



Re-imagining History: Interview with Virgin Island Studies Collective

Af: Farhiya Khalid Feb-01-2021

The collaborative essay ‘Ancestral Queendom - Reflections on the Prison Records of the Rebel Queens of the 1878 Fireburn in St. Croix, USVI (formerly the Danish West Indies)’ was published in 2019.¹ Written by the Virgin Islands Studies Collective, a group of academics, artists, and activists who are “committed to centering the Virgin Islands as a site of inquiry and theorization”. VISCO is centrally concerned with the erasure of the Virgin Islands from larger discourses - the Danish colonial archive and the Danish cultural memory being key sites of erasure. The essay is written in what the group describes as the “post-centennial” era, post 2017, the year marked by the 100th anniversary of the sale and transfer of the Virgin Islands from Denmark to the United States. 2017 marked a shift in the conversation around and between Denmark and its former colonies in the Caribbean, most notably the increasing access of Virgin Islanders to the millions of archival records that remain stored in Denmark as they began to emerge in online databases and temporarily in exhibitions.

Virgin Islands Studies Collective consists of four Virgin Islanders, La Vaughn Belle, Tami Navarro, Hadiya Sewer and Tiphonie Yanique. Their collaborative essay is a direct engagement with the archives and archival production. Each member responds to one of the prison records of the four women taken to Denmark for their participation in the largest labor revolt in Danish colonial history. 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.

This is the vantage point of the conversation between the two VISCO members Tami Navarro and La Vaughn Belle with journalist and historian Farhiya Khalid. The talk has been recorded and can be watched and read in its full length below.

Farhiya Khalid

Thank you again for joining me in this talk for Public Square. I'm just shortly going to introduce myself and you two also and then we'll commence the conversation My name is Farhiya Khalid. I'm a Somali journalist and historian based in Copenhagen, and I'm really excited to speak to both of you. Thank you for taking the time. Tami Navarro is the associate director of The Bernard Center for Research on Women an editor of the journal Scholar and Feminist Online she's a cultural anthropologist and serves on the board of the Saint Croix Foundation and is also a member of the editorial board for the journal Small Acts - A Caribbean Journal of Criticism. She's the co-host of the podcast Riding Home – her book American Voices from the Caribbean and Financialization in the US Virgin Islands will be out later this year. Thank you, Tami.

La Vaughn Belle 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 counter visualities and narratives. She is also 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. You two are half of VISCO - Virgin Island Studies Collective which is a group of academics, artists, and activists who are committed to centering the Virgin Islands as a site of inquiry and theorization. VISCO is centrally concerned with the erasure of the Virgin Islands from larger discourses, the Danish colonial archive and the Danish cultural memory being key sites of erasure,

and as a collective VISCO is committed to a practice of collaborate collaboration.

I heard your talk with Cynthia Oliver, and read your collaborative essay “Ancestral Queendom” and this made me think: How can we together in a context in Denmark but also in the Virgin Islands being a former Danish colony talk about history and collective remembrance but also new imaginaries? Your vantage point was these historical records and you looked at the different penal records of the four different queens. So maybe we can start off by that. Just elaborating on how you got the idea to write this collaborative essay and why you started off by looking at these penal records, and what was there to be uncovered and what was absent when you're looking at colonial archives in the way you did.

La Vaughn Belle

Thank you for inviting us, Farhiya. You know of course we're sorry that our two other members Tiphonie Yannique, and Dr. Hadiya Sewer couldn't be here today, but we have the Crucians, the two Crucians here, and you know as Virgin Islanders The Fireburn or *Fyahbun* as we call it which is the largest labor revolt in Danish colonial history.

It's one of our largest events in the Virgin Islands it's so much a part of who we see ourselves to be, however there isn't really much known about The Fireburn. we have a general sense of what happened but there exists in Denmark thousands of records with a much more specific accounting. Many people were interviewed but in the Virgin Islands what we have is more of an oral history memory which is quite powerful we sing songs about this. So, for us I know that in 2017 for me it was the first time I had actually seen the prison records and it was in an exhibition at The Workers Museum and I'll be honest the first time because most of the exhibit was in Danish I walked by the records and didn't notice. It was the second time when the curator actually did a tour for us in English is when we recognized what they were, and I think that speaks something to what it feels like for Virgin Islanders that so many of the records are not legible to us not only because we don't have access, but we also can't physically see them.

