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BLACK DOLLS, NANNIES AND CHILDCARE IN THE DANISH WEST INDIES

Abstract: Taking point of departure in two black dolls that once belonged to Sophie Christine Oxholm and to the family of Clara Asenath Schultz, the article explores aspects of childhood and childcare in colonial homes. Both girls grew up in the Danish West Indies in the nineteenth century and were cared for by African Caribbean nannies – the likely makers of the dolls. Drawing on historical and literary sources, I investigate the roles and responsibilities of African Caribbean nannies in white households, their perception by white parents and children and the nannies' self-representations materialized in the dolls. I also explore the dolls as biographical objects and souvenirs capturing bonds between children and nannies and privileged upbringing of the girls. The dolls are an entry point to explore aspects of childcare, domestic labor, and everyday life in colonial Danish West Indies.



Introduction

Danish archives and museums contain a wealth of materials related to the country's nearly 300-year-long colonial presence in the Caribbean. Alongside the vast volumes of legal, military, and fiscal documents, there are also materials relating to personal engagements with the islands by individuals living there for longer or shorter periods of time. They include objects, photographs, and souvenirs brought to Denmark by returning families. Due to their emotional, biographical, and representational value, they are relevant to engage with to illuminate complexities of colonial entanglements on a microscale level. Taken together as an assemblage, this collection offers entry points into colonial worlds and their material constitution. It can contribute to an understanding of intersectionality and agency in colonial societies, and it invites a critical and reflexive scrutiny of diverse experiences of colonial realities depending on the individual's gender, age, and class.

In this article, I explore examples of objects from this museum assemblage and put them in a wider socio-historical context. I focus on two handmade black dolls and highlight how they connect with the labor of enslaved and free domestic workers and with a specific gendered and racial discourse on African Caribbean women espoused by white families in the Danish West Indies. I also study how these dolls functioned as representational objects and as souvenirs collected for personal reasons for their ability to capture memories of meaningful events, emotional attachments, and experiences. My aim is to contextualize these humble objects, connect them to the experiences of childhood, childcare, and Black domestic labor in the Caribbean – themes that remain poorly, or not at all, explored in the scholarship on the Danish West Indies.

Black dolls, their owners and likely makers

In the collections of Danish museums there are several examples of black rag dolls brought from the former Danish West Indies. Among them is a doll that belonged to Sophie Christine Oxholm (nee Langhaar Smidt), who moved to St. Croix in 1799, and another doll that was either owned by Clara Asenath Schultz (nee Petit) who was born in St. Thomas in 1862 or gifted to Clara's daughter by Clara's former nanny.¹ The first doll is currently in the collections of the Museum Lolland-Falster at Guldborgsund, and the latter is at the National Museum in Copenhagen.

Both dolls are hand-sewn and individualized through facial features, dress, and ornaments, but they also show differences in the fashioning of the body. The doll

¹ The museum's records are ambiguous on that point – the donor of the doll was uncertain about its exact history (conversation with National Museum's curator Anne-Mette M. Andersen 19.03.2024).



Ill 1. Doll that belonged to Sophie Christine Oxholm, most likely made by her enslaved nanny.

From the collections of Museum Lolland-Falster Guldborgsund, FMN00979X00000001.

Photo by Elisabeth Holm Nielsen, Museum Lolland-Falster.

owned by Sophie is beautifully crafted with attention to details revealing the maker's sewing skills (Ill. 1). The body of the doll is made of black sateen cotton. The head is proportional, with hair covered by a headwrap of pink and red checkered cotton knotted in front. The heart-shaped face has eyes sewn using white and black cotton thread, stitched eyebrows and nose, and lips made of red yarn. On the neck, the doll has three necklaces made of golden and black thread, red silk ribbon, and a metal ring. The doll is dressed in a fitted, short-sleeved top with puffed arms made of yellow, floral-patterned cotton and a full skirt made of light, printed cotton with a floral pattern and ecru cotton slip underneath. Chin, fingers, and toes are stitched to give a realistic appearance. The doll shows considerable wear, suggesting that it was played with. The fabric on the face, neck, and feet is slightly torn, revealing the material used for stuffing, and there are loose stitches in several places, while the skirt is frayed and torn in front.



III2. Black doll owned by the family of Clara Asenath Schultz made by her nanny.

From the collections of the National Museum NM1201-1205/1988. Photo by John Lee.

The second doll (Ill. 2) is also made of black sateen cotton. The facial features are stitched and articulated. The doll is dressed in a red dress with puffed arms and a white apron with embroidered details, indicating the maker's fancywork skills. The hair is made of black wool yarn that is braided and placed in a wreath, covered with an orange scarf made of shiny fabric. The doll's matching jewelry – bracelet, earrings, and headscarf decoration – are made of small white and orange beads. The doll is in very good condition.

The existing scholarship on black dolls is rather slim.² Most of it is recent and spurred by exhibitions of black dolls from the collection of Deborah Neff at the Mingei International Museum in San Diego in 2015 and La Maison Rouge in Paris in 2018, and the *Black Dolls* exhibition at the New York Historical Society in 2022.³ The asso-

2 Lavitt 1983, p. 31; Wallace-Sanders 2008, pp. 33-37, 54-57; Maresca (ed), 2015; Phillipe & Willis 2018; Jean-Louis 2022; McGreevy 2022; Mitchell, Ruffins and Tate 2022.

