

## Introduction: Transfer Day Centennial, Postcolonial Denmark and its Beyond

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The build-up to the Transfer Day Centennial, March 31, 2017, commemorating the sale of the Danish West Indies to the United States, was slow. But it would be fair to say that some of the events and debates moved through Danish society as an out-of-context hurricane. In the USVI, the Transfer was commemorated very differently, not least with the reference to Transfer Day as the beginning of yet another colonialism. The many debates, events and exhibitions surrounding the epicentre of Transfer Day itself in Denmark, raised issues concerning the way in which Danish colonial history unfolded. An updated five volume history on the Danish empire in Danish, *Danmark og kolonierne* (released on the Transfer Day Centennial), represented the most prestigious and the most concrete result of the need to renarrate colonial history. It is worth remembering the volumes replaced the deeply embarrassing colonial nostalgia driven account (*Vore gamle tropekolonier*) published six decades before that had remained the only, by default, authoritative account of Danish colonial history in the USVI.

But perhaps the Transfer Day Centennial was in fact more about releasing colonialism from its historical confinement, and redirect the focus from colonialism understood predominantly as colonial era towards a preoccupation with how colonialism and enslavement spoke to current Denmark. Unsurprisingly, racism became a recurrent theme in the debates, even if primarily with least reservation when the debate took place in English. “Unsurprisingly,” because if racism and colonialism are the twin monsters of colonial modernity, it raises the question what happens when colonial modernity is replaced by modernity as at the *very least* also a legacy of colonial modernity. Or to answer the question with a parallel question haunting narratives of contemporary modernity: If racism disappeared in the wake of the Second World War, because of its close association with totalitarian, extremist regimes driven by racializing ideologies, how, when and where did racism disappear (to)? Why are contemporary “anti-migrant” regimes of perception - informed by urges to put in place systemic forms of oppression - based on conceived notions of intrinsic selfhood and otherhood that are repeatedly disavowed as being racializing, not simply a continuation? If they do not stem from colonialism and enslavement narratives, where do the contemporary racialization preoccupation come from? This innocuous question has in contemporary times proven as difficult

to answer as the rise of enslavement question. Where its abolition is minutely accounted for, its origins by contrast exist in an unrecognised blur.

The range of activities around the Transfer Day Centennial makes it dangerous to generalise, yet participation in English language and Danish language events revealed a distinction between the kinds of conversations that were taken place. English language debates assumed racism and racialization discourse as pivotal to the recasting of narratives about Danish colonialism in the USVI and elsewhere, situating Danish colonial history and its legacy in a wider European, Western and global context. “Racism” as a concept referring to an actual historical experience, but also transcending that historical setting, was tied to the question of the reproduction of the colonial archive, which I here refer to broadly as a process of dealing with repositories of racialized thought in Danish history – a kind of history of mentalities but with the important caveat that I do not subscribe to the notions of compartmentalised history. It is precisely the slot view of history that enables an “unspoken” current “us” to view a historical “them” that at times represent our progenitors but at other times are historical others to our contemporary selves. Colonial archive, broadly conceptualised, speaks to the importance of the built-up archive both as literally a historical record, but also more loosely, but not less influentially, as a response to the needs to legitimize colonialism and enslavement.

After the colonial era and the end of enslavement, the archive is left to gather dust, also because of the urgency to put distance to the black history of colonialism. Except at moments, where the nation is called upon to once again identify intrinsic differences between national selves and alien others – say when Polish workers came to work in the Danish sugar beet fields that had replaced the production of sugar from colonial sugarcane plantations. One place to connect othering and racialization narratives could thus focus on the transformation and continuity between the treatment of sugarcane plantation enslaved and post-enslaved and the history of the treatment of “sugar” migrants coming to Denmark, who were not black, but not accepted as equal whites either. Racialization and the history of migration to Denmark could also be connected to the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century racialization of non-English speaking Danish migrants to the United States. This historical parallel between immigration and emigration and the racialization that accompanied it would be important because of what it reveals about regimes governing migration, and that Danes were not above being racialized themselves. But for the purposes of the issues at stake in this volume of *Kult*, it is more important to note the continuity in racialization through the

migration prism, which historically also include a small group of colonial subjects and enslaved who landed up in Denmark. Migration as a continued phenomenon, even if the scale of it varies, connects the colonial era and its original archive to contemporary Denmark and its derived colonial archive.

