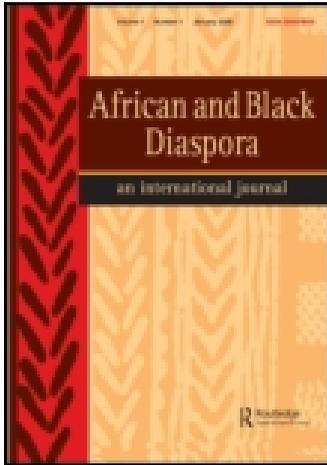


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## African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rabd20>

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Published online: 07 Dec 2013.



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To cite this article: Ursula Lindqvist (2014) West Indian women in Danish popular fiction, African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal, 7:1, 52-69, DOI: [10.1080/17528631.2013.858919](https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2013.858919)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2013.858919>

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## West Indian women in Danish popular fiction

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This paper examines nationalist nostalgia for Denmark's colonial period in the Caribbean through the lens of popular women's fiction. Empirical accounts of this period written by Danish historians have, to a limited extent, undergone such contrapuntal examinations. But these accounts assume so little discursive space in Danish history books that it seems unlikely that they are Danes' primary source of knowledge about the Danish West Indies (1672–1917). More compelling sources are the popular culture narratives that have circulated since Denmark's thwarted attempt to sell the islands to the USA in 1902. Because popular women's fiction tends to depict women's subjective experience rather than posit an empirical reality, its role in reproducing knowledge about Denmark's colonial history, and in constructing its national identity, has never been examined. Such a reading reveals Denmark's continuing struggle with symbolic miscegenation nearly a century after she was forced to give up her Caribbean colonies.

**Keywords:** Danish West Indies; nationalism; popular women's fiction; colonial history

### Introduction

As Cynthia Enloe (1989) has argued, the discursive history of national consciousness often omits both the experience and the standpoint of women: 'Nationalism typically has sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope' (44). However, whereas the Danish West Indies (1672–1917) occupy little space in Danish history books, they have been a popular setting among readers of Danish women's and children's fiction for more than a century. These popular texts arguably have done more to reproduce and recirculate key tenets of Danish national culture depicting Denmark as an enlightened modern nation than any official account of Denmark's colonial period in the Caribbean. Ironically, these texts began circulating at a time when Denmark was on the verge of losing these tropical colonies, whose value was symbolic rather than economic by that time; indeed, the islands had become a financial liability for Denmark and a subject of political debate. The first such work of popular fiction, Ingeborg Vollquartz' nostalgic *Glade Barndomsdage i Vestindien* [Happy Childhood Days in the West Indies], appeared less than a year after Denmark's first (unsuccessful) attempt to sell the Danish West Indies to the USA in 1902, a move fiercely opposed by Danish nationalists who considered the islands a core component of Denmark's identity.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I explore the evolution of this national identity over the twentieth century as exemplified in several works of popular women's fiction. These stories, written by women and for women (and in one case, also for children), reveal

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Danish women's ambivalent fascination with the figure of the West Indian woman and her complicated relationship to Danes and Denmark. In the earlier works of fiction, published prior to Denmark's extending the vote to women and working-class men in 1915, the female authors implicitly consent to Denmark's imperial enterprise and thereby assert their Danish subjectivity at a time when full citizenship was denied to them on the basis of their gender.<sup>2</sup> However, Danish women's fiction of the late twentieth century not only perpetuates these racial discourses of colonial desire, it also validates them by subsuming them with popular contemporary discourse on women's empowerment.

In stark contrast to Danish journalist Thorkild Hansen's epic, documentary-style novel *Slavernes øer* [Islands of Slaves 1970] – the third installment of his award-winning *Slave Trilogy* detailing Danish involvement in the triangular slave trade<sup>3</sup> – these popular fictional works set in the Danish West Indies provide a highly romanticized colonial context. These texts are written by women from the current/former metropole for an audience of female peers; feature female and feminized characters and situations; and tend to be regarded more as pleasure reading than literature or documentary. As such, they have largely avoided intellectual critique, particularly compared to cultural artifacts with recognized artistic and/or intellectual heft and cultural capital in the global marketplace of ideas (for example, the films of the Dogme 95 directors, Hansen's *Slave Trilogy*, or Alex Frank Larsen's 2005 documentary series for Danish television, *Slavernes slægt* [The slaves in our family]). But it is precisely its apparent lack of political content, as well as its appeal to the sensibilities of a female, middle class, domestic audience, that positions popular women's fiction to reproduce racialized national narratives without stirring critical reflection or debate. Such narratives contribute to what Bourdieu (1993) has called a *habitus*: a system of principles and beliefs, transposable among different 'fields' of production (such as the arts, the academy, and politics) that are learned since childhood and perpetuated in the assumptions that underlie social relations. To put simply, a *habitus* consists of taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions, which are socially reproduced, that generate and organize the practices and representations of everyday life. Yet the social relations within a field are constantly being contested and renegotiated as new material realities arise, old assumptions are challenged, and previously existing hierarchies are reordered. Such a process, I argue, is exactly what is at work with in these exemplary works of Danish popular women's fiction. I do not intend to make a quantitative argument about the degree of influence these works of popular fiction wield in national identity formation, but rather to examine how they symbolically – and collectively, over time and in renegotiated contexts – reproduce Denmark's national imaginary in a way that simultaneously obscures and distorts its colonial history.

