonial experiences than with those of its Nordic neighbours. The answer to this question depends on the particular prism through which colonialism is observed. If the focus is on political processes in the metropolitan centre and the colonial periphery, then the North Atlantic colonies share important features with parts of the French empire in the Caribbean, and in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which have also remained under the domination of the metropolitan culture. If attention instead is directed at the space occupied by the colony in the metropolis' cultural-social imaginary, the North Atlantic colonies occupied a space parallel to that of Algeria in the French empire. In both cases, the territories were not defined by their status as overseas colonies. What brought the colonies inside the framework of the metropolitan culture's social imaginary was the perception of the shared culture produced by colonialism and the colonies as an extension of the national imaginary. In the Danish imaginary, the North Atlantic was perceived as a national extension through the orchestration of Viking lore.<sup>15</sup> The Vikings had centuries earlier established settlements in the North Atlantic. They came from Norway and, as archaeologists have discovered, brought people from the British Isles to the Arctic and sub-Arctic and could therefore hardly be considered to be of Danish ancestry. Yet the enormous temporal gap between the Viking era and late Danish colonialism enabled this largely fictional reconstruction. This is not a unique feature of Danish historiography; in Portugal the role assigned to Portuguese discoverers in performing colonialism as a mythological extension of the national imaginary – without referring to the brutality of the subsequent conquest and subjugation – has come under scrutiny in recent postcolonial scholarship.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast to the North Atlantic, the Danish colonies in the tropics were seen to belong to a separate sphere. Apart from the appealing mythology surrounding the idea of the North Atlantic as a national extension, the differentiated classification can also be partly explained with reference to the marked differences between the colonies created for enslavement, which was a very different operational logic from that which informed the colonial subjugation in the North Atlantic. Yet this difference was not necessarily always so pronounced. In the slave colonies after the abolition of slavery, colonial administrators attempted to continue the production of tropical crops through the use of indentured labour. Similarly, the production of specific goods required and demanded by the Danish monopoly trade in the North Atlantic also constituted a regulated colonial labour force. The different localised forms of colonial administrative practice – often developed in response to the specificities of the situation – were subjected to the overall project of colonial rule, whose primary objective throughout the Danish empire remained profits.

In the light of the commonalities existing across Danish imperial history, it is paradoxical that Danish scholarship in relationship to the North Atlantic and the tropical colonies, historically as well as contemporarily, has largely lived segregated lives. Many reasons can be provided for this situation, some of which are highly complex and therefore beyond the scope of this article. What is more important for my argument here, however, is the fact that the lack of comparative scholarship reproduces the segregation of slavery-based economies in the tropics, from ‘unreal’ colonies in the North Atlantic. This furthermore enables a reading of Danish colonialism in the tropics as temporally remote, and therefore of only limited ‘historical consequence,’ while colonialism in the North Atlantic is not seen to be driven by the desire for dehumanising profiteering and exploitation, but rather by other potentially ‘benevolent’ efforts. Yet, there is little evidence to support the implicit narrative of segregation between colonialism in the north and in the tropics during the colonial era. Discussions over ways to ensure the profitability of the colonies were as rife in the north as they were



in the south. Slavery in the north was considered pointless from the perspective of economic rationalism, the same economic rationalism that led to the abolition of slave trade in the Caribbean.

### **The legacy of colonialism and its reconstructed postcolonial presents**

Colonialism and postcolonialism are obviously linked, yet clearly distinct ways of conceptualising Europe's relationship with its former colonies and its imperial and colonial past. All of Europe can be argued to have entered the phase of the postcolonial, if postcoloniality is understood as a condition shaped in formative identitarian ways by the legacy of a colonial experience, as colonisers or colonised – not infrequently European nations have been both. Norway, as part of the Danish-Norwegian kingdom until 1814, was simultaneously a colonial power and domestically subjected to Danish rule, a situation not dissimilar to that of Scotland in relation to the British empire.<sup>17</sup> Denmark, on the other hand, acted indisputably as a colonial power until the introduction of home rule in Greenland in 1979. Due to the economic and political power as the only sovereign state in *Rigsfællesskabet* (The [Danish] Commonwealth), Denmark continues to act in ways not unlike those of a colonial power when national interests are at stake.<sup>18</sup> Postcoloniality, in the political territorial form of deregulating the former colonial power, represents a condition where Greenland and the Faroe Islands continue to press for political reform of the established power regulations within *Rigsfællesskabet*.

