

THE DANISH AFRICAN: WOLLE KIRK, WHITENESS AND COLONIAL COMPLICITY.

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Abstract

The article analyses the racial self-representation of Wolle Kirk in his memoir *Paradis i frit fald til helvede? En tilstandsrapport fra Zimbabwe* (2008). Kirk bought a farm from the Rhodesian apartheid government in 1973 and ran it with his sons until he was violently attacked on the farm in 2002 as part of Zimbabwe's 'fast-track' land reform program. The article reads the signs of race produced in the memoir as located both in the context of the violent land disputes in Zimbabwe in the 2000s, and in terms of Danish development aid and solidarity discourses, which produce a claim to Danish exceptionalism that Kirk accepts wholesale. We argue that the text exemplifies how claims of Danish exceptionalism may not only de-historicise whiteness and deny colonial accountability, but also produce complicity with, and tacit acceptance of, colonial structures of race.

Introduction

In this article we analyse the memoirs of Wolle Kirk: *Paradis i frit fald til helvede? En tilstandsrapport fra Zimbabwe* (A paradise in free fall towards hell? A status report from Zimbabwe) which he published in Denmark in 2008. Wolle Kirk, who variously referred to himself as a 'West-Jutlandic African' and as a 'white-negro',¹ was born in 1937 in Hanstholm in the Nordjylland region of Denmark. He first travelled to Africa in 1968, when he was employed by the NGO *Mellemfolkeligt Samvirke* on a DANIDA project as

¹ Jacob Stenz, 'De vestjyske afrikanere' in *Morsø Folkeblad*. 11 June 2008, p. 12. Based on his interview with Wolle Kirk, the author, Jacob Stenz, has published a number of similar articles, with roughly the same wording in a number of local papers in Jutland (e.g. *Midtjyllands Avis* 24 May 2008, *Jyske Vestkysten* 25 May 2008, *Dagbladet Vestjyske* 24 May 2008) giving the interview a wider dissemination beyond the narrow local readership of *Morsø Folkeblad*.

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an agricultural expert in Zambia for two years. Kirk and his family then immigrated to Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) in 1973, apparently as a protest against Denmark's inclusion in the European community.² In Rhodesia, he bought farmland from Ian Smith's apartheid government – which heavily subsidised white-owned farms to support Rhodesian economic growth and entice European immigration into the country – despite international sanctions against the rogue state. Between the years 1973 and 2002, Kirk built up and operated a major dairy, cattle and tobacco farm – Zengea Farms – owned by his company, Red Dane Dairy. In 2002, Kirk's farm was invaded in Zimbabwe's notorious land grabs, where white-owned land was seized for reclamation by supposed 'war veterans' of the liberation struggle against the Rhodesian state. Robert Mugabe saw this as the "last struggle for the complete decolonization of our country and continent as a whole".³ While many of the attackers were indeed impoverished peasants – and perhaps even veterans of the liberation war – in reality, Zimbabwe's land redistribution program was poorly administered and rife with corruption and cronyism. The result was violent land grabs, rather than systematic land redistribution. The seizure of Kirk's farm was violent, too (he lost his left eye in the attack) and although his farm was ultimately protected by Robert Mugabe's agreement to uphold bilateral investment promotion and protection agreements with Denmark, Kirk and his wife returned to Denmark after the attack.⁴

Back in Denmark, Kirk quickly formed a public profile as commentator and expert on the Zimbabwean situation. In 2008 he published an account of his time in Africa, paying particular attention to what he portrays as Zimbabwe's descent into complete breakdown in its postcolonial years. The memoir, *Paradis i frit fald til helvede? En tilstandsrapport fra Zimbabwe*,⁵ culminates in the scene of the attack on Kirk's farm; a scene that consolidates his narrative of Zimbabwe's plummet into 'hell'. The book is published by Kirk's own publishing house 'Piraten' (the pirate) – a clear reference both

² This information is included in almost all the obituaries published in Danish newspapers after Kirk's death in a car accident in Denmark in 2009.

³ Robert Mugabe, *Inside the Third Chimurenga*, The Department of Information and Publicity, Harare, 2001, p. 55.

⁴ Kirk's sons took over the management of the land. A renewed attempt at reclamation occurred in 2006, despite Mugabe's agreement with Denmark. Once again this was unsuccessful and Zengea farms remains in the hands of the Kirk family's company, Red Dane Dairy.

⁵ Wolle Kirk, 'Paradis i frit fald til helvede? En tilstandsrapport fra Zimbabwe', Piraten, Hurup, 2008.

to the distinctive eye-patch that Kirk wore after losing his eye in the farm attack and to his self-perception as an anti-establishment figure.

The event of land reclamation in the Zimbabwean postcolony, and the representational strategies used to depict it, is a complex and dense discursive site, both in Zimbabwe, where the land issue has been at the heart of political struggles over the last two decades,⁶ and internationally, where the land issue has been interpreted, largely as a ‘black on white’ issue.⁷ The racial meanings pervading the scene are multiple and contested from every side, evoking intense conflict and recalling violent colonial history. The fact that Kirk enters this representational fray, in Danish to a Danish audience, in his book and in his varied and multiple statements about Zimbabwe in the Danish media, is our key site of analysis in this article. Kirk’s presentation of his Danish national identity, and his configuration of his whiteness as specifically Danish, is linked, throughout his writing and interviews, to his investment in developing the skills of his workers and educating their children on his farms. While this self-perception – position, even – complicates the meanings of Kirk’s whiteness in the Zimbabwean context, we wager that it does not counter his complicity with colonial formations of race. Kirk is not only complicit in the colonial and apartheid past as a beneficiary of Rhodesian subsidies which supported white ownership of farms at the cost of and in direct competition with black farming initiatives. More than this, we read his complicity in colonial models of race in ways that have been theorized by various commentators on Nordic colonial imaginaries. Ulla Vuorela’s discussion of the ways in which “tacit acceptance in our everyday practices...can be transformed into colonial complicity”⁸ is instructive, as is Christina Petterson’s reading of this complicity as constituting both symbolic and systemic violence in Slavoj Žižek’s sense.⁹

⁶ e.g. Brian Raftopoulos, *Nation, race and history in Zimbabwean politics*. In: Raftopoulos & Savage (eds.) 2004: Zimbabwe. Injustice and Political Reconciliation. Institute for Justice and Reconciliation. Cape Town. 2004, pp.160-175.