3 Maresca (ed), 2015; Phillipe and Willis 2018; Jean-Louis 2022; McGreevy 2022; Mitchell, Ruffins and Tate 2022.

ciated research concludes that black rag dolls were most often made by Black women for their own children as well as for the children they took care of as nannies. It is very likely, then, that the dolls studied here were also made by Sophie's and Clara's childhood caregivers. The sources researched for this study – census records capturing the structure of both households, memoirs of Clara Schultz, as well as memoirs and letters from the Danish West Indies and other Caribbean islands – provide a complex picture of reliance on nannies and domestic servants. They offer a glimpse into various tasks and expectations placed on the nannies, and possibly different reasons for taking childcare jobs by African-Caribbean women. Finally, they communicate about the types of interactions between nannies and children, including toy making.

The dolls are a particular source. They offer a very material and multidimensional entry point for investigating the dynamics of care, labor, and race. These playthings may seem unassuming, but they have biographical and representational resonances and connect to colonial practices of child-rearing, household arrangements, work, and privilege. They relate to the members of the Langhaar Smidt and Petit families and their life in the former Danish West Indies, the particularities of motherhood and childhood in the colonies, as well as the relationships between white parents, children, and African-Caribbean nannies in the Danish (and wider) colonial context before and after emancipation. They are also complex representational and symbolic objects. They were most likely made by the girls' nannies in the image of themselves and meant to be comforting objects and companions. They thus connect to the types of care expected from and provided by the nannies, as well as the attachments many nannies and children seemed to have formed with each other.

Sophie Christine Langhaar Smidt, the original owner of the first doll, was born in 1797 in Fuhr, Jutland. She moved with her parents to St. Croix in 1799, where she spent her childhood and early adult years. Her father, Claus Langhaar Smidt, was a Danish government employee in St. Croix. Her mother, Christiane (née Schouboe), assumed the typical role of a house mistress, wife, and mother, raising Sophie and her siblings in the family's home in Christiansted.

Besides the political and diplomatic engagements of Claus Langhaar Smidt, not much is known about the family's life in St. Croix.⁴ Claus was a highly positioned civil servant, and his representative West Indian home housed several enslaved domestic servants. According to the land register of 1802-04, the couple and their growing family lived in a large house at Dronningens Gade in Christiansted. In 1802, the family included Sophie and two other children under the age of six, and it was served by four enslaved staff, including two women. It is more than likely, that at least one of these women was a dedicated nanny. In 1803-04, the arrival of a new child prompted a purchase

4 Grove 1902.

of an additional female slave, perhaps a nanny.⁵ Considering that Christiane gave birth to two more children, the household must have expanded proportionally over the years to include additional caretakers.⁶ In 1814, when the household is reduced, as the older children move out and there is only one adolescent sibling requiring care, the composition of enslaved labor changes again to include four men and only two females.⁷

In 1813, Sophie married Jørgen Nicolay Oxholm, a pastor at the Lutheran church in Christiansted and the nephew of the Danish army officer, plantation owner and, for a brief period, governor general of the Danish West Indies, Peter Lotharius Oxholm. The couple had their first child, Clara, in 1814 and in maintaining their new household, in a house belonging to the church, they were helped by an enslaved woman.⁸ Three years later, the family grew to have three children and with that the domestic staff increased also, to now include three women and one man. At least one of these women must have been a dedicated nanny.

The Oxholms moved back to Denmark in early 1820's, where Sophie died in 1886. Among the possessions she left behind was a black doll she brought from St. Croix. The doll was kept in Sophie's family as an heirloom for another hundred years; it was donated to the museum in 1979.

The second doll is connected to Clara Asenath Petit, who was born on July 8, 1862, in Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas to Jewish creole parents Julia Eve and Samuel Eugene Petit. The family operated mercantile and shipping businesses in the post-emancipation era. Clara was the fourth child of the couple and had five older and younger siblings. Through the series of preserved census records and Clara's memoir it is possible to reconstruct the composition of the Petit household. In 1855, the young family lived in the Estate Catherineberg, in the northern outskirts of Charlotte Amalie. The house was owned by Julia's father, Morris Benjamin Simmonds, whose family had German and English roots. At that point the Petits had a three-year old daughter and were expecting their second child. The household included a nanny – 50-year-old Hannah Marselly, as well as three domestic servants.⁹ According to Clara's memoir, Hannah was born in slavery on the plantation belonging to Clara's maternal great-grandparents. She was employed as a domestic servant in the grand-

5 Rigsarkivet, Audited Accounts, West Indian Accounts, Land register of St. Croix 1803, p. 22; <https://www.sa.dk/ao-soegesider/en/billedviser?epid=17226869#207004,39318770> (visited on 21-07-2023).

6 Two boys died in early infancy.

7 Rigsarkivet, Audited Accounts, West Indian Accounts, Land register of St. Croix 1814, p.10; <https://www.sa.dk/ao-soegesider/en/billedviser?epid=17226869#207006,39319239> (visited on 21-07-2023)

8 Rigsarkivet, Audited Accounts, West Indian Accounts, Land register of St. Croix 1814-1816, p. 16, 280; <https://www.sa.dk/ao-soegesider/en/billedviser?epid=17226869#207006,39319239>; <https://www.sa.dk/ao-soegesider/en/billedviser?epid=17226869#207006,39319503> (visited on 21-07-2023).

9 Virgin Islands US, Census Records, 1841-1911, Census of St. Thomas, Eugen Petit in entry for M B Simmonds, 1855; <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:6C36-9T6Z> (visited on 16-07-2023).

father's household, worked as a nanny for Julia and her younger sibling, and took care of Clara's older sister, to retire at the old age.¹⁰ In 1857, as the family grew, the Petits employed another nanny, Mathilda Danielson born on the island of St. Croix.¹¹ Three years later, the family was living in their own house on Wimmeskafte Gade in Charlotte Amalie. Their three young children were attended to by two new nannies – 16-year-old Mary Johnson from the island of Saba and 25-year-old Jeanne Kettel from the island of St. Barthelemy.¹² The fact that the nannies came from other islands is not surprising. Throughout the nineteenth century, there was a high level of labor-related mobility across the Caribbean islands and the Petits employed servants from across the region.