For Denmark, postcoloniality in this framework represents a process of coming to terms with a different perception of its role in global history. This altered perspective represents a fundamental alternative to the established practice of two customary reactions to its colonial past: a) refusing to see itself as a colonial power, and b) when occasionally accepting it, holding on to a narrative of Scandinavian humanitarianism, exceptionalism, and benevolent civilising mission — which has worked as the default explanation of Danish colonialism. An interesting recent test of the Danish

preparedness to revise its self-perception has developed around the theme of reconciliation emerging from two of its former colonies. One is the U.S. Virgin Islands, an observer member of the Caribbean Association of States (CARICOM), which has established a commission to call for reparations from the former colonial powers. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, commitment to the reparations agenda comes mainly from civil society. In a similar vein, the Greenlandic government decided in 2013 to establish a reconciliation commission. This places Denmark in the potentially embarrassing situation of simultaneously facing a Caribbean critique over its enslavement history and a Greenlandic critique of Danish colonialism. One of the interesting aspects of the Greenlandic reconciliation discussion lies in its primary focus on the era immediately after the annexation of Greenland and the Faroe Islands to Denmark in 1953, a period that is ‘technically’ postcolonial because of the abolition of their colonial status. The period is also known as the ‘modernisation period’ when thousands of Danes came to Greenland to replace a small community-based culture with an imposed industrial, urban-based economy. Greenlanders have seized upon this as an immensely destructive period, which put Greenlandic identity under siege. A number of factors caused the new policy: Danish anxieties over the American presence in Greenland during and after the Second World War; the pressure from the United Nations to deliver autonomy to colonised peoples; domestic critique of appalling living conditions in Greenland; Greenlandic pressures to be emancipated from the Danish monopoly trade and from authoritarian Danish bureaucrats, and a desire to become a part of the world outside.<sup>19</sup>

The postcolonial condition of Denmark also pertains to the status of Greenlanders and Faroese living in Denmark (roughly 20,000 of each, compared to the ca. 50,000 who live in each of the two autonomous territories), where they ironically do not have the status of minority, because they are considered on a par with Danish citizens, although many of them are facing considerable problems in adapting to life in Denmark, including facing Danish discrimination – not unlike the experience of migrants and refugees from the non-West. The only recognised minority in Denmark is the German-

speaking minority living immediately north of the German border. Other minorities in Denmark are migrant communities, which again do not enjoy minority rights, and refugees. 11 per cent (or more than 600,000 people) of the Danish population are either migrants or descendants of migrants. The largest migrant communities are Poles, Turks, Germans (each community has around 30,000 members), Iraqis, Romanians, Bosnians, Norwegians, Iranians, Pakistanis and Swedes (20,000-12,000 members).<sup>20</sup> To address the question of postcolonial Denmark is also to ask how citizenship and minority rights are patrolled by the 'ethnic' majority.

The final dimension of postcolonial Denmark relates to what can be provisionally labelled as 'Danish post-1945 interventions in the global arena'. This has traditionally taken two forms: Denmark as a rather passive member of NATO working for the downscaling of military confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and Denmark's emergence as a major donor of development aid, beginning in the wake of the Second World War and becoming a major political and economic factor from the early 1960s.<sup>21</sup> This general observation, however, would need to take into account the dramatic transformation of the foreign policy to a militant intervention policy since the participation in the 2003 Iraq invasion.<sup>22</sup> It would also need to be linked to an increasingly non-apologetic strategy of denying refugees access to Denmark, to the rise of anti-Muslim sensibility across public discourse, to an increasingly self-serving emphasis in Danish development aid, and to the anxiety in public discourse over disappearing jobs to legal, semi-legal, and illegalised labour from predominantly Eastern Europe. All of which amounts to the image of a postcolonial nation in a state of permanent crisis.<sup>23</sup>

