

# Negotiating Danish identity with(in) Copenhagen's postcolonial landscape of commemoration

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## ABSTRACT

The paper investigates changes to Copenhagen's landscape of commemoration concerning its former colony, the Danish West Indies (DWI), prompted by the 2017 centennial anniversary of the Islands' sale to the US. It argues that Denmark, like other European nations, navigates a postcolonial identity crisis and that the landscape of commemoration plays a significant role within it. The paper advances our understanding of postcolonial Europe's identity crisis not only by shedding light on the under-explored case of Denmark, but also by emphasizing the role of the landscape of commemoration in this crisis. In addition to demonstrating how landscapes function as 'arenas' for negotiating expressions of hegemonic identity and territorial claims, it argues that the commemorative landscape is pivotal in tackling the construction of 'Europe' as a detached, self-made entity rather than a space (re)produced through connections with other (ed) places and people. It underscores that Europe's allegedly monochromatic historical fabric is woven from diverse global threads. Re-membering Europe with the people and regions vital to its (re)production re-writes them into European history and re-locates detached Europe (with)in the world.

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In this paper I investigate changes to Copenhagen's landscape of commemoration concerning its former colony, the Danish West Indies (DWI), prompted by the 2017 centennial anniversary of the Islands' sale to the US. I argue that these changes indicate that Denmark, like other European nations, navigates an identity crisis encapsulated as 'a problem of postcolonial whiteness.'<sup>1</sup> Despite Denmark's ongoing colonial relations with Greenland and the Faroe Islands, Denmark has received significantly less attention than other former European powers within the study of postcolonial Europe.

This paper advances our understanding of postcolonial Europe's identity crisis not only by shedding light on the under-explored case of Denmark, but also by emphasizing the role of commemorative landscapes in this crisis. In the context of Europe's historical construction as a detached, self-made entity, commemorative landscapes can showcase how European spaces are actually (re)produced through connections with other (ed) places and people. Re-membering Europe with the people and regions vital to its (re)production re-writes them into European history and re-locates detached Europe 'within and with the world.'<sup>2</sup>

I begin by underscoring the commemorative landscape's significance in national identity negotiation and its special potential in navigating Europe's postcolonial identity crisis. I then provide an overview of Denmark's colonial history in the Caribbean and discuss the relationship between the public memory of this past and the current hegemonic expressions of Danish identity, as well as the 'identity crisis' unraveling them. Bringing these themes together, the empirical section illustrates how debates, discussions and discourses about Danish identity manifest in and through four DWI-related memory-sites in Copenhagen (Fig. 1), and how rather than being static, these sites relate to one another and function as an arena for negotiation over the borders of Danish history and identity.

## Heritage and the landscape of commemoration

Within the framework of the nation-state, heritage articulations are instrumental in constructing an 'imagined community' deriving its legitimacy from the notion that its members are territorially and genealogically connected.<sup>3</sup> Being disinherited from the nation's heritage and shared genealogy, therefore, signifies not only

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas De Genova, 'The European Question: Migration, Race, and Post-coloniality in Europe', *Social Text*, 34 (2016) 75–102 (p. 79).

<sup>2</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Duke University Press, 2017), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict Richard O'Gorman Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1983).



Fig. 1. Map indicating the four sites. Figure by the author, utilizing ArcGIS. Used with permission.

exclusion from true national membership but also challenges the legitimacy of claims to physical space within the nation.<sup>4</sup>

Heritage's exclusionary character and its link to territorial claims becomes more apparent when materialized in public spaces, crucial for constructing 'the public.'<sup>5</sup> Shaping the public landscape of commemoration (which includes toponyms, historical markers, monuments and memorials) requires resources and authority, leading primarily to the materialization of hegemonic memories in the commemorative landscape.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, engagement with the commemorative landscape isn't limited to powerful actors, as seen in grassroot mobilizations.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Un-settling "the Heritage", Re-imagining the post-nationWhose Heritage?', *Third Text*, 49 (1999) 3–13.

<sup>5</sup> Nuala Johnson, 'Cast in Stone: Monuments, Geography, and Nationalism', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 13 (1995) 51–65; Brian S. Osborne, 'Constructing Landscapes of Power: The George Etienne Cartier Monument, Montreal', *Journal of Historical Geography* 24 (1998) 431–58; Karli-Jo T. Storm, "'Who and Where Are We?": Landscapes as Mediums of Identity Negotiation for Georgia's Azeri-Turks', *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 27 (2019) 443–77.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Allen, Mary Lawhon, and Joseph Pierce, 'Placing Race: On the Resonance of Place with Black Geographies', *Progress in Human Geography*, 43 (2019) 1001–19; Katharyne Mitchell, 'Monuments, Memorials, and the Politics of Memory', *Urban Geography*, 24 (2003) 442–59.

<sup>7</sup> Christiana Abraham, 'Toppled Monuments and Black Lives Matter: Race, Gender, and Decolonization in the Public Space. An Interview with Charmaine A. Nelson', *Atlantis*, 42 (2021) 1–17.

The broad engagement with the commemorative landscape reflects a recognition that historical representation is not just a power product but also a means for wielding power, leading scholars to conceptualize commemorative landscapes as 'arenas.'<sup>8</sup> Conceptualizing commemorative landscapes as 'arenas' where the public debates representations of the past, underscores that unlike fixed monuments, the past is dynamic.<sup>9</sup> Collective identities are constructed through shared understandings of a common past, and these understandings shift when the group's needs, values, or makeup changes.<sup>10</sup>

The dynamic and relational nature of identity helps explain why the landscape of commemoration provides such an apt medium to negotiate it. As Doreen Massey argues, places, like identities, are better understood as processes constituted through engagements with other people, times and geographies.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, historically Europe has been cemented as what Massey calls a 'place-on-a-map' devoid of

<sup>8</sup> Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, 'Memorial Landscapes: Analytic Questions and Metaphors', *GeoJournal* 73 (2008) 165–78.

<sup>9</sup> Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Astrid Nonbo Andersen, "'We Have Reconquered the Islands": Figurations in Public Memories of Slavery and Colonialism in Denmark 1948–2012', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 26 (2013) 57–76; Karen E. Till, *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Doreen Massey, 'Geographies of Responsibility', *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, 86 (2004) 5–18.

external connections.<sup>12</sup> While the reading of nations or places in general as ‘places-on-a-map’ isn’t unique to Europe, in the formerly colonized world one is continuously confronted with how faraway places influenced local trajectories. Architecture, toponyms and land ownership represent a small portion of the evidence speaking to the impossibility of confining history to national boundaries.

Walking in the streets of Europe, however, one can hardly tell how they have been produced and sustained by global connections. This sanitized construction leaves one to think that the European space might have been achieved purely via the superior nature of Europe’s ‘native’ (that is, white) inhabitants.<sup>13</sup> Those inhabitants’ identities, in turn, are also constructed as essential and self-made.

These constructions of identities and places as ‘self-made’ position the postcolonial European landscapes of commemoration as especially powerful mediums in navigating Europe postcolonial crisis. Their potential ability to link space and time and reveal the ways in which the European space is predicated on other geographies and histories can open what Massey calls the ‘space-time-envelope’ of frozen-in-time and enclosed Europe. In the context of crisis, such opening can provide new foundations for an inclusive and more grounded European identity. To show how the European space and European identity are things many can make claims to, however, one must consider national contexts.

## Re-membering Danish identity

Denmark’s colonial history spans over 500 years from the tropics to the Arctic, with 245 years of rule over its sugar colony, the Danish West Indies (DWI) where it enslaved people it trafficked from its West African post.<sup>14</sup> In 1917, Denmark sold the DWI to the US, where it remains an ‘unincorporated territory.’ In Denmark, the history of the DWI was largely forgotten until the recent 2017 centennial of the Islands’ sale.<sup>15</sup> Several ‘Danish-specific’ reasons explain this absence of memory.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, collective colonial amnesia isn’t unique to Denmark but is part of a wider postcolonial European phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> A key feature of the European phenomenon is the classification of colonial history as an ‘appendix’ to national history rather than a central component of national development.<sup>18</sup> In Denmark, this ‘appendix’ has also been portrayed as innocent and benevolent.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Doreen Massey, ‘Places and Their Pasts’, *History Workshop Journal*, 39 (1995) 182–92 (p. 188).

<sup>13</sup> Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Cornell University Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Scott Stawski, ‘Denmark’s Veiled Role in Slavery in the Americas: The Impact of the Danish West Indies on the Transatlantic Slave Trade’ (unpublished master’s thesis, Harvard University, 2018) <https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/37365426/STAWSKI-DOCUMENT-2018.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> [accessed 19 March 2024].

<sup>15</sup> Lars Jensen, ‘Introduction: Transfer Day Centennial, Postcolonial Denmark and Its Beyond’, *KULT. Postkolonial Temaserie*, 16 (2020) 1–6.

