



# Essay

## I Am Queen Mary: An Avatar in the Making

Foto: *I Am Queen Mary*, 3D Sketch in Artec Studio  
La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers

# I Am Queen Mary: An Avatar in the Making

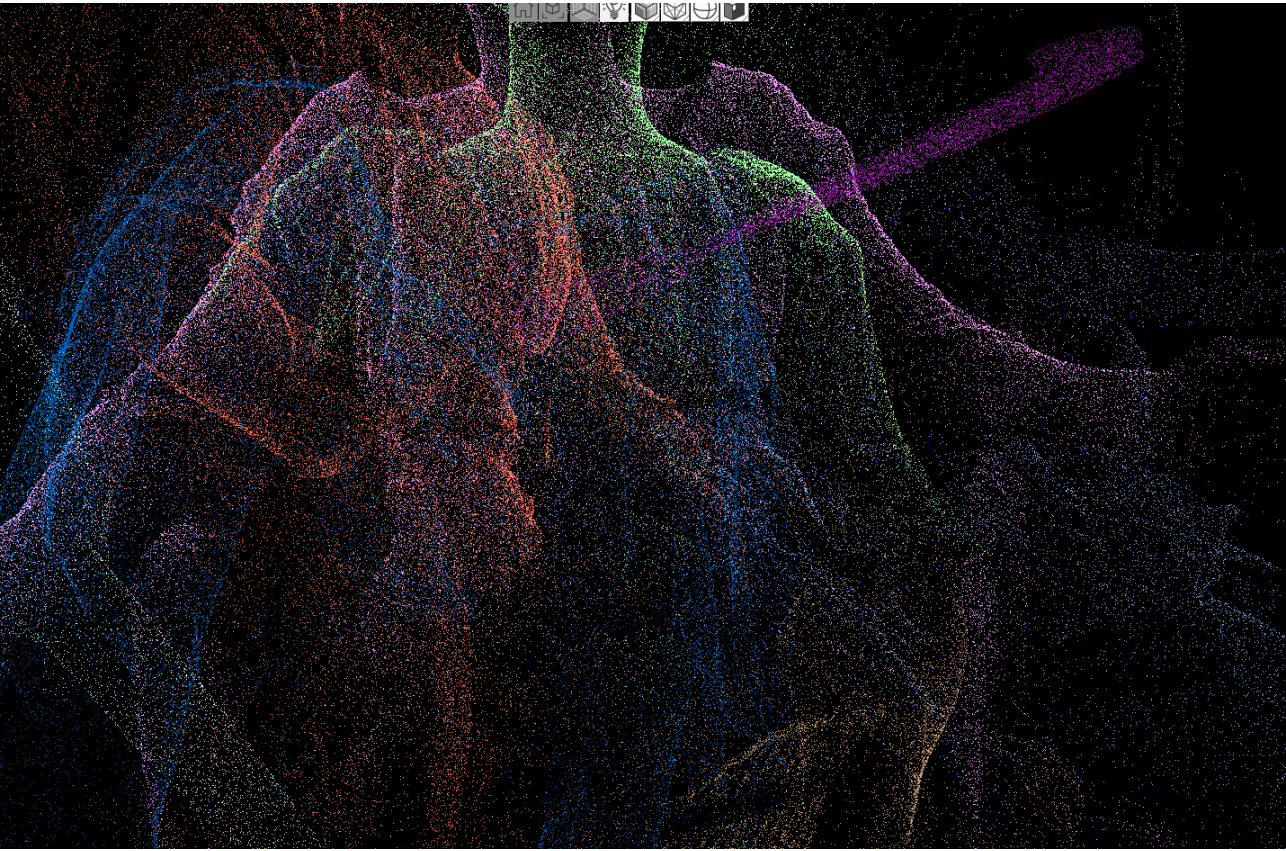
By Nina Cramer

*Her body may be composed of other parts and times: it is, in other words, questionable, in doubt, dubious. This woman—a person, a persona—speaks through a performative mask, oscillating between object and subject, dispersed yet complete.*  
—Jennifer DeVere Brody

