MEMORY UNCOVERED: JEANNETTE EHLERS FRAMING DENMARK’S COLONIAL PAST IN THE WORK WHIP IT GOOD: SPINNING FROM HISTORY’S FILTHY MIND (2017)

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The familiar narrative of Denmark is a one-sided story of free education and hygge; untold and silenced are hundreds of years of slave trading and colonising. The current absence of colonial discourse shapes Denmark’s identity and international relations. Danish-Trinidadian artist Jeannette Ehlers marks her opposition to this selective history-writing in her artistic work and engages with the unplaced culpability of Denmark’s colonial past. Ehlers’ resistance is illustrated in the video of the performance Whip it Good: Spinning From History’s Filthy Mind, recorded in 2014. She criticises history, performing themes of trauma and ‘otherness’ with a particular emphasis on women, and re-enacts one of the most brutal punishments of the enslaved: whipping. Ehlers ‘whips it good’ by echoing Denmark’s colonial past hereby challenging Danish national identity. Preceding this analysis of Ehlers’ work, an outline of Denmark’s colonial past will be presented. This commentary draws upon post-colonial theory and focuses on the enslaved females’ experience.

Forgotten: Denmark’s Colonial Past

“The slaves walked on their naked feet through two hundred years of Danish history without leaving any other trace than the bit of information we find in the school textbook about Denmark being the first country to abolish slave trade. Thousands of men, women and children. And one sentence to tell it all. And the claim is wrong.” - Thorkild Hansen: Coast of slaves (1967)

Colonialism is not just taking possession of far-away lands, it privileges an oppressive racial ideology and emphases differences which justify rights to conquer and subjugate through economic strategies and exploitation with no regard to local agency. These mechanisms were just as apparent in Denmark as in other imperial nations.

3 R. Halberg and B. R. Coley. Dansk Vestindien – fra dansk koloni til amerikansk territorium, p. 27-34
4 M. Naum and J. Nordin. ‘Introduction’, p. 6
5 M. Naum and J. Nordin. ‘Introduction’, p. 6
7 R. Halberg and B. Coley. Dansk Vestindien, p. 117-118
was reluctantly withdrawn from sale in 2014.10 ‘Skipper Mix’ liquorice was perceived as an innocent component of culture and not as a racist stereotype from colonial ideology.11 Colonial complicity is consistent with Paul Gilroy’s theory of ‘Postcolonial Melancholia’, where melancholia restricts the coloniser and colonised by silencing the shameful past.12 Another example, is shown in the romantic imagery of ‘Our Lost Paradise’, presented by the Danish travel agency Bravo Tours when advertising former Caribbean colonies, demonstrates Gilroy’s theory.13 The advert text falsely frames the Caribbean by idealising it and ignoring the Islands’ problems of high crime rates and poverty.14 These examples articulated the consistent and convenient ignorance around Denmark’s colonial past.

2017 marks the centennial of the sale of the Islands to the US. In Denmark various small museums and galleries have organised exhibitions, and grassroots organisations have created temporary memorials to mark this event. These temporary initiatives are limited to the year 2017, and the Danish government has stayed remarkably silent; when the Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen visited the Islands in March 2017 he offered no apology. A part of history is ignored in the Danish psyche: the wealth obtained from the colonies contributed to the construction of neighbourhoods in Copenhagen, and the narrative divorces monetary gains from political oppression and economic exploitation.15 Historian Pierre Nora emphasises the importance of public ‘sites of memory’ which illustrate collective remembrance.16 Without acknowledging and memorialising its colonial history contemporary Danish self-identification remains uncontested. Denmark left its’ colonial subjects without basic civil rights and has escaped its colonial hangover, severely impacting its self-identification and nationhood. As a result, ‘Postcolonial Melancholia’ survives without objectification.