Mary died in July 1861, a year before Clara's birth.¹³ There is no available information on whether the Petits hired another nanny following the death of Mary and the birth of Clara. It is therefore hard to speculate if it was Jeanne or another caretaker who made the doll. The only servant that is mentioned by name in Clara's memoir is Hannah, even if she admits that the housekeeper and other servants took care of the children in various ways.¹⁴ In 1870, now widowed Samuel Eugene Petit and his six children lived in a house on Bjerge Gade. Their domestic staff included four women: a housekeeper, washer, cook and a servant.¹⁵ None of the previously employed nannies and staff seemed to be any longer attached to the household.

Clara left St. Thomas in 1890s and arrived in Denmark with some personal possessions that included furniture, photographs, seashells, and other keepsakes from the island as well as some black rag dolls made by her nanny.¹⁶ She married navy captain Johannes Herman Schultz in 1898 and the couple had two daughters. A relative of the family recalled visits at the family home and playing with the dolls that originally belonged to Clara. One of the dolls was made of brown woolen fabric, and dressed in a "skirt with variegated colors, a white blouse with puff sleeves, a yellow little sleeveless vest, a necklace of tiny glass beads, gold earrings and black hair of yarn. The mouth and eyes were sewn on with yarn, and on the head a colorful scarf was tied in the Caribbean style."¹⁷ The doll donated to the National Museum differs from this description suggesting that there were at least two different black dolls in Clara's home.

10 Schultz 1955.

11 Virgin Islands US, Census Records, 1841-1911, Census of St. Thomas, Eugene Petit, 1857; <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:6QDT-LM3Z> (visited on 16-07-2023).

12 Virgin Islands US, Census Records, 1841-1911, Census of St. Thomas, E Petit, 1860; <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:6C5N-Q6N2> (visited on 16-07-2023).

13 Virgin Islands US, Church Records, 1765-2010, Church records of All Saints Episcopal Church, St. Thomas, Mary Johnson, 1861; <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:Q2WF-GZX4> (visited on 22-07-2023).

14 Schultz 1955, p. 5, 8-9, 11.

15 Virgin Islands US, Census Records, 1841-1911, Census of St. Thomas, Eugene Petit, 1870; <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:6CTY-CJQS> (visited on 16-07-2023).

16 Labrosse 2017, p. 28.

17 Labrosse 2017, p. 28.

The existence and survival of the dolls leads to questions about the importance of these things as symbols of relationships between Black nannies – the likely makers of these dolls – and the two girls and their families. It invites scrutiny of the role and perception of nannies in Danish Caribbean homes as well as investigations of the potency of dolls as souvenirs and memory objects.

The figure of Black nanny

In white plantocracy and civil servants' households across the Caribbean and American South, Black nannies were ubiquitous.¹⁸ Hannah Marcelly, Mathilda Danielson, Mary Johnson and Jeanne Kettel, who cared for children in the Petit household, as well as scores of recorded and anonymous nannies in other white households in the Danish West Indies, provided indispensable work. Their responsibilities and position are captured in letters, memoirs, and fictional stories. Some of the nannies were also immortalized in paintings and photographs.

In the memoir of Mary Petersen detailing her childhood and youth in St. Thomas between 1876 and 1892, two women feature prominently – Alice, a mulatto servant and Nana, a Black nanny.¹⁹ They helped her father to raise Mary after her mother's premature death. According to Mary, both were dedicated to her, gentle and loving, all-giving, all-forgiving surrogates. These "two most fateful souls" did not only assist her in everyday activities and practical aspects of life (making clothes for her and her dolls, playing with her and providing guidance, taking her to school, playdates and on walks).²⁰ They provided emotional support as well. Nana especially assumed the role of little Mary's confidant and protector, never too far from the girl, ready to console, defend and praise her, offer embrace, and listen to Mary's secrets and worries.

A picture of attachment and indispensability, like the one described by Petersen, emerges from other private and literary sources, e.g., Ingeborg Vollquartz's children's book *Glade Barndomsdage i Vestindien* (1903) and Thora Visby-Petersen's memoir *St. Thomas. Tropeminder fra de Vestindiske Øer* (1917). The former is one of the more detailed descriptions of the relationships between nannies and children. Vollquartz moved to St. Thomas with her young family at the end of the nineteenth century, and the book is a fictionalized account colored by her own experiences of the island, written from the perspective of two boys and their nannies.²¹ In the story, Annie and Consuela, accompany their charges, that conspicuously bear Vollquartz's sons middle names, from morning to night. They fulfill their every wish and provide constant en-

18 See, e.g. Carstens 1981, p. 79-80; Olwig 1988, p. 8-9.

19 Petersen 1954.

20 Petersen 1954, p. 4.

21 Although the book represents a different genre than the memoirs, it is written in a style closely resembling a memoir and operates with strikingly similar narrative discourse.

tertainment and supervision – from walks in the parks and along the shore, collecting seashells and feeding sea turtles to treating them with sweets, giving baths and singing night-time lullabies. The children are spoiled by the patient and loving attention of their nannies. These feelings are reciprocated, and the boys are inconsolable upon learning of their departure to Denmark without Annie and Consuela:

