

Introduction

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Nordic postcolonialism is not an established discursive field. It lacks an independent theoretical framework through which its themes and ideas can be articulated. Until recently, any references to postcolonialism, within a Nordic context, would be to postcolonial studies in English departments in Nordic universities. (Nordic postcolonial studies are among the oldest postcolonial curricula).¹ These disciplines remain, however, primarily preoccupied with postcolonial studies in Anglophone parts of the world, a preoccupation also propelled by the emphasis on teaching only original English language texts within English courses. Outside English departments, postcolonialism as a preoccupation with colonial history, with its legacy, and especially with its impact on conceptions of the national self in metropolitan/imperial cultures, has led to sporadic interventions within a Nordic context. However, it has not occasioned a sustained critique of the historical relationship between the Nordic countries and colonialism. Nor has it resulted in a critique of how the shaping of a global vision, during colonial times, might persist in an altered form that nonetheless perceives global relations, for example, in the shape of the relationship between north and south, and in similar ways to how it was seen during colonialism.

There are good reasons for this, which we nonetheless problematise in the following discussion, and which this volume questions. Historically, the Nordic countries remained peripheral colonial powers throughout the colonial era. Only the Danish-Norwegian kingdom had any substantial colonial possessions. Once again the Nordic countries are marginal to the mechanisms of a globalisation whose relationship with

¹ In Denmark, postcolonial studies began as an interest in literatures from the British Commonwealth at Århus University in the late 1950s. By the mid-1960s Commonwealth literature studies was being established as a general field both at Århus and Copenhagen Universities. This follows a similar pattern to the establishment of Commonwealth literatures in the Anglophone world, and gradually elsewhere. In the 1980s Commonwealth literature studies was replaced by the broader and more theory-orientated term postcolonial studies. The history of the evolution of the field and its battle zones are outlined in Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*, London: Verso, 2007.

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the imperial-colonial nexus, which shaped international relations post-Columbus to the decolonial era, remains under examined. Yet, if the colonial era – and its contemporary parallel – are global, then the Nordic countries must necessarily occupy a (or several) position(s) inside this global system of economic, social and cultural exchange. To be peripheral is not identical to being an innocent bystander. To identify this peripheral position, and to interrogate its meaning, are enormously complex tasks, which this volume, and the accompanying *Decoding the Nordic Colonial Mind* workshops, initiate.

In this regard it is necessary to map the multiple roles and engagements which the Nordic countries had in colonial and postcolonial times and, as well as, to delineate how colonialism entangled different Nordic countries as a means of seeing the world and conceptualizing the relationship between different parts of it. The Nordic countries have not been incidental in the shaping of the modern world as demonstrated by Mary Louise Pratt's identification of the Swedish naturalist, Carl von Linné, as a crucial actor in shaping Europe's consciousness of the planet through his classification system for all plants on the earth in *Systema Naturae*.² Pratt stresses that Linné's Swedish nationality, – despite Sweden being 'a relatively minor player in global economic and imperial competition' – stimulated and facilitated the general acceptance of his ideas among other European nations.³ The example of Linné also reveals that *Decoding the Nordic Colonial Mind* connects to postcolonial explorations elsewhere in continental Europe; these are emerging as a major field of interest, for example, in Lusophone and Italoophone postcolonial studies.

Italy and Portugal may (like the Nordic countries) have been more or less peripheral to the activities which impelled colonialism as a system of exploitation, but the postcolonial research carried out in these places raises similar questions about their reluctance to come to terms with their complicity in colonialism. This line of enquiry also involves the issue of the legacy of colonialism in national thought paradigms that addresses the increasing presence in Europe of non-western 'others', whose very existence seems to raise disturbing, important questions concerning naturalised, hierarchical positions of European selves, and non-western 'others'. Part of this project, however, concerns problematising the readily produced dichotomy between two separate worlds one of which is passive and the other active – a perception which often threatens to become characteristic of north-south discourse. The dilemma here is, on the one hand, not to lose sight of the unequal historical spatial organization of the world, which continues to inform the present, while,

² Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, 5 and 24.

³ Pratt, 25.