The public sculpture *I Am Queen Mary* (2018) is, at the time of writing, placed on the harbour front by Copenhagen's West India Warehouse, standing an impressive seven meters tall.<sup>1</sup> This collaborative project by artists La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers is the first monument in Denmark to establish a commemorative space around the country's lasting colonial impact in the Virgin Islands and resistance against it. The surface of the sculpture's plinth incorporates two tons of coral that were once cut by hand from the ocean around St. Croix by enslaved Africans and used in the foundations of buildings in the former Danish West Indies. Atop this plinth sits a "hybrid" of the two black- and woman-identified artists in the image of the Caribbean freedom fighter Mary Thomas, or Queen Mary as she is widely known, magnified far beyond life-size and milled out of polystyrene.<sup>2</sup>

My remarks here centre on a series of digital renderings of Belle and Ehlers' Queen Mary produced by gathering data from both their bodies with structured light 3D scanning technology and used to design the physical sculpture.<sup>3</sup> I define these renderings as sketches—preliminary devices made with a view to further processing at other scales and in other mediums—and view them as markers of a process that complicated, modified and consolidated some of the project's core ideas before arriving at the clarity of the final design. The sketches range from rough scans of each artists' enactment of Mary Thomas to their later seamless embodiment of her, but all relate to the work's titular declaration: *I Am Queen Mary*. In the flood of news articles generated around the sculpture's unveiling, Ehlers and Belle repeatedly made reference to the significance of using their own bodies to represent a historical heroine (e.g. Knight 2018). This choice has not been without controversy with critics voicing concerns about the incongruence between the artists and the historical figure represented in their work. This text proposes the avatar as a prism through which to explore the artists' play with this provocation of persona versus personhood.<sup>4</sup>

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- 1) The West Indian Warehouse in Copenhagen once stored goods produced on the islands St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John that were colonised by Denmark. The building has since 1984 been used by the National Gallery of Denmark to house The Royal Cast Collection of approximately 2,500 white plaster casts of seminal sculptures in Western art history ranging from Greek antiquity to the late Renaissance.
  - 2) The sculpture's tagline is "A Hybrid of Bodies, Nations and Narratives". I worked closely with the artists on the programming around the inauguration of the sculpture on March 31st, 2018.
  - 3) The artists thus reroute a scanning procedure often associated with what sociologist Simone Brown (2009: 142) characterises as technologies of biometric surveillance routinely applied to do "the sorting work of nationalizing, and by extension racializing". All comments on the 3D sculpting process for *I Am Queen Mary* are based on the author's conversation with 3D Printhuset on May 16, 2018.
  - 4) In doing so, I am drawing on Uri McMillan's novel theorisation of the avatar in the book *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (2015).



*Fig.1 La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers. I Am Queen Mary. 2017. 3D sketch in Artec Studio. Courtesy of the artists.*

“Avatar” in its current popular usage is a (usually) humanoid graphic that represents and is manipulated by a computer user. It often serves purposes of mobility, interaction and community-building in the context of virtualised social experience (Coleman 2011: 12).<sup>5</sup> The word is derived from Hindu mythology where its original meaning is that of an earthly incarnation or personalisation of a deity intended to counteract an evil in the world, etymologically linked to the ancient Sanskrit *avatārah* (descended from the sky) (Weistone 2004: 118). In both instances—as simulated self and spiritual embodiment—the avatar does not possess an identity but rather performs one in the service of its user(s). The potentials of the avatar in contemporary art are vast, as David Joselit (2005) notes: “By injecting a powerful ingredient of fantasy into the delineation of identity, the avatar makes possible an imaginary/real mobility” that can facilitate experiments with comportment and appearance. By activating the concept of the avatar in my reading of the *I Am Queen Mary* sketches, I seek to parse out the “questionable” ontological and temporal character of this aggregate figure, to borrow from Jennifer DeVere Brody in the epigraph above.

5) A more clear-cut example of avatar-building involving Queen Mary is the currently in-progress 360 film inspired by the Fireburn, <https://fireburnthegame.com>.

