

Marronage is Resistance Against the Colonizer's Construction of History

Abstract

*The contribution is an intervention into the book *Kolonierne i Vestindien [The Colonies in the West Indies]* (1980) by Danish historian Ove Hornby. Pointing to the limitations and biases of Hornby's account of the St. Croix Fireburn labor revolt of 1878, the contribution is an implicit critique of the way archival sources have been put to use within the discipline of history writing in attempts to delegitimise anti-colonial resistance. It is with some ambivalence that we have chosen to also include an English translation of the Hornby text as well as our annotations, and thereby reproduce the very language we are critiquing. However, these translations have been important in order to ensure greater accessibility to a USVI readership.*

Keywords: resistance, Fireburn, history-writing, colonial bias, Black redaction and annotation

»All these words from the seller, but not one word from the sold. The Kings and Captains whose words moved ships. But not one word from the cargo.«

- Zora Neale Hurston

When accessing the past, we are often forced to make do with the colonizer's archival sources and history books while the task of locating the voices of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the colonial archives is an inordinate challenge. About the approximately 13 million enslaved people who were transported on the Middle Passage between 1450 and 1900, the archives tell us almost nothing. Their history is subsumed in the innumerable financial accounts, ledgers and protocols made by slave traders, merchants or plantation owners.

The silencing continues throughout history. What follows is an excerpt from a Danish history book that discusses the 1878 Fireburn labor revolt on St. Croix.ⁱ The past is seen exclusively through the colonizer's white gaze. Through acts of redaction and annotation, we have exposed the colonial bias inherent in this account that attempts to pass itself off as neutral.

Black feminist scholar Christina Sharpe notes that what she calls *Black redaction and annotation* can function as “a counter to the force of the state”—a way of returning to violent documents with the intention of seeing and reading otherwise. For Sharpe, Black redaction and annotation are tools with which to expose “the failure of words and concepts to hold in and on Black flesh” in order to “disrupt the dysgraphia that wrote a version of events that was riven with antiblackness”.ⁱⁱ Similarly, in our case, we use these tactics as a mode of editorial revision and resistance. By striking through colonial and demeaning language, by adding the names of people involved in the Fireburn, by marking out the euphemisms used to justify Danish colonial rule, by pencilling in some of the nuances that have been lost, we are taking history writing to task. Marronage is resistance against the colonizer's construction of history.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Ove Hornby. 1980. *Kolonierne i Vestindien*. Copenhagen: Politikens Forlag.

ⁱⁱ Christina Sharpe. 2016. *In the Wake*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016, 113-130.

ⁱⁱⁱ You can read Marronage's take on writing about the Fireburn on St. Croix and the Fireburn Queens in *Marronage #1*.

Stærkt oplyst: 1848 var folkene var sigende, havde til plantagerne og om de "vækkende" arbejdsreglementet kan en del om det. Men om det og om det s.d. plantagerne

pagne satte sig ud over arbejdsreglementets lønbestemmelser og betalte sine sæsonarbejdere to til tre gange mere, end der normalt kunne opnås på plantagerne. Sankt Croix blev at ligne ved en krudttønde - der behøvedes blot en gnist for at få øen til at eksplodere.

Bygger på politiofficeren i Frederiksteds beretning "R. Petersen"

Sankt Croix i flammer FIREBURN

På skiftedagen den 1. oktober søgte landnegrene på Sankt Croix i stort tal ind til byerne - for at søge en ny plads, finde skibsløjlighed bort fra øen eller blot for at få sig en glad dag. Således også i 1878: I Frederiksted, der havde det store sukkerdistrikt som opland, var der livlig omsætning i romboerne, og stemningen blandt landarbejderne blev hurtigt oprømt og aggressiv. Hen på eftermiddagen begyndte der at spredes rygter om negre, der var blevet stoppet på vej væk fra øen, og rundt omkring diskuteredes forholdene i højlydte toner. Der var uro i luften, da politiet samlede en stærkt beruset landarbejder op og bragte ham på hospitalet, fordi han havde skåret sin fod. Da betjentene søgte at splitte mængden, blev de mødt med stenkast og måtte trække sig tilbage til fortet.