### From small empire to small nation

The Danish West Indies were the last of its colonies that Denmark sold,<sup>4</sup> and Karen Fog Olwig (2003) has argued that this sale forced Denmark to acknowledge its completed transformation from a small empire to a small nation. Denmark, today a nation-state of about five million people, once was a colonial power and a composite state consisting of Norway and Schleswig-Holstein (now a province in northern Germany) as well as colonies in India, West Africa, the Caribbean, the Norwegian Sea (the Faroe Islands), and the North Atlantic (Greenland and Iceland). As Østergård (2004) points out, 'the multinational character of the realm is evidenced by the fact that by the end of the 18th century the biggest cities of the composite state were Copenhagen in Denmark proper, Altona and Kiel in

Holstein, Flensburg in Schleswig, and Bergen in Norway, while the seaports of Charlotte Amalie in St. Thomas [Danish West Indies] and Frederiksnagore [India] were second and sixth, respectively, as measured by trade volume' (26). Like many European kingdoms, Denmark flourished from the profits of the triangular trade between Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Europeans would bring textiles, rum, and manufactured goods to Africa and purchase enslaved Africans who had been imprisoned in forts built along the Ghanaian Coast. The enslaved were shipped to the Caribbean colonies, where their labor produced sugar, rum, cotton, and tobacco among other crops. These raw materials were then shipped back to Europe. However, it became costly for Denmark to defend its holdings against larger powers; following the Gunboat War against Great Britain, for example, the state of Denmark went bankrupt in 1813. Another humiliating defeat was the loss of Schleswig and Holstein to Prussia and Austria in 1864. Denmark was also sensitive to changes in the global economy and was deeply affected when the price of sugar began to fall. Industrialization brought new demands for investing in the colonies' infrastructure, and with democracy movements came demands for better working conditions and, more radically, the abolishment of slave labor.

Severely overextended, Denmark over the course of the nineteenth century would cede much of its territory to greater powers even while nationalist sentiment was reaching its peak. Danes struggled to adjust to a new self-image in light of a shrinking geography. Discussion of selling the no-longer-profitable Caribbean islands of St. John (St. Jan), St. Croix, and St. Thomas to the USA arose in the Danish *Rigsdag* as early as 1852 – four years after the emancipation of the enslaved on the islands. But the nationalist argument that the islands had a symbolic importance for Denmark prevailed. In 1902, a Treaty of Sale was actually drawn up, ratified by the USA, signed by President Roosevelt, and sent to Denmark for ratification, but the landed aristocracy who made up the *Landsting* in the Danish *Rigsdag* refused to accept it. Following the aborted sale, a Danish nationalist and art patron, Holger Petersen, financed the trip of the young Danish painter Hugo Larsen to the Danish West Indies to paint island life as a way to showcase the islands' splendor back in Denmark. (These paintings were, ironically enough, not exhibited as a collection until 2006, in Øregaard Museum north of Copenhagen, a site that was once a Danish West Indies plantation owner's estate.)<sup>5</sup> But by 1917, increasing indebtedness and the threat of a German military presence in the Caribbean overcame these concerns. Denmark sold its West Indies to the USA for \$25 million, and they became the US Virgin Islands.

Danes' success in distancing themselves from the unsavory aspects of their colonial history has a number of compelling justifications. First, while the 300,000 Africans whom Hansen estimates that Danes subjected to slavery is a substantial number, this figure is but a fraction of the total estimated 15–45 million Africans whom Europeans as a whole enslaved and brought to the New World (Stecher-Hansen 1997, 87).<sup>6</sup> Thus the Danish role has been downplayed – even ignored – in many scholarly studies of this period (see Poddar, Patke, and Jensen 2008, 59). Second, Danish colonial subjects in the Caribbean, unlike those of England or France, for example, never immigrated to Denmark in significant numbers, so the average Dane has never had to confront the physical, human result of Denmark's colonial enterprise on home soil. Third, aside from the colonial administration and the gendarmes, the majority of the European civilians in the Danish West Indies were not Danish; the Danes welcomed Dutch, English, and Irish planters to establish plantations on St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix. Thus, while the Danes who lived on the islands read Danish newspapers and perpetuated Danish cultural customs (such as Christmas traditions), the lingua franca of the islands was not Danish,

but rather Dutch creole among field slaves and English for communicating with domestic (household) slaves and conducting business. Thus unlike current and former colonial subjects of larger empires such as Spain, France, and Great Britain, Virgin Islanders do not share with Danes a common language and cultural heritage resulting from the colonial relationship; rather, Virgin Islanders have developed their own cultural traditions rooted in their particular history. Indeed, Danish tourists who visit the islands today find only disparate artifacts from the Danish colonial period, such as Danish place names – e.g. the towns of Charlotte Amalie, Fredriksted, and Christiansted, after Danish monarchs – and street signs, such as *Kongens gade* (King's Street) and *Dronningens tværgade* (The Queen's Cross Street), pronounced with a distinctly local accent; the former Government House; the old military forts; the ruins of the old Annenberg sugar plantation on St. John; and the preserved Whim Plantation Museum on St. Croix. What was once the largest slave plantation on St. John is today an exclusive resort, Caneel Bay. The old Customs House at the square in Fredriksted on St. Croix where slaves once were auctioned has become the office of the Tourist Board. Tours that cater to Danish tourists tend to emphasize positive actions of the Danish colonists, such as Governor Peter von Scholten's emancipation of the slaves in 1848 (commemorated by a 'Freedom' statue,



Figure 1. The Government House in Christiansted, St. Croix, where Peter von Scholten, the last Danish governor of the Danish West Indies, once ruled. It served as part of the set for the 1987 Danish feature film *von Scholten*. Photo by Ursula Lindqvist, 2007.