*the nannies cried, when they had to separate from their boys.
‘Goodbye, apple of my eye,’ they said, ‘We can never see you again!’
and they kissed the boys’ hands.
‘Goodbye, my treasure, goodbye, my heart,’ cried the poor black girls,
and the boys clung to their necks, didn’t want to separate from them and just cried,
‘Stay here, Annie, stay with us, Consuela, don’t go!’
Mother cried, and the girls kissed Mother’s hand and whispered, ‘
God bless you my white mother!’
Yes, the whole scene was just awful.²²*

Visby-Petersen’s memoir *St. Thomas. Tropeminder fra de Vestindiske Øer* (1917) recalls her stay on the island between 1880 and 1882 and is written in a condescending and patronizing tone. As a child, Thora and her siblings are surrounded by a group of servants, including her nanny Polly. They spoil them to unhealthy levels and provide attentive care from morning to night. Reflecting as an adult on the level of love and devotion given by her nanny, and more generally by Black nannies to white children, Visby-Petersen considered them to be surpassing the feelings the servants had for their own children.²³ She was not alone in espousing that view. The tropes presupposing African-Caribbean women’s lack of motherly instincts towards their own children but adoration of white charges and hence aptitude for their care were already created in the eighteenth century and lived on until the end of Danish colonial rule.²⁴ In 1880, E. V. Kolthoff described how the African Caribbeans in The Danish West Indies “distinguish themselves by their good-natured mindset and faithful devotion to those that are above them in one way or another or showed them kindness and care. A perfect example of it are ‘nurses’ or nannies, which when associated in their young age with white men’s children, often attach themselves to such ‘baby’ with a touching devotion and faithfulness lasting and undiminishing during their entire lives”.²⁵ Visby-Petersen tested that commitment herself when she requested and received a twist of hair from a servant Ruth as a departing gift.²⁶

22 Vollquartz 1903, p. 28. Similar image appears in Lucie Hørlyck’s fictional stories *Under tropesol* (1913), as well as in her letters to family back in Denmark, see Ottesen and Bach Nielsen 2020, pp. 123-124, 131.

23 Visby-Petersen, 1917, p. 25.

24 See Simonsen 2017, pp. 34, 41-42, 90; on racial discourse of gender in the Danish West Indies, see, Veisegaard Olsen 2016.

25 Kolthoff 1880, p. 70.

26 Visby-Petersen 1917, p 37.

For white Danish women access to Black servants and nannies was a matter of course, just as was the discourse presupposing the aptitude, natural devotion, and subservience of African-Caribbean women. Their narratives cement an image of faithful slave and servant without questioning the reasons of performing dedication and taking domestic jobs by these women. The decisions and circumstances to do so were in fact varied: skill and pride in one's own abilities, a calculation that this type of work could lead to manumission, or realization that it is one of the few available options to generate economic support for women and their families.

Before the abolition of slavery, dedication and well-performed domestic work could come with a reward of promotion, special privilege, and manumission. Scrutinizing court records, Marie Veisegaard Olsen and Gunvor Simonsen have found out that women, often domestics, constituted approximately 60-70% of freed enslaved adults in the district of Christiansted in St. Croix in the period of 1780-1812.²⁷ The same records also indicate dangers and strain of this type of work: verbal and physical abuse from mistresses and masters, sexual violence, grueling work hours, sacrifice of the needs of one's own children and family.²⁸ The emancipation signed into law in 1848 ended the enslavement and guaranteed personal freedom, but the labor conditions in various sectors of the islands' economy remained abusive leading to strikes and to the Fireburn Labor Riot in 1878. For African-Caribbean women the employment options were not only exploitative but also relatively limited in a colonial society operating with a particular discourse of race and gender. Domestic work was one of the avenues to secure income, even if it came with long hours, great deal of responsibility and very little privacy.

Writing in the post-emancipation era, Danish female authors did not necessarily dwell on the social and racial realities of West Indian society that pushed Black women to caretaking jobs. They remained largely silent on the issue of working conditions of female household servants. Other sensitive subjects, like the sexual exploitation of nurses and other servants in white households, were omitted as well, even if they were frequently reported to the local authorities and began to be prosecuted by the court in the nineteenth century.²⁹ The physical and emotional toll associated with nursing and taking care of white charges compromising the servant's ability to establish a family and care for their own children were largely avoided as well.³⁰

Annie and Consuela, the fictional nannies in Vollquartz's *Glade Barndomsdage i Vestindien* did not follow the family to Denmark, but many other real nannies did. Generations of families like Marstrand-Gyllich, Stakemann, and Riise, who were moving back and forth between the Danish West Indies and Copenhagen in the

27 Veisegaard Olsen 2016, p. 566; Simonsen 2017, p. 34.

28 Simonsen 2017.

29 Simonsen 2017, pp. 77-104.

30 Lindqvist 2014, p. 61.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, relied on several West Indian nannies.³¹ They traveled to provide continuous care to the children of their employers and often served as familiar company to the creole mothers. In the Danish context, the skin color and hovering presence of the nannies were visible markers of the status and identity of the white families that were employing them – an unmistakable indicator of their colonial connections. Justina Antoine, a nanny of Annie and Emily Marstrand, was painted by Wilhelm Marstrand in 1857; others were immortalized in a series of photographs.³²

