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# Archives that Matter

## Infrastructures for Sharing Unshared Histories. An Introduction



Figure 1: Still from the video installation *Christmas Report and Other Fragments* (Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2017). Textile samples ordered by the Danish-Guinean Company on the Gold Coast in Ghana. The order was sent to Copenhagen and then sent to the Danish colony in Tranquebar, today Tharangambadi, India, where the textiles were produced. The textiles were sent to Ghana where they were traded for enslaved Africans, minerals and other goods. Source: The Danish National Archives, Dansk-Guinesisk Kompagni, Breve fra Direktionen 1705-1722, 390. “Vestindisk-Guineisik Kompagni, Direktionen Breve og Dokumenter fra Guinea: 390/589”

*I browse through folders of hundreds of scanned copies of handwritten red, brown ink on yellowed paper:  
on page 390  
I encounter them:*

*Latkes  
Broulis  
Chereled  
Niconyjer  
Chellos ...*

*Red, white, blue,  
some darker, some lighter,  
Some chequered, some striped,  
Sealed to the paper (the red wax shines through)*

*Ward  
Waft  
Weaving  
Waves  
Tharangambadi (meaning singing wave in Tamil)  
What would the waves sing?  
What would the woven strings sing?  
Silenced song  
Woken by touch  
In the wake<sup>i</sup>  
I can no longer touch them*

*“We were sent by the Danish Colonial Administration, in Christiansborg, Accra, Ghana to Copenhagen Denmark, to order more like us. We were then sent from Copenhagen to Tranquebar (Tharangambadi) India and reproduced in large quantities. Shipped back (maybe passing through Copenhagen) to Accra, where we were traded for enslaved people, minerals and other goods. Together with the enslaved we were stacked and shipped to the Caribbean, to the Danish West Indies, where we became the national fabric Madras.*

*In Ghana we became part of the national fabric as well. Now produced by Dutch multinational companies and resold as African prints.*

*In Europe and the colonial center we became the scotch print in Ivy League Uniforms, Colonial overseers’ pants, and military uniforms, shipped back to India (to oversee our production).*

*We are an index of our own passage*

*Woven between continents,*

*Of becoming digital*

*We precipitate the pixel that we would later become*

*The hand of the laborer*

*Held the loom that wove us*

*That loom*

*Later wove the program*

*that returned us*

*to our current pixelated form<sup>’ii</sup>*

\*

“The work we do requires (...) new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery.”  
(Sharpe, 2016, p. 13)

2017 marked the centennial of Denmark’s sale of its former colony The Danish West Indies to The United States, today the United States Virgin Islands. For this occasion, the Danish National Archive, the Royal Danish Library’s Photo and Map Collection, as well as other archives and collections in Denmark, undertook a mass digitisation of their archival records from St. Croix, St. Thomas, St. John, Ghana and the transatlantic enslavement trade. The contested history of these archives is well known in archival studies (Bastian, 2003; Andersen, 2017). After the sale of the Virgin Islands in 1917, most of these archives were relocated to Denmark, leaving the inhabitants of the islands without access to approximately 250 years of written and visual sources of history. Hundred years later, the National Archive alone has scanned more than 1.2 kilometres of shelf space, adding up to more than 5 million digital scans. The records are said to be among the best preserved from the transatlantic enslavement trade and many are included on UNESCO’s world heritage list.

While browsing through the digitized archives, the scanned image of the snippets of Indian textiles hit me viscerally, as its very texture comes to carry a direct indexicality of the transatlantic enslavement trade. The Middle Passage. And their own passage becoming digital: being fragments of textiles, they almost seem to predate the pixels that they would later end up becoming.

The garment, ripped apart from the fabric of which it should form part, and sealed onto the ledgers, enfolds in its texture the violent cut to connection that slavery marks, a cut that severs the enslaved from their land, history and kinship. That cut can be said to be re-incised when Denmark took back the archives after selling the Danish West Indies to the United States. The uprooting of the archive marks a double cut, in which people who were forcefully removed from their history and environment, are then cut off again from access to that little trace, that name, that list, or that scrap of cloth which might still exist in the ledgers within the archive. Or perhaps it marks a triple cut – a material cut, a rasterization, a discretization – when what is returned after digitization is not the actual archival records, but rather the scanned copies in 300 dpi.

The cloth samples became our entry points for this special issue, prisms that serve as an analytic to approach the colonial archive as well as to map ongoing practices across continents that work to repair the cuts enforced by colonial experiences.<sup>iii</sup> From their cross-continental journey into the digital format in which they can be found today, these fabrics carry the “forcible encounters, removals, and entanglements” (Lowe, 2015, p. 2) that made up the violent colonial enterprise. At the same time, they also point to the historical and material processes that underwrite digitisation, as the computer and the global webs of data emerge out of the history of weaving, as cyberfeminist Sadie Plant suggested (Plant, 1995). From this layered history, the fabric samples came to function as an impetus to weave new threads connecting communities, histories, and archives into a web that fosters new ways of creating with and through the archive.