Figure 2. Shopping arcades that cater to tourists and major cruise lines now line King Christian Walk, named after the Danish monarch Christian V (1670–1699), in the port city of Charlotte Amalie, named after his wife, the queen, on the island of St. Thomas. Photo by Ursula Lindqvist, 2007.

in this same square in Fredriksted, of black leader General Buddhoe holding a machete and blowing into a conch shell).<sup>7</sup>

Even Danes who never make it to the islands on vacation, however, have been exposed to ample pop culture narratives at home about Denmark's former Caribbean colonies. Just a few examples include the 1987 biopic *Von Scholten* (Kjærulff-Schmidt 1987); the historical play *Von Scholten*, which toured with Folkteatret throughout the country during the 2009–2010 season; Maria Helleberg's crime novel *Druknehuset* [The Drowning House 2008], set in the Danish West Indies in the eighteenth century; a children's show on Danish television set in the islands; and a classic segment of Denmark Radio's annual Christmas special, called *julkalender*, titled 'Nissernes Ø—historien om de Dansk Vestindiske nisser' that recounts the exploits of some of Santa's elves (*nisser* in Danish) who lived on these tropical islands. Indeed, in every case, the Danish cultural texts produced for a Danish audience refer to the islands as *Dansk Vestindien*, the Danish West Indies, without referencing the islands' current name, the US Virgin Islands, which they have been called since 1917. Paul Carter (1987) has argued that the process of naming subsumes the lived history of a place into a spatial and symbolic history:

This metaphorical way of speaking is a pointer to the way spatial history must interpret its sources. It also indicates, concisely and poetically, the cultural place where spatial history begins: not in a particular year, nor in a particular place, but in the act of naming. For by the



Figure 3. This sculpture, “Freedom,” commemorating Governor von Scholten’s emancipation of the enslaved in the Danish West Indies in 1948, stands in the public square where slaves once were auctioned in Fredriksted, St. Croix. Photo by Ursula Lindqvist, 2007.

act of place-naming, space is transformed symbolically into a place, that is, a space with a history. (xxiv)

By reinforcing the name of a place that no longer exists, these cultural texts help Danes maintain a relationship to the Danish West Indies as they imagine they were, enabling them to recast the relationship between Denmark and her former tropical colonies in nostalgic terms and to distance Danes and Denmark from issues facing the islands today – including those stemming from the islands’ colonial history. In addition, as Olwig (2003) has argued, modern tendencies to portray Denmark’s colonial history in the Caribbean in a romantic light have intersected neatly with nationalist discourses that celebrate Denmark’s new role in the world as an enlightened, moral and model democracy – replacing its former status as the Nordic region’s largest colonial power.

### **Nannies, nursing, and colonial desire**

Facilitating Danes’ relationship to a romanticized colonial history are fictional texts born in the moment in which Denmark still was struggling to hold on to its tropical colonies.

This struggle is exemplified in the fictional debut of Danish writer Ingeborg Vollquartz, born in 1866 in Nørresundby, Denmark, and one of the first Danish women to make a living from her writing.<sup>8</sup> Her small, sentimental book, *Glade Barndomsdage i Vestindien* [Happy Childhood Days in the West Indies], was published by Jens Møllers forlag in 1903, one year following the aborted sale of the islands to the USA and not long after she and her husband, a captain in the Danish Navy, returned to Denmark after having lived in the islands for four years. In it, the first-person narrator recounts the blissful and innocent childhood years of two young Danish boys on St. Thomas. The tale ends, tragically, with the boys' leaving the islands for Denmark, their tropical paradise forever lost to them. The narrator does not identify herself, but the boys' names – Jørgen and Aage – are the middle names of Vollquartz' own two sons and, as the narrator says, 'good Danish names'. In her opening, the narrator asserts the story's authenticity, confirms the veracity of the wonders that readers already have heard about the islands, claims an exceptional status for these boys who are bequeathed such remarkable experiences, and positions the Danish West Indies as a paradise at the world's end. She writes:

Now I will tell you something that really is true, not just a story that is made up, no, every little bit really happened. I want to tell you about how it was for two little boys I knew, when they were little, because they really experienced a lot and saw the world, which only happens for very few children. When they were still little, so that they could neither speak nor walk, they lived on the other side of the world, over in the West Indies; where, as you know, Denmark still owns three beautiful islands, St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. Jan. They are located close to each other, but far, far away from us here in Denmark, and one must sail over the entire big Atlantic ocean to reach them, but when one has made the journey, it truly looks beautifully different over there than here at home. (5)<sup>9</sup>

The attached narrator, presumably an adult, tells the story as she/he imagines the children experience it, articulating the children's wonder. This effectively conjures nostalgia for a romanticized childhood that neither the narrator nor Danish readers have experienced personally:

You can imagine, that it was wonderful for children! There it was always warm, as you've heard, always summer, never sleet and cold, snow or wind – no, always blue skies, sun, green trees, flowers, and always – imagine! – the most delicious fruits! No pears, apples and plums, but oranges, pineapple, bananas and many other glorious fruits that you here at home never have tasted! (8–9)

The narrator then recounts a series of events, always in an ecstatic tone: the boys' father is a naval captain and they live in a beautiful garrison, where live music is played twice daily. The boys play with turtles in the ocean. Their black nannies tuck them in at night with mosquito netting and wave palm branches over them as they sleep. The boys make friends with the soldiers stationed at Fort Fredrik, and Solider Number 66 carves a ship for them out of wood that gets swept out to sea. They get to ride in the baskets of a donkey. They give a shilling to a crippled man named John. And they celebrate a 'real' Danish Christmas on St. Thomas – albeit without a real Danish evergreen.