Customarily, postcolonially informed analyses of former empires' relationship to their former colonies read the relationship in terms of legacies of power relations, static processes of decolonisation, or the betrayed promises of former colonies failing their mission to obtain political and economic independence. Too little attention has been devoted to the process of restaging and

reinforcing relations in the postcolonial era between former empires and their former colonies, and to how this relates to the question of the persistence of colonial relationships. The Danish case offers some interesting insights here, since Denmark occupies a unique double position. On the one hand, it remains in a position of power in relation to its overseas autonomous territories in the North Atlantic, while on the other hand, Denmark is quite literally in the process of restoring its relations with its former colonies in the tropics. Tranquebar on the East coast of India represents one of the three colonies where restoration efforts in recent years (by the Danish National Museum, a society of volunteers, and a private fund) have raised issues concerning the relationship between colonial nostalgia and power relations.<sup>24</sup> Projects have also sought to involve the contemporary local communities, and to restore the fishing community after the deadly 2004 tsunami. The Danish National Museum has been engaged in a similar restoration project in Ghana. Here parts of the research and restoration efforts were supported by the ministerial Danish Development Aid Agency (DANIDA).<sup>25</sup> Ghana was the first country to enter the recipient list of overseas Danish development aid and is one of the key partner countries today. The discourse of the ‘shared’ colonial history remains largely absent from the development aid discourse, which leads to a peculiar split in the discourse over the contemporary Danish presence in Ghana. On the one hand, there is historical, archaeological, and anthropological archival research which focuses on traces of the Danish colonial era and research into colonial relations.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, there is a development aid discourse whose gaze is fixed on the present and future, as if colonialism has no role to play in explaining Ghana’s historical under-development. The last of the former tropical possessions, the U.S. Virgin Islands has become part of the world’s leading northern power. Yet, here Danish organisations have been involved in various restoration projects linked with the islands’ status as a Danish tourism magnet. For at least a decade, 10,000 Danes or more have annually descended on the islands to enjoy the bonanza of a tropical climate and colonial nostalgia, physically and predominantly manifested in

the preserved Danish buildings from the colonial era, Danish street signs and other more marketed forms of tourism.<sup>27</sup> Tourism is also a way of connecting the ‘lost’ colonial world in the tropics with the remaining now semi-autonomous parts of the empire in the North Atlantic. Danish tourism in the Faroe Islands and Greenland not only is a major factor in the local economies, but also is a result of the many family links between the islands and Denmark that have been established over the years. The interconnections among work, education, and leisure are reflected in the many islanders who now live in Denmark, and the thousands of Danes who have been temporarily stationed, albeit some of them for a considerable number of years, in Greenland and to a lesser extent in the Faroe Islands. Greenland as the Arctic ‘frontier’ projects Danish entrepreneurship and adventurous spirit against a too cushioned Danish welfare society. The same entrepreneurial spirit has been claimed and strategically deployed in support of the idea that the Danish ‘modernisation’ of Greenland was motivated by an unselfish urge to provide assistance to Greenland. This attitude prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s during the modernisation process itself, and while some critique has been levelled at this policy – also in Denmark - there is little indication of an actual process of coming to terms with this history as a form of colonialism - in Denmark.

### **Danophone postcolonial literature**

Given the long term involvement in colonialism, perhaps the considerable amount of Danish literature about the colonies is unsurprising. The national archive in Copenhagen hosts one of the most complete colonial archives in Europe. Anthropologists and historians have dipped into this material<sup>28</sup> and the national archive has its own interesting history in relation to the colonies, from the struggle over where to keep the colonial archive, to the protracted repatriation of the *Sagas* to Iceland and the less contested process of making archival material relating to the Danish West Indies available online.

In the canon of Danish literature, the colonial world has remained an occasional rather than a mainstream interest. In the former tropical colonies, minimal interest in literary engagements with the Danish colonial past can be found (U.S. Virgin Islands poet Edgar O. Lake is one exception), a situation further complicated by the absence of the Danish language in all three territories. In the Faroe Islands, in postcolonial Iceland, and particularly in Greenland, Denmark, or the Danish presence, is either more directly present or haunts the backdrop of the literature. Greenland has a marked tradition for articulating anticolonial resistance and postcolonial intervention.<sup>29</sup> Beyond literature itself, contemporary artistic representation with a postcolonial theme or inclination would include Iben Mondrup, Julie Edel Hardenberg and the most self-ascribed postcolonial Greenlandic artist, Pia Arke, who died in 2007. Iben Mondrup's recent novel, *Godhavn*,<sup>30</sup> details the interconnected yet paradoxically segregated lives of Greenlanders and Danish ex-pats in the small community of Qeqertarsuaq in the 1970s, when Greenlandic towns still had their Danish colonial names. Pia Arke's work collected in the two volumes, *Stories from Scoresbysund* and *Tupilakosaurus: Pia Arke's Issue with Art, Ethnicity, and Colonialism, 1981-2006*,<sup>31</sup> represents an archive in itself over Greenlandic identity and the Greenlandic-Danish relational history. Many contemporary artists do not label themselves as Inuit or Greenlandic, but speak of their work as occupying a hybrid space between more tradition-oriented practices and modernity-embracing ways of perceiving what is nonetheless self-consciously framed as a Greenlandic outlook. Artists articulating their work as contemporary (apart from the already mentioned, Mondrup, Hardenberg and Arke, this would also include Kim Leine and others) often identify themselves as working in an in-between space, a paradoxically contested and overlapping space between Greenland and Denmark. These artists operate in a context of hybridity, borderline whiteness, or see themselves as performing a creolised contemporary identity that simultaneously tests what it means to be Greenlandic, Greenlandic-Danish or Danish-Greenlandic.<sup>32</sup> As such they inhabit a shared space with an emerging

