

Roots tourism, documentarism and representations of race

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Birgitta Frello: Roots tourism, documentarism and representations of race

The paper discusses representations of race in the Danish documentary series, *Slavernes slægt (Slaves in the Family)*. The series aims at presenting a critical perspective on the story of Danish colonial history as it is conventionally told by following Scandinavian descendants of slaves from the former Danish colony of the West Indies as they travel 'back' to the West Indies in order to search for their 'roots'. In the paper I will focus on the participants' representations of race in relation to the series' overall narrative framing. It turns out that the representation of race that is generated through the overall narrative of the series is highly ambivalent, and that the individual participants' representations of race are on the one hand saturated with historical meaning, and on the other hand negotiated in relation to the very specific individual life projects.

Keywords: race, colonial history, documentarism

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Roots tourism, documentarism and representations of race

I will talk about a Danish documentary series, called *Slaves in the Family* (*Slavernes slægt*). The series was launched in 2005 on the Danish public service TV station, DR, and later it was followed by another series (*the traces of the slaves*) and by a book. I will discuss the original series, focusing on representations of race and how these representations are shaped through representations of kinship.

The series

First, I like you to watch the intro to the series.

It says:

“For the first time ever, it has become possible for at large number of families to find their roots among forgotten slaves from Africa. Now they tell their stories”

Slaves in the Family is a series of four programs. It focuses on Scandinavian descendants of slaves from the former Danish colony of the West Indies (St. John, St. Thomas and St. Croix) – now the US Virgin Islands. In the series, we follow how people of mixed Scandinavian and African or African-Caribbean descent explore their genealogy and look up unknown blood relatives.

In Denmark, The West Indies is usually mainly depicted as an exotic place which the Danes have a special relationship with because of the historical relations. Slavery is not at the forefront of Danish public narratives of the colonial history,

although the plantations on the islands were heavily dependent on the labor of slaves who were imported from West Africa.

The series aims at presenting a critical perspective on this story as it is conventionally told. It is emphasized that the lack of representation of the history of slavery in Denmark is not just as a question of omission. It is also as a question of active repression, and the series focuses on how deeply involved in the slave trade Denmark was, and how important the colony and the slave trade were for building Danish trade, industry and fortunes.

The producer of the series, Alex Frank Larsen articulates the problem like this:

‘In terms of humaneness the era of slavery was one of the most painful parts of our history, but we almost never hear about it. Particularly remarkable is the fact that young people of today who grow up in an ever more mixed society, do not learn about these crucial preconditions for their own time and existence. It looks like a national taboo’ (Larsen 2005, p. 11).

Hence an explicit purpose of the series is to demonstrate that Danish colonial history is a dark history of trading and enslaving human beings rather than a benign history of abolishing slavery – as popular historiography will often have it.

This critical perspective is furthermore supported by what I will call ‘a narrative of hybridity’. For example the producer, Larsen, emphasized that Camilla, whose search for roots we follow in the first program, has black ancestors even though she is ‘blond as a Viking’ – as he puts it (Larsen 2005, p. 6).

I will return to Camilla’s story later. The point here is that by juxtaposing the ‘black ancestors’ (or ‘dark blood – as Camilla herself formulates it) and being

'blond as a viking' Larsen draws attention to the power struggle that is involved in defining Danishness and which usually takes for granted that Danishness equals whiteness. The claim involved is that this naturalization of whiteness should be confronted, since 'We are all immigrants' – as he put it on one occasion.

Hence, Larsen situates the series within the frame of a debate that includes *both* the uncomfortable fact of the slave trading Danish past, *and* the question of the definition of 'Danishness' and the relation between on the one hand, the ethnic Danish majority and on the other hand, the ethnic minorities in Denmark.

