

Preface to the Second Edition

It is with great pleasure and excitement that we write this new preface to the second edition of *The Postcolonial North Atlantic: Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands*, six years after the book was published in 2014. When we first invited colleagues to contribute to a workshop with the same title at the »Arbeitstagung der deutschen Skandinavistik« at the University of Vienna in the fall of 2011, the idea to frame the North Atlantic archipelago as a coherent postcolonial space appeared new. The situation has shifted considerably since that time. The past ten years have seen dramatic changes of the geopolitical landscape and significance especially of the Arctic part of the region, and of domestic politics, and bi- and multilateral relations of Denmark, Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands. Academic discourse has shifted accordingly. In short, what seemed avant-garde at the time is now a widely accepted fact: the North Atlantic, and by extension the Nordic region as a whole, has not been exempt from, but is deeply entrenched in colonial thought and practices that still impact its peoples, cultures, and societies.¹ From this recognition of coloniality and its immanent asymmetrical structures originates the wish and imperative to provide access to knowledge beyond paywalls and independent from geographical location and institutional affiliation; hence our decision to republish an open access version of the book.

The articles in this volume have not been changed or amended since the first edition, and thus reflect the state of the art of the first half of the 2010s. Yet, the texts remain relevant and topical in that they provide fundamental insight into negotiations of the postcolonial status of the North Atlantic nations, and into manifestations of their interconnected, often competing, histories in literature, language, politics, art, fashion, and public discourse. They invite to comparative investigations into the region's past and present as seen from its diverse and distinct viewpoints, and to explorations of this part of the Nordic region from a joint critical post-colonial perspective.

So, in which ways has the situation changed since the first edition of *The Postcolonial North Atlantic*? The following paragraphs should be understood as an invitation to further research and reading, rather than as full and representative overview over current events and recent scholarship.

¹ See e.g. RUD: 2017.

Many of the tendencies noted in the 2014 edition have proved persistent and grown stronger. First, there is a remarkable increase of the economic, political, and cultural cooperation within the North Atlantic archipelago we already noted in the 2014 introduction: »Vestnorden«, as the region is labelled ever more frequently, manifests itself in the form of political cooperation (among other instances as part of the Nordic Council), joint tourism marketing², or in higher education, such as the joint MA program »West Nordic Studies«, offered since 2015 at the University of the Faroe Islands, the University of Greenland (Ilisimatusarfik), the University of Akureyri in Iceland, and the University of Nordland in coastal Norway. These occurrences witness a region in the making: a region beyond the old motherland Denmark, and beyond its affiliation with Scandinavia, and continental Europe.

When the first edition was published in 2014, the situation in Iceland was marked by the immediate consequences of and reactions to the financial crisis of the years 2008–2011. This was also true for investigations into Iceland's still controversial postcolonial status that were often linked to examinations of the state of crisis.³ Iceland has by now successfully overcome the crisis and is considered one of the wealthiest and most livable nations in the world. However, like other postcolonial nations, a challenge lies in the recruitment of new elites untainted by past regimes' corruption and abuse of power. Furthermore, a new crisis has emerged from the seemingly successful management of the economic crisis, namely an environmental crisis due to overconsumption of resources by industrial development and tourism.⁴

Issues of sustainable development are prevalent in the Faroe Islands, too. The Faroe Islands are currently in a phase of economic upswing, mainly due to the development of two sectors: fish farming, to supplement the traditional fishing industry, and tourism. Both sectors need to be monitored closely to prevent jeopardizing the vulnerable environment. When visiting the Faroe Islands in June 2019, I [LAK] repeatedly heard apropos the rapid growth of the tourism industry, that the aim of its sustainable development was to »not become like Iceland«. Another aspect

2 See www.vestnorden.com

3 See Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud and Kristín Loftsdóttir's articles, and JENSEN and LOFTSDÓTTIR: 2014.

