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Lowering the Gaze

- The Acropodium in *I Am Queen Mary*

Abstract

This article is written by one of the co-creators of the monumental public sculpture entitled I Am Queen Mary that was done in collaboration with Jeannette Ehlers. Inaugurated on March 31, 2018 the project is the first collaborative sculpture to memorialize Denmark's colonial impact in the Caribbean and those who fought against it. The essay traces the beginning of the collaboration as a transatlantic conversation that prompted the development of two separate ideas and articulates how the monument represents a point of convergence of the artistic practices of both Belle and Ehlers. Moreover, the essay highlights how the conjoining of the original monument projects created various conversations and tensions around colonial structures and visibility. By entering the work through its coral stone base, it uses the acropodia as a conceptual framework to discuss the hidden infrastructures of coloniality and how - through lowering the gaze and other sensorial shifts - a new kind of embodied knowledge can be gained. The article employs Kevin Quashie's ideas around the aesthetics of quiet as a way to not only think differently about resistance and blackness as only exterior phenomena, but to consider the power and complexity of interiority. By extension, offering up a similar lense to view the inner life of coloniality, the article discusses how through the acropodia in I Am Queen Mary the invisible structures and labor of not only colonial systems, but the monument itself, can be made transparent.

Keywords: *I Am Queen Mary*, monuments, public art, Danish West Indies, acropodia, coral stones, decolonial

On a crisp sunny day in what looks and feels like a park I meet in St. Croix for the first time with Helle Stenum, a Danish researcher and lecturer in migration studies, to discuss some preliminary ideas of a collaborative project around the colonial history between the Virgin Islands and its former and longest colonizer - Denmark. This park, located alongside the harbor of Christiansted, a town named after a Danish king, is currently under the auspices of the United States National Park Service. The expansive perfectly cut lawn and tree-lined walkway flanked with wooden benches sanitize what was once a military complex of Danish colonial buildings that included: a scale house, a customs house, a warehouse, a slave auction block (although flattened now to a parking lot), a Steeple building (although no longer functioning as a chapel) and a fortress replete with cannons and a dungeon and a (now hidden away) whipping post. Helle and I sit on a bench that faces the ocean, faces the dock that for centuries ferried goods and people that were classified as goods all at the behest of Danish industry and expansion. It's a few years before the upcoming 100-year anniversary of the 1917 sale and transfer of the Virgin Islands from Denmark to the United States and in 2014 Helle's ideas have crystallized around how one might commemorate such an occasion. She proposes a transatlantic conversation through exhibitions and other programs to be simultaneously housed inside the West Indian warehouse in Copenhagen and the one in Christiansted that we can see in our view. She is talking to me because I am an artist that has been working and thinking about

coloniality and colonial structures for several years now and have done previous collaborative projects in Denmark.ⁱ She has also spoken to Jeannette Ehlers, a Danish artist of Trinidadian descent who has also been working in a similar trajectory across the Atlantic producing projects that interrogate Danish amnesia around their colonial history. Helle proposes that Jeannette and I each develop a memorial, one in Denmark and one in St. Croix, a gesture that would later lead to the erection of a collaborative monument - *I Am Queen Mary* - whose first iteration occurs in Copenhagen in March 2018.ⁱⁱ



Figure 1. Image of the base and figure during the installation of *I Am Queen Mary* at the former Danish West Indian warehouse in Copenhagen, March 28 2018. Photo Credit: Michael K. Wilson

On a painfully cold morning, days before Easter, days before the centennial year would end, days before *I Am Queen Mary* would be inaugurated, on this snow blanketed morning there were two fully realized sculptures that had not yet become one. The two pieces made in strikingly different ways and from polar opposite materials stood in the fabricator's warehouse on the outskirts of Copenhagen ready to make their journey to the warehouse that stored goods that came from the former Danish West Indies. The large seated female figure had been glued to a peacock chair and recently repainted black. Remnants of the woeful green iteration, the earnest attempt to appear like aged bronze, were visible in the crevices of her skirt folds, arms and feet and looked almost intentional. But there was no more time to debate if a patina bronze effect could be achieved and if it was even desired or necessary. In a final and contested decision, she would be black, painted with paint mixed with plastic that would make her impenetrable to the elements. Although weighing less than 200 pounds, milled out of large chunks of what is known commercially as Styrofoam, she was light for a sculpture of that size, able

to be lifted by less than 10 of us. But despite being relatively lightweight she was too big for the warehouse and the door couldn't open to get her out and a beam prevented her from being placed horizontally. It took manipulating her awkwardly and precisely to a 30-degree angle to be able to open and move her through the large garage doors and place her on a flatbed. Strapped in and driven cautiously it was an amazing sight - a colossal black figure sailing through a sea of white snow. As we got closer to the city, people stopped and stared, took pictures and the excitement grew.

