# Elements of Community

## An Exploration of Postcolonial Heritage, Identity, and Memory in St. Croix, US Virgin Islands

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# Dedication

For the people of St. Croix, their ancestors, and their descendants, forever –

# Acknowledgements

There are many people I want to thank for their contributions to this work. I am most grateful to all the members of St. Croix's community who participated in this research – your wisdom, expertise, perspective, and willingness to share with me are the reason this dissertation has come to fruition. It has been one of the biggest privileges of my life to learn from you. Thank you.

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# Abstract

This dissertation examines the complex dynamics of community heritage and identity on St. Croix, USVI, a former Danish colony in the Caribbean. Through four thematic case studies – water, earth, wind, and fire – this research explores how communities on St. Croix negotiate meaning through material heritage tied to Danish colonialism. By investigating the intersections of identity, heritage, and memory, this study reveals the ways in which postcolonial heritage is constructed, contested, and reconciled. The findings of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of critical community heritage, highlighting the harmonies, tensions, ambiguities, and ambivalences inherent to diverse postcolonial communities with complex histories, and the ways in which these communities reclaim and reconfigure their cultural heritage in the face of enduring colonial legacies.


Denne afhandling undersøger den komplekse dynamik af samfundsarv og identitet på St. Croix, USVI, en tidligere dansk koloni i Caribien. Gennem fire tematiske casestudier – vand, jord, vind og ild – undersøger denne forskning, hvordan samfund på St. Croix forhandler mening gennem materiel arv knyttet til dansk kolonialisme. Ved at undersøge skæringspunkterne mellem identitet, arv og hukommelse afslører denne undersøgelse de måder, hvorpå postkolonial arv er konstrueret, anfægtet og forenet. Resultaterne af denne forskning bidrager til en dybere forståelse af kritisk samfundsarv og fremhæver de harmonier, spændinger, tvetydigheder og ambivalenser, der er iboende for forskellige postkoloniale samfund med komplekse historier, og de måder, hvorpå disse samfund genvinder og rekonfigurerer deres kulturelle arv i ansigtet. af varige koloniale arv.

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# Chapter 1

## 1.1 Introduction

St. Croix is an island located within the Leeward Island group of the Caribbean and is part of the U.S. Virgin Islands (Figure 1). From 1733-1917, the island was a colony of Denmark, during which its primary industry was the cultivation and production of sugarcane. Today, the island's economy is supported by tourism, agriculture, and, until June of 2021, crude oil refinement.

**Figure 1** Map of the Caribbean with St. Croix [inset] indicated (Zahedi 2024).

St. Croix's colonial heritage has long been the subject of historical and archaeological inquiry from an international community of scholars (Figueredo 1974; Hopkins 1987; Hayes 2000; Jensen 2007; Lenik 2009; Hardy 2007; Odewale et al. 2017; Persons 2018). Although this rich tradition of research has offered significant insight into the island's past, research about St. Croix has seldom focused on the lived experiences of present communities and,

more specifically, how contemporary communities negotiate and derive meaning from colonial remnants. However, a direct engagement with this aspect of the postcolonial experience can shed light on how the enduring materialities of colonialism are intertwined and embedded within the everyday heritage of people on the island.  This dissertation, therefore, seeks to address this understudied topic.

In recent years, postcolonial Caribbean research has increasingly highlighted the value of contemporary communities in advancing our understanding of the dynamic processes behind heritage, identity, and memory (Scher 2012; Gonzalez-Tennant 2014; Jean, Malatesta, and Jackobson 2024). Phillip Scher's (2012) work on ambivalence and ambiguity in Caribbean heritage practice in Barbados, for example, highlights contemporary discourse tied to public commemoration and representations of the past within the present – situating the challenges of representing a 'resistance narrative' within the context of heritage-based tourism. Drawing attention to the complexity and heterogeneity of island communities, Edward Gonzalez-Tennant applied a contemporary heritage framework to collaborative archaeological research in Nevis – arguing that assumptive race and perceived ancestry can "restrict the ability of archaeologists to craft collaborative projects" by focusing too heavily on "externally-defined racial affiliation" (2014, 26). To this end, the academic 'turn' toward community-based research is intellectually stimulating and enlightening because it is oriented toward profound insight regarding the intrinsic complexities, tensions, and subtleties of island communities. Indeed, the recent rise of 'community-based' approaches to archaeology and heritage has set the stage for a new era in interdisciplinary postcolonial studies in the Caribbean, emphasizing mutual benefit to communities and scholars alike (McClanahan 2007; Smith and Waterton 2009; Wylie 2014).

Despite major strides across the region toward mindfully applying postcolonialism as method and mobilizing collaborative practice, there remain significant gaps in the scholarship

– perhaps chief among them, that 'community' itself is often not interrogated as a category of analysis. Although the term may seem self-evident, especially when applied to small islands, it is more complicated than it appears (McClanahan 2007). Presumptions about identity (e.g., gender, race, class, ancestry, etc.) and affiliation can unintentionally homogenize communities, bypassing the tacit ambiguities and nuances of the region in the present day – inadvertently perpetuating the colonial structures and epistemic dominances that have marginalized Caribbean worldviews for centuries (Robinson 2020, 12). In many ways, St. Croix is a paradigm for engaging with this issue from a community heritage perspective – the contemporary island exists as a palimpsest of colonial histories, archaeological and architectural heritage, and multicultural identity.

This dissertation examines how contemporary communities on the island (re)create and negotiate meaning in the present through colonial residues – extant artifacts, standing structures, and cultural landscapes tied to the Danish colonial period – and seeks to understand the intricacies, nuances, and layers that shape the diverse experiences of islanders in the postcolonial Caribbean. Applying Sonya Atalay's (2020) notion of braided knowledge, which refers to the weaving together of knowledge systems to create a stronger and more intricate whole, this research draws from various sources – independent and collaborative archaeological survey, participant observation, audio-recorded interviews[1], contemporary art and photography, and colonial archives – and combines diverse methods such as ethnography, historical research, critical discourse and spatial analysis to present a holistic, inclusive, and progressive perspective on St. Croix's post/colonial heritage. Through this lens, I aim to contribute to a deeper insight into how the processes of heritage, identity, and memory have consistently (re)shaped social life on St. Croix, defining what it means to be from and of this place.

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[1] These interviews are referenced throughout this dissertation as STX-01, STX-02, STX-03A, etc.

## 1.2 Enduring Materialities of Colonialism

This study is one component of *Enduring Materialities of Colonialism: Temporality, Spatiality, and Memory*[2] (EMoC), a contemporary archaeology and heritage project that examines the social and material afterlives of Danish colonialism on St. Croix. Within the wider project, this dissertation centers community heritage and the socio-political process of ascribing meaning to the material and immaterial inheritances and legacies of the Danish colonial period, with a particular emphasis on the entangled relationship between natural and cultural heritage.

International border closings during the Covid-19 global pandemic significantly impacted the ability for the EMoC team to engage in collective and collaborative fieldwork, and as a result the focus of the project shifted considerably relative to the evolving circumstances. Presence on the island, especially during a global crisis like an ongoing pandemic, was an important aspect of the overall research design, informing and shaping my fieldwork, interpretation, and analysis – demanding that I critically engage with structural inequities, globalized dynamics of power, and the ethics of how to conduct research in a post/colonial place.

## 1.3 Scope of Study

In some respects, St. Croix ($212^2$ km) might be understood as – to borrow from Jamaica Kincaid – "a small place" (1988). It can be tempting to imagine islands as microcosms and situate them through the lens of 'smallness' – enclosed and insular communities that are bounded by the sea and disconnected from the rest of the world. In reality, however, this imaginary is not quite true. Karen Olwig argued that while islands have often been viewed as ethnographic research 'units,' they are 'problematic units of analysis'

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[2] The project is led by Principal Investigator Laura McAtackney, PhD and was funded by the Independent Danish Research Fund (DFF) in 2019, with the project running between 2020-2024.

because of the intrinsic fluidity of island societies (2007, 260). Indeed, while islands remain rich and textured sites of study, it is important to be mindful that they are not static, isolated, or insular. In the case of St. Croix, the island has been inextricably tied to continuous cycles of immigration and emigration – a legacy that has had a profound influence on the island's cultural development (see: 2.5-2.8). The geographical scope of this study cannot therefore be separated from the community scope. Although this research is centered on St. Croix, it engages an expanded habitation space – drawing on the island's multitemporal and oscillating (post)colonial connections to West Africa, Denmark, the United States, and, enduringly, to other Caribbean islands.

Indeed, the human settlement of the island across time has been characterized by the movement of people – to and from Africa, Europe, the mainland Americas, and elsewhere – and St. Croix has been known, in past and present, for its 'cosmopolitan' nature. This has sometimes stoked intracommunity tensions, in which certain types of longevity (e.g., ancestral and descendant lineage) wield greater influence and higher esteem on the island – even among those who might appear outwardly connected or affiliated. The post-Transfer period (1917-present) has seen substantial change to the island's community, as many Danes left the island and others – wealthy 'continentals'[3] and 'snowbirds,' migrant and immigrant laborers, and Palestinian refugees – sculpted a new social landscape in St. Croix[4].

In this dissertation, I engage with the multiculturalism and diversity of St. Croix's population, although one of my aims is to amplify the voices of Afro-Caribbean[5]

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[3] 'Continental' is local term for white, usually wealthy, residents from the mainland U.S.. Although it is widely used, depending on the context it can be used as a derogatory term for an American who has not integrated with Crucian culture.

[4] According to the 2020 US Census, the population of St. Croix is 41,004 – 71% Black or African American, 12% White, 0.8% Asian, 0.5% Native, and 9.8% 'some other race.' In addition, 23.7% of respondents identified of Hispanic or Latino (of any race). However, pandemic restrictions impacted data collection and therefore there might be inaccuracies within the census data from 2020 (US Census 2020). The median household income in St. Croix is $39,445 – almost half the US national average of $74,580.

[5] I use Afro-Caribbean to differentiate between various Black identities present on St. Croix and to distinguish between people with ancestral ties to the Caribbean and continental Americans.

communities – their perspectives and experiences with post/colonial heritage, identity, and memory. There are several reasons for this – first, because the majority people on St. Croix are Afro-Caribbean; second, because of the pervasive lack of Afro-Caribbean perspectives and representation in postcolonial research in Denmark (Jensen 2015); and, third, because many of the people most enthusiastic in participating in this research were Afro-Caribbean. This demographic focus is not intended to diminish the value of other perspectives – and indeed, non-Black Caribbean, Danish, Continental American, Puerto Rican, Palestinian, and people of other cultural backgrounds were included in this research. In tandem, various components of the wider EMoC project have drawn from Danish and other perspectives (Naum 2024; Bolin 2024; Berg 2022). Moreover, because this dissertation is about community heritage, I sought a data set that was representative of the island's population.

## 1.4 Academic Context

In the past, academic literature focused on the Danish West Indies generally took a sentimental approach to Denmark's colonial legacy, tied to national narratives of colonial nostalgia and the myth of colonial mildness – an academic legacy that has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years (Andersen 2019; Meyer 2019; Tafari-Ama 2020; Weiss 2023). Although many have argued this nostalgia or ignorance as a type of postcolonial repression, Astrid Nonbo Andersen (2013) argued that it has instead been subject to "figurations," which are renderings of the past grounded in a self-projected contemporary Danish identity – a national discourse that has only recently been challenged by communities previously and presently colonized by Denmark. In the years leading up to the 2017 Centenary of the Transfer of the Danish West Indies from Denmark to the U.S. (1917), scholars in Denmark experienced a renewed interest in the nation's colonial past and began to shift their focus toward 'breaking' the historical silence.

In Denmark, academic projects from various disciplines, such as art history (Danbolt and Pushaw 2023)*,* anthropology (Vium 2024)*,* and history (Simonsen 2024; Roberts et al. 2024; Bøegh et al. 2022), turned their attention toward the West Indies. Yet the historical focus of many of the Centenary-era projects gave way to an 'apolitical' angle and many primarily sought to 'unearth' archival records. Indeed, such projects were successful in re-establishing connections between Denmark and its former 'paradises' in the Caribbean. Some of the most impactful work involved collaborations between scholars in the Virgin Islands and Denmark, for example *I Am Queen Mary* (2018)*,* an art installation co-created by the Crucian artist LaVaughn Belle and Afro-Danish artist Jeanette Ehlers. In tandem, there were various projects spear-headed by scholars in the Virgin Islands – for example, the *Invisible Heritage: Transfer 2017* (2017) exhibition curated by Monica Marin, Chief Curator of the Virgin Islands.