⁷ e.g. Wendy Willems, *Remnants of Empire? British media reporting on Zimbabwe*. In: Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture. Special Issue November 2005. pp. 91-108.

⁸ Ulla Vuorela, ‘Colonial complicity: The “postcolonial” in a Nordic context’ in Suvi Keskinen, Sari Irni and Diana Mulinari (eds.) *Complying with Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region*, Ashgate, Surrey, 2009, p. 20.

⁹ Christina Petterson, ‘Colonialism, racism and exceptionalism’ in Kristín Loftsdóttir and Lars Jensen (eds.) *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region*, Ashgate, Surrey, 2012, p.30. See also Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, Picador, New York, 2008, p. 9-10.

A key question for us is: to what extent does Kirk's memoir – and his subsequent stylizing of his public persona in Denmark – tacitly accept the privileges of his whiteness in the Zimbabwean context? Since this whiteness does not carry the same meanings in the Danish context, how does one find critical leverage in addressing the ways Kirk represents the historically and racially fraught scene of land reclamation in Danish to a Danish audience, as though he and that audience are positioned as innocent bystanders to colonial history? These questions raise broader concerns as to how notions of Nordic exceptionalism might collude with colonial racial meanings that continue to circulate in and about Africa today.

Danish Exceptionalism

The question of the Nordic region's involvement in and complicity with the long and violent history of European colonisation has come under intense scholarly scrutiny in recent years. This scholarship, exemplified in the two volumes *Complying with Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region* (2009) and *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region* (2012), as well as a special edition of the journal *Kult* entitled 'The Nordic Colonial Mind' (2010),¹⁰ has interrogated the notion that Nordic countries are exempt from both European colonial history and the racial meanings that that history has left in its wake. Scholars have questioned the idea of Nordic exceptionalism by identifying multiple and complex sites of Nordic colonial activity,¹¹ as well as by analysing the extent to which colonial imaginaries have shaped Nordic perceptions of belonging and nationhood,¹² family and culture,¹³ and gender,¹⁴ class and race.¹⁵

¹⁰ S.K Maurer, K Loftsdóttir et al. (eds.) *Kult en temaserie*, (Special issue: Nordic Colonial Mind) vol. 7, 2010.

¹¹ See, Mai Palmberg, 'The Nordic Colonial Mind' in *Complying with Colonialism*, pp. 35-50; Erlend Eidsvik, 'Colonial discourse and ambivalence: Norwegian participants on the colonial arena in South Africa' in *Whiteness and Postcolonialism*, pp. 13-28; and Petterson, 'Colonialism, racism and exceptionalism', pp. 29-43.

¹² Suvi Keskinen, "'Honour related violence" and Nordic nation-building' in *Complying with Colonialism*, pp. 257-272; Kirstín Loftsdóttir, 'Belonging and the Icelandic others: situating Icelandic identity in a postcolonial context' in *Whiteness and Postcolonialism*, pp. 57-72.

¹³ Bolette B. Blaagaard, 'The Flipside of my Passport: Myths of Origin and Genealogy of White Supremacy in the Mediated Social Genetic Imaginary' in *Complying with Colonialism*, pp. 51-66; Johanna Latvala, 'Stranger or family member? Reproducing postcolonial power relations' in *Complying with Colonialism*, pp. 85-100; Linda Lund Pedersen, 'Intimacy with the Danish state: my partner, the Danish state and I – a case study of family reunification policy in Denmark' in *Whiteness and Postcolonialism*, pp.

Yet, Mai Palmberg usefully cautions us, in our readiness to discover sites of colonial complicity in the Nordic region, not to flatten the historical nuances of the variable degrees with which European nations invested in and benefited from colonial projects.¹⁶ Indeed, she makes the important claim that the discourse of exceptionalism emerges, in the first instance, precisely because the Nordic region does enjoy a different relationship to European colonial history than that of the Imperial superpowers. This difference is not only because of the Nordic region's relatively minor (though by no means non-existent) involvement in colonization, but also because of its solidarity and development aid credentials. In our view, it is precisely these solidarity initiatives instituted in the Nordic relationship with southern independence movements that promoted a 'will to exceptionalism', in which an anti-colonial stance erased critical scrutiny of Nordic complicity in colonialism. This will to exceptionalism was then woven into the Nordic development aid tradition, which is characterized by notions of global responsibility, equality and ideals of peace and security through the eradication of poverty.¹⁷ Like its Nordic neighbours, Denmark supported liberation struggles in the global south, particularly in Southern Africa, where bilateral support to humanitarian organizations and liberation movements went hand-in-hand with aid initiatives, setting the Nordic countries apart from their western allies during the cold war.¹⁸ Furthermore, Danish bilateral aid via the state agency DANIDA as well as various NGO groups, developed aid initiatives that were often tied in with solidarity initiatives.¹⁹ As such, a

141-158; Leena-Maija Rossi, 'Licorice boys and female coffee beans: representations of colonial complicity in Finnish visual culture' in *Complying with Colonialism*, pp. 189-206

¹⁴ Suvi Keskinen, 'Transnational influences, gender equality and violence in Muslim families' in *Whiteness and Postcolonialism*, pp. 73-88; Jana Sverdljuk, 'Contradicting the "prostitution stigma": narratives of Russian migrant women living in Norway' in *Complying with Colonialism*, pp. 137-154; Salla Tuori 'Postcolonial and queer readings of "migrant families" in the context of multicultural work' in *Complying with Colonialism*, pp. 155-170; Jaana Vuori, 'Guiding migrants to the realm of gender equality' in *Complying with Colonialism*, pp. 207-224; Chia-Ling Yang 'Whose feminism? Whose emancipation?' in *Complying with Colonialism*, pp. 241-256.