Uncovered: Jeannette Ehlers’s Whip it Good: Spinning From History’s Filthy Mind (2014)
The Danish-Trinidadian artist Jeannette Ehlers attempts to push the uncontested Danish narrative, ignorant to colonialism, off its pedestal. She repeatedly engages with Denmark’s colonial past and its relationship with the present. Her performance Whip it Good: Spinning from History’s Filthy Mind has travelled the world since 2013; in it Ehlers whipped white canvasses in London, Copenhagen, Cape Town, Berlin, and more nations who are traditionally perceived as imperialist. Globalization has allowed Ehlers’ political piece to reach far outside of the physical boundaries of Denmark and into the larger post-colonial structures of the world.17 The performance was recorded in Copenhagen in the West Indian Warehouse as part of a solo show in 2014. The warehouse was used to store products from the Danish colonies; the choice of location is a strong symbolic gesture to its former function, as it now holds the closed Royal Danish Cast Collection. The piece transcends the limitations of performance when commemorated in video, i.e., the spectator overcomes the problems of absence. However the video format also presents a limited view for the audience because of the camera’s control of the gaze. Ehlers would end each performance by letting her audience finish the painting. This aspect of participation is absent from the video where the audience is only observing. Ehlers’ five-minute long video begins in darkness and silence as the frame moves over sculptural casts under a dim light. The frame continues in complete darkness.

10 R. Halberg and B. Coley. Dansk Vestindien, p. 135
11 D. Muliniari, etc. ‘Introduction’, p. 2
15A. Bjørn. “Vi Har Svært Ved at Se Os Selv i Rollen Som Undertrykkere Og Slavehandlere.”
16Pierre Nora. ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieuxde Memoire’. Representation, no. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989), pp. 7-24
17 Ursula Maria Probst. ‘Why Never Any Ever: To what extent do performance and performative interventions affect a repolitisation of our living conditions? In Touch the reality: Rethinking Keywords of Political Performance, ed. Christiane Krejs (Vienna, 2016), pp. 13-17
while a subtle and displaced sound of crackles emerges. Then suddenly a shocking sound reverberates through the silence and ‘Whip it Good’ appears written in white letters on a dark background. The perspective changes and the camera focuses on the artist forcefully smearing charcoal on a whip with her hands. Her arms and legs are covered in white body paint in a striped pattern. She is dressed in a white two-piece body wrap covering the lower and upper part of her body and her dreadlocks are tied in a white cloth. In front of Ehlers is a large white canvas hung from the ceiling (fig 2). She runs forward and whips the canvas again and again. So far her whips seem premeditated, calm and targeted, but as the video progresses the repeated whipping becomes more frenetic as she aggressively revisits each streak with her whip (fig 4). Short camera sequences present fragments of her hand gripping the whip tighter, and her feet running backwards. She now whips multiple times and as she whips faster, the image shifts between her whipping and the plaster casts that surround her – all of the casts’ facial expressions seem chosen for their pain or fragmented appearance. The canvas begins to swing back and forth under the force of her whip.

This analysis develops an interpretation anchored in international theories and testimonies of post-colonial experience to comprehend a discourse absent from Danish narrative. Furthermore it adopts a feminist approach, focusing on the validation of female enslaved experience and resistance. This investigation frames Whip it Good under three subtitles; ‘Trauma and Parody’, ‘History’s Filthy Mind’ and ‘Blackness, Femininity and the Other’. These link the performance to relevant post-colonial and feminist theories.

**Trauma and Parody**

Ehlers brings the brutality of whipping – a well-known punishment for unruly slaves – to life in a theatre-like setting. Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), a treatise on the relationship between architecture and state punishment, describes punishment as a tool for making bodies more obedient, useful, and for discipline and dominance. Foucault describes the disappearance of the public spectacle of punishment in the early nineteenth century but Whip it Good returns to it with all of its repulsiveness. When Ehlers first breaks the silence and lashes at the canvas, it is unexpected and shocking. Furthermore, it echoes the past; the sound travels through centuries, suggesting the inhumane punishment of enslaved African bodies to the audience. The aftermath of oppression, punishment and exploitation left trauma in the minds of the descendants of the enslaved. This performance can be understood as being a partially resurfaced trauma. In interviews Ehlers emphasises aspects of collective trauma and its negative effect on black self-identity.