With much less drama the companion piece had been wrapped in plastic sheets and placed inside a large trailer quietly arriving beforehand. A structure made of coral stones that many weeks before had been shipped across the Atlantic. Months before that I, along with my studio assistant, Ralph Motta, had dug them out of the ground from my property in Christiansted and carried them back to my studio to be crated for shipping. And years before that (a couple hundred or so) they had been cut out of the ocean by people originally from the western coast of Africa who were brought to labor in the Danish claimed islands in the Caribbean sea. Haagensen, a Danish planter and slave owner described the harvesting process in his journal:

Those seastones are collected from the reefs that surround nearly the entire island; this makes things much easier for those plantations located near a beach [...] The reefs that grow from out of the sea produce a never-ending, limitless quantities of limestone. Just as fast as it is removed, it grows back again. And it is quite convenient to gather because the reef extends above the surface of the sea, with the result that the slaves can stand on it with the water not rising above their feet, except at high tide when it reaches to their thighs and often to their midsections. For that reason, one waits for the low tide and calm weather to undertake this work. The sea is then calm. On such a day, more stones can be cut and gathered than on two other days. When the weather is good, one need not worry that one's slaves will get drowned or hurt. The slaves are not unaccustomed to standing naked the whole day long in the sea gathering stones, although when it is windy, it becomes very cold (Haagensen, 1758/1995, pp. 9-10).

In addition to describing the process of harvesting the coral stones, Haagensen also describes the process of making the lime, a binding substance of the stones and bricks made by burning the corals. His description of the labor makes visible in the records what is often invisible in the structures, the perilous labor of African bodies that have built these societies, the veritable foundation of great wealth and industry. But as seemingly descriptive as Haagensen's writings are, there is so much that is still unseen. How did the workers decide which corals to use? How did they get the stones out of the ocean and from the ocean to the land? How did they protect their hands and feet? Did one have to be a good swimmer or be able to hold your breath for long periods? How did their god beliefs inform their labor, or trauma, or joy, or fear, or a myriad of other emotions and positions? There is a set of skills and knowledge present in the work that remains undocumented and subaltern, revealing the tacit nature of the master narrative often dominant in the archives. For Haagensen corals are "limitless" resources and he uses words like "convenience" to describe their availability. He describes the enslaved as not being "unaccustomed" to such work further revealing the biases of his circumstance.

As problematic as it is to see human beings as another kind of *natural resource* to be extracted, it is part of the logic embedded inside colonial infrastructures and development. In that way the journey the enslaved Africans made centuries before is mirrored in the journey of their afterlives in the form of the coral stones back across the Atlantic. The stones, however, arrived in Denmark much later than anticipated. The expected one-month journey tripled due to customs delays and storms. We had hoped to align the unveiling with the 2017 anniversary of the day the Fireburnⁱⁱⁱ began- October 1st. However, the late arrival of the corals pushed us to consider showing the sculpture with an empty base, filling them with the corals later. We had to confront the reality of what that would mean, what it would lack, how different the project would be without its other half.

We opened our calendars and looked forward for another meaningful date and landed on March 31st, Transfer Day. This wasn't the kind of day we were looking for. Transfer Day stood in direct opposition to what the Fireburn on Contract Day meant. Yet, we realized that there was a possibility to transform the colonial origination of that

day in the same way that the Fireburn had transformed the unfair and oppressive terms of Contract Day. We also imagined that we could stall, and perhaps permanently halt, the closure of the Danish-described “dark chapter” that the end of the Centennial year foreshadowed. We hoped to transfer the spirit of the Fireburn and burn out some of the pain of being conferred from one colonial power to another without consent or consultation. And besides, it would also be Easter. This happenstance seemed like a meaningful and important sign of renewal and rebirth.