group of migrant writers, some of whom write in Danish. However, migrant Danish literature is not a well-established genre and remains far from canonised.<sup>33</sup>

The last group of postcolonial Danophone writings are produced by artists who seek to express a creolisation of Danishness that is relational to places beyond Denmark. Historically, Karen Blixen remains not only the most internationally recognised of these Danish authors; her African work also continues to draw renewed attention by Danish scholars. Part of this attention inevitably focuses on the question of her racism, routinely disputed and imputed only to disappear again largely unresolved, once the media has lost its restricted attention span.<sup>34</sup> Jakob Ejersbo represents one of the most striking recent examples of writing about Danes in postcolonial exile.<sup>35</sup> His fiction details the lives of development aid workers and their families in East Africa. These characters struggle through their encounters with Africans and other white expatriates to make sense of their lives and identities. Peter Høeg's *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*<sup>36</sup> internationally became *the* book about Denmark's unresolved colonial relationship with Greenland.<sup>37</sup> More recently, Kim Leine's novels present the same relationship in a way that stresses the Danes as largely lost characters in Greenland. This is especially evident in his novel *The Prophets of Eternal Fjord*.<sup>38</sup> In this novel, Danish early colonialism is a juggernaut that rolls over local Greenlandic culture, even as the colonial and religious administrators continuously gravitate towards their self-destruction. Anticolonialism is explored as a theme in this historical novel through the rewriting of the Greenlandic self-appointed prophet Habakuk, who spearheads a new religious movement that threatens the local Danish colonial administration's control over trade and therefore profits. While Leine proclaims his historical novel a work of fiction, Habakuk did exist and his religious movement did in fact threaten the Danish colonial administration's subjugation of their colonial subjects.

The artistic space opened at the boundary of normativised Greenlandic, Greenlandic-Danish, and postcolonial exiled identities can be discussed as a hybrid, creolised, critical race studies and

whiteness studies space. Each of these labels draws upon particular histories of disciplinary developments, which they seek to contest in order to make room for the possibility of an emancipatory space of articulation.

## **Conclusion**

To establish a proper narration of postcolonial Denmark requires a much broader approach and far more extensive work than is possible in this brief article. What the article has sought to do is to gesture towards fruitful avenues of research. What the article has also urged is to be wary of the singularity of nation-imperial narratives, even when they set out overtly to critically re-examine the nation's colonial past through a postcolonial present. The discourse of benevolence and exceptionalism is not merely a trap to be identified and tiptoed around. Benevolence and exceptionalism are extremely seductive and persuasive narratives that offer the productive perspective of nuances and ambiguities. What is very often neglected in nation-imperial contexts is that what enables such nuances and ambiguities is the idea that the postcolonial is a moment that in terms of its critical potential has exhausted itself – 'we have already been there'. Or the opposite – the premise that we cannot *fast backward* ourselves historically to the colonial moment. Hence we cannot understand how it really was. What I have sought to illustrate by discussing the Danish case is how close to the contemporary the colonial moment actually is, and yet it continues to be seen either as a phase we have always already passed through, or as a moment we have always already lost. What is called for is not merely more postcolonial literary analysis, or postcolonial work in the archives – which only represent a partial view of postcolonial Denmark. What is required is working across a number of different disciplinary fields as well as with a comparative approach on relevant aspects of colonialism – past and present – with parallel situations elsewhere in the European (post)empires.