4 See Reinhard Hennig's contribution to the volume.

of the current prosperity is a potential shift of power relations within the The Danish Realm.⁵ One of my hosts held the opinion that »Denmark has not yet understood that we don't need them, but they need us: it is us [referring to both the Faroe Islands and Greenland] who own the resources«. Phases of economic crises and booms bring with them a tide curve of debates about potential independence from Denmark. The first draft of a Faroese Constitution was submitted to the parliament in 2017 after an almost 20-years long process, but consensus among the political parties about the wording is pending. It seems that for now, the argument prevails that the Faroe Islands could use their good starting position to work for more equal relations within The Kingdom of Denmark instead of pushing for independence. According to yet another conversation partner, what stands in the way for a reform of the *rigsfællesskab* is the unwillingness of Denmark to rethink, or give up on, its traditional role of motherland, including a paternalistic attitude towards the two minor partners that is increasingly put into question in both the Faroe Islands and Greenland.

What is true for both the Faroe Islands and Greenland is the fact that the bilateral postcolonial relation to Denmark is currently and increasingly being superseded by a new, global, network of power relations and geopolitical tensions. The United States, Russia and China compete for economic and political prevalence in the Arctic region, and while the focus is on Greenland, the Faroe Islands are not left out of the process. For instance, as the Faroe Islands are not a member of the EU, they were able to bypass EU sanctions on Russia during the 2014 Crimea crisis and keep supplying Russia with farmed salmon. Such »sovereignty games«⁶, performances of an independent political economy, should be interpreted not as primarily driven by anti-Danish and anti-imperialist resentments, but rather by aspirations to diversify dependencies and alliances.⁷

Greenland has, without doubt, seen the region's most dramatic changes and challenges in the past years. The changing geopolitical situation culminated 2019 in the offer by the acting president of the United States, Donald Trump, to »buy Greenland«. While the idea was brusquely

5 The Kingdom of Denmark, in Danish *rigsfællesskabet*, consisting of Denmark, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland.

6 GAD: 2017.

7 Cf. GRYPDEHØJ: 2016.

dismissed, the event might in its aftermath contribute to a fundamental reorientation or revision of the Greenlandic-Danish relations: of determining narratives of the shared past as well as of the shape of future relations within the *rigsfællesskab*.⁸ The event forces Denmark to realize that the annual block grant, so far understood as subvention or donation, must rather be regarded as the market value of what nations are willing to pay in exchange for military and commercial presence in Greenland: it turns out for everyone to see that Denmark has not been paying subsidies, but a comparatively low amount to secure its geostrategic position. In Denmark, this recognition challenges centuries-old narratives of benevolent Danes and ungrateful Greenlanders.⁹ Denmark's position is further challenged by additional pressure from the outside: when China recently offered to invest in the development of the airport infrastructure in Greenland, the United States pressured Denmark to step in, despite the reluctance in both Denmark and Greenland to what many see as a resuscitation of the old colonial relationship. In other words, Denmark's shares in Greenland could turn out considerably more complicated and expensive in the years to come.

In Greenland, ten years after the implementation of Self-Government, the recent events have fed new national confidence over the opportunity of partnerships beyond the bilateral bond with Denmark, yet also diffuse feelings of disorientation and uncertainty, and a fear of new dependencies. Two other domestic political occurrences have in the few years since the first edition of *The Postcolonial North Atlantic* reflected the state of ongoing decolonization processes in Greenland, namely the Reconciliation Commission (2014–2017), and the installment of a Constitutional Commission in 2017. It is too early to estimate the resonance to and impact of the work of these two commissions. However, what is interesting to note in view of the framework of the book are the frequent references to the Icelandic way to independence in both the Faroese and the Greenlandic context of drafting future constitutional relationships within the Danish Kingdom.¹⁰

Two more tendencies in the shifting cultural, economic, political, and ecological landscape of the North Atlantic archipelago are worth noting,

8 Cf. OLSVIG and NIELSEN: 2019.

9 Cf. VOLQUARDSEN: 2019.

10 Cf. BERTELSEN: 2019.

as they indicate the region's interconnectedness with global movements and processes. First, the globally growing awareness of anthropogenic climate change, pollution and species extinction brings with it a reconsideration of the utilization of natural resources also, and especially, in the North Atlantic nations. As they strive for prosperity and economic independence, it is inevitable to balance the increasingly disreputed extraction of fossil fuels and expansion of heavy industry (most relevant for the region are mining, the prospect of oil drilling, and Iceland's aluminum plants) with the protection of vulnerable environments and livelihoods.