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on the other, understanding the complexities which underlie this power relation.⁴ The search for a western identity and, more precisely, for the definition of a western self that emerges against a non-western ‘other’, is a common feature in western societies, within the contemporary processes of globalisation. Migration, the globalisation of capital and capitalism, climate change can all be viewed as examples of how public discourses seek to determine the meaning of Western and Western interest, while implicitly or implicitly referring to others. In Edward Said’s work *Orientalism*⁵ – often seen as the defining movement in creating a postcolonial perspective – *the orient* is no less important in creating the self than the other. Finally, the Nordic countries also have their own peculiar histories (older as well as more contemporary), their own particular and more recent interventions into the processes of globalisation (as evident in, for example, their high profiles in development aid and relatively modest military presences in international conflicts).

The Decoding the Nordic Colonial Mind’s project agenda is the disentangling of peculiarities and similarities both within the Nordic countries and with respect to the world outside these countries. A volume like the present one with its seven articles cannot hope to do this; nor does it seek to do so. Instead, this journal outlines some important markers necessary to begin resolutely the undertaking of postcolonising the Nordic countries, or perhaps more productively – in reference to the Nordic countries’ strong presence in the development aid industry – call it decolonising the Nordic countries. As indicated, engagement with such a project is a relatively recent one, and has produced only scattered interventions to date.⁶

If we accept Ngugi’s idea of decolonisation as a mental process,⁷ and accept the notion that colonialism is a relationship between a metropolitan culture and a colonial culture, then decolonisation must take place in both sites. If the Nordic countries participated in colonial adventures – a clear line for which can be established from the 1620s until mid-20th century – then it becomes imperative to ask how did the Nordic countries handle their role culturally. That is, not only during colonialism, but also after its

⁴ Kristín Loftsdóttir, 'This Time It's Different': Globalization, Power and Mobility. In *Topographies of Globalization: Politics, Culture, Language*, Valur Ingimundarson, Kristín Loftsdóttir, Irma Erlingsdóttir (eds), 149-62. Reykjavík: University of Iceland, 2004, 158.

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

⁶ See for example: B. Christiansen L. Jensen, K. Johansen, S. Kok and K. H. Petersen (eds) , *På sporet af Imperiet: Danske tropefantasier*. Roskilde: Institute for Sprog og Kultur, 2005; S. Keskinen, S. Irni, D. Mulinari, & S. Tuori, S. (eds), *Complying With Colonialism*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2009.

⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, London: James Currey, 1986.

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conclusion as a formal regime of domination. Ngugi among others point out that ‘postcolonialism’ only makes sense, if ‘colonialism’ has been conceptually completed. The ‘post’ does not signal an ‘after’, rather it is understood as relational to ‘colonialism’. These postcolonialists would argue that we cannot understand what happens in post-earthquake Haiti, nor can we understand the degree of destruction, without referring to the history of colonialism. For Nordic countries, this means, that postcolonialism speaks of a continued conceptualisation of a Nordic self, and a non-western ‘other’ in either a direct or an implicit hierarchical understanding of ‘postcolonialism’. On a more general level to interrogate postcolonial Nordic countries entails speaking about the invisibility of whiteness, of the privileging of vernacular languages, of the absence of racial discourse and the overt presence of ‘culture’ as an objectified, already identified, naturalised, hierarchised referent.

The Nordic Colonial Mind began as a series of discussions in Uppsala on Nordic African interconnections in 2006 and 2007. Scholars met to discuss what relationships the Nordic countries had to colonialism, and, in particular, whether those relationships constituted a particular form of broader European colonialism. The need to delimit the legacy of Nordic African history and to extend it outside geographical boundaries was an outcome of these discussions. They explored how the non-European world is considered in the contemporary Nordic cultures and, further, how in this age of intensifying globalisation such figuring(s) of the Nordic relationship with the non-European world is influenced.

Within the essay, ‘Provincialising Scandinavia’, Lars Jensen opens a conversation about the kinds of theoretical frameworks we might engage under the banner of Nordic postcolonialism. Jensen’s contribution to this conversation, draws on Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincialising Europe* to suggest a provincialisation of Scandinavia. One that entails reading Scandinavia as historically and contemporaneously peripheral to the European continent and shaped by colonial modernities that evidence both regional and continental particularities. The essay also calls for a critical exploration of what is at stake in the naming of relevant theoretical frameworks, that is, of the postcolonial project this volume begins to outline.

