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## ***Descendants of Slaves*** *The articulation of mixed racial ancestry in a Danish television documentary series*

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**ABSTRACT** The aim of the Danish television documentary series *Slavernes Slægt* (*Descendants of Slaves*, 2005) has been to enhance public awareness of Danish colonial history. As is typical of contemporary mediated memories, the account of national history is combined with ‘small histories’ that focus on live stories of individuals and their families. Participating in the series are present-day descendants of enslaved Africans who, as a result of an interest in family historical research, have found information about their black ancestry. The series challenges the supposed historical homogeneity of Nordic nation-states by pointing out the historical presence of black individuals. However, this article will show how discourses of family history (e.g. the focus on bloodlines) converge with old ‘race’ theory; the result of which is that the series inadvertently reproduces processes of visual Othering.

**KEYWORDS** *Denmark, descendants, family history, Nordic countries, ‘race’, slavery, television documentary*

**This article examines** the Danish television documentary series *Slavernes Slægt* (*Descendants of Slaves*) about Denmark’s role in the transatlantic slave trade and the slavery system in the Caribbean region.<sup>1</sup> As indicated by the title, the series grants access to descendants of enslaved Africans. *Slavernes Slægt* can be seen as one example of a growing subgenre within historical documentaries that retells colonial history by following individuals’ attempts to trace the life stories of their ancestors.<sup>2</sup> *Slavernes Slægt* is especially concerned with individuals and families who, through their interest in genealogy (the search for family history in archives), have discovered that they have black ancestors. The aim of this article is to examine how the ‘mixed racial ancestry’ of these descendants is articulated in the series. The analysis is based on an understanding of identity as discursive-performative (Barker and Galasiński, 2001), and it is especially



interested in how the descendants 'tell themselves' and thereby construct family identities. The analysis will show how participants from Nordic countries draw on an understanding of 'race' that is different from the concepts used by some American descendants who also participate in the series.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it will examine how the documentary series represents differences in physical appearance within the portrayed families by remediating old family photographs in contrast to new television images of contemporary descendants. These differences are framed in terms of a politics of vision that encourages the viewer to search for phenotypical traces of 'blackness'.

### **Challenging national history through television documentaries**

From the beginning of the 17th century, Denmark took part in the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans by shipping them and establishing forts on the African Gold Coast (now Ghana). Later, the colony of the Danish West Indies was established on the three Caribbean islands, St Thomas (from 1671), St John (from 1718) and St Croix (from 1733), and the slavery system functioned until emancipation in 1848. The islands stayed under Danish rule until 1917, when they were sold to the US and renamed the United Nations Virgin Islands. Due to the sale of the islands, Denmark has never received a substantial flow of immigrants from its former slave colonies as has been the case in Great Britain and the Netherlands, where descendants of enslaved Africans can be said to have formed minority groups. Consequently, the debate on slavery in Denmark has been rather low-key and less politicized than elsewhere, since it is not articulated as collective memory politics of minority groups. The idea behind *Slavernes Slægt* has been to enhance the awareness of this part of Danish national history.

Typically, historical documentaries are characterized by the combination of a wide variety of materials (Corner, 1996). The series *Slavernes Slægt* consists of four hour-long programmes in the form of complex montage-texts kept together by the continuous use of an off-screen narrator. The participating historical experts and portrayed 'descendants' are presented both via interview fragments and observational scenes. In order to represent historical events, remediation of archival material and cultural artefacts (old film footage, documents, maps, paintings and photographs) are combined with contemporary scenes from historical locations. Dramatic reconstructions of scenes from the slavery period are included both as fragments of theatre productions and in the form of television and movie dramatizations. Most of the scenes have been taken from the Dutch educational documentary series, *Slavernij* (2003, NOT/Teleac), but a particularly dramatic scene, where slaves are thrown overboard in the middle of the Atlantic, is from Steven Spielberg's film *Amistad* (1997). Manifest intertextuality is used



in the title *Slavernes Slægt*, which positions the series as a follow-up to a trilogy of documentary novels by the Danish writer Thorkild Hansen.<sup>4</sup> According to the producer-director of the television documentaries, Alex Frank Larsen, Hansen's trilogy told the collective history of the slaves but did not focus on individual slaves and their descendants. The ambition of Larsen and his team was to dive further into the archives and tell such family histories, and in the documentary series they are mediated through the stories and actions of contemporary descendants.<sup>5</sup> The documentary series represents a variety of performative memory practices such as music, theatre and the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the former Danish West Indies, which became controversial due to claims for an official Danish apology. However, the greater part of the documentaries does concentrate on family histories of descendants living in Denmark and other Nordic countries. The participants include families which have immigrated within the most recent generations and families descended from black ancestors who arrived in the 18th and 19th centuries. Some of them have family history as a hobby, and the documentary series follows their genealogical search as well as their emotional encounters with unknown relatives.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the series, the intertwining of family histories and broader national and regional histories is stressed, and in this way the documentary exemplifies the intersections between different 'memory communities' (Kuhn, 2002).

In his introduction to the anthology *Television Histories* (2001), Gary R. Edgerton describes the producers of historical television documentaries as 'popular historians', pointing out how their construction of history often embraces presentism. This implies that the past is evaluated by the standards of the present, moreover that documentarists choose to portray the events and individuals that seem most relevant from a present-time angle (Edgerton, 2001). In relation to the premiere of *Slavernes Slægt* on Danish television, Larsen explained that his reason for making the series was to challenge collective amnesia concerning the Danish role in slavery, which he assumed to be due to suppressed feelings of guilt. He accused professional historians of not having bothered to communicate their historical knowledge of the Danish colonial past to 'the rest of us', and said that he was indignant about indifference towards this part of history. He pointed out how entire historical precincts of Copenhagen, and numerous manor houses in the Danish countryside, had been financed by slavery, while Denmark still had not a single memorial to the enslaved Africans; these themes were introduced in the first part of the documentary series. When asked why it was that important to challenge this alleged amnesia, Larsen stressed the need to relate to these questions 'because it is about who we are as Danes'.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the documentary series can be seen as an example of a type of historical documentary that attempts to contribute to a nation wrestling with its past (Vos, 2001). To use Maurice Halbwachs' (1992[1925]) classical term, the series might be said to be shaped by a

concern about the collective memory of the nation. However, in the present analysis of *Slavernes Slægt* it is helpful to draw on contemporary theorists such as Annette Kuhn (2002) and Mieke Bal (1999), who are inspired by Halbwachs but prefer the term 'cultural memory' in order to emphasize memory as a performative act: 'cultural memorization as an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future' (Bal, 1999: vii).