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As the scanner sweeps over Belle and Ehlers' bodies, a light source projects a series of patterns onto them. Their bodies' distortion of these patterns is recorded and relayed back to the 3D modelling software Artec Studio where clusters of data appear in real time. Any slight movements cause fragmentation in the resulting image. Instantaneously compiled into distinct, colour-coded layers, the scans are superimposed onto one another. These digitised bodies, whether in the form of porous point clouds, meshed structures or smooth surfaces modelled by light and shadow, maintain a willing malleability. This allows the technician to cut away at the data, isolating and combining specific fragments for the figuring forth of a composite woman. My favourite snapshot of this process, that I find equally intriguing and discomfiting, shows a frontal view of a fiery orange body melding discordantly with a grey one. It is tempting to view an image like this as unsettling the assumption that "[t]he *body* (...) is the means by which we produce ourselves as *social beings*, by which we produce 'social space'" (Jones 2000: 19, emphasis added). *I Am Queen Mary's* disjointed figuration in these early stages instead evokes black feminist



Fig.2 *La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers. I Am Queen Mary. 2017. 3D sketch in Artec Studio. Courtesy of the artists.*

theorist Hortense Spillers' (2003) proposition that the integrity of the "body" as a social medium has historically been denied people racialised as black in the Americas while challenging us to imagine embodiment and agency together with historical conditions of objectification.

As performance studies scholar Cynthia Oliver observes, black women in diaspora have long deployed their own physicality as raw material in spectacular and subversive enactments of altered or alternate selves. Her extensive research on Virgin Islands pageant culture explores the ways black women performed royalty during Danish colonial rule as a survival tactic that positioned them as sources of cultural knowledge, political vision and aesthetic worth. "[T]he emergence of a black queen and her role as resistant woman," Oliver (2009: 8) writes, was tied to her propensity for "mocking whiteness, femininity, empire, the separation of classes, and ultimately the enslavement of black people". Unlike European sovereigns, nineteenth-century Caribbean queens were *chosen by the people* for their ability to perform for themselves and their communities in politically and socially valuable ways.

Queens were at the forefront of the Fireburn uprising of October 1878 where agricultural workers in the former Danish West Indies organised and revolted against the indentured servitude that followed the abolition of slavery. As its name suggests, the Fireburn involved setting ablaze large



Fig.3 Charles Edwin Taylor. A Rebel and Queen Mary. 1888. Wood engravings.

parts of Frederiksted town and sugarcane fields as well as the pointed destruction of plantation facilities throughout St. Croix over a period of five days (Marsh 1981: 344). The revolt was suppressed by the colonial regime and a number of people were arrested in its aftermath, including the four women Mary Thomas, Agnes Salomon, Mathilde McBean and Susanna Abrahamsen who were variably charged with arson, looting and murder for their leadership roles in the uprising. While these women are hailed as Queens of the Fireburn in Virgin Islands cultural mythology, this revolt has been omitted from Danish labor history despite the documentary records and related archival material being kept in Copenhagen.

The visual traces of Mary Thomas in the archive reflect the ways black women and femmes' bodies have often been scripted by colonial image-makers to bear the burden of representational alienation and abjection in the context of transatlantic slavery and its afterlives (Odumosu 2015; Ahmed 2002). An early published illustration of her was produced by the English doctor Charles Edwin Taylor—a self-styled historian and artist whose preferred medium was the wood engraving—and can be found in his book *Leaflets from the Danish West Indies* (1888). Framing the Fireburn as a “carnival of horror”, Taylor describes Crucian workers as a “band of monsters” with a particular emphasis on the role of women:

*The women—and they seemed the worst—danced and sang, or rather howled, the men joined in chorus, clashed their sticks, blew their shells, and set fire. Shrieking, yelling, and leaping, their lithe forms lighted up by the glare around them, they looked more like a legion of fiends than things human. (157-8)*

Interpolated in Taylor's interpretation of the Fireburn are two black-and-white illustrations captioned “A Rebel” and “Queen Mary” respectively, though both have come to stand in for evidentiary depictions of Mary Thomas. The women are distinguished by the objects they hold (a cane bill each, a lighted torch and a white flag) but their faces are inscrutable due to the excessive shading crudely used to establish their blackness.<sup>6</sup> Given this fraught representational legacy of the Caribbean woman as mobiliser, insurgent and queen, the stakes are high in contemporary efforts to portray Mary Thomas.