This special issue emerges from a seminar entitled *Archives that Matter. Digital Infrastructures for Sharing Unshared Histories*, organized by Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, Daniela Agostinho and Nanna Bonde Thylstrup in Copenhagen in 2018.<sup>iv</sup> Building on the many research, artistic and curatorial activities that took place throughout the centennial year of 2017<sup>v</sup>, this seminar was the first to address the politics and ethics of mass digitization of colonial archives by bringing together experts in digital heritage with artists, researchers and curators working in the field of colonial histories. Throughout the centennial year, it became clear to many of us that digitization had to be complemented - if not challenged - by other practices and epistemologies. In the Fall of 2016, leading up to the centennial year, the Royal Danish Library in Copenhagen organized a series of data sprints on “Representing History through Data”, in which students, researchers and professionals were invited to engage

with the archival records in digitized form through digital tools, with the technological expertise from computer scientists from IT University Copenhagen. It became quickly apparent that most of the participants in the room were white Danes, which ended up creating a situation that mirrored the unequal conditions of colonial archival and knowledge production. What could these participants possibly say and do about these materials (photographs, log books, census, among others) that would not further entrench them in the colonial regime that they were already ensnared in? Moreover, the format of the data sprint also raised questions about the epistemologies of quantification inherent to datafication that cannot be separated from the history of colonialism of slavery. As scholars such as Simone Browne (2015), Jessica Marie Johnson (2018) and Jeffrey Moro (2018) have pointed out, the notion of data is deeply embedded in colonial histories of quantification that have a defining moment in the transatlantic enslavement trade. As Jeffrey Moro pointedly notes, “by imagining the Middle Passage as data, as fungible, manipulable, discrete, countable—we are not necessarily doing something new to it. We are participating in a deep time of datafication” (Moro, 2018, n.p.). At the same time, the non-quantifiable, unregistered and uncollected dimensions of the experience of those under slavery and bondage continue to go unnoticed and unattended, rather than being brought to attention (Agostinho, 2019). How then to adequately reconstruct the lives of those who lived under slavery and bondage through data?

These questions prompted us to invite artists and scholars from the US Virgin Islands and Ghana to bring a different context to these archives, to recount other stories beyond those registered by data, and to open up to other dimensions of the archive that were not present in the Danish national history of colonial experience. The seminar thus explored the potentials of intersecting digital humanities with cultural studies as well as artistic and arts-based research. Bringing together participants from Denmark, the United States Virgin Islands, Ghana, Belgium and Croatia, the seminar constituted our first attempt to open up the conversations initiated during the centennial year to a transnational and transdisciplinary reflection in order to map the many connections across regions that digital archives both enable and disable.

The seminar departed from the notion that, while mass digitisation of archival records carries a promise of easier access to the archives, it also gives rise to ethical, political, aesthetic and methodological questions concerning the access, dissemination and reuse of sensitive and contested material. With *Archives that Matter* we thus wished to begin a conversation about emerging digital colonial archives, pointing to the limitations as well as possibilities that digitization of colonial material gives rise to. Echoing recent insights from the fields of postcolonial and black digital humanities (Brown, 2015; Dillon, 2015; Glover and Gil 2017; Johnson, 2018; Parham, 2014; Risam, 2018; Rusert, 2017), we aimed at discussing not only the colonial epistemologies that digital colonial archives run the risk of reinscribing, but also at showcasing and fostering practices that critically engage with and reimagine the colonial legacies that haunt archives under digital conditions. Some of the questions we proposed to explore were: what are the new sites of forgetfulness and silence created by the digitization of the colonial archives? How to do justice to the subjects, histories and experiences registered and unregistered by these archives? What kinds of materialities are lost and potentially newly found in processes of digitization? What are the implications of giving and precluding access through digital means, and how can meaningful and socially just access be envisioned? How to repair the connections broken by colonialism and archival knowledge? And finally, how to create *shared infrastructures* for re-use of the archival material that fosters radical, creative, decolonial and technological collaborations across communities?

The focus on “unshared histories” present in the subtitle is a direct reference to debates that took place during the centennial year, after the former Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen’s speech in Christiansted, St. Croix on the US Virgin Islands, on March 31, 2017, during the official Centennial Transfer Day program. Prior to this speech there had been expectations that he would take the opportunity to issue an official apology for Denmark’s involvement in enslavement and colonization. Rather than an apology, the Prime-Minister delivered a speech that emphasized how the people of Denmark and the people of the US Virgin Islands share “common historic bonds”, “the same view of history” and the “same heroes”. The problems and shortcomings of this speech were noted by many (see eg. Danbolt & Wilson, 2018). But one notorious problem resides precisely in the takeover of the archives in 1917, the effects of which cannot be repaired by the provision of access to digital

copies hundred years later. Hundred years of unshared access to these archives have dictated a deeply unequal relation to historical knowledge that needs sustained efforts to be undone. As art historian Temi Odumosu noted on different occasions, this is not a history or archive that is shared, in the equitable sense of the word, but one that is experienced and embodied fundamentally differently, depending on who you are as a person living in the US Virgin Islands or in Denmark. With this special issue we echo Odumosu's suggestion to take the concept of "sharing" in "shared histories" seriously in order to call for ways to actually share the archives, and to use the archives and their digitization as a way of initiating dialogue and creating a path for healing.

Inspired by this plea, this issue includes contributions by authors who participated in the seminar as well as authors we later invited to contribute in order to extend the conversations the seminar initiated. Two years have elapsed since the seminar took place, and the contributions herein do not merely reproduce the presentations delivered at the event. Rather, the issue predominantly features work that came into being over the course of the last two years, thus testifying to the post-centennial attempts at moving forward, attempts spearheaded by artists and researchers invested in creating paths for rethinking and healing colonial legacies. The issue features a blend of articles, essays and artistic contributions that reflect (though not exhaustively) the breadth of questions, practices and collaborations sparked by ongoing engagements with these archives. In many ways, this issue has been an editorial experiment in relationship-building that captures some of the intersecting practices being woven into a growing web of relationships. In the remainder of this introduction, we share our reflections on archival materiality and on infrastructures that inspired this special issue, reflections that are necessarily indebted to the ongoing dialogues that the issue aims to encourage further.