The recent rise of far-right politics and populism in Denmark, particularly stemming from the global resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 has hindered so-called 'woke' research by obstructing funding for postcolonial projects and inducing a hostile academic environment for so-called 'activist' postcolonial scholars (Stachurska-Kounta 2024). Research confronting Denmark's colonial past has sparked a response from the right-wing partly because it destabilizes and challenges contemporary notions of 'Danishness,' in which the Nordic nation is a self-appointed international champion of "human rights, peace, and democracy" (Shain 2024, 242) – this national collective identity has simultaneously downplayed colonial legacies, whilst promoting the myth that Denmark is 'post-racial' (see: 8.3.4-8.3.5) (Stachurska-Kounta 2024). Indeed, despite the considerable progress toward engaging with Denmark's past colonial atrocities – including its role in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and colonization of the Caribbean – there still remain significant gaps in the scholarship. In particular, there has

been little research into the experiences and perspectives of contemporary communities in the former Danish West Indies. In tandem, research has seldom focused on the enduring aftershocks of colonialism and how people in the Virgin Islands view contemporary Denmark, one of the 'happiest nations in the world' – its wealth and progressive social programs secured at the expense of the people it colonized (Martela et al. 2020).

This academic gap has practical implications – the methodologies underpinning post/colonial research on St. Croix have been largely guided by an extractive approach to fieldwork, a practice that has resulted in some cynicism and research fatigue on the island. In the first few months of fieldwork, I realized that emails from my university address were sometimes ignored by people on the island – upon meeting some of the email recipients later on, they explained that unsolicited emails from Danish researchers were common – some expressing relief that I was not Danish and confiding that they were reluctant to work with well-funded visiting researchers for no compensation or recognition – a tradition they have come to expect from outside researchers. Unfortunately, an atmosphere of distrust toward Danish and other non-resident researchers on the island will be difficult to overcome. As several participants in this study have voiced, those who have come to the island have drawn from Crucian knowledge and expertise through interviews, participant observation, focus groups, and surveys – often never to be heard from again. As one interviewee reflected:

> [The frustration is] the extractive nature of their work – the fact that millions of dollars [were] thrown at researchers, 2016, '17, '18, whatever. The researchers came to get information to take back and take out, and very little was left in the communities. Their engagement with professionals, their engagement with Virgin Islanders – people were not compensated. The expectation was that we were here to help, even though they were getting paid big dollars. (STX-13).

This has left some islanders feeling disrespected, objectified, and marginalized.

In recent years, various projects have sought to rectify this shameful academic legacy, aspiring toward more equitable, collaborative, and sustainable research for St. Croix.

Archaeological endeavors such as the Estate Little Princess Archaeology Project (ELP), led by the Society of Black Archaeologists (Flewellen et al. 2022), have expanded the discourse on community archaeology in St. Croix while aiming to introduce a new generation of Black students to archaeology – working collaboratively with various non-profits and organizations on the island. Projects such as ELP should indeed be celebrated for paving the way for inclusive and decolonial archaeological futures, which co-create knowledge together *with* communities and seek to diversify a field long dominated by researchers who are largely elite, white, and/or male. At the same time, archaeology has its inherent disciplinary limitations; although it sometimes incorporates contemporary elements, archaeology is primarily focused on reconstructing and understanding the past through analysis of material culture and its context – and it is therefore not always the most suitable approach for examining contemporary communities and their experiences with postcolonial heritage.

A critical heritage perspective, on the other hand – which examines the value, significance, and meaning of cultural heritage – questions dominant narratives, considers power dynamics and socio-political circumstances, and analyzes how heritage is constructed, represented, and used in the present. The contemporary angle a heritage approach facilitates has been underemployed in St. Croix. In tandem, critical heritage studies often draw from diverse methodologies, therefore fostering community engagement from social groups representing a myriad of interests, specialties, and backgrounds. In the context of this doctoral research, a critical heritage approach was most appropriate approach because of its flexibility, which enabled project partners and participants to collaboratively shape the questions, methods, and interpretations of the island's heritage.

In response to the epistemic and ethical concerns regarding how research has been done on St. Croix in the past, this study was designed as a community-based project, which was aided by my residence on the island. Over the past four years, I have integrated with the

island community, working with St. Croix-based scholars from diverse fields of study (e.g., contemporary art, museums, education, environmental conservation, history, archaeology, etc.), serving on the boards of the St. George Village Botanical Garden and Finding Your Archives a Home (FYAH), designing and hosting exhibitions and workshops at Fort Frederik and Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism (CHANT), organizing a donation-based community yoga program, volunteering for various organizations (e.g., Project Promise, State Historic Preservation Office, St. Croix Archaeological Society, Collective Collaboration, St. Croix Strike Team, St. Croix Animal Welfare Society, etc.) engaging in political activism (Black Lives Matter and Free Palestine), and participating in panel discussions on the island (Claiming Spaces 2021). Through these efforts, I have embraced participant observation in the truest sense, through the shared experience of the rhythm of island life – and its myriad of joys and challenges.

## 1.5 Research Question and Objectives

This study is inspired by a fascination with cultural complexity and nuance and was shaped by evolving ideas developed by experiences on the island – how the harmonies, tensions, and ambivalences inherent to community, as a category of being, are significant to how meaning is ascribed to postcolonial heritage in the Caribbean. The overarching research question of the dissertation has been shaped by the notion of, as one participant in this study described, 'living in the remnants of the colonial period' (STX-14).

Indeed, a surprising characteristic of St. Croix's contemporary landscape, despite the island's significant development and change over the past century, is the degree to which colonial spaces are entangled within the everyday experiences of islanders. Nearly all of St. Croix's neighborhoods have retained their colonial estate names (e.g., Rattan, Golden Rock, Castle Coakley, etc.) and many colonial buildings, most notably plantations, are still in contemporary use (e.g., Estate Little Princess/the Nature Conservancy, Estate St. George/St.

George Village Botanical Garden, Estate Diamond Ruby/Youth with a Mission, etc.). This notion of living *within* the ruins of the colonial period directed me toward a significant gap in the research of the island and the question:

> How does the diverse public in St. Croix navigate, negotiate, and reinterpret the meaning of (post)colonial heritage tied to the Danish colonial period (1733-1917), and in what ways does social memory mediate the intersections, tensions, and solidarities that shape collective identity and community?

Concentrating on this overarching question, this study examines postcolonial community heritage through case studies centered on the four classical elements – water, earth, wind, and fire. This thematic approach seeks to bridge the ancestral traditions of Afro-Caribbean communities with the contemporary heritage of St. Croix, examining this connection through various categories and understandings of heritage. Additionally, the 'elemental' framework was inspired by my contemporary archaeological fieldwork, during which I often encountered intentionally deposited materials at colonial heritage sites, ancestral and ritualistic offerings which included seeds and fruits, bottles, cigarettes, candles, marine shells, and coral (see: 4.2; 6.4; 7.4). Research participants explained that these assemblages were tied to the performance of African spiritual practice and ancestral veneration rituals, and that the deposited objects signified the four elements – water, earth, wind, and fire – required to summon spirits from beyond the material world we inhabit.

In turn, the structure of this dissertation is reflective of the ancestors of the people of St. Croix, and in particular to those who never lived to see their own liberation. The four case studies approach the primary research question from slightly different perspectives and methodologies, and through a combination of disciplinary angles – mainly within archaeology, anthropology, history, marine biology, contemporary art, literature, geography, and heritage. Building from the overarching research question, the distinct case studies engage distinct sub-questions, including – how colonial exploitation of the marine environment has impacted contemporary coral reefs and aquatic heritage (Chapter 5); how

creolized Afro-Crucian identity is performed and (re)constructed through the African baobab (Chapter 6); how diverse communities on the island ascribe meaning to the remnants of wind-powered sugarmills and their contested symbolism (Chapter 7); and how spatiotemporal distance and contemporary identity shape the memory and commemoration of colonial resistance in St. Croix and Denmark (Chapter 8). Independently and collectively, these four case studies engage the ambiguities of identity, memory, and community – examining how they underpin the island's postcolonial heritage.

Building from this, a critical heritage perspective on the island's enduring colonial legacy benefits the intellectual communities on St. Croix and in Denmark in several ways that previous historical and archaeological studies do not. Drawing from a contemporary community focus, the theoretical foundation of this study examines heritage as a social, cultural, and political construct, highlighting its role in shaping collective identity and memory. As a reflexive practice, it challenges epistemic dominance by integrating folk memory and community-sourced data with 'conventional' historical and archaeological data, to present the island and its postcolonial reality with complexity and nuance – seeking to inspire more questions than it answers.

In addition, this study positions communities on the island as research partners and heritage experts, implementing postcolonial theory as method. The methods and sources of data mobilized were almost entirely collaborative, a departure from the established practice on the island. Through this intentional and reflexive approach, I aim to contribute to a more sustainable model for future research in St. Croix.

## 1.6 Chapter Overview

Drawing from various sources of data and disciplines, I mobilize diverse approaches to provide a response for the guiding questions of this dissertation. The chapters that follow are progressively structured – with the early chapters (1-4) providing a 'road map' to the main

research chapters (5-9). In the next chapter, Chapter 2, I present the general history and context of St. Croix, providing a foundation for understanding the island as a post/colony. In Chapter 3, I outline my particular approaches to methodology, largely driven by an overarching ethos, which highlights the role that community-based research plays in deconstructing epistemic dominance and hierarchies of knowledge on small islands, to demonstrate how embracing fluidity, ambiguity, and hybridity is central to advancing our understanding of how colonialism has shaped our contemporary world(s). Chapter 4 provides a framework for the theoretical perspectives that support the methods, sources of data, interpretation, and conclusions of this study – mobilizing postcolonialism, ecocriticism, and creole social theory to demonstrate the layering of colonial materialities and legacies, identities, and collective memories on the island.

The substantive research chapters (5-8) seek to obfuscate the line between natural and cultural heritage, building from the postcolonial, ecocritical, and social creole theoretical frameworks underpinning the dissertation. The four primary case studies engage community heritage from diverse and interdisciplinary angles. Each chapter includes a separate discussion on methods and sources of data, applied theory, historical context, analysis, and discussion.

In Chapter 5, I present a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of colonial coral mining and masonry on the island. St. Croix has a unique architectural heritage – beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, vast quantities of living coral were mined from the island's emergent reefs and used to construct many of its buildings, the evidence of this practice still visible in its many existing colonial structures. I delve into this understudied practice, drawing from postcolonialism and historical ecology – incorporating archaeological, ethnographic, and archival data to examine how colonial environmental exploitation enduringly affects

contemporary islanders, who are faced with the compounding effects of anthropogenic climate change.

In Chapter 6, I weave together oral histories and folklore about the many baobab trees on St. Croix – a plant species that was carried to the island by enslaved Africans. Communities on the island claim that St. Croix has more baobab trees than any other Caribbean island (Nicholls 2012) – a superlative that is embodied within contemporary engagement, discourse, myth, and memory centered on the trees. Although the island's baobab trees have been a subject of community-level discussion and storytelling for many years, they have not been examined as postcolonial remnants, nor through a contemporary heritage framework. Adding this perspective to the body of academic scholarship aims to elevate the stories, memories, and legacies of Afro-Crucian communities, by exhibiting how the baobab tree lies at the intersection of broader discourses about postcolonial identity and heritage.

In Chapter 7, I present St. Croix's many standing windmills as sites of contested heritage – investigating how diverse communities on the island engage, understand, and experience them. Although colonial windmills have long been a focus for researchers in the Caribbean (Cherry and Rothenburg 2021; Goodwin 1994), they are seldom explored as *living* heritage sites. On St. Croix, windmills have become 'icons' of the island's heritage – represented on travel brochures, in jewelry, and replicas – however their 'symbolism' is rarely elaborated upon in contemporary public or academic discourse. For some, the windmills are viewed as majestic feats of architecture, evoking nostalgic reminiscence of the island's former 'glory' and mythical 'golden age.' For others, the mills are viewed as complex and multivocal sites that represent colonialism and enslavement, whilst simultaneously existing as ancestral monuments and cenotaphs. Drawing from interviews with members of the diverse public, I examine how various perspectives regarding the symbolic meaning of the windmills

shape how they are encountered and interpreted, how their contested status reflects contemporary dimensions of power, and how the windmill 'issue' speaks to the larger challenge of developing the island as a heritage tourism destination.