What's striking about this tale, aside from the ecstatic descriptions of the islands, is that 'seeing' island life through the eyes of children (via an attached narrator) dispenses of any requirement to mesh this idyllic version with reality. The children's innocence shields them from any evidence of economic and social unrest which plagued St. Thomas at the turn of the century, and which would have been the topic of considerable debate in

Denmark at that time. The book makes a compelling emotional appeal to preserve Danes' innocent and childlike view of their beloved islands and their own relationship to them. This is perhaps best illustrated by how the book concludes, with the family's departure:

Yes, there was wailing and crying, when the boys and their parents for the last time went out through the garrison doors and down to the water, where a boat would take them to the big ship, in which they would sail home to Denmark. The nannies and 66 came along to the ship, and the nannies cried, when they had to separate from their boys. 'Goodbye, apple of my eye,' they said, 'We can never see you again!' and they kissed the boys' hands. 'Goodbye, my treasure, goodbye, my heart,' cried the poor black girls, and the boys clung to their necks, didn't want to separate from them and just cried, 'Stay here, Annie, stay with us, Consuela, don't go!' Mother cried, and the girls kissed Mother's hand and whispered, 'God bless you my white mother!' Yes, the whole scene was just awful. (28)

The very real anguish that many who lived on the islands during this time experienced, largely from the persistent social inequities that remained slavery's legacy, becomes subsumed in the grief of this Danish family who must lose their island paradise, and the little Danish boys who must part from their beloved West Indian nannies. By representing this text as the nostalgic experience of children, this text is able to engage with contemporary political discourses on the proposed sale of the Danish West Indies through an emotional appeal, without opening its own discourse to critique. The anguish that the boys feel in the story symbolically performs the anguish many Danes felt over the pending loss of their idyllic islands to an emerging superpower. Just as it would not occur to the boys to question that their nannies are domestic labor employed to bathe them, play with them, feed them, and sing them to sleep, it likewise would not occur to Danish readers of this charming little book that the islands were hardly a paradise for the many West Indian laborers living on paupers' wages.

Until the Danish West Indies' first labor union formed in 1916 (following black organizer David Hamilton Jackson's trip to Denmark in 1915), laborers had no legal means to agitate for better wages and working conditions. A 31 January 1916 editorial in St. Croix' first black-owned newspaper, *The Herald* of Christiansted (edited by Jackson), describes 'a procession of hunger clothed in rags and dirt' of striking laborers from St. Croix plantations who are kicked out of their homes and sent to live in makeshift camps (3). The islands were not a paradise for children, either; in fact, the 11 May 1916 issue of *The Herald* includes an editorial on the islands' infant mortality rate, which was three times that of Denmark and Germany (2). These conditions were not widely known in Denmark; the small, English-language *Herald* did not circulate there. Finally, while West Indians were producing their own cultural forms of music, folktales, and poetry (including the original forms *quelbe*, *cariso*, and *calypso*) that depicted island life, these did not (and for the most part, still do not) circulate in Denmark.<sup>10</sup> Rather, it was the 'really true' stories of Danish women such as Vollquartz that informed, and continue to inform, Danes' view of island life during the colonial period. This has allowed Danes to perpetuate a romantic relationship with a fictionalized past, without being forced to account for the atrocities perpetuated during Danish colonial rule or the structural racisms that became its legacy.

Vollquartz' little book, while it purports to describe the lives of two little Danish boys, features a portrait of a young island woman who presumably is one of the boys' West Indian nannies on its cover (and the image appears again in the book's pages).<sup>11</sup> Her eyes are shining, her lips turn up in a slightly coy smile, and her loose-fitting blouse has a



Figure 4. Sketch of a West Indian nanny featured on the cover of Vollquartz' book *Glade Barndomsdage i Vestindien* (1903). Illustration by Jenny Westring-Lehmann.

V-shaped slit that plunges between her breasts and a wide neckline that exposes one shoulder. Particularly to early twentieth-century Danish audiences, the image suggested both that she lived in an exotic, tropical climate; that she was a sexual island woman



Figure 5. Sketch of a West Indian nanny with her Danish charge that appears as an illustration in Vollquartz' *Glade barndomsdage i Vestindien* (1903). Illustration by Jenny Westring-Lehmann.

(prior Danish written accounts about the islands, most notably Carstens 1740/1981, already had established this stereotype); and that she was a wet nurse who opened her blouse to feed the little Danish child in her charge. As Wilma A. Dunaway (2003) has documented, wetnursing of the master's children is a role that enslaved black women performed on plantations, causing them to develop bonds of affection with their white charges at their own children's expense.<sup>12</sup> Such wet nurses often serviced the sexual needs of their masters as well, in large part in order to increase the enslaved population (Carstens also documents this, although he blames the enslaved women for seducing their Danish masters). Even once slavery was abolished on the islands, widespread social inequality forced West Indians into paid roles similar to those they had held as slaves. Seen in this light, the little Danish boys clinging to their nannies, and the nannies' attachment to the boys, is no longer innocent, but rather exemplifies the powered and ambivalent nature of this relationship. Had Danish readers considered the history and the commercial aspect of this seemingly innocent attachment, they might have better understood the boys' wailing as marking the severing of a very powered and problematic relationship. According to Young (1995), colonial desire is borne of the sexuality that pervades colonial discourse, with miscegenation the inevitable outcome of such intimate contact: 'The focus on hybridity also inscribes gender and the sexual division of labor within the mode of colonial reproduction' (19). The narrator does strive to erect artificial boundaries within these close child-nanny relationships, asserting that while the boys speak English with the domestic help, and one of the boys was born in the islands and the other has no memory of Denmark, they are nonetheless very much *Danish* boys. However, a contrapuntal reading of the text reveals that these *Danish* boys, while biologically Danish, are nonetheless the offspring of a symbolic miscegenation perpetrated by their parents and the homeland they represent.

