

WHO IS THAT? AND HOW COME I DON'T KNOW?

By Rikke Luna & Matias

At the harbor front of Copenhagen a giant, black woman is sitting gazing at the sea. She reminds us of stories we have long forgotten and she tells us about suppressive, hidden structures, but her eyes are fixed on a brighter future somewhere in the horizon. Her name is Queen Mary, and she will not loosen her grip before her torch has shed light on the all absorbing darkness of the past.

On several occasions we have described *I Am Queen Mary* as this year's most important work of art, but the reality is that she's much more than that. When the two artists [Jeannette Ehlers](#) (b. 1973) and [La Vaughn Belle](#) (b. 1974) on March 31, 2018 inaugurated their 7 meter tall sculpture of the significant rebel Mary Thomas, they began a conversation that for too many years has been silenced in an unimaginable network of omissions and lies. One week after the inauguration, which also marked the 101st anniversary of the sale of the former Danish colony in the Caribbean, we met Jeannette and La Vaughn.

But this story begins somewhere else.

The first encounter with an unknown history

One year ago we visited the independent exhibition space [meter](#) at the outskirts of Nørrebro in Copenhagen, where our worldview unexpectedly got opened up. The reason was first and foremost to visit the two curators, Rie Hovmann Rasmussen and Louise Lassen Iversen, to congratulate them on their newly opened platform, but the day would turn out to offer another new acquaintance. We stayed for an artist talk with a caribbean artist, and in a crowded exhibition space we were overwhelmed by our own ignorance. Rie and Louise had invited La Vaughn Belle to Denmark to participate in their Spring Program *Unravelings* (about Denmark's history as a colonial empire) with her exhibition *Ledgers from a Lost Kingdom*. The reason was that 2017 marked the 100th anniversary for Denmark's sale of three Caribbean islands, which by 1917 had been a Danish colony for 250 years.

To be honest, we hardly knew anything about this important part of Denmark's history and probably even less about the consequences of this gloomy chapter. In both powerful and caring words La Vaughn unraveled the history and awoke a variety of emotions in us; empathy, shame and powerlessness, but even more we felt a sense of anger. We were angry because no one had ever told us these stories before. Why hadn't we learned about the Danish colonies, the cruelty of slavery and its fatal consequences in school?

During the past year Denmark's colonial history has been the focal point of several exhibitions and initiatives, and we have done our very best to rectify our hopeless ignorance. We have read tons of articles, watched documentary films and discussed the postcolonial reality with friends and over family dinners. We quickly found out that we weren't the only ones who hadn't learned anything about Danish colonial and slave history in school, and for the few who had, the general idea was that 'Denmark wasn't as bad as the other European powers.' Jeannette and La Vaughn's sculpture of one of the most important rebels in Danish colonial history makes it impossible again to forget and marginalize the violence that our ancestors exposed to innocent people for more than a quarter of a century.

I Am Queen Mary is a poetic, responsible and distinctive manifestation, who with a cane bill in one hand and a torch in the other thrones up against the West India Warehouse at Toldbodgade 40 in Copenhagen. The permanence of the sculpture is currently being discussed as the government is trying to sell the historic building, and then there's discussions whether the sculpture should be cast in bronze rather than the durable acrylic material that it now consists of. But for now, all this is irrelevant - the most important thing is that *I Am Queen Mary* is here.

An erased part of our self-understanding

On a sunny morning in the early spring, we walk alongside the yellow brick wall of the Assistens Cemetery to meet up with the two artists. Our conversation will weave around an obvious and rewarding collaboration, the artistic visions and some of all the stories that have been left out of the history books (if they were ever there in the first place?).