Building from discourse centered on postcolonial 'amnesia,' 'nostalgia,' and (de)selective memory in Denmark (Andersen 2020; Jensen 2019; Blaagaard 2010), Chapter 8 engages the commemoration and representation of the 1878 Fireburn[6] in St. Croix and in Denmark. Exploring the transregional material and memory of this pivotal event, I draw in metropolitan Denmark as an expanded field of 'imperial debris' (Stoler 2008) – interpreting Denmark, St. Croix, and the space in-between them as a contemporary 'nervous landscape' (Byrne 2003), in which collective memories about the Fireburn challenge and destabilize self-projected Danish exceptionalism. This chapter seeks to provide a reframing of the Fireburn as an entangled heritage legacy that, whilst eliciting diverse emotional responses regarding self-representation, identity, and the future, bond Denmark and St. Croix through shared history.

Finally in the conclusion (Chapter 9), I provide a deeper discussion of how these case studies contribute to an understanding of postcolonialism in St. Croix, Denmark, and elsewhere. I offer suggestions for future research and call for a greater emphasis on research sustainability, equity, and collaboration from visiting researchers on St. Croix and elsewhere in the Caribbean. Lastly, I suggest future directions for reparative justice and redress for Denmark and its former colonies.

## 1.7 Conclusion

This introduction has provided a general overview of this dissertation. In the chapters that follow, I present the culmination of the past four years of research on St. Croix, during

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[6] The Fireburn was a labor rebellion on St. Croix, which began on October 1, 1878. Over the course of several days, two-thirds of the plantations on the island were burned. It remains the biggest labor rebellion in Danish history.

which I have approached the enduring material and immaterial legacies of Danish colonialism on the island in diverse ways, drawing from colonial archives, archaeological data, contemporary art, and community perspectives. The aim of this research has been, ultimately, to examine how heritage manifests as a dialectic between past and present, how groups on the island navigate this process and, in turn, negotiate what it means to be 'of' St. Croix.

This dissertation presents innovative and original research by the author, which integrates distinct registers of knowledge – institutional, scientific, and traditional – to implement an anti-hierarchical, collaborative, and holistic methodological approach that aspires toward heritage futures that are informed by a critical awareness and understanding of how colonialism continues to shape our contemporary world. Although significant effort, dedication, and passion went into this work, it is not without flaws or blind spots. As intellectual endeavors tend to do, this academic journey has left me with more questions than answers – a result that has only further rouses a spirit of curiosity. I look forward to continuing my lifelong pursuit toward a deeper understanding of our shared humanity and a commitment to social justice through intercultural awareness. The next chapter brings us back to the island's beginning – engaging a retrospective angle that situates contemporary St. Croix within the context of its distant and not-so-distant past.

# Chapter 2
## Island Context

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a backdrop of the island, establishing a foundation that is built upon in the chapters that follow. It begins with an introduction to the contemporary geography of the island, followed by its geological and ecological development. It then briefly touches on the island's early human settlement and colonial history, beginning with the Spanish colonization of the island in 1493. This is followed by are more in-depth discussion of the Danish colonial period through 'the Transfer' (1917), and the island's transition to a colony of the United States (U.S.). Finally, it presents the contemporary period, building a foundation for Chapters 3 and 4 – the methodology and theoretical chapters of this work. I would like to emphasize that this chapter tells only one of infinite versions of the story of St. Croix – aiming to offer historical context that situates the island within the framework of this dissertation.
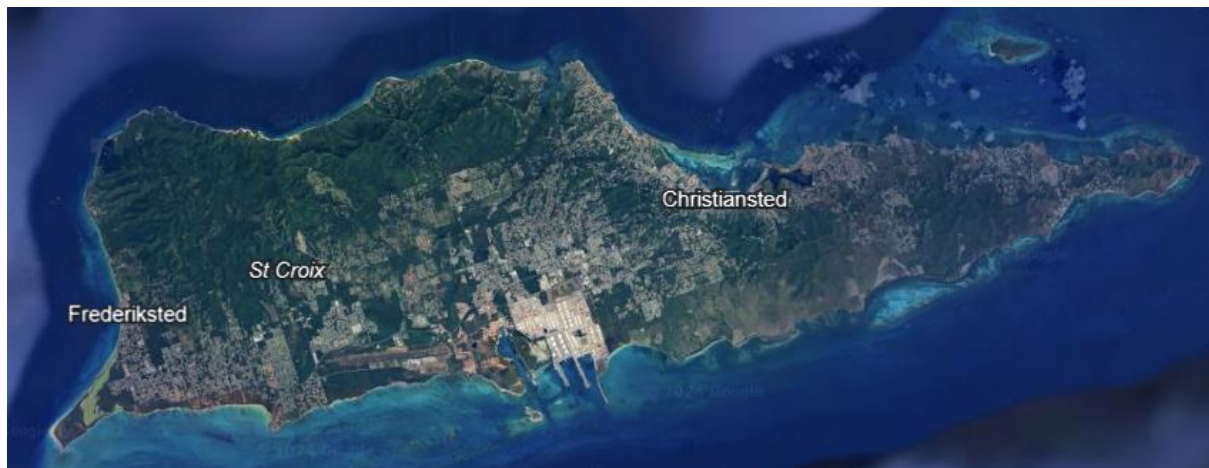


**Figure 2** An aerial view of the island (Google Earth 2024).

### 2.2 Geography

St. Croix's unique geographical, geological, and ecological characteristics have had a substantial influence on its history and development. The island is long and narrow – 45 kilometers from west to east, and 11 kilometers from north to south – which has, to some

degree, shaped human settlement patterns and social relations on the island (Figure 2). St. Croix has two main cities – Christiansted, its capital, and Frederiksted. Christiansted is located along the central-east north shore (Figure 3) and is known for its pastel West Indian-style buildings, its many independent shops, art galleries, restaurants, and the Christianvaern Fort, which is administered by the National Park Service. Although referred to as a 'city,' Christiansted is a town of less than 2,000 people. It has a historic 'feel' – with uneven ballast brick stairs and sidewalks, covered walkways, and narrow streets, many of which have retained their Danish names (e.g., Strandgade, Bjerge Gade, Kirke Gade, etc.). The east side of the island is primarily dry scrubland – the hilly interior landscape dominated by cacti, ginger thomas, and acacia (Figure 4). The coastal landscape in the east is characterized by a prominent barrier reef, white sand beaches, and salt ponds. The 'East End' is sparsely populated and undeveloped.



**Figure 3** A view toward Government House in Christiansted. The colonial architecture blends a Scandinavian and West Indian aesthetic (Zahedi 2024).

**Figure 4** A view of the east end of St. Croix, looking westward. This photo was taken during the rainy season, when the east side of the island is green and lush (Zahedi 2020).

The mid-island region is an agricultural and commercial district, home to a large shopping center, Sunny Isle, built in the 1970s during a period of rapid development and Americanization (Highfield n.d.). Most of the year-round population lives in this part of the island. There are many farms to the west of Sunny Isle – farmers and fishers often selling their products on the roadside. The island's 'North Shore' is known for Salt River, an inland bay with mangrove forests, a bioluminescent lagoon, and picturesque beaches. The 'South Shore' is industrial – home to several rum distilleries (i.e., Cruzan and Captain Morgan), a commercial shipping port, the airport, and the remnants of the island's defunct oil refinery. Frederiksted, also known as 'Freedom City,' on the west coast, is the arts and culture hub of the island (Figure 5). The 'West End' is home to St. Croix's rainforest, many long, white sand beaches, and 'the Pier,' St. Croix's cruise ship port.

**Figure 5** "Freedom" by Ghanaian artist, Bright Bimpong (1998), was sculpted in commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of Emancipation. The depiction of an emancipatory conch blower is located in front of Customs House in Frederiksted – just across the street from Fort Frederik – the site of Emancipation. There are two other copies of the statue – one is in Copenhagen and the other in St. John. (Zahedi 2021).

There are many colonial structures in various states of preservation on the island –

plantations, churches, official buildings, and schools. St. Croix's multi-layered and textured

historical landscape is an attraction to tourists and islanders; in 2022 the island was

designated a National Heritage Area (NHA). In the U.S., NHAs are federally designated

places through which "historic, cultural, and natural resources combine to form cohesive,

nationally important landscapes" (NPS 2024). Indeed, the island's distinct and unique

heritage landscape is discussed in more detail in the proceeding sections.

## 2.3 An Island Emerges

Eighty million years ago, the sedimentary rocks that eventually became St. Croix

emerged from the sea (Whetten 1986). Originally arising as two distinct islands connected by

a coral reef, continued tectonic pressure and subduction eventually lifted and unified the

islands, forming a central valley bisected by an inlet (Nagle and Hubbard 1989).

The island was ecologically diverse – its gentle eastern and western hills, freshwater streams and rivers, and deposits of various minerals and rocks supporting diverse habitats for various species of flora and fauna. Its terrestrial landscape was comprised of tropical and dry forests, grasslands, and scrubland. Its marine landscapes included sandy and rocky beaches, craggy cliffs, mangrove forests, coral reefs, seagrass beds, and saltwater ponds – ecological niches for many animals (e.g., manatees, flamingoes, several varieties of migratory birds, etc.). A large barrier reef developed along the east side of the island, teeming with life (e.g., coral, mollusks, invertebrates, turtles, fish, sharks, cetaceans, etc.) – and offered protection for the coastline and inland habitats (see: 5.2-5.3). The island existed untouched by humans for millions of years. Yet, it was its biodiversity and geography that drew the first people to settle – seafarers who viewed the lush island as a place of possibility and prosperity.

## 2.4 The First People

There is a pervasive myth of post-contact indigenous extinction in the Caribbean (Haslip-Viera 2012), but indigenous heritage remains very much alive across the region, including on St. Croix (STX-13; STX-18; STX-19). St. Croix was first settled 500-1000 B.C.E. (Hardy 2008; Torres et al. 2023; Fitzpatrick 2015), although it is the Taino period (700 C.E. – 1600) that is of the greatest interest to most people on the island. The Taino knew St. Croix as *Ay ay* (i.e., 'big river' or 'water') (Figueredo 1974), enduringly used as a decolonizing alternate name for the island.

The Taino were a large ethnic group, their territory extending from the Northern Bahamas and Cuba to St. Kitts and Nevis (Higman 2021). Previously believed to be a relatively homogenous tribe, the Taino are now understood to have been culturally and linguistically diverse (Curet 2014). Archaeological excavations (1920s-1950s) indicate that the Salt River area was a significant Taino site, perhaps the seat of a regional chiefdom (Morse 1995), among the excavated assemblages – sophisticated slipware, zemi sculptures,

*duho* (i.e., carved seats), ceremonial smoking implements, petroglyphs, and a ceremonial ball court for a game known as *batey* – the only *batey* court found in the Eastern Caribbean (Hatt 1924; Wild 2013). By 1425, another group had come to occupy the island – the Kalinago – an advanced, patriarchal, and democratic chiefdom, regionally known as fierce warriors (Cissel 1993). The Kalinago renamed the island *Cibuquiera* (i.e., 'stony land'), and it was the western-most boundary of their territory. The Taino and Kalinago cohabitated the island, the sole inhabitants of the island until its colonization by the Spanish in 1493.

## 2.5 St. Croix and its 'Seven Flags' through a Postcolonial Lens

St. Croix has a layered colonial history – claimed, purchased, captured, and exchanged by various European empires many times over. The island is sometimes referred to as the 'land of seven flags,' a nod to the many nations – Spain, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Knights of Malta, France, Denmark, and the U.S. – who have laid claim to it. Although many early colonial efforts were short-lived and unsuccessful, references to the 'seven flags,' are common. For some people on the island, the notion of the 'seven flags' evokes the island's romantic and storied past, when St. Croix was a coveted treasure (Lewisohn 1970). Others find it offensive, arguing that the 'seven flags' narrative glorifies colonialism, and by extension, the eradication of Indigenous and enslavement of African people. A central pillar of this dispute is the controversial celebration of Christopher Columbus, who claimed the island for Spain during his second voyage in 1493 – a pivotal moment commemorated in contemporary St. Croix through names such as 'Columbus' Landing' in Salt River.

On November 14, 1493, Christopher Columbus, commanding a fleet of seventeen vessels, dropped anchor in the harbor at Salt River – although contrary to popular belief, Columbus did not set foot on the island. Salt River is often indicated as the site of the first violent encounter between European and Indigenous people in the Caribbean (Minelli 1987) – but Meredith Hardy (2008, 244) makes the distinction that the event was likely the first

*recorded* violent encounter, suggesting that early skirmishes probably occurred on other islands. Primary accounts claim that, attempting to 'rescue' several Taino people, the Spanish approached the bay's eastern cape, encountering a canoe with four men, two women, and a child (Chacna 1494). The fleet surgeon, Dr. Diego Alvaredo Chacna, reported that fire was exchanged – resulting in two Spanish injuries and one fatality (1494, 290), prompting Columbus to name the site 'Cabo de las Flechas' (i.e., the cape of arrows).