The images of nannies in Danish literature and historical sources are largely similar to those in female writing from other Caribbean islands and the American South.³³ Evelyn O’Callaghan, who studied women’s writing in the British West Indies, noted the trope of biological and surrogate motherhood present there and the authors’ judgment of the indispensability of Black nannies and nurses, their great deal of responsibility for the everyday care of white children, and their accommodating nature bordering on overindulgence. Co-parenting, the socialization of privileged white creole or expatriate children by Black servant women, and the dependency on nannies and nurses throughout early phases of motherhood often led to strong bonds between women across race and class, but, as indicated by O’Callaghan’s reading of colonial literature, it also caused some frictions. She points out that some domestics “resisted the role of faithful surrogate-mother” and quickly realized “the power they held in being responsible for white children [... which they...] did not hesitate to convert [...] to improvement of status”.³⁴ In many instances, the female authors note the strong attachments and emotional reciprocity of white children towards their nannies. Both these points are evident in Alison Carmichael’s experience of Trinidadian and St. Vincent household arrangements where once a female servant was “appropriated for the children, she had twice the authority of either parent,” and the “affection of the children towards ... negro domestics was unbounded, and where they [the children] took no pains to conceal that they preferred the society of these servants to that of any white person.”³⁵

African-Caribbean perspectives on childcare

Because of very few preserved records, it is hard to understand how nannies perceived their work, including the navigation between their own motherhood and care of white children. In Ann Beaudhuy’s letters to Clara Falbe (born Rothe) written in

31 Nielsen 2015, pp. 140-191.

32 Nielsen 2015; Sampson 2017.

33 E.g. O’Callaghan 2004; Wallace-Sanders 2008.

34 O’Callaghan, 2004, pp. 78-81.

35 Carmichael 1834, vol. 1, p. 29, 121.

1871, Ann reminisces being a nanny to Clara and her brothers during their upbringing on St. Croix in the mid-nineteenth century. The letters are filled with language of motherly love and care, advice for Clara, now wife and mother herself, and Ann's unfulfilled wishes to act as a nanny of Clara's children. Yet, they are also saturated with disappointment and a sense of betrayal of a woman whose sacrifice and commitment to the Rothes was not appropriately recognized and rewarded.³⁶

A memoir of Alton Adams tells the story of a broken family when his grandmother left her three adolescent children on St. John and traveled as a nanny with the family Brøndsted to Copenhagen in 1883. The expanding Danish family kept her constantly occupied and she never returned to the island, maintaining contact with her family through letters, gifts, and remittance. Remarkably, Annie's daughter Henriette worked as a nanny for another Danish family, who moved back and forth between Copenhagen and the Caribbean, and for a brief period between 1883 and 1886, mother and daughter lived close to each other in the Danish capital. Similar stories of exploitation, of separation and dissolution of African Caribbean families can be traced in the census and other records and reappear in narratives of and about Black people in the Caribbean and American South.³⁷

One of the nannies in the Petit household – Mathilda Danielson – has experienced a similar separation. Prior to joining the Petits, Mathilda lived on the island of St. Croix and is listed in Christiansted's St. John Episcopal Anglican Church Records as the mother of Maria Eliza, born on 24 September 1848 and baptized five months later.³⁸ The 1857 census lists Mathilda as a nanny living with the Petits in Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, but her daughter is not a member of that household. The mother and her nine-year-old daughter apparently did not live together and most likely were not on the same island. One can only speculate how Mathilda felt about this separation. Perhaps she shared the emotions of Harriett Jacobs, a nanny in mid-nineteenth-century New York, who was mentally transported to her own children when caring for her charges: "I loved Mrs. Bruce's babe. When it laughed and crowed in my face, and twined its little tender arms confidingly about my neck, it made me think of the time when Benny and Ellen [Jacobs' children] were babies, and my wounded heart was soothed."³⁹ One can imagine that Mathilda dealt with the absence of her child in a similar way. Caring for the Petits' children could have provided a temporary illusion of attending to her own daughter. The census from 1880 indicates that mother and daughter reunite in the household of Eliza, now the wife of the prison inspector in

36 Halberg 2021.

37 See, e.g. Jacobs 2018 (1861); Prince, 2001 (1831); Bridges 1988, p. 50.

38 Virgin Islands US, Church Records, 1765-2010, St Croix > Christiansted > St John's Episcopal Anglican Church > Baptisms 1841-1854 > image 45 of 124; parishes, U.S. Virgin Islands; <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:939N-CJ7H-1?cc=1883386&wc=M6PL-4ZS%3A178111601%2C17811602%2C178111603%2C178111604> (visited on 20-07-2023).

39 Jacobs 2018 (1861), p. 119.

Christiansted, Bernhard Dondtler.⁴⁰ Mathilda continued to live with her family until old age, helping with housekeeping tasks and caring for her grandchildren.

The African-Caribbean women in the Danish West Indies did not produce accounts of their lives and experiences. Such biographies are found, however, in other colonial contexts. One of the most complex portraits of biological and surrogate motherhood from the perspective of a Black woman comes from Harriet Jacobs' (aka Linda Brent) autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), recounting her ordeal of enslavement in North Carolina and escape to New York. The account challenges the racist assumption of Black mothers being inattentive to their own children, drawing attention to the emotional and psychological struggles of motherhood in the slavery system. It also maps the multigenerational – her own, her mother's, and grandmother's fates of complex intertwinements in their positions as children, mothers, and nannies. Jacobs' raped grandmother was simultaneously nursing her own daughter and her half-sister, the white child of the plantation owner. In the daytime, she was forced to prioritize the needs of her charges in the household and society that “seemed to think that slaves had no right to any family ties of their own; that they were created merely to wait upon the family of the mistress”.⁴¹ But at night, she worked tirelessly to save money for purchasing her children's freedom. The premature death of Harriet's mother briefly reverses the roles of surrogate motherhood when the white mistress becomes Harriet's guardian indulging her in the privileges of white society but ultimately failing to grant her freedom. As an adult taking care of her ‘dear little white charges’, ‘darling little babes that had thawed her heart’, the images and concerns for the wellbeing of Harriet's own children are always on her mind and motivate her decisions.⁴²

The story of Harriet Jacobs is significant for yet another reason. While hiding in New York and working as a nanny of Imogen and Lilian Willis in the 1840s and 50s, she made three black dolls for her charges.⁴³ These might not be the first or only toys she sewed as in her autobiography she speaks about making playthings and clothes for her own children.