¹⁵ Lars Jensen 'Danishness as whiteness in crisis: emerging post-imperial an development aid anxieties' in *Whiteness and Postcolonialism*, pp. 105-118; Tobias Hübinette and Carina Tigervall 'When racism becomes individualized: experiences of racialization among adult adoptees and adoptive parents of Sweden' in *Complying with Colonialism*, pp. 119-136; Tobias Hübinette, "'Words that wound": Swedish whiteness and its inability to accommodate minority experiences' in *Whiteness and Postcolonialism*, pp. 43-56.

¹⁶ Palmberg 'The Nordic Colonial Mind', p. 36.

¹⁷ Espen Brunbech, Annette Skovsted Hansen, and Kristine Midtgaard, 'Historier om dansk udviklingsbistand' in *Den Jyske Historiker*, no. 120, 2008, pp. 5-6.

¹⁸ Palmberg 'The Nordic Colonial Mind' 36; Christopher Munte Morgenstjerne, *Denmark and National Liberation in Southern Africa*. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet. Uppsala, 2003, p. 13.

¹⁹ Brunbech, Skovsted Hansen and Midtgaard, 'Historier om dansk udviklingsbistand', pp. 8-9.

Danish self-image as the defenders of Human Rights and global equality emerged from development aid²⁰ and solidarity politics, both of which were held as ‘proof’ of a Danish anti-racist stance.²¹

The early Danish development aid initiatives in Africa in the 1960-70s were driven by a post-World War II idea of helping third world countries ‘evolve’ in a teleological development trajectory. Danish ‘experts’ were placed into various sectors with the explicit aim of enlightening locals on how to run agriculture, industry, education, government, and so forth. It is worth noting that this category of ‘expert’, into which Kirk falls when he first travels to Zambia on a DANIDA initiative, consisted of nothing more than having non-skilled farming experience from Denmark. Kirk, for example, had not received any form of formal training either in farming or development aid. However, owing to the thinking of the time, Danes with practical knowledge of ‘superior’ Danish farming methods automatically placed them in the role of ‘expert’. It is also worth noting that the organization *Mellemfolkeligt Samvirke*, (The Danish Association for International Cooperation, MS) which employed Kirk as an agricultural expert, had cross-cultural exchange and solidarity at the core of their ideology. As such, cultural exchange was part of the idea behind sending a Danish farmer to Zambia as an expert. In this understanding development aid becomes a double mission: both technological/educational and cultural. In such figurations of development aid Danishness itself is understood as having development potential, an idea that pervades Kirk’s narrative of his private farming adventure in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe too.

We therefore view the discursive dialectic between solidarity and aid as having brought with it a set of meanings that structure Danish (Nordic) relationships with Africa along paternalistic lines.²² Moreover, we illustrate the ways in which this paternalism generates racial meanings, attaching ‘Danishness’ inevitably to whiteness in the African

²⁰ Christian Friis Bach, ‘Foregangslandet under forandring 1989-2005’ in Bach, Olsen, Kaur-Pedersen and Pedersen (eds.) *Idealer og Realiteter. Dansk Udviklingspolitisk Historie 1945-2005*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen, 2008, p 524.

²¹ Morgenstjerne, *Denmark and National Liberation in Southern Africa*, p. 17. For postcolonial critiques of the assumption that Denmark’s anti-colonial stance was equivalent to non-racism see Lars Jensen, ‘Provincialising Scandinavia’ in *Kult*, no. 7, 2010, pp. 7-21; Birgitta Frello, ‘Dark Blood’ in *Kult*, no. 7, 2010, pp. 69-84; May-Britt Öhman, ‘“Sweden Helps”’: efforts to formulate the white man’s burden for the wealthy and modern swede’ in *Kult*, no. 7, 2010. pp. 122-142.

²² See Sunniva Engh ‘The conscience of the world? Swedish and Norwegian provision of development aid’ in *Itinerario*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2009, pp. 65-82; Jensen, ‘Danishness as whiteness in crisis’, 2012; and Palmberg, ‘The Nordic Colonial Mind’, 2009.

context. In this sense, we build on Lars Jensen's argument in 'Danishness as Whiteness in Crisis: Emerging Post-Imperial and Development Aid Anxieties', that development aid discourse is a key feature in demonstrating "the infallibility of the naturalised majority self. The self that is constructed as 'white', but at the same time rendered invisible, as a naturalised norm."²³ In our discussion, such whiteness – an invisible, naturalised norm – is not an available social position in the context of postcolonial Zimbabwe. While Kirk falls back on precisely this idea of his own Danish whiteness, we raise questions as to the political implications of such an effacing of racial meaning in this African postcolony.

Wolle Kirk in a Zimbabwean context

In *Paradis i frit fald til helvede?*, Kirk recalls his search for suitable land to farm in 1973 when he first arrived in Rhodesia. He writes 'I was on the lookout for a farm that would provide both opportunities and challenges and, at the same time, form the basis of a new life: a farm that would lie in the midst of Africa's fertile plateau and that would be a good investment so that I could afford to go home and fetch Birthe and the five children.'²⁴ What Kirk leaves out here is that his 'investment' was a privilege of his race: the Rhodesian government's generous subsidising of white-owned farms at the time was a strategy to keep the land in the hands of a white minority as well as to attract a new generation of white farmer-settlers to the country.

Kirk purchases his land, then, at a critical moment in Zimbabwe's history. Even with the inevitability of the country's move towards democracy, Rhodesian premier Ian Smith worked hard in his final years of rule to ensure that white Zimbabweans would retain their social and economic privileges in the time after liberation. The interim contract (the Lancaster House Agreement of 1979) drawn up to mediate the handover of power from Smith's regime to Robert Mugabe's newly democratic Zimbabwe in 1980

²³ Jensen, 'Danishness as whiteness in crisis', pp. 114.

²⁴ 'Jeg var på udkik efter en farm, der både kunne give muligheder og udfordringer og samtidig danne grundlaget for en ny tillværelse. En farm, der skulle ligge midt på Afrikas frugtbare højslette og samtidig være en passende investering, så der kunne blive råd til at rejse hjem og hente Birthe og de 5 børn.' Kirk, 'Paradis i frit fald til helvede?' p. 20.

specifically denied the new president the right to redistribute white-owned land to black farmers within the first decade of democracy. All land transfers had to be conducted under a ‘willing-seller, willing buyer’ agreement at full market prices. Mugabe’s acceptance of these conditions was, in part, an attempt to ensure economic stability at the time of political transition. Yet, the compromise was intensely felt: at the time that Mugabe came into power “about 70 percent of Zimbabwe’s total landmass, including communal areas, was owned by the state and 24 percent owned by large-scale commercial farmers”.²⁵ This meant that of the country’s arable land, around 40% was owned by a small minority of white farmers (approximately 6000), whilst a population of about 4 million black Zimbabweans were living in state-owned ‘communal areas’ without economic resources to become land-owners.