### Archives that Matter

Our approach to colonial archives is informed by the many thinkers who examine archives as sites of power, knowledge and violence but also reimagination, redress and healing (Caswell and Cifor, 2016; Fuentes, 2016; Hartman, 2008; Lowe, 2015; Stoler, 2002). Following Foucault (2002), we approach archives as a nexus of practices that are constantly productive of meaning through which we are being constituted in the present. As such, the archive is not something which belongs to the past but something which actively shapes us in the present. This is why the colonial archives matter and keep reverberating the colonial past in the present. It is not a finished chapter, as the former Danish Prime Minister tried to contain it in his centennial speech in the US Virgin Islands – nor is it an "unpretty" past as the Danish Queen tried to tame it in her 2017 visit to Ghana – but rather it is actively structuring and reproducing subjectivities and power relations in the present.

2017 was also the year that Christina Sharpe's book *In the Wake* began to have a profound impact across fields of inquiry and practice. In the book, thinking through the afterlife of slavery, Sharpe makes the powerful point that the "past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (Sharpe, 2017, p. 9). This formulation spoke poignantly to the discussions many of us were having around the centennial, when we were confronted with Danish society's collective inability to perceive the past documented in the archives not as a bygone era, but as having ongoing effects in the colonial present (see Odumosu, 2019). Sharpe's question "[H]ow does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still?" thus resonated profoundly with the context of the centennial commemorations. With the title "Archives that Matter" we thus wanted to draw attention to the material effects of the past upon the present (in the form of continued exploitation, discrimination, racism and unequal power relations) and to situate the archives as a site where the "ongoingness" of the past is materialized and felt. Echoing the Black Lives Matter movement as well as Judith Butler's book *Bodies that Matter*, in which Butler shows how power is exercised upon and through the materiality of gendered and sexualized bodies, our intention was to suggest that the archive distributes materiality unevenly, whereby some lives matter more than others. Browsing through the archival records, from slave ship logbooks to plantation ledgers, this uneven distribution of lives is notorious and largely remains to be acknowledged, honoured and redressed. As Ayana Flewellen remarks in her contribution to this issue, "race as a social construct and racism as an experiential fact mattered in the past and matters in the present". *Archives that Matter* thus gestures towards the unresolved ongoingness of the past and the need to collectively generate



“different ethical registers” (Thomas, 2019) towards the archives, new ways of “making-sensible” (Sharpe, 2018) that more adequately acknowledge their material, affective and sensorial effects.

## *Matter*

*Archives that Matter* also emphasises that the materiality of the archive matters and continues to matter when the actual physical material is digitized. To think through this we were inspired by another groundbreaking book that came out in 2017, Tina Campt’s *Listening to Images*, in which she calls for an affective reorientation towards archives that takes into account their broadly constituted sensoriality. She puts forward an understanding of archival photographs “as deeply affective objects that implicate and leave impressions upon us through multiple forms of contact: visual contact (seeing), physical contact (touching), psychic contact (feeling), and, most counterintuitively of all, the sonic contact” (Campt, 2017, p. 72). Expanding her reflections, we emphasize the need to attend to the sensoriality of the archive, and to the manifold ways the archival material elicits our engagement, even in its digital materialization. Following Campt, it is perhaps by attuning to the “lower frequencies” and the unnoticed materiality of the records that we might be able to hear some of the stories unregistered by the archive. It is our hypothesis that the textural affordances offered by the digitization of the colonial archive constitute a double process. On the one hand, the digital archive seems to disable the immediate sensorial and affective qualities related to the physical records, but at the same time, the affective qualities of archival materiality are enfolded in the very texture of the seemingly flat digital scan.

To further explore this, we draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick & Renu Bora’s distinction between *Texxture* (with two x’s) and *texture* with one x. According to Sedgwick (2003, p.15) an object with *texxture* is “dense with offered information about how substantively, historically, materially, it came into being”. In other words, a *texxtured* object carries information about its own becoming. As an example, Sedgwick uses the hand molded brick that “still bears the scars and uneven sheen of its making” in the very surface of the brick. The history of the material clay becoming a brick is thus enfolded in the very texture of the brick. On the other hand, *texture* with only one “x” blocks the information about its making in its surface; it “signifies the willed erasure of its history” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 15).

With archival records, we might think that analog archival records carry the history of their own making in their very texture. The violence is embedded and embodied in the very scrap of cloth. In the seal. In the stroke of the pen. Information withheld. We only have a name – a misnaming. With the digitization of that object, some of that information might be lost, flattened, compressed, pixelated.

However, thinking with Hito Steyerl and her notion of the “poor image”, might it be possible to think the digital scan not as void of texture, but rather, like the fragments of cloth that carried their lines of flight in their very texture (between India, Ghana, US Virgin Islands and Denmark), might those lines of flight be enfolded into the texture of the digital image? Steyerl (2013, p.1) describes poor images as “the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production which testify to the violent dislocation, transfers, and displacement of images - their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism”. Despite the flatness with which they appear on our computer screens, is it possible to think of these images as entering a digital cycle of dislocation and displacement that evokes the cut to connection that people and objects endured in colonial times? With Laur M. Jackson (2016), might we situate this original experience of displacement of the Middle Passage as “[the living tissue](#)” of these digital files?

## *Rematerialisation*

What we suggest is that by entering a digital regime of circulation, these documents and files enter a process of *rematerialisation* which harbours a potential for radical interventions. Central to our thinking on rematerialisation is La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers’ groundbreaking public sculpture *I Am Queen Mary*. Unveiled on the harbour of Copenhagen, in front of the West Indian Warehouse, on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018 (one year after the centennial of Denmark’s sale of the Virgin Islands), this project is the first collaborative monument to

memorialize Denmark's colonial impact in the Caribbean and those who fought against it. Queen Mary was one of the four queens who led the Fireburn uprising against the Danish colonial administration and the slave-like conditions that the workers were still working under, 30 years after the official abolition of slavery.