- <sup>1</sup> Anthony Pagden, 'Fellow Citizens and Imperial Subjects: Conquest and Sovereignty in Europe's Overseas Empires,' *History and Theory* 44(4), 2005, pp 28-46
- <sup>2</sup> See Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000; Walter D. Mignolo, 'The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference,' *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101(1), 2002, pp 57-96; and Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of the Other and the Myth of Modernity*, New York: Continuum, 1995, for an important discussion of the first and second modernity and the repercussions of this for the contested issue of 'phone' centricities.
- <sup>3</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London: Routledge, 1992, p 6.
- <sup>4</sup> See Kristín Loftsdóttir and Lars Jensen, 'Introduction: Nordic Exceptionalism and the Nordic 'Others' in Kristín Loftsdóttir and Lars Jensen (eds), *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, pp 1-11; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, 'Italy and Its Colonies: An Introduction', in Prem Poddar, Rajeev Patke and Lars Jensen (eds), *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures: Continental Europe and its Empires*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008, pp 262-268; Miguel Vale de Almeida, *An Earth-Coloured Sea: 'Race', Culture and the Politics of Identity in the Postcolonial Portuguese-Speaking World*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2004, pp 48, 99, 112.
- <sup>5</sup> Scandinavian Vikings colonised, pillaged and raped their way across Europe, even if they also settled peacefully in uninhabited areas of the North Atlantic. Historically, however their colonisation, like that of the Romans and others, predate the beginning of the colonial era, customarily seen to be initiated by Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama. In similar fashion the Scandinavian crusades, which led to the colonisation of parts of the Baltic region, are also seen as belonging to a different era.
- <sup>6</sup> Most of the accounts of Danish colonialism in South Asia are in Danish, but for a brief account see Randolph Stow 'Denmark in the Indian Ocean, 1616-1845. An Introduction', *Kunapipi*, 1 (1), 1979, pp 10-26.
- <sup>7</sup> For an historical account of the end of slavery in the Danish West Indies, see Neville A. T. Hall, *Slave Societies in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix*. Mona, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press, 1992, and for a dramatised version, see Thorkild Hansen, *Islands of Slaves*. Legon, Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2005.
- <sup>8</sup> There are several Danish language accounts of the history of the overseas territories. Interestingly enough, there is, however, no collective account. The 'tropics' have been effectively separated from the 'Arctic'. The only major collective works on the tropical colonies are Johannes Brøndsted (ed.), *Vore gamle tropekolonier, Volumes I and II*, Copenhagen: Westermanns Forlag, 1953; Ove Hornby, *Danmarks historie: Kolonierne i Vestindien*, Copenhagen: Politikens Forlag, 1980; Ole Feldbæk and Ole Justesen, *Danmarks historie: Kolonierne i Asien og Afrika*, Copenhagen: Politikens Forlag, 1980. On the North Atlantic, see Tom Nauerby, *No Nation Is an Island*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1995; Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1,100 Years: History of a Marginal Society*, London: Hurst and Company, 2000; Mads Lidegaard, *Grønlands historie*, Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag, 1991. My own study, *Danmark: Rigsfællesskab, tropekolonier og den postkoloniale arv*, Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag, 2012, discusses the relationship between Denmark and all its colonies in the context of creating and maintaining a national imaginary.
- <sup>9</sup> Jensen, *Danmark: Rigsfællesskab*, chapters 2 and 3; Frede P. Jensen, Erik Beukel and Jens Elo Rytter, *Phasing Out the Colonial Status of Greenland, 1945-54: A Historical Study*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010; Sjúrdur Skaale (ed.), *The Right to National Self-Determination: The Faroe Islands and Greenland*, Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2004.
- <sup>10</sup> For an interesting account of this and a discussion of the conflictual memories and silences occasioned on both sides of the conflict see Stef Scagliola, 'The Silences and Myths of a "Dirty War": Coming to Terms with the Dutch-Indonesian Decolonisation War (1945-1949),' in *European Review of History*, 14 (2), 2007, pp 235-62.
- <sup>11</sup> Uffe Østergaard, 'Færøerne i det danske rigsfællesskab – nation uden stat eller med,' Copenhagen: CBS, Working Paper no. 44, 2008, p 9; Jensen, *Danmark: Rigsfællesskab*, pp 195-97; Birgir Hermansson, *Understanding Nationalism: Studies in Icelandic Nationalism 1800-2000*, Stockholm: Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, 2005, p 174.
- <sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the Swedish empire, see Sheila Ghose, 'Postcolonial Sweden', in Prem Poddar, Rajeev Patke and Lars Jensen (eds), *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures: Continental Europe and Its Empires*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp 417-422. As Ghose points out, Sweden 'never achieved any significant territorial expansion beyond Europe', whereas in Europe it included 'Finland, Estonia, Latvia and parts of Northern Germany, making the Baltic Sea a *mare nostrum*' (417-18). Domestically, the empire included also the subjugation of Swedish Sápmi.
- <sup>13</sup> Loftsdóttir and Jensen, *Whiteness and Postcolonialism*; Magdalena Naum and Jonas Nordin (eds), *Scandinavian Colonialism and the Rise of Modernity: Small Time Agents in a Global Arena*, New York: Springer, 2013.