The aftermath of white privilege and the continued protection of white farmers by the Lancaster House Agreement, as well as corruption and mismanagement within Zimbabwe’s ruling party, ZANU(PF), meant that by the late 1990s, Mugabe still had not made good on his promises of the 1970s to redistribute land to the Zimbabwean people. Indeed, in 1996, only “71,000 farm families were re-settled on 3.6 million hectares of land”, a far cry from the initial goal of resettling 162,000 families on 8.3 million hectares by 1990.²⁶ In the middle to late 1990s around 70% of the country’s most arable land remained in the hands of white farmers.

By the end of the 1990s a tide of economic, social and political disintegration had put the Zimbabwean government at its most vulnerable. In a ploy to retain political support by mobilising Mugabe’s old promise of returning the land to the people, the Zimbabwean government instituted their ‘fast-track’ land reform program, which was neither programmatic nor reformist: land was, as we’ve already stated, seized, often violently, without any financial compensation whatsoever, and in most cases also without any systematic redistribution. What transpired was well documented in the global media. Yet, despite widespread news coverage, the land seizures were largely analysed in the global press as only a symptom of the failure of the Zimbabwean nation state; that is, as

²⁵ James S. Juana, ‘A quantitative analysis of Zimbabwe’s land reform policy: An application of Zimbabwe SAM multipliers’ in *Agrekon: Agricultural Economics Research, Policy and Practice in Southern Africa*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2006, p. 296.

²⁶ Juana, ‘A quantitative analysis of Zimbabwe’s land reform policy’, p. 298.

an entirely postcolonial problem without reference to, or interrogation of, the colonial structures underpinning the clearly racialised distribution of land as it stood in the mid-1990s.²⁷ What followed was a rhetorical war between Zimbabwe's ruling party and the international media that quickly solidified into an absolutist semiotics of race from both sides. Wendy Willems illustrates this through an analysis of British media reporting on Zimbabwe. She argues that the British media, "through strategies of simplification, ethnicisation and marginalisation...sought to frame and represent...events in Zimbabwe in terms of a racial conflict between black and white".²⁸ Furthermore, the Zimbabwean government "successfully managed to exploit these discourses on what they termed "Britain's kith and kin" [i.e. 'whites', which] enabled them to present and frame the crisis in Zimbabwe as a bilateral disagreement over land with *imperial* power Britain...."²⁹

Zimbabwe's ruling party thus mobilised the reclamation of land in overtly racial terms, as is evident in Mugabe's rhetoric at the time, when statements such as "Africa is for Africans. [Our] Land is ours by birth, ours by right;" and, 'we call on all blacks to stand together to isolate these whites,' were commonplace.³⁰ The global media and publishing industries were similarly invested in the racial meanings of land reclamation, even at the same time as they claimed racial neutrality in their representation of the events.³¹ What this means is that the discourses of race pervading the events of land reclamation in Zimbabwe in the 2000s were dense and complex: no claim to exemption from the colonial meanings of whiteness seems possible in such a context, yet it is precisely this claim that gets mobilized in Kirk's various accounts of the Zimbabwean

²⁷ See Wendy Willems, 'Remnants of Empire? British media reporting on Zimbabwe' in *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* (Special Issue), 2005, pp 91-108. Willems discusses how the British media inadequately contextualised the Zimbabwean crisis, thereby presenting 'Robert Mugabe as...solely responsible for the crisis in Zimbabwe' (100), a rhetorical move that effaces colonial accountability altogether.

²⁸ Willems, 'Remnants of Empire?', p.103.

²⁹ Willems, 'Remnants of Empire?', p.104. Emphasis ours.

³⁰ 'Zimbabwe President: Fight Whites', *The Associated Press*, 14 December 2000. Available URL: <<http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/dec15.html#link3>> (05 November 2007).

³¹ In the years immediately following the land grabs, dozens of white memoirs and autobiographies about Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwean situation emerged. Some key examples include Alexandra Fuller's *Scribbling the Cat* (2004); Peter Godwin's *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun* (2005), Douglas Rogers's *The Last Resort: A Memoir of Zimbabwe* (2008), Lauren St John's *Rainbow's End: A Memoir of Childhood, War and an African Farm* (2008); Wendy Kann's *Casting with a Fragile Thread: A Story of Sisters and Africa* (2007); Christina Lamb's *House of Stone: The True Story of a Family Divided in War-Torn Zimbabwe* (2009).

situation for a Danish audience.

Wolle Kirk seen from a Danish point of view

Since *Paradis i frit fald til helvede?* is written in Danish (and in Denmark), we also need to consider the discursive context of its reception if we are to interrogate the (double) racial meanings that pervade and are produced by the book. To illustrate this we want first to draw attention to the media representations surrounding the publication of the book as well as Kirk's role as a local celebrity. A journalist in the nation-wide newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, for example, framed an interview with Kirk with the following introduction:

For 32 years he ruled his African farm – without feeling like a colonial master – but Wolle Kirk was eventually squeezed out by violence and corruption. Now, the Kirks are back in that Denmark, which they once could not stand.³²

It seems inevitable that a Danish farmer in Africa will be depicted with references to the nation's famous child, Karen Blixen – here via the phrase “sin afrikanske farm” which paraphrases the Danish title of Blixen's autobiography *Out of Africa: Den Afrikanske Farm*. Indeed other journalists also depicted Kirk via references to Blixen.³³ This framing places Kirk both in a particular literary tradition and in the context of narratives that depict Danish relations with Africa. Blixen's *Out of Africa* has been important in shaping both. Indeed, Jensen has argued that *Out of Africa* “has probably meant more for Danish perceptions in the 20th century of Africa than any other single book”.³⁴ In this tradition, the Danish narrator/protagonist places her-/himself in an ambivalent position *vis-à-vis* the colonial projects, which they on the one hand benefit from and on the other hand see

³² Frits Christensen, 'Piratens tredje liv' in *Jyllands-Posten*. 10 December 2006, p. 4. The original quote reads: 'I 32 år herskede han over sin afrikanske farm – uden at føle sig som koloniherr – men Wolle Kirk blev til sidst presset ud af vold og korrupsion. Nu er ægteparret Kirk tilbage i det Danmark, de engang ikke kunne holde ud.'