"First of all I was shocked that I never learned about this in school," Jeannette begins, when we are seated in her apartment four floors above the busy traffic of Nørrebrogade. A few years after she graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 2006, she visited Ghana and here she discovered a hidden history, that not only helped shape the Danish prosperity and wealth, but also resonated in Jeannette's personal experience: *"I felt that it was my story - I mean, I felt so connected."*

In the mid-1600s, Denmark and Norway took over the West African coastline of what we now know as Ghana. Earlier, the Gold Coast (that Ghana was called until 1957) was under the control of European colonial powers like Portugal, Sweden and the Netherlands who, like Denmark, had an interest for gold, ivory and people as slaves. Over a period of almost 150 years, Denmark transported what is estimated at 111,000 people under inhumane conditions from Ghana to the three Caribbean islands Thomas, St. Jan and St. Croix, which formed the Danish colony; The Danish West Indies.

In her early works Jeannette had already dealt a lot with erasure without fully understanding why, but now it suddenly made sense. In the same way that the Danish colonial power deprived people of their homes and families, the history of these cruelties has been deprived from the Danish storytelling - and above all our self-understanding. *"It was very much about feeling connected to my Caribbean roots and my black heritage, because that hasn't really been nurtured a lot here in Denmark. From that moment in Ghana I knew that this was what I was going to work with. I felt like a new and more complete version of myself,"* Jeannette explains, and ever since she has dealt with the dark past and the postcolonial structures.

What it means to be colonized

In La Vaughn's case the colonial history has been a very visible part in her upbringing. *"When you live in the Virgin Islands - a place that has changed colonial hands seven times - the past has a huge impact on who you are. What it means to have been colonized subjects, and our trying to find our way out of that,"* La Vaughn explains. In her necklace a small machete is hanging, not unlike those the African enslaved used to harvest sugar cane, and which later became a symbol of the inevitable resistance. *"As an artist I felt a need to deal with it, because it affects every aspect of our lives,"* continues La Vaughn who studied literature, sociology and curriculum design in New York, before she went to Cuba to study art at the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana.

In 2008 La Vaughn was in Denmark for the first time to curate an exhibition on the sale of the Virgin Islands at Overgaden - Institute of Contemporary Art in collaboration with curator Jacob Fabricius. Here, the two artists met and it became clear that their lives and work had multiple parallels and intersections. Jeannette and La Vaughn instinctively knew that one day they had to work together, but only five years later a joint project began to take form when they were both invited to participate in migration researcher Helle Stenum's exhibition project Warehouse2Warehouse. The idea was to make a transatlantic art exhibition in the colonial warehouses in Copenhagen and Christiansted in St. Croix on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the sale of the Virgin Islands. Helle Stenum invited Jeannette and La Vaughn to each develop a monument over the colonial past, but although the original exhibition never became a reality, the two artists continued their work on the subject.

Corals, whipping and a joint monument

Meanwhile La Vaughn was in the process of restoring [her studio](#) – a dilapidated building in the part of Christiansted, where free blacks after 1848 were allowed to settle. Despite the historical significance, the area was largely abandoned, but in the ruins of the houses of the liberated enslaved, La Vaughn made some strange findings. Behind the Danish bricks and the crumbling plaster she found a supporting structure of straight cut coral stone.

"Why are they here, why aren't they in the ocean?" La Vaughn exclaims by the absurdity and explains that the enslaved were sent into the ocean to pick up corals that were used in the foundation of most houses that were built at that time. *"I thought it was so interesting how the labourers represented the foundation both literally and symbolically – and that it was invisible. So my original idea was to make it visible by making a sculpture out of coral stone."*

In Denmark, Jeannette had previously performed her performance *"Whip It Good"* (2013) in the West India Warehouse, which today houses the National Gallery's collection of plaster casts, and when invited to the exhibition by Helle Stenum one particular idea was crystal clear. *"I saw Michelangelo's sculpture of David which stands in front of the building as an opponent, so it was pretty clear to me that there should be a huge, black woman as well."* Jeannette and La Vaughn decided to combine their two ideas into one monument of Denmark and the Virgin Islands' joint past.