Trauma is what the cognitive system fails to recognise which it then refuses representation of and instead it simply takes shape through symptoms, for example the need for repetition. Repeated whipping accelerates in pace, recognising the need for repetition which is embodied in the performance. Images such as The Scourged Back (fig 3) memorialise whipping, a practice utilised by oppressors to diminish and discipline. She examines the whipping used to constitute the pain inflicted on black bodies. In the book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) the Martiniquan philosopher Frantz Fanon describes the black experience as being enslaved by the past. Ehlers’ unconscious and unwitting urge to repeat historical circumstances alludes to a lack of agency, as if she is being controlled by the traumatic history of racial oppression just as Fanon articulates.

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19 J. Ehlers, *Whip it Good*, 00:43
20 J. Ehlers, *Whip it Good*, 04:36
21 J. Ehlers, *Whip it Good*, 04:38
24 Isabelle Wallace. ‘Trauma as Representation: A meditation on Manet and Johns’ in *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, ed. Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg, (Dartmouth College Press, 2006), pp. 3-27
26 Hilary McD Beckles. “Historicizing Slavery in West Indian Feminisms.” *Feminist Review*, no. 59 (1998), pp. 34-
Whip it Good’s resistance confronts the notion of absence of agency. Ehlers is dressed and painted in tribal dress taken from African and Haitian cultures, a powerful reference to Haiti – the first black republic established by the rebellion of the enslaved. The charcoal on the whip refers to the labour of enslaved Africans carried out in coalmines. Surrounding symbols of ancient high European culture, she smears the charcoal on the white man’s tool, the whip, and attacks the canvas. The performance does not romanticise suffering: it is a harsh, and brutal testimony of torture. However, the sculptures surrounding her depict heroic pain in battle and death. As Ehlers whips faster the sequences switch to the lowered face of The Dying Gaul and the fractured face of the giant Alcyones from The Pergamon Altar. This performance marks the intersection between trauma and parody. Literary scholar Amy Tang gathers the two terms that otherwise seems paradoxical under ‘compulsive repetition’, a form of behaviour that is controlled and uncontrolled, with and without agency. With this framework Ehlers dialectically repeats the whips with focus and with obsession. Her performance is a humourless parody that uncovers cruelty and brutality. Parody gives Ehlers’ character agency as the subject revises the past through repetition – a great gesture of criticality and resistance to the status quo.

In the framework of trauma and parody, Ehlers articulates resistance to the repressor through an imitation that marks a shift in power; the whip is now in the hands of ‘the other’. She empowers ‘the other’ with armour bearing symbols of rebellion and independence to strike at the canvas and paint black scars. The lines on the canvas indicate the trauma’s resistance to representation but Ehlers makes this pain legible.

History’s Filthy Mind
The longer title of the work, Spinning from History’s Filthy Mind, anchors the performance as a response to the concept of history. ‘Filthy’ can be understood as disgusting, but also as offensive. History does not straightforwardly record events, but negotiates between power and knowledge. The relationship between these concepts is inextricable. As discussed by Foucault power produces knowledge and in turn knowledge constitutes power. In keeping with Foucault’s paradox Denmark owns 1.6 kilometres worth of shelves containing the written data from its imperial past, this data is on the UNESCO’s list of written world heritage. Yet this abundance of documentation has not influenced Danish history-writing: the powers choose to ignore the knowledge. Ehlers makes a powerful comment on Danish amnesia by framing Whip it Good in the architectural backdrop of the West Indian Warehouse. The building currently houses the Royal Danish Cast Collection, a collection with a troubled history. During the twentieth century these kinds of collections were used by fine art students to study and imitate but became unpopular and lost function. When the National Gallery of Denmark rebuilt its museum, the collection was moved to a barn outside of Copenhagen. It was abandoned there for a decade and never returned to the gallery. Reluctantly the collection received the space of the West Indian Warehouse and opened in 1995 as a museum. In 2002 the National Gallery forced the collection to close and fired all employees. The warehouse is now the opposite of a site of memory: it is a site of oblivion. The floors of the warehouse are filled with casts of European art thereby disguising the building’s history by repurposing and reconceptualising it with white plaster casts. Ehlers haunts amongst the statues, representing the ghost of the past. The camera witnesses Whip it Good, controlling our gaze and watching her as