³³ See, for example, Lena Jeppesen, 'Bedstefar og Førstekonen har Zimbabwe i blodet', in *Ringkøbing Amts Dagblad*, 14 April 2003; and Niels Rohleder 'Portræt: Den danske farmer' in *Information*, 01 November 2002.

³⁴ Lars Jensen, 'The historiography of Danish representations of Africa: From Blixen to Development aid' in Brugioni et al. (eds.) *Áfricas Contemoprâneas – Contemporary Africas*. Universidade do Minho, Centro de Estudos Humanísticos, 2011, p. 38.

themselves as not participating in.³⁵ Blixen is of course the most prominent Danish example of this literary tradition – and also the most controversial. The postcolonial backlash against Blixen,³⁶ and the way in which this was received in a Danish context, is telling of how Danish exceptionalism is extended to include even those who actively participated in colonialism as settlers (having bought his farm in 1973, we propose to place Kirk in this same category). In Danish literary debates, even critics who claim to understand postcolonial critiques of Blixen are prone to understand the backlash against Blixen as a product of proximity and distance. That is, ‘the African critic’ is read as biased by his proximity to the political and cultural ramifications of colonial rule and simultaneous distance from the self-perceived anti-racism of the Danes. Thus, to their minds, African critics have missed Blixen’s intended goodwill towards the Africans in her work: the perception being that while she may have been a product of her time, she nevertheless loved ‘her natives’ and fought their case against the British.³⁷ Likewise, when representing himself to a Danish audience, Kirk explicitly places himself in opposition to the ‘British farmers’ (the former Rhodesian settlers/colonizers) in Zimbabwe. In the following extract from an interview – published in a local Danish newspaper following the publication of *Paradis i frit fald til helvede?* – Kirk depicts his management philosophy in opposition to his white peers and as something distinctly Danish/Jutlandic:

As employer of close to 1000 workers, Wolle Kirk favoured what he calls ‘west-jutlandic management’. ‘The leader is not placed on a pedestal. He walks amongst his workers on an equal footing. And he is capable of performing the same tasks as the others. When we started the butchery, I had to learn how to be a butcher. When we started the dairy, I had to learn that,’ he says.

His attitude meant a departure from the racial divides that were predominant among the British farmers. Wolle Kirk paid a black worker exactly the same as a white worker, if he had the same qualifications. That may be the reason that he was never truly accepted

³⁵ Lasse Horne Kjældgaard, ‘En af de farligste bøger, der nogen sinde er skrevet om Afrika? Karen Blixen og kolonialismen’ in *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2009, pp. 111-135.

³⁶ Most notably framed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Moving the Centre. The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. James Currey, London, 1993; see also Kirsten Holst Petersen, ‘Blixen-igen-igen: Nationalt ikon, national stolthed’ in *Kult* (Special issue: Jagten på det eksotiske), no. 3, 2006, pp. 9-22.

³⁷ See Kjældgaard, ‘En af de farligste bøger’, 2009.

by the other white farmers. He did join their country club, but he did not play golf or drove a large Mercedes, like the others.³⁸

Like Blixen, who saw herself as an extraordinarily benevolent landlord on her Kenyan farm,³⁹ Kirk also paints a picture of himself as the ‘better employer’ as compared to the ‘British’ white farmers; his peers. Kirk bases this difference on both his ‘non-Britishness’ and on his rootedness in western Jutland. This is, then, interpreted by the journalist as an anti-racist stance, which becomes the backdrop against which the violent racially motivated attack on Kirk is then narrated.

Without attempting to draw any further literary similarities between Blixen and Kirk, they do share a positionality that is complicated by the fact that their writings are aimed at an outside (not African) audience: A Danish (and in Blixen’s case also American) reader, whom the texts are intended to enlighten about the plight of Africans. As such, their narratives of self-involvement in Kenya/Zimbabwe are audience specific, and their descriptions of ‘the natives’/ ‘the blacks’ are invested with preconceived Danish (western) ideas of ‘the other’ onto which the narrative attempts to add new (enlightening) perspectives. *Paradis i frit fald til helvede?* very directly represents this mode of writing; writing exclusively for a Danish audience, Kirk takes a lot of trouble to ‘educate’ his readers about Zimbabwe and ‘the blacks’. Thus, Kirk depicts himself as a missionary in both contexts: in Zimbabwe he represents ‘Danishness as progress’ with his introduction of ‘west-jutlandic management’ methods, while in Denmark he becomes the expert on Africa, an expertise he inscribes onto himself in his claim to having become, as a result of his time and experience in Africa, a ‘west-jutlandic negro’:

I have become a white negro, Wolle Kirk squeezes out the words through a rusty laugh that becomes muffled in an itchy cough. His white beard has a yellow discoloring around the mouth caused by

³⁸ Stenz, ‘De vestjyske afrikanere’, p.12-13. Original quote: ‘Som arbejdsgiver for op mod 1000 ansatte gik Wolle Kirk ind for det, han kalder »vestjysk management«. - Lederen står ikke oppe på en piedestal. Han går rundt mellem sine medarbejdere på lige fod. Og han kan selv udføre det arbejde, de andre er sat til. Da vi startede slagteriet, så måtte jeg lære at være slagter. Da vi startede mejeriet, så måtte jeg lære det, siger han. Hans indstilling betød et opgør med de raceskel, som især var fremherskende hos de britiske farmere. Wolle Kirk betalte en sort medarbejder nøjagtigt det samme som en hvid, hvis han havde de samme kvalifikationer. Måske var det derfor, han aldrig rigtigt blev accepteret af de andre hvide farmere. Han var godt nok med i deres country club, men han spillede ikke golf eller kørte rundt i en stor Mercedes, som de andre.’