In the absence of an actual picture or archival image of Queen Mary Thomas, the two artists set out to 3D-scan their own bodies and to merge those two images into a third image – an “avatar” as Nina Cramer (2018) has suggested. In so doing their two bodies come to constitute a new image – a hybrid image, a data body – that cuts across time and space. The full title of the piece is in fact *I Am Queen Mary - a Hybrid of Bodies, Nations and Narratives*. Echoing John Akomfrah's (2010) reflection on “digitopia”, we situate this overlap between the diasporic and the digital as a “harbinger of new modes and relations” that carries the history of its making. In this process of merging bodies, nations and narratives, the scan and the pixels that it is comprised of enfold the many layers and histories unregistered by the colonial archive, activating the connections between the two continents, the two artists and the figure of Queen Mary and the Fireburn Queens. The gaps in the archive (the absence of a picture of Queen Mary, the lacuna of its prison record) become an opening, a way of “entering and leaving the archive” (Sharpe, 2017, p. 13) with a new materialisation. By working on the affect, the image is able to tear itself away from the body or totality of which it should form part and becomes a new entity of its own [I AM QUEEN MARY]. But that entity still carries the history of its making in its newfound form. As such it marks a relationality across time, space, and materials, enfolding the historical context, geographies, bodies and the current present. The rematerialisation of *I Am Queen Mary* could thus be situated within an “roads praxis” as suggested by Jessica Marie Johnson (2019, n.p.) “a black diasporic technology for exploring what digital and analog landscapes hide and reveal”, a mode to “create data without losing affect, sensation, and kinship as a framing for black life”.

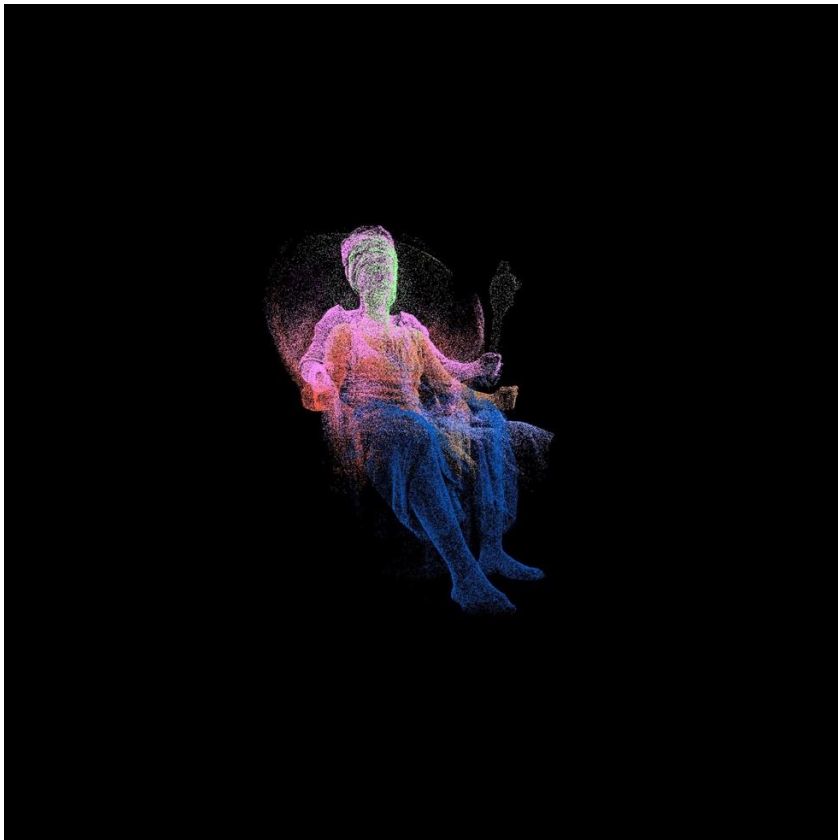


Figure 2: 3D Sketch of *I Am Queen Mary* (La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers, 2018). Photo: 3D Printhuset and Daviid Ranlø. Courtesy of the artists.

Belle and Ehlers' strategy not only becomes interesting to think with in relation to how artists and scholars can engage in "wake work", in "inhabiting and rupturing" the archives (Sharpe 2016), but also to think the whole digitization process of the colonial archive. If we think the digital archive as matter, then the material is composed of zeros and ones stored in electric circuits. Those circuits are no less material than the ledgers that store the archival records (Parks and Starosielski 2015). If we situate the colonial archive as a site of "breakdown and breakthrough" (Morgan, 2016), then those digital circuits also offer pathways for fugitive practices to be materialized.

Another way to look at this process, as La Vaughn Belle suggests in her contribution to this issue, is through the plinth of the monument. While the final sculptural figure of Queen Mary, assembled from the merged bodies of Ehlers and Belle, printed in polystyrene, and coated in black paint, could potentially obscure the way it came into being (that is, if one hasn't seen the body scans), the plinth tells another story. Made from corals that enslaved Africans were sent to harvest from the sea, the texture of the acropodium carries the violent history of its making in its surface. The texture of the acropodium thus reinscribes the materiality of colonial history already stored in the data bodies that make up the sculptural figure of Queen Mary. As a harbinger of new, diasporic articulations of colonial history and anti-colonial resistance, *I Am Queen Mary* gestures towards the many possibilities of rematerialisation and lines of flight that the digital opens up to once we attend to its textured materialities.