Brief summary of my argument

I find the series interesting, among other things because I sympathize with the critical intentions, that it has. However, I also find it interesting because it illustrates a problem that often can be found in narratives that aim at a 'critical' perspective. You could call it the problem of 'double discursivity': that is, that the narrative somehow reproduces central features of the discourse that it sets out to criticize. In this series, the problem of 'double discursivity' is primarily connected to the representation of race as articulated in terms of kinship.

The series wrestles with the absences and repressions in Danish dealings with the colonial history and it does this to a large extent through various narratives of genealogy and hybridity. I will argue that the series' overall narrative is caught in an uneasy tension between on the one hand a discourse of hybridity and on the other hand a discourse of purity. And I will argue that a consequence of this is that even though the series sets out to criticize the power difference between whites

and blacks and even though it claims responsibility for the atrocities of the past. Never the less the result is that this power difference is reproduced rather than displaced because of the way in which the story is told.

Furthermore, I will argue that on the one hand the series criticizes ideas of purity, because it re-articulates the narrative of Danish colonial history and of Danish national identity. But on the other hand, the idea of purity is re-installed by the way in which the series articulate 'kinship' as the basis of true relations and true identity.

On focusing on kinship

The importance of kinship is decisive for the narrative of the series, but it is expressed and handled in very different ways by different voices in the series. I can only illustrate it briefly here.

On the one hand we have the historian, Sven Holsøe, who is given the status of an expert in the series. He describes the possibilities for the Danish slave-descendants that are opened because the meticulous Danish archives from the colony have been made available electronically.

I quote:

'This generation of Danes is for the first time being allowed to or allowing themselves to be honest about their past and particularly if they come from ... certain members of their family were African. Family becomes very important here, because the whole process of slavery and of enslavement was to negate family'

This quotation indicates that focusing on kinship is not just a convenient narrative device for telling the 'uncomfortable' story of the Danish complicity in

slavery. Kinship is of immense importance for coming to terms with the past. This is supported by Larsen – the producer – who draws a parallel to African-Americans who search for their roots and who find no information - or very limited information – when they look more than a few generations back in time. Larsen refers to the sense of ‘vacuum’ that this situation of not being able to ‘close the circle’ – as he puts it - leaves to people who search for their ancestors, and he concludes: ‘This is the chance, which is now appearing in Denmark. Here we can close circles’ (Larsen 2005, p. 11). – That is, because of the archives.

In these quotes by Holsøe and Larsen, they both emphasize the importance of knowing one’s family history. However, while Holsøe talks about it in terms of ‘allowing’ oneself to be ‘honest about the past’, Larsen refers to it in terms of ‘closing circles’ and he places the African-American and the Danish slave descendants on the same footing referring to their attempts at ‘closing the circle’.

This difference – between ‘being honest’ and ‘closing circles’ – indicates a tension that is present throughout the series. On the one hand, the series has a critical perspective on Danish ways of dealing with the colonial past; on the other hand, I will argue that the series, despite the critical ambitions, comes close to negating specific Caribbean ‘black’ experiences, connected to the legacy of slavery, because of the ways in which ‘kinship’ is represented in the series.

The narrative about the Scandinavian slave descendants is articulated primarily as a story of re-uniting family bonds that have unrightfully been broken down by slavery and colonial power. The result is that white, middleclass Danes are described as ‘victims’ of slavery along with their black, Caribbean ‘relatives’: According to the narrative of the series, they are all equally victims of slavery’s ‘negation of family’ and they all need to ‘close circles’.

Narrative framing

This is particularly evident in the way in which the genealogical explorations, that the participants perform, are framed by the *voice over* in the series. I will give you just one example:

In the first program we follow Camilla, a young Dane who travels to the West Indies in order to explore her family history. At the end of her journey, she goes to Peter Island where she meets a blind fisherman, Conrad Smith and his sister.

I will just show you a picture of that encounter – and I will leave it up to you to contemplate how to interpret this image.