### Danish contra West Indian Queens

A few years following Vollquartz' debut, Danish widow Lucie Hørlyk, who had returned to Denmark following her husband's death on St. Croix after 11 years there, turned to writing fiction to support herself and her two sons. In 1907, she published her debut collection of short stories, *Under tropesol: Fortællinger fra Dansk Vestindien* [Under the Tropical Sun: Stories from the Danish West Indies], followed by two novels also set in the islands and one in Denmark, prior to her death in 1912 at the age of 42. While no publication figures are available, the fact that she supported the family entirely on her writing income suggests that there was, indeed, an audience for fictional accounts about the Danish West Indies. Rather than unequivocally extol the virtues of island life as Vollquartz had done, Hørlyk sought to depict the islands in a more realistic fashion, including widespread poverty, social conflict, and even racial prejudice. Her stories feature female protagonists and colloquial dialogs peppered with English phrases and island idioms. Hørlyk's translator into English, Betty Nilsson, writes in a 1968 introduction that 'since there is so little in story form about the Virgin Islands, Hørlyk's stories are interesting for the glimpses they give of life in those days. Of course, her presentation of race relations, however broadminded for its day, is influenced by the prevailing attitudes of her time' (9). Hørlyk's stories, then, are afforded the authority of representative accounts of life in the Danish West Indies simply by virtue of the absence of other published fiction from this era; given that black residents of the West Indies did not have a newspaper that represented their world view until 1915, it is hardly surprising

that they did not publish their own fiction until the American period – and then they did so in English.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Hørlyk's racialized descriptions of her West Indian characters are mediated, in Nilsson's view, by the historical moment in which she wrote. But Olwig (2003) has pointed out the main pitfall of preserving such imaginary accounts of the Danish West Indies in their own historical time, when racial biology was accepted science: 'ideologies that are no longer acceptable can still flourish freely' (218). One can only imagine how the racialized language of Hørlyk's newly translated short story 'Hun var hvid' [She was White] struck English-language audiences of the 1960s, when the US civil rights movement in full swing. The protagonist of this story is, ironically, not the 'white' woman referenced in the title (a young ingénue who, as it turns out, had been stealing from a black shopkeeper in order to maintain her family's standard of living) but rather her foil: a black island woman known as Queen Mary. Virgin Islanders consider 'Queen' Mary Thomas a folk hero for her role in leading the 1878 'Fireburn' uprising that led to much-needed labor reforms on St. Croix.

Significantly, women and children played an important role in the Fireburn. Of the three primary activist leaders of the insurrection – Queen Mary, Queen Agnes, and Queen Mathilda – it is Mary who is the most celebrated, 'reputed to be extremely fearless and courageous,' according to Virgin Islands historian Sele Adeyemi (2006). It was allegedly Mary who instructed women and children to use rum barrels and kegs of kerosene to set fire to buildings in the town of Fredriksted and led mobs of 500– 600 workers on a burn-and-plunder march across the island, actions which earned her prison time in Denmark. Hørlyk's description, however, mocks Mary's celebrity and casts her in racialized terms that attributes her actions to a 'natural' tendency toward aggression and violence. The song Hørlyk claims the women sang as they burned and pillaged had, by the early twentieth century, become a beloved folk song among West Indians seeking to forge a sense of solidarity and common history among the working class. The West Indians' worker movement, inspired by the success of the worker movement in Denmark, was agitating for better wages and conditions. As labor historian Peter Hoxcer Jensen (1998) writes, 'it is not correct to characterize the 1878 insurrection as a very impulsive and in fact incomprehensible phenomenon, as has so often been done' (135). Black laborers had expected a series of sweeping reforms of the detested labor laws that had been in effect since the emancipation of the enslaved population in 1849, to take effect on 1 October 1878, the annual Contract Day that followed the opening of a new factory on St. Croix earlier that year. When this did not happen, enraged laborers began rioting in Fredriksted, then marched across the island torching the fields and estates of the white planters who were their employers. In Hørlyk's story, however, Mary is described in a way that preempts any possible connection to Denmark's worker movement. Here, she is not a labor leader but a criminal who 'had not changed her violent leanings. Almost daily she was hauled into court for pilfering, fighting (she could still handle a knife elegantly), or for her outrageous speech' (16). Hørlyk's narrator further describes her as 'a large negro woman with her turban askew, a wrinkled old face and bloodshot eyes; her thick upper lip was drawn up so far that one could see the gums over the few, shining white teeth. She was gesticulating and shouting wildly, her thin, wiry arms flailing the air like wings on a windmill' (15).<sup>14</sup> This cartoonish figure stands in stark contrast to the Queen Mary whom Virgin Islanders consider a 'heroic and semi-mythological' figure (Bastian 2003) and whose actions are celebrated in a popular folk song, 'Queen Mary, ah where you gon' go burn?' performed, for example, by schoolchildren on a recent CD recording that celebrates Virgin Islands folk life and history.<sup>15</sup>