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<sup>14</sup> See Serena Maurer, Kristín Loftsdóttir and Lars Jensen, 'Nordic Colonial Mind: Introduction', *Kult* 7, 2010, pp 1-6. Suvi Keskinen, Salla Tuori, Sari Inri and Diana Mulinari, *Complying with Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region*, London: Ashgate, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> See Lars Jensen, 'Provincialising Scandinavia', *Kult 7 – Nordic Colonial Mind Project*, 2010, pp 7-21, <http://postkolonial.dk/kult-7-nordic-colonial-mind>.

<sup>16</sup> See Elsa Peralta, 'Fictions of a Creole Nation: (Re)presenting Portugal's Imperial Past', in H. V. Bonavita (ed), *Negotiating Identities: Constructed Selves and Others*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp 193-217.

<sup>17</sup> See Iver B. Neumann, 'Imperializing Norden', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 49 (1), 2014, pp 119-29.

<sup>18</sup> The Thule case, where the Inughuit were forced to move to a different location in 1953 because of the American desire to expand the Thule Air Base, is one example. It took more than 40 years before compensation and an apology finally came in the late 1990s. See Christian Harlang, Henrik Karl Nielsen and Aqqaluk Lyngé, *Retten til Thulelandet*, Nuuk: Forlaget Dike, 1999. A more recent case is the secret CIA flights via Greenland in connection with George W. Bush's war on terror. Greenlandic politicians demanded in vain of Danish authorities that they examined whether American flights had violated international conventions and as such violated Greenlandic air space.

<sup>19</sup> Lars Jensen, *Crisis as Opportunity – Opportunity as Crisis: Greenlandic Independence and Sustainability*, in Kristín Loftsdóttir and Lars Jensen (eds), *Crisis in the Nordic Nations and Beyond*, London: Ashgate, 2014, pp 143-160.

Lars Jensen, 'Danishness as Whiteness in Crisis: Emerging Post-Imperial and Development Aid Anxieties', in Kristín Loftsdóttir and Lars Jensen (eds), *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities*, London: Ashgate, 2012, pp 105-117. Jens Dahl, *Arktisk selvstyre*, Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1986.

<sup>20</sup> *Indvandrerne i Danmark 2015*, Danmarks Statistik [Denmark's Bureau of Statistics], November 2015, <http://www.dst.dk/Site/Dst/Udgivelser/GetPubFile.aspx?id=20703&sid=indv2015>.

<sup>21</sup> Jensen, 'Danishness as Whiteness in Crisis'.

<sup>22</sup> It is possible to trace the interventionist military policy back to the Balkan wars in the 1990s. What fundamentally changed in the early 2000s was the unconditional Danish alignment with the Bush administration's blunt aggression against Iraq, in spite of the lack of UN endorsement.

<sup>23</sup> For a wider discussion of the anxieties haunting whiteness discourse in affluent Western societies, see Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*, Sydney: Pluto Press, 2003; Suvi Keskinen, Salla Tuori, Sari Inri and Diana Mulinari, *Complying with Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region*, London: Ashgate, 2009; Loftsdóttir and Jensen, *Whiteness and Postcolonialism* and Loftsdóttir and Jensen, *Crisis in the Nordic Nations and Beyond: At the Intersection of Environment, Finance and Multiculturalism*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Helle Jørgensen, *Tranquebar—Whose History? Transnational Cultural Heritage in a Former Danish Trading Colony in South India*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> For a brief introduction to the history of Danish colonial excavation see Inge Merkyte and Klaus Randsborg, 'Danish Castles, Forts and Plantations in Ghana: The Archaeological Evidence', *Acta Archaeologica* 83, 2012, pp 317-32.