The Danish conversations around the Transfer Day Centennial due to their aversion to speak about racism and racialization treaded down a more difficult, if not agonistic, path. On the one hand, there was the inevitability of recognising racism and racialization as intrinsic to colonialism. This called for the production of a segregating distance between current Danes and colonial and colonizing Danes. But this in turn created difficulties for the urgency to recognize the USVI as former Danish territory. An urgency produced by colonial nostalgia. On the other hand, there was a salvage operation aimed at shielding contemporary Denmark from being “soiled” by the dehumanizing discourse of racism. In mainstream contemporary Denmark issues relating to racism are typically dismissed with a reference to “protect” others from becoming reduced to “victims”. Remember - even when you are frogmarched to a plane to be flown to a country where even representatives of the Danish foreign ministry cannot leave the airport for safety reasons – you must never accept the role of being a victim, because it objectifies you. Already, exposing the hypocrisy informing Danish attitudes to illegalised migrants and refugees, sidetracks us from what is left unchallenged by shifting the focus to the discourse about them. That obliterating the dehumanising term “racism” from the discourse about them, also removes the spotlight from Danish attitudes informed by an entrenched history of racialization. Thus Danish attitudes to the locals abroad, such as when Danish tourists travel to the USVI, are not to be understood in terms of racism, even when the postcolonial encounter seems a straightforward re-enactment of the colonial encounter with the usual distribution of haves and have-nots. Similarly, Danes encountering short term and intergenerational migrants in Denmark, are automatically exonerated from racializing discourse. On a few occasions during the events of 2017, the wall separating deracialized current discourse from non-declared racialized colonial discourse broke down. This included instances where attention was drawn to Danish colonial attitudes continually informing perceptions of Greenland and Greenlanders living in Denmark. Thus what the 2017 debates made clear, much more was at stake than yet another bout of rediscovery of Danish colonial history.

What was also interesting in the Danish language contexts was another balancing act between commemoration surrounding the Danish presence in the then Danish West Indies, that is, the

inevitability of recognizing (colonial) racism was rubbing shoulders with nostalgia infused narratives of familiar Danishness in “exotic tropical” surroundings. Quite often the solution appeared to be to stick to euphemistic language. Yet euphemism was forced to confront materiality when confronted with the urge to rescue select colonial figures, Peter von Scholten (as slave emancipator) and Schimmelmänn (as slave trade abolitionist), from the wholesale condemnation of enslavement of colonialism that paradoxically becomes evacuated of Danes and Danishness. If we accept von Scholten and Schimmelmänn as hero material, we are accepting the CEO of the colonial administration and the biggest plantation holder in the Danish West Indies, as heroic material. That in itself is highly questionable as evidenced by the USVI lack of reference to them as their “emancipators”. But what is also a consequence of seeing specific people as heroes is that the enslaved seeking to emancipate themselves become either “chaotic masses” or “a menace” – a colonial trope Joseph Conrad immortalized in *Heart of Darkness* – or passive bystanders or recipients of Danish enlightened rule and the civilizing mission.

So who were the people, the Danes and their Danishness that we condemn as propagators of colonialism and enslavement? The “Black chapters” of enslavement and colonialism in Danish (and European) history narration, to the extent that it is even dealt with, is narrated in a general, descriptive, uncommitted tone as if to underline this has nothing to do with “us”. Except where rays of light, if not Enlightenment, is allowed to penetrate the chapter’s obscured details. And in this ray of light, the spotlight of history, stand the von Scholtens, Schimmelmänn and Egedes not just in Danish colonial narratives but in all European colonial narratives. In the spotlight they are surrounded by discourses of civilization, benevolence and exceptionalism and all with a view to the process of colonial restaging. That is, not the process of coming to terms with racism, racialization and their legacies and reproduction, but always as an opportunity to narrate the encounter of the present with the past in terms of always already removed from the grasp of colonialism’s racist core. And it is inevitably narrated as for “us”, the white innocent Danes - to parallel Gloria Wekker’s lucid account of white Dutch selfhood - to decide when we have become “deracialized”. There is no call to ask those subjected to our racialization, whether our detox program has been efficient or not. In the current accounting of the colonial encounter “we” once again produce our perceptions of selves and others, as if there is no need to consult the descendants of those we enslaved and turned into colonial subjects – for example about whether we are re-enacting colonial tropes. Just as then “we” felt no need to engage with others as human beings like us, to the contemporary “we” “they” are for us to decide whether to consult and under what premises, even

when we are directly speaking about them. Of course, for the colonial system to operate “they” had to be de-recognised as human beings, and “we” did this systematically when required by the situation to do so – to protect our interest and our privilege. When the conversations in 2017 were held in English, however, it was clear that monologue masquerading as dialogue – that fine-tuned European practice enabled by the arrogance of Enlightenment pretence to speak on behalf of anyone (sufficiently civilized) – could not cut the mustard. And it led to some tense moments in the debates, but it also meant the debates in English were far richer, ambitious, nuanced and honest. As is typically the case with those kinds of conversation in Denmark.