In his arguments for the importance of a documentary series on the Danish role in slavery, Larsen articulates themes which have been raised in other European countries. For example, the Dutch debate has been quite intense, especially in relation to the national monument unveiled in Amsterdam in July 2002. In this context the strategies of drawing attention to the historical presence of slaves in the Netherlands, as well as to monumental buildings as traces of colonial history, have been used (i.e. de Jong and Zondevan, 2002). Another theme in the Dutch debate was the claim that knowledge of the colonial past was crucial for coexistence in a multi-ethnic society, and this argument was especially raised by black minority groups, which for the most part have immigrated from Surinam and the Antillean islands since the 1970s (Horton and Kardux, 2004; Marselis, 2006). While memory discourses on slavery might be border-crossing, they are articulated differently according to national contexts (Huyssen, 2000). During the promotion of *Slavernes Slægt* in the Danish media the theme of coexistence in a multi-ethnic society was raised. The series documents the presence of blacks in Denmark in the 18th and 19th century, and by portraying their descendants a commonsensical notion of the Danish population as having been homogeneous until the arrival of 'guestworkers' in the 1960s is challenged.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the series points out how racism and systematic discrimination is a part of Danish history. Just before the television premiere, the first part of the series was shown to upper secondary students in a multicultural suburb of Copenhagen, and the reactions of Muslim students were reported in the media. Larsen commented that it was no surprise that Muslim students could relate to these historical events, since they experience discrimination in everyday life (Fjelstrup, 2005). In this way, the series was contextualized in relation to everyday racism in contemporary Danish society (cf. Essed, 1991).

### **Family history and the collective memory of slavery**

Representing families' historical searches for their ancestors offers easy identification for Nordic viewers. The participants are 'just like us' and they perform a hobby that has become immensely popular in Nordic countries over the last few decades. To follow a personal search, a quest, is a widely-used narrative strategy in historical television documentaries, which makes the most of intimacy as an inherent quality of television (Edgerton, 2001; Vos, 2001). Moreover, by letting descendants function as



‘witnesses’ of history, the documentary series draws on a wider memory trend that is visible in museums. It is typical of contemporary mediated memories that grand historical narratives are supplemented by ‘small histories’ in order to exemplify how historical events have influenced the lives of individuals and their families (Baer, 2001; Reading, 2003; van Dijk, 2004). In an article about the use of new technologies in Holocaust museums, Anne Reading (2003) comments that the huge interest in family history among potential visitors could be used fruitfully in order to expand and challenge their interest in the historical events. In *Slavernes Slægt* family history is seen as having the potential to enliven history:

[Narrator] History about the time of slavery is coming to life. Many people in Denmark and in the other Nordic countries have discovered that they are descendants of black slaves. That is why they have begun to dig in the unknown saga of the slave families. (1; 06.47.00)<sup>9</sup>

The (re)construction of family history is based on extant elements of the past such as oral history, documents, artefacts, paintings, old maps and photographs. They serve as pretexts of memory that mediate the past (Kuhn, 2002). Conventionally, photographs and family albums are ascribed special importance for the sense of family and Kuhn emphasizes their importance in the performative creation of family:

Family photographs are about memory and memories: that is, they are about stories of a past, shared (both stories and past) by a group of people that in the moment of sharing produces itself as a family. (2002: 22)

Photographs are studied for the recognition of visual likeness, and part of the fascination in looking at old photographs lies in the way that they document recurrent genetic features as well as the surprising physical differences that can exist within a family (Barthes, 1982[1980]). As discussed by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1982[1980]), old family photographs may have a ‘piercing’ quality for descendants that is not necessarily obvious to outsiders (1982[1980]: 128). After the death of his mother, Barthes finds a photograph from her childhood, which for him is highly emotionally charged. In this photograph he rediscovers a gentleness that he remembers as the quintessence of his mother’s personality. A central activity in family history is to collect old family photographs, establish who the people are, and connect the photographs to collected knowledge about them. Since family historians have never met their long-dead ancestors, there is no remembrance of deeply-felt personal encounters, as in Barthes’ mourning for his mother. However, based on collected knowledge about the persons, they can ascribe meaning performatively to photographic portraits, as for example described by Dee Parmer Woodtor in her guide to African American genealogy:

Whatever you imagine your ancestors to have been, this is your chance to find out who they really were. You will be surprised when those faces peering down at you take on new meaning. Remote dark eyes will now come to life.