Dolls as playthings and (self) representations

The fictional and historical narratives paint a consistent image of attentive nannies indulging their charges and forming mutual affective bonds with them. The dolls that belonged to Sophie and Clara, just like the dolls made by Harriet Jacobs for Imogen

40 Virgin Islands US, Census Records, 1841-1911, Census for St. Thomas, 1880; <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3QHV-R32S-WSQK-S?cc=4109619> (visited on 20-07-2023)

41 Jacobs, 2018 (1861), p. 26.

42 Jacobs 2018 (1861), p. 119, 121-122, 128, 132, 134.

43 Wallace-Sanders 2008, p. 54, fig. 15. The dolls are exhibited by the New York Historical Society.

and Lilian Willis, indicate that some nannies not only played with but also created toys for the children they cared for.

The paucity of direct historical sources about the nannies that took care of Sophie and Clara means that the dolls are rare testimonies of their otherwise rather anonymous lives. It is tempting to regard these dolls as created in the image of their makers and informed by self-conceptualization, active decision making about how to appear as miniaturized selves. Unlike the most typical dolls of the time, these two represent adult women, not babies or children. The dolls are individualized and represent Black bodies in two very different ways. Clara's doll is well made with stitched and realistically articulated facial elements and a somewhat fuller body. With its neat uniform consisting of a white apron covering the doll's blouse and skirt, and headscarf tied at the nape, it is an unmistakable image of a domestic servant. Sophie's doll is crafted with attention to details, especially in fashioning the head and face. The symmetrically stitched eyebrows, large eyes, small mouth, and the articulated small nose and chin give the doll a youthful appearance. The hair is covered in the West African way with a headwrap tied in front made of fabric resembling the style of 'guinea cloth', check cotton popular in West Africa and the Caribbean.⁴⁴ The slender body is neatly dressed in a colorful and well-fitted outfit, a top with a low-cut neckline and full skirt, and decorated with a set of necklaces. It lacks any obvious references to the servant's outfit and subverts the norms for the dress of enslaved and freed women determined by the colonial laws.⁴⁵ These dolls thus present two different visual statements: one that conforms to and one that escapes stereotypical categorizations of African-Caribbean women as domestics; one that is perhaps visually more familiar to a child being taken care of, and one that prioritizes a dignified self-image of the doll maker.

The enslaved and emancipated African-Caribbean women used clothing as conduits of personal stories, aspirations, identities, as "a world of social relations put upon" their bodies.⁴⁶ Worn clothing demonstrated and advertised sewing skills, access to textiles and accessories, as well as availability of tailored dress. One can extend these observations to the dolls made by these women. Fashioning the toys, like dressing oneself, would variously figure as a way of codifying gender roles and forms of power, or contesting, reclaiming Black bodies and freeing the representation from stereotypes.

The makers of both dolls were proficient with needle and thread. The dolls are naturalistic, artistically stitched and their clothes are well-made out of several types of fabric. Many domestic servants were required to be able to mend and sew clothing for the employers and other staff, and a considerable group of freed African-Carib-

44 Kriger 2005; Skeeahan 2015, p. 107-110.

45 Hall 1992, p. 58, 59-60, 94, 145-149.

46 Stallybrass and Jones 2000, p. 3; for Danish West Indies, see Simonsen 2017, p. 114-121, for other Caribbean islands, see e.g., Buckridge 2004, 2006; DuPlessis 2023.

bean women took dressmaking as a profession.⁴⁷ Memoirs and historical documents from the Danish West Indies provide glimpses into African-Caribbean practices of acquiring textiles through barter, purchases, and gifting.⁴⁸ Mary Petersen, for example, recounts how servants in her house would purchase fine cottons and obtain fabric samples to make clothing, patchwork coverlets, toys, and dresses for her dolls.⁴⁹ Similar work was done in Clara's household.⁵⁰

The dolls are capturing the idealized/stylized appearance of the maker or her model and materializing sewing skills, but they have another function as well. They are toys belonging to the realm of children and play. Unlike other playthings, dolls are special as they are made in our image, "the only human-like creatures children are given dominion over".⁵¹ They are "scripted things", objects whose use is both prescribed and improvised.⁵² A part of the child's "miniature kingdom that can imitate or disrupt the logic of your everyday life, the life conceived of and run by adults."⁵³ That 'alive' nature of dolls and agency of children playing with dolls is captured in Mary Petersen's memoir. She recalls that she would take her doll to kindergarten, undoubtedly to help her through the hours spent with a stern teacher, but she would not let the other kids touch it as she regarded the doll as a living being. That privilege belonged only to her, her nanny and housekeeper, people she felt comfortable with. The dolls were companions and confidants, washed and dressed for special occasions.⁵⁴ Used for reenacting and improving moments from daily life, playing out fantasies; they were spoken to and for. Dolls made by and representing nannies were intended and accepted as avatars, extensions of the caretakers' bodies to provide comfort in moments when nannies were not physically available to attend to their charges. In appearance, the dolls resembled the caretakers, the cotton surface and stuffing made them soft and huggable, their size – portable. These qualities of the dolls guaranteed a sense of perpetual, reassuring presence of the nannies.⁵⁵

Sophie and Clara were brought up on different islands and in different socio-cultural and historical contexts. Sophie grew up and raised her own family in pre-emancipation settings. Their domestic staff, including nannies, were enslaved. It is there-

47 Based on census records, Marie Veisegaard Olsen (2016, p. 574-575) calculated that about half of free African-Caribbean women in the early nineteenth-century Christiansted were seamstresses. See also Weaver 2012; Mitchell, Ruffins and Tate 2022.