There is contemporary dissonance regarding which Salt River site deserves celebration: Columbus Landing or the Cape of Arrows. For some, Columbus is a heroic figure, the discoverer of the 'new' world – his 'landing' on St. Croix a source of pride, despite its factual inaccuracy. For others, the Cape of Arrows is tied to a heritage of anti-colonialism and resistance – a narrative that extols the first violent encounter on Caribbean soil as an indigenous victory against their European invaders (STX-20A/B; STX-22).

### 2.5.1 One Island, Many Flags

Columbus colonized the island and renamed it *Santa Cruz* (i.e., 'Holy Cross'), although the Spanish did not pursue development of the island – focusing their efforts on the Greater Antilles (e.g., Puerto Rico, Cuba, Hispaniola). They did, however, continue to violently raid St. Croix, capturing and enslaving its indigenous inhabitants. The end of the indigenous period remains unclear. Samuel Wilson suggested that a particularly devastating attack in 1555 eradicated the remaining islanders (1993, 48-49). However, Brigit Morse argues that there were still indigenous inhabitants on the island in 1587, when John White[7] stopped at Salt River and reported that there were still people living there (1995, 473). The Spanish had deserted the island by 1590. After this, the island changed hands several times, beginning with the English (1631) and French (1634) – both ousted by Spain. Through the 1640s, the French, Dutch, Spanish, and French fought over the island (Hardy 2008).

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[7] John White was the governor of the failed colony at Roanoke Island.

Eventually, the French captured the island, renaming it Saint Croix, although their colonization efforts failed. By 1651, two-thirds of the 300 French inhabitants on St. Croix had died (Highfield 2009, 32). In 1661, the governor of St. Kitts bought St. Croix as his private estate, deeding it to the Knights of Malta.

The French West India Company purchased the island in 1665 – the first attempt to 'permanently' develop and cultivate it (Highfield 2013). They established a modest but profitable tobacco industry, relying upon the labor of indentured servants from rural France, known as *engages* (Hardy 2017, 248). By the 1680s, the French became more interested in the lucrative sugar industry, which required a larger labor force. The French West India Company and the Senegal Company collaboratively enslaved and stole thousands of African people to St. Croix – within a few years, there were more Africans than French on the island (Highfield 2009, 65).

The French struggled to establish St. Croix, with poor access to fresh water and suffering disease from stagnant water from the island's many salt ponds (Hardy 2017, 248). By 1697, St. Croix was largely abandoned, apart from a small population of 150-600 "poor English settlers" who migrated from the Eastern Caribbean and around 450 enslaved Africans (Highfield 2009, 65; Hardy 2017, 252). The French colonization of the island was unsuccessful, but they established its early cartographic, cadastral and infrastructural foundations. Military fortifications, plantations, and towns established by the French were built upon by the Danish, the island's next colonizers.

## 2.6 St. Croix, Danish West Indies

The Danish West India and Guinea Company purchased St. Croix from the French in 1733, and it became the third major island in the Danish West Indies. Its sister islands, St. Thomas and St. John, are geographically grouped with the British Virgin Islands, collectively forming the Virgin Islands Archipelago (Figure 6). Despite forming one 'territory,' St. Croix

is somewhat disjoined from St. Thomas and St. John. It is the largest island in the US Virgin Islands but is often secondary in political matters – sometimes considered the forgotten virgin island.
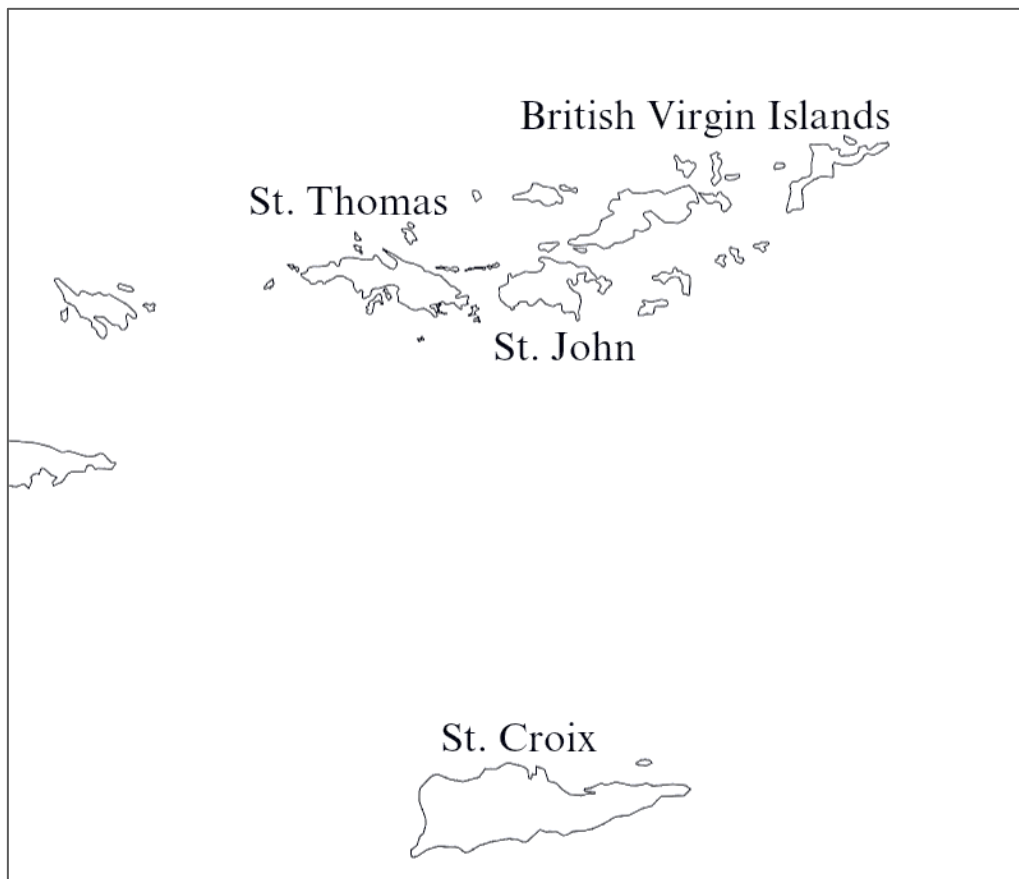


**Figure 6** A map of the U.S. and British Virgin Islands, with St. Croix to the south.

St. Thomas was colonized by the Danish (1672-1917), attractive because of its central location within a cluster of islands. Its neighbor, St. John, was purchased as a sugar island (1717-1917), although its steep topography and irregular rainfall made its development challenging (Armstrong et al. 2008). In 1733, St. John was captured by enslaved Akwamu people, who retained control of the island for nine months (Sebro 2013). Fearing subsequent rebellions on their most profitable sugar island, the 1733 purchase of St. Croix came at an opportune time for the Danes to re-establish their footing in the lucrative sugar market. The islands were appointed different governors, and so though they were all 'Danish,' they remained politically separate (Knox 1852, 82). When St. Thomas was declared a free trade

port in 1764, Denmark restricted trade between St. Croix and St. Thomas, hoping to avoid a

loss of profit from illegal (i.e., untaxed) sugar markets (Mulich 2013) – further alienating St.

Croix from the other islands in the Danish West Indies.



**Figure 7** An early Danish map of St. Croix, which clearly shows the cadastral survey – a micro-managerial
spatial order that is uncommon in the Caribbean (Beck 1754).

The Danish West India Company initiated a cadastral survey that divided St. Croix into

several hundred estates (Figure 7), measured from a 'center line' that ran east to west –which

eventually became known as the Centerline Road (i.e., Queen Mary Highway), the historical

road connecting the two sides of the island (Knudsen et al. 2021). Because sugar was the

most profitable commodity, three hundred sugar plantations were surveyed and plotted first.

The remaining tracts of land were sold as cotton estates (Tyson 1992, 2).

Denmark was a small nation, its population inadequate to develop St. Croix. It instead

incentivized economic investment from established planters on neighboring islands – Danish

(St. Thomas and St. John), Dutch (e.g., St. Eustatius and St. Maarten), English (e.g., Anguilla

and St. Kitts), and French (e.g., Martinique and Dominica) – by offering them loans and

"quasi nobility" (Heilbuth 1845, 17). St. Croix quickly became a profitable sugar island, establishing 88 plantations within the first ten years – increasing to 138 by 1752 (Beck 1754).

The island substantially benefited from foreign planters, who brought knowledge and experience from elsewhere (West 1799). Because St. Croix was established relatively late, its plantation system was modified from other islands – the colonial elite reaping the benefits of regional infrastructure and avoiding novice mistakes (Hayes 2000, 35). Despite its productivity, the plantation system implemented on St. Croix was unsustainable – a single crop system, intensive land use, and mass clearing resulted in substantial deterioration of the soil over time, which was recognized even in the 19th century (Hovey 1838, 186-8).

### 2.6.1 Denmark and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

The myth of colonial 'mildness' is a longstanding narrative (Weiss 2023; Andersen 2013) which purports there was a "special, benevolent form of slavery in the Danish colonies" – in part passed down from colonial propaganda that assured the public that "conditions [were] better on Danish ships and in Danish plantations than on those of other nations" (Smed 2023, 103). When compared with Portugal, Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands, Denmark's role in Caribbean colonialism was smaller scale, but it was no less brutal – the islands' economies were entirely supported by enslaved labor and, to this, the trajectory of St. Croix's commercial development and success is directly correlated with the importation of enslaved people from Africa and elsewhere in the Caribbean (Meader 2009; Hayes 2000)[8]. In the Danish islands, the death rate consistently surpassed the birthrate, their politico-economic viability, therefore remaining heavily reliant upon the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

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[8] Between 1755 and 1765, as the sugar industry on St. Croix began to take off, the enslaved population of St. Croix had nearly doubled, from 8,897 to 15,699 (Westergaard 1917, 318), and by 1775, the population had grown to 23,834 (Loftin 1977, 17).

At its peak, the Danish colonial empire spanned four continents – Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia. Beginning in the mid-seventeenth century, it established several trading posts and forts along the Gold Coast in Africa, most famously Fort Christianborg (i.e., Osu Castle) in present-day Ghana. In recent years, the scale and degree of Denmark's role in slave trading has come under increasingly critical scrutiny (Gøbel 2016). Scott Stawski's research suggests that contrary to dominant narratives that place Denmark as the seventh largest slave trading nation, it was actually the fifth largest when accounting for transshipment, the inter-colonial trade, and the illegal slave trade (2018, 12). To this point, Bernard Bailyn notes that while the colonial Caribbean theoretically operated upon principles of "formal realities," (e.g., the ideals of plantation society, systematized trade, etc.), this view does not represent the truth that beneath idealized institutional structures laid an "informal actuality, [with] patterns of its own" (2005, 60).

Historical estimates of the total number of enslaved people imported to the Danish West Indies vary greatly; this is because studies of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, including calculations of its human toll, frequently fall under the guise of nationalized systems of *legal* trade, which fail to account for the international networks of enterprise and cooperation upon which they relied, economic loopholes, or the illicit markets that also existed (Green-Pedersen 1980, 177). For example, the National Museum of Denmark (2024) indicates an estimated 60,000 Africans were transshipped to the Danish West Indies, while Arnold Highfield suggests the number is closer to 120,000 (2009, 81) – but these estimates do not include enslaved Africans transshipped to other islands, the interisland slave trade, nor undocumented slave trading. One study recently proposed that the total number surpasses 600,000 – an estimate calculated through comprehensive archival research in Denmark, the U.S., and the Virgin Islands (Stawski 2018, 2). Hence, one must acknowledge that the Danish

Slave Trade was not a closed-loop system – its impact and legacy extended beyond Denmark and its colonies.

Multi-ethnic African diasporic legacies were transposed to St. Croix when colonial elites, who representing different nationalities themselves, brought diverse communities of enslaved people to the island (Weiss 2019). As reflected by Holger Weiss, the eighteenth century "Atlantic World was as much an African era as it was an era dominated by Europeans" (2019, 2), as diverse African communities brought their distinct cultures, spiritual practices, and traditions to the Caribbean, which were creolized (Oldendorp 1987). African identity remains a point of pride in contemporary St. Croix – many delving into comprehensive genealogical and genetic research to investigate ethnic heritages, tribal affiliations and coordinating opportunities to revive lost cultural practices.