<sup>16</sup> Astrid Nonbo Andersen, ‘Islands of Regret – Restitution, Connected Memories and the Politics of History in Denmark and the US Virgin Island’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, Aarhus University, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Julia Suárez-Krabbe, ‘Pluriversalizing Europe: Challenging Belonging, Revisiting History, Disrupting Homogeneity’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 17 (2014) 155–72; Aline Sierp, ‘EU Memory Politics and Europe’s Forgotten Colonial Past’, *Interventions*, 22 (2020) 686–702; Peo Hansen, ‘European Integration, European Identity and the Colonial Connection’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, (2002) 483–98; Lars Jensen, *Postcolonial Europe* (Routledge, 2020); Gurinder K. Bhambra, ‘The Current Crisis of Europe: Refugees, Colonialism, and the Limits of Cosmopolitanism’, *European Law Journal*, 23 (2017) 395–405.

<sup>18</sup> Lars Jensen, *Postcolonial Denmark: Nation Narration in a Crisis Ridden Europe* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Andersen, ‘“We Have Reconquered the Islands”’.

The tendency to research the DWI as an ‘appendix’ to Danish history shifted somewhat in the 1980s with US Virgin Islands (USVI) historical research on the DWI influencing Danish historians.<sup>20</sup> This shift together with the later re-cataloging of the DWI archives inspired new research about the DWI in Denmark.<sup>21</sup> An inexhaustive list of research themes includes Afro-Caribbean culture in the colonial archives, the health conditions of the enslaved, the enslaved in Danish courts, uprisings and resistance, as well as a deeper understanding of the Danish triangular trade.<sup>22</sup> Recent work also sheds light on trajectories of similarities and differences in governmentality between the islands and the metropole.<sup>23</sup> Of note is the robust and more popular publication, *Danmark og kolonierne* (Denmark and the Colonies) published on the centennial day of the sale, featuring contributions from many of the leading DWI historians in Denmark.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, the volume fails to explain how important the DWI were to Denmark.<sup>25</sup>

Determining the exact contributions of Denmark’s Caribbean possessions to the country’s development is impossible; however, denying these contributions is untenable. For example, sugar played a pivotal role in Denmark’s economic development.<sup>26</sup> The wealth accumulated from the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and plantation economy gave rise to a new nobility, influencing local industry, landownership, and class structures.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the introduction of colonial goods such as coffee, cocoa, sugar, and spices, altered Danish cuisine in ways still reflected in modern grocery stores, which often have ‘colonial goods’ (*kolonialvarer*) sections.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Niklas Thode Jensen and Gunvor Simonsen, ‘Introduction: The Historiography of Slavery in the Danish-Norwegian West Indies, c. 1950–2016’, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 41 (2016) 475–94.

<sup>21</sup> Jensen and Simonsen.

<sup>22</sup> Karen Fog Olwig, ‘“Witnesses in Spite of Themselves”: Reconstructing Afro-Caribbean Culture in the Danish West Indian Archives’, *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 32 (1984) 61–76; Niklas Thode Jensen, *For the Health of the Enslaved: Slaves, Medicine and Power in the Danish West Indies, 1803–1848* (Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2012); Gunvor Simonsen, ‘Slave Stories: Gender, Representation, and the Court in the Danish West Indies, 1780s–1820s’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, European University Institute, 2008) <<https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/6819>> [accessed 15 February 2024]; Louise Sebro, ‘The 1733 Slave Revolt on the Island of St. John: Continuity and Change from Africa to the Americas’, in *Scandinavian Colonialism and the Rise of Modernity: Small Time Agents in a Global Arena*, ed. by Magdalena Naum and Jonas M. Nordin, Contributions To Global Historical Archaeology (Springer, 2013), pp. 261–74; Erik Gøbel, ‘Danish Shipping Along the Triangular Route, 1671–1802: Voyages and Conditions on Board’, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 36 (2011) 135–55.

<sup>23</sup> Kristoffer Edelgaard Christensen, ‘Governing Black and White: A History of Governmentality in Denmark and the Danish West Indies, 1770–1900’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Lund university, 2023).

<sup>24</sup> *Vestindien: St. Croix, St. Thomas Og St. Jan*, ed. by Poul Erik Olsen, Danmark Og Kolonierne, 1.udgave, 1.oplag (Gad, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Lars Jensen, *Postcolonial Denmark*.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Evans Loftin Jr, ‘The Abolition of the Danish Atlantic Slave Trade’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, Louisiana State University, 1977) <[https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_disstheses/3072](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/3072)> [accessed 19 March 2024].

<sup>27</sup> Tina Fasmer, ‘Sjællands vestindiske forbindelse kommer på museum’, *Sjællandske Nyheder*, 13 January 2017 <<https://www.sn.dk/danmark/sjaellands-vestindiske-forbindelse-kommer-paa-museum/>> [accessed 26 March 2022]; Karen Sivebæk Munk-Nielsen, ‘Saltede sild som slavekost: Fra Kalundborg til Dansk Vestindien’, *Geffon*, 4 (2019) 24–39.

<sup>28</sup> Mathias Danbolt, ‘Retro Racism: Colonial Ignorance and Racialized Affective Consumption in Danish Public Culture’, *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 7 (2017) 105–113; Kruse, ‘The Colonial, Racist Legacy of Danish Supermarkets’, *Scandinavia Standard*, 21 March 2021 <<https://www.scandinaviastandard.com/the-colonial-racist-legacy-of-danish-supermarkets/>> [accessed 26 March 2022].

The task of assessing the consequences of the ‘forgetting’ of Denmark’s colonial history in the nation’s narration is also challenging.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, scholars have argued that failure to account for Denmark’s colonial past allows for colonial logics to continue operating in contemporary Danish society. These include lingering racial ideologies, stereotypical representations in popular culture, institutional discrimination, the detention and deportation of asylum seekers, targeting of racialized residential areas, participation in the ‘war on terror’, and practices related to development aid.<sup>30</sup>

Denmark’s selective memory regarding its colonial past needs to be understood within the broader framework of Nordic exceptionalism, a discourse that presents the Nordic countries as homogeneous, peripheral, industrious, peaceful, equal, tolerant, innocent, and happy.<sup>31</sup> Bolette Blaagaard argues that this allows Nordic countries to absolve themselves from ‘multicultural concessions’ associated with ‘colonial guilt,’ thereby maintaining an image of a ‘purer’ European civilization. This is intricately connected to the notion of the Nordics as a space of idealized whiteness.<sup>32</sup>

The challenge of tackling racism within this landscape is further exacerbated due to the post-World War II European endeavor to detach the continent from ‘race’. In this context, the very people talking about contemporary racism are charged with perpetuating racist logics.<sup>33</sup> These dynamic preserves ‘white innocence’ in the face of ongoing racism.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, casual expressions of racism, termed ‘hyggeracisme’ by anti-racist activists are trivialized as

lacking malicious intent, and those taking offense are labeled ‘overly-sensitive’.<sup>35</sup>

Dismissal of racism is also facilitated by the assumption that recent immigrants are changing Denmark’s original homogeneity.<sup>36</sup> Immigrants are charged both with threatening Danish customs and culture, and with introducing the notion of ‘race’ in the public discourse.<sup>37</sup> This discourse of victimhood is often intertwined with a nostalgic longing for a past when racism was not a topic of general discussion.<sup>38</sup>

The defensive responses to efforts by racialized minorities and the Danish left to tackle the colonial past and its legacies are indicative of the nation’s postcolonial condition. Painting critics as irrational, hypersensitive, and aggressive, uncovers the deep commitment the predominant white demographic has to the narrative of innocence and their apprehension about losing it. This commitment includes vigorous efforts by politicians and society to endorse overtly racist language and imagery and to hinder research exploring postcolonial, migration, and gender relations.<sup>39</sup>

Lars Jensen situates Denmark’s postcolonial condition within a broader European postcolonial identity crisis.<sup>40</sup> The crisis is marked by Europe’s diminished importance on the global stage, reduction in social mobility, and erosion of social support networks, which collectively produce a lack of social cohesion and sense of helplessness.<sup>41</sup> The ‘postcolonial distinctiveness’ of the crisis rests in the way colonial forgetting hinders an understanding of the global processes behind these developments.<sup>42</sup>

Faced with uncertainty, attempts to stabilize Danish identity focus on contrasting it with the figure of ‘the other’ - primarily Muslims, migrants of color, and visible minorities—even those born and raised in Denmark.<sup>43</sup> The pervasive discussions and policies surrounding migration and integration reveal a complex tapestry of

<sup>29</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation’, in *Literary Theory and Criticism: Recent Writings from South Asia*, ed. by Arun Gupto, 1st edn (Routledge, 2021), pp. 35–68.