<sup>26</sup> See The National Museum's Ghana Initiative, <http://natmus.dk/forskning/forskningsprojekter/ghana-initiativet/>. Accessed, January 07, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Louise Sebro, 'Vort tabte paradis? Danmark og den koloniale fortid,' *Historie nu*, 2007, online magazine [http://www.historienu.dk/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=490&Itemid=31](http://www.historienu.dk/site/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=490&Itemid=31); Helle Jørgensen, 'De dansk-vestindiske øer efter 1917', *Danmarkshistorien.dk*, 2013 <http://danmarkshistorien.dk/leksikon-og-kilder/vis/materiale/de-dansk-vestindiske-oer-efter-1917/>.

<sup>28</sup> Recent publications in English include, Niklas Thode Jensen, *For the Health of the Enslaved. Slaves, Medicine and Power in the Danish West Indies, 1803-1830*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2012; Nathalia Sofie Bricet, *Generating Common Heritage: Explorations Into the Reconstruction of a Former Danish Plantation in Ghana*, PhD Thesis, Department of Anthropology, Copenhagen University, 2012, and Helle Jørgensen *Tranquebar – Whose History? Transnational Cultural Heritage in a Former Danish Trading Colony in India*, PhD Thesis, Department of History and Area Studies, Aarhus University, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> On Greenlandic artistic production and the postcolonial context, see Karen Langgård, 'Greenlandic Writers', in Prem Poddar, Lars Jensen and Rajeev Patke (eds), *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures: Continental Europe and its Empires*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008, pp 71-73. Some of the better known novels include Mathias Storch, *En grønlanders drøm*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1915; Augo Lyngé, *Trehundrede år efter*, Nuuk: Atuakkiorfik, 1931/1989; Hans Anthon Lyngé *Bekendelser*, Nuuk: Atuakkiorfik, 1998; Juaaka Lyberth, *Godt i vej*, Nuuk: Milik Publishing, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Iben Mondrup, *Godhavn*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Pia Arke, *Stories from Scoresbysund: Photographs, Colonisation and Mapping*, Copenhagen: Pia Arke Selskabet and Kuratorisk Aktion, 2010; *Tupilakosaurus: Pia Arke' Issue with Art, Ethnicity and Colonialism, 1981-2006*, Copenhagen: Pia Arke Selskabet and Kuratorisk Aktion, 2010.

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<sup>32</sup> For a discussion on a history of the representation of ‘the Greenlander’/‘Inuit’/‘Eskimo’, see Erik Gant, ‘Den excentriske eskimo’, *Tidsskriftet Grønland*, 5, 1996, pp 169-92. <http://www.tidsskriftetgronland.dk/archive/1996-5-Artikel01.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> Søren Frank, ‘Is there or Is there not a Literature of Migration in Denmark?’ in Wolfgang Behschnitt, Sarah de Mul, and Liesbeth Minnaard, *Literature, Language and Multiculturalism in Scandinavia and the Low Countries*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013, pp 197-223.

<sup>34</sup> The most recent example of this occurred in connection with the publication of Marianne T. Stecher, *The Creative Dialectic in Karen Blixen’s Essays: On Gender, Nazi Germany, and Colonial Desire*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Jakob Ejersbo *Exile*, London: MacLehose Press, 2011; Jakob Ejersbo, *Liberty*, London: MacLehose Press, 2014; Jakob Ejersbo, *Revolution*, London: MacLehose Press, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Høeg, *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow*, London: Harvill, 1993.

<sup>37</sup> Kirsten Thisted, ‘The power to represent. Intertextuality and discourse in *Miss Smilla’s Sense of Snow*’, in Michael Bravo and Sverker Sörlin (eds), *Narrating the Arctic. A Cultural History of the Nordic Scientific Practices*, Canton, Mass, USA: Science History Publications, 2002, pp 311-342; Prem Poddar and Cheralyn Mealar, ‘Danish Imperial Fantasies: Peter Høeg’s *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow*,’ in Prem Poddar (ed.), *Translating Nations, The Dolphin* 30, 2000, pp 161-202.

<sup>38</sup> Kim Leine, *The Prophets of Eternal Fjord*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015.