Hørlyk's narrator denigrates Mary's historic role by describing her to Danish readers as one who 'had distinguished herself by an insatiable desire to see white people's houses burn. More than anything else she wanted the *bocras*' head on a pole' (*bocras* being a pejorative term for white people, which is also explained to Danish readers in a footnote). Mary was sent to Denmark, according to Hørlyk's narrator, not just to serve jail time, but also to be 'shown to royalty there as an interesting subject,' referencing what was actually a popular form of entertainment of that time: bringing dark-skinned, 'primitive' people to Denmark and displaying them as exotic subjects in public places, such as the central Copenhagen amusement park Tivoli (see Andreassen 2003). 'The fact that she "had been to Europe and seen the royal people" was Queen Mary's pride and gave her a special place among the people,' according to Hørlyk's narrator (16). This assertion effectively denies, first for Danish readers in 1907 and later for English readers in 1968, that Mary's 'special place among the people' actually stems from her role as the West Indian worker's movement's own 'Queen' who had won them better wages and working conditions. Hørlyk's characterization instead reflects the Danish bourgeois world view that casts Europe as a civilization far superior to that of the Caribbean and its monarchies as the 'royals' worthy of admiration. Hørlyk ends the story with Mary 'swinging her arms' in a 'respectful greeting' with 'gums and teeth exposed' in the presence of the Danish Commissioner, evoking the image of an ape-like figure rather than a respected labor leader. The story's ironic final lines finally explain its title: 'And naturally the girl was innocent. Can one steal when one is white and pretty as an angel?' (20) While this ending implies that Hørlyk intends for her audience to question whether whiteness and virtue necessarily go hand in hand, her racialized language throughout the story in describing Queen Mary overwhelm and subdue this objective. Given that this racialized language was considered as an accepted part of popular discourse, it is unlikely Danish readers would treat even the most over-the-top descriptions of Mary as ironic. Here again, there have been no serious attempts to challenge the use of such racialized language in Danish fiction and its replication of Danish colonial paradigms; in fact, such discourse remains protected in today's Denmark by its 'historic' designation, allowing it to, as Olwig claims, 'flourish freely' in the present.

### **Dangerous liaisons**

Another of Hørlyk's stories published in Denmark in 1907 and translated into English 61 years later, titled 'Nanna Judith,' suggests that miscegenation is the answer to Denmark's decadent civilization in the new world order. Racial biological discourses in Scandinavia during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries advocated for the careful delineation of racial types, such as the 'Nordic Teutonic' type, and linked the preservation of these types to the preservation of their respective civilizations (Lundborg 1921). As Young (1995) has shown:

Race was defined through the criterion of civilization, with the cultivated white Western European male at the top, and everyone else on a hierarchical scale either in a chain of being, from mollusc to God, or, in a later model, on an evolutionary scale of development from a feminized state of childhood (savagery) up to full (European) manly adulthood. In other words, race was defined in terms of cultural, particularly gender, difference – carefully gradated and ranked. A racial hierarchy was established on the basis of a cultural pecking order, with those who had most civilization at the top, and those who were considered to have none – 'primitives' – at the bottom. (94)

Fear of miscegenation, then, was borne not of some vague commitment to racial purity, but rather the notion ‘that without such hierarchy, civilization would, in a literal as well as a technical sense, collapse’ (95). However, one of the great contradictions of colonialism is that it was precisely the desire for the exotic ‘other’ that spurred many Europeans to propagate their cultivated civilizations on foreign shores – which inevitably led to miscegenation. ‘Thus the sexual attraction felt by white males for black and yellow females lies at the basis of both the rise and the fall of civilizations’ (Young 1995, 109). European ambivalence for the beautiful *mulatta*, a feminized racial pejorative for ‘mixed race’ and stemming from the word ‘mule,’ lies at the heart of Hørlyk’s melodramatic story ‘Nanna Judith.’ The protagonist is the newly arrived Danish Government doctor, Dr Berg, on St. Thomas who becomes fascinated by a beautiful, young, dark girl named Marion and her grandmother, whom everyone on the island calls Nanna Judith. Gradually, the doctor learns Judith’s tragic story: she had been a black servant girl in a plantation owner’s household when a handsome Scotsman fell for her and took her to live with him. They had a light-skinned daughter, Bell, and as the daughter grew older, Judith distanced herself from her so as not to ruin her daughter’s chances of making a good match or being perceived as a real lady. Bell married an Englishman and had three daughters of her own. While Judith permitted her grandchildren to visit her, she instructed them to call her ‘Nanna Judith,’ obscuring her blood relationship to them by adopting a generic title that island children called their nannies.

While two of the daughters were blonde and pale, the third grandchild, Marion, had black hair, black eyes, and skin darker than her mother’s, indicating a recessive gene in the family. Marion is beautiful, and Dr Berg inevitably falls for her and tells Nanna Judith that he wishes to marry her and take her with him back to Denmark. Toward the story’s conclusion, he tells Nanna Judith: ‘You sound like you thought I was bestowing a great honor upon Marion, when I marry her. I don’t see it that way at all and I don’t want others to. It is Marion who is bringing new strong blood into my somewhat over-civilized, old European family’ (82). While Hørlyk appears to be advocating a progressive position on race relations through the voice of the Danish doctor, she is actually articulating a contemporary nationalist sentiment that draws from the circulating discourses on racial biology. Dr Berg is the voice of science and civilization; he represents an educated Dane who must ‘enlighten’ the illiterate, uneducated Nanna Judith, a West Indian woman, on matters of racial biology. While he speaks of injecting Marion’s ‘new strong blood’ into his ‘over-civilized, old European family,’ he both validates the discursive delineations of racial types and of the racial hierarchies of ‘civilization’ Young describes. On a symbolic level, the regenerative miscegenation Dr Berg describes has a parallel in a popular political argument of Hørlyk’s day, namely that the Danish West Indies were vital for the perpetuation of Danish national culture.

Yet Hørlyk is quite careful to designate both Judith and Marion as exceptional women whose extraordinary beauty and strong moral character caused them to be ‘chosen’ by male European mates. Their exceptional status is furthermore anchored in their ‘mulatta’ identities; they possess the natural energy and strength of the ‘primitive’ and the fine features and moral core of the ‘civilized.’ This discursive move underscores Hørlyk’s target audience: bourgeois Danish women. As Young notes, colonial desire is not limited to European men; in this symbolic paradigm, gender falls away, and European colonizers become the masculinized white race which desires the yellow and brown feminized races (109). Thus it is not at all unnatural for Danish women readers to feel drawn to Judith and Marion. However, facilitating this attraction are the values Hørlyk ascribes to these

particular women characters that could be apprehended as common Danish, or what could be considered Christian, values. Unlike Queen Mary of the earlier story, who only wants to stir up trouble, Judith and Marion are gracious, insightful, self-righteous, and self-sacrificing. They are heroic women whose actions Danish women readers could imagine themselves emulating. Their status as exceptional individuals, then, sets them apart (quite literally, in the story's narrative) from the hybrid colonial island society that produced them.