<sup>30</sup> Bolette B Blaagaard and Rikke Andreassen, ‘Disappearing Act: The Forgotten History of Colonialism, Eugenics and Gendered Othering in Denmark’, in *Teaching Race with a Gendered Edge: Teaching with Gender, European Women’s Studies in International and Interdisciplinary Classrooms*, ed. by Brigitte Hipfl and Kristín Loftsdóttir (Central European University Press, 2012), pp. 81–92; Mathias Danbolt and Lene Myong, ‘Racial Turns and Returns: Recalibrations of Racial Exceptionalism in Danish Public Debates on Racism’, in *Racialization, Racism, and Anti-Racism in the Nordic Countries*, ed. by Peter Hervik, *Approaches to Social Inequality and Difference* (Springer International Publishing, 2019), pp. 39–61; Tina Gudrun Jensen, Kristina Weibel, and Kathrine Vitus, “‘There Is No Racism Here’”: Public Discourses on Racism, Immigrants and Integration in Denmark’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 51 (2017) 51–68; Mira C. Skadegård, ‘With Friends Like These, Who Needs Enemies?: Structural Discrimination and Good Intentions in Danish Everyday Contexts’, *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 7 (2017) 214–223; José Arce and Julia Suárez-Krabbe, ‘Racism, Global Apartheid and Disobedient Mobilities: The Politics of Detention and Deportation in Europe and Denmark’, 107–127 (2018) 21; Kristina Bakkær Simonsen, ‘Ghetto–Society–Problem: A Discourse Analysis of Nationalist Othering’, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 16 (2016) 83–99; Lars Jensen, *Postcolonial Denmark*.

<sup>31</sup> Bolette B Blaagaard, ‘Remembering Nordic Colonialism: Danish Cultural Memory in Journalistic Practice’, *KULT. Postkolonial Temaserie*, 7 (2010) 101–21; Danbolt; Gudrun Jensen, Weibel, and Vitus; Kristín Loftsdóttir and Lars Jensen, ‘Introduction Nordic Exceptionalism and the Nordic “Others”’, in *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region* (Routledge, 2012); Temi Odumoso, ‘What Lies Unspoken: A Remedy for Colonial Silence(s) in Denmark’, *Third Text*, 33 (2019) 615–29.

<sup>32</sup> Bolette B Blaagaard, ‘Relocating Whiteness in Nordic Media Discourse’, in *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Exhibition Project in Five Acts*. Helsinki: NIFCE, Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art. (2006) 1–24; Blaagaard and Andreassen.

<sup>33</sup> Danbolt and Myong; Danbolt; Julia Suárez-Krabbe and Nanna Kirstine Leets Hansen, ‘INTRODUCTION: Taking Racism Seriously’, *KULT. Postkolonial Temaserie*, 15 (2018) 1–10.

<sup>34</sup> Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>35</sup> The term ‘Hyggeracisme’ combines Denmark’s cherished (and heavily commodified) concept of ‘hygge’—a sense of coziness and contentment—with racism, reflecting a tendency to downplay racist remarks as mere jokes in line with the cultural pursuit of harmony. This term critiques the way such casual racism is normalized under the guise of maintaining Denmark’s image as a congenial society, where people who break the ‘hygge’ atmosphere (e.g., by pointing out racism) are characterizing as aggressive or too sensitive. See: Jaughna Nielsen-Bobbitt, ‘What Is Hygge Racism & How Did It Become so Pervasive in Danish Culture?’, *Scandinavia Standard*, 6 July 2020 <<https://www.scandiaviastandard.com/what-is-hygge-racism-how-did-it-become-so-pervasive-in-danish-culture/>> [accessed 20 March 2024]; Włodzimierz Karol Pessel, ‘The Hygge Phenomenon. Between a Lifestyle and Nationalism’, *Przegląd Humanistyczny*, 461 (2018) 35–47; Charlotte Higgins, ‘The Hygge Conspiracy’, *The Guardian*, 22 November 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/nov/22/hygge-conspiracy-denmark-cosiness-trend>> [accessed 15 February 2024].

<sup>36</sup> Danbolt.

<sup>37</sup> Danbolt; Suárez-Krabbe and Leets Hansen.

<sup>38</sup> Danbolt.

<sup>39</sup> Manté Vertelytė and Peter Hervik, ‘The Vices of Debating Racial Epithets in Danish News Media Discourse’, in *Racialization, Racism, and Anti-Racism in the Nordic Countries*, ed. by Peter Hervik, *Approaches to Social Inequality and Difference* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), pp. 163–81; Christian Birk, ‘Messerschmidt har søgt i forskeres løn, rejser og forhold til fremmede magter: »Det kan ikke være andet end chikane«, *Berlingske*, 24 October 2021 <<https://www.berlingske.dk/danmark/messerschmidt-har-soegt-i-forskeres-loen-rejser-og-forhold-til-fremmede?referrer=RSS>> [accessed 22 March 2022].

<sup>40</sup> Lars Jensen, ‘Postcolonial Denmark: Beyond the Rot of Colonialism?’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 18 (2015) 440–52; Lars Jensen, *Postcolonial Denmark*.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Hervik, ‘Denmark’s Blond Vision and the Fractal Logics of a Nation in Danger’, *Identities*, 26 (2019) 529–45; Lars Jensen, ‘Postcolonial Denmark’; Lars Jensen, *Postcolonial Denmark*; Elsa Peralta and Lars Jensen, ‘From Austerity to Post Colonial Nostalgia - Crisis and National Identity in Portugal and Denmark’, in *Austere Histories in European Societies: Social Exclusion and the Contest of Colonial Memories*, ed. by Stefan Jonsson and Julia Willén (Taylor & Francis, 2016), pp. 74–91.

<sup>42</sup> Hall; Mbembe; Charles W. Mills; Charles Mills W., ‘White Ignorance’, in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, SUNY Series, Philosophy and Race (State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. 11–38.

<sup>43</sup> Hervik; Bakkær Simonsen.

neo-nationalism, neo-racism, white entitlement, anti-feminism, and anti-left sentiments, among others.<sup>44</sup> At the heart of these discourses lies the question of who counts as ‘Danish’.

Preoccupation with defining Danish identity has been so prominent that the Danish Language Council selected ‘*danskhed*’ (Danishness) as the ‘Danish word of the year’ for 2016.<sup>45</sup> That year, Minister of Culture Bertel Haarder initiated a public project to create a ‘*Danmarkskanon*’—a canon of quintessential Danish values and cultural characteristics. The resulting list highlighted Christian cultural heritage, the Danish language, freedom, liberalism, and ‘*hygge*’.

The following year, Haarder and Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen visited the USVI to commemorate the centenary of the DWI’s sale to the US (‘Transfer Day’). Rasmussen declared that, contrary to the nostalgic historical narrative Danes grew up with, today both Danes and Islanders share a common understanding of history. However, the centennial commemorations in Denmark (particularly those held in Danish) were criticized as being one-dimensional and introspective.<sup>46</sup> As such, the Centennial reproduced Denmark’s tendency to celebrate DWI anniversaries in self-serving ways.<sup>47</sup>

However, unlike previous anniversaries, the Centennial saw concerted efforts both to challenge *and* reinforce the prevailing narratives about DWI within Copenhagen’s landscape of commemoration. This reflects another unique element of the Centennial celebrations: the prominence of questions concerning what Denmark is and who can make claims to it.

The following section examines four memory-sites associated with the 2017 Centennial, based on fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2023 involving interviews with activists, politicians, artists and heritage practitioners involved with the sites or associated debates. I also analyzed relevant media coverage, accessed through the search engine InfoMedia, as well as local and national government documents associated with the sites.

The following analysis will demonstrate the ways in which the sites relate to one another, in order to show how the meaning of Denmark and Danish identity is negotiated within and through Copenhagen’s DWI’s commemorative landscape.

## I AM QUEEN MARY

‘I AM QUEEN MARY’ (IAQM) was initiated by USVI artist La Vaughn Belle and Danish-Trinidadian Jeannette Ehlers. Originating as a temporary commemorative project for the Centennial, IAQM was unveiled on March 31, 2018, made from black-coated Styrofoam-like material and supported by a permeant coral and concrete base. IAQM was placed outside the former Danish West India Company warehouse, now housing the National Gallery’s Royal Cast Collection (Fig. 2), and only 400 m from the royal palace. It was removed in December 2020 after suffering irreparable damage from storm.

The statue honored Mary Thomas, a leader of the 1878 Fire-burn revolt against the Danes in St. Croix, though the physical likeness was a composite of the bodies of the two creators.<sup>48</sup> The



Fig. 2. I AM QUEEN MARY at the Vestindisk Pakshus, today the Royal Cast Collection. Photo by Oliver Foerstner. Licensed for use by Shutterstock February 21, 2024.

result was a commanding 7-m-tall statue of a Black woman seated on a throne-like chair, overlooking the harbor with a machete in one hand and a torch in the other. Through the careful merging of their bodily images, the artists not only created a symbol of resistance and empowerment but also engaged in a dialogue with history, identity, and the enduring legacies of colonialism.