Age lines will now become character lines, and expressions once unreadable will now be read. (1999: 6)<sup>10</sup>

Family history has been ascribed a special position in recollections of slavery. According to Paul Gilroy, in the abolitionists' fight against slavery there was already a literary tradition for an 'intense fascination with the image of divided families' (1993: 28). However, the African American wave of genealogy was prompted especially by Alex Haley's novel *Roots* (1976) and the 1977 television series based upon this book. Numerous books and websites are dedicated to the search for enslaved ancestors, and typically family history is articulated as a contribution to collective African American memory (e.g. Parmer Woodtor, 1999). Within recent years, the use of DNA technology has been included in order to establish the origins and 'roots' of enslaved Africans. However, the family history represented in *Slavernes Slægt* is of a more traditional kind and is based primarily on oral history and documents. Some of the descendants in the programme are helped by professional historians from the St Croix African Roots Project, which includes the creation of a database combining numerous historical records. The documentary series introduces the viewer to this project and it is stressed that the Danish archives are extraordinarily rich and well-preserved. The importance ascribed to the records ought to be seen as drawing on the tradition of African American genealogy described above. In the documentary series this is expressed by an American historian working on the project:

Family becomes very important here, because the whole process of slavery and of enslavement was to negate family, to make you helpless because you had no family. You were ripped from your family, transported to the New World, alone, without family. To find family, this has been a very important need on the part of the Africans who arrived, and then of their descendants. (Svend Holsoe, 1; 34.35.01)

Throughout the documentary series the off-screen narrator continuously emphasizes the importance of family, with the use of metaphors as 'finding roots', 'the ties of blood' and by pointing out that the descendants have 'African blood in their veins'. The statements of experts and descendants are framed by the narrator, and the interviews are sliced into a number of sequences. As noted by Mary Macdonald (2006), witnesses in historical television documentaries do not have full authorial control over their autobiographic stories, but nevertheless they do have a voice. Thus the articulation of identity and 'race' in *Slavernes Slægt* can be seen as the result of collaboration between descendants and the production team, where the latter has the ultimate editorial authority.

### **'Race' and racisms**

Throughout the series the descendants thematize the fact that they have a black ancestor. The following analysis is based on an understanding of





racial classifications as socially constructed. This implies that the physical differences or phenotypes used to differentiate ‘races’ only make a difference because they are ascribed culturally to do so (Jenkins, 1997). According to Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1992[1990]), the ‘science of race’ evolved in the period 1790–1840 and was partly a reaction to the abolitionist challenge of the legitimacy of slavery. Biological ‘race’ theories functioned as ‘scientific’ supplements to, and gradually succeeded, ancient prejudices and myths about non-European people – as for example in the religious notion of black Africans as biblically cursed to be slaves. Among the different scientists that contributed to the initial formulations of ‘race’ theories, in the Nordic context one might stress the importance of the Swedish taxonomist Carl von Linnæus. In the tenth edition of his *Systema Naturae* (1758), Linnæus linked the subdivision of four varieties of *Homo Sapiens* with different character types (Pred, 2004). Allan Pred describes this as the point in history when ‘scientific racism textually arrived in Sweden’, although the term ‘race’ did not come into use before the end of the 18th century (2004: 9).<sup>11</sup> Biological race theories were essentialist in the sense that they presumed to link physical differences between groups to moral and intellectual capacities as well as to ‘race’-specific behaviour. These theories were used to legitimate white supremacy and racist discrimination in colonized areas as well as in Europe. While different versions of biological racism evolved in different national contexts, a common feature was an obsession with ‘breeding’ and ‘pure’ ancestry (Anderson, 1991[1985]), and consequently ancestry and blood metaphors are among the racist terms that have been absorbed by everyday language. Fear of miscegenation has been a general feature of ‘race’ thinking in the Nordic context also, but interracial marriages have never been legally banned, although they could meet strong opposition (Golly, 2005; Pred, 2004). The children of such couples may have been categorized as ‘mulattos’, but the racialization of later generations would have been dependent on phenotypical characteristics such as skin tone, hair texture, etc. Light-complexioned descendants would have ‘blended in’. Historically, European and American concepts of ‘race’ have been quite different. In the American tradition a person would have been categorized as ‘black’ if having any known black African ancestry, whereas in Europe only dark-skinned individuals would be referred to as ‘black’ (Blakely, 2005). The present analysis of *Slavernes Slægt* will show how these different concepts of ‘race’ still emerge in contemporary articulations of mixed racial ancestry.

In the course of the 20th century, classical theories of distinct biological ‘races’ have been widely dismissed, and in the European context (certainly in the Nordic countries) the use of the term ‘race’ was banned after the Second World War.<sup>12</sup> The dominant political rhetoric categorizes people instead in terms of ethnicity and cultural difference, and as a consequence sometimes it has been difficult to point out racist practices, since the term



'race' has been absent (Sawyer, 2002; Stolcke, 1995). Following Martin Barker's (1981) description of 'new racism', over the last few decades anthropologists have documented the rise of racisms that are 'expressed largely in the discourse of unbridgeable differences' (Hervik, 2004b: 249).<sup>15</sup> Commonly, these 'new' kinds of racisms deny being hierarchical and 'just' point out the incommensurability of different cultures (Hervik, 2004a). However, based on an essentialist view of culture as dependent on descent, the 'new' racisms are not radically different from, and have not totally replaced, 'classical' biological racisms. Pred (2004) notes how such cultural traits and biological markers as skin tone and hair colour are routinely '(con)fused', and argues that 'new' racisms have been 'superimposed upon pre-existing racisms' (1997: 385). In the same way, Marianne Gullestad has emphasized: 'We are not just dealing with a change from one way of arguing to another, but with a whole range of different contemporary forms of racialization and racisms' (2004: 196). Thus biological concepts of 'race' have not vanished completely. Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe has pointed out the persistence of popular folk concepts of 'race' as based on 'differential "reading" and "ranking" of phenotypes' (2004b: 4), and in his book *The Past is not Dead* (2004), Allan Pred examines how classical biological stereotypes and vocabulary about 'blacks' have resurfaced in present-day Sweden.