They are housed in institutions in Denmark but that we also do not have access to the language and so even though we were physically in the presence of the records we didn't even recognize. So, for us when we realized that it was such a profound, I think Tami you were there too. It was such a profound experience to see this very tangible It was a copy, but it was still quite tangible for us to be like wow look at the names of these women, look at their ages, look at what they had on when they entered prison. I mean it was a very profound experience for us, and I think that stayed with us, and it got us thinking about this gap in the records, and this gap in Virgin Islanders eyes on the records.

Tami Navarro

Thank you, La Vaughn, and thank you Farhiya for the invitation. It was stunning to see the kind of flatness of the records. The kind of what I talk about as this quantitative authority compared to these sorts of larger-than-life figures that we have that have inhabited our lives through song as La Vaughn talks about, oral history, just invocations every day. There's a sort of way in which this history of what we in the Virgin Islands experiences as three queens - now we know maybe more if we're speaking about historical accuracy. But the figures that we knew and were such a part of our lives and culture were so flattened in these archival records, and for me I felt like there was a tension, and that we had now going through the records more factual information more historically accurate information. But it also felt like less information. It felt very silencing, and so that is some of the work that we did, and why for me the work of this group is that it allows me to sort of push the boundaries. I'm an anthropologist by training, and to sort of go into the realms of auto ethnography and to think through. I'm trained to think through kinship ties and affective ties. What are the kinds of bonds that might have held these women together but then to think further? So, a lot of us dwell on adornment which is an area that La Vaughn works in quite a lot and thinks through. So, what did it mean that they had on particular kinds of jewelry? What would that thought process have been to take this item of value as a woman, as a black woman across the ocean with you when you're heading into a penal system.

It was the tension between having more information which there's a dearth of in the Virgin Islands. As La Vaughn talked about we don't have access, and when we do have access it's limited often in the way she outlined but even with the information there was so much more to do. There were so many layers, and our contribution I think as four black women from the Virgin Islands is trying to sort of read our lived experiences as Virgin Islanders through theirs. What might this have been? What are the ways that we live today that we could imagine would have shaped their lives during their lifespans as well.

Q:

So when you here and in your talk with Cynthia Oliver, and in the essay, talk about this inaccessibility when it comes to the archive and the historical records in the relation that Denmark has to the Virgin Islands what did you find? When you talk about that there was this flattening sense with the quantitative historical archives as you saw them. What did you feel was missing or lacking?

La Vaughn Belle

All context. My gosh, you know these were real women So for example when you're thinking about even Queen Mary. You know what I found was very interesting is that these women become a part of a group through their incarceration because they were at different parts of the island when The Fireburn was occurring and they become kind of joined through their incarceration and then through the cultural re-memory of them. There's a process that happens in there. I think what gets flattened is also that aspect. And what the documents allowed us to do is to kind of pick apart with the very few details that they have.

For example, there was one detail. As simple as that Queen Mary on her prison record her name as a queen was there which is a very significant detail. That the carceral system would recognize a cultural naming. Because she wasn't a queen like in the European tradition or anything like that. She was named queen because she already was a leader and so here this record kind of acknowledges that. So, there was in many ways things that we were surprised that the records addressed and then of course there were so many things that were not there.

So, when you're thinking about what does it mean for someone? For example, I had the record of Susanna Abramson. Then what does it mean for her to be charged with theft in a system that so much of your life your time your dignity is being stolen from you? So, that's not really picked apart in the records. I think it's hard for people to get a sense of what these women were protesting against, what were they rebelling against. That isn't really there. You don't really get a sense. When you live in the Caribbean and you know even to walk down the street in the high day sun is difficult. People avoid the sun like that but then imagine working 12 hours a day in that kind of condition. The records don't

have that sense. You don't get a sense of all those tactile things.

Tami Navarro

I think that what La Vaughn is saying and the question itself speaks to the issue of access. Why it's important that different kinds of people with different kinds of lenses have access to the material because someone in a Danish archive with that sort of life history, and instead of experiences of growing up in Europe would read them very differently.