48 Hall 1992, p. 94; Veisegaard Olsen 2016; see also Skeehan 2015.

49 Petersen 1954, p. 2, 94.

50 Schultz 1955.

51 Jefferson 2015.

52 Bernstein 2011.

53 Jefferson 2015; see also Stewart 1993, p. 57.

54 Petersen 1954.

55 Miriam Formanek-Brunell (1998, p. 28) notes how in the late nineteenth century black rag dolls were favored by American girls attributing this affection to African-American nannies who took care of these children. She quotes a white mother stating that the affections of her daughter were centered on a black doll: "never going to bed without Dinah in her arms, and crying for 'di' if the nurse had forgotten to put her in the crib". She also quotes a case of a girl feeding only tasty foods to her black doll.

fore hard not to reflect on what it meant for an enslaved woman to care for white children and make a doll for them in a household, which not only embraced slavery as a system but was directly involved in the wielding of power in the Danish West Indies; a household that was raising their children to live up to and perpetuate gender, racial and social roles dictated by that system. What was the significance of enabling and seeing the children play with a black doll in a context that treated Africans and African Caribbeans as property? Did the power over an inanimate but animable doll provide an exercise in future dynamics between white and Black women? Did it figure in racial fantasies and the reenactment of scenes of racialized violence and forced labor?⁵⁶ Did it strengthen the sense of a constant presence and accessibility of Black bodies through dolls as their proxies? Could it have been used by the nannies as a didactical tool to instill gentleness and care? To teach the children to see the humanity of Black body? The tears on the face and body of Sophie's doll could be traces of frequent caressing and a sign of continual companionship and inseparability between the girl and her doll. But they could also be signs of violent play and doled out punishments.

The appearance of Clara's doll is an invitation to another type of play. Anthony Martin noted how in nineteenth and early twentieth-century commercially made dolls advertised in mail-order catalogs and newspapers "reinforced the practice of using Black dolls as servants for White dolls" through scene staging, props, and appearance.⁵⁷ The particularly popular character was that of the nanny. These black nanny dolls, like their handmade predecessors intended for use by white children, are seen as "important loci for learning about race and imposing racial hierarchies".⁵⁸ They represented symbiotic relationships between the two cultures, but also the separate and uneven worlds the nannies and children lived in.

Kimberly Wallace-Sanders in her study of Black nannies in the American South suggested that handmade dolls, especially the topsy-turvy, two-sided type of white and black dolls joined together, were intended as playthings for both white and Black children. The former perhaps were meant to see it as a representation of a bond between themselves and African-American nannies; the latter, as suggested by Mildred Jailer and Wallace-Sanders, perhaps desired the dolls because it represented "a baby like the ones their mother cared for".⁵⁹ In reality, and as doll representations, the bodies of the nannies served as "a tendon between the races, connecting the muscle of African American" labor with the skeletal power structure of white plantocracy, nurturing both their biological and surrogate children. They stand as a representation of the inextricability of whiteness from its black counterpart (and vice-versa) in the co-

56 Such uses of black dolls were found in the 2011 study of Robin Bernstein. On racial dimensions of dolls and play, see Mitchell, Ruffins and Tate 2022.

57 Martin 2014, pp. 142-143; see also Formanek-Brunell 1998.

58 Brandon 2004, p. 197.

59 Wallace-Sanders 2008, p. 34.

lonial Caribbean and American society.⁶⁰ In the Danish context, there is an example of such a two-sided doll representing a Black nanny at one end and a white, blue-eyed, and blond-haired child on the other – each of the busts hiding in the shared skirt of the doll’s outfit. That doll was made on St. Thomas and bought by Jens Høeg, a chief physician at Ørsted Hospital, during his visit to the island in 1908. Currently, it is in the collections of Museum Østjylland in Randers (KHM/52:0215).⁶¹

Dolls as souvenirs

Before the dolls were donated to the museums, they were kept as souvenirs and heirlooms. That Sophie and Clara made a conscious choice as adults to keep them as souvenirs and bring them to Denmark suggests a special aura of the dolls as biographical tokens connected to the memories of childhood and unusual upbringing. The signs of wear on Sophie’s doll, and the recollections of playing with Clara’s dolls indicate that these objects were played with, engaged with as a source of stories and memories in multigenerational settings.

The conceptual exploration of souvenir as a category of material culture stresses their specific aura and agency: an uncanny ability to trigger ‘looking back’ and collapsing time and space, stir up a sensation of “temporal proximity, a fleeting moment in which the trace of an unconscious past is actualized”.⁶² Most research on souvenirs highlights their biographical and referential qualities. Some scholars point out that souvenirs are objects participating in the constructions of the self, used reflexively as touchstones of memory.⁶³ The autobiographical character of the souvenir makes it, according to Susan Stewart, a ‘textured’ object that is “emblematic of the worth of that life and of the self’s capacity to generate worthiness”.⁶⁴ They exist as impoverished and partial samples of a unique life experience, which gives them a particular strength and potency. As they “can only evoke and resonate to, and can never entirely recoup” those experiences, they provide a vehicle, a prompt for a narrative discourse, retelling an episode from a personal experience and reimagining that experience. The material concreteness of souvenirs allows for grounding and structuring memories.⁶⁵

Dolls, playthings, and miniaturized objects are special types of souvenirs connecting in real and imaginary sense to childhood. Stewart observed that “the miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and pro-

60 Chinn 2012, p. 873.

61 <https://www.kulturarv.dk/mussam/VisGenstand.action?genstandId=2179591>.