The class difference between Camilla and the Smiths is obvious, but the narrative doesn't in any way explore the economic and social legacies of slavery. Instead it focuses on Camilla's enthusiasm when she explores her family history. She enthusiastically tells Conrad Smith that her family and the Smith-family are connected because the family who owned her ancestors sold land to the Smith-family's ancestors.

This encounter concludes the first program and Camilla's story, and it is accompanied by voice over. I quote:

'By this encounter a circle is closed in the long journey of Camilla. For the first time since the time of the slaves, descendants of the two related slave families from Peter Island are re-united. Thanks to Camilla's energetic quest they can now start drawing the ties of kinship across race, culture and nationality'.

I suggest that we look closer at this statement in order to ask what it implies.

- First, there is the question of agency: It is Camilla, the Danish woman, who is granted the capacity to re-unite and initiate ‘drawing the ties of kinship’.
- Second, there is the question of consequence: One can ask: Can ‘the two related slave families’, indeed, ‘start drawing the ties of kinship’? Do they have anything in common?
- Third, there is the question of ‘who cares?': Does it make any difference if they ‘draw the ties of kinship’? What kind of ‘circle is closed’ by this encounter – other than Camilla’s quest for a personal identity?

Conclusion

What I want to direct attention to by this example is that by representing Danish colonial history through a narrative of kinship, the series to some extent undermines its own critical intentions. The narrative depicts an image of natural connections that go back for decades or even centuries and that unite people ‘across race, culture and nationality’ whether or not the people involved ever knew about these connections – it lies in the blood.

By doing this, the emphasis of the narrative ceases to be on re-viewing history and claiming responsibility for the atrocities that were committed by the Danish state and by other Danish agencies during colonial time – even though this, no doubt, was the ambition behind the production of the series in the first place. Rather, what appears to be emphasized is a narrative of re-unification: It is about re-uniting what has been unrightfully torn apart, based on a notion of natural ties

made of blood. The issues of power and inequality completely disappear in the process.

By focusing on kinship, *family* – or rather *biology* – becomes the organizing unit of the tale, and consequently blood relations – rather than politics, economy, race or whatever – come to determine who are the victims and who are the perpetrators of history. According to the logic of the series' narrative, the victims are whoever can somehow claim to be related to the slaves. The series renders individual experience and life circumstances irrelevant by depicting the 'family' as the collective unit, which lives through history and which – collectively – can be the victim of this history.

The protagonist of the first program, Camilla, is a Danish teacher, who has no personal experience whatsoever with the legacy of slavery. However, in concordance with the narrative of the natural ties of kinship, it makes perfect sense that there is a scene in the first program in which a descendant of the planter who owned Camilla's enslaved great great grandmother, expresses a feeling of guilt towards her, when he tells her about the brutal suppression of a riot on the plantation in the 1820's.

So, the series sets out to enable the Danes to 'be honest about the past'. And it ends up depicting middleclass Danes as victims of slavery.

Furthermore, while the narrative of the series is predicated on racially hybrid kinship, as when it is emphasized that 'dark blood' can be found in the veins of Camilla, the 'Viking', still kinship is nevertheless articulated in terms of essence, that is, in term of finding one's 'true identity'. The potentially subversive story of hybridity is here displaced by a sentimental quest for a 'true' personal identity.

Yet another quote from Larsen can serve as an illustration:

‘A lucky coincidence of factors carry the reason why so many Danes can suddenly dig out their true identity and sometimes embrace unknown relatives on a remote continent after more than 100 years of separation’ (Larsen 2005, p.9.).

The discourse of purity, which the talk of ‘true identity’ is predicated on, of course does not erase the critical hybridization of Danishness and of dominant Danish versions of history that are also present in the series. But I think that it raises some interesting questions concerning the conditions for criticizing notions of essence and purity:

Are we dependent on constructing new versions of purity each time we acknowledge and try to deconstruct the ones that we find problematic? Or is it possible to construct different kinds of narratives, one may ask?

Narratives like the ones we find in *Slaves in the Family* certainly doesn't help.