The fight for truth and liberation

Over a period of 250 years St. Jan, St. Thomas and St. Croix was under Danish colonial rule. The African enslaved who Denmark transported on ships under extremely cruel conditions ([click here](#) to see a drawing that shows how to "practically" have as many enslaved on board as possible) were forced to work in the Danish sugar plantations without wages or any other form of civil rights. In 1792, the Danish state decided to make the transatlantic trafficking illegal, but apparently no one was in a hurry to put a ban into effect. Not until 1803, and at that time Denmark had robbed more than 100,000 people their freedom, homes and families. The total amount of Africans transported across the Atlantic Ocean by European colonial powers is estimated at [around 12.5 millions](#), but there's no reason to believe that Denmark should be more humane as a slave nation than others. "We were just as bad as the others. I can't identify a particular, humane Danish colonialism," lecturer at Aarhus University Niels Brimnes told the [New York Times](#) in connection to the inauguration of *I Am Queen Mary*.

Despite the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade it was still lawful to keep people as slaves, and the trade between the plantation owners amongst the islands was still intact. In the first half of the 19th century, the slavery was debated and in 1847 the Danish king adopted [a final abolition of slavery](#), but ... not before 12 years later. However, the decision came way too late and in 1848 a revolting rebellion let Peter Von Scholten (who at that time was the governor of St. Croix) to defy the king's order, thus declaring the liberation of the enslaved with immediate effect.

"He is perceived as a hero, but he was definitely not a hero," Jeannette exclaims about the Danish governor who left the islands the very same year and is now in a sarcophagus in the Assistens Cemetery's only preserved mausoleum. From Jeannette's balcony we would probably be able to see the yellow building which to this day still celebrates Von Scholten as the enslaved's emancipator, had it not been for the cemetery's dense trees. Perhaps we would even be able to spot his memorial writings, which describe his work in the Danish West Indies as "honorable and humanitarian", but when we ask Jeannette and La Vaughn about how to perceive Governor Von Scholten instead, there is no hesitation: *"As a colonizer and a function of the colonial system."*

Even though the enslaved officially now were free, not much were changing. In 1878, the continuing of poor working and living conditions culminated in the greatest rebellion in the Danish colonial history; [The Fireburn](#). Mary Thomas, Axeline 'Agnes' Elizabeth Salomon, Matilde McBean and Susanna 'Bottom Belly' Abrahamsson were fighters in a rebellion which resulted in mass burnings of buildings and sugar plantations, and a militant counterattack by the colonists. The four rebels all got long prison sentences, which were partly served in a Copenhagen women prison before they were sent back to St. Croix.

In the Virgin Islands the rebels have since been celebrated as The Fireburn Queens, and especially Mary Thomas (Queen Mary) has been given a heroic status among descendants of the enslaved. For Jeannette and La Vaughn she was therefore an obvious figure to raise a monument in celebration of.

A hybrid of bodies, nations and narratives

Our conversation weaves around forgotten stories, the lacking collective memory, artistic reflections and the extensive process of constructing a 7 meter tall sculpture in the middle of Copenhagen. Even the achievement of creating a sculpture of a named woman belongs to the rarities in Denmark. In fact, there is only a handful of such, and of black women there is only Queen Mary. *"After spending more time in Copenhagen I realized that there aren't a lot of sculptures of women in the public space, and when there are, they are often unclothed and displayed because of their beauty,"* La Vaughn notes and explains how *I Am Queen Mary* deviates from the norm. *"She actually denies you access to look at her body in that way,"* she continues, and Jeannette draws a parallel to the David sculpture, which now becomes the undressed ideal of beauty: *"He looks so little and annoyed now,"* she adds with a glint in her eye.

Since it is unknown how Mary Thomas looked, Jeannette and La Vaughn decided to 3D scan their bodies and reconcile each of their data into a manipulated, hybrid individual. The merging of bodies was then milled out of a number of styrofoam cubes at Wow Factory in an industrial area just west of Viby Zealand. When we visited the workshop a few weeks before the inauguration, the white fragments were scattered all over the industrial premises, waiting to be collected and coated with the durable acrylic polyurea. In one corner, two masons were busy covering the plinth with corals, which have been shipped in tons from St. Croix. And in the middle of the crowded hall a giant backrest stretched four feet into the air.