31M. Foucault. Discipline and punish, p. 27
34Troels Andersen. ‘Ude af Øje’, p. 23-24
she lashes at the canvas.\textsuperscript{35} Ehlers utilizes the statues as passive by-standers; the camera rests on the face of Venus de Milo (fig 7), whose gaze appears blank due to the absence of colour in her eyes. Ehlers’ performance critiques the neglect, disregard and whitewashing of the colonial narrative. For each whip that lashes on to the canvas, there is a moment of criticism of Denmark’s selective writing of history. According to Foucault what produces good criticism is the emergence of disguised and disqualified historical knowledge – called ‘subjugated knowledge’.\textsuperscript{36} Whip it Good brings the subjugated historical content of Denmark’s colonial past to life, elucidating an unresolved anger and pain. The pattern of the white body paint on Ehlers body emulates the white kaolin clay used by Voudoun worshippers in East Africa to join the living with the dead. This indicates a dimension of ritual in Whip it Good as Ehlers summons the spirits of the dead creating an ancestry as she whips.\textsuperscript{37} She draws on an old tradition of performance as she symbolically recalls subjugated knowledge in the spirits. As she critiques and reassembles Denmark’s colonial past, she places an elusive culpability Frantz Fanon also examined: “I as a man of color [sic] do not have the right to hope that in the white man there will be a crystallization of guilt towards the past of my race.”\textsuperscript{38} It is her ‘right to hope’ that Ehlers attempts by re-enacting the neglected history. To make hope a reality Ehlers recognizes the documentation of Denmark’s colonial past in architecture, hereby contesting the Danish narrative. The canvas becomes a history painting that refuses figuration but makes pain and subjugated enslaved experience legible and documented. Whip it Good refuses the function of the Cast Collection as a site of emulation and attempts to write new history. The history painting of oppressed trauma documents a lost narrative of Denmark’s brutal colonial past. History’s Filthy Mind is the victim of Ehlers’ whip as she writes new history. It is an archival record exceeding figural representation, language, and it refuses its oblivion. She claims knowledge and power, which empower and legitimise her to ‘whip it good’.

**Blackness, Femininity and ‘the Other’**

Ehlers purposely chooses the character of the resilient female as they are often excluded from the narrative of rebellions. Women were an important part of the resistance during colonial times; they worked within the political infrastructure, promoted a culture of intransigence and destabilized the everyday by challenging structures of race, class and gender.\textsuperscript{39} Although a part of the resistance they were undoubtedly the most exploited group as law and public opinion did not protect them.\textsuperscript{40} White women, to maintain their own status, excluded ‘the other’ from the discourse of womanhood. They emphasized black females’ physical strength and masculine bodily features.\textsuperscript{41} Ambivalently, as this perception of black females was used to exclude them from womanhood, they continued to be the victims of rape.\textsuperscript{42} The expectation of sexual availability shows how black women were subjugated in power structures. Whip it Good destroys the notion of vulnerability in its forcefulness and emphasis on female strength – now as a sign of empowerment. As the ultimate symbol of this Ehlers reclaims the whip associated with her opposite: the white male.\textsuperscript{43} This symbol of authority uncovers the tenuous and fragile power relationship now in the control of ‘the other.’ ‘Otherness’ is emphasized in Whip it Good, which is an environment of opposites between black and white, male and female, good and evil, superior and inferior, and underlined by the stark contrasts of shadows on the white figures. This dualistic worldview is called ‘Manichaeism’ and demands an analysis of the oppositions. Ehlers