The most exceptional 'mulatta' woman of all in the Danish national imagination is, of course, Anna Heegaard, the famous mistress and life companion of Governor-General Peter von Scholten, who freed the enslaved in the Danish West Indies in 1848. While numerous reworkings of this colonial love story have been attempted through the years, I will focus on a serialized novel that bestselling Danish writer Maria Helleberg published in the Sunday magazine of a Danish newspaper in 1999. The novel, titled *Størst af alt er kærlighed* [The Greatest of All is Love], presents itself as an authoritative biography written in the style of a historical romance, reducing Anna Heegaard's life to a narrative of her intimate relationships with white men. The novel's third-person narrator constantly reminds us (or has Anna constantly reminding herself in this story) that she is 3/16 black, underscoring the ubiquitousness of 'black codes,' legal classifications that effectively created a caste system for people of African descent in the Caribbean colonies. Anna's father is a Danish plantation owner whom Anna, and the narrator, labels 'the Great White Man,' because of his impressive physical stature and the size of his plantation. Anna was born free, which gives her the caste designation 'free colored.' While this is a novel, Helleberg has insisted in interviews that the novel's contents are 'true,' and that she visited the islands and thoroughly researched Heegaard's life and times so as to depict them accurately. This claim to historical accuracy, however, does not extend to providing context for racialized terms such as *mulatta*. In the imagined world of this novel, Danish readers are exempted from having to consider such terms critically, because the language, like the setting, is 'historically accurate.' Rather, Helleberg exoticizes Anna as a 'beautiful mulatta' whose exceptional status stems not only from her remarkable beauty and relative paleness, but also from her intelligence and initiative – traits that intersect neatly with discourses of female empowerment that had become popular in Denmark by latter half of the twentieth century. She becomes a heroine of Danish fiction and film, and her heroic status smothers any broader contextual discussion of race and sex in the Danish colonial context.

Helleberg's story about Anna is caught up in the genre of historical romance, which focuses on a protagonist's inner emotional life and physical experience at the expense of any kind of intellectual development. We never see, for example, how Anna learns business and finance to the point that she is able to invest the money that she inherited from her father wisely. As a result, certain critical bits of information about Anna's character are never fully brought to light. We learn, for example, that as a young merchant's wife, she makes a sound business decision to dump her investment in sugar once she finds out that prices are falling. The fact that she traded in sugar at all, when this was the primary product of slave labor in the West Indies, is not introduced as any kind of moral dilemma for Anna. She wanted to make money to strengthen her own position, and this story suggests that her marginalized status as a 'free colored' woman exempts her from engaging in the kinds of moral dilemmas that are reserved for her life partner, the European Von Scholten. Her abrupt moves from one relationship into another before she finally ends up with the governor, who is the love of her life, are also presented as historically accurate, in the sense that women of African descent could not marry

European men at that time and so they ‘enjoyed’ the ‘freedom’ to choose their partners without the burden of marriage. ‘It’s a good thing I’m not Danish – this would have been impossible!’ Anna declares at one point, after leaving one man for another. On the one hand, Anna’s wry, liberated attitude likely appealed to late twentieth-century Danish female readers. But on the other, Helleberg’s flippant treatment of codified racial discrimination trivializes such codes’ devastating impact on many West Indian families (as exemplified in the short story ‘Nanna Judith’).

However, Anna’s moves from one man’s bed to another are far less interesting than the symbolic spaces she moves between in this novel. As the story unfolds, before Governor von Scholten courts Anna, he mentions her in arguments with traditionalists as proof that ‘island folk’ can reach their full potential. Anna embodies not only the dreams of her mother and her grandmother, who had to work and buy their way out of slavery, she also exemplifies all people on the island who are not fully European. She is presented as ‘neither fish nor fowl, neither black nor white,’ but rather occupying a liminal space in between:

Anna had two worlds. They never touched one another, as far as she knew – only she was the connection between them. And she never wondered about that, she took it for granted. In one world was her mother, Mama Susanna, and her husband, whom Anna called Cappel, and who called her ‘Miss Ann.’ That world took place in town, that was called Christiansted, and it took place in long, sun-bathed streets. There Anna ran as fast as she could through the arcades, and she never fell on the many steps up and down, she knew Company Street and King Street... At Mama Susanna’s house, one ate food that burned in the mouth, and was called kallaloo or wahoo. One didn’t do that at Washington, as the plantation was called, where the Great White Man lived. There, meat was simply meat, not spiced, and the adults got red wine in crystal glasses. There were beds so high, that she could not reach them by herself, but had to be lifted, and when she lay in them, her dear Nanna Hannah opened the windows for fresh air. (1.45)

One world is her mother’s and Cappel’s very nice house in the small town of her birth, and the other is out in the country, on a plantation located quite a distance from town. Anna’s dual world lasts until she reaches age 14, when her father dies. Her subsequent moves chronicle her climb up the socioeconomic ladder in the islands, even though she barely leaves the small town of Christiansted. This narrative is surely designed to appeal to Danish women readers, who may see a resourceful and independent heroine in Anna.