³⁹ See, for example, Jensen, ‘The historiography of Danish representations of Africa’, 2011.

tobacco. A screwd, peasant-cunny smile points up towards the leather eye-patch, which covers his missing eye, the one the robbers took out. Before, I was a Scandinavian, now, I'm a white negro.⁴⁰

Kirk clearly favours these exotic depictions of his persona, not only does he refer to himself as 'a negro' in the Danish context, he also repeatedly calls himself 'the Pirate'⁴¹ He positions himself in an 'outsider' position both in the Zimbabwean context, where he depicts himself as distinct from his 'British' farmer neighbours, particularly on the issue of race-relations,⁴² but also because he is 'the common man' who does not fit in well in the country club, and is not partial to materialistic goods. In the Danish context, which he originally abandoned (or, in his words, "could not stand"),⁴³ he is positioned as the 'west-jutlandic negro'; a double outsider position, owing to the 'outback' referencing of western Jutland, and the exotic figure of the 'negro'. Although, economically he has very clearly been positioned as colonial/white landowner in Zimbabwe; culturally, socially and in terms of his image, Kirk styles himself as an oppositional figure; the voice of 'common sense' – a person who can 'speak truth to power' in Zimbabwe, and in Denmark enlighten the Danes about 'facts as seen from the ground' in Zimbabwe.

Re-enacting colonial whiteness

Given that Kirk self-presents as being different to the other white farmers by virtue of his Danishness, it is unsurprising that he details the other Scandinavians in his (white) community in Zimbabwe. He dedicates an entire chapter to a figure he calls Røde Erik, a Dane who had already lived and farmed in Rhodesia for a number of years when Kirk

⁴⁰ Stenz, 'De vestjyske afrikanere', p.12. Original quote: 'Jeg er blevet hvid neger, klemmer Wolle Kirk ud i et rustent grin, der kvæles af en kras hoste. Hans hvide skæg er let gulnet omkring munden efter snaddens tobakssovs. Et skævt, bondesnu smil peger op mod læderlappen, der dækker for det manglende øje, som røverne stak ud. Før var jeg skandinav, men nu er jeg hvid neger.'

⁴¹ See also: Christensen, 'Piratens tredje liv', 2006, p. 13; and Jens Kirk Pedersen, 'Afrikas blødende hjerte' in *Dagbladet Holstebro Struer*, 01 April 2003.

⁴² Kirk describes himself explicitly as an anti-racist in his heart-of-hearts; see: Kirk, 'Paradis i frit fald til helvede?' p. 156.

⁴³ It is worth noting here that there is some dispute as to Kirk's relation to the Danish State. Having taken DANIDA funding (via the private sector program), Kirk has been accused of misrepresenting himself as a Dane, owing to the fact that DANIDA funding was conditioned on his being Zimbabwean. The journalist who raised these allegations, Niels Rohleder, is one of the few critical voices in the Danish media, with regard to Kirk's self-representation as 'the Danish African'. See Rohleder, 'Portræt: Den danske farmer', 2002.

first arrives there in 1973⁴⁴ Also, Kirk repeatedly notes the fact that the first farmer to be killed in the land invasions, David Stevens, was ‘*svenskegifte*’, which is to say, married to a Swede⁴⁵ the relevance of this observation is never elaborated. However, Kirk connects this detail to the fact that the priest presiding over Stevens’s funeral, one Terje Berkholdt, is Norwegian. Kirk notes in regard to Berkholdt that “we Scandinavians are apt at sounding the alarm, in such situations,”⁴⁶ which leads to added international pressure on the Mugabe government after the murder of Stevens and his farm manager.⁴⁷ We are lead to believe, then, that detailing these white characters’ Nordic backgrounds or connections, is a rhetorical gesture that re-enacts this group’s difference to the rest of the white community. To its Danish audience, such observations may summon readers’ identification with these farmers (precisely through the prism of Nordic exceptionalism); farmers who are presented not only as the vestiges of white colonial Rhodesia, but as a community of mixed-white origins with differing political and ideological persuasions.

It is clear that Kirk sees himself as exempt from the racial meanings that pervade this context, by virtue of his being both white and not entirely of the white community. Erlend Eidsvik’s analysis of the ways in which early Norwegian immigrants to South Africa inhabited an indistinct position between the British and the Boers is instructive. For Eidsvik, these Norwegian settlers “not only adhered to the colonial discourse, but also reconstituted and reinforced this discourse through explorations and exploitations of their own ambivalent position”.⁴⁸ Similarly, while Kirk positions himself as different to the other Zimbabwean ‘whites’ as rhetorical leverage for why we should read his narrative as racially neutral, his articulation of his own racial exceptionalism turns out to reconstitute and reinforce colonial discourses of race.

To stage this argument more concretely it is worth noting that Kirk’s identification with a Scandinavian community in Zimbabwe not only bolsters his claims to a whiteness exempt from colonial structures of race, but also allows him to present a black other in racial terms with no acknowledgement (or even awareness) of the racist implications of

⁴⁴ Røde Erik’s nickname, referring as it does to Erik the Red, an archetypal colonial figure, is, of course, significant. Kirk, ‘Paradis i frit fald til helvede?’ p. 16-17.

⁴⁵ Kirk, ‘Paradis i frit fald til helvede?’ p. 44.

⁴⁶ Original quote: Er der noget, vi skandinaver er skrappe til, så er det at råbe vagt i gevær i en sådan situation (44).