\textsuperscript{35}Ina Blom. The Autobiography of Video: The life and Times of a Memory Technology, (Oslo, 2016)
\textsuperscript{36}Michel Foucault. Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977 (New York, 1980)
\textsuperscript{38}F. Fanon. Black Skin, White Masks, p. 228
\textsuperscript{39} H. Beckles. “Historicizing Slavery in West Indian Feminisms.” p. 50
\textsuperscript{40} bell hooks. Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (London, 1982), pp. 20-43
\textsuperscript{41} bell hooks. Ain’t I a Woman, pp. 23-24
\textsuperscript{42} bell hooks. Ain’t I a Woman, p. 27
embraces the framework of ‘the other’ as an opposition to the dominant white male world and surrounding European sculptures. When she whips the canvas two enormous statues stand behind her draped in white; Ehlers’ figure is smaller and emphasises this by wearing white drapery to associate and contrast with the classical statues. She is a woman of colour and in this performance she utilizes the features of her body to perform its ‘otherness’. Ehlers puts on a costume and a mask in the form of paint, choosing to embody a character. Clothing in a performance is like a uniform used for intimidation and a symbol of taking part of something larger than the body of the artist. Ehlers becomes an ethnographer, collecting different objects to create a new identity of female resistance. Her citing Haitian culture is a gesture to the empowered enslaved. But the historical and described relationship between women and the Haitian revolution is romanticised. Although it was the first nation to grant women citizenship, they were denied landownership and access to the military. In the destruction of colonial structures, women fought and died alongside men, but nationalism secured their powerlessness and dishonour instead of serving an equal return. Her performance of ‘otherness’ in the ‘manichaic’ environment is a comment on overall opposition. Ehlers embodies independence and resilience by privileging Haitian features: it is a sign of empowerment but this is problematic. Another reference to a movement of resistance is found in the image Whip it Good (fig 1). Here Ehlers references a photograph taken of the founder of The Black Panthers Huey Newton in 1968 (fig 8). They are each seated in similar wicker-chairs but have chosen different weapons, Ehlers holds a whip and Newton a gun and a spear. Newton’s portrait imitates Western colonial portraiture using a zebra rug on the floor and ‘tribal’ props in the background. Newton employs an empowering visual language: he confronts a system of oppression through forcefully gazing into the lens with the white viewer’s own attributes. Ehlers echoes Newton’s pose and gazes at the audience fearlessly. Her image repeats an environment of opposites, as the white drapery of statues in the background stands in contrast to the black chair. The Black Panthers was a revolutionary party founded in California in 1966 and were influential in the civil rights movement. To reference The Black Panthers is a gesture to their violent rejection of America and all global brutality towards people of colour – this theme of violence is apparent in Ehlers performance. Through emulating the pose and chair of Newton’s iconic image it signals a tension between genders. Newton and the fellow members of The Black Panthers became international celebrities and heroes of the civil rights movement, which was dominated by the stereotype of the aggressive black male. Ehlers’ image suggests a more prominent role for women within this narrative. The chair is used in both photographs as a throne, but Ehlers inverts the masculine stereotype of the ‘hero’ through placing herself as the protagonist. Ehlers brings to the foreground the tribal decoration, which is used by Newton to symbolise the visual language of oppression. By positioning the opposite, she opposes the oppressor, and cites a movement of brutal resistance. Whip it Good is a patchwork of citations of the black history of resistance that empower the character of ‘the