Uro i luften om den 1. oktober 1848
 1. oktober
 for at søge en ny plads, finde skibsløjlighed
 på plantagerne
 for at søge en ny plads, finde skibsløjlighed

Situationen var på vippen, og nogle kendte og alment respekterede hvide borgere søgte at få negrene til at forlade byen. På dette kritiske tidspunkt kom en kvinde løbende og råbte, at den neger der var blevet bragt på hospitalet, nu var død som følge af politiets mishandling. Følelserne kom i kog, og det nyttede ikke, at man hurtigt kunne konstatere, at den meget omtalte landarbejder sov rusen fredeligt ud i sin hospitalsseng. Nu ville negrene have »retfærdighed«, og de samledes i en truende skare på pladsen foran fortet.

Stenene fløj gennem luften, og skønt de få soldater affyrede varselsskud, blev yderporten revet op, og besætningen måtte skyndsomt søge tilflugt i den indre fortgård. Da bombardementet med forhåndenværende kasteskyts fortsatte, og den sidste port begyndte at give efter, gik de indespærrede over til

fløjt ned i sproget er det klart at situationen er hos de hvide selv om de "sorte" arbejderne på arbejdsreglementet drives til kamp

Malmklokke fra Schimmelmann-plantagen La Grange nær Frederiksted. Klokken er støbt i København 1778 og blev hundrede år senere sønderslået under Oktoberoprøret. Handels- og Søfartsmuseet.



400 arbejdsarbejdere
 12 hvide
 Danske myndigheder påstod at kun 60 arbejdsarbejdere var under opstand men det amerikanske konsulat mener at der var op mod 250 arbejdsarbejdere blev dræbt

hvorfor er "man" ikke oprører?

plantagearbejdere

at fyre direkte mod mængden. Negrene trak sig modvilligt tilbage til byen, og en upopulær planter på vej til fortet blev ilde tilredt. De indesluttede soldater var for få og for slet bevæbnede til, at man turde risikere et udfald, og først på aftenen begyndte butiksplyndringen, og enkelte bygninger blev antændt. En stor del af byens borgere søgte tilflugt i kirkerne eller roede ud til skibene på reden.

hvide politierne søgte at splitte mængden og fik dem til at forlade byen

Der var sendt bud til Christiansted med bøn om undsætning, men rytterne havde vanskeligt ved at undslippe de krigeriske landarbejdere, og de stedlige autoriteter modtog først ulykkesbudskabet på den anden side midnat. I Christiansted mente man at kunne afse en snes soldater, men undsætningen nåede først frem til Westenden ved halv-fem tiden om morgenen. Frederiksteds forretningskvarter var i mellemtiden forvandlet til et flammehav, og oprørerne havde også foretaget ihærdige, men fejlslagne forsøg på at sætte ild til fortet. Efter at have modtaget forstærkningen var solda-

312 Dismantling under Representative Government, 1848-1917

paigned disregarded the wage regulations in the Labor Act and paid his seasonal workers two to three times more than what could normally be earned on the plantations. Sct. Croix began to resemble a powder keg—a spark was all it would take to make the island explode.

Sct. Croix in Flames

Every year on transfer day, October 1st, Sct. Croix's country negroes would travel to the towns in large numbers—in order to find a new position, seeking opportunities to leave the Island by sea or simply to have a cheerful day. Such was also the case in 1878: In Frederiksted, where the big sugarcane district was located, the rum shops were bustling and the mood among the workers quickly turned excited and aggressive. During the afternoon, rumors began to spread about negroes who had been detained while trying to leave the Island, and wide and about wage conditions were discussed vociferously. There was unrest in the air as the police picked up a heavily drunken field worker and brought him to the hospital because he had cut his foot. When the police tried to dissolve the crowd, they were met with stone-throwing and were compelled to withdraw to the fort.

The situation was poised to escalate, and well-known and widely respected white citizens tried to convince the negroes to leave town. At this critical moment, a woman ran into the crowd shouting that the negro who had been brought to the hospital was now dead as a result of his mistreatment by the police. Tensions had reached a boiling point, and it was to no avail that one could quickly determine that the much-talked-about field worker was peacefully sleeping off his intoxication in his hospital bed. Now the negroes wanted “justice”, and they gathered in a threatening mob in the square in front of the fort.