So, I talked a bit about the jewelry which I think all of us sort of dwelled on a little bit in our contributions. But one thing that Tiphonie Yanique talked about is being in the sick bay together. So, in the archive it'll just say one headache on a Monday one sore throat or something and she noticed that two of the queens had headaches on the same day in the record, and they were just sort of written down as medical ailments, and so she expounded from there. She's like what are the odds that these two women would have headaches and find themselves in the sick bay together and what might that be? What would their time together be used for? Had this been a strategy to spend time together, to think, to plot, to plan, to commiserate. That these are young women. To be together, how might they have made their way through this system, and again just thinking through I think that is what I mean by the silencing. That we see things in a very sort of way but to sort of breathe life into them and think about the fact, as La Vaughn said, these are human beings, these are people very far from home. What might they have been attempting? How might they have been attempting to survive and to make meaning, and to find their ways to one another in this extreme situation they found themselves in?

La Vaughn Belle

I think people forget that they were first also sentenced to death most of them, and so just even thinking and them being taken to Denmark to kind of work out the rest of their days that was the alternative. For me it's what conditions must you have been living under? All of them were mothers so that means that they risked their lives and their children's lives in some ways to be away from them too. So, I think people they forget. I mean even sometimes we forget. What were they really fighting for? What were the conditions like?

There were some other records that I came across more recently that was really shocking for me, and it was not Danish records. It was American records that were created right after the transfer when they had sent a team of naval doctors to try to kind of assess what they had just bought. The mortality rates, and you know we're thinking about a global pandemic right now but the mortality rates of people for example on Saint Croix were as high as 50 percent and you think about people were being worked to death. The conditions were so poor that 50 percent of people who were not surviving. You know we're in a pandemic where people were talking about you know 100 million people being affected with COVID and you know this is a tragedy, but this is half the population not surviving because of the working and living conditions they were under in the Danish West Indies, and the naval report actually uses the word genocide.

I think that's something that Danes for sure don't have any concept of in terms of thinking about their history, and even Virgin Islanders I think anyone coming out of a slavery society we understand. We kind of get a sense of how harsh it was but I think it's also very important to kind of reframe them sometimes in terms that are maybe even more modern because sometimes words like slavery they don't have the same weight but when you say things like genocide or mortality rates of 50 percent all of a sudden, we're talking about the same thing but we start to understand them in different ways.

Tami Navarro

Yes, Isabel Wilkerson's book when she talks about a caste system, I think helped a lot of people refrain this idea of the legacy of colonialism but through fresh eyes.² I think that's why work like this in the archives and with the material we have available is important because there's the tension or the danger rather on either side. The sort of minimizing or flattening as we talked about a bit but also the

sort of elevating without thinking of the suffering. So, I think in the Virgin Islands we can throw on a madras head tie and you know sing Queen Mary and it's a sort of a reclamation but to think as La Vaughn says, what were the actual conditions of servitude of life that this was a sort of make or break. So, I think there's a danger on either side of overly celebratory or overly silencing but just to really think through what are the conditions of these people's lives and what were they faced with and what were they trying to do about it?

Which is to say it's hard. It's hard so I think it took four of us to do this and it took four of us from really different backgrounds with different training and pushing and working. Pushing against and working with each other so there's conversation amongst us in all kinds of configurations as we go because it's difficult and it's taxing, but I think that it got us I hope somewhere productive, but it's work. It is work but it's important work that we're doing, I think.

Q:

So just to get back to that process. You were each assigned a queen and your work is in its essence very collaborative. Can you put some words on how you work with each other?

La Vaughn Belle

It was mostly through conversations. It's mostly through our dialogue. I think I had maybe had the first beginnings of something that I had started, and when sent it to the group we kind of all realized that there was like this personal aspect of it that I think everyone thought could be a very interesting way that each one of us had also tried to approach it through that lens, and then kind of open it back up. I know Tiphonie and I are the two creatives in the group. We spoke a lot about speculative fiction. How much can we really say how? How much can we push? How much can we push our imagination into this?