So, what should we remember about 2017 three years later? Most memorable to me was four events – least memorable ironically March 31 2017 itself. The four memorable events were the exhibition *Blind Spots*, the conference, *Unfinished Histories*, held in connection with the exhibition, the unveiling of the Queen Mary (Installation) Statue on March 31, albeit in 2018, and the screening of the documentary film, *We Carry It within Us*. And then I would also highlight a non-event, the arduous process of deciding where to place the statue, *Freedom*, gifted to Denmark by the USVI. Where indeed do we place statues reminding us of our enthusiastic participation in enslavement? Even the conventional Danish “hero material” is not put on public display, but stashed away in a corner of the Assistens Cemetery, or unacknowledged, or obscured, as the builder of the inner-city prominent mansion around the corner from the palace of the most prominent sponsor of colonialism – the Danish kings. The fact that no one who might in other contexts feel called upon to either describe, or at times defend, the exceptionalism of their hero material, which never includes anyone from the enslaved side, speaks volumes about that really there is no amnesia – in the sense of having lost the memory of – surrounding Danish colonialism and enslavement narratives. Promoters of colonial restaging, which can include, drawing attention to “forgotten” colonial history and bemoaning the lack of historical knowledge generally, know very well which buttons are best left alone. One such mistake would be to propose raising a statue of von Scholten and Schimmelmann, because it would immediately lead to an international reaction – “in Denmark they raise monuments to their enslavement heroes”. Better to quietly celebrate “their achievement” in Danish and in forums that are public but for the initiated. Nationalism can of course never be politically correct, because it reflects who we are...

It is difficult and possibly also somewhat pointless to re-establish what took place during the selected four events mentioned above. I see them as events that clearly reached beyond their

immediate moment to raise questions about their own perceived inadequateness but at the same time also insisting to leave a mark greater than the space they occupied. The Queen Mary statue and *Freedom* reach beyond because of their permanence, enhanced in the case of Queen Mary through the conversion of what was an artistic temporary installation into a bronze statue – though the future of the statue and its location is currently not settled. The statues are permanent reminders of Danish colonial history, but also of the legacies of colonialism. Helle Stenum’s documentary, *We Carry It within Us*, can be repeatedly screened as a reminder of some of the processes surrounding the Transfer Day Centennial. The conference, *Unfinished Histories*, led to the publication of some presentations, but as a discussion event with its tense moments, in particular as the discourse on racism and racialization spilled into other less directly colonial contexts, it became another version of what we carry within us. The exhibition, *Blind Spots*, equally is an event at an extended moment in time that nonetheless would have left a lasting impression because of the way it insisted on bringing the contemporary into the space of the colonial past through a number of different strategies. And also because it openly addressed the relationship between Danish nostalgic narratives about the colonial era and what took place in the colonies, but also through a juxtaposition of nostalgic past and exotic-familiar present with its focus on current travel narratives about the USVI – which until fairly recently were routinely marketed in Denmark as travels to the Danish West Indies.

Collectively, the productive events surrounding the Transfer Day Centennial constitutes a platform of contentious discourses marking the centennial, from ambiguously qualified “celebrations” to critiques. The platform is the basis from which to continue the conversation. It invites us to look towards the future with the unfinished negotiations of the past at the back of our minds. This is the second trajectory that informs this issue of *Kult* and will be taken up in a future issue dealing with another commemorative event: Greenland in 2021 will have its “colonial anniversary” with the tricentennial of the arrival of the Norwegian-Danish missionary, Hans Egede. This event will mark an occasion inviting overlapping concerns and critiques that informed the Danish-US Virgin Islanders discussions in 2017. The first trajectory of this current issue which you are about to read deals with some of the immediate repercussions of some of the events that marked the Transfer Day Centennial.

This issue of *Kult* has been co-edited by Björn Lingner and Lars Jensen.