Stones were flying through the air and although the few soldiers present fired warning shots, the outer gate was torn open and the soldiery

had to hurriedly seek refuge in the fort's inner courtyard. When the bombardment with whatever missiles were at the crowd's disposal continued and the last gate started to give in, the trapped began to

313 Denmark distances itself

(Caption:.) Bronze bell from the Schimmelmann plantation La Grange near Frederiksted. The bell was cast in Copenhagen in 1778 and a hundred years later it was smashed to pieces under the October rebellion. Maritime Museum of Denmark.

shoot directly at the crowd. The negroes reluctantly withdrew to the town and a widely disliked planter was badly hurt on his way to the fort. The trapped soldiers were too few in numbers and too poorly armed for one to dare to risk a fall out, and in the early evening the ransacking of stores began and a few buildings were set on fire. A large part of the town's citizens sought refuge in the churches or rowed out to the ships at the roadstead. A plea for reinforcement was sent to Christiansted, but the dispatch riders had some difficulty escaping the belligerent field workers, and the local authorities did not receive the tragic news until past midnight. In Christiansted, one decided that a few soldiers could be spared, but reinforcements did not arrive at the West End before 4.30 in the morning. In the meantime, Frederiksted's business district had been transformed into a sea of flames and the rebels had made persistent yet unsuccessful attempts to set fire to the fort. After receiving reinforcement, the soldiers were....

Excerpt from Ove Hornby. 1980. *Kolonierne i Vestindien*. Copenhagen: Politikens Forlag, pp. 312-313.

Translation by Marronage

ANNOTATIONS AND REDACTED WORDS AND PHRASES
TRANSLATED IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

salg: sale

ophævelse af slaveri: abolition of slavery

Arbejdsreglementet: the Labor Act

Fællessukkerkogeriet: the Central Sugar Factory

to til tre gange mere: two to three times more

Bygger på politimesteren i Frederikssteds beretning "R. Petersen": Based on the chief police officer in Frederiksted's account "R. Petersen"

Slaveriet "ophørte" i 1848 men arbejderne var bundet til plantagerne gennem et midlertidigt arbejdsreglement. Kun en dag om året kunne man ophæve sin kontrakt.: Slavery was "abolished" in 1848 but the workers were tied to plantations through a temporary labour regulation. Only one day a year were you allowed to terminate your contract.

skiftedagen: Transfer Day

Udrejsevisum blev typisk udstedt i dagene omkring d.1.oktober: Travel visas were typically issued in the days around October 1st

rygter: rumors

Plantagearbejdere: plantation workers

negre: negroes

politiet: the police

Stærkt beruset: heavily drunken

landarbejder: field worker

Henry Trotman fra plantagen Mt. Pleasant & Plessen: Henry Trotman from the plantations Mt. Pleasant & Plessen

Felicia James: Felicia James

kvinde: woman

neger: negro

man: one

konstatere: determine

sov rusen fredeligt ud: peacefully sleeping off his intoxication

retfærdighed: justice

truende: threatening

Stenene fløj gennem luften (...) de inspærrede gik over til...:
Stones were flying through the air (...) the trapped began to...

Helt ned i sproget er det klart at synsvinklen er hos de hvide, selvom de "sorte" arbejdere pga. arbejdsreglementet drives til kamp: Right down to the level of language it is clear that the point of view is that of the whites, even though the "black" workers are driven to action because of the Labor Act

Danmark distancerer sig: Danmark distances itself

oprøret: the rebellion

400 arbejdere arresteres, 12 henrettes. Danske myndigheder påstod at kun 60 arbejdere døde under opstanden, men det Amerikanske konsulat mener det var op mod 250 arbejdere der blev dræbt.: 400 workers are arrested. 12 executed. The Danish authorities claimed that only 60 workers died during the uprising, but the American Consulate are convinced it was more than 250 workers who were killed.

Hvorfor er "man" ikke oprører?: How come "one" is not a rebel?

Mange plantere deltog i det frivilligkorps der dræbte mange plantagearbejdere i dagene efter den 1. oktober: Many planters participated in the volunteer militia that murdered many plantation workers in the days following October 1st

upopulær: disliked

man: one

byens borgere: The town's citizens

krigeriske: belligerent

ulykkesbudskabet: tragic news

forretningskvarter: business district

Marronage is a Copenhagen-based decolonial feminist collective that emerged in 2016 to politicise the centennial of the sale of the former Danish West Indies to the United States. Together with other likeminded collectives and comrades, we organise discursive events, workshops, demonstrations, actions, interventions, texts, video, audio, imagery, financial support with the aim of working towards the abolition of a still colonizing world. Marronage, redaktion@marronage.dk.