### *Smuggling*

A final example of digital materiality that we would like to offer is one that points to the need to invent new infrastructures for sharing unshared histories, infrastructures that go beyond the digital servers, networks and interfaces that currently hold the digitized archival records. In the summer of 2018, Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld together with research librarian Mette Kia Krabbe Meyer (Royal Danish Library) and art historian Mathias Danbolt (University of Copenhagen) participated in the event "[Connecting with the Archives: Reclaiming Memory](#)" in St. Croix, organized by Frandelle Gerard within the annual Summer School facilitated by CHANT: Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism, a local organization working to preserve cultural heritage in St. Croix. For this occasion Katrine and photographer Anu Ramdas printed more than 200 photographs from the archives (selected together with David Berg, a photographer from St. Croix, and Mette Kia Krabbe Meyer) into a 7 meters long paper roll, which were then packed and transported to St. Croix, where they were handed over to CHANT and the participants in the event.



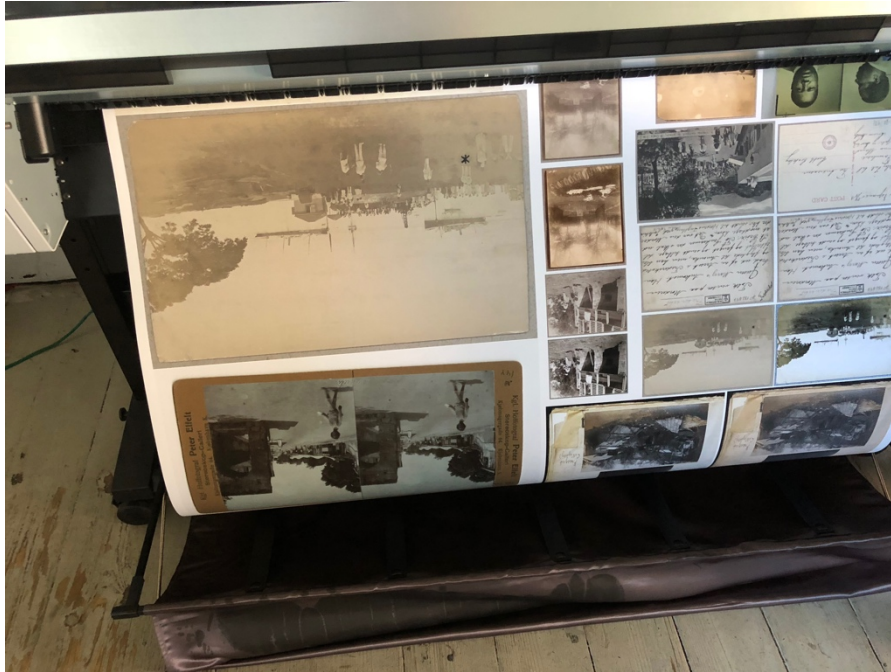


Figure 3: Printing the archives. July 2018. Photo: Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld.



Figure 4: Photographer David Berg looking through the printed archival photographs. CHANT, St. Croix, July 2018. Photo: Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld.

Upon presenting this intervention at a conference on Digital Culture in Germany, we were asked by an audience member why Katrine printed the photographs and carried them to St. Croix if they are online anyway. The question is an important one to address, as it carries the assumptions of accessibility that digitization so often generates. With this intervention, we wanted to point to the unequal conditions of access that digitization can perpetuate rather than mend. Often with digitization, the actual physical records are deaccessioned, which prevents people from physically engaging with the materials even if they have the means to consult them in Copenhagen, where they are still kept. Even though these archives can be consulted online, unequal conditions of connectivity dictate radically different engagements with the digital material. In September 2017, for instance, two category 5 hurricanes struck the USVI territory within a two week period. On St. Croix, St. John and St. Thomas, many people lost their roofs and most of their possessions, and much of the islands went for weeks without power. Digital access is not a condition taken for granted at all times. But more than this, we wanted to point to how archives are situated, experienced and interpreted differently in different contexts, as Tami Navarro suggests in VISCO's essay in this issue, where she pushes us to consider the significance of the context within which archives exist: "how different it would be if such images were not just digitized by Danish institutions and *shared* with those in the Virgin Islands, but housed—and, importantly, situated there?". As Navarro argues, "The removal of such objects from their context - the people and places which made them possible - is an act of erasure that continues even after attempts to repair this break with gestures such as the digitization of archival material". And finally, she argues that the way in which these documents are archived and "shared" are currently outside the frame of reference for Virgin Islanders, and that vital context that could be provided by Virgin Islanders is currently missing.

As such, while we argue above that digital files carry in their texture the history of their making, this texture, we contend, is not complete without the **context** from which they emanate and in which they belong. This context comes to constitute a form of materiality that needs to be restituted to these records.

In our collaborative, quasi-literal smuggling of the archives we are indebted to Irit Rogoff's conceptualization of smuggling as an "operating methodology", a "potent model through which to track the flights of knowledge, of materials, of visibility and of partiality all of whose dynamic movements are essential for the conceptualisation of new cultural practices" (Rogoff, 2006, p. 3). Our act of smuggling is conceived as a mode of interrupting the circulation of digital files under the colonial regimes of visibility engendered by digitization, and to instead divert them, reroute them and redistribute them towards an alternative infrastructure for archival engagement. This act of flight allows us to imagine what it would be like if the archives could find a new life outside the institutional infrastructures that seized them under the pretense of caretaking. What possibilities for knowledge, reckoning and recognition would such an infrastructure open up to?