**2.6.2 Social Organization in the Danish West Indies**

Enslaved and free Africans and their descendants comprised the majority of the population of St. Croix from the second quarter of the eighteenth century onward[9]. Despite enduring a colonial system based upon racialized exploitation, diasporic African communities played a significant role in the development of the socio-cultural landscape of the island. Weaving together traditions from their West African homelands, European influences, and the unique conditions of the Caribbean, they cultivated an entirely new culture.

The island's plantation-based economy created a society sharply divided along class lines, which reflected the power dynamics that drove the colonial machine (Hall 1992) – social stratification had both horizonal and vertical elements that were dependent upon numerous factors (e.g., race, complexion, gender, education, ability, etc.) (Highfield and Tyson 1994). Colonial elites (i.e., planters and elected officials) accounted for a small

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[9] Although the population fluctuated, at its peak in the mid-eighteenth century, the enslaved population was between 18,000 and 20,000 individuals, while the European population ranged between 1,500 and 2,000 (Highfield 2009, 88-91).

percentage of the population but exercised nearly all authority. Hans West, a Danish teacher on St. Croix in the late eighteenth century, stated that members of the planter class were "primarily Englishmen, with the exception of a few officials and four to six Danish-born planters and [their] local children" (2004, 64), although it should be noted that his description of 'English' likely conflates English, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh people, whom all represented the British Empire but had distinct cultural identities that were situated with the unique and entrenched colonial hierarchy of the British Isles. The merchant class, while not as wealthy as the elites, also enjoyed an opulent lifestyle by Caribbean standards – represented by diverse nationalities and cultures including Danish, English, Dutch, German and Jewish people (Lawaetz 1991, 142). The 'lesser white' class included petty traders, bookkeepers, soldiers, sailors, and plantation overseers – many individuals of this class were Europeans from colonized countries, for example Ireland, Scotland, and Wales (Mackenzie 2008; Tyson 2014).

From the early Danish period, there was a vibrant Free Black community on the island, although there were many stipulations to their 'freedom' (Sundsback 2023). For example, the building code of 1747 imposed restrictions on where free communities were permitted to reside, limited to sections laid out by colonial surveyors – known as 'Free Gut' in Christiansted and Frederiksted (Thurland 2009, xvi). The Free Black community developed as a result of social, economic, and interracial mixing between Europeans and Africans (Hall 1980). When interracial relationships resulted in children, the resultant children were sometimes granted free status (Olsen 2016). To this end, colorism was often a factor that limited or increased social mobility within free and enslaved communities (Simonsen 2003) and, to some extent, remains an enduring issue on the island and elsewhere in the Caribbean (STX-01; Appendix B).

Artisans, which included free Black individuals, were skilled in specialized trades such as carpentry, masonry, embroidery, basketweaving, silversmithing, and blacksmithing (Thurland 2018). Expertly crafted goods from St. Croix became coveted goods in the European market – for example Crucian mahogany and silver (Halberg 2018, 9). Many of these colonial collections are exhibited at European museums, for example at the National Museum of Denmark. Although rare and valuable objects are often featured in displays of the opulent lives of the colonial elite – in stark contrast to the unrefined, rustic, and simple material culture typically exhibited in displays interpreting enslaved lifeways (Voices of the Colonies 2024) – it is important to acknowledge their makers, the conditions under which they were produced, and where they might be most appropriately interpreted – in European or Afro-Caribbean displays (Figure 8).



**Figure 8** This silver teapot by Peter Bentzon, a free Black man born on St. Croix, exhibits the quality of craftsmanship on the island. The teapot was the one millionth object catalogued by the Smithsonian (Smithsonian 2024).

Enslaved communities were stratified by colonists to maximize the profitability and success of their economic pursuits – and were largely divided by work and proximity to the planter class. Domestic laborers carried out duties such as cooking, washing, sewing, and

childcare for the family of the planter. Craftspeople formed about ten percent of the enslaved population and comprised of masons, carpenters, cobblers, blacksmiths, tailors, musicians, and rum distillers (Odewale 2019). The Kamina, or field laborers, made up approximately 90% of the enslaved (Highfield and Tyson 1994). There were small numbers of people who existed outside the colonial system, and retain a heightened place in community memory – chief among these, maroons (i.e., self-emancipated individuals). Unlike larger, mountainous islands, such as Jamaica, where maroons were able to establish semi-permanent settlements, St. Croix's size and topography did not allow for this – although little is known about the maroon communities of St. Croix, oral history holds that maroons hid in coastal caves along Maroon Ridge, awaiting ally ships to carry them to freedom on other islands (Dunnavant 2021; Oldendorp 1987) (Figure 9).



**Figure 9** Maroon Ridge is a sacred and spiritual place for many people on the island. A proposal was recently set forth to designate the site as a territorial park (Zahedi 2021).

### 2.6.3 The Road to Emancipation

By the late eighteenth century, descriptions of slavery and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade began to circulate in Europe, which mobilized a small abolition movement in Denmark (Smed 2023). Sensing an increasing pressure from the public, Denmark issued a Decree on the Slave Trade (1792), which would 'officially' ban the importation of enslaved people from

Africa to the Danish West Indies after 1803 – viewed as a philanthropic act by King Frederik VI, who was widely praised for it (Southwick 2020). However, rather than marking the "beginning of the end" of slavery in the Danish West Indies (Voices from the Colonies 2024), the decree was instead intended to establish a sustaining and reproducing population of enslaved people in the islands (Gøbel 2021). While the importation of enslaved Africans remained relatively stable between 1775 and 1792, the decade preceding the 1803 Abolition of the Slave Trade was marked by a dramatic increase of slave trading from Africa to St. Croix, especially women of childbearing age – clearly evidencing this objective (Green-Pedersen 1975, 204).

Despite the pervasive belief in Denmark that it was the first to abolish slavery, this narrative is not accurate. The Haitian Revolution and France's abolition of slavery in 1794 predated the 'official' end of Denmark's Transatlantic Slave Trade by nearly a decade. Although Denmark was the first European nation to permanently abolish the *Transatlantic Slave Trade* in 1803, Erik Gøbel notes that after 1803 authorities accepted "a number of exceptions" (2011, 136); the ban was reportedly not enforced until 1807, when the island was seized by the British (Richardson 1968, 12) and slavery continued in the Danish islands until 1848. The British occupation of the Danish West Indies (1807-1815) brought an influx of Free People of Color (Hall 1980, 65), who irrevocably destabilized the St. Croix's colonial social order (Tyson 2014; Planters Inquiry 1881). As Free Black communities in the Danish West Indies grew in size, and thus their social, political, and economic power, so did demands for equality (Chowdhury 2015).

Peter von Scholten, the Governor-General of the Danish West Indies from 1827-1848, is remembered for his progressive politics, which were undoubtedly influenced by his common-law wife, Anna Heegaard, a wealthy free woman of color (Poblete 2021). Their twenty-year relationship coincided with increasing freedoms granted to both free and

enslaved Afro-Crucians in the Danish West Indies, many suggesting she was instrumental in informing his views (Hall 1976). Facing mounting international and domestic pressure, on July 28, 1847, King Christian VIII issued a royal decree which stated that all children born after 1848 would be free, and that full emancipation would follow twelve years later. This sparked outrage within the enslaved class, many realizing they would not live to see their liberation. Over the subsequent months, they initiated a plan for revolution.

### 2.6.4 Post-Emancipation to Transfer

The Emancipation of the Danish West Indies is remembered differently on St. Croix and in Denmark – representing a significant rupture in postcolonial memory. In Denmark, glorified depictions of Peter von Scholten depict him as racially enlightened – a courageous and benevolent savoir for those enslaved in the colonies – although this heroic portrayal has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years (Hügsen 2019; DeGout 2011).

In St. Croix, emancipation is a story of colonial resistance, through which the enslaved secured their own liberation – and in which the Danes, faced with revolt, had no choice but to admit defeat (Bastian 2002; Marin and Zahedi 2023). Understanding that there was already a plan for gradual emancipation, the colonial military was decentralized, and rural estates were poorly defended – it was clear to the enslaved that they could easily overtake the ruling class (Green and Cissel 1989). On July 2, 1848, General Buddhoe (i.e., John Gottleib), Moses Roberts, and other conspirators rang the plantation bell at Estate La Grange, summoning laborers on the West End. In the early hours of July 3, hundreds of protestors gathered in Frederiksted, armed with machetes and cane bills (Taylor 1888) – within hours, eight thousand people had surrounded Fort Frederik, demanding freedom (DeGout 2011). Von Scholten, fearing bloodshed, unrest, and destruction, declared the immediate emancipation of all 'unfree' in the Danish West Indies. In the days that followed, he was reportedly ill

(Hansen 1917, 313), by some accounts suffering a nervous breakdown (Hall 1984). He left the Danish West Indies in disgrace, never to return.

The period following emancipation was one of social and political disruption against a backdrop of economic decline – shortly after the new governor, Peter Hansen, introduced the Labor Act of 1849, effectively reinstating a form of slavery in the islands. The conditions under the Labor Act were so poor that international newspapers continued to refer to the economic system in the Danish West Indies as 'slavery' for decades after emancipation – calling liberation in the islands a 'mockery' and 'delusion' (New York Herald 1878). After emancipation, planters were paid handsomely – 50 West Indian Dollars per slave freed. Although workers now received a meager salary, wage deductions for room and board, medical expenses, and equipment that could only be purchased from the planter, meant that there was little change in opportunity; this resulted in a series of labor strikes and local attrition from the plantations (Dookhan 1974). Fearing complete economic collapse, planters successfully campaigned for foreign recruitment – migrant laborers from the Eastern Caribbean (e.g., Barbados, St. Lucia, Antigua, etc.) and elsewhere (e.g., China and India) came to St. Croix on temporary contracts (Perry 2008; Roopnarine 2016, 2021). Elizabeth Thomas-Hope (2002) has written on this regional shift after emancipation – emphasizing how migration influenced the existing structures and practices in society – a phenomenon driven by the poorest economic strata, who largely represented the migrant worker community. Although St. Croix had long been known as a 'cosmopolitan' island (Hopkins et al. 2011), in the post-emancipation period, its multiculturalism was for the first time directed by the agency of Free Black communities who sought new opportunities in a rapidly changing world.

## 2.7 The Fireburn

In 1878, the frustrations of the labor class reached a tipping point – sparking what remains the biggest labor rebellion in Danish history – an event known as the Fireburn. On Contract Day (i.e., October 1, when new labor agreements were signed), laborers had gathered to celebrate in the rum stalls in Frederiksted. The crowd became incited – some theorizing the cause was a response to police brutality (Commission of Inquiry 1878), that underpaid laborers had reached a breaking point (Planters Inquiry 1881), and others that colonial authorities had refused to surrender migrant laborers' passports, effectively imprisoning them on St. Croix (Tyson 2014). The incited crowd chased military officers into Fort Frederik, pelting them with conch shells and coral. This quickly erupted into a full-blown rebellion as fires were ignited in the streets, drawing country laborers to investigate and join in. Eventually, the crowd was dispersed from Frederiksted, but this decentralized the rebels, who infiltrated country estates, gaining allies as they made their way across the island. By October 4, 1878, two thirds of the estates on the island had been burned, many of which were entirely destroyed.

Thousands of laborers participated in the Fireburn, most prominently the 'queens' Mary Thomas, Axeline 'Agnes' Solomon, Mathilde McBean, and Susanna "Bottom Belly" Abramsen (Navarro et al. 2017). A title rooted in African monarchical tradition based on ascribed authority (Farrar 1997), queens were revered figures in their communities and according to various accounts, Mary Thomas was known as a 'queen' prior to the rebellion (Trial Protocol 1878). Danish authorities harshly put down the rebellion and participants were punished swiftly and severely. Interrogations continued for three years, during which hundreds of individuals were tried and sentenced (Planters Inquiry 1883). The Fireburn drew international attention (New York Times 1878) and resulted in the repeal of the Labor Act – although laborers continued to strike in the years that followed (St. Thomas Tidende 1879).

The sugar industry reached a low point after the Fireburn (2,500 tons of exported sugar), but made a recovery, reaching a high of 18,000 tons in 1902 (Hayes 2000). St. Croix's sugar industry remained lucrative through the mid-1960s, when the island transitioned to manufacturing and tourism.