Focusing on a post-abolition rebellion, the artists de-centered Denmark’s pride in abolishing the slave trade first, contesting the idea of uniquely benevolent Danish rule. Additionally, the absence of information on Mary Thomas in IAQM can be viewed as a critique of Danish knowledge production and public memory, suggesting visitors should have already known her without needing an explanation—a treatment often afforded to statues of white men in the city. IAQM’s positioning also engaged in dialogue with traditional sculptures of white males; she was situated with her back to the Royal Cast Collection, which houses replicas of the western sculpting canon visible behind her.

The sole text accompanying the statue read: ‘a hybrid of bodies, nations, and narratives.’ The theme of hybridity was reflected in several ways. The coral stones composing Mary’s (remaining) plinth were initially harvested by the enslaved in the DWI for Danish colonial structures, where they were subsequently covered by bricks. By bringing the stones to the forefront, the plinth unveils

<sup>44</sup> Hervik, p. 530.

<sup>45</sup> Garbi Schmidt, ‘Myths of Ethnic Homogeneity The Danish Case’, in *Undoing Homogeneity in the Nordic Region: Migration, Difference and the Politics of Solidarity*, ed. by Suvi Keskinen, Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir, and Mari Toivanen (Taylor & Francis, 2019), pp. 35–49 (p. 36).

<sup>46</sup> Lars Jensen, ‘Introduction: Transfer Day Centennial, Postcolonial Denmark and Its Beyond’; Mathias Danbolt and Michael Wilsom K, ‘A Monumental Challenge to Danish History’, *Kunstkritikk*, 26 April 2018 <<https://kunstkritikk.com/a-monumental-challenge-to-danish-history>> [accessed 27 March 2022].

<sup>47</sup> Andersen, “‘We Have Reconquered the Islands’”.

<sup>48</sup> Lomarsh Roopnarine, ‘Contract Labor Migration as an Agent of Revolutionary Change in the Danish West Indies’, *Labor History*, 61 (2020) 692–705; Clifton E. Marsh, ‘A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Labor Revolt of 1878 in the Danish West Indies’, *Phylon*, 42 (1981) 335–45.

the colonial landscape's violent foundations within the metropolitan area.<sup>49</sup> This revelation underscores the relational intertwinement between Denmark and the USVI and situated Mary Thomas not as an outsider but as a Danish subject who championed freedom and equality—values central to contemporary Danish self-perception.

Furthermore, the IAQM not only revealed spatial hybridity but also addressed the hybridity of time. Memorials risk creating a sense of 'pastness' or 'temporal displacement.'<sup>50</sup> IAQM, however, connected various Black struggles across different times and places. In the website dedicated to the monument, the artists show how the monument carried specific connections to the Black Panther Party leader Huey P. Newton, the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers strike and its iconic slogan 'I AM A MAN,' the 1992 film *Malcolm X*, and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement which, similar to the Fireburn revolt, was initiated by women seen as 'rebel queens.'<sup>51</sup>

By refusing to be confined to the past and actively linking with other Black resistance movements, IAQM allowed Afro diasporic individuals in Denmark to identify with the DWI's history, even without direct genealogical connections to it. It also acknowledged the ongoing impact of historical atrocities and their geographical interconnections.<sup>52</sup> This geographical linking of racial justice struggles also countered the notion of spatial displacement, challenging the Danish mythology of peaceful homogeneous whiteness which casts racism as a problem of the United States.

Although IAQM offered a radical reimagining of Denmark and presented the first depiction of a Black woman within the nation's commemorative landscape, its temporary status underscores the power imbalance characterizing the ability to shape the built landscape of commemoration. As the artists shared in both personal conversations and public talks, the power imbalance compelled them to employ various strategies to secure IAQM a permanent place.<sup>53</sup> One strategy involved hiring a PR company to promote the project, which garnered more national and international attention than the artists anticipated. Generating hype, they hoped, would demonstrate IAQM's importance and encourage support for its preservation. However, when the monument's lightweight material eventually succumbed to the elements, the artists adopted a second strategy: developing an augmented reality (AR) app that allows visitors to see IAQM in its original location. Hiring a project manager to liaise with government officials was the third strategy pursued by the artists. All of this resulted in a petition to make IAQM permanent and the Danish government's pledge to provide DKK 1 million to that end. This financial contribution, however, is conditioned upon the artists raising the rest of the sum, a thing they have yet to achieve due to ongoing logistical hurdles.

Interestingly, the project manager who was hired to liaise with government omitted references to IAQM's connections with broader Black struggles from the official request for a permanent installation. Instead, it emphasized the positive image that IAQM

offered to Denmark—a country showcased as progressive and willing to address its 'historical misdeeds,' as evidenced by the extensive media coverage IAQM received.<sup>54</sup> Since the official request on behalf of the artists did not mention the monument's connections with diasporic struggles for racial justice, when the local government received letters of opposition to the monument on the grounds of its diasporic connections, the municipality was able to deflect them by pointing out that these connections were not articulated in the official request for permanent installation.<sup>55</sup> The omission of IAQM's Black consciousness from the request, and highlights of the benefits IAQM holds for solidifying Denmark's benevolence narrative, reflect the limitations marginalized groups face in their efforts to challenge the status quo through the hegemonic medium of the built landscape.<sup>56</sup>

IAQM received positive feedback from Afro-Danish groups and leaders, valuing it as vital representation of Black contributions to Danish society. However, in an interview, Bwalya Sørensen of Black Lives Matter Denmark suggested that initial awareness of IAQM was mainly in elite, predominantly white circles. Addressing this, Sørensen popularized IAQM for the broader Black community and coordinated a march on its inauguration day from the former women's prison in Christianshavn where the Fireburn leaders were held (today a bakery) to the West Indian warehouse. Sørensen emphasized IAQM's importance by saying

if you're a little black girl who grew up in Jutland and everybody calls you the N-word and then you come with your school and you stand there and look up... [takes a deep breath] "I am Queen Mary." ... and it's not in Vesterbro or Nørrebro – no. It's down the road from THE Queen.<sup>57</sup>

Sørensen highlighted the significance of the IAQM's presence in the heart of Copenhagen's symbolic landscape, especially considering the backdrop of exclusion and alienation. Echoing various community organizers and Black organizations interviewed, Sørensen emphasized the monument's ability to foster a sense of belonging, stating, 'we wanted a little black girl in the other side of the country to know that IAQM is there – we belong here. And this is our country too.' Furthermore, Sørensen noted that IAQM's narrative reclaimed Black agency in advancing the labor rights so cherished in Danish society.

However, the reception of IAQM has not been entirely positive. Critics argue that the monument's explicit connections to broader Black struggles make it irrelevant to Denmark, undermine its historical validity and align it with an illegitimate political agenda. These opponents believe that IAQM does not warrant national recognition or funding due to its alleged aesthetic shortcomings

<sup>49</sup> La Vaughn Belle, 'Lowering the Gaze - The Acropodium in I Am Queen Mary', *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Informationsvidenskab Og Kulturformidling*, 8 (2019) 37–45.

<sup>50</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 'Abortive Rituals: Historical Apologies in the Global Era', *Interventions*, 2 (2000) 171–86; Joshua F.J. Inwood, "'It Is the Innocence Which Constitutes the Crime": Political Geographies of White Supremacy, the Construction of White Innocence, and the Flint Water Crisis', *Geography Compass*, 12 (2018) 281–299.

<sup>51</sup> iamqueenmary.com, 'Background', *I Am Queen Mary* <<https://www.iamqueenmary.com/history>> [accessed 25 March 2022].

<sup>52</sup> Massey, 'Geographies of Responsibility'.

<sup>53</sup> Jeannette Ehlers, personal communications, 17 October 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Anders Juhl, 'To forskellige årsager til, at statuen bør bevares som et permanent monument.' (Copenhagen: Municipality of Copenhagen, 2019) <<https://www.kk.dk/sites/default/files/agenda/fb710f5b-f9fe-4f93-b1ff-4324ded72545/9d126b73-1278-4f90-bf5d-5353e9a48b44-bilag-1.pdf>> [accessed 20 March 2024].

<sup>55</sup> Henrik Appel, 'Spørgsmål til skriftlig besvarelse' (Copenhagen: Municipality of Copenhagen, 2021), p. 2 <[https://www.kk.dk/sites/default/files/2021-07/150321\\_-\\_forvaltningssvar\\_til\\_henrik\\_appel\\_esbensen\\_om\\_permanentgoerelse\\_af\\_monumentet\\_i\\_am\\_queen\\_mary.pdf](https://www.kk.dk/sites/default/files/2021-07/150321_-_forvaltningssvar_til_henrik_appel_esbensen_om_permanentgoerelse_af_monumentet_i_am_queen_mary.pdf)> [accessed 20 March 2024].

<sup>56</sup> Allen, Lawhon, and Pierce.