As described above, the documentary series *Slavernes Slægt* draws attention to Denmark's role in the transatlantic slave trade and the colonization of the Caribbean region. The series takes a clear moral stand against the racist ideologies used to legitimize slave systems. Moreover, in the Danish context, the series was promoted in relation to questions of equality and discrimination in contemporary, multi-ethnic Danish society. Nevertheless, both the narrator and the participating descendants often draw on popular folk concepts of biological 'race' when they construct mixed racial identities. The reason for this might be that the discourse of family history (e.g. ancestry and bloodlines) converges with biological 'race' metaphors. Furthermore, the television aesthetics of the series might be said to position the viewer as a competent reader of phenotypical differences. A search for traces of 'blackness' may seem benign and a 'natural' reaction to encountering the visible difference of some of the descendants. However, as argued by Gullestad, such visually-based processes of racialization are not the result of natural cognitive processes, but based on a long tradition of phenotypical signification:

Interpretations of differences are not universal, but emerge in historically specific processes as human beings give meaning to what goes on around them. When some physical features appear as particularly visible, this is not due to the features themselves, but to historically specific frames of interpretation that have become self-evident and self-explanatory for many people. Visibility, in the sense of prominent features that are invested with particular meanings,



is not natural and universal but is historically specific and culturally produced and reproduced through fleeting and shifting negotiations. (2004: 186)

## Visual Othering and the construction of identity

Since family historians often emphasize ancestors with a particularly dramatic life story, it is not surprising that the descendants in the documentary series are eager to trace enslaved ancestors. Often family rumours of an 'exotic' past are the starting point for an interest in family history, but for some of the descendants in *Slavernes Slægt*, their curiosity has been prompted by comments about their visual appearance. The Dane, Henning Palmann, tells how his grandmother insisted that there was 'negro-blood from the slaves in our veins' (3; 20.56.18). He decided to search for information that could verify this rumour and explain his dark appearance. His wife is from Vietnam and questions are asked often about her background. On these occasions Henning experiences a 'visual process of othering' (Yue, 2000), since he is pointed out also as visibly different from the majority of Danes. He enjoys the 'game' of insisting that he has his background in the Danish cities Viborg and Copenhagen while people are asking awkwardly whether he is actually from 'another foreign country' (3; 32.51.05). Their questions are based on a politics of vision that rests on an implicit notion of 'Danish appearance'. Henning has black hair and very dark eyes, and while Danes are not nearly as blond and blue-eyed as often assumed (in notions of typical Danishness), complexion, hair and eye-colour are still important signs in the categorization of people as 'foreign-looking'. Ming-Bao Yue (2000) has shown how such politics of vision function to exclude persons of minority backgrounds from the imagined national community, but since Henning has a majority background, he does not seem to perceive the question as a threat. Rather, he embraces this 'foreignness', stating that he has always felt 'something exotic in my body', and he sees this as a question of sensing 'where you belong' or to 'know your roots' (3; 20.24.00). His search shows that his great-great-great-great-grandfather, Frederik Ludvig Antoni, came to Denmark from St Croix around 1800, and made a career for himself at a Danish castle where he ended up as a quite wealthy and highly-trusted butler. Furthermore, the records reveal that Antoni's mother was born in Africa. Henning is very proud and excited about these findings and the documentary shows how he shares his genealogical results with his wife and children.

The documentary series also portrays a young female genealogist, Camilla, who is followed on her search in archives in Denmark and Britain as well as on journeys to the Caribbean islands, where her ancestors were slaves. Camilla talks passionately about her search and makes a lively and emotional television interviewee. She might have been chosen for the first part of the documentary series because she actually had no knowledge about her enslaved ancestors before the family historical search. Moreover,



her interest in genealogy was prompted by a politics of vision (Yue, 2000). Although she is blonde, on several occasions she has experienced being pointed out as visibly different from other Danes of majority background. In the documentary she is introduced as follows:

[Narrator]: Camilla Marlene Jensen is as Danish as anybody. Twenty-nine years old, born and raised in Copenhagen. But something about her appearance from time to time makes people ask:

[Camilla]: 'Excuse me, but do you have some dark blood in you?' (1; 07.48.00)

The question Camilla paraphrases exemplifies how blood metaphors are used to articulate the subject of visible difference. This introduction encourages the viewers to scan Camilla's face for some ineffable and enigmatic difference and, in so doing, draws on the viewers' assumed preconception of how 'dark blood' might be visible in her face.

Camilla tells how she obtained knowledge about her great-great-grandfather, Charles, who came to Copenhagen from St Croix around 1869. She was extremely happy to hear that portrait photographs of him exist, and shows them to the camera while relating what she has discovered about his life so far. Later, in an airport scene, she again takes out the photographs, shows them to her family, and points out the portrait that is her favourite, because 'He has such lovely eyes' (1; 37.39.11). In another scene, she is talking to a historian at the archives and the photographs are scattered over the portfolio with documents they are studying. At several points in the documentary, the old photographs are emphasized as central pretexts of memory in Camilla's genealogical search, and she is disappointed not to find photographs of Charles' mother. The continuing focus on old family photographs might be said to invite the viewer to search for some physical likeness between Camilla and Charles, and the printed articles that promoted the series did indeed point out their physical resemblance in writing and by contrasting their portraits (Fjeldstrup, 2005; Larsen, 2005).

At a family reunion, Camilla tells other Danish descendants how she has traced their family back to her great-great-great-great-great-grandmother, Violet, who was born in Africa; thus her results are used to renew the depth of family memory. At the same time, Camilla describes her quest as a deeply personal experience which has had a profound emotional impact, and she is engaged in an autobiographical retelling of identity. To read about the transatlantic transportation of slaves has left her with 'some kind of mark' (1; 17.14.15), and she describes her search with words as incredible, hard, painful and deeply unhappy (1; 06.47.00). On her journey to the Caribbean region she speaks at a university on Tortola and, in the light of her family historical results, she reinterprets choices made earlier in her life:

I am really proud of my heritage and finding out about it. I can understand why I took certain directions in life, why I went to live in South Africa for five years. I see a connection now. (1; 50.04.24)



The point of departure for Camilla's search was the experience of being pointed out as visibly different, but her interest in family history and possibly her collaboration with the television crew as well has not only explained her visual appearance – based on her findings, she has constructed a new sense of 'rootedness' which she then uses to restructure her autobiographical memory. Throughout the documentary she continually explains her reasons for doing family history. She could not find any 'peace of mind' (1; 16.13.19) before she had traced her ancestors and obtained some knowledge of their lives. She says that she 'owe[s] it to them' (1; 16.45.24), because slavery and colonialism have been a repressed part of Danish history. She motivates her interest in family history by referring to national history, and in this way her articulation of family identity supports the overall agenda of *Slavernes Slægt*.