**Figure 5:** Facebook post by photographer David Berg in which he juxtaposes a print of a painting by Frederik van Scholten from the Royal Danish Library against the background of his grandmother's backyard in St. Croix. He was familiar with this painting through a print that he used to see at his grandmother's house. On his first trip to Denmark he saw the original painting by Scholten at the Royal Danish Library. St. Croix, July 2018.

### Fugitive infrastructures for sharing unshared histories

The scraps of cloth, and their route or journey from Tharangambadi to Accra, to Copenhagen and Charlotte Amalie or Christiansted, also suggest the way in which the “intimacies of different continents” (Lowe, 2015) sustained the colonial project. These intimacies testify to the vital role of infrastructures for the colonial enterprise, through which routes, journeys, exchanges and encounters were made possible. Such infrastructures live on below and through the digital networks that now store and carry the digital version of these files. In *The Undersea Network*, media scholar Nicole Starosielski (2015, p. 2) points to the historical stability of communications technologies, noting how the undersea internet cables of her study “follow the contours of earlier networks, layered on top of earlier telegraph and telephone cables, power systems, lines of cultural migration, and trade routes”. This deep materiality of digital communication infrastructures reminds us that infrastructures are a vehicle that both connects and disconnects. It is our hypothesis that the digital infrastructures that mediate the colonial archive today simultaneously entangle and disentangle communities once connected and disconnected by colonialism – they both connect and disconnect people to the historical past due to various infrastructural challenges such as access, language and radically different colonial experiences.

But infrastructures can also be a means of transformation and inventiveness (Verhoeven, 2016). As Deborah Cowen (2017, n.p.) notes in “Infrastructures of Empire and Resistance”, “alternative worlds require alternative infrastructures, systems that allow for sustenance and reproduction”. Cowen suggests that perhaps the greatest railroad ever built was the Underground Railroad, an infrastructure built not from railway connections but from safe houses, passageways and people who made escape from bondage imaginable for fugitive enslaved people. The Underground Railroad, Cowen remarks, “is a breathtaking reminder of the power of oppressed peoples to build infrastructures that work to make another world possible” (Cowen, 2017, n.p.).

With this special issue, our hope is to expand the meaning of infrastructure towards imagining different infrastructures - material, imagined, analogue, digital, affective, sensorial, artistic and collective - for sharing unshared histories. To return to the cloth samples, and how they inspired us to weave new threads connecting communities, bodies, and archives, we propose to reimagine infrastructures as “connective matter” to generate new intimacies between continents, histories and narratives.

Conceived as a counter-archive that foregrounds the material, affective, textural, sensorial and embodied knowledge that the colonial archives do not account for, this special issue and the contributions herein offer various pathways and threads for imagining alternative infrastructures that create space, both physical and virtual, for sustained relationships, interventions and practices to emerge<sup>vi</sup>.

**The Virgin Islands Studies Collective (VISCO)** opens the special issue with a collaborative reflection on the prison records of the Fireburn Queens, the leaders of the labor revolt that occurred in 1878 on St. Croix (USVI), and who were sentenced to be imprisoned in Denmark. Their incarceration records became recently accessible due to their digitization and translation from Danish, allowing VISCO to confront the tensions between historical documentation and the islands’ collective memory of the four women. Each member of the collective - visual artist La Vaughn Belle, anthropologist Tami Navarro, philosopher Hadiya Sewer and novelist and poet Tiphonie Yanique - responds through their own intellectual and creative practice to one of the prison records of the four women: Axeline Solomon, Mary Thomas, Mathilde McBean, and Susanna Abrahamson. Their reflections combine elements of speculation, fiction, black feminist theory and critique as modes of responding to the gaps and silences in the archive, as well as finding new questions to be asked. Central to each of the interventions is the idea of embodied knowledge and how they position their own lived experiences as women from the Virgin Islands in the archival engagement. VISCO’s collective reflection is a much awaited and groundbreaking development in a post-centennial moment, in the way it centers the Virgin Islands as a site of inquiry and theorization, and in how it confronts the incommensurate discrepancies between archival records and collective knowledge as “opportunities towards limitless renewals of knowing”. VISCO’s article highlights that in the aftermath of the mass digitization of Denmark’s colonial archives, there is an urgent need to explore not only



the contents of the archive, but also to expand archival access and to develop new modes to attend to the nuances of archival interpretation and intervention.

In “Lowering the Gaze. The Acropodium in *I Am Queen Mary*”, visual artist **La Vaughn Belle** reflects on the transatlantic dialogue behind the first public monument to memorialize Denmark’s colonial past in the Caribbean, the sculpture *I Am Queen Mary* (2018), co-created with Jeannette Ehlers, a Copenhagen-based artist of Danish and Trinidadian descent. The essay retraces the origin of the project to the parallel artistic practices of the two artists that later intersected in the monument, bringing together shared and unshared colonial histories. Belle’s proposition in this essay is to “lower the gaze” and engage with the sculpture from the viewpoint of its plinth, a coral stone base that goes back to her earlier piece “Trading Post”. By entering the work through its acropodium, Belle calls for a sensorial shift that gives access to an embodied knowledge that more clearly attunes to the materiality of colonial history. By lowering the gaze and entering the piece through the stone base, Belle proposes to see the plinth as a quiet monument to the enslaved and to other, often invisible colonial infrastructures that make up colonial *pastpresents*.