<sup>57</sup> Bwalya Sørensen, personal communications, 19 August 2021.

and because Mary Thomas, depicted in colonial archives as an outlaw and abusive mother, is considered a controversial figure.<sup>58</sup>

Researchers of colonial and art history were quick to point out fallacies rooted in the critiques and how they are characterized by racialized and gendered undertones as well as misunderstanding of diasporic and spatial interconnections.<sup>59</sup> One can also note how the focus on IAQM's alleged aesthetic deficits, femaleness, foreignness, militancy, and purported thuggishness mirrors the media portrayal of Sørensen. Both are depicted as stereotypical, dehumanized 'angry Black women,' accused of importing an American race-relations discourse to Denmark.<sup>60</sup> Through 'Black abstraction,' the anger of Black women is decontextualized, positioning them as aggressors rather than victims resisting oppression.<sup>61</sup> With respect to the experiences of Black women in Danish academia, Oda-Känge Midtvåge Diallo writes:

Black women in the predominantly white and male world of Danish academia thus produce friction, discomfort and become impossible presences merely because of the conceptualised political value of their skin, gender and bodies. By being there, and doing their work they are in constant conflict with the narrative of the academic sphere as white, male and "Danish".<sup>62</sup>

In many ways, Queen Mary's position by the powerful landscape of Amalienborg mirrors that of many Black women who find themselves alone amidst white patriarchal Danish environments. Her empty coral plinth (Fig. 3) a testament to the difficulty of withstanding this climate without proper support.

### Freedom

Unlike the temporary IAQM, 'Freedom' serves as the official, nationally recognized monument commemorating the DWI (Fig. 4). Crafted in 1998 by US-Ghanaian artist Bright Bimpong to mark the 150th anniversary of emancipation in the USVI, 'Freedom' (known in the USVI as the Conch Shell Blower) is a life-sized bronze statue that adorns each of the three USV islands. As the centennial



Fig. 3. IAQM's empty coral plinth. Photo by the author, used with permission.

anniversary of the USVI sale in 2017 approached, the USVI Historical Preservation Committee (USVIHPC) discovered a fourth replica of 'Freedom,' along with busts of workers' rights advocate Hamilton D. Jackson and emancipation-rebellion leader General Buddha. The USVIHPC chair explained in an interview that the realization that Copenhagen lacked any monuments to the DWI, brought the committee to decide to gift these replicas to the city so as to illuminate the memory of the DWI in Copenhagen.<sup>63</sup>

Notably, 'Freedom' provides a counter-narrative to the prevalent Danish story, which credits Peter von Scholten, the governor of the DWI during emancipation, with benevolently 'granting' freedom to the enslaved. 'Freedom,' however, underscores the uprising of the enslaved, which bound von Scholten to make the emancipatory decision.<sup>64</sup> As the USVIHPC chair noted in an interview, being an official US governmental entity prevented them from gifting 'Freedom' to Denmark without going through Washington D.C. Since they wished to frame the gesture as a gift 'from the people of the USVI to the people of Denmark,' they turned to the St. John Historical Society (SJHS) to lead the project and raise necessary funds for transporting 'Freedom' and the two busts to Denmark.<sup>65</sup>

According to the SJHS president, the decision to work with the predominantly white organization became a point of contention since it positioned the white and US-mainland born president of the Society as the official USVI representative to give a speech at the inauguration ceremony.<sup>66</sup> The USVIHPC chair, a white man evidently mindful of racial issues and the USVI's ongoing colonial relationship with the US, reached out to SJHS due to its extensive network and meticulous financial records. SJHS's favorable position, however, reflects the USVI's colonial status, raising critical questions about who can afford the means to narrate the past in official channels.

To find suitable locations for the gifts, the USVIHPC chair contacted Western Zealand Museum manager and friend, Karen Munk Nielsen. As Nielsen noted in an interview, finding a place for 'Freedom' proved a lot more challenging than securing homes for the two busts.<sup>67</sup> Initially, the statue was displayed at various sites, including Copenhagen's City Hall, the Worker's Museum, and,

<sup>58</sup> Jes Fabricius Møller, 'En hyldest til oprøret', *Kristeligt Dagblad*, 4 March 2018 <<https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/danmark/en-hyldest-til-oproeret>> [accessed 11 January 2024]; Morten Mikkelsen, 'Statue over dansk kolonitid forestiller en dømt forbryder', *Kristeligt Dagblad*, 25 June 2020 <<https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/danmark/kolonitids-statue-forestiller-en-doemt-forbryder>> [accessed 25 March 2022]; Morten Mikkelsen, 'Portræt af en omstridt karakter: Queen Mary er et tvetydigt symbol', *Kristeligt Dagblad*, 26 June 2020 <<https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/danmark/queen-mary-er-et-tvetydigt-symbol>> [accessed 25 March 2022]; Nikolaj Bøgh, 'Debat: I Am Queen Mary er ikke et monument over kolonihistorien, men over identitetspolitikken', *Information*, 5 January 2021 <<https://www.information.dk/debat/2021/01/am-queen-mary-monument-kolonihistorien-identitetspolitikken>> [accessed 25 March 2022]; Letters to the editor, 'Jeg kan vanskeligt forestille mig nogen, der fortjener en heltestatue mindre end » Queen Mary«, *Berlingske*, 22 June 2020, <<https://www.berlingske.dk/content/item/1484785>> [accessed 25 March 2022]; Appel, 'Spørgsmål'.

<sup>59</sup> Gunvor Simonsen, "'I Am Queen Mary'", Jes Fabricius Møllers kritik af ny skulptur rammer ved siden af, *Kristeligt Dagblad*, 10 April 2018 <<https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/debat/i-am-queen-mary-jes-fabricius-moellers-kritik-af-ny-skulptur-rammer-ved-siden-af>> [accessed 28 February 2024]; Søren K. Villemoes, 'Statuers eksklusion', *www.weekendavisen.dk*, 27 May 2021 <<https://www.weekendavisen.dk/content/item/37320>> [accessed 28 February 2024].

<sup>60</sup> See; Niels Thomsen, *Ved Profetens Skægl*, 2020 <<https://www.trykkefrihed.dk/bwalya-soerensen-er-paa-lange-stræk-en-udmaerket-repraesentant-for-blm.htm>> [accessed 31 March 2022]; Rasmus Sand Høyer, Dagens tegning: *En Krølle*, 2020 <<https://jyllands-posten.dk/debat/tegning/ECE12601146/dagens-tegning-en-kroelle/>> [accessed 31 March 2022].

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Ross, 'The Rhetorical Tapestry of Race: White Innocence and Black Abstraction', *William and Mary Law Review*, 32 (1990) 1–40.

<sup>62</sup> Oda-Känge Midtvåge Diallo, 'At the Margins of Institutional Whiteness: Black Women in Danish Academia', in *To Exist Is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe*, ed. by Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande (Pluto Press, 2019), pp. 219–28.

<sup>63</sup> David Knight Sr. Personal communications, 3 December 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Andersen, 'Islands of Regret'; Lars Jensen, *Postcolonial Denmark*.

<sup>65</sup> David Knight Sr. Personal communications, 3 December 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Lonnie Willis. Personal communications, 13 November 2020.

<sup>67</sup> Karen Munk Nielsen. Personal communications, 3 August 2, 0,201.



**Fig. 4.** Freedom by Bright Bimpong. The plaque reads 'In memory of the struggle against slavery in the Danish West Indies. Gifted to Denmark in 2017 after a fundraiser on the occasion of the centennial of the Transfer of the Islands to the US. Copies of the sculpture can be found on each of the three Islands.' Photo by the author, used with permission.

unexpectedly, at the Christiansborg Palace's Royal Representation Halls, where the Queen hosts official receptions. Following these displays, 'Freedom' spent a year in storage while it was treated to withstand Denmark's climate. The delayed installation of 'Freedom', Nielsen suspects, was partly due to changes in political leadership and a lack of interest from the new Minister of Culture, who belonged to the Liberal Alliance party. To overcome these obstacles, stakeholders used the media to pressure the government, ultimately leading to the project's advancement under new political leadership from the Social Democrats.<sup>68</sup> By the time the project gained momentum, the preferred location for the statue next to the West Indian Warehouse had been taken by IAQM. In October 2019, nearly three years after it was gifted, 'Freedom' was erected in the historic Danish Asia Company Warehouse, now housing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Notably, unlike the three other replicas in the USVI and IAQM, 'Freedom' faces away from the water. As one Afro-Danish heritage practitioner noted in an interview, Denmark's placement of 'Freedom' with his back to the water disrespects the original message of connectivity across the oceans.<sup>69</sup> Another white Danish practitioner, who was involved in the project, suggested in an interview that this inward-facing position is symbolic of Denmark's self-involved approach to its colonial history, where its memory is leveraged for internal debates rather than a recognition of its connection to - and accountability for - distant places and people.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Johan Varning Bendtsen, '»Et virkelig uheldigt signal at sende«: Ingen ved, hvor den dansk-vestindiske slave-skulpturgave skal stå', *Politiken*, 14 February 2018 <<https://politiken.dk/kultur/art6338497/Ingen-ved-hvor-den-dansk-vestindiske-slave-skulpturgave-skal-st%C3%A5>> [accessed 29 March 2022].