46 Andrew Howel. The Analysis of Performance Art: A guide to its Theories and Practice (Amsterdam, 1999), pp. 15-34
48 H. Beckles. “Historicizing Slavery in West Indian Feminisms.” p. 50
other’, attempting to include black female rebellion in the narrative of resistance. Women have turned to performance art as it is less burdened with the history of the white male. Through this art form they reclaim their bodies and depict themselves as active instead of passive. Ehlers articulates the notion of activeness and of history by surrounding herself with static statues. She not only refuses the male gaze but also the gaze of the dominant white culture excluding black features from the discourse of beauty. Art historian Rocia Aranda-Alvarado argues that in Caribbean art “the body is a sign of presence, of resistance and ultimately of catered and signifying beauty.” What surrounds Ehlers in Whip it Good are not only static statues but also their representation of Western beauty. The video presents a classical example of this, Venus de Milo (100BC), as Ehlers whips with greater intensity. She posits herself in opposition to the statue, a white bastion of beauty, and in opposition to the concept of beauty being exclusive – i.e., she challenges the status quo. In her forceful creation of paintings she references Jackson Pollock’s action painting, a reference that alludes to themes of modernism and male aggression. However her painting would not be accepted within monopolised formalist structure like Greenberg’s modernism. Whip it Good does not attempt to escape meaning and does not lock the interpretation to the boundaries of the canvas. Therefore, this performance challenges the discourse of abstract art because of the abundance of symbols of independence and resistance Ehlers presents.

Ehlers claims beauty in blackness; she demonstrates aggression and resistance in femininity through the character of the ‘other’. In this performance Ehlers attempts to decolonize the female black body by illustrating its opposition to continued colonial discourses, and occupying female resistance. She turns tables: she refuses the role of a white canvas on which anything can be projected and punishes it instead.

**Remembered: Conclusion**

Jeannette Ehlers physically and metaphorically whips at Danish colonial amnesia and reawakens its colonial past in Whip it Good: Spinning from History’s Filthy Mind. She lashes at ‘Postcolonial Melancholia’ in the return of the spectacle of punishment, enacting a parody that highlights the trauma. The black scars on the white canvas are the un-representable trauma’s painfulness made legible. Ehlers empowers her female figure of resistance with symbols of authority and independence. She avoids victimisation despite being female by appropriating actions of destruction and creation so often fulfilled only by males. The canvas becomes a history painting of the silenced and oppressed. Her ghost haunts the West Indian Warehouse; its casts become the passive white bystanders to the whipping as she attempts to transform a site of forgetfulness into a site of remembrance.

Ultimately, Ehlers’ performance frames Denmark’s colonial past as unresolved and inflamed by the absence of culpability.

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53A. Harboe Flensburg, ‘Susan Sontag Spørgsmålene / Jeannette Ehlers’.
55 J. Ehlers, Whip it Good, 04:06-04:07
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IMAGES

Figure 1: Casper Maare, Whip it Good (2014). C-print. 21x29,7 cm.
(Image: Lotte Løvholm (ed.). Say it Loud (Copenhagen, 2016, p. 109)

Figure 2: Jeannette Ehlers, Still from Whip it Good: Spinning From History’s Spinning Filthy Mind (2013), video 01:26 min. Accessed 20/01/2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6oeY087vtU (2014)

Figure 3: William McPherson and Mr. Oliver, The Scourged Back (1863), albumen print, 8.73 x 5.4 cm, SFOMA, San Fransisco, USA

Figure 4: Jeannette Ehlers, Still from Whip it Good: Spinning From History’s Spinning Filthy Mind (2013), 04:36 min. Accessed 20/01/2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6oeY087vtU (2014)

Figure 5: Jeannette Ehlers, Still from Whip it Good: Spinning From History’s Spinning Filthy Mind (2013), 04:01 min. Accessed 20/01/2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6oeY087vtU (2014)

Figure 6: Jeannette Ehlers, Still from Whip it Good: Spinning From History’s Spinning Filthy Mind (2013), 04:30 min. Accessed 20/01/2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6oeY087vtU (2014)

Figure 7: Jeannette Ehlers, Still from Whip it Good: Spinning From History’s Spinning Filthy Mind (2013), 04:06-04:07 mins. Accessed 20/01/2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6oeY087vtU (2014)

Figure 8 Blair Stapp, Composition by Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton Seated in Wicker Chair (1967). Lithograph on paper, 88x59 cm, Collection of Merrill C. Berman
(Image: New York Historical Society)