The artistic contribution FOR LOVE ALONE by visual artist **Jeannette Ehlers** documents a 6 hour-long performative intervention originally titled *Into the Dark*, created for ‘Culture Night’, a large annual public cultural event in Copenhagen. The performance at the Royal Cast Collection/West Indian Warehouse on October 12, 2018 was inspired by the four rebel queens of the Fireburn revolt, Queen Mary, Queen Susanna, Queen Agnes and Queen Mathilda, and consisted of two groups of four black women who acted as living sculptures in the West Indian Warehouse, confronting the coloniality of the space. Accompanied by a soundtrack of the monologue *Queen Mary Spirit*, written by novelist and poet Tiphonie Yanique from the US Virgin Islands, the women changed positions and formations throughout the night. The performance further invited a dialogue with the public sculpture *I Am Queen Mary*, co-created by La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers, which is placed just outside the Warehouse. Ehlers’ contribution includes Tiphonie Yannique’s written monologue *Queen Mary Spirit*, accompanied by photographic and video documentation.

**Ayana Flewellen’s** article “African Diasporic Choices: Locating the Lived Experiences of Afro-Crucians in the Archival and Archeological Record” draws on Black feminist and post-colonial theoretical frameworks to question and explore the historicity of archaeological and archival records. The contribution offers a critical discussion of the implications and challenges of open access to digitized documentary sources, such as the newly digitized archival records regarding Denmark’s role in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Flewellen reminds us that “open access does not amount to equitable legibility of documents available, nor does it provide transparency regarding the subjective nature inherent in the production of archival collections and within processes of digitization.” By engaging with some of the digitized images, Flewellen locates the gaps in both archival and archeological records, while simultaneously illuminating them as spaces of potentiality and possibility to gain insights into the interior lives of the enslaved and later free African diasporic peoples of the former Danish West Indies. The article draws on preliminary findings from Flewellen’s archeological work at the Estate Little Princess, an 18th-century Danish sugar plantation located on the island of St. Croix, USVI. Centered on the past lived experiences of African Diasporic women through the lens of sartorial practices, Flewellen’s archeological research illuminates spaces of tension as well as productive encounters between the archeological and archival records.

The next artistic contribution comes from **Dorothy Akpene Amenuke**, artist and lecturer at the Department of Painting and Sculpture at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana. In the visual essay “Being Content (?). Containment, Habitation and Devotion”, Amenuke explores the politics of space and what she calls “the possibly communicative potential of fibres and fabrics”. The essay features her work on inhabited spaces in the colonial context and her exploration of “parasitic beings” that take up space in all kinds of environments. Amenuke’s work questions who is allowed to inhabit which spaces, and explores the potential of fabrics to create spaces of inhabitation and intimacy. Within Amenuke’s practice, inhabiting is the state of being inhabited/occupied and also being or dwelling in, by turning the inside outside and the outside in. Employing



techniques such as stitching, tying, gluing, etc., and exploring themes that reference women and daily life, she creates evocative objects and installations, some of which come into their elements when installed in the natural environment. With the long processes of fiber and fabric manipulation, her sculptures and installations embody the time taken to create them and the laborious nature of daily routines. Amenuke's work on the materiality of fibers and fabrics, and their potential to create new spaces and structures for intimacy, offers a conceptual framework to think about materiality, rematerialisation and historical entanglements.

In "Landscapes of the African American Diaspora in Denmark. An Imaginary Exhibition", **Ethelene Whitmire**, Professor at the Department of Afro-American Studies, University of Wisconsin – Madison, draws on the method of curatorial dreaming in an exploration of how an imaginary exhibition can offer an alternative infrastructure to engage archival materials and scholarly work in new ways. Whitmire's own archive of items collected to write the book *Searching for Utopia: African Americans in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Denmark* includes hundreds of primary sources such as personal letters, photographs, films, documentaries, novels, government records, news articles and more. In particular, the contribution focuses on the landscape paintings of the African American painter Walter Williams, an expatriate who lived in Denmark, and the author dreams of reaching broader audiences for scholarly research, noting that "I want visitors of my imaginary exhibition to feel like they are standing inside my archive." Withmire's archival research charts less well-known diasporic pathways that tell richly layered stories about African-Americans in Denmark, while unfolding the method of curatorial dreaming as an affective and sensorial form of engaging with the archives of her scholarly work.

The Copenhagen-based decolonial feminist collective **Marronage's** contribution "Marronage is Resistance to the Colonizer's Construction of History" offers an intervention into the Danish history book *Kolonierne i Vestindien* [The Colonies in the West Indies] by Danish historian Ove Hornby, which discusses the 1878 Fireburn labor revolt on St. Croix. As Marronage points out, the archives tell us almost nothing of the experiences of the colonized and the enslaved, and "[w]hen 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." Marronage's intervention employs the practice of redaction and annotation, inspired by the work of Black feminist scholar Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, as a way of "returning to violent documents with the intention of seeing and reading otherwise". Their contribution includes an English translation of the Danish history book, as well as their annotations, to ensure greater accessibility to a non-Danish readership.

In "Colonial media ecologies. Resounding the colonial archive with impressions from a field trip to Ghana", **Lene Asp Frederiksen**, writer and Ph.D fellow at the Department of Culture and Society, University of Linköping, explores how the medium of sound and audio recordings hold "a potential for a multi-perspectival and multi-voiced opening up of colonial archives". In this mixed-media contribution, Asp Frederiksen documents a field trip to Ghana with written and aural impressions in an attempt to trouble the monological genre of the travelogue through the polyphonic register of sound recordings. Asp Frederiksen's contribution offers a reflection on the materiality of colonial archives through a media ecological approach that situates the landscape as a form of material archive, showing how "knowledge of history might be stored in other-than-text narratives". Importantly, Asp Frederiksen's contribution offers both a methodology - documentary audio recordings - and a discussion of how to address layered colonial environments through a media ecological and media archeological approach, as well as the possibilities of digital media to voice *dialogical narratives* about colonialism.