## 2.8 The Transfer of 1917

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the U.S. had developed an interest in purchasing islands in the West Indies (Pendleton 1917) and beginning in 1865, made several attempts to purchase the Danish West Indies from Denmark (Eggleston 1959). However, it was not until 1916 that the two nations came to a final agreement, the impacts of World War I ultimately influencing Denmark's decision to sell the islands for 25 million dollars (approximately $660 billion, adjusted for inflation) (LaMotta 1989). The Danish West Indies were officially 'transferred' to the U.S. on March 31, 1917, marked by ceremonies at Fort Christiansvaern (Figure 10) in St. Croix and at Fort Christian in St. Thomas.
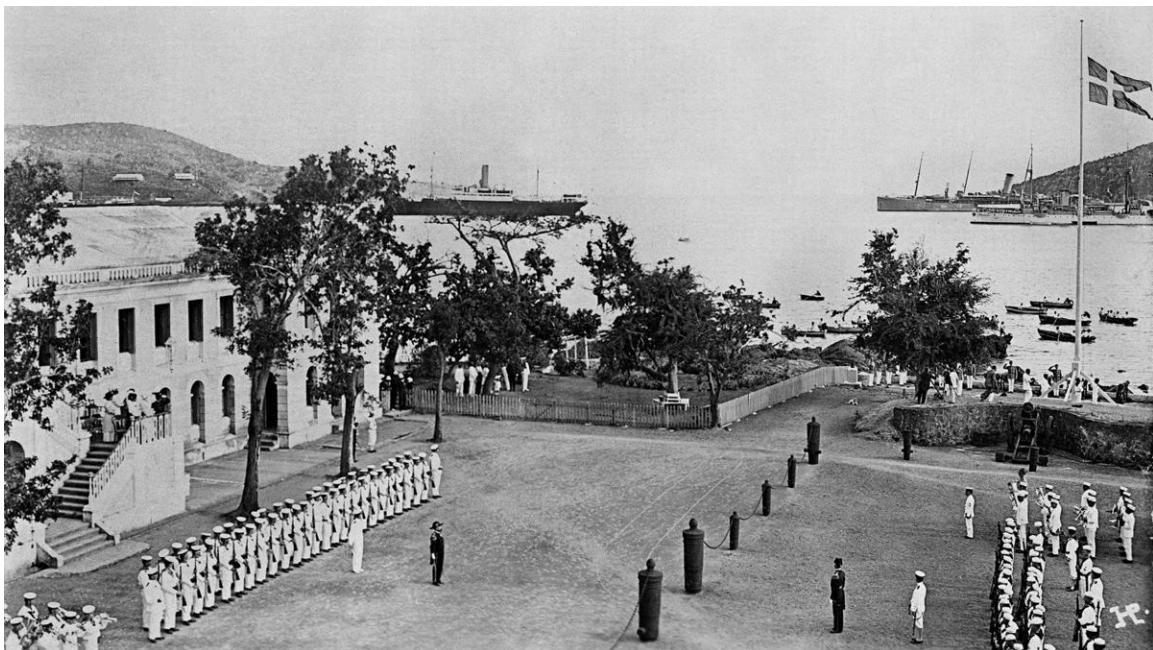


**Figure 10** March 31, 1917, marked the Transfer of the Danish West Indies to the U.S. (National Archives Denmark 2024).

The memory of the Transfer has a complicated legacy – many on the island feeling that they, a 'free' people, were sold (Nelson 2015). The event has been written about from Virgin Islands perspectives:

> Is March 31, 1917 […]. Denmark decide it don't want we. America decide it do. One find we unnecessary because they way up in Europe. The next find we absolutely necessary because they backside sitting on the Caribbean. Just so we get pass from hand to hand […]. And that's what happen. Danish West Indies become U.S. Virgin Islands. And just so, we go from Danish to American like it ain nothing. Like it ain everything (Yanique 2015, 10-14).

In the past quarter century, academic literature has described Denmark's postcolonial memory of its former Caribbean colonies as a 'colonial nostalgia' (Jensen 2015; Anderson 2020; Körber 2017) – frequently centered on notions of paradise 'lost' and emphasizing an enduring friendly relationship between Denmark and its former colonies (York 2019). This narrative is actively promoted to Danish tourists – from tours catering specifically to tourists from Denmark to souvenirs such as a graphic t-shirt recently seen on the island, embellished with the regretful declaration, 'we should have kept them!' and the Danish flag.

The relationship between St. Croix and Denmark is enduringly complex. Some Crucian communities resent Denmark, a feeling stemming from the nonconsensual 'selling' of the island and its people and its refusal to offer reparations or a financial, material, or symbolic apology for its colonial legacy (STX-01, STX-13, STX-20). Some Crucians with ancestral ties to the Danish era reference Denmark's significant wealth, contending that this high quality of life was secured at the expense of those living in their colonies – including profits from slavery and the 'sale,' the sum of the latter representing 1.6 times Denmark's current GDP (International Monetary Fund 2024). The Transfer is often central to such discussions – some arguing that the 'transferring' of the islands, in turn, 'transferred' the blame for enduring inequalities from Denmark to the U.S., conveniently absolving Denmark of its postcolonial responsibilities (Bojsen et al. 2020). Yet others actively engage in maintaining and promoting social ties to Denmark (e.g., the Friends of Denmark Society).

Most people fall somewhere in the middle – some viewing Denmark with slight skepticism and reserve, and others harboring a hazy awareness that St. Croix was once Danish – sometimes conflating the Danes with the Dutch.

The Transfer did not sever all ties between Denmark and St. Croix. A substantial number of 'tropical' Danes remained in the island after 1917, and some of their descendants remain on the island today (Øestergaard Hansen 2017; Berg 2022). However, because there are few Virgin Islanders in Denmark, there has been limited opportunity for equitable intercultural discussion, resulting in narrative dissonance (Odumosu 2019). These concerns were reactivated in St. Croix during the Centenary in 2017, when new opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange were funded by various entities in Denmark (Agostinho 2024).

**2.8.1 An Unincorporated Territory**

In the aftermath of the Transfer, the new American colony navigated significant uncertainty regarding its evolving status, the compounding influence of migrant and immigrant communities, and a shifting economy. The U.S. had long been interested in purchasing the islands but had failed to fully consider the logistics of acquisition, seemingly overlooking that the Virgin Islands were inhabited – the early twentieth century on St. Croix in a state of limbo, marred by ambiguity and indecision.

The U.S. designated the islands an 'unincorporated territory,' limiting the constitutional rights of islanders, including the voting eligibility of residents. Like Denmark, the U.S. federal government oversaw the entire administration of the islands, authorizing the president to appoint the governor of the territory. In 1936, the 'temporary government' ended and through municipal councils, civilian authority was implemented (Gilmore 1984, 144-145). However, it was not until 1964 that the territory was given the right to elect its own governor and lieutenant governor, secure non-voting representation within Congress, vote in

primary (but not general) federal elections, and abolish the veto of local laws by the president (Gilmore 1984, 146).

In St. Croix, there was a significant demographic shift during the post-Transfer period. Following the 1920 stock market crash, Puerto Rico's sugar industry declined, prompting laborers to move to St. Croix (Simounet 2017; Matthews 2005). During World War II, the U.S. Navy took possession of eighty percent of the land on Vieques, dispossessing most of the population, many of whom moved to St. Croix (Ayala 2001). The new residents established themselves on the island, purchasing land, starting businesses, and farming (Simounet 2013). In 1934, President Roosevelt prompted significant land redistribution on St. Croix (Thompson 1935, 683), which subdivided land retained by the planter class and increased the number of small, diversified homesteads (Bond 2021). However, by the 1950s, labor shortages led to the government introducing a seasonal work permit scheme for Eastern Caribbean workers, known as 'down-islanders,' primarily from St. Lucia, Antigua, and St. Kitts, later expanding to other islands, including Martinique, Dominica, and Barbados (Jackson 2003).



**Figure 11** St. Croix has long been known as an agricultural, 'foodie' island. This image shows some local produce at a farmers' market on the island (Zahedi 2022).

Migration and immigration to St. Croix fueled community tensions as migrant workers faced politico-economic obstacles and social exclusion. Initially intended as temporary laborers without permanent resident permits, they remained at the fringes of Crucian society (STX-04; Simounet 2013, 42), which generated negative attitudes toward 'down-island' communities that persist today (Navarro 2021). In the mid-20th century economic factors exacerbated social stratification along racial lines on St. Croix (STX-04). The island's wealthy 'continental' population grew, doubling between 1940-1960 – many of whom started businesses in hospitality and tourism (Harrigan and Varlack 1977, 403). Ancestral Afro-Crucians sought to distinguish themselves from lower-class Black migrant workers, aiming to secure elite status within the Black community and access to higher social capital and esteem (STX-01).

By the 1960s, Virgin Islanders sought modernized industry, some viewing agriculture as a colonial continuance, and proposed industrialized manufacturing for enhanced territorial autonomy (Navarro 2010). The governor announced a deal with Harvey Aluminum in 1962, proposing Krause Lagoon for development, despite environmental protests that cited its ecological value (Daily News 1962a; Johnson 2019; STX-18). The legislature approved the deal, offering 700 acres and a 16-year tax exemption (Daily News 1962b). During construction, migrant workers shifted from agriculture to construction, eventually settling on St. Croix with their families, influencing the cultural landscape (Harrigan and Varlack 1977). Harvey Aluminum phased out agriculture, dismantling the Bethlehem Sugar Factory in 1964. Hess built an oil refinery in 1966, boosting the economy but harming surrounding ecosystems (STX-18), and after a series of accidents and pollution issues, the refinery closed in 2011 – reopening briefly in 2021, and after another series of accidents, filed for bankruptcy in 2022 (Joselow 2022). The site remains abandoned (Figure 12).

**Figure 12** A sugarmill with the abandoned Hess Oil Refinery in the background (Zahedi 2023).

The introduction of the jumbo-jet in the 1960s fueled St. Croix's tourism industry, contributing to its rapidly changing economy (Seward and Spinrad 1982). However, despite the booming economy, many residents struggled with rising costs of living, while profits remained high for companies like Harvey Aluminum and Hess, contributing to a highly stratified society (STX-04; Navarro 2010). Wealthy elites, including Laurence Rockefeller, who bought 4,000 acres in Fountain Valley in 1966 (Griffin 1997, 6), held most of the island's wealth, driving further division and segregation. Such mounting tensions were a contributing factor in the Fountain Valley Massacre on September 6, 1972, when five young Black Virgin Islanders killed eight people and wounded eight others, making global news and deterring tourists for years (STX-02; STX-04; Karagiannis and Madjd-Sadjadi 2012). The island eventually recovered in the 1980s, entering a period of economic prosperity as tourism and manufacturing thrived.

Hurricane Hugo, a Category 5 storm, devastated St. Croix in September 1989, destroying 85% of homes and businesses, causing oil spills, and eliminating public utilities (Navarro 2018). The disaster was catastrophic, with Major Robert Moorhead likening it to a "nuclear blast" (National Criminal Justice Reference Service 2024). Civil unrest and looting followed, with police and National Guard members among the looters, creating an

atmosphere of "complete anarchy" (Boyd 2021). Recovery took months, and rebuilding infrastructure and housing took years, leading to a mass exodus of residents, some of whom never returned. Just six years later, Hurricane Marilyn struck again, critically damaging the island's infrastructure and housing (Navarro 2018).

St. Croix entered a period of relative stability and significant investment in tourism, including a cruise ship terminal, boardwalk, and resorts, attracted middle-class Americans (Roopnarine 2016). However, this investment created social and economic distance between long-time residents and recent arrivals (Roopnarine 2016, 69). The introduction of broadband internet and social media expanded the island's connection to the world, facilitating new communication avenues and perspectives (STX-20A/B). The African Roots Project, established in 2002, reignited interest in African and Caribbean heritage, inspiring innovative programs and interest groups focused on historically marginalized stories (National Public Radio 2009).