I think through those conversations we realized that both in the oral history and even in the historical documents is a tremendous amount of imagination. They already are in some ways fictions because when you have a Danish officer documenting the life of a black Caribbean woman that he doesn't quite understand it's still a projection what we're capturing many times in the records, and it's still someone in some sense someone else's imaginary I think through that process we began to understand. I mean Tiphonie as a writer that's what she does in many ways, and as an artist I do it in another way as a visual artist. I know for me I stepped in with a lot more faith, and a lot more confidence to kind of claim the record, and to understand that we were operating. There isn't like a hierarchy. It isn't like this worship of the document and that these Danish archives are the truth and everything else we have to question it. It was like putting it on the same plane as the oral history or even our own imagination. It was kind of putting them all together that's what I think I gained from the collaborative process of really talking through these things.

Tami Navarro

Me too. I felt like a sort of freeing to insert ourselves or to think of ourselves in parallel to these lives so it was freeing for me to think about. As I say I talked about the jewelry. So, I wrote a bit about my first gold earrings that I got in Christiansted, and what it meant, and how I felt both as a black woman, you know as a young black girl. Somebody in the Virgin Islands to feel imbued with this kind of value and power, and why someone would want to hold on to that when they're being taken away from everything that they know and sailed across to a strange place. I would want to hold on to that as well so it was very liberating for me to think through my life and the kinds of structures of power that I grew up in, and to just think how again, how might we make sense of this information which we've been given access to, and it's the collaborative process that did allow that kind of freeing.

I should say that our politics is probably the central thing that allows this collective to operate that we're rooted in a black feminist politics of collaboration. So, it's not like this was a one-off, and just this one time we decided to center collaboration but that's at the heart of everything that we do. For

other people seeking to work together to do work wherever you are, activists work intellectual work, artistic work I would argue that is kind of the heart of what makes this possible. One, a deep respect for each other's work and perspective but to a willingness to kind of to flex and change and reflect and move forward together. I would think that that's our guiding principle the sort of black feminist politics, and practice really of collaboration. Which is not to say it's always easy. Sometimes our training has us deeply rooted. Like "no actually the document says this. That's what we have to write". but just being open to thinking through, okay, how might there be another truth or set of truths that we can present alongside this truth.

Q:

That was also almost a red thread in all your contributions. This reimagining and recreating. I think it's Tiphonie who says at one point that it's almost like re-imagining what seemingly might seem impossible. What were the fruits of that?

La Vaughn Belle

I mean, a lot of my work deals with going back into different kinds of archives. To look for silences and gaps. Sometimes I go in and I may not even know what I'm looking for. It's just a driving question, and then when I come back out, I may have a whole new set of questions. It's like I've been changed through the experience. When I say, I work with different kinds of archives I mean like the studio that I'm in is a kind of an archive. It's a house from the 1700s where the first registered owner is a woman from the western coast of Africa who survived slavery, survived the middle passage, survived you know, and was able to buy this house in the 1700s which is quite a phenomenon to have lived that kind of life, and she wasn't the only one. There were several women. I guess for me it helps me literally feel more grounded in the space that I'm in. It helps me to I draw strength when I think about these women, and their lives. I think I draw strength from that, and it helps me when I'm thinking about my daily life as a mother, and an artist, and an entrepreneur, and all those things. I think it it helps me also to find I guess a different sense of purpose as well, and strength I would say

Tami Navarro

I feel like I even want to invert the question because your question is about the kind of history that could be, I'm presuming here, presented in Denmark. You talked about big blocks of history, and we're certainly going with a different degree of nuance but we're doing that based on where we're coming from in our lives, our training, our perspective.

But I would say, even more than the gaps, what was shocking to me and La Vaughn maybe too is the silences, when we went over. The sort of early iteration of our project and collaboration is we all were together in Denmark during the year of the transfer. The commemoration year of the transfer, the centennial. We are there to celebrate a documentary that we had variously been part of, and we were doing these tours as the one talked about. They had all these exhibitions and there was just a lot of sort of movement around thinking through the Danish West Indian history. But when you went anywhere outside the orbit of the people who were actively engaging it, there was like this complete myopia. No one knew really anything about the history of colonialism that Denmark had engaged in. That was my experience anyway. So, there's a sort of like narrow orbit of people who are deeply invested in the centennial year, and then it was everybody else. So, when I said, oh I'm from the Virgin Islands, I'm from Saint Croix it's sort of like, okay: "Well why are you here?"