Finally, the special issue concludes with an essay by visual artists Annarosa Krøyer Holm and Miriam Haile, co-runners of the **Hvid[me]Archive**, a collaborative project that has brought together many of the practices featured throughout this special issue. Their contribution, "Hvid[mə] Archive – An artistic research project highlighting critical, intersectional and decolonial practices" recounts how the artistic research project Hvid[mə] Archive started as a critical comment on the Danish Royal Cast Collection's exhibition in the colonial West Indian Warehouse in Copenhagen. The authors establish the project as "a response to the lack of verbalization about the warehouse's colonial past, as well as to the lack of a verbalization about the context and history that the

plaster cast collection is a product of". Tracing and unfolding the use and re-conceptualization of the Danish noun 'hvidme', the essay demonstrates how it created an entry point for a contemporary critical whiteness discourse in a specific Danish art context. The essay reflects on how the project developed from Annarosa Krøyer Holm's critical intervention in the white space of the West Indian Warehouse into the decolonial and intersectional artistic research collaboration that **Hvid[me] Archive** is today. Hvid[me] Archive can thus be seen as a growing collaborative infrastructure that facilitates and sustains exhibitions, artistic workshops, networks and events with visual artists, cultural producers, writers and theorists working within a critical decolonial framework.

The contributions in this issue approach the archives through different engagements, exploring various notions of materiality and offering new sensorial methods through which to enter (and leave) the archival record. In their breadth of creative approaches, these contributions explore and call for different understandings of infrastructure that interrogate, reimagine and share the archives in ways that offer a path (or many paths) forward.

### **Acknowledgments and moving forward**

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Infrastructure building takes time, patience, labour and persistence. We are now starting to see the fruits of the many post-centennial collaborations across geographical boundaries, and this special issue charts some of the ongoing pathways for moving forward that we hope can be further nurtured by a growing web of critical and imaginative practices.

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<sup>i</sup> With Sharpe, “If (...) we think the metaphor of the wake in the entirety of its meanings (the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness) and we join the wake with work in order that we might make the wake and *wake work* our analytic, we might continue to imagine new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, to survive (and more) that afterlife of property.” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 17-18)

<sup>ii</sup> This text is loosely woven based on popular articles on the history of the Madras fabric as well as on Sadie Plant (1995).

<sup>iii</sup> Our usage of the term repair throughout the text is informed by Eve Sedgwick’s “reparative reading” and David Scott’s reflections on repair and reparation. With David Scott, we depart from the premise that New World slavery is not repairable - it’s “beyond repair” (Scott, 2018). This means that the notion of repair here, rather than the reconstitution of something to its previous whole, is tied to a psychic and poetic dimension, as the possibility of telling a different story, and the imaginative potential of this retelling for the acknowledgement of unrighted wrongs. Rather than signaling a temporal closure or a finite gesture, repair is a process that speaks to a temporality of ongoingness. With Sedgwick we thus situate repair as a “reparative practice” to emphasize the processual, transformative and quotidian labour of repairing the past. “What we can best learn from such [reparative ]practices”, Sedgwick wrote, are “the many ways in which selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (Sedgwick, 1997, 35). A reparative practice, for Sedgwick, is thus about learning how to build small worlds of sustenance that cultivate a different present and future for the losses that one has suffered.

<sup>iv</sup> The programme can be consulted at <https://cemes.ku.dk/activities/2018/archives-that-matter/>.

<sup>v</sup> The events and interventions in Denmark during the centennial included, amongst others, the exhibition *Blind spots*, curated by Mathias Danbolt, Mette Kia Krabbe Meyer and Sarah Giering at the Royal Danish Library, which featured different artefacts from the library’s collection (photographs maps and postcards, among others) alongside artworks by contemporary artists such as La Vaughn Belle (USVI), Jeannette Ehlers (Denmark) and Nanna Debois Buhl (Denmark); art historian Temi Odumosu’s sound interventions, titled *What lies unspoken*, at both the *Blind spots* exhibition and the National Gallery of Denmark; the conference *Unfinished histories: Art, memory, and the visual politics of coloniality*, organized by Mathias Danbolt and Mette Kia Krabbe Meyer at the University of Copenhagen and the Royal Danish Library; and Jeannette Ehlers and La Vaughn Belle’s *I am Queen Mary*, an artist-led monumental statue of labour revolt leader Mary Thomas—the first public monument to a black woman in Denmark—situated in front of the former West Indian Warehouse on Copenhagen’s harbor front, unveiled in March 2018. Other independent and smaller scale exhibits, such as *Performing Archive: Estate Bethlehem*, an exhibition by visual artist Renée Ridgway at Astrid Noack’s Atelier, and interventions organized by artists and activist collectives such as Marronage, Black Lives Matter Denmark and Hvid[mə] Archive, were also crucial in mobilizing communities around Denmark’s colonial legacy, and in leading some of the most radically anticolonial conversations and experiments. In the USVI, there were several artistic and curatorial responses to the centennial, including a group exhibition titled ‘100 years of...: A centennial transfer reflection exhibition’ held at the Bajo el Sol Gallery in St John; another group exhibition, titled ‘Invisible heritage: transfer 2017’, curated by Monica Marin at the Caribbean Museum Center for the Arts in St Croix, which later travelled to the USVI Cultural Embassy in Copenhagen; and the exhibition ‘The centennial: my take/my view’, shown at the Fort Frederik Museum in St Croix. In general, the centennial commemorations fostered only a few transatlantic initiatives, mostly spearheaded by individual artists, curators and researchers outside the framework of official commemorations.

<sup>vi</sup>Note on peer review: all articles have undergone peer review. Artistic contributions have received editorial feedback but have not undergone peer review.