The coral stones created a space for another kind of renewal, a continuation and an access to another kind of knowledge. Shortly after they arrived we had the difficult task of cleaning them. They were full of dirt, cement and mold that had developed in their months crated at sea. We rallied assistance from Nina Cramer and Michael Wilson who both had been working on the project with us in varying capacities of scholarly and logistical support.^{iv} Additionally, Roger Matthiesen, a member of parliament who I had met at our presentation of the project at a Black Lives Matter meeting joined us that day. While handling and cleaning the corals he commented with an astute poetics that the coral stones were like the “cotton fields” of the sea. The sharp corals were injurious, leading one to imagine incredulously how those who had originally harvested them managed to do so without the protection of gloves. Roger and Michael also commented on the sensorial whispers of the stones for they spoke not only to the touch, but the smell of the ocean seeped out, and the waves lapping the coral reefs echoed from a distance. The hands of the bodies that had stood naked the whole day long gathering stones were reaching back too- we could feel them.

This communion in the ritual of cleaning the coral reminded me of when I would watch my father, an Anglican priest, enact the ritual of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet. During the ceremony Jesus avows to Peter that “unless I wash you, you have no part with me”. The washing represents a pedagogy of doing, an access to a kind of knowing and the axis in which the awareness of one’s own positionality could be more fully understood. It is embodied knowledge that often fills the gaps and silences of colonial archives. The act of doing and *doing again*, reenacting past events, actions and positionalities activates a space of possibility and becoming.

Reenactment has been a central part of the process in *I Am Queen Mary*. Both Jeannette’s and my body were separately scanned as we recast ourselves in Huey P. Newton’s iconic image in a peacock chair with a sword and a rifle. Inserting our bodies into the history of the Black Panthers was a transnational connection to other resistance movements while centering a female figure. We later created a digital composite of our bodies signaling a hybridization of not just our bodies, but our nations and narratives. This hybrid was used to create an allegorical portrait of Mary Thomas, one of the leaders of the 1878 *Fireburn* labor revolt in the former Danish West Indies. It is an individual and joint reenactment, additionally invoked through the title *I Am Queen Mary*, as the viewer is invited to situate themselves inside this history.

Although it’s most obvious in the figure, reenactment is also a part of the coral stones in which embodiment occurs on multiple levels. The stones embody various types of sensorial reenactments: tactile, kinetic, sonic and structural. Taken from the ruins of colonial buildings they are reenacted as a new kind of foundation in an art historical context and open up possibilities of revealing the invisible colonial infrastructure.

I Am Queen Mary represents an intersection of the trajectory of two parallel artistic practices occurring on different sides of the Atlantic. Our positionality and relationship to power along those axis points was complicated by our shared and unshared colonial histories. This is evidenced in the different ways we engage with violence through Jeannette’s *Whip It Good* performance and my *Cuts and Burns* series, her whipping black charcoal onto a white canvas and me cutting and burning into white paper. Further evidence is our previous performance video works of our bodies in colonial spaces: my *Somebody’s Been Sitting in My Chair, Somebody’s Been Sleeping in My Bed* (2011) in which I reenact the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* in a plantation great house (today functioning as the Whim Plantation Museum) and her video performance *Black Magic in the White House* (2009) simulated inside the Danish colonial mansion Marienborg (today functioning as the home of

the Danish prime minister). Other points of connection are the ways we have both used our family histories in our works to challenge the supposed objectivity of colonial histories and the different ways we have tried to deal with displacement, loss and fragmentation. Jeannette's attraction to Huey P. Newton and other icons of Blackness was often mediated in her video and photo work. It comes very much out of her Afro-Danish experience and the need to connect to Blackness both as a response to the lack of a physical black community in Denmark, and as a tool of resistance to living in a country where Danishness was defined by whiteness. That erasure of self and the violence implicit is matched in the violence of *Whip It Good*. Differently, on my side of the Atlantic, living in both the real and symbolic violence of colonial structures with towns named after Danish monarchs, the colonial forts masking as parks and the sugar mills scattered across the landscape like aged tombstones, I was compelled to look for the hidden narratives inscribed in these spaces and subvert their colonial power.



Figure 2. *Trading Post*, La Vaughn Belle 2015. Reclaimed coral stones cut by enslaved Africans, encased in plexiglass, 36"x18"x18" Photo Credit: Tamia Williams

Our different positionalities are also evident in how we originally responded to Helle's invitation to develop a monument. I envisioned a monument around an idea of a column (or columns) of the coral stones I found outside my studio. I marveled how their flat edges signaled that someone's hand had marked them, and wanted to work with both the beauty and the tragedy of how they got there. In some ways they looked like readymades, but unlike Duchamp's readymades in which the artistic gesture was the significant act, suppressing or even canceling out the history of how the object came to be, I was starting with the narrative of the object coupling it with the artistic gesture of assemblage. Entitled *Trading Post*, I assembled the stones in a structure made of plexiglass, exposing the hands of the enslaved Africans that labored them out of the ocean to form the foundations of the colonial era buildings. It was a plinth, but what stood on top would be the discourse created, an acropodium. In Greece acropodia were often used to add monumentality to temple settings and mausoleums. In this case I

wanted it to add monumentality to the people whose labor was forced, whose survival miraculous and whose non-survival noteworthy. *Trading Post* was a place where value was declared, both in the economic framework of a colonial trading zone and as a plinth in an art historical context.