"In the Virgin Islands we don't envision Queen Mary sitting," La Vaughn begins when we ask about the posture of the sculpture. *"We envision her standing and ready to fight."* The fact that they decided to have her sitting is in particular due to the reference to an iconic photograph of Black Panther founder Huey P. Newton, who is sitting in a peacock chair with a rifle in one hand and a spear in the other. Surprisingly both Jeannette and La Vaughn had been photographed in a similar chair on each side of the Atlantic in 2014 with only a few days between. To us, the coincidence is almost symbolic as to how the two artists' practices over a decade have slowly approached each other to now completely merge into a hybrid of bodies, nations and narratives.

Who is that? And how come I don't know?

Although there are multiple similarities between Jeannette and La Vaughn's work, it has turned out that their upbringing on each side of the Atlantic has given them different perspectives on the history. *"When I first saw Jeannette's performance piece 'Whip It Good', there was a lot that I didn't understand,"* La Vaughn continues: *"Coming from a black community, where whipping occurred, that using of the whip felt almost like a revenge fantasy. It didn't feel right for me."* She didn't understand Jeannette's decision to involve such violence and humiliation in her art, but that changed significantly when she began spending more time in Denmark.

During 2017, La Vaughn was in Denmark four times, and during the summer she stayed in Copenhagen for three months together with her three children. *"I started to feel what it feels like to live in a white community. We had a lot of negative experiences,"* she says with wrinkled brows. *"So then I got her piece. I got why she chose to do this violent thing, because it IS violent - erasure is violent, it is alienating, it's a violence on your body and on your psyche to live in a society where you are constantly being denied."*

Erasure and denial can be difficult mechanisms to spot, because they are defined by the opposite of a visible presence. We usually associate violence with something physical, and something that leaves scars, scratches and bruises, but the mental violence does not leave the same clear traces. However, that does not make the mental violence any lighter than the physical - on the contrary, it can be even harder to handle because of its invisibility.

With *I Am Queen Mary*, Jeannette and La Vaughn show that art can play an important role in visualizing hidden structures and starting important conversations. *"In some ways, I Am Queen Mary is as big as she is, because she required that to be seen. She couldn't have been The Little Mermaid's size, she had to be the most massive thing you can imagine."* *"Beyond what you can imagine!"* the two artists exclaim, revealing their own astonishment over the size of the sculpture. *"When you look at a sculpture that size, your first question is 'who is that?' and your next question is 'how come I don't know?'"* La Vaughn adds.

She is here, because you were there

I Am Queen Mary has to be big. *I Am Queen Mary* has to be seen. Now she sits scouting over the harbor of Copenhagen, reminding us of stories we hardly knew and embodies centuries of oppression and exploitation of black people. Traces from the time when Denmark colonized the three Caribbean islands is manifested in the palaces and castles surrounding *I Am Queen Mary*. They are built on slave money, and the same goes for large parts of the European wealth and prosperity.

For Jeannette and La Vaughn, *I Am Queen Mary* is very much about creating an understanding of the history and the consequences that the past carries with it. *"It's about connecting the african diaspora and connecting narratives and stories about resistance. That's why we have her sitting in the same chair as Huey P. Newton. He and the Black Panther Party, as well as so many other movements have fought against the same things as the Virgin Islanders fought against during the Fireburn. And it's the same thing that the Black Lives Matter movement and our generation are fighting against today,"* Jeannette explains. *"The ways may have transformed, but the structures are still the same."*