But like Marion and Judith in ‘Nanna Judith,’ Anna is the exception, not the rule, and her trajectory seems so natural and effortless that her alleged role as the hope of the island folk becomes problematic. The narrative logic of her own story also becomes conflated with the master narrative in which she plays a part, namely that of the ending of slavery in the Danish West Indies. This narrative logic stipulates that slavery, and all of its associated institutions, had an expiration date, and once Danes were forced to become modern, this outdated practice would simply die out naturally. This maturation process is exemplified in the sequence of Anna’s Danish lovers: her first, Christian, is patriarchal, provincial and oppressive; her second, H.C., is enlightened, cosmopolitan, and respectful; and finally, Governor Von Scholten is a visionary who brings about real change. He has been celebrated posthumously for ending slavery in the Danish West Indies without revolution or bloodshed. His emancipation proclamation (at the time made against the wishes of the Danish king, who had preferred to phase out slavery) had immediate economic consequences for Denmark, which has allowed Danes to adopt a heroic and

self-sacrificing self-image as part of its national identity. As Denmark completed its transition from small empire to small nation, its evolving national story preempted any real accounting of Denmark's involvement in Europe's colonial enterprise and the role of this enterprise in building a modern, democratic Denmark.

### Conclusion

As Susan Buck-Morss (2009) has shown, Denmark is hardly unique among European colonial powers who were enabled to embrace Enlightenment discourses of freedom and democracy while perpetuating the human trafficking, enslavement, and systematic exploitation of Africans and their descendants in the Caribbean. However, Olwig argues that Denmark, along with its Nordic neighbors, is perhaps unique in that it divested itself of its colonies without an anti-colonialist uprising abroad or at home that would force ordinary Danes to confront their colonial history. Modern Denmark thus continues to distance itself from any culpability in regards to the hard facts of its colonial past, while embracing the colonial nostalgia born at the turn of the century when its islands were lost. This only accentuates the colonial desire that Young claims is at the heart of racist and colonialist discourse, making it seem only natural that these fantasies live on in fictional tales featuring beautiful and exceptional (Danish) West Indian women.

### Notes

1. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Anne Walbom of the Danish West Indies Society in Copenhagen for generously opening her private archive to me and helping me apprehend the instrumental role of popular culture narratives about the Danish West Indies. I am also grateful to Virgin Islands scholars George F. Tyson and Malik Sekou for sharing their expertise; to the staffs of the Danish Royal Library and Danish National Archives; to the American Scandinavian Foundation, who supported my work with a postdoctoral research grant; to Professor Nandini Dhar of Florida International University for her incisive feedback; to this special issue's editors, Lena Sawyer and Ylva Habel; and to the independent reviewers.
2. For a discussion of how this dynamic operates more broadly in colonial contexts, see Mills (1993) and Blunt and Rose (1994). Credibility as legitimate authors was also a problem for Danish/Nordic women writers of the early twentieth century, who often published under male pseudonyms in hope of more favorable reception from critics and readers. The most famous of these was Danish baroness Karen Blixen, celebrated author of *Out of Africa* (1937), who published under the male pseudonym Isak Dinesen from her literary debut in 1934.
3. Hansen won the Nordic Council's Literature Prize for the trilogy in 1971. The first two books in the series were *Slavernes Kyst* [Coast of Slaves 1967], set in Denmark's slave forts on Africa's west coast; and *Slavernes skibe* [Ships of Slaves 1968], depicting Denmark's role in the Middle Passage. Hansen researched Denmark's colonial history in its ample archives on the period, the most complete of any slave-trading kingdom. Despite Hansen's efforts to write a definitive work that would force Danes to come to terms with this aspect of their history, its representation has not increased in Danish history books since the 1970s (although certain historians have revised their wording slightly in response to Hansen's research). As Stecher-Hansen (1997) writes in her study on Hansen's documentary fiction, 'Hansen admits that he had expected that the Danes would be scandalized by his critique of their national pride. Instead, he claims that the Danes accepted the offense, 'as good entertainment, as it always is, when one's neighbor receives a blow' (87).
4. At the time the sale was completed, in 1917, Denmark still had Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands among its territories. Iceland achieved home rule within the Kingdom of Denmark in 1918 and full independence in 1944; the Faroe Islands began home rule in 1948 and Greenland, in 1979; and in 2009 Greenland moved a step closer to eventual independence

- from Denmark by adopting a self-rule government, remaining politically and economically attached to Denmark but in a more equitable relationship.
5. See Brendstrup (2006).
  6. Unlike the sketchiness of archival records on slave trading as a whole, which have thwarted efforts to count more precisely just how many Africans were enslaved and transported on ships across the Atlantic, Danish records are remarkably precise and well preserved in the Danish National Archives in Copenhagen, bolstering Hansen's claims to historical accuracy.
  7. For a detailed account, see the historical novel *Buddhoe* (1976) by Virgin Islands historian Patricia Gill Murphy.
  8. See the online [Danish kvindebiografisk leksikon](http://www.kvinfo.dk/side/170/) (Danish Women's Biographical Dictionary) at <http://www.kvinfo.dk/side/170/>.
  9. Translation mine, as are all other translations from Danish into English unless otherwise noted.
  10. See for example Williams (1998), Jarvis (1970), and Schrader (1991).
  11. The book features pencil sketches of the island women and the Danish boys throughout. The illustrations are by Danish artist Jenny Westring-Lehmann, who also worked as a sculptor for the porcelain maker Royal Copenhagen from 1911–1913.
  12. For a critical discussion of black love of white children, see Cheng (2000).
  13. For an excellent overview of the literary history of the Virgin Islands, see Williams 1998.
  14. Translations from Hørlyk's work are from Betty Nelson's (1969) published English translation.
  15. The lyrics are as follows:

Queen Mary, ah where you gon' go burn?  
 Queen Mary, ah where you gon' go burn?  
 Don't ask me nothin' tall.  
 Just geh me de match and oil,  
 Bassin Jailhouse, ah deh de money dey

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