Jeannette had also been thinking about value and monumentality when she first envisaged placing a statue of a large black woman to counter Michelangelo's *David* on the outside of the Danish West Indian warehouse in Copenhagen. Her proposal aimed at counteracting the dominance of Eurocentrism in both the historical Danish narrative and the larger art historical one represented in what is called the Royal Cast collection, currently housed inside the colonial warehouse. It encompasses over 2000 replicas of sculptures from Greek antiquity to the Renaissance. The figure would be an interpretation of a promotional image she created for her solo exhibition in which she recast the character of her performance, *Whip It Good*, using the iconic Huey P. Newton image of him seated in a peacock chair with a rifle and spear in either hand. The counter-narrative significance of this gesture created inside the Royal Cast collection would be extended into the public realm. Helle later suggested that Queen Mary would be an ideal figure to pay homage to as it would utilize another mythic and historical figure in a similar way that *David* engendered both qualities. Queen Mary would also be a more direct link to the resistance movements in the Caribbean.



Figure 3. Jeannette Ehlers, c-print from recordings of the performance *Whip It Good* in the Royal Cast Collection, Copenhagen, 2014. Photo Credit: Casper Maare. Courtesy of the artist.

However, when the two projects became one a new set of tensions arose around visibility and infrastructure. The design of *Trading Post* was influenced by the desire for the monument to function as a site-specific counter to the *David* sculpture that was already positioned outside the colonial warehouse in Copenhagen. It's the reason *I Am Queen Mary* is the colossal size of 24 ft as she matches and slightly surpasses him in height. However, the aims of the coral stones, designed to showcase the invisible structures of colonialism, were challenged by its dual function as the plinth in *I Am Queen Mary*. Cultural and literary arts scholar Kevin Quashie describes this tension as a contrast to the normative ways that blackness, black culture and history are represented in public. Framed through the lens of resistance, violence or struggle, responses to colonialism and racism are often imaged as expressiveness, loudness, publicness. This same expectation is what undergirded the critique of the sculpture in the Virgin Islands because contrary to how Queen Mary and the other Fireburn queens had previously been imaged, as standing, charging or in another dynamic posture, in *I Am Queen Mary* she is seated. This challenged the collective imaginary to envision this cultural icon in another way, in the aesthetics of what Kevin Quashie calls the *quiet*. He argues that, "An aesthetic of quiet is not incompatible within black culture, but to notice and understand it requires a shift in how we read, what we look for, and what we expect, even what we remain open to. It requires paying attention in a different way" (Quashie, 2012, p. 6). In this way one could also see Queen Mary in a seated position, in contemplation, as an expression of an interiority, representative of the fuller and more complex world of one's inner life.



Figure 4. La Vaughn Belle & Jeannette Ehlers, *I Am Queen Mary* (NY version). Installation view from the *Radical Love* exhibit at the Ford Foundation Gallery in NY, June 2019. High Density Foam and reclaimed coral stones cut by enslaved Africans, encased in plexiglass, 84"(h) 47 (w) and 60" (depth). Photo Credit: Powerhouse Arts. Courtesy of the artists.

When applying these concepts to the coral stones the aesthetics of quiet serves to highlight in a similar way the “inner life”, the quiet infrastructure of coloniality. The activities, the structure, the labor and the inequities that often undergird the more overt expressions of racism and colonialism. As Quashie asserts, to see this requires a shift in how we read, what we look for and what we expect. As evidenced by the numerous photographs that image the monument with the figure alone, this shift is often not realized. By lowering the gaze and entering the piece first through the acropodium one begins to see the plinth as a quiet signal to the foundational labor of the enslaved and the other often invisible colonial infrastructures. The second iteration of *I Am Queen Mary* which was realized in June 2019 in New York as in indoor sculpture for an exhibition at the Ford Foundation represents a closer approximation to the original intention. Without the David sculpture, the piece differs not just in size, but also in the design of the coral stone base. Instead of being bound in cement, in this version the stones were encased in plexiglass which placed the infrastructure of coloniality centerstage as the plinth becomes transparent.

However, akin to the way that the foundational labor of slave societies is often subsumed by the outputs of that labor, there exists a foundational labor in this project as well, the invisible infrastructure of a public art project that is artist-led by two Black women artists positioned at different sides of the Atlantic and operating in different colonial realities. One of those realities is that the first iteration of the project occurs in Denmark primarily because Jeannette was able to raise funds appropriated for the centennial year from Danish agencies and institutions. However, a non-commissioned artwork means that it still lacks a certain kind of institutional support, that permissions must be sought out, funds raised, insurance purchased and the responsibility of maintenance assumed by the artists until a fuller institutional support is garnered. The ability to navigate all of these issues and bureaucratic entanglements must be met with a certain level of creativity, resolve and labor. It also means that the artists must undertake the work to take up the space to create the dialogues that decoloniality requires. This dialogue did not only happen externally with the project, and with the numerous artist talks and engagements with the press that occurred before the piece was constructed and subsequent to its inauguration. There were also internal dialogues about collaboration and positionality, about African diasporic nuances and disparities, differing access to power and privilege, differing ways to think about Blackness and different needs to respond to because of that positioning, with narrative construction being but one of them.

As a decolonial project, *I Am Queen Mary* reminds us that it is not only an ocular shift that is required when thinking through colonial *pastpresents* and trying to find ways to make transparent what stands masking as parks and plinths and shared history. Indeed, a broader sensorial shift is required, for there are parts of the memory that is not collective and part of the quiet that is not silence. The pedagogy of the somatic, of reenactment, provide a methodology to shift the gaze to the quiet of coloniality by allowing access to other sensorial capacities, intimacies and knowledge. In *lowering the gaze*, similar to an act of bowing one’s head in prayer or introspection, there is a process of looking inward that occurs. It is this process that holds the promise of countering the colonial endowment from commandeering our futures- our ability to transform the opacity of the fundamentals and see what possibilities exist inside.

La Vaughn Belle *makes visible the unremembered. She is a visual artist working in a variety of disciplines that include: video, performance, painting, installation and public intervention projects. She explores the material culture of coloniality and her art presents countervisualities and narratives. Borrowing from elements of architecture, history and archeology Belle creates narratives that challenge colonial hierarchies and invisibility. She has exhibited in the Caribbean, the USA and Europe in institutions such as the Museo del Barrio (NY), Casa de las Americas (Cuba), the Museum of the African Diaspora (CA) and Christiansborg Palace (DK). Her work has been featured in a wide range of media including: the NY Times, Politiken, VICE, The Guardian, Time magazine, Caribbean Beat, the BBC and Le Monde. She is the co-creator of I Am Queen Mary, the artist-led groundbreaking monument that confronted the Danish colonial amnesia while commemorating the legacies of resistance of the African people who were brought to the former Danish West Indies. She holds an MFA from the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, Cuba, an MA and a BA from Columbia University in NY. Currently she is a fellow at the Social*

Justice Institute at the Barnard Center for Research on Women. Her essay is part of a larger manuscript she is writing entitled "Ledgers From a Lost Kingdom". Her studio is based in the Virgin Islands. Her work can be found at www.lavaughnbelle.com and at I Am Queen Mary project's website: www.iamqueenmary.com.

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ⁱ From 2006-2008 Belle worked on a transnational project with Danish curator Jacob Fabricius that culminated in an exhibition called *Overdragelse* (Danish for transfer). Five artists from Denmark were brought to St. Croix to create work and the intention was also to bring artists from the Virgin Islands to Denmark to do the same. Lack of funding on the Virgin Islands side stunted this aspect of the project. However, artists from both locations participated in the group exhibition at the Overgaden Institute for Contemporary Art in Copenhagen in 2008.

ⁱⁱ The Warehouse to Warehouse project did not transpire due to lack of funding and institutional changes in leadership at the warehouse in St. Croix and closure of public access to the museum at the warehouse in Denmark.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Fireburn is the name of a labor revolt that occurred on St. Croix in 1878 in which Mary Thomas emerges as one of the leaders. It began on October 1st (Contract Day) when the new contracts that bound laborers to plantations for a year went into effect. The Fireburn was a protest against the living and working conditions instituted after the abolition of slavery in 1848 and lasted for several days. The name is derived from the burning of sugar plantations and large parts of the town of Frederiksted which occurred during the rebellion.

^{iv} See Cramer, N. (2018) I Am Queen Mary: An Avatar in the Making, and Wilson, M.K., & Danbolt, M. (2018). [A Monumental Challenge](#).