So, it was clear to me that the history of the Danish history of colonialism wasn't a huge unit in the Danish history education that school children are receiving and so, I think that is a larger issue than even the gaps. It's these huge silences around this history at all and then beginning the question of the nuance and the kind of finer grain but just having a more transparent honest look at the historical realities of the Danish experience, I think would be important.

La Vaughn Belle

I definitely experienced that too, and I think the ramifications of why it's so important to understand that. I mean first of all living in the Virgin Islands it's impossible to forget because the first question is why am I here on this island? I have to look at colonialism and slavery to be able to understand why my body is here in this century at this time. So, it's kind of impossible for us to not think about that history because that's the whole creation of the Caribbean.

I think that more importantly is that when we begin to go back into these records and begin the process of truth-telling or the process of truths telling like the multiple truths that can come out of this journey together will come the natural question of what do we do about it. Because it is impossible to look at this history, and not see that irreparable harm was caused. Systemic harm was caused. It's actually not just, you know, I stepped on your toe, sorry. It's like I dramatically change the structure of your society so that you're still having to suffer and deal with the ramifications of that, and then the question of responsibility. Like literally, your ability to respond then comes into play. Because what are you going to do about it? I mean now that we've talked about this history now that we've looked at it the question is what do we do about it?

You know, just even the fact that, although it didn't highlight it, the centennial was so much focused on our past. At that time, we were thinking about our 100 years of being connected to the United States of America but so much of our encumbrances in trying to find our way through our own self-determination is because, at the time of the centennial, and the time of the transfer Denmark did not see Virgin Islanders, the black people who were here as citizens. As people worthy of a political voice. So that was completely taken off the table. We had no rights, no citizenship for the first 10 years of being under American rule and that was because of the negotiation that happened with Denmark. So, in some ways we're still struggling through that. So just to begin to imagine what if that negotiation had thought about us in a different way? We would be in a very different place as Virgin Islanders and that impacts everything.

Again, we're in the middle of a pandemic that impacts our ability to find enough resources to protect ourselves in a pandemic. If we are dependent on a colonial power to and I'm sure you know Tami as someone who speaks more about the financial markets and the connection between colonialism and how it's created our financial dependence today. All those things they didn't just come out of nowhere. They came out of this history and they impact us a lot today.

Tami Navarro

Yes, and just the fact that it's ongoing. So, one of the things was all the attention and again in a certain orbit during the centennial year that I feel has waned pretty dramatically. So, there was a sort of moment where it was exciting to talk about this historical moment, and this was almost a celebration, and it has become more difficult or the conversations I would say have become more constrained or curtailed. This affects resources. This affects abilities to have trans-Atlantic collaboration. It was an exciting moment... "Oh, that was fun"... But we're still here. We're still living. The place is still here. We're still in need if not in greater need of really figuring out how the colonial history that we experience continues to shape life today. It didn't go away after the centennial year.

Q:

For you as Virgin Islanders, and also being here during that celebration of the transfer. How do you see that remembrance in the national narrative, when you look at Denmark? What position did it have?

La Vaughn Belle

I spent almost six months of 2017 in Denmark. I was back and forth, and then I spent three solid

months. So, I had a very unique perspective of how the two places. I know you use the word celebrate in air quotes, I don't know if that'll come out through the podcast, so I'll just clarify that it really means celebrate, commemorate. Because it's kind of hard to celebrate your colonial transfer from one power to the other.

Both: Although we did... We did do it...

La Vaughn Belle

Jeanette Ehlers and I - part of our desire to create I am Queen Mary was around penetrating the collective consciousness, about creating a project that would force institutions to take up this conversation beyond the centennial, because when two artists create a public artwork that gets the kind of attention that project did. You know we can't continue to maintain, although we're doing it now we can't continue to maintain that artwork ourselves. So, it kind of puts Denmark in this position where the institutions had to respond. Do we make it permanent? And I think that speaks to the power of what also creatives and artists can do. That you can push conversations in places that institutions clearly did not want to be.

