

Moving Spaces

Enacting Dance, Performance, and the Digital in the Museum
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Creolised Dance, Museumised Space: Jeannette Ehlers and Decolonial Re-Edification

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Abstract This chapter examines three works by Danish artist Jeannette Ehlers that involve dance as ritual movement in what I call "museumised space". Examining these dances as creolised products arising from the enslavement of Africans by European nations, I will argue that Ehlers performs through them an Afropean decolonial praxis of 're-edification' around the silences surrounding Denmark's colonial past, involving in particular a dialectic between spectrality and material sumptuousness that draws purposely on dance in relation to the materiality of sound.

Keywords Creolisation. African-heritage dance. Museumised space. Decoloniality. Jeannaette Ehlers. Danish colonialism.

Summary 1 Dance as Creolising Ritual. – 2 The Materiality of Sound. – 3 Ghost in the Big House (Cracking the System).

Vine scrolls, marble drape, erect breasts carved out of white perfection. Impassive statues with blind stone eyes. The screen goes blank. Whip it good! It flashes up in white. The sound slices through the air, tearing through the edifice. We see you, white markings on brown skin. The designs of another History on your living, breathing, heaving body. A rasping sound: you are rubbing charcoal on the whip. The white canvas waits, tensed. Do the statues tremble slightly? Anticipation. The whiplash, again, now on canvas. The marble folds become visceral, your exertions, lapidary. The whipping becomes more and more frantic, building its implacable rhythm to a crescendo. Streaks crowd the canvas: a new music score in charcoal blood. You have danced. The marble statue bows its head.

In the polished room with the polished floor and the polished furniture, we catch glimpses of you. Your short red dress and trainers, sometimes just your arm stretching out as you whirl in the arms of your unseen partner. Your body is erect, you are on tiptoes, bending your knees ever so slightly in between the beats. The waltz swells. It fills the void left by unspeakable things. And you slip



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in and out of the beat, creating your own contretemps with the mirrors of history. The chandeliers glitter in the sunlight. How much more light do we need to illuminate the horror?

The snow over Marienborg was heavy. How would a Caribbean woman have endured her first Danish winter? Spirit dances. The vèvè wavers in candlelight, the gilded and upholstered chairs waver, history wavers. Rosicrucian patterns reflecting on the parquetry. Percussion rises. The traces become palpable, in their disjunction new structures emerge and dissolve. The shadow bears weight. It bends History. Then, like Michael Jackson facing the Pharaoh, on the precise split second of the percussion's final slap, you disappear into the floor. It's over. "Remember the time".¹

Dance makes sound visible and space palpable. It triangulates the body moving in time to sound within the materiality of space. To dance in this way is to instantiate relationality as *vincularidad* 'enchainment' (Mignolo, Walsh 2018, 1) of aural, kinetic, sacred, and material histories. When the dancer embodies these histories as crystallised through the matrix of displacement and renewal that we shorthand as the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993), what pasts/futures are activated? How does brutality distil beauty, and how does the same body hold together contraries? What happens when the dance(r) initiates the triangulation of movement, sound, and space within edifices that proclaim, through their material lineaments, what Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, following Anibal Quijano (2000), memorably describe as the "colonial matrix of power?" (2018, 114-15). What dialogues begin?

These questions are provoked by a consideration of the Danish artist Jeannette Ehlers,² whose practice mobilises dance within what I call 'museumised space' – a continuum that allows me to link together diverse sites where the colonial matrix of power is displayed for purposes of 'edification'. I use this word deliberately drawing on the physicality of the edifice, and its metaphoric use for improvement through instruction. Edification ensures that this coloniality keeps percolating into the present. Edification is the mobilizing of public funds and discourses around heritage preservation, pedagogy, and display, to legitimate the functioning of museumised space as a machine for inculcating a respectful attentiveness to the past commensurate with the expectations of the *Zeitgeist*. I include within museumised space, grand homes that materialised the accumulation of capital through participation of their former owners in the transatlantic slave trade, and that are now classified as heritage or national property, selectively open to visitors. Their maintenance is ensured through the taxpayer's money on the logic that the spectacle of their grandeur is beneficial to the public, whether viewed from the outside or through "organized walking" (Van Beurden 2015, 53) inside. The work of edification thus aligns these houses to sites that declare themselves explicitly as museums, and indeed, they are frequently converted into such self-declared museums that participate equally, though differently, in the work of "cultural guardianship" (Van Beurden

¹ I thank Ehlers for the detail of the waltz composition she uses in this piece (email communication with the Author, April 2021).