<sup>69</sup> Mikahla Iversen. Personal communications, 19 August 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Morten Kjaerum. Personal communications, 18 March 2022.

Despite the official recognition bestowed on 'Freedom' via the inauguration ceremony presided over by the Minister of Culture Joy Mogensen, awareness of the sculpture remained limited.<sup>71</sup> 'Freedom's' location, against the powerful backdrop of Christiansborg and the seventeenth-century Stock Exchange building is not well-visited or known. Several factors contribute to its relative obscurity. Within the Afro-Danish community, the relative lack of awareness to 'Freedom' may be attributed to the fact that the entire effort to bring the monument to Denmark was led by white actors and organizations on both sides of the Atlantic. Among the general population, the prolonged period it spent in storage meant that by the time it was inaugurated, people may have forgotten about it. If 'Freedom' was in a frequently visited area, this lack of knowledge wouldn't be so detrimental as people will have a chance to spontaneously 'remember' it by stumbling upon it, but the grounds of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are not widely visited. Lastly, it is overshadowed by IAQM, which (despite its temporary status) was successfully framed as 'the only' monument dedicated to the history of the DWI.

### Frederik V

While less known than IAQM, 'Freedom' was noticed by the collective Artists Anonymous. Inspired by the global BLM protests' engagements with statues of enslavers and troubled by the Danish view of such events as irrelevant to Denmark, on November 6, 2020 the group released a video depicting 'a happening' in which they submerged a plaster replica of King Frederik V's bust, a figure

<sup>71</sup> This limited awareness is reflected in the interviews conducted for this research where even activists, artists and academics deeply involved in efforts to bring the memory of the DWI to the fore - were no aware of 'Freedom.'



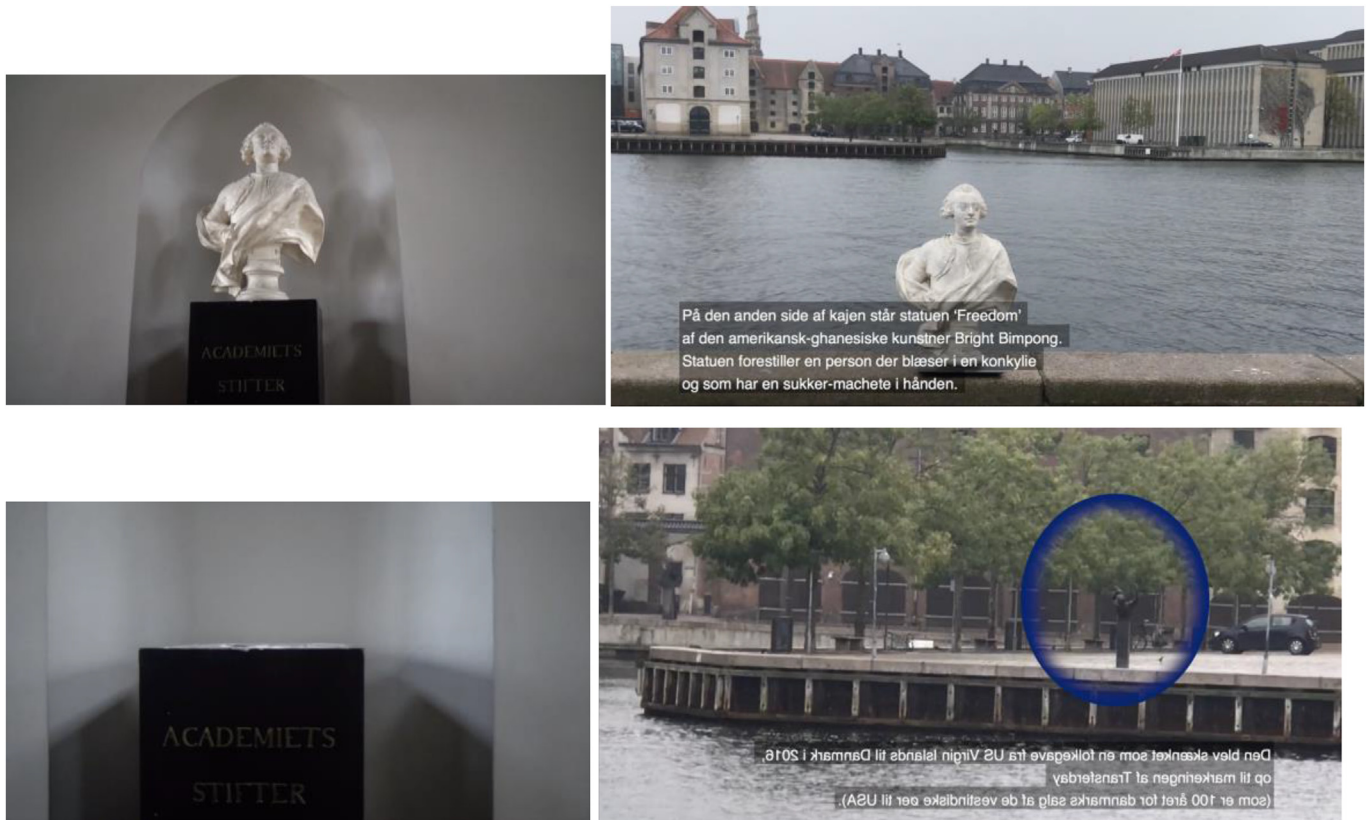


Fig. 5. Screenshots from the video of 'the happening' (2020) which took place across from *Freedom*. Courtesy of Anonymous Artists, used with permission.

deeply tied to colonial atrocities, into the harbor.<sup>72</sup> The video shows the king's bust, which is one of few plaster copies of the original (and made only between 1950 and 1980) being bagged in black plastic, and stolen from its pedestal in the Ceremonial Hall at the Academy of Fine Arts, before being dropped into the waters behind Charlottenborg, directly opposite 'Freedom'. The footage fixates on 'Freedom,' encircling it (Fig. 5) while providing a description of the sculpture. It then reads a message that can be found in an accompanying open letter the group published in Danish and English:

By sinking Frederik V into the canal, we want to articulate the ways in which the colonial era is invisible, but still has direct consequences for minority people inside and outside the academy. We want an art world that takes responsibility, not only for the actions of the past, but for the ways in which colonialism is still active today.<sup>73</sup>

The removal of the bust was hardly noticed before the video release. Once released, however, the sinking drew major reactions. Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, then head of the Institute for Art, Writing, and Research at the Academy, claimed responsibility and was consequently expelled. Then the Academy's rector, Kirsten Langkilde, was pressured into resignation by Culture Minister Joy

Mogensen, who interpreted the event as a symptom of identity politics infiltrating the Academy and used it to justify sweeping changes.<sup>74</sup>

The incident divided Denmark's academic and artistic circles. Some individuals interviewed, including academics, artists, and heritage practitioners, distanced themselves from Dirckinck-Holmfeld to keep their standing with the public and funding bodies, given the government's harsh criticism of 'research activism'. However, Dirckinck-Holmfeld also received strong support, evidenced in the over 1020 signatures a petition of solidarity with her gathered amid ensuing media frenzy and criminal charges.<sup>75</sup> One group intent on reevaluating Denmark's colonial legacy, the School of Re-membering, even began selling images of the sunken, water-treated bust to fund its activities.

In an interview, Dirckinck-Holmfeld interpreted the distorted bust as a metamorphosis. Specifically, from a symbol of white monarchy into an object resembling both a conch shell (the instrument of rebellion in 'Freedom') and a vulva (Fig. 6), reflecting her hope for a transition from white patriarchal history to a racially just and feminist future.<sup>76</sup>

Dirckinck-Holmfeld's aspiration for the event to spark dialogue on Denmark's colonial past-present, especially in the arts, was partially realized. Following the event, the government formed a

<sup>72</sup> Scott William Raby, 'Moment no. 3: Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld', interview with Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 9 June 2022, *Art Hub Copenhagen* <[https://arthubcopenhagen.net/en/media\\_item/moment-no-3-katrine-dirckinck-holmfeld/](https://arthubcopenhagen.net/en/media_item/moment-no-3-katrine-dirckinck-holmfeld/)> [accessed 22 February 2024].

<sup>73</sup> Anonyme Billedkunstnere, 'DET KGL. DANSKE KUNSTAKADEMIS GRUNDLÆGGER SMIDT I HAVNEN — I DO ART', *IDOART.DK*, 2020 <<https://www.idoart.dk/blog/det-kg-l-danske-kunstakademis-grundlaegger-smidt-i-havnen>> [accessed 30 March 2022].

<sup>74</sup> Pernille Dreyer and Jonas Rimer Hansen, 'Joy Mogensen: Der Er Behov for En Ny Start', *Berlingske*, 17 March 2021, section 3, p. 6.