It was very clear that this was like, we're going to open up to have this conversation and then we're going to close back this dark chapter as it was referred to many times in Danish discourse, and just move on. Uh, no we're not going to move on. It was almost as if like we were a door jamb as the door was closing and we just door jammed and it's like Uh... we're going to leave this door open a little while longer and we're going to hope that we can open it back up, and I think that's a lot of what our work is doing. Not just in our relationship to Denmark, but you know our relationship to the United States our relationship with Puerto Rico who's our sister in this this very strange colonial relationship with the United States as well and you know even the British Virgin Islands.

We're kind of looking and seeking partnerships and conversations and dialogue, and I think that's the same idea of not seeing it in like a silo. It's not isolated. We're all interconnected, and again you know, referring to the pandemic again, I think that really showed us that we are interconnected. These systems are interconnected across time and space.

Tami Navarro

If there are other resources that you're going to share Hadiya Sewer (VISCO member, red.) has written on COVID-19, and how it has impacted our ability to respond.³ It has been impacted by our coloniality. Our sort of liminality as American citizens. We have no political relationship with Denmark at this time so our in-betweenness, and how that affects both epidemiology and our ability to respond and again resource allocation. So, this still matters in all these different ways that these things, history continues to unfold but our positioning continues to impact how we experience them.

La Vaughn Belle

In terms of the pandemic our inability to close our borders. This is one of those moments you could thrive as a small island nation because people come in by air or by sea. If you were able to kind of create barriers or restrictions, and we weren't really able to do that. I know for sure, we felt this kind of vulnerability where you know all these people from these COVID dominating countries looked at us, and it's like "oh let's go vacation, and pass this pandemic in the Caribbean somewhere", and as our cases started to skyrocket you know there was just such a vulnerability. Our health care systems can't even handle this. You guys can go back wherever you came from. What are we supposed to do when our hospitals get totally overrun?

Tami Navarro

But it was one of the few places that was open. You know back, we're thinking about mid-2020, the Virgin the US Virgin Islands was one of the few places in the region that remained open for American

travelers to go to, and then to no surprise for anyone who can think about public health there were all these headlines at one point “the hottest hot spot in America for COVID is the US Virgin Islands”, so again kind of which is a very similar narrative, and I don't have time to get into it but a similar narrative to when (hurricanes, red.) Irma and Maria struck. This kind of selective inclusion and exclusion of the Virgin Islands as a site of belonging. So, when things are going bad it's sort of like ‘oh my god they have nothing to do with us’ but then we can be scapegoated. That the islands can sort of be that horrible place. That is, I guess part of us. So that was really striking for me, this sort of inevitability that the cases would rise as air traffic continued and increased as people were fleeing trying to get out of cities in the mainland, and then the kind of shaming when the spike happened.

Q:

My last question, because you have to leave now. When you talk of the historical records and the inaccessibility... You mention at one point that some of them have been digitized and are accessible to Virgin Islanders. How much is that, and is there any discussion going on how to make these records more accessible?

La Vaughn Belle

I mean, the national archive system in Denmark has been doing uh an effort where they've tried to digitize, I think over a million records. The problem is that that was done without a lot of collaboration with Virgin Islanders. So, it's almost as if someone said I'm going to take all these papers put them online and there was no public conversation or discourse or conversations about how to access it. I mean if you've ever tried to access the records it's still quite difficult, I find, and not all of them are translated. You kind of have to know the internal logic of the archive to be able to even know what you're looking for because the meta... the tags... If I wanted to look for head ties and head scarves, those things don't exist in the searching... It's not Google so it's kind of hard if you don't know what you're looking for. How do you even begin to access it, and I think those are some of the issues?

But I think of course the system could feel like they did something and then limit access to the material records which is even more problematic because as a visual artist there are aspects of materiality that are very important that really do get lost on a screen and so it just raises a lot of questions. More questions than answers.

Tami Navarro

I'll just say one thing before I go, which is that for me again this is the importance of relationship, and collaboration so one person we've been working with for a long time is Helle Stenum, and she has a project now that she's heading The Fireburn files, where she has digitized and has been actively seeking collaboration and insight from our group in particular but other Virgin Islanders as well about what kinds of information need to be included. What kind of input do you have the ability or the capacity to offer.