⁴⁷ Kirk, ‘Paradis i frit fald til helvede?’ p. 44; 77

⁴⁸ Eidsvik, ‘Colonial discourse and ambivalence’, p. 13.

his own language. An example from *Paradis i frit fald til helvede?* illustrates the point: Kirk describes what he sees as an unfair and unreasonable charge of racism by the political commissioner of the region where he has his farms. The charge is based on the fact that Kirk gives the nickname ‘Orangutan’ to a young worker on his farm. Kirk writes:

The political commissioner, a new position that we had been saddled with after independence, approached me very formally and pointed out that it was pure and plain racism to call a man Orangutan. I explained to him, very carefully, that it was precisely to highlight the boy’s unique strength and agility and even that he was the district’s fastest runner, that I had given him this nickname. The commissioner seemed to chew on this for some time, but did not pass the matter on to a higher office.⁴⁹

The racial implications of a white farmer calling his black employee ‘Orangutan’ in a context where the residues of racist colonial terms such as ‘Ape’ or ‘Monkey’ to refer to black Africans are painfully present are considerable. While the performative act of naming this young man ‘Orangutan’ cannot be so easily excised from this entanglement of racist language, Kirk uses the term as though he stands before its colonial history as an innocent, thereby rendering the charge of racism absurd. This incident illustrates the ways in which the claim of exceptionalism operates to efface an awareness of – and accountability for – a tacit agreement with the colonial structures that pervade the meanings of race in Zimbabwe.

Indeed, Kirk portrays the attack on his farm as *racist*, precisely because his whiteness is (to his mind) not a marker of colonial complicity. Kirk seems genuinely surprised when he is told by a ZANU(PF) representative that “For us, the revolution is to wrest all property and power from the whites”⁵⁰ a claim he sees as racist because of his

⁴⁹ ”Den politiske kommissær, en ny institution, som vi jo efter uafhængigheden var blevet belemret med, henvendte sig meget formelt til mig, og gjorde opmærksom på, at det var den rene skinbarlige racisme at kalde et menneske for Orangutang. Jeg forklarede ham så, meget omstændeligt, at det netop var for at fremhæve at knægten var helt enestående både stærk og adræt og tilmed distriktets hurtigste løber, at jeg havde givet ham dette kælenavn. En forklaring hans velærvædighed kommissæren tyggede noget på, men dog ikke viderebragte på højere sted.” Kirk, ‘Paradis i frit fald til helvede?’ p. 133.

⁵⁰ Kirk, ‘Paradis i frit fald til helvede?’ p. 61.

self-perception as being different to the other white Zimbabwean farmers in his vicinity.⁵¹ Indeed, the attack might be seen to violently re-inscribe the significance of Kirk's whiteness, a significance he wishes to deny, upon his own body. Interestingly, it is at this point, a point where Kirk is forced to confront the history of race in Zimbabwe *as a white man*, that his own language collapses into a base colonial repertoire of racial meaning. Describing the farm invaders' intensifying agitation outside his farmhouse in the 24 hours leading up to the attack, Kirk writes:

the choir began to sing revolutionary songs to a thundering accompaniment of drums. Singing is perhaps an understatement. They screamed and shouted and spat obscene names at us across the garden. The motifs of Mugabe's infallibility, the central committee's righteousness and wisdom and the white wrongdoers evil deeds and land theft, were repeated amidst powerful slogans such as... 'Throw the white bandits and land thieves down into the flames of hell'.⁵²

While the singing of the songs of revolution during the land grabs was certainly an expedient mobilisation of the discourses of struggle, one cannot dismiss the value of these songs, for the singers, at this particular juncture in the nation's history, as mere false consciousness. Indeed, whether we see the evocation of the struggle past at this moment of Zimbabwean history as "the use of war-time tragedy for party purposes...[which has] had the effect of ...cheapening liberation history"⁵³ or not, the fact remains that white-owned land remains, for dispossessed black Zimbabwean peasants, a site of colonial violence. It is this reality that Mugabe used so well in his own

⁵¹ Such self-perception urges us to ask more significant critical questions about what it means, then, to read the slogan 'We will not be colonised again', (a common slogan during the land seizures) mediated by Kirk and translated into Danish: 'Vi vil ikke koloniseres igen!' Kirk, 'Paradis i frit fald til helvede?' p. 36. The translation linguistically stages the author's non-accountability to the very colonial history he is referring to: in English, the line calls a complex history of colonial meanings of power and land into a discursive sphere, in ways that force the reader to reflect on the histories of colonisation that lead to this particular historical juncture. In Kirk's translation, the phrase is represented as anachronistic, and even absurd.

⁵² "Så begyndte koret at synge revolutionære sange med dundrende tromme akkompagnement. Synge er måske en underdrivelse. De råbte og skreg og spyttede sjofle uforskammetheder ud over hele haven. Motiverne var alt fra Mugabes ufejlbarlighed, central komiteens retfærdighedssans og visdom. De Hvide forbyrderes onde handlinger og jordtyveri for 100 år siden, kraftigt iblandet slagord som: *Afrikas jord på sorte hænder! Smid de hvide banditter og jordtyve ned i Helvedes flammer!*' Kirk, 'Paradis i frit fald til helvede?' p. 96.

⁵³ Terence Ranger, 'The Zimbabwe Elections: A Personal Experience' A presentation given at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies on March 19 2002. Available URL: <http://cas1.elis.ugent.be/avrug/pdf02/ranger01.pdf> (28 March 2008)

rhetorical manipulation of the situation at the time.⁵⁴ But in Kirk's description, the songs become emptied of their dense layers of historical significance and the singers themselves become reduced to a frenzied mass, unthinkingly shouting out the slogans of the ruling party, without a will of their own. This confirms postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe's observation that, in the west, it

...is assumed that, although the African possesses a self-referring structure that makes him or her close to "being human," he or she belongs, up to a point, to a world we cannot penetrate. At bottom, he/she is familiar to us. We can give an account of him/her in the same way we can understand the psychic life of the *beast*. We can even, through a process of domestication and training, bring the African to where he or she can enjoy a fully human life.⁵⁵

We are not denying that Kirk was a victim of extreme violence in this attack and it would be unfair to expect the physical violence that he suffered not to influence his later writing of the scene. Yet, it is interesting that at the point Kirk becomes the victim of violence (and before that, a victim of the systemic violence of racism itself) that he should revert to an unapologetic colonial repertoire of race to describe that violence. Kirk's attackers, as Mbembe put it, "unfold under the sign of the beast"⁵⁶ – even in their very racism – while the well-meaning European, cleansed of all colonial responsibility by virtue of his birthright as a Dane, unfolds under the signs of rational humanity and political neutrality.⁵⁷ Later, Kirk reiterates the very colonial logic Mbembe is describing: "How often have I and other well-meaning Europeans been forced to accept the fundamental difference between Africans and ourselves in the perception of life."⁵⁸

Thus, the presentation of a well-meaning whiteness detached from colonial history inevitably redoubles to produce the irrational, savage and bestial black other. It is perhaps no surprise that such stereotypes of African blackness slip into overt and

⁵⁴ See, for example, Mugabe *Inside the Third Chimurenga* 2001.