<sup>75</sup> SOLIDARITETSERKLÆRING, '1015+ I SOLIDARITET MED KATRINE DIRCKINCK-HOLMFELD OG ANONYME BILLEDKUNSTNERE — I DO ART', *IDOART.DK*, 2020 <<https://www.idoart.dk/blog/solidaritet-med-katrine-dirckinck-holmfeld-og-anonyme-billedkunstnere>> [accessed 29 March 2022].

<sup>76</sup> Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld. Personal communications, 31 October 2021.



Fig. 6. A miniature copy of the 'rematerialized' sculptures. Photo by the author, used with permission.

committee to consider a colonial museum, a project long championed by advocates like the NGO Kolonihistorisk Center. The Committee was heavily critiqued for its composition and internal disputes that were made public resulted in an imposed media-silence on its members.<sup>77</sup> While these 'scandals' harmed the committee's standings they kept colonialism in the media spotlight beyond centennial commemorations. Despite public interest, however, the final report was sidelined. A committee member interviewed for this paper noted that by deeming one of the committee's recommendations impractical-situating the museum at the West Indies Warehouse - the government was able to ignore all other suggestions made and shelve the report.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Michael Böss, 'Skal woke-bevægelsen have sit eget museum i Danmark?', *Jyllands-Posten*, 15 October 2021 <<https://jyllands-posten.dk/debat/breve/ECE13375008/skal-wokebevægelsen-have-sit-egemuseum-i-danmark/>> [accessed 30 March 2022]; Mads Bager Ganderup and Kristian Lindberg, 'Museumsinspektør retter hårde beskyldninger mod forskere: »Arrogant attitude « og » præget af » white innocence«, *Berlingske*, 2021 <<https://www.berlingske.dk/content/item/1599493>> [accessed 29 March 2022]; Kåre Lauring, 'Hvad dølen laver en museumsinspektør med fagområde indenfor gipsafstøbninger i en arbejdsgruppe om et kolonihistorisk museum?', *Berlingske*, 20 October 2021 <<https://www.berlingske.dk/content/item/1599923>> [accessed 29 March 2022]; Nathalie Ostrynski, 'Red Kolonihistorien Fra de Identitetspolitiske Aktivister', *Berlingske*, 15 October 2021 <<https://www.berlingske.dk/content/item/1598904>> [accessed 30 March 2022].

<sup>78</sup> Henrik Holm. Personal communications, 9 May 2023.

While 'the happening' ignited national debate, the heritage experts I interviewed felt the backlash impeded meaningful engagement with Denmark's colonial history. They empathized with Dirckinck-Holmfeld, who dedicates much of her artistic, intellectual and activist work to tackling Danish colonialism. Nonetheless, they believed affective strategies that recognize people's genuine ignorance and emotional attachments are better suited to promote unlearning and relearning necessary for sustainable change.<sup>79</sup>

Since marginalized individuals should not shoulder the dual burden of experiencing oppression and educating oppressors about it, anti-racist discourse advocates for members of the dominant group (such as Dirckinck-Holmfeld) to take on the labor of 'calling people in' rather than 'calling people out.'<sup>80</sup> Similarly, however, students of color should not be tasked with removing oppressive symbols, like the statue of Frederik V in their learning environments, as reflected in the appreciation of Dirckinck-Holmfeld actions for Melanie Kitti, an artist of color and a Royal Danish Academy alum.<sup>81</sup> Either way, given the emotional investment in the dominant narrative and the ontologies it legitimizes, the heritage practitioners and academics interviewed believed it was naïve not to anticipate the backlash and feared the action provided a moral high ground for conservatives.<sup>82</sup>

### Alberta Viola Roberts memorial

Heritage enthusiast and Conservative Party representative Nikolaj Bøgh of Frederiksberg was deeply offended by the sinking of Frederik V into the harbor, reporting the incident to the police. He later wore a t-shirt with the bust's image and the words 'nothing forgotten nothing forgiven,' an appropriation of a phrase linked to 2007 protests against the violent demolition of ungdomshuset, an anti-establishment, counter-culture hub.<sup>83</sup> This appropriation can be interpreted as trolling the left while signaling to the right that the sinking is associated with 'radical,' leftist movements.<sup>84</sup> In a Facebook post following 'the happening,' Bøgh compared the sinking to acts committed by Nazi Germany, the Taliban and ISIS, called for a cleanup at the Academy of Fine Arts and punishment for Anonymous Artists, and warned against becoming like the US where 'thugs and perpetrators feel entitled to censor our common

<sup>79</sup> Morten Kjaerum. Personal communications, 18 March 2022; Karen Munk Nielsen. Personal communications, 3 August 2, 0,201; Helle Stenum. Personal communications, 2 November 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Nicole Chung, 'I'm Tired of Trying to Educate White People About Anti-Asian Racism', *Time*, 27 May 2021 <<https://time.com/6051948/educating-white-people-anti-asian-racism/>> [accessed 29 March 2022]; Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, Expanded edition (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018); B. L. Wilson, 'Perspective |I'm Your Black Friend, but I Won't Educate You about Racism. That's on You.', *Washington Post*, 8 June 2020 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/06/08/black-friends-educate-racism/>> [accessed 29 March 2022]; SURJ, 'Our Values', *Our Values* <<https://surj.org/about/our-values/>> [accessed 29 March 2022].

<sup>81</sup> In: Kate Brown, 'An Explosive Debate Has Roiled Denmark After a Department Head at Its Top Art Academy Was Fired for Drowning a Bust of a Former King', *Artnet News*, 2 December 2020 <<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/katrine-dirckinck-holmfeld-royal-academy-of-art-1927592>> [accessed 29 March 2022].

<sup>82</sup> also see: Henrik Holm, 'A Big Splash in Shallow Waters: The Statue of Frederic V and the Danish Colonial Past', *1700-Tal: Nordic Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 18 (2021), 144–49.

<sup>83</sup> Camilla Falkenberg, 'Intet glemt – intet tilgivet: Demonstrationen for Ungdomshuset på Jagtvej 69', *MY DAILY SPACE*, 2 March 2017 <<https://mydaily.space.dk/2017/03/10-aars-demonstrationen-ungdomshuset-jagtvej-69/>> [accessed 12 July 2022].

<sup>84</sup> Mike Bruun, 'Det kan være rigtig svært som privilegeret ung dansk teenager at stille sig i offerrollen - men de gør deres bedste', *Berlingske*, 6 July 2020 <<https://www.berlingske.dk/content/item/1485311>> [accessed 12 July 2022].

history.<sup>85</sup> Surprisingly, he also suggested a memorial for Alberta Viola Roberts.

In 1905, four-year-old Roberts and seven-year-old Victor Cornelius were taken from St. Croix to Denmark under the pretense of a short visit. In reality, they were displayed at a colonial exhibition in Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens and never returned home. After traumatic exhibition (described later by Cornelius), Cornelius received a mainstream Danish education, while Roberts went to maid school, dying at 15 from tuberculosis.<sup>86</sup> Buried unmarked in Solbjerg Cemetery on the day the DWI transferred to the US (March 31, 1917), Roberts remains largely forgotten, whereas Cornelius gained public attention for choosing to stay in Denmark after the Islands were sold and for his successful educational career. In 2016, a statue honoring Cornelius was unveiled in his town of Nakskov, making him 'the real first' DWI figure to be immortalized in the Danish commemorative landscape. While Cornelius spoke of the experiences of racism, his successful integration in the metropole granted him attention that stories challenging the narrative of benevolence haven't received.

Robert's memory, however, was resurrected with the Centennial, and Bøgh was not the only one engaging with it. Activists, artists and academics from the Afro-Danish community and the USVI honored Roberts's memory, including through holding a vigil at her place of rest.<sup>87</sup> Afro-Danish community organizers noted in interviews that they considered suspicious the fact that Bøgh, who is known for his nationalistic positions, was behind the proposal. However, Bøgh describes his motivation in a Facebook post:

Contrary to the monstrous and problematic "I am Queen Mary"-this sculpture will be a real and honest commemoration of an event that actually happened and that says a lot about our colonial history and about the difference in how we viewed other people then and now.<sup>88</sup>

Bøgh then turns to the sinking of Frederik V:

History should never be hidden away or destroyed because you are angry about how people have thought in the past. But we should remember and learn from it and a memorial to Alberta can contribute to that. There is no reason to exaggerate the importance of the colonial history. But it is also a part of our history that we should remember. That is why it is good with markings and monuments in the public space. And the fundamental thing here is that we add something that makes us wiser. Not subtract and destroy statues or throw busts in the harbor. That only makes us dumber and more hostile towards each other.