So that's a budding project. She's just now launching and trying to sort of bring it into the world but I think that it has been, it could have been faster, but I think the reason that it's not is because she is seeking input and has thought about partnerships in really central and important ways. So that when it is in its fullness it actually makes sense for and becomes most useful to Virgin Islanders rather than just a sort of ham-handed gift. “So, here's some archives that are online” “I hope you have internet, I hope that your electricity is stable”. There's a whole host of things that go into you know just slapping something on the internet, but I think that talking with people and again thinking about the conditions of our lives would go a far way even as we enter the sort of realm of the digital.

BIO – Virgin Islands Studies Collective (VISCO)

Tami Navarro is the Associate Director of the Barnard Center for Research on Women (BCRW) and Editor of the journal *Scholar and Feminist Online*. She is a Cultural Anthropologist whose work has published work in *Cultural Anthropology*, *American Anthropologist*, *Transforming Anthropology*, *Small Axe Salon*, *The Caribbean Writer*, *Social Text*, and *Feminist Anthropology*. She serves on the Board of the St. Croix Foundation and is a member of the Editorial Board for the journal *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*. She is the co-host of the podcast, “Writing Home: American Voices from the Caribbean” and her book, *Virgin Capital: Race, Gender, and Financialization in the US Virgin Islands* will be out later this year.

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. 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). 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. Her studio is based in the Virgin Islands.

Tiphonie Yanique is from the Virgin Islands and is an associate professor at Emory University in English and Writing with a focus on Caribbean Studies. She is the author of the poetry collection, *Wife*, which won the 2016 Bocas Prize in Caribbean poetry and the United Kingdom’s 2016 Forward/Felix Dennis Prize for a First Collection. Tiphonie is also the author of the novel, *Land of Love and Drowning*, which won the 2014 Flaherty-Dunnaw First Novel Award from the Center for Fiction, the Phillis Wheatley Award for Pan-African Literature, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Rosenthal Family Foundation Award and was listed by NPR as one of the Best Books of 2014. She is the author of a collection of stories, *How to Escape from a Leper Colony*, which won her a listing as one of the National Book Foundation's 5Under35. She has been listed by the Boston Globe as one of the sixteen cultural figures to watch out for and her writing has been published in the New York Times, Best African American Fiction, The Wall Street Journal, American Short Fiction and other places. Tiphonie Yannique’s novel, *Monster in the Middle*, will be published in October 2021.

Hadiya Sewer is a Visiting Scholar in the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice at Brown University. She earned her B.A. in Sociology from Spelman College and her M.A. and Ph.D. in Africana Studies from Brown. Her work looks at Africana philosophy, Caribbean political theory, feminist theory, and environmental justice in the Caribbean. She is also the President and Co-Founder of St. JanCo: the St. John Heritage Collective, a land rights and cultural heritage preservation non-profit in St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands and Vice President of Program Development and Outreach at the Virgin Islands Youth Advocacy Coalition.

Interviewer

Farhiya Khalid is a journalist and historian based in Copenhagen. She is a member of the organization Responsible Press (Ansvarlig Presse) and her work mainly examines media representation and self-representation of minorities in Danish media. She works as a journalist and has recently hosted the podcast *More Than Bricks* (Mere end mursten) about the Danish ‘ghetto laws’.

-
1. Belle, L., Navarro, T., Sewer, H., & Yanique, T. Ancestral Queendom. *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Informationsvidenskab og Kulturformidling*, 8(2), 19-36.
 2. Wilkerson, I. (2020). *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. Random House.
 3. *COVID-19 in Small Tourism Dependent Caribbean Islands*: This Working Group aims to examine the discourses and imagined futures surrounding economic impacts and political responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in small, tourism-dependent Caribbean islands. With the reliance on tourism and other external sources for economic viability, COVID-19 will have strong and lasting impacts on Caribbean futures. It is important for scholars to study how COVID-19 affects the region and beyond, and to propose possible frameworks for sustainability and self-resilience as rapid responses to the

situation.