### **The question of forgetting or remembering**

Since historically the Nordic concept of 'blackness' has been based on visibility, descendants have been relatively free to remember or forget black ancestry – or rather their possibilities for choosing have been determined by the degrees of 'visible difference' of individual members within the families. Clearly, prejudices have been abundant in Nordic contexts, and some descendants might have seen an advantage in editing black ancestry out of the common family history, while others might have chosen to cherish it.

The documentary series portrays an Icelandic family descended from the enslaved Hans Jonathan. He was owned by an important slave-holding family and came to Copenhagen as a child. In 1801 he ran away and volunteered for the naval battle between Denmark and England, which took place just outside the port of Copenhagen. Denmark was defeated within a few hours, despite which the soldiers were honoured as national heroes. After the battle Hans Jonathan's owner wanted to send him back to the Danish West Indies in order to have him sold. A lawsuit followed, since it was common to regard black individuals as servants, not as slaves, when they were living in Denmark. Although Hans Jonathan gained the support of the crown prince, he lost the case. The narrator categorizes the ruling as state racism, and an expert in legal history contrasts it with British lawsuits which came to the opposite conclusion and ruled that a slave became free when setting foot on European ground. The expert also states that about 100 other black individuals living in Copenhagen at this time would have had the same legal status as Hans Jonathan. In this way the dramatic fate of Hans Jonathan is used to exemplify how the Danish slave system had harsh consequences, not only in the far-away colonies, but also for black individuals living in Denmark. By thematizing the living and legal conditions of blacks in 19th-century Denmark, the series documents their historical presence and can be said to have the

same agenda as the emerging field of research, Black European Studies (see Black European Studies (BEST), 2005).

After losing the lawsuit Hans Jonathan escaped once more, fled the country and sailed to Iceland, where he became a tradesman and married a local girl. The narrator informs us that he was well-received in Iceland and became a respected member of the local community, and this is emphasized in contrast to the racist situation at the imperial centre, Copenhagen.<sup>14</sup> The descendants are proud of Hans Jonathan's complex life story, and they characterize him as being honest, hardworking and strong – qualities that they also seem to ascribe to the family.

Three young sisters are interviewed while they are putting on make-up, and this might be seen as a way to emphasize visually their light complexions. They tell of their own surprise when they heard of their black ancestor and of the equally surprised reactions when they tell others. One sister laughingly relates how people react by saying: 'Oh, so that's where you got your sense of rhythm' (4; 49.44.15), a reaction that links 'blackness' to a classical stereotype. The descendants do not hide the fact that visible difference has been experienced at times as problematic. The family historian, Helgi Mar, who dug up the dramatic life story of their ancestor, became interested after talking to his grandmother, Dagny. She claimed to have been contacted by a young, dark woman at a spiritualistic meeting and thought she recognized her great-great-grandmother, the enslaved mother of Hans Jonathan. The dark woman thanked Dagny for always talking proudly about her 'black ancestry' and Helgi Mar explains that 'to some it has been a sensitive subject, this origin' (4; 38.12.17). Many old family photographs exist, and again the viewer is given the opportunity to notice the 'dark' appearance of Hans Jonathan's early descendants. One of these photographs, a portrait of his beautiful and dark great-granddaughter, is used in a montage of portraits that announce the theme of family history in the first part of the series. Here it is superimposed on a contemporary image of an equally beautiful, but very blonde, female descendant. This visual effect might be said to play on the fascination of studying family photographs for genetic traces and differences (cf. Barthes, 1982[1980]). From a present-time angle, the theme of visible differences is supported by young descendants who relate how children with dark hair have been teased that they were descended from a black man. Simultaneously, the camera shows participants at a family reunion, focusing in particular on a middle-aged man who does not get a voice in the documentary, but is pointed out obviously because of his dark complexion, dark eyes and curly black hair. The theme of visual difference is commented upon also by a descendant who draws a parallel with present-day racism and doubts whether Hans Jonathan would have been received as well had he arrived in Iceland today. Thus she briefly links family history to the question of coexistence of different 'racial' groups in contemporary Nordic societies, although this theme is not elaborated on any further.



## Blending in or 'passing': different concepts of 'race'

In *Slavernes Slægt 3* we attend the 70th anniversary of the family society of the Zamores, the descendants of Antoine Zamore, who in the 1740s was captured on the African coast, taken to France and later (around 1770) gained employment at the Swedish court.<sup>15</sup> Antoine served as a valet to the Swedish crown prince and later became a kettle drummer in the Royal Life Guards. Apparently he became a popular and respected person in Stockholm, but the documentary also thematizes fear of miscegenation, since the Swedish priesthood prevented Antoine, 'a Moor', from marrying into the finer circles of Stockholm. Only with direct help from the king was he allowed to marry a farmer's daughter. While prejudice did restrain black individuals in their choice of spouses, interracial marriage was not impossible and the endogamous 'colour' line was relatively permeable, compared to the situation in the Caribbean colonies and North America (Pred, 2004).<sup>16</sup> Racism in 19th-century Sweden is touched upon only briefly, but the themes of being 'racially mixed' and visual difference serve as a backdrop for the following representation of the Zamore family. At the anniversary, descendants are studying a family tree, and the programme-makers visualize one branch through a montage of superimposed old photographs and new television stills. The narrator anchors the montage verbally:

In the house of the kettle drummer hangs the picture of the family tree and of his son Carl Magnus Zamore. He was the only one of the kettle drummer's 16 children in total who has descendants today. For instance, there is a straight line from Carl Magnus through his son, his daughter, her son and the former president of the family society, to his sons. (3; 47.52.00)

The viewer is guided through the montage, and since the faces are carefully superimposed to blend into each other, the viewer is in a perfect position to study likeness and difference throughout the generations. The children ending the montage are blond and not likely to be pointed out as visibly different from the majority of Swedes. The family can be said both to exoticize and glamourize their background, and this is backed up by the television aesthetics emphasizing the 'straight line' to this particular ancestor.<sup>17</sup> Antoine's fate lends the common family memory an exciting, 'colourful' depth. Generally, the Swedish Zamore descendants can blend easily into the Swedish majority, but choose performatively to identify themselves as his descendants. The montage visualizes how physical traits that in traditional racist discourse, as well as in commonsensical popular understandings of 'race', have been ascribed status as privileged markers of blackness (e.g. skin colour, hair texture and hair colour; see Ifekwunigwe, 2004a) might actually not be typical of descendants after only a few generations. In this way the montage functions as a lead-in to the following thematization of passing.



Participating in the family reunion in Sweden are six American siblings. They are descendants of one of Antoine's grandsons, Herman, who in 1886 emigrated to the US. One of these American descendants speculates on the difficulties Herman might have faced when trying as a black person to build up a new life in the US. She assumes that he would have experienced American racism as harsh compared to the Swedish context: 'I think that must have been heartbreaking for him to not be valued for the same things that he was valued for in this country' (Robin, 3; 51.46.06). She does not seem to consider the fact that most likely he, as a dark-skinned individual, would have experienced prejudice in 19th-century Sweden as well (Pred, 2004). Her statement alludes to the race relations of the US, built on a rigid black/white dichotomy and the 'one-drop rule', which according to F. James Davis (2003) is unique to the US. The one-drop rule implies that a person is categorized as black if they have *any* known black ancestry, and thus builds on a racist notion of 'black blood' defiling 'white blood'. The rule originated in the American South, but was adopted as a dominant national definition; although challenged within recent decades, it is still widely accepted as a commonsensical understanding of 'race' by white as well as black communities. The American concept of 'passing for white' rests on this rule, since it means a person who is defined as black but visually can be taken for a member of the white majority and who chooses to cross the 'colour' line either for a short period of time (e.g. to get a job) or for good.

Before re-establishing contact with the Swedish Zamore descendants, the six American siblings had assumed their family name to be a trace of Spanish ancestry and they had no knowledge of their black ancestor. Their grandfather, Birger, who was a great-grandson of Antoine Zamore, chose the strategy of passing. He broke with his father, got a degree from Harvard and 'lived as a white person' (Rick, 3; 53.06.13). In the documentary the possibility of this choice is visualized by contrasting family photographs of the dark-skinned Herman and his much lighter son, Birger. The Swedish background was kept a secret, and the siblings speculate that this might have been due to the strong wish of their grandfather and possibly their father to hide the fact of the black ancestor: 'My grandfather and my father had very strong feelings about people with darker skin, even though they both had to know the story, they still presented themselves as white people' (Robin, 3; 53.42.23). The American descendants are happy to meet their Swedish relatives, and Rick articulates it as a sense of common identity: 'It's like meeting yourself, meeting hundreds of yourselves' (3; 54.58.15). He sums up the problematic of passing and the (re)found knowledge of family history like this:

You know, there is more harmony in knowing your past. You can't know yourself until you know your history. Until you know your parents' history, your grandparents' history, you don't know who you are. When you learn that, then you have more confidence to meet other people and to appreciate other people. (3; 54.23.23)





His statement can be analysed as ‘double’ in the sense that it can be read both as drawing on a genealogical discourse about the importance of family history for anchoring personal identity, and as alluding to American discourses on passing. Strategies of passing have been described often in terms of deception and as an expression of tragic, racial self-hatred. Moreover, within black communities, passing has been viewed as disloyal (Squires and Brouwer, 2002). Alternative discourses stress how passing, especially during segregation, could function as resistance against white supremacy, but nevertheless a family history of passing is still widely associated with a sense of guilt and seen as a cause of dysfunction.<sup>18</sup> Against this background, Rick’s statement could be said to ascribe a healing quality to the performative (re)construction of family history.

Viewing this sequence, a Nordic viewer might recognize the theme of passing from, for example, watching American movies.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, Davis (2003) has a point when he calls attention to the difficulty of explaining the phenomenon of passing and the implications of the one-drop rule to non-Americans. Based on their black ancestry, two of the American Zamore descendants comment on how to categorize themselves in racial terms. Anne has just mentioned the previous theory of the family name as being Spanish, when she says:

It’s such a fascinating history when you think you are one thing, and then you find out that you are very different. You know, especially in America. Most of my students are black, and so this has made me more interesting to them that I am one of them now. (3; 41.18.15)

While she does not exactly call herself ‘black’, she does see black ancestry as redefining her relationship to the black students. Anne has a very light skin, is blonde and has been raised as belonging to the white majority. It might not be that obvious to a Nordic viewer why the black students would consider her to be ‘one of them’, but following the logic of the one-drop rule, Anne and her siblings could be categorized as black even though they are not visibly dark and have only 1/32 black ancestry.<sup>20</sup> As mentioned earlier, the one-drop rule is still influential in American popular folk concepts of ‘race’ but has been challenged within recent decades, and this has made room for relatively freer choices of belonging by people of mixed ‘race’ (Ifekwunigwe, 2004a). Anne’s brother, Rick, can be said to challenge the one-drop-rule, when he states: ‘I look white, I am white, but I am proud to have a black ancestor’ (3; 41.32.00). He acknowledges his white appearance and cultural background, and also might be considering the fact that he is not likely to be a target of racial discrimination. At the same time he stresses his pride in the black ancestor and breaks with a family history of denial, which was based on the principle of white supremacy (Gordon, 2004[1997]). Again, a Nordic viewer might be slightly puzzled by his need to state that he is not black, since to their eyes this is quite obvious. As pointed out by Ifekwunigwe,