Whether Bøgh's proposal will materialize or not, it is clear that his intentions to commemorate Roberts are intertwined with efforts to foster greater legitimacy around the dominant narrative that is challenged by IAQM and the sinking of the bust. Specifically, Bøgh cultivates the ability of memorials to displace time (e.g., 'the difference in how we viewed other people *then and now* ... because

you are angry about how *people have thought in the past*').<sup>89</sup> As such, he denies the ongoing legacies of colonialism in Denmark, for example, the construction 'others,' or in his words, 'strangers.'<sup>90</sup>

Framing Roberts—a Danish subject living most of her short life in Denmark—as a stranger, not only constructs 'Danish' as white, but also obfuscates the spatial relationship between DWI and Denmark. While IAQM presents Mary Thomas as a Danish subject worthy of monumentalization, reflecting space's hybridity and Danish modernity's spatial dependencies, Bøgh's framing of Roberts does the opposite. By implying colonial subjects weren't vital to the Danish project ('there is no reason to exaggerate the importance of the colonial history'), Bøgh relegates Roberts to a supporting role in Denmark's journey towards self-improvement; Robert's grave allows for an engagement with shame for the national past in a way that doesn't dispel national pride but fosters it.<sup>91</sup>

Ceremonial mourning over past atrocities against 'strangers' restores white innocence and allows individuals to continue benefiting from domination's structural legacies guilt-free.<sup>92</sup> This dynamic is seen at 'Sambo's grave' in the UK, a pilgrimage site for white visitors honoring an unnamed Black child from the West Indies.<sup>93</sup> Shirley Anne Tate argues that this memorial exemplifies how deceased Black individuals can be used to reinforce white supremacy, either through sanitized racial identification or racialized leisure tourism. The grave offers a venue for discharging guilt and enacting 'post-racial' conviviality.<sup>94</sup>

The focus on child victims, like Roberts and 'Sambo' in contrast to empowered adults, like Mary Thomas, is no coincidence. Whitney Plantation in Louisiana, US, uses imagery of enslaved children to evoke white empathy.<sup>95</sup> Likewise, Bøgh explained his preference to memorialize the child Roberts instead of adults who were exhibited in 1905 by noting that he found her premature death 'particularly touching'.<sup>96</sup> This focus on children facilitates what several of the interviewees identified as a tendency to represent Black individuals as victims rather than people possessing agency.

Bøgh's text reflects an effort to overcome the Danish identity crisis through engagement with colonial history and the figure of the 'other.' In the text, one can identify both an overarching in-group ('how we viewed other people') and a sub-group within the in-group. This sub-group is characterized by classic gendered tropes of *emotionality* (specifically, anger — expressed as a 'destroying' of history) and *irrationality* (expressed as an inability to engage with colonial history rationally).

Bøgh's proposal turns Roberts' memorial into a site for the in-group to 1) learn factual, rational history; and 2) channel and absolve their shame and guilt, and quite literally bury the past.<sup>97</sup> One can think of Bøgh's proposal as reflecting a desire to contain challenges from counter-narratives and claims for space within

<sup>89</sup> Inwood.

<sup>90</sup> Jens Rebensdorff, 'Alberta blev udstillet i et bur i Tivoli: Nu skal hun have et mindesmærke på Frederiksberg', *Berlingske*, 15 January 2021 <<https://www.berlingske.dk/content/item/1533382>> [accessed 30 March 2022].

<sup>91</sup> Sara Ahmed, 'The Politics of Bad Feelings', *Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association Journal*, 1 (2005), 72–85 (p. 72).

<sup>92</sup> Inwood.

<sup>93</sup> Shirley Anne Tate, 'Love for the Dead: Sambo and the Libidinal Economy of "Post-Race" Conviviality', in *Opposing Colonialism, Antisemitism and Turbonationalism: Rethinking the Past for New Conviviality*, ed. by Marina Gržinić, Jovita Pristovšek, and Sophie Uitz (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), pp. 531–49.

<sup>94</sup> Tate, p. 533.

<sup>95</sup> Jelani Cobb, *A Conversation with John Cummings, Founder of the Whitney Plantation, America's First Slavery Museum*, dir. by Center for Brooklyn History, 8 March 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=am72UFCyDYA>> [accessed 30 March 2022].

<sup>96</sup> Rebensdorff.

<sup>97</sup> Ahmed.

<sup>85</sup> Nikolaj Bøgh, 'Øverst Salys Buste Af Frederik V', *Status Update*, 6 November 2020 <<https://www.facebook.com/674034729594774/photos/a.681085018889745/1350369491961291/>> [accessed 30 March 2022].

<sup>86</sup> Victor Cornelius, *Fra St. Croix Til Nakskov: Et Livs Eventyr* (Frimodt, 1976).

<sup>87</sup> Images from the vigil could not have been reproduced due to copyrights, but they can be found here: Politiken Foto, 'Alberta var kun en lille pige', *Status update*, 1 April 2017 <<https://www.facebook.com/politikenfoto/posts/alberta-var-kun-en-lille-pige-da-hun-blev-fjernet-fra-sin-mor-og-brugt-som-under/822362931248553/>> [accessed 29 March 2024].

<sup>88</sup> Nikolaj Bøgh, 'Jeg har foreslået, at vi på Frederiksberg', *Status update*, 17 January 2021 <[https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1406937776304462&amp;id=674034729594774](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1406937776304462&amp;id=674034729594774)> [accessed 30 March 2022].

Danish history by 'other' groups. His approach to memory decontextualizes Denmark as a place with distinct in-groups and out-groups, asserting a cohesive and hierarchical imagined community.

The urgency of restricting counter-narratives in Denmark is seen in art historian Jacob Wamberg's account.<sup>98</sup> His piece features an image of IAQM decapitating Frederik V while wearing dark sunglasses, casting the king as the victim and barefoot Mary Thomas as the aggressor.<sup>99</sup>

Here again 'Black abstraction' obscures the context of Black agency: Mary decapitates Frederik V not with a sugar bill—imposed on her by Danish oppressors—but with a sword. Inspired by the work of Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti, Julia Suárez-Krabbe and Kirstine Leets Hansen refer to this logic as 'starting from secondly'; a logic that decontextualized the response to aggression. Within this logic popular representations portray antiracists as the aggressors, demanding that they prove their claims of racism.<sup>100</sup> While Wamberg oscillates between critiquing Dirckinck-Holmfeld's actions and IAQM's supposedly violent message, he begins his piece expressing fear over potential reactions to his opinions. Against the backdrop of BLM and #MeToo, Wamberg's account reflects white masculine anxiety over being toppled from both figurative and actual pedestals.

Here it is worth remembering that the very engagement with the memory of the DWI is carried not only against the backdrop of the BLM and #MeToo movements, but also amidst prevalent anti-Muslim sentiments and Denmark's ongoing colonial relations with Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Acknowledging atrocities, as reflected in Bøgh's proposal, becomes somewhat less complex in situations devoid of accountability structures (USVI being under US rule). Furthermore, there's a significant challenge in upholding Denmark's self-image of progressivism while simultaneously engaging in anti-Muslim rhetoric. In this landscape and against the backdrop of contemporary 'color blindness,' lamenting (past) racial bigotry upholds a progressive image without addressing prevalent manifestations of cultural racism.

Nonetheless, as Michael Rothberg's shows, solidarity between activists can engage and amplify different groups' memories.<sup>101</sup> Activists and artists, therefore, resist political attempts to co-opt their visions, as evidenced in the Alberta Viola Roberts' case. Afro-Danish organizer Sade Yde Johnson noted in an interview that Bøgh's vision lacks an understanding of space's multivocality. Although Bøgh's proposal might contribute to creating a sense of 'pastness' and reinforcing white Danish identity, Johnson is confident that the memorial will be reclaimed and reinterpreted.<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusion: what do we talk about when we talk about the Danish West Indies?

While debates over monuments might seem focused on aesthetics or historical facts, they often reflect deeper concerns about recognition and belonging. Having one's story represented publicly validates it as part of the community's narrative, signaling who belongs in public spaces. In Copenhagen, monuments primarily celebrate white men contributing to Denmark's development, omitting those enslaved and exploited overseas in the process. This omission narrows Denmark's history to its current borders and foregrounds Danish identity in nativist, racialized terms.

Contestations over collective memories, in Denmark and elsewhere, reflect contemporary societal issues and debates. The fierce negotiations taking shape (with)in Copenhagen's commemorative landscape, however, reveals not only how different groups work to advance their political agendas, but how these agendas pertain to fundamental claims about what is 'Denmark' and who is a 'Dane'. Embedded in these is a radical effort to open the European 'space-time-envelope' in a way that shows the relational nature of space and identity. This re-envisioning offers a pathway out of crisis, moving from exclusionary articulations of Europe's past and towards an inclusive future.

## Declaration of competing interest

During the preparation of this work the author GPT-4 used in order to reduce the word count. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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<sup>98</sup> Jacob Wamberg, 'Rematerialisering', *Weekendavisen*, 9 April 2021 <<http://www.weekendavisen.dk/content/item/36047>> [accessed 22 March 2022].

<sup>99</sup> The illustration by Rasmus Meisler could not have been reproduced due to copyrights, but it can be found in the link above.

<sup>100</sup> Suárez-Krabbe and Leets Hansen.

<sup>101</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>102</sup> Sade Yde Johnson. Personal communications, 17 August 2021.