## 2.9 The Centennial of the Transfer

The 2017 Centennial of the Transfer of the Danish West Indies/US Virgin Islands was a pivotal moment, inspiring a resurged interest in the shared histories between Denmark and its former colonies, as communities in both places negotiated its significance, meaning, and legacy (STX-13, STX-14, STX-20) (Andersen 2019; Navarro et al. 2019). On St. Croix, the Centennial was commemorated with a military parade in downtown Christiansted ending at Fort Christiansvaern, the site of the 1917 ceremony, with a re-enactment of the changing of the flags. Recalling the atmosphere during the commemoration, one participant recalled:

> There was a group that had anti-Transfer Day posters […] everybody was making speeches and everything, they were rallying at the same time. So, the governor would be speaking and [a large group was] protest[ing] in front of Denmark, to see these atrocities. So, it was leading up to the Transfer, the gentleman, the Prime Minister of Denmark, coming here because [everybody wanted an apology]. And he kind of sort of did, but didn't apologize. Then we found out if he had made a direct apology then they would open the floodgates [for

reparations], so he couldn't apologize. But he talked about that we're unified in the same

tension, and he recognized that Denmark wasn't always on the same side of doing right in

history – but he never actually made an apology (STX-20A).

The Centenary was a moment of reflection for many, in some cases activating tensions and in

others inspiring collaborations and partnerships. It highlighted unprocessed and unresolved

feelings for many Crucians and Danes regarding their shared history – a phenomenon that

underpins this dissertation. This excitement was, unfortunately, short lived.

On September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria hit St. Croix – a Category 5 storm that

brought 220 km/h winds and over 500 mm of rain to the island. According to Virgin Islands

Representative to Congress, Stacey Plaskett, over 90% of the buildings on the island were

damaged or destroyed and all utilities and communications were off-line (Woogan 2017). It

took nearly a year for electricity to be fully restored in St. Croix. Depression and post-

traumatic stress disorder reached epidemic levels (Allen 2019). After the storm, the

significant destruction of housing, coupled with the sudden halt of tourism, a major employer

on the island, left islanders facing the future with uncertainty (Figure 13).



**Figure 13** Hurricane Maria resulted in substantial and widespread devastation on the island. Many buildings on the island remain in disrepair (ABC News 2017).

The fierce winds of the storm had stripped all the leaves from the trees, exposing archaeological features on the landscape. Some on the island, living in the midst of the ruination of Maria and without electricity were drawn to explore these forgotten colonial remnants, long obscured from view and inaccessible due to dense tropical vegetation. Hurricane Maria, which occurred six months after the Centennial, reactivated and recentered an interest in postcolonial heritage – inspiring a new chapter of the island's journey toward (re)discovering itself.

## 2.10 Conclusion

As presented in this chapter, St. Croix is a small island with a relatively short, but enormously complex colonial history. This chapter has presented an overview of the context of the island – its geography, geology, and history – in order to provide a foundation of knowledge necessary for the chapters that follow. There were many possible 'endpoints;' however, I ended with Hurricane Maria because at the start of this project in 2020, its impact was still strongly felt and present. Even three years after the storm, as I viewed the island for the first time from the window of an airplane, I saw thousands of homes with blue tarps instead of roofs, still awaiting funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Many of my earliest conversations with people on the island were centered on the Centenary and the subsequent storm – and therefore, it seemed an appropriate point of departure. The next chapter discusses the methodology and ethos of this dissertation, informed by the island's unique social, political, and economic context.

# Chapter 3
## Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

The purpose of research is to create knowledge. Methodology determines *how* that knowledge is constructed, and provides transparency regarding research ethos, intention, and integrity. This chapter presents the methodological framework that underpins this dissertation – and how ethical considerations, theoretical perspectives, methods and sources, and analysis have informed its structure and design, outlining the overall methodological ethos that has guided this doctoral research as a whole. It begins with an ethical framing that delves into positionality, reflexivity, and how to carry out research in historically and presently colonized places, drawing from specific examples from my fieldwork. Lastly, it engages collaboration as method, explaining how 'community,' as a dimension and 'unit' of research, has informed the design, fieldwork, and analysis of this dissertation.

In recent years, ethics have emerged as a key issue in the study of heritage, especially for those conducting research in post/colonial communities, concerns about 'ethics' often centering methodological ethos (Nicholas and Hollowell 2016). This is because ethical considerations are critical to the design and execution of research, the latter of which can unknowingly cause harm to 'studied' communities – especially small island communities who are vulnerable to enduringly uneven power dynamics (Fricke and Hoerman 2023). In recent years, ethics in island research emerged as a focal point due to the unique challenges and circumstances faced by islanders, especially on formerly or presently colonized places (Matheson et all 2020; Hayfield 2022; James 2023; Radclyffe and Ale'eke-Bemama 2024). Felicia Fricke and Rachel Hoerman contend that ethically informed island research requires significant revisions or "altogether abandoning" customary practices and motivations to "build a discipline that can be a positive rather than a negative in island worlds" (2023, 484).

Speaking to the 'present imperfect,' Lynn Meskell (2007) cautions against unintentionally replicating colonialism through research practice, advocating for a listening approach that is aligned with the desires and needs of the community in question. Indeed, Fricke and Hoerman (2023) and Meskell (2007) raise a critical point – that researchers are seldom the primary (or only) stakeholders in research and that culturally situated and value-based approaches to research are sustainable, in that they account for the political dimensions of research, and its short and long-term implications.

Looking inward, researchers can evade falling into colonial and 'extractive' research patterns by practicing reflexivity and examining how positionality can influence research questions, methods and sources of data, interpretation, analysis, and dissemination – as well as the potential ripple effect of their ultimate outputs (Nimführ and Meloni 2021). In part as a remedy to the colonial roots of academic research, 'the' community has become an integral and mainstream component of cultural studies (Smith and Waterton 2009). Although community inclusion is a welcome change to academic custom, it is crucial for researchers across disciplines to approach collaborative research mindfully, critically, and sustainably – remaining mindful that there is no 'one size fits all' to community research – and acknowledging that communities, themselves, are highly political entities that are comprised of diverse individuals (Moser et al. 2002). Indeed, 'community,' itself, is not a remedy to academia's own entrenched inequities and structural dominances – but is its own category of research that merits close and critical analysis.

Indeed 'the community' as a unit of study can be highly susceptible to idealism that represents it as inherently bounded, cohesive, and harmonious – particularly in 'alluring' sites of study, such as Caribbean islands like St. Croix. As asserted by one participant, Caribbean islands are more than 'happy people, palm trees, and beaches,' but instead highly complex societies that are comprised of individuals who represent diverse values, interests, and

backgrounds. Circling back to Meskell's (2007) point, one must remain mindful that community needs and desires are seldom uniform or universal – a reality that somewhat complicates the task of collaborative research. The most prominent voices are not necessarily the most representative of the underlying dynamics that inform the community structure – tacit and underlying community subtleties can unknowingly play a significant role in influencing heritage discourse and constructing knowledge. There are also merits to conducting research that have not been considered by non-academic actors, although they might be appreciated by associated communities (e.g., coral mining, see Chapter 5). In this case, collaboration can play a vital role in analysis and interpretation – through the co-creation of knowledge, that draws from the unique expertise of researchers and community experts. Building from this latter point, the next section provides a framework for engaging with reflexivity and ethics for community-based researchers working in post/colonial island communities.

## 3.2 Reflexivity, Positionality, and Ethics

On small islands, ethical gray areas can pose significant challenges for researchers. The compounding frustrations of 'studied' communities directed toward visiting academics can post challenges, sometimes misplaced or undeserved (Grahame and Grahame 2009); this is because many small communities are intimately familiar with extractive methodologies and 'fast' approaches to research – which generally do not prioritize, and sometimes entirely bypass the building of rapport and trust (McFarlane and Dempster 2020). This concern was voiced by participants as something they had commonly experienced (Appendix C, STX-13, STX-14); therefore, I sought to develop a methodological framework that aligned with the desires, needs, and concerns of the diverse public(s) on St. Croix. In particular, I critically engaged with the notions of ethics, reflexivity, and positionality by putting myself, as a

researcher and a newcomer to the island, under the microscope – an undertaking that was necessary but sometimes confronting and uncomfortable.

Although historically, anthropological-approaches to 'ethics' were framed near-exclusively through the principle of 'do no harm' (e.g., study design, informed consent, confidentiality, etc.) and research integrity (e.g., honesty, accountability, transparency, rigor, etc.), in recent years reflexivity and positionality have emerged as key issues for social researchers (Vanner 2015). These terms pertain to the intersectional, socio-political, and ontological issues of how researchers approach the social world, or as Serge Elie reflected, a professional obligation for those for whom "the self is *the* instrument of research" (2006, 53). Reflexivity refers to the "self-examination of how research findings were produced, and, particularly, the role of the researcher in their construction" (Heaton 2004, 104). Within a reflexive framework, positionality accounts for the combination of various social identities (e.g., gender, race, class, ethnicity, education, ability, geographical location, etc.), their intersections, and the way they shape how we, as researchers, understand and engage with the world and, in turn, our research.

While keeping in mind that identity is "fluid and dialogical," contextual, and continuously (re)constructed, researchers must consider their own positionalities as a prerequisite to fieldwork (Acevedo et al. 2015, 32). Despite an intensifying focus on ethics in postcolonial research, reflexivity and positionality are seldom directly or explicitly attended to, beyond a declaration or "confession of privilege as a way of revealing unequal power dynamics" – an emerging tradition that Jasmin Gani and Rabea Khan argue is, itself, underpinned by coloniality, and "paradoxically acts as a means of centering whiteness through the narcissistic gaze and an assertion of legitimacy" (2024, 68). Indeed, positionality is often viewed solely in terms of broad identity categories (e.g., race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), and by extension, frequently engages privilege as its fundamental

grounding. As the white and privileged are overwhelmingly represented in academia, a centering of whiteness and privilege perhaps seems somewhat inevitable. At the same time, positionality is also frequently cast as a negative guilt-laden task – an 'issue' that compromises one's research. But, when critically and directly examined, positionality can just as easily *benefit* and *enhance* research.

Corlett and Mavin refer to reflexivity as a form of "self-monitoring" and "self-responding," practices that they argue are integral to research development, design, execution, and analysis (2018, 377). On the other hand, there are limits to self-awareness. Glynis Cousin directly interrogates the notion of positional piety, in which "either moral authority is claimed through an affinity with subjects (such as working-class woman) or through a confessional declaration of difference and relative privilege (such as white middle-class man)" questioning the notion of the self as a "virus which contaminates research" and instead viewing the self as a "research tool" (2010, 9-10). Indeed, this effort is futile without a critical acknowledgement of the infinite complexity and fluidity of the self, as well as understanding that 'positionality statements' (and the language within them) are value laden. With this stipulation, I provide a brief positionality statement below.

### 3.2.1 Author's Reflection

I am an Iranian American cis-gender woman from Kingston, New York, which is the unceded territory of the Esopus, a sub-group of the Lenape Nation. I am a citizen of the U.S. and Iran and am part of a diverse nuclear and extended family (i.e., Iran, the U.S., Ghana, Japan, Germany, Italy, Barbados, Wales, England, Ireland, Canada, India, Thailand, Australia, among others). My access to cultural diversity and global heritage from a young age has had a substantial impact on me and my worldview – wholly inspiring my career trajectory.

In the past, I have had a complicated relationship with my Iranian American identity, which has shaped how I understand identity, race, and belonging. Neda Maghbouleh (2009, 9), exploring Iranian identity within the American racial hierarchy, argued that Iranian Americans "sit, categorically, at the outer limits of whiteness and, more important[ly], possess social experiences that reflect the outer boundaries and limitations of what 'official' whiteness can achieve or mobilize." Indeed, Iranian Americans and the wider Middle Eastern and North African community (MENA) have an intimate and personal understanding of how the parameters of racialized identity are socially constructed, fluid, and deeply political – collectively experiencing a *loss* of white privilege and shift from 'other' to 'enemy' status in the post-9/11 period.

My American accent, passport, and white-presentation can – at times – eclipse my Iranian identity in certain parts of the world. However, my olive skin and ethnically ambiguous name can also be a privilege in some spaces, such as St. Croix, where I am sometimes viewed as non-white, and fit into diverse social groups. In many respects, I am an 'outsider' in St. Croix because I am not Crucian or Black. On the other hand, I am often mistaken for Latina or Arab. My proximity to both whiteness and non-whiteness has been an advantage in my work within diverse communities, presenting an opportunity to navigate between various communities on the island, perhaps with greater ease than mono-racial researchers. The complexity of my own identity has influenced my research, through which I have recognized the ambivalences and ambiguities of identity and community on St. Croix and elsewhere. I previously lived in the Caribbean – in Belize (2011-2012) and in St. Eustatius (2013-2016) – which contributed to my understanding of Caribbean heritage, diverse creole identities, and distinct colonial legacies. For nearly five years, I have lived as a dual resident of St. Croix and Denmark, during which I navigated and negotiated my insider/outsider status in both places. In 2022, I gave birth to my daughter at Juan F. Luis

hospital on St. Croix – she is Crucian and although I am not, her birth cultivated a permanent grounding to the island.