⁵⁵ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, University of California Press, Berkley, 2001, p. 2.

⁵⁶ Kirk, 'Paradis i frit fald til helvede?' p. 1.

⁵⁷ And even martyrdom: It is worth noting that Kirk compares himself to the Danish martyr Kaj Munk. Kirk, 'Paradis i frit fald til helvede?' p. 101.

⁵⁸ "Hvor ofte er jeg selv og andre velmenende europæere ikke blevet tvunget til at indse den fundamentale forskel, der er mellem afrikanerne og os i livsopfattelse." Kirk, 'Paradis i frit fald til helvede?' p. 177.

unapologetic idealizing of and support for the Rhodesian government⁵⁹ and Ian Smith (whom Kirk is an apologist for and hails as a “son of Africa”⁶⁰) by the close of the text. This championing of a racist regime, taken in isolation, would be considered incendiary to most readers. But the text justifies the position by virtue of Kirk’s claim to want the best for Zimbabwe’s black majority and in the context of his broader narration of the terrible violence he himself has suffered. He writes

In retrospect, one would naturally have chosen a faster path towards majority rule, but had this constitution continued unhindered Rhodesia would today have a black majority in parliament based on a solid middle class, probably a strong economy and a great deal more humanity and democracy than under Mugabe’s dictatorship.⁶¹

Conclusion

We read Kirk’s final statements in *Paradis i frit fald til helvede?* as instructive as to his discursive positionality, both in a Zimbabwean and a Danish context:

I have no academic schooling, I only have my experiences and observations throughout a life in Africa and Zimbabwe to attach my suggestions to, and also I have left my one eye in Africa, but perhaps that gives me an eye to things, which wiser people have overlooked⁶²

The position as the common man, who speaks truth to power (academics and ‘wiser people’), whom, he suspects, would charge him with racism, because of his support for the Smith regime, is carefully constructed throughout *Paradis i frit fald til helvede?* as a life-long project; from leaving Denmark in protest over the European community, his

⁵⁹ Kirk, ‘Paradis i frit fald til helvede?’ p. 142.

⁶⁰ Kirk, ‘Paradis i frit fald til helvede?’ p. 150.

⁶¹ ”Set i bakspejlet skulle man selvfølgelig have valgt en hurtigere vej frem mod flertals styre; men havde denne forfatning forsat uhindret, ville Rhodesia i dag have haft sort flertal i parlamentet baseret på en solid middelklasse, sandsynligvis en stærk økonomi samt en god portion mere menneskeret og demokrati end under Mugabes diktatur.” Kirk, ‘Paradis i frit fald til helvede?’ p. 144.

⁶² ”Jeg har ingen akademisk skoling, kun mine erfaringer og iagttagelser gennem mit liv i Afrika og Zimbabwe at hænge mine forslag på, og så har jeg efterladt mit ene øje i Afrika, men måske jeg derfor får øje på ting, som klogere folk har overset.” Kirk, ‘Paradis i frit fald til helvede?’ p. 189.

‘anti-racist’ management of the farms, to his final opposition to Mugabe’s dictatorship; Kirk is placed as an anti-establishment figure. There is a distinctive aesthetic to this position: Kirk represents himself as rooted in ‘the soil’ – that of Africa and of western Jutland.

Kirk’s references to western Jutland with its relatively harsh living conditions and peasant traditions are brought forth throughout the narrative as a continual source of inspiration. Kirk’s position as a genuine ‘son of the soil’ functions to authenticate his narrative as a ‘disinterested’ account based on real-life experience, untainted by the upper-class sensibilities and/or left-wing politics otherwise associated with development practitioners and academic Africanists. The peasant inspirations of Kirk’s youth are woven into the narrative as an astatic association between western Jutland and the Zimbabwean countryside, for example in his description of designing the school on his farm:

The school stands out as a three-winged west-jutlandic marsh farmhouse with a thatched roof. The reason that I chose this model, when I drew up and projected the school, was the flat area, where the school should be built, and that I have always been impressed by, how thoroughly the old marsh farmhouses with their mighty thatched roofs creates a fine contrast in a flat landscape.⁶³

Furthermore, Kirk’s self-styled persona as the ‘white negro pirate’ functions to lend his descriptions of Zimbabwe, its land, people and politics, the authentication of a disinterested party. Throughout his polemic, he remains the Dane/Scandinavian innocent and well-meaning bystander to colonial and postcolonial conflicts and power relations. By first placing himself and other Scandinavian whites in opposition to ‘British whites’ and aesthetically associating ‘his’ Zimbabwean countryside with the landscapes of western Jutland, he places himself outside the violent history of colonialism and its political legacies. This discursive move is partly made possible by the context of the Mugabe/British discourse of the land distribution issue as a racist-postcolonial problem;

⁶³ ”Skolen fremtræder som en trelænget, vestjysk marskgård med stråtag. Grunden til at jeg valgte denne model, da jeg tegnede og projektrede skolen, var det meget flade område, hvorpå skolen skulle bygges, og at jeg altid har været imponeret af, hvor gedigent de gamle marskgårde med deres gevaldige stråtag skaber en fin kontrast i et fladt landskab.” Kirk, ‘Paradis i frit fald til helvede?’ p. 114.

thus placing Danes and other Scandinavians as exempt from complicity – even involvement – in the racial inequality and racist history of land-distribution in Zimbabwe. Kirk's acceptance of white privilege in the violent colonial context of the 1970s, where he purchased his land, is overwritten in his narrative by the fact of the violent attack on his farm in 2002. By accepting an opposition between British whiteness as colonialist and Danish whiteness as anti-racist, Kirk renders his own white privilege and collusion with the colonial past irrelevant; a manoeuvre that exemplifies the ways that the very claims to exceptionalism are themselves complicit with colonialism.