Second, especially valid for Greenland, there is a growing consciousness and pride of the population's Indigenous heritage. A revitalization of Indigenous knowledge and socio-cultural aspects of life, the most visual of which certainly being the recent revival of traditional facial tattooing, has the potential to bring about epistemological and institutional change, and allows for global Indigenous solidarization and, in turn, a strengthening of decolonization efforts.¹¹ During the devastating bush fires in Australia in 2019, while most European media and initiatives were concerned with the perspective and lifestyle of the majority population, and with consequences for the continent's wildlife, Greenlanders focused first and foremost on the impact on Australia's Aboriginal population. Another instance where Greenland's double European and Inuit heritage and affiliation became apparent was at the Nuuk Nordic Culture Festival in October 2019 that simultaneously stressed, or claimed, Greenland's belonging to the »Nordic family«¹², and manifested Greenland's bond with circumpolar Indigenous peoples via the presence of Sámi artists and representatives of Canadian First Nations and Inuit groups.

These new and old alliances form an alternative or supplement to the trans-North Atlantic ties created and upheld by Scandinavian colonialism and settlement. Together with the strengthening of nation building processes in Greenland and the Faroe Islands, their intensification contributes to a de-centering of Scandinavia and *Norden* that has the potential to further shift emphasis between alleged centers and peripheries and between land-based and oceanic perspectives on the region.¹³

11 Cf. MARKUSSEN: 2017.

12 The festival was initiated by the Nordic Institute of Greenland NAPA, a cultural institution under the Nordic Council of Ministers.

13 See William Frost's article in this volume, and HÖGLUND and BURNETT: 2019.

Parallel to the developments in the North Atlantic nations, the past years have also seen a shift in Denmark's self-understanding of its role as colonial power. The climax has so far been the 2017 centennial commemoration of the transfer of the former Danish West Indies, today's US Virgin Islands, to the United States. Commemorative events and publications arguably reached a wider audience than ever before, with a wealth of exhibitions in Denmark's biggest museums, a large number of scholarly and popular book publications¹⁴, and best-selling historical novels such as Mich Vraa's trilogy about the repercussions of Denmark's transatlantic slave trade.¹⁵ Heightened attention, growing awareness and knowledge, and the increasing admission of voices from the former colonies, have led to a questioning of persistent narratives of Danish innocence and benevolence, but have also triggered aggressively disapproving reactions.

Concerning the postcolonial North Atlantic, while a petition to anchor knowledge about the *rigsfællesskab* as an obligatory part of the curriculum of Danish schools failed in 2018¹⁶, it is, again, visual arts and fiction that might prove a main provider of food for thought to revisit past and imagine future relationships within the Unity of the Realm: Siri Ranva Hjelm Jacobsen, Silvia Henriksdóttir, Niviaq Korneliusen, Sørine Steenholdt, Inuuteq Storch, Julie Edel Hardenberg, Kim Leine and Iben Mondrup, among others, keep shedding a light on past and present trans-North Atlantic histories, fates, and tensions.

We hope that the volume will find many curious new readers, and re-readers, and we look forward to continued discussions and North Atlantic journeys. If nothing else, on a personal level, the journey of which the book's now two editions form a central part has in the meantime brought the two of us to the region itself, and we hope to see you there.

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¹⁴ Among them ANDERSEN: 2017 and BRIMNES et al.: 2017.

¹⁵ *Haabet* («Hope»; 2016), *Peters kærlighed* («Peter's Love»; 2017), and *Faith* (2018).

¹⁶ In contrast to a required small share of Norwegian and Swedish as part of the curriculum in Danish literature.

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