'conceptions of "race", "mixed race" and social status are historically, geographically and culturally specific, and hence do not travel easily' (2004b: 5), and a Nordic commonsensical understanding of 'blackness' is based primarily on visible distinctions. The Nordic genealogists use 'racial' terminology, i.e. blood metaphors, which might be heard also in the US, but this does not mean that they operate with the same concept of 'race'. At no point in the television documentary series do they consider whether they themselves could be categorized as 'black' or be ascribed to a minority group due to their mixed ancestry. One reason why they so readily exoticize their ancestry could be the fact that having a small fraction of black ancestry does not challenge their privileged position as members of the white majority.

## Conclusion

The intention of *Slavernes Slægt* is to enhance the awareness of the Danish role in the transatlantic slave trade and the colonial system in the Caribbean region, as well as to point out traces of this history in contemporary society. This article has focused on one important theme in the series: present-day descendants of enslaved Africans in the Nordic countries.

A common myth in Danish debates on the multi-ethnic society is the understanding that until the immigration of Muslim 'guest workers' in the 1960s and 1970s, Danes were a fairly homogenous group with a shared national culture. Shortly after the Danish television premiere of *Slavernes Slægt*, Tabish Khair (2005) wrote a feature article on Danish amnesia concerning the historical presence of 'coloured' immigrants. According to Khair, Asian merchants and sailors regularly arrived in Denmark as early as the 18th century, and he draws a parallel to enslaved blacks arriving from the colonies. He criticizes Danish historians for not making the fates of these 'foreign ghosts' publicly known and, furthermore, links the tendency to neglect early intercultural encounters to present-day fear of foreigners. Indeed, the argument that Danes have had only a few decades to adapt to the idea of cultural diversity is commonly used to explain and excuse tensions between the majority and minority ethnic groups, and according to Sawyer (2002) the same rhetoric is common in Sweden. The notion of Danishness (as well as Swedishness and Icelandicness) as historically homogeneous is challenged in the documentary series by family historians who have found immigrant black ancestors in their family trees. The descendants are proud of their ancestors' abilities to cope in new contexts, and by relating their biographies they point out how, historically, black individuals have been a part of Danish (and Nordic) history. The documentary series links this challenge to collective national memory and thereby manages to thematize racism and slavery as 'ethical and intellectual heritage' (Gilroy, 1993: 49) as well as the historical leakiness of national boundaries (Gilroy, 1997). Through the interplay



between the statements of the descendants and the overall premise of the programme-makers, *Slavernes Slægt* can be said to use mixed ancestry as a challenge to commonsense notions of Nordic national identities (and especially of Danishness).

The paradox of the documentary series is that it still recirculates biological, racial thinking. The television camera seems fascinated by visual differences within the portrayed families. This may be motivated partly by a wish to represent ‘visual Othering’ experienced by the descendants in everyday life, but inevitably it invites the viewer to think in terms of phenotypical differences and thereby participate in a process of racialization. Also, an awkward convergence between genealogist terminologies and racist notions of ‘black blood’ (cf. Anderson, 1991[1983]) is used to thematize visible difference both by the narrator and the descendants. While family historical search for enslaved ancestors might be a border-crossing memory practice, it does take shape according to the context where it is articulated. As shown in the analysis, Nordic descendants draw on a different popular concept of ‘race’ than their American relatives, and are remarkably ready to exoticize their ancestry. The overall agenda of the documentary series is explicitly anti-racist, but within the sub-theme of family history analysed here, racialization based on biological notions of ‘race’ is passed on inadvertently. As pointed out by Gullestad, not all racialization is necessarily based on hostility, but might ‘just’ reproduce everyday thinking:

The triviality of much racialization creates powerlessness because there is no manifest enemy. There is often no hatred, just the application of deeply seated and apparently innocent cultural ideas. (2004: 197)

One reason that such popular folk notions of ‘race’ are still common in Nordic contexts could be that after the Second World War, the term ‘race’ was taboo rather than deconstructed. ‘Race’ and ‘racism’ simply have not been seen as relevant in the Nordic countries. This might be due to national self-conceptions of Nordic countries as not having the ‘burden of guilt’ often associated with ‘whiteness’ in other contexts. Some Nordic countries, for example Iceland, have a long history of colonial subordination. In Sweden a lack of knowledge about the country’s colonial past converges with national pride in having played an important role in international anti-racist discourses (Pred, 2004; Sawyer, 2002). While Danes can hardly overlook their country’s colonial history, especially since it has involved colonization of neighbouring Nordic countries, researchers have pointed out a stubborn tendency to ascribe ‘humane’ qualities to Danish colonialism and to banalize Danish colonial history (e.g. Jensen, 2001; Thisted, 2005). Consequently, Nordic countries have lacked an academic tradition of critically scrutinizing the legacy of racial discourses in contemporary culture. However, in recent years such studies have been initiated within postcolonial studies and the evolving field of

black European studies (see BEST, 2005; Pred, 2004; Sawyer, 2002). Such studies are important, since the perseverance of racial vocabulary might not be without consequences for present-day and future encounters. As mentioned earlier, Pred has warned us against the convergence of 'old' biological 'race' thinking and 'new' cultural racism. This underlines the need to examine apparently benign articulations of racial thinking as those exemplified by *Slavernes Slægt*. Based on historical research, the television series presents an impressive account of Danish participation in the transatlantic slave trade and the Caribbean system of slavery. However, historical documentaries about colonial history could benefit from combining such historical knowledge with insights from research about contemporary racisms and processes of racialization in order to deconstruct, and not merely recirculate, contemporary, commonsensical notions of 'race' in everyday language and culture.