My responses to Jeannette Ehlers' work draw on, respectively: *Whip it Good!* (many versions exist; I refer to the one that was commissioned by Art Labour Archives); *Three Steps of Story*, and *Black Magic at the White House*.

² <https://www.jeannetteehlers.dk/portefolje.html>.

2015, 61-99). I use Ehlers' danced interventions in such museumised spaces to explore how the "activation" (Apter, Derby 2009) of memories of slavery and colonialism, which she claims as part of her personal history, can enact a decolonial praxis.

Ehlers' mother is (white) Danish, and her father (Afro-descendant) Trinidadian. She has a Danish last name, lives in Copenhagen, and self-identifies as non-white. *Prima facie*, she inhabits an easily decipherable version of 'Afropean' identity - "a space where blackness was taking part in shaping European identity at large" (Pitts 2019, 1). Indeed, "delv[ing] into ethnicity and identity inspired by her own Danish / West Indian background [she creates] pieces [that] revolve around big questions and difficult issues, such as Denmark's role as a slave nation - part of the Danish cultural heritage, which often gets overlooked in the general historiography" (Jeannette Ehlers). Exemplifying the Afropean as "living in and with more than one idea: Africa and Europe, or, by extension, the Global South and the West, without being mixed-this, half-that, or black-other" (Pitt 2019, 1), her creative process is sutured to explorations of decolonial thinking through the project *BE.BOP*, which she claims was an "epiphany" for her "personal as well as artistic life" (Lockward 2019, 429).³ One of the three pieces discussed in this essay, *Whip It Good!* [fig. 1], was commissioned in 2013 by *BE.BOP* as a live act that has since been performed across Europe in numerous sites that aggregate into museumised space. The other two pieces are short films (each just over three minutes long), produced in 2009 as part of a set of works termed *Atlantic*.⁴ *Black Magic in the White House* [fig. 2] is a digitally manipulated film of her dancing to Haitian percussion inside a space suggestive of Marienborg, the official residence of the Danish Prime Minister since 1962.⁵ *Three Steps of Story* [fig. 3] shows her waltzing inside Fort Frederik, a National Historic Landmark in the Caribbean island of Saint Croix, formerly part of the Danish West Indies and now part of the US Virgin Islands. Each work activates memories of enslavement to instigate processes of re-edification through bringing into the museumised space African-heritage dance practices generated through circum-Atlantic creolisation processes (Kabir 2020a).

These dances are the kinetic-memorial record of how the sacred, the secular, the African, and the European, come together in unpredictable yet irrepressible ways to resist the Plantation as a necropolitical system (Mbembe

³ *BE.BOP* (Black Europe Body Politics) is a collaborative project that was flagged off in 2012 at Berlin's Ballhaus Naunynstraße. It is "a safe space for healing colonial and imperial wounds" where "knowledge is understood as a collective creation, a collective healing process" and that "has engaged European audiences in intricate detail with the outrage generated by Black/African Diaspora peoples when confronting a racist world order structured along the lines of coloniality" (Lockward 2019, 419). The key thinker translating Latin American concepts and praxis of decoloniality, Walter D. Mignolo, has been associated with *BE.BOP* from its inception, and the late Alanna Lockward, one of the founders, who worked closely with Ehlers within *BE.BOP*, is acknowledged by Walter Mignolo as an important influence (Mignolo, Walsh 2018, xi).

⁴ The installation *Atlantic* (2009) consists of four videos, including the two examined here, which move between museumised spaces in Denmark, the Danish West Indies, and the Cape Coast, Ghana.

⁵ The camera shows Marienborg from the outside only and an embroidered sampler on a white china plate that presents its stylised façade. The interior is from "another location in Copenhagen, since Ehlers was refused permission to film at Marienborg by the Prime Minister's Office" (Hvenegård-Lassen, Staunæs 2020, 234). This important elision will be addressed at the close of the essay.