62 Goss 2004, p. 331; see also Stewart 1993, Potts 2018.

63 Stewart 1993; Love and Kohn 2001; Morgan and Pritchard 2005.

64 Stewart 1993, p. 139; Pearce 1994, pp. 195-196.

65 Stewart 1993, p. 136.

tected from contamination.”⁶⁶ Sophie’s and Clara’s childhoods spent in the privileged household in the West Indies, surrounded by an army of indulging servants was blissful and carefree, easy to romanticize and feel nostalgic about.⁶⁷ The doll would have emotional connotations, not only to the childhood idyll as such but also to the caretaker who enabled such an experience. We can imagine the doll, both as a plaything in the hands of young Sophie or Clara and as a souvenir regarded by the grown-up women, as a stage of projecting an intentional series of actions and fantasies animating the object. If we accept the mutual devotion and attachment between nannies and children, so often quoted in historical and fictional narratives, and assume that Sophie, Clara and their respective caregivers shared such strong emotional ties, the doll as a ‘stand-in’ for the actual nanny would have had a significant meaning for both. The interchangeability of the real person and the doll would assure constant presence of the nanny in the vicinity of the child to provide comfort and company, to be hugged, loved and to confide in. As a souvenir of a grown-up Sophie/Clara, it would have continued to carry emotional resonance of a biographical love-object associated with a memory of childhood and the care of their nannies, attachments remembered and retold in the act of playing with the dolls with their own children and relatives.

There is a possibility that Clara’s doll was a gift sent to her daughter by Clara’s former nanny. The gift has sent a dual message – a plaything for a little girl and a memory thing for Clara, nudging her to revisit her time as a child and relationship with her caretaker. Its emotional potency was undoubtedly recognized by both women, Clara and her former nanny.

Conclusion

Sophie’s and Clara’s rag dolls made by their African-Caribbean caretakers are enduring material objects that relate to everyday colonial realities, cultures, and landscapes of motherhood, childhood, and care in pre- and post-emancipation Danish West Indies. Behind their modest façade there are layers of meanings. They are textured and complex things materializing nannies’ self-expression and artistic skills; objects of affective bonds between nannies and children they took care of; artifacts that arose from a socio-cultural and historical context of white privilege predicated on the system of racialized inequality and exploitative labor conditions; memory objects allowing nostalgic daydreaming and revisiting moments of childhood. They are evocative objects. The yarn eyes of the dolls hold the spectator’s gaze. Their undeniably individualized appearance and wear from play invite questions about the makers, the users, and the realms of domestic work and care. The range of historical and literary sources

66 Stewart 1993, p. 69.

67 Schultz 1955.

investigated here – documents related to the families and households the dolls belonged to, the memoirs and other accounts of childhood, childcare, and caregiving – afford at least partial answers to those questions and provide important contextualization. They inform about the domestic arrangements, shared parenthood, and childhood. They also shed light on the experiences, actions, and decision-making of African-Caribbean women as individuals and as a group, as they navigated racial and gender stereotypes in and outside of the white households they worked for.

The existing scholarship on the history of Danish West Indies rarely, if ever, considers the experiences of motherhood and childhood, the roles and positions of domestic servants, and the dynamics of care in colonial settings. Even rarer is the attention to museum collections as sources. These collections, which include photographs, souvenirs, and various objects brought by returning families or sent back to relatives in Denmark, are important material testimonies of intersectional experiences and subjectivities in the evolving colonial context. The collections, just like historical documents, privilege the perspectives of white residents of the islands, but occasionally – as is the case with the studied dolls – they afford a glimpse into personal, intimate worlds of African-Caribbean people. They are material, tangible remnants of their skills, imagination, and self-perceptions.

The dolls are just two objects out of rich colonial collections held by Danish museums. These collections are offering an invitation to be scrutinized and contextualized for the sake of writing a nuanced social history of the Danish West Indies and its various residents.

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Resume

Denne artikel udforsker eksempler på håndlavede sorte dukker, specifikt en dukke lavet i begyndelsen af 1800-tallet af en sort barnepige af Sophie Christine Oxholm (f. Langhaar Smidt) og en dukke, der højst sandsynligt tilhørte Clara Asenath Schulz (født Petit), født i St. Thomas i 1862. Med udgangspunkt i historiske og litterære kilder kontekstualiserer jeg dukkerne inden for slave- og frie hjemmehjælperes arbejdsregimer i de koloniale kontekster, og opfattelserne, forventningerne, race- og kønsbaserede relationer mellem afrocaribiske kvinder og hvide familier i Dansk Vestindien. Jeg studerer også, hvordan disse dukker fungerede som selvrepræsentative og symbolske genstande. Hvordan de udtrykte færdigheder og handlefrihed hos skaberne, tilpassede sig og modarbejdede stereotype og reductive forestillinger om de sorte kroppe. Til sidst undersøger jeg deres rolle som souvenirs, der fangede minder om båndet mellem Sophie, Clara og deres barnepige og om den privilegerede barndom i Dansk Vestindien. Det overordnede formål med artiklen er at forbinde disse ydmyge genstande med oplevelser af barndom, hvide privilegier, arbejde og uligheder i det koloniale Caribien samt at gøre opmærksom på de historiske og narrative potentialer i kolonisamlinger på danske museer.