

Thank you for the invitation to speak on this special and important day of I Am Queen Mary.

And thank you so much Jeannette and La Vaughn for creating this spectacular and beautiful sculpture – for making I Am Queen Mary come into existence here in Copenhagen, as the first monument created in Denmark to commemorate and honor the resistance against the Danish colonial masters and planters. From this day on I Am Queen Mary will be here as an unavoidable intervention into the white Danish national narrative.

(Process)

We were in the Warehouse2Warehouse project together. A project that aimed at making the Warehouse here in Copenhagen and the Warehouse in Christiansted a transatlantic bridge for storytelling, dialogue, art, historical narratives, and commitment on the shared colonial past between Denmark and the USVI.

It started out with plans of creating two mobile monuments of commemoration, that were to change place during the centennial year of 2017 as a physical and symbolic gesture of acknowledging both differences in perspectives and positions, and connectedness in the shared past and troubled present.

Plans and aims changed for a lot of reasons and the Warehouse2Warehouse project as such collapsed, but you, the artists, continued with a lot of hard work and persistence, the transatlantic cooperation, which has been at the center of your process in creating I Am Queen Mary.

Instead of two monuments in two different places, there is now one monument in one place, created by two artists from different places in the geography of coloniality.

(Histories)

The history of the Virgin Islands under Danish colonial rule is also a history of resistance and rebellion. The St John insurrection in 1733 is one of the earliest and most successful revolts against slavery in the Caribbean, and also the 1848 revolt in St Croix led to abolition of slavery.

However slavery was replaced in 1849 with repressive, unfair rules and control of farm workers. The pay was low, mobility was restricted. Conditions were harsh.

1st October 1878, the farm workers finally had it, and they rebelled and burned down many plantations, opened up greathouses and chased planters out. Queen Mary was one of the leaders in Fireburn, but not the only one.

On the fifth day of the rebellion and in the middle of a declared State of exception, the Danish governor Garde ordered a drumhead court martial to prosecute leaders of the insurrection. With no prosecutor and defence lawyer, with no specification of the crime they had committed and with no clarity on witnesses or explanations, twelve men were sentenced to death and shot immediately. Six in Christiansted and six in Frederiksted. Six native born and six migrants in a perverted kind of symmetry.

Those names should be remembered as well:

John Lewis, James de Silva, Joseph Paris; Henry James, Augustus George, John Adams, Thomas Graydon, Samuel Henry, Robert James; Daniel Phillips, John Charles and Joseph Harrison. They all declared that yes, they did burn down plantations and yes they lead activities of rebellion.

403 were arrested on St Croix in October 1878, 336 were released and 40 brought to trial, among them Queen Mary.

The trial was happening in a unfair, unjust system, where other laws than those in Denmark applied to Virgin Islands and the farm workers. Language was power. Those on trial were questioned in English and the laws and court records were written in Danish.

8 were sentenced to hard labour for life in Copenhagen. Queen Mary came across the Atlantic together with three other women and three men from the rebellion, and she was incarcerated in Christianshavns Women's Prison together with Mathilde McBean; Susanna Abraham, 'Bottom Belly', and Axeline 'Agnes' Solomon, who together with Rebecca Frederik were known as 'the black amazons'.

The three men, Joseph Bowell, James Emmanuel Benjamin and Edvard Lewis were taken to Horsens Penitentiary.

There are so many histories to be told about Fireburn and Queen Mary and all the people involved, but let me here just choose one of the perspectives, the perspective of Queen Mary as a migrant worker:

Queen Mary was born in Antigua in 1842, and immigrated when she was in her twenties to St Croix. Actually 23 of the 40 sentenced were migrant workers; from Antigua, Barbados, Trinidad, Jamaica, St Lucia and St Kitts.

When Queen Mary was 16 years old in 1858 and living in Antigua, a four day post-slavery – and complicated and violent - uprising took place, where Antiguan women – in the reports that followed, were characterized as 'acting violently and aggressively like men' and using the watchword 'our side'.

'Our side' was the watchword that was heard again and again during the rebellion on St Croix and a favorite one for Queen Mary.

This emphasizes the wave of resistance in the Caribbean against the racialised system of labour exploitation. Rebellions and struggles to get out of the often empty freedom after slavery was abolished, travelled throughout the Caribbean; St. Kitts, Montserrat, Trinidad, Domenica in 1844, St Lucia in 1849, Tortola in 1853, Guyana 1856, St Vincent 1862, Jamaica 1865, Tobago and Barbados in 1876. Afro-Caribbeans were interconnected through migration and communication despite being under different colonial nation states, and they were fighting for their lives and rights to matter.

On St Croix the native born, and the migrants fought together.

(Memory)

Fireburn was well known at that time. It was discussed in Danish Newspapers and in parliament. The archives from the court are more than 300 pages. NYT fx wrote an editorial 11. October 1878 and described the conflict as a question of labour rights.

However so impressively little knowledge has been produced on the basis of the rich archival sources. We need to dig deeper into the history of Fireburn – and break down the power of the Danish language as the preferred language of the Danish historians writing about the shared colonial past.

Despite the many balcony speeches in 2017 about transparency and dialogue, when it comes to the digitized archives, it is still the privilege of the Danish speaking people to read the archives. At the same time there is a lot of knowledge and memory and stories in the USVI about the persons involved in Fireburn, that should count. So a new transatlantic project will be announced 1. October 2018 – the 140 anniversary of the Fireburn, dedicated to make documents accessible, produce historical knowledge, newsletters, workshops, books, exhibitions on Fireburn and bridge between institutions and civil society; written and oral history, languages and across the Atlantic. Partners in Denmark, USVI and the US are on board to develop the project in order to launch it in October with a long term plan of 5 maybe 10 years.

We call the project The Fireburn Files Network.

And while these histories in the coming years are being told, Queen Mary will sit here, on top of the coral bricks carved out by enslaved Africans on St Croix.

She has turned her back to Amalienborg and the sculpture of King Frederik the V, who bears still today witness of the Royal Family's' wealth from trading enslaved Africans and running plantations on St Croix. I see Queen Mary sitting down for a moment to reflect, but ready to rise again.

In order to praise the story of her and the Fireburn – and to praise the amazing artists La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers, allow me to quote from Maya Angelou's 1978 poem;

Still I Rise

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust,
I'll rise.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air,
I'll rise.

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.