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Once decisions have been made as to which elements from each 3D scan will form the final figure, Ehlers and Belle's body data is loaded into the software Blender to be further moulded and remoulded. By this point, the artists form a compound and contained corpus whose geometry can be viewed from any angle with the drag of a cursor. The technician tinkers with the torque of an arm and fine-tunes the angle of a leg before these disparate parts are locked into place. Various textured and patterned brushes are used like fine-grained sandpaper to perfect the figure's sutures through countless hours of editing. Belle and Ehlers' Queen Mary is barefoot and wears a headwrap, a simple blouse and skirt. In each hand, she now clearly grasps the tools of insurgency or emblems of white fear that we are familiar with from Taylor's engravings. But this is more or less

6) The cane knife is a widespread trope in the imaging of racial panic in the print culture of the Americas during the Age of Revolution. (See Brown 2011). For instance, Taylor's illustrations bear a resemblance to the print *Desalines [sic], Primer Emperador de Hayti endia de Gala* in Vida de J. J. Dessalines: gefe de los negros de Santo Domingo from 1806. For an art historical discussion of Taylor's text and images in relation to *I Am Queen Mary*, see also Danbolt and Wilson 2018.”

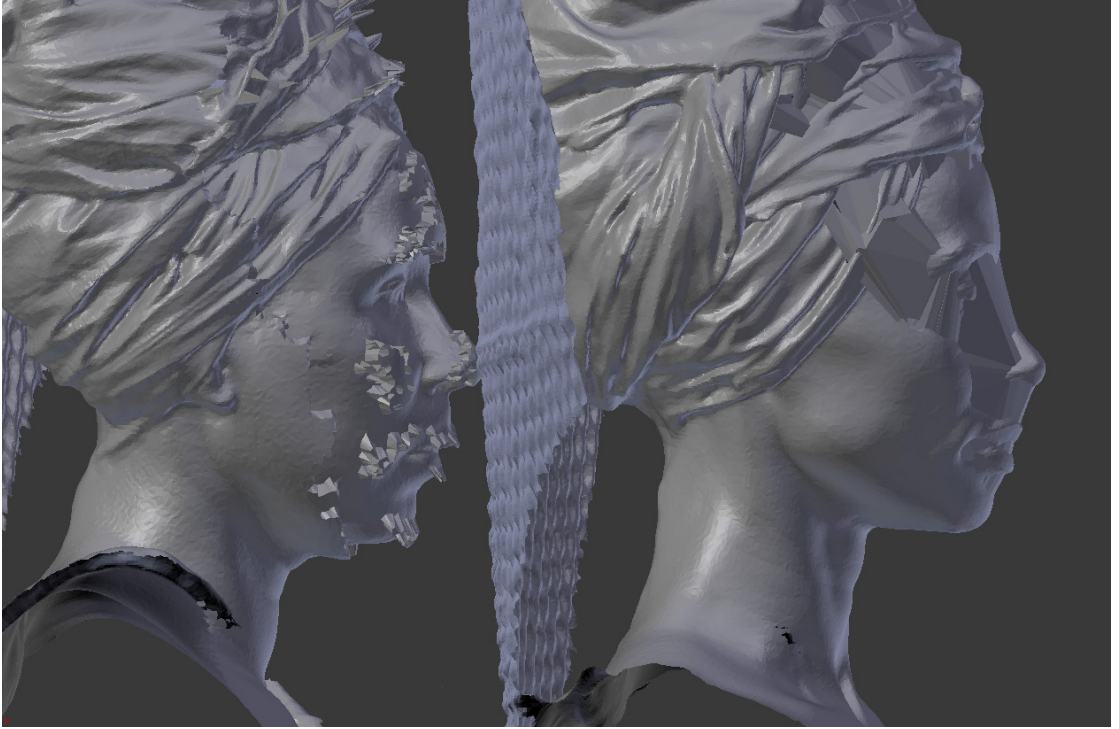
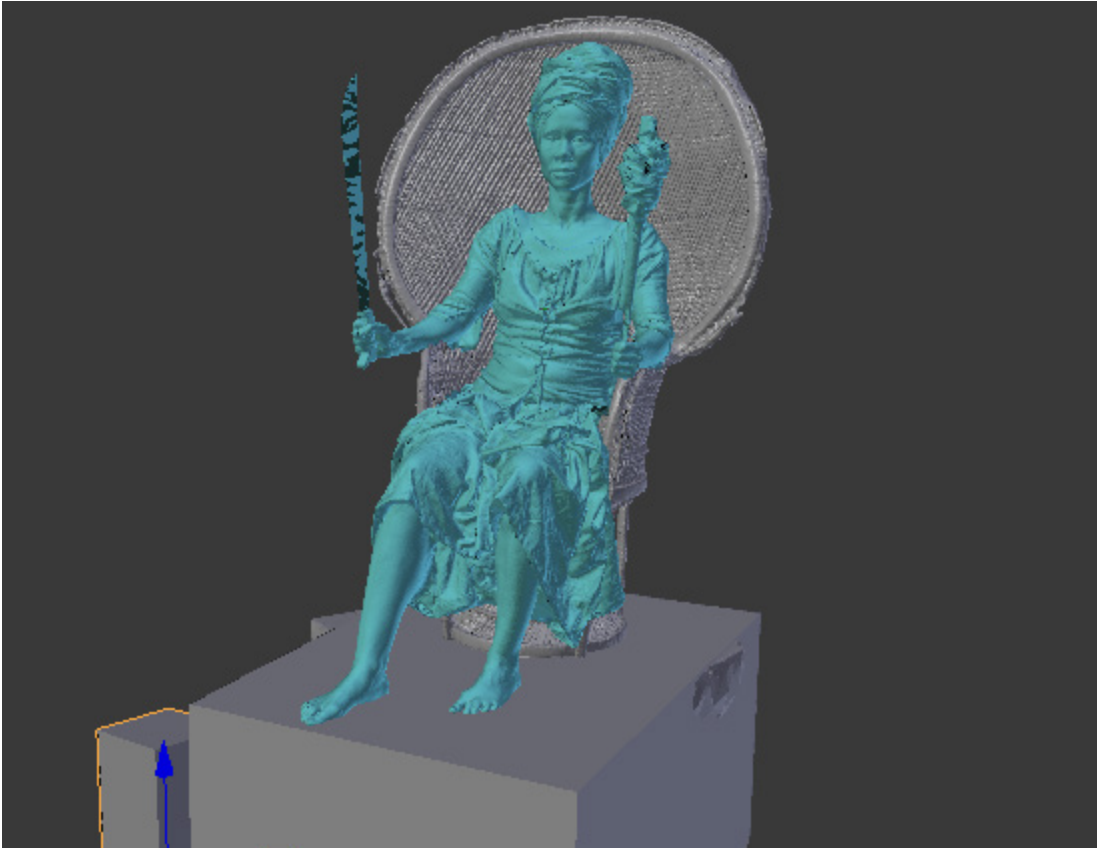


Fig.4 La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers. *I Am Queen Mary*. 2017. 3D sketch in Blender.  
 Courtesy of the artist.

where Belle and Ehlers' hybrid departs from Taylor's illustrations, even as it references them. Rather than viewing *I Am Queen Mary* as having a strictly corrective relation to the textual and visual perversions of the archive (as offering an "accurate" representation to counteract the abundance of racist imagery in circulation), I find it fruitful to imagine the sketches as putting pressure on taken-for-granted notions of historical narration or illustration at large. Couldn't we, with reference to cultural historian Tavia Nyong'o (2009: 138), see their avatar as intentionally and overtly "ridden with glitches and mistakes, a character driving us ultimately to break (...) with a conception of history as presenting the past 'as it really was'?"