Figure 1 Jeannette Ehlers, *Whip It Good!* Photographer: Nikolaj Recke. © Jeannette Ehlers

Figure 2 Jeannette Ehlers, *Black Magic at the White House*. © Jeannette Ehlers



Figure 3 Jeannette Ehlers, *Three Steps of Story*. © Jeannette Ehlers

2003). The African heritage that their flexible resources either foreground or camouflage is also the heritage that gives the dancer an affective vocabulary for somatically remembering identities experienced as lost, alienated, fragmented, and yet powerfully capable of inciting subversion and rebellion. This vocabulary, too, generates a continuum: on it a dance like the waltz can be situated alongside percussive ritualised movement to the drums, because each is haunted by an infinitely mediated idea of Africa.⁶ This idea resonates through the music to which Ehlers dances, and the habitus within which she performs. One piece emphasises Europeanness through the waltz, the other, Africanity through voodoo. Together and complementarily, however, they signify creolised dance as reservoirs of collective memory that can activate at different times and places an African heritage: neither to return to origins nor to declare the impossibility of return, but rather, to intervene within the project of edification through a variegated play of covert/overt compromise and resistance. In this frame, *Whip It Good!* too, invites being read as a hyper-ritualised, reparative dance performance, conducted to the soundtrack of the rhythmically cracking whip.⁷ Responding to these three pieces while paying close attention to the spaces of their performance and exhibition, I interpret Ehlers' Afropean practice through the lens of creolisation as touch-

⁶ The essay starts with the premise that, like languages of Europe, dance forms of Europe too circulate within circuits of creolisation. The waltz is thus as haunted and potentially infused by Africanity as are French, English, Portuguese, Dutch, and Spanish. Provincialising Europe through the waltz is arguably one of the basic motivations for Ehlers choosing to dance this genre in the space of Fort Frederik along with the historical memory of waltzing in this space, which I shall elaborate on later in the essay.

⁷ My reading thus diverges from Lockward's (2017, 110): "In her latest piece, Jeannette Ehlers finally did in front of an audience what she had done previously in such works such as the above-mentioned *Black Magic in the White House*, as well as in *Three Steps of Story* (2009). Instead of dancing, however, in her first live performance, *Whip it Good!* (2013), she challenged the audience with a deceptively simple action: whipping".

stone for global modernity's intricate relationship to the traumatic processes of enslavement, colonialism, and extractive capitalism. Dancing in the museumised space performs re-edification through creolisation as relationality (Glissant 1997; Wendt 2019). As Ehlers affiliates these different dances to different sites in the Caribbean and Denmark, and elsewhere in Europe, she dances into being a new archipelagic "kinetoscape" (Kabir 2020a), within which Denmark and the Caribbean become relationally re-situated.

1 Dance as Creolising Ritual

The starting point of this essay is dance, so let us first explicate what, and how, Ehlers dances. The two pieces of 2009 differ from *Whip It Good!* in drawing on codified and recognisable dance genres, which their respective titles draw attention to. *Three Steps of Story* refers to the three steps that constitute the basis of the waltz, while the first part of *Black Magic* is an ironic-serious reference to the strong associations between dance and percussion in voodoo ritual – associations that are born out in this piece by the use of a lighted candle, a brush, a small vessel, and a vèvè or floor drawing for the voodoo divinity Papa Legba. In *Three Steps of Story*, Ehlers dances the waltz with a light yet stately grace, tracing out a highly controlled linear geometry. In *Black Magic at the White House*, she dances to percussion in keeping with the increasing tempo of the drumming, performing circular, sweeping movements isolating the pelvis accentuated by the dress with a bustle that we see in silhouette. These movements are executed mostly upright but at times with her crouching on the floor in 'twerking' position, which has ritual significance in African heritage dances and should not be interpreted as unreconstructed sexualisation of the female body. While the arms in *Three Steps of Story* are held in partner-hold position and the torso is locked, in *Black Magic at the White House* the arms are locked because they hold aloft the lit candle throughout, even as the torso moves in accordance with Africanist kinaesthetic principles of isolation and polycentrism. Finally, the two pieces may be contrasted by their respective mobilisations of a secular and a sacred dancing practice.