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### Notes

1. *Slavernes Slægt* was produced and directed by Alex Frank Larsen at his own production company, Medialex. The series had its premiere on the Danish public service station DR2 in January 2005 and has been shown on Icelandic and Swedish television.
2. An example of a similar documentary is *Ketibo Ye Ye* (Frank Zichem, NL, 2003), which follows Surinamese-Dutch Clarence Breeveld on a transatlantic travel to both the old slave routes in Ghana and a Maroon village in Surinam. The methods of tracing origins of enslaved ancestors by the use of DNA testing have been thematized in the British project *Motherland* (BBC, 2003) and the US documentary series *African American Lives* (PBS, 2006).
3. The term 'Nordic countries' refers to the five nation-states Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, Finland, and the three autonomous regions Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Svalbard. However, in the series, the participants are only living in Denmark, Iceland and Sweden.
4. Thorkild Hansen's historical-documentary novels, *Slavernes Kyst* (*Coast of Slaves*, 1967), *Slavernes Skibe* (*Ships of Slaves*, 1968) and *Slavernes Øer* (*Islands of Slaves*, 1971), alternate between historical accounts and descriptions of the author's own travels to the former Danish colonies on the African coast and the Virgin Islands. In 1971, the trilogy was awarded the Nordic Council's prestigious Literature Prize.
5. Interview with Alex Frank Larsen in the television news programme *Deadline*, on the Danish public service channel DR2, 2 January 2005.



6. In this article, the term 'genealogy' will be used in order to describe the tradition of systematically examining family history and lines of ancestors. The article is not concerned with Michel Foucault's critical genealogies.
7. Interview in *Deadline*, DR2, 2 January 2005. See also written interviews with Alex Frank Larsen (Fjelstrup, 2005; Jensen, 2005) and his own account in the magazine *Samvirke* (Larsen, 2005).
8. For a discussion of the documentary series in relation to Danishness and the concept of hybridity, see Frello (2006).
9. Citations in Nordic languages have been translated into English. They are marked with the number of the episode in the documentary series and a timecode.
10. In an essay on the use of old photographs by historians, Raphael Samuel points out that historians performatively ascribe meanings to pictures in a similar way:

We may think we are going to them for knowledge about the past, but it is the knowledge we bring to them which makes them historically significant, transforming a more or less chance residue of the past into a precious icon. (1994: 328)

11. Unfortunately, Pred does not discuss the reception of Linnaeus' theories in the other Nordic countries, but his theories became widely circulated throughout Europe.
12. For an argumentation against 'race' categories based on genetic difference, see the 'American Anthropological Association Statement on "Race"' (American Anthropological Association, 2004[1998]). The existence of human 'races' is still a contested and controversial subject within biological research. However, it lies outside the intention of this article to go into this discussion of new technologies of genetic classification, since its interest is in examining social and cultural consequences of the heritage from 19th-century 'race' theories.
13. Discussions of 'new racism' often refer to Martin Barker's *The New Racism* (1981) as a common starting point for this line of research. In my discussion of cultural racism I draw on the following research from the Nordic context (on Sweden: Pred, 1997, 2004; Sawyer, 2002; on Norway: Gullestad, 2004; and on Denmark: Hervik, 2004a, 2004b). Although I do not argue that patterns of racisms have evolved in exactly the same way in the various Nordic countries, for the purpose of this article I have chosen to settle for a general overview of the subject of 'old' and 'new' racisms.
14. Iceland was at the time a colony under Danish rule. In 1918 Iceland became a separate state under the Danish crown, but not until 1944 did the nation gain full independence and become a republic.
15. Sawyer (2002) has pointed out how black individuals through history have arrived in Sweden by a variety of different routes. Sweden also participated in the transatlantic trade with enslaved Africans, and in 1784 the Swedish king, Gustav III, bought the Caribbean island St Barthélemy from France, which island became a centre for the Caribbean slave trade. Sweden did not stop the slave trade until 1830, and slavery on the island was abolished in 1846. St Barthélemy was sold back to France in 1878. According to Sawyer (2002), this part of Swedish history is not widely

- known by present-day Swedes, who sometimes even assume Sweden to be linked to anti-racist discourses due to its not having participated in slavery (see also Pred, 2004). Swedish participation is not an explicit theme in the documentary series, which focuses primarily on Danish colonial history.
16. For a thought-provoking discussion of the fear of miscegenation in a Swedish context see Pred (2004). Pred portrays the black man Badin, who in the 18th century was brought to the Swedish court from the Danish West Indies and who married twice. Badin was, by his contemporaries as well as in later texts, represented as hypersexual, and Pred argues that old stereotypical notions of black men as a threat to white Swedish women, and implicitly to the Swedish nation, have endured until the present time (Pred, 2004).
  17. The children ending the montage in fact might have up to 63 other great-great-great-great-great-grandparents that were probably neither black, nor had close relations to the Swedish royal court.
  18. For an interesting insight into passing as a controversial strategy of resistance in the racially segregated southern states, see Gaudin (nd).
  19. Passing has been a theme in the two film versions of *Imitation of life* (John M. Stahl, 1934; Douglas Sirk, 1959), both based on Fanny Hurst's 1933 novel (Hurst, 2004[1933]), and more recently in *The Human Stain* (Robert Benton, 2003) based on the novel by Philip Roth (2000).
  20. According to legal definitions in some southern states, 1/32 of 'black ancestry' would have meant that an individual was categorized as black. For example, Louisiana operated with the 'one-drop rule' – any known 'black blood' – until 1970, when the definition was changed in favour of the 1/32 rule. This rule was not abolished until 1983, when parents were given the right to designate the 'race' of newborn children (Davis, 2003; Squires and Brouwer, 2002).

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