### 3.2.2 Postcolonial Research in a Presently Colonized Place

St. Croix has a colonial past and present. Because of this, its residents endure a unique set of challenges, as a colonized people with an ambiguous political status. Reflecting upon the study of postcolonial community heritage, several questions emerged, among them: how does one pursue ethical research in a post/colonial space, funded by the former colonizer and being from the current colonial state?

Heritage discourse in the Caribbean has increasingly incorporated various terms relating to coloniality – among them, 'postcolonial,' 'decolonial,' and 'anticolonial' – terms that are related, but distinct (Davis and Walsh 2020). Although it is easy to dismiss such semantic discussions as theoretical and pedantic, how these terms are used, and by whom, can offer insight into the differences between how colonialism is theorized in academic spaces versus how it is experienced by people enduring colonialism. Walter Mignolo (2007) described decolonization as a 'de-linking,' which confronts and resists Eurocentrism, a process that might be understood as a form of 'emancipatory rupture' (Hirade 2024). The pejorative prefix 'de' implies reversal and deletion of colonizing forces, making 'decolonize' an active term that not only opposes colonialism but radically resists it. The term 'decolonial' is ubiquitous in social research emanating from the Caribbean in the past decade (Knudsen et al. 2022). Yet its nonreflexive use by an overwhelmingly elite, white, and visiting community of researchers can be perceived by colonized communities as fraudulent and hypocritical (Onyebuchi Eze 2024). For post/colonial communities, decolonization is not an academic trend, but a call to action that can only come from within – an intergenerational 'undoing' of centuries of subjugation, marginalization, and erasure.

I have elected to not use the term 'decolonial' to describe my work – although I use it to describe the work of Caribbean artists and scholars in the same sphere of research. This decision evolved over many years in conversation post/colonial communities about the meaning and application of the word 'decolonial.' I have no ancestral connection to the Caribbean and am a citizen of the island's contemporary colonizer, working on behalf of a university and therefore representative of its former colonizer, aiming to fulfil an academic qualification; I have directly and indirectly benefitted from the colonization of St. Croix. Therefore, I resolve that I cannot and should not consider my work decolonial. Although I do not consider this dissertation decolonial, I do consider it activist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial.

The term anti-colonial refers to opposition to colonialism and its effects, or what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) refer to as a 'movement of resistance.' In combination, decolonialism and anti-colonialism work to counteract the negative and enduring effects of colonialism by disrupting and destabilizing it on a structural level, simultaneously from the bottom up and top down. These deliberations on terminology and colonialism as a real and lived experience are far from purely theoretical. During the period of fieldwork, I sometimes encountered reluctance, or even refusal, from islanders to collaborate in research due to my affiliation with Denmark. The consequence of a legacy of extractive scholarship and scientific colonialism has negatively affected people on the island, as evidenced in this email:

> Thank you for your email. Before I accept or decline your offer [for an interview], please kindly spell out the details of your project for me. What will be the final result of your research? Will you produce a video or audiotape? Will you do a book for sale? What will be my role and how will I benefit?
>
> I am asking you this because I have been interviewed by several Danes in the past. They came, videotaped knowledge that I freely provided, and I never heard from them again (Appendix C). [10]

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[10] It must be stated that while this participant was not able to participate in a formal interview due to health concerns, I was given explicit permission to use this correspondence in this dissertation.

This type of skeptical response was common during my fieldwork. Yet it does not evidence that St. Croix is 'over-researched,' but instead, it stems from a chronic failure to properly consult, collaborate, compensate, and communicate with communities in research about their own heritage – and, in tandem, undermines their substantial contributions to academia (STX-13). For historically marginalized segments of St. Croix's community, this legacy has perpetuated deep-seated structural inequity, epistemic dominance, and scientific colonialism, by which non-Crucian researchers exploit and benefit from Crucian knowledge. As explained by STX-13:

> Because the thing about the politics of Danish money is – it's only for Danes. They're not going to spend it here. So I found [Centenary funding] being a perpetuation of that colonial extractive system. […] I just keep seeing that my name is showing up in [academia.edu], but I have to pay to go on to see them. But I'm going to say I've only had three people send me papers, so they're not even sharing it. Many people aren't even translating them to English.

Indeed, these grievances must be considered by visiting researchers intending to work with communities on the island – most crucially when they utilize terms such as 'decolonial,' 'anti-colonial,' or 'postcolonial' to refer to their work. The above point is not raised to shame or disgrace work carried out by scholars from Denmark, but rather to raise attention to how previous research has been experienced and received by people in St. Croix – in sincere hope to inspire a new path.

As a representative of Aarhus University, I have aimed to rectify some of the tension toward visiting researchers from Denmark through this work, which takes a collaborative approach, elevates the wisdom and expertise of communities on the island, and intermingles sources of data. Delving into the actionable, I directly asked some participants how they envisioned sustainable, equitable, and inclusive research futures:

> Be humble and know your place. It is cultural and it's systemic that there's this sense of entitlement and knowingness that a lot of scholars have as they travel the world. But humble yourself so that you can hear and see and engage with what's really happening in that community. Because too often without that, researchers are selecting subjects who are like

that, who are going to give them the story they want, and they're ignoring the rest of the community. I think that anybody that's planning on doing research, they need to know where they're going. They need to research the culture. They need to make contact to find out who are the people that I should be asking permission to be doing this work. Because there's a sense of entitlement that I can drive into a neighborhood and just knock on somebody's door, see somebody and ask questions. That doesn't work here. So, it's that humility that allows for awareness of the place (STX-13).

This participant's latter point, regarding a 'sense of entitlement' that prioritizes academic pursuit over the "right to be left alone" (Lundsgarade 1970) is another point important consideration for researchers. One participant noted that they were on a 'list' of prominent voices in the Virgin Islands, that was given to Danish researchers intending to visit the island (Appendix B). While I never encountered such a list in Denmark, it is possible that through word of mouth certain knowledgeable individuals have emerged as St. Croix 'experts' without their informed consent. While this development is in some ways not surprising, it is also unfair to the Crucians who have become default island guides, with no compensatory agreement or recognition, for eager visiting researchers who are unfamiliar with local etiquette and political dynamics. In tandem, it is unethical for researchers to freely share contact details for research participants without their informed consent.

### 3.2.3 Identifying Participants, Collaborators, and Interviewees

Upon my arrival on St. Croix, several prominent individuals were suggested as 'experts.' My slow approach to research enabled me to refrain from immediately reaching out to them – instead, I prioritized engaging with non-traditional, but equally knowledgeable members of the island community. Drawing from John Schofield's (2014) argument, that *everyone* is an expert in their own heritage, I engaged every person as such – an expert – deferring to their direction and interpretation and positioning myself as a novice to St. Croix with a specialized but particular skillset, lending itself to the study of postcolonial community heritage. I sought interviewees that were diverse (e.g., race, class, socio-economic class,

education, etc.) – they represented elders, herbalists and farmers, fishers, scientists, historians, artists, business owners, activists, and landowners, among others. I sought a representative sample of participants which, due to the island's demography, were mostly Afro-Caribbean, although I also specifically engaged those representing other identities (e.g., Danish, American, white Crucian, Puerto Rican, Palestinian, African American, etc.).

I was careful to protect the privacy of research participants. On a small island, information that may seem inconsequential to outsiders (e.g., neighborhood of residence, names of family and/or friends, profession, ancestral status, etc.), can easily identify a participant to other members of the community. I determined that directly identifying participants and interviewees could inhibit their ability to speak openly. It could also limit *my* ability as a researcher to speak freely and honestly. Therefore, all interview and field data for this research has been fully anonymized (i.e., STX-01, STX-02, etc.). Anonymization alleviated several ethical concerns – most fundamentally, that participants could present themselves, their opinions, and their feelings on their own terms (Ní Laoire 2007). In tandem, the socio-political dimensions of heritage, identity, and community on small islands – in which "one voice cannot speak for the entire community [and] often the voice speaking is easily recognizable" (Matheson et al. 2020, 720) – played a role in anonymizing community data.

## 3.3 Interrogating Hierarchies of Knowledge

Social research is interpretive – or, as my undergraduate advisor, Victor DeMunck (2009), keenly stated, "people are not rocks." This is to say that research involving human subjects is often victim to its own subjectivities. While objectivity and subjectivity are commonly understood as antonyms, in the context of research practice, this is seldom the case; it can be more productive to instead look at objectivity and subjectivity in relationship to one another, rather than opposing forces (see: 5.5.3; 6.2; 7.3; 8.2-8.3).

Implicit hierarchies of knowledge were a pervasive condition in early cultural research, although in recent years, scholars – particularly those working in critical and postcolonial heritage – have incorporated quantitative 'scientific' sources of data with qualitative 'humanistic' sources of data (Filippucci 2009). At the same time, interdisciplinary qualitative research remains somewhat beholden to persistent established structures of epistemic dominance (Vaditya 2018; Shaefer and Alvesson 2020). Despite an increasing acknowledgement of the relationship between research, interpretation, and the perpetual question of objectivity versus subjectivity, the fraught relationship between the two remains poorly assessed and critiqued in the research world (Baniamer and Allendi 2024). This issue is most prominent in disciplines that are customarily distanced from their inherently interpretive (i.e., subjective) nature – such as archaeology and history – through which 'primary data' (e.g., archival records or archaeological assemblages) have been viewed as apolitical and objective (see: 8.2-8.3).

David Harvey problematizes the "differentiation between historical and heritage narratives based upon the issue of objectivity," arguing history has been linked to 'scientific endeavor' and heritage relegated to a 'frivolous' realm of study (2001, 325-326). Although written over twenty years ago, this view is still pervasive in some spaces (see: 7.3.3 and 8.3). Building from Harvey's point, this academic debate is centered on how diverse registers of knowledge have been understood. This dissertation consults various sources (e.g., artifact collections and assemblages, spatial data, archival records, oral histories, participant observation, etc.) but for the purpose of this exercise I will draw on two of these – archives and oral histories (e.g., 6.3; 7.3; 8.2). Institutional Knowledge (e.g., archives) and Traditional Knowledge (e.g., oral history) have often been presented as competing truths, despite the fact that they retain and convey different types of knowledge and memory (Ngoepe 2020). Both registers of knowledge fulfill distinct societal needs. For example, colonial records satisfied

the needs and requirements of Danish authorities in the West Indies and Denmark, documenting information about the politics and economy of the island (STX-15A/B). Oral tradition on St. Croix, on the other hand, was derived from West African epistemology, and its transmission to the Caribbean satisfied the need for marginalized communities to establish their own means of remembering and relating to the past (see: 6.4-6.6) (Thurland 2009). These registers of knowledge, therefore, are not in competition with one another – they document entirely different information and ways of knowing (STX-14).

Building from this, this dissertation combines multiple perspectives and ways of knowing by weaving together various strands of knowledge (Atalay 2012). I incorporate archaeological survey, ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and archival research to engage with a more comprehensive and just interpretation of postcolonial community heritage within the substantive research chapters. In tandem, I integrate multiple epistemologies, center community voices and perspectives, foster collaborative, and reciprocal research relationships, and prioritize ethical and responsible knowledge production, explained in more detail in the following section.

### 3.3.1 Sources of Data

This dissertation draws from an interdisciplinary framework that incorporates archaeological data, community interviews, participant observation, and colonial archives, and have drawn from critical heritage scholarship to inform my approach to diverse registers of knowledge. In particular, the work of Sonya Atalay (2016), Laura Ann Stoler (2013), Laura Jane Smith and Emma Waterton (2010), Odewale (2009), Lyons and Marshall (2914); and Steve Stern (2006) have inspired my reading of communities, archaeological remnants, landscapes, and archives.

Laura Ann Stoler, speaking to the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of archival practice, refers to colonial collections as 'imperial debris' and an "elevation of

European categories" of what constitutes qualified knowledge (2013, 349). Weaving in a memory perspective, Randall Jimerson describes the notion of archival 'memory' as a "social construct, reflecting power relationships in society" (2003, 89). I build from this within various case studies, in particular in reference to coral mining and baobab trees (Chapters 5 and 6) – colonial legacies almost entirely absent from historical records – engaging their omission as equally consequential as the prevalence of other colonial legacies in the archives (e.g., the sugar industry). By intermingling diverse forms of data, I aspire toward balance in interpreting and representing the past – striving to understand how these forms of knowledge coalesce to shape contemporary heritage and identity. David Lowenthal, perhaps stated