Despite these evident contrasts in form and function, both pieces draw on the same heritage of circum-Atlantic creolised performative traditions that developed through what Joseph Roach called "oceanic interculture" (1996). Neither is dancing to voodoo purely 'African', nor is the 'waltz' purely European; rather, each performance reveals an elastic kine-to-somatic structure for embodied performance that connects people and places through potentially infinite permutations of 'Africanity' and 'Europeanness'. The sartorial code of the dancing body in *Black Magic at the White House* Europeanises the Africanity of voodoo while the brown body dancing in *Three Steps of Story* Africanises the European connotations of waltz – reversals that are amplified by the assignment of 'three steps' to a Caribbean location, and 'black magic' to a Northern European one. The reminder of waltz's ubiquity as social dance of creolised cultures (De Jong 2003; Brokken 2015) is complemented by the reminder of Afro-diasporic religiosity's North Atlantic life (Matory 2018). Through these inversions, Ehlers signals the fundamental obscuring of origins that is the hallmark of creolisation as process and theory (Kabir 2000b). Jointly, the two performances of 2009 proclaim an Afropean kinesthetics that is not just intent on showcasing the somat-

ic impress of the black body in white space (including the White Cube), but announces as an 'always-already,' a dialogic, creative, and unpredictable relationality. Neither national borders nor racialised essences, but webbed and entangled (Pinnix 2019) structures for understanding cultural dispersal and re-aggregation throughout the circum-Atlantic space, are the choices exercised by Ehlers' signal.

These swirled and non-binaristic models for circum-Atlantic, creolised interculture also impel us to question the ostensible contrast between secular and sacred dance genres that Ehlers' 2009 performances set up. We see, instead, two sides of the same coin: 'ritual'. In both cases, the body interacting with the collective provides meaning and 'gravitas'. The precise ritualistic function of each dance genre does, however, diverge, in accordance with the ratio of Europeanness to Africanity each piece foregrounds. The sacred nature of voodoo does not need elaboration or defence today, although it was precisely this sacrality that led to the fear and fascination with which Haiti continues to be regarded by the North Atlantic gaze (Ulysse 2015). On the other side of the spectrum, creolised forms of European dances - not just the waltz that Ehlers dances, but the contredanse and quadrille traditions which preceded it - were powerful social rituals: the means of choosing to preserve a status quo that I have elsewhere called a "balancing act" (Kabir 2020b). Despite the collaboration implied by the dances, which retain their European names, the revolution triggered by voodoo rites, and the corresponding variations in their outward forms, each transmits the resistive power of creolisation. Even C.L.R. James (2001, 14), who contrasts the "dream of freedom" embodied in "midnight celebrations of voodoo" where the enslaved of Saint-Domingue "danced and sang", with the "house slaves [...] dressed in cast-off silks and brocades" who "like trained monkeys [...] danced minuets and quadrilles, and bowed and curtsied in the fashion of Versailles", concedes that such instances of 'mimicry' offered alternative pathways to revolutionary consciousness.

The spectrum of creolised circum-Atlantic dance that Ehlers references in *Two Steps of Story* and *Black Magic at the White House* sets up a historical, kinetic, and materialist frame for us to interpret *Whip It Good!* as a dance performance, even though Ehlers does not refer to or import into the performance any specific dance genre. Across the numerous performances of the piece in different sites, certain features remain constant: the whip rubbed with black charcoal, the white canvas suspended from the ceiling like a punching bag, Ehlers' outfit comprising two pieces of plain white cloth wrapped minimally around her body and a matching white headwrap, and chalk-white body paint. This monochromatic minimalism is matched by the minimalism of gesture: all that the performance does is repeating, over and over again, two acts: whipping the canvas and rubbing charcoal onto the whip, in alternating gestures. Yet this alternation sets up a rhythm that gives choreological coherence to the performance. Together with the body art and the compressed violence of the act of whipping, the choreology endows the whole with the signifying power of the 2009 performances - in particular *Black Magic at the White House*. Exercising the whip performs expiation and excoriation as part of the same ritual. Furthermore, every 'artwork' created by the repeated lashings of the whip against the canvas is completed by volunteers from the audience who are invited to mimic the artist at the close of her performance. The participatory nature of this piece augments its ritualistic format. By creating a new collective consciousness through

body movement in space and to sound, *Whip It Good!* illustrates how creolisation can generate unexpected new responses to what Peter Fryer, in the context of Afro-Brazilian percussive and kinetic traditions, called the “rhythms of resistance” (2000).