The historical connection to former opposition groups and civil rights movements is also found in the title of the sculpture. Adding an "I am" refers to 1968, where more than 700 black sanitation workers in Memphis went on a strike and demonstrated against poor pay and working conditions. *"I Am A Man!"* was the simple message that they wrote on their signs and banners. *"And it's the same with immigrants today. All they are declaring is, that they are humans beings: 'where I live I cannot live. I have the right to find a place in the world, where I can live.' That's all they are saying,"* states La Vaughn, and Jeannette adds: *"And many times they cannot live where they live because of the colonial project."* For the two artists, the hope is that *I Am Queen Mary* can help to emphasize an understanding of history's consequences, so that the victims will not be blamed. *"It's the same for Queen Mary. She is here, because you were there."*

The bodily experience of racism and oppression

The postcolonial structures can be hard to spot, especially if you have not experienced what it means to live in a colonized body. As white Europeans born into an eurocentric worldview, raised in a white majority society, repressive structures can be as good as impossible to understand. If you do not have the physical experience of racism, it's easy to judge the experiences of others as trivial. Here, personal stories can play an important role.

"Let me give you an example." La Vaughn begins to tell a story about an unpleasant experience she had during a stay in Denmark last year. In connection with the preparation of an exhibition, she worked regularly at a recognized art institution in Copenhagen, and one day she wanted to give her brother and a colleague a tour. Somewhere she encountered a closed door, and as the leader of the department had just recommended her to knock, she did just that. *"We knock and at first no one answers. So we start to walk away, but then somebody opens up. She sees us and the first thing she does, is this."* La Vaughn places her hands in a defensive position in front of her body and says with a frightened voice: *"You are in the wrong place!"* La Vaughn chooses to dismiss the apparent racist reaction and explains the situation to the woman, but she continues to block the doorway with her body and denies them access. *"I could see it in her eyes that she was afraid of my brother."*

"When you think about what racism is. It is literally denying people access to institutions, and that was exactly what she was doing." Later La Vaughn tried to share her story with the institution's administration, but was initially faced with denial and the explanation that it probably was because the

woman did not know of them. *"The director had a hard time, and I told him: I am a black woman, I have lived with racism my whole life since childhood, I know what racism is, I feel it on my body, I know what it looks like, I know what it feels like. You as a white man do not have the same experience."*

Like La Vaughn, Jeannette also has multiple experiences where she has been treated negatively because of the color of her skin. *"A year ago I was in Venice airport standing in line to get into the plane when the police came. They looked directly at me and asked to see my papers."* Jeannette was the only non-white person in the line and it was no coincidence that they chose her as a victim of their suspicious questions. The officers did not point out any of Jeannette's white fellow passengers, but continued to doubt her purpose of traveling and her affiliation to Denmark. *"I was shocked, and when I told white Danes about my experience, the reaction often was like: 'oh yeah, it's sad... but you have to understand the situation with immigrants right now...' They weren't listening, instead they tried to explain it."*

The violence of denial

It sends shivers down our spines when we realize that both Jeannette and La Vaughn were denied their experiences when they tried to share them with others. The director in La Vaughn's story had never on his own body felt what she described, and therefore his natural reaction was to dismiss the victim's feelings in an attempt to explain and defend an oppressive behavior. *"When people tell us, that this is a thing of the past, we are like: 'what reality are you living in?'"* says La Vaughn emphasizing the postcolonial consequences: *"What colonizing does is, that it erases other people's stories. It makes them feel that their stories are not important."*

La Vaughn draws a parallel back to The Fireburn, where the rebels burned down big parts of Frederiksted. *"When people have this conversation about why the rebels were so violent, I am like: Do you understand what people were living under? There were no way out of that, except for violence. They were living under an extremely violent system, and their freedom wasn't going to come, unless they fought for it."* Jeannette nods with acknowledgment and continues: *"The consciousness of black culture doesn't come on its own, we really have to push through, especially here in Denmark. If we don't do anything, we will be left with status quo."*

A bridge across borders and oceans

With *I Am Queen Mary*, Jeannette and La Vaughn have certainly managed to challenge the status quo. La Vaughn looks around at the table as if she is looking for pen and paper. She says that there's a picture she wants to draw. Instead, she brings her hands together, so her fingers intersect: *"She and I, we merged to create a vessel - a portal for other stories to come through us,"* she says in a low voice. *"We have a narrative inside of us, it's inscribed in and on our bodies, and by connecting our two stories, we allow all these other people to join in, and to have a voice and a platform."*