We can read Anne Hege Simonsen’s and Kristin Loftsdottir’s articles in this volume as two examples of how we might approach the application of the kind of attention to postcolonialism in peripheral contexts Jensen calls for. In ‘Fantasies and Experiences’, Hege Simonsen charts Norway’s discursive colonization of Africa in the twentieth century Norwegian press. She demonstrates how this colonisation worked through the media’s production of fantasies of Africa that had little to do with materialities of life on the African

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continent and a Norwegian presence there, and how these fantasies were linked to both Norwegian nation-building and broader European notions of the colonised Other.

Loftsdóttir's essay 'Becoming Civilized' reads the interplay of peripheral Nordic and continental European colonial narratives in an Icelandic context through the lens of intertextuality. Her exploration of how masculinised nationalist notions of Europeanness are drawn on and reworked in a colonised Icelandic discursive and physical space demonstrates the importance of a Nordic postcolonialism that works across categories of race, gender and nation. Loftsdóttir's article also, like Hege Simonsen's, highlights a need for a Nordic postcolonialism that charts the production of 'fantasies' of Nordic colonial encounters that erase the materialities of colonial subjects, spaces and encounters.

Birgitta Frello's essay, 'Dark Blood', offers hybridity as another tool for a Nordic postcolonialism, one that can help us explore the complexities, incongruities and paradoxes of postcolonial categorization as it emerges in Nordic spaces. Frello demonstrates the ways in which the Danish television series *Slaves in the Family* (*Slavernes slægt*) is 'caught in an uneasy tension' between a 'liberal hybridism' that obscures unequal power relations and 'hybridity as displacement' that highlights these relations by disrupting racially and culturally pure notions of Danishness. She questions an uncritical embrace of interpretations of hybridity as inherently resistive to colonial categorisation and the power inequalities with which they are intertwined, calling instead for attention to the ways in which seemingly transgressive moments of hybridity can end up reproducing colonial notions of categorical purity.

Kristina Helgesson Kjellin's article, 'Science in the Name of Jesus,' finds ambiguity in the ways in which two turn-of-the-twentieth-century Swedish missionaries, Karl Edvard and Selma Laman, represented their collection of human craniums in the Belgian Congo. She shows how this ambiguity emerged in the space between, on the one hand, the missionaries' critiques of colonialism's treatment of the Congolese and, on the other, their reproduction of colonial categorizations of civilized Swedes and primitive Africans that justified missionary work as the salvation of the latter by the former.

In 'Remembering Nordic colonialism' Bolette Blaagaard revisits the Danish television series *Slaves in the Family* to show how the documentary series' depiction of a re-enactment of Denmark's emancipation of its Caribbean slaves epitomises Danish journalism's contribution to the reproduction of a cultural non-memory of Denmark's colonial past. Blaagaard demonstrates how this brief moment in the series demonstrates a journalistic 'ignorance' (in the double sense of 'not knowing' and 'ignoring') about Danish

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colonial history that forecloses productive engagement with colonial and postcolonial relations within, and between, Denmark and the Caribbean. She also argues that the kind of non-memory of Danish colonialism *Slaves in the Family* produces enables representations of national guilt about contemporary modes of engaging with ‘difference’ in Denmark, including those emerging in the context of the ‘cartoon controversy’ of 2005-2006, as ‘un-Danish’.

May-Britt Öhman’s essay, ‘Sweden Helps’ traces the ways in which two Swedish international development assistance campaigns (in the 1950s and 1960s) worked to reinvent Sweden as a modern, well-off nation of ‘good people with good intentions’ who ‘help’ the poor and miserable of the *global south*. Öhman argues that the Swedish state projects Swedish development assistance during this period as altruistic in so much as it was free from colonial commercial interests. This representation however concealed both Swedish international development’s capitalist roots and Sweden’s colonial past.

Like the essays that proceed it, Öhman’s writing continues the Nordic Decolonial project of examining obliterations, erasures, and/or forgetting in overarching ‘fantasies’ of colonial and postcolonial interactions. Reading across the articles also offers opportunities to admit regional continuities, connections, distortions and instabilities between Nordic colonial modernities emerging at different moments and at different geographic sites. The contributions to this volume chart an emerging Nordic postcolonialism that speaks of the invisibility of whiteness, of the privileging of vernacular languages, of the absence of racial discourse and the overt presence of ‘culture’ as an objectified, already identified, naturalised, hierarchised referent. They map this Nordic postcolonialism, in terms of developing theoretical frameworks for reading the Nordic as postcolonial, and by offering models of how such frameworks might be applied to interpret specific historical and contemporary spaces, sites, subjects, practices, and texts.

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