2 The Materiality of Sound

The whiplash slicing through the air “lacerates the whole audience” (Bariendos, s.d. online), conjoining Ehlers’ movements to convert spectacle to an extreme of shared hapticity. Handing over the whip to audience members elicits divergent responses dependent on their racial identification – including those whose refusal of the challenge Ehlers attributes to their self-perception as racially white (Lockward 2017). Assuming the “ambivalent nature of the fetish” then, the whip “darkly illuminate[s] the role of material things in the continual re-negotiation of human social relationships” (Matory 2018, xii). The whip’s “intermaterial vibration can afford a better understanding of the ways in which music does what it does, and the ways in which humans use it as a force for good and bad” (Eidsheim 2015, 163), because Ehlers’ visceral soundtrack produces what Matthew Morrison calls “Blacksound” (2019). Drawing on the invocation of “phonic materiality” by Fred Moten (2003, 1), whereby the scream of the enslaved is the ground zero of resistance, Blacksound attunes us to “the material hypersonicity of blackness that always cuts through and across the scripting and erasure of black people and their aesthetic practices” (Morrison 2019, 792). Through Ehlers’ danced ritual, the whiplashes script on the white canvas another story about blackness, aesthetics, and labour. In its repetitive (black)sound congeals both the enslaved person’s labour and the necropolitical exercise of power. Piercing through museumised space to reclaim it as public domain, the whip reminds us that, “breaking with uprootedness and the pure world of things of which he or she is but a fragment, the slave is able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and the very body that was supposedly possessed by another” (Mbembe 2003, 37).

The whip is the reminder that “musical sounds are made by labor” (Abbate 2004, 505). *Whip It Good!* performs re-edification through the whiplash that the artist’s labouring body converts to Blacksound. The movement-sound-space triangulation invites audience members to reorganise their commonly-held interpretations of sound as either noise or music: “with noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. With music is born power and its opposite: subversion” (Laing 1987, 6). As radical music, the whiplash activates the dialectic between power and subversion through the ritualised movement of Ehlers’ body repeatedly whipping the canvas. Its sound conflates two sources of fugitive percussion for the enslaved – the body and *objets trouvés*. Creolisation was instantiated as resistance through the astonishing proliferation of idiophones as well as membranophones on the Plantation. Caribbean percussive traditions and instruments proliferate, mutate, and generate pleasurable sounds through unexpected source materials: skin and wooden frames; crates and storage boxes; seeds, gourds, tree trunks, wooden sticks used in shipbuilding, and a range of metallic objects purloined from everyday use, from oil drums to ablution vessels to spoons; and now, a whip. Ehlers perpetuates this tradition by taking the whip and generating through it a spectacle of moving ritually to Blacksound. The whip

as Ehlers' percussive instrument reveals the body "as capable not only of production and consumption, and even of entering into relations with others, but also of autonomous pleasure" (Laing 1987, 32), precisely as the border between pleasure and pain is uncomfortably disrupted by the hyper-racialisation of the performing body. The body markings accentuate the oscillating semiotics that tremble between appropriation and affiliation, acknowledgement and mourning, dis- and re-enchantment – enacting a fetishisation that reclaims the fetish.

Ehlers had already begun exploring this complex affective charge of Afro-Atlantic percussion in *Black Magic in the White House*. That performance is sonically unadorned by any other instrument or voice. It also lacks textual exegesis, with accompanying texts simply calling it 'voodoo dance' without elaborating on the nature of the rhythm or the drums involved.⁸ The resultant opacity draws attention to a threshold beyond which meaning is withheld for the uninitiated. The esoteric quality of the vèvè, the candle, and the brush augment this mysterious, ritualised sacrality (Hvenegård-Lassen, Staunæs 2020) whose connotations are channelled through the single word 'voudou' and its silent partner 'Haiti'. From Père Labat writing of his enslaved dancing on the Dominican-owned plantations of northern Martinique (1724), to Moreau de Saint-Mery (1801) observing dance in Saint-Domingue on the eve of the Haitian Revolution, the sound of African-heritage percussion has continued to trigger in observers a fear and fascination intimately connected with the drum's potential to incite rebellion. For this very reason, the Afro-diasporic drum has become a privileged trope for all those formulating or excavating modes of resistance by being "Closer to the drums" (Escobar 2008, 25). The connection between rhythm, retention, and resistance are read as codes that "refer us to traditional knowledge, symbolic if you will, that the West can no longer detect" (Benitez-Rojo 1996, 225), which shape Caribbean self-understanding as a "culture that shatters the stone of time" (Glissant 1997, 137). Indeed, the immense significance granted heuristically to African-derived music's syncopated, polyrhythmic percussion sees it capable of subverting not only European understandings of rhythm, but the linear temporality of capitalism itself.

Yet it is not just moving to the lacerating whip and the menace of 'black magic' through which Ehlers mobilises dance as resistance and subversion. Her use of Emile Waldteufel's famous Skaters' Waltz within *Three Steps of Story* suggests that dancing in museumised space must evoke but also move beyond binaries of 'black' and 'white' – whether through the witty title that riffs off the moralistic connotations of the adjectival pair, or the charcoal streaks left against the white canvas. One of the most frequently creolised European genres, the waltz as dance form lent its partner hold to the myriad "dance-of-two" (Chasteen 2004, *passim*) forms that emerged all across the Atlantic rim, but equally important was its popularity with Creole composers (Kabir 2020a). As Dutch journalist Jan Brokken recently discovered

⁸ The credits to the video let some information slip through: the piece, "Fanamfe Af", is a non-traditional composition by Ghanaian percussionist Francis Kofi Aziati, included in his album *Vugbe (Drum Language): Traditional Rhythms of Ghana* (Sonos Records, s.d.). The use of a Ghanaian composition was based on rhythms of the Ewe ethnicity spread across Ghana, Togo, and Benin, to evoke Haiti as somatic memory in a pastiche of Marienborg (as discussed earlier in the essay) by an artist with Trinidadian parentage. This relay shows the infinite permutational power of the idea of creolisation. There can be no fixed point of 'origin', only nodes and intersections, call and response.

to his astonishment, “if you wanted to please someone on Curaçao or Aruba, you gave them a waltz as a gift” (2004, 89). Ehlers’ choice of a composition by Waldteufel, whose compositions circulated widely in the Americas as part of 19th century “World music” (Magaldi 2009), is additionally resonant because of his identity. While not a Creole composer himself, as a Jewish person from the Alsatian borderland between France and Germany, he is, arguably, creolised (Boatcă 2020). His Jewishness activates memory of the lively participation of Jewish composers within the history of Caribbean creole waltz, which, as Nanette De Jong has shown for the Antillean waltz of Curaçao, “has crossed and re-crossed racial, political, and social barriers to re-energize the island’s repertoire of popular and classical music” (2003, 251). As Waldteufel’s Skaters’ Waltz reverberates through Fort Frederik in Ehlers’ film, Blacksound seeps into ‘creolesound’, and resistance expands to encompass both mimicry and marronage.

3 Ghost in the Big House (Cracking the System)

What Ehlers dances (to) is every bit as important as where she stages this dance: the sumptuous and beautifully maintained Mirror Hall of Fort Frederik. She thereby activates a particular memory: the relationship between creolisation, dance, and the emancipation of slaves from Fort Frederik on 3 July 1848 by Carl Frederik von Scholten, Governor-General of the Danish West Indies from 1827 to 1848. Von Scholten’s place in history, while ensured by this act, was underwritten by his policy of inviting freed former slaves to his notorious Governor’s Dances in Fort Frederik from as early as 1831 – social gatherings taking place in this very Mirror Hall we see, during which the racialised divisions holding in place a deeply unequal social order would have momentarily given way to racially and socially mixed groups dancing the creolised mazurka, schottische, quadrille, and waltz (Hall 1980). This unexpected open-mindedness displayed by the Governor-General was a consequence of his twenty-year long relationship with a second-generation freed slave woman from Saint Croix, Anna Hergaard (Olsen 2016). Culminating in his bold move to emancipate the enslaved in 1848, it ended with von Scholten’s consequent departure from the Islands to Denmark. Did this separation, part of the tumultuous overturning of the status quo, feed into the psychic derangement that von Scholten apparently suffered from on return to Europe? And what about Anna Hergaard? These unanswered questions find visible echo in the waltz danced singly by Ehlers, with but a shadow partner outlined in her arms. Moreover, we never see Ehlers directly: we see only reflections of her brown body, clad in a red dress and white tennis shoes, framed successively in the mirrors that line the room through whose length she waltzes.

These reflected fragments, the glittering mirrors, and the absent partner punctuate the waltz with a polyrhythm of unspeakable things, illuminating the confusing space of intimacy, emotion, compromise and negotiation that exists between ‘black’ and ‘white’. This is not a shadowy but lustrous state, conveyed by the sparkling mirrors, the highly polished parquet floor, and the glittering chandeliers. Like the shiny carapace of the fetish that hides and calls for attention (Mulvey 1991), it highlights the dancer seen only in the reflection of the same mirrors that constitute the room’s material splendour. A similar dialectic between spectrality and sumptuousness is achieved by the digital manipulation of the dancer’s image in *Black*

Magic in the White House. Except for few momentary flashes, we never see Ehlers' dancing body directly, but always in outline, through traces and ripples it leaves in space-time - "effecting a distortion of the straight lines of the panels, the doors, and the frame of the romantic landscape paintings" (Hvenegård-Lassen, Staunæs 2020, 234). That we see only the silhouetted body accentuates the silhouette itself - of a woman in 19th century European dress consonant with the habitus of Marienborg, built as a summer residence for Commander Olfert Fischer in 1744. Wealth accumulated through the slave trade thus congeals in the elegance and taste (Gikandi 2011) that emanates from the high-quality furnishings and décor, in keeping with the property's current role as residence of the Danish prime minister. Gliding across walls, furniture, frames and floors that constitute the material history of museumised space, Ehlers' ghostly dancing body activates "the interplays between slave trade, economic wealth, and the spectral value of artworks as commodities", haunting and performing an "exorcism of the aesthetic spirits of coloniality" (Barriendos s.d. online).

Speaking of the African Americans she recruited for her new dance projects evoking the expressive culture of the Caribbean islands she had experienced during her anthropological fieldwork, Katherine Dunham once observed that "the creole waltz and mazurka they performed like true veterans, bowing, curtsying, shuffling, fluttering their beribboned fans and embroidered lace kerchiefs, as I had imagined the slave population of those islands would have done in the mimicry of the masters of the big house" (Kabir 2015, 220). The Big House spun into existence "sticky webs of copy and contact" (Taussig 2017, 21). Through dance and sartorial styles, the so-called house slaves mimicked - just a bit too faithfully, recalling Homi Bhabha's notion of "sly civility" (2012) - European codes often denied through sumptuary laws, to offer early Afro-diasporic versions of "African modes of self-writing" (Mbembe 2002). The freed slaves who accepted von Scholten's invitation to dance in Fort Frederik; the enslaved brought to live and work inside Marienborg; Ehlers' 'voodoo dance' in one location; her forever partially reflected waltz in another, in the frame of the Big House, these are all self-conscious annotations of attempts at "fleeing the Plantation" (Crichlow 2009). Straddling the Atlantic Ocean, Marienborg and Fort Frederik stand as manifestations of a *Casa grande e senzala* complex (Freyre 1995), where *casa grande* is the 'Big House' and *senzala*, the Kimbundu word for 'village' that, in Brazil, comes to mean 'Slave's Quarters'. If the *casa grande* remains a traumatic splinter in the post-*senzala* self, dancing through this space those very dances that perform creolisation's foundational scene of encounter (Kabir 2020a) activates the memory of creolisation as a process of both collaboration and resistance. The splinter then triggers a counter-process of inducing "cracks" (Walsh, Mignolo 2018, 81-96) within the system of post-Plantation edification.

Ehlers' Afropean consciousness (Lockward 2017) makes her body porous to the ironies and as well as to the new possibilities of creolised performance through which she cracks open the colonial matrix of power. The heuristic of creolisation moves us away from descriptive labels of an Afropean identity as 'hybrid' (or even more limitingly as a product of 'métissage', which restrains the matter to biology alone) towards analytical explication of the ways in which such identity enters and motivates praxis. Creolisation as a shared condition that connects past and present as well as specific insular and continental histories frees Ehlers, whose Caribbean ancestry is from Trinidad rather than Saint Croix, to perform affiliation as *vincularidad*, and

to connect with the Danish West Indies as well as Haiti. As a relational state, creolisation is capable of disrupting the system from within. It is the Trojan horse that brings *cimarronaje* 'marronage' into the *casa grande* through "posture, attitude, act, action and thought *casa adentro* (or in-house) of disobedience, rebellion, resistance and insurgency, and also of the decolonial construction and creation of freedom" (Walsh, Mignolo 2018, 43).

The endless repetition necessitated by mimicry can enable release from history through the right conditions that include technological resources such as the digital manipulation and circulation of danced interventions we see in Ehlers' 2009 works. The whiplash that lacerates consciousness *in situ* can then crack open the system because it arises from a praxis that brings into museumised space creolised dances that assume Europeanised forms as well as those whose African kinetic repertoires overtly signify *cimarronaje*. By treating these dances as proximate rather than polarised, Ehlers is able to disrupt the master-narratives and silences that still surround histories of enslavement, colonialism, and empire in public discourse and monumentality.

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 the slave trade.
(Thorkild Hansen 2002, 33)

Slavery flows all over the city [...] Black Copenhagen [...]. Running through our veins no matter how hard they try to let those flows dry. That's why I speak in visual tongues, poetically shaking up from colonial amnesia [...] confronting the denial, and challenging the denial of the denial.

(Jeanette Ehlers)

The involvement of Scandinavian countries in those histories has only very recently begun to be interrogated and unmasked. Yet the road towards a decolonial seizing of history cannot be a simple matter of overturning the curriculum. To the (White) Danish historian, the "naked feet" of slaves left no trace other than the slender yet unshakeable authority of the textbook (Hansen 2002, 33). Even that admission of amnesia can recede only up to the horizon of European pedagogy. The edifice remains unshaken. A few more bits of information should do the trick and we shall all be happy again. The (Afropean) Danish artist sees the matter quite differently. The enslaved and her history leak all over the city, making its whiteness black (Ehler in Barriendos s.d., online). And if she is with naked feet, it is because she chooses to be so, in order to "challenge the denial of the denial". She can equally well be in tennis shoes dancing a waltz, or in a big skirt dancing to what the uninitiated hears as 'voodoo rhythm'. Indeed, because she has made you think it is a 'voodoo dance', straight from Haiti, the joke is on you. It is percussion by a Ghanaian artist using rhythms of the Ewe ethnicity, present in several West African nations. If Marienborg is out of bounds because it is the Danish President's residence, she will digitally mimic its interior and make an ironic comment on stereotyping and fetishisation by signalling its façade via an embroidery sampler. Through mimicry, parody, improvisa-

tion - all aspects that motor creolisation - the edifice will be disrupted. As she says in the context of her latest work - the collaboration *I Am Queen Mary* with the artist of Virgin Islands heritage, LaBelle Vaughn - "working within a decolonial discourse is disruptive by nature since the aim is to create counter narratives to the dominant colonial structure" (Ehlers cited in Georgadis 2021, n.p.).

In the case of "Denmark's own vexed attitudes of pride, glorification, shame, and amnesia toward its colonial heritage in the Danish West Indies (which was sold to the United States in 1917) and the nation's role in the black Atlantic slave trade" (Lunde, Stenport 2008, 228), the centenary of the sale of those islands was a trigger to open up this discourse. Ehlers' pieces of 2009 and 2013 excavated for her audiences this buried connection between Denmark and the Caribbean via the triangular trade, preparing the ground, in a way, for that new consciousness to emerge (however painfully and slowly). Although this essay has not been able to consider the ways in which her wider praxis involves Danish presence in the coastal forts of West Africa as creolising and museumised spaces, I hope this focused reading of specific works by her will open pathways for a broader consideration of how creolisation as a heuristic can decode the decolonial work of re-edification that she performs through dance in the museum. It can also offer a fresh perspective on her most recent collaborations with La Belle Vaughn, which initiate museumisation of spaces of storage and distribution associated with Denmark's colonial trade through monumental rather than kinetic interventions. The earlier danced interventions examined here thus ask to be assessed as necessary steps in Ehlers' ongoing project of re-edification, through which emerges over time a decolonising aesthetics for the "art plantations of modernity" (Lockward 2017, 430). Ehlers has remarked that "most art institutions are not ready for decolonization" and she "still struggle[s] with decolonizing [her] relationship with them" (Lockward 2017, 430). Dance, codified movement to meaningful sound, interacts with the materiality of museumised space as embodiment of this struggle. "The silencing of Danish brutal and corrupt history is defiantly challenged by the ubiquitous and phantasmagorical appearance of the artist whose presence is alternatively erased and exaggerated" (Lockward 2019, 110). Dancing thus, the weight of the past is redistributed.

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