Throughout the process, Jeannette has seen the project as a bridge that not only connects the two artists but potentially also people from across the globe. *"We've got so many messages from all over the world. Not only people of African decent, but also people of color with other backgrounds. It really connects being black and being non-white,"* she says with an equal share of humbleness and pride in her voice. *"That's really also our goal, because the Eurocentric narrative has been too massive."*

Long before the sculpture was completed the two artists were aware that their work had a global relevance. *"That is why it has also spoken to the rest of world. We knew that this story is a world story,"* explains La Vaughn, who, together with Jeannette, hired an international press agency in a desire to spread the story as wide as possible. They knew that they had a huge challenge in front of them because neither Denmark nor the Virgin Islands are big nations. *"If you try to find St. Croix on a world map, a lot of times it's not even there, and if it is, it's a tiny dot."* Nevertheless, Jeannette and La Vaughn have managed to create wide global attention about *I Am Queen Mary*. The New York Times, Vice, BBC and many more have mentioned and written about the important work of art and the stories that are embedded in the sculpture. *"To think that people from all over the world are talking about a rebellion that happened in a little dot in the ocean somewhere, and that they can see themselves in that is just amazing."*

La Vaughn points out that *I Am Queen Mary* is a fully artist-driven project. Many people and organizations have supported the idea and helped with the development and production of the sculpture, but at the core *I Am Queen Mary* is Jeannette and La Vaughn's project. "Some of the narratives in the media have been like: 'Denmark is doing this...' but in reality artists did this. We are showing, that artists can be leaders," underlines La Vaughn.

"Until the lion has his historian..."

Even though it feels like we just sat down in Jeannette's living room, two hours have already passed by, and the two busy artists' time is about to run out. La Vaughn will go back to St. Croix in a couple of days and there is still a lot to be done before she leaves. A journalist is waiting to do a phone interview, yet Jeannette finds time for a final point: "This project is about rewriting history and to put forward all things that haven't been in the light." She takes a last sip of her coffee and rounds off: "There's an African saying that goes: 'until the lion has his historian, the hunter will always be the hero.'"

We find ourselves back on the busy streets of Copenhagen. We cross the Queen Louise bridge towards inner city, and Jeannette's last words continues to resonate. We walk through King's Garden, where sunbathing danes gather together to enjoy the first signs of spring and turn left at Bredgade. All around us pompous mansions are towering, several of which would have never been built, had it not been for Denmark's cruelty on the other side of the Atlantic. For too long, these buildings have been symbols of a bygone era of majesty and a proud cultural history. Now we see them in a completely different light. Generations of denial have shrouded our collective memory in layers of lies and made it impossible to see clearly, but thanks to Jeannette and La Vaughn we can now start scratching the surface.

We pass the West India Warehouse and Michelangelo's David figure and see a group of people who have gathered at the opposite end of the building. From a distance they seem paralysed in the sun in front of *I Am Queen Mary*. Some take pictures, others just observe, some seem a bit puzzled while others try to explain and quote from articles they have read. A buzzing curiosity is challenging our common ignorance, and that's precisely what the artists want. For Jeannette and La Vaughn, the goal is to remove the veil of ignorance and to provide a starting point for new conversations. Rarely have we experienced two artists with such an important story to tell, and who manage to deal with complex and difficult issues with so much love and care.

As we leave *I Am Queen Mary* again and walk along the harbor towards the city, we are passed by one of the boats sailing tourists around the canals of Copenhagen, and we recall a story La Vaughn told us earlier in the day. At the inauguration of the sculpture, there were many who congratulated the two artists and expressed their gratitude for *I Am Queen Mary*. One of them was a Copenhagen tourist guide who spoke very accurately about the important potential of the sculpture: "It is very difficult to talk about Denmark's colonial history, your sculpture makes it impossible not to."