A throne-like rattan chair was built from scratch in Blender to serve as an unorthodox support for this proxy figure. Seated in it, she strikes a variation on the pose adopted by Huey P. Newton, Black Panther Party co-founder and Minister of Defence, in a widely circulated photograph. Centred in a tableau allegedly devised by his comrade Eldridge Cleaver, Newton was photographed in a peacock chair, a zebra skin spread out on the floor beneath him, holding a long spear in one clenched fist and the nose of a shotgun in the other. Belle and Ehlers' avatar similarly embraces the proud body politics of Black protest in her unflinching gaze and frontal posture. However, their re-staging of Newton's image can be seen to disrupt a certain heteropatriarchal purview of Black revolutionary histories. It calls to mind Lyle Ashton Harris' lush Polaroid photograph *Toussaint L'Ouverture* (1994) where the artist poses on a gilded throne as a beautifully made-up Louverture, ambivalently placed against a backdrop of pan-Africanist red, green and black. Or Renée Cox's series *Queen*



*Fig.5 La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers. I Am Queen Mary. 2017. 3D sketch in Blender. Courtesy of the artists.*

*Nanny of the Maroons* (2004) where the artist staged photographs of herself as the contemporary embodiment of an eighteenth-century spiritual and military leader of a maroon community in Jamaica. Particularly the striking image of Cox-as-Nanny bathing in the clear water of a river resonates with Belle and Ehlers' decision to represent Queen Mary in an uncharacteristic state of repose. Like Harris' and Cox's photographs, the *I Am Queen Mary* sketches reveal the artists' choice to prioritise an imaginative embodiment of "ancestors beforeandcomingandnotgone" (LaVon 2015: 73) over the notion of a reliable likeness or an understanding of past, present and future as related to each other in a mutually exclusive and sequential manner.

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I understand the title *I Am Queen Mary* as the artists' way of coming to terms with their simulated embodiment of Mary Thomas and an attempt to guide potential identifications and interactions with the finished work. While direct, the title leaves us to grapple with its ambiguities: Who is the subject of the sentence? Mary Thomas? The artists? Or the viewer reading or speaking the words? Among other sources, Belle and Ehlers drew inspiration for



their title from the 'I AM A MAN' placards first carried by black sanitation workers who went on strike in Memphis in 1968 to protest low wages and dangerous working conditions. Commenting on artist Glenn Ligon's appropriation of this same historical reference, critic Gregg Bordowitz notes that "[a]s a combination of subject and verb the phrase ['I am'] refers to an existential fact. It's also an assertion toward a mode of being" (2018: 77). For Bordowitz, the protest placards' use of the first-person-singular pronoun in the present tense renders their claim open for meaningful acts of interpretation to any viewer regardless of their subject position.

Belle and Ehlers' use of this same grammatical structure in *I Am Queen Mary* extends to their publics an opportunity for productive self-interrogation. This might entail the questioning of colonial-historical omission, prompting a viewer without knowledge of the references that inform this work to ask, "Who is that? And how come I don't know?" (Albæk-Falk and Filipsen 2018). It might also bring about an aspirational identification with Mary Thomas that, in this instance, is set in motion by Ehlers and Belle's prefigurative (Camp 2017: 17) transformation of their singular physical bodies into a hybrid 'transplane' graphic (Schröter 2014).<sup>7</sup> In other words, we might locate a political efficacy in the way *I Am Queen Mary* undermines any "sense of unity and self-possession in favour of an intensified and enlarged sense of 'self' as nonlocal... entangled with you, and not able to stop at you, not able to know if there is a stop..." (Weinstone 2004: 161). My impulse to approach Mary Thomas' configuration in the realm of computational sculpture via the concept of the avatar stems from the sketches' visualisation of precisely this kind of entangled and expanded self. Made into data, each artists' body yields something of its boundedness to position this "homespun heroine" (Brown 1926) in a personalised, solicitous and reciprocal relation with us.

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7) For Tina Camp, prefiguration within an black feminist political practice entails the embodiment in the now of those social relations, cultures, and experiences that are the ultimate goal. In the context of this text, I find it interesting to think of the grammar of the artist's sketch as prefigurative.

## I Am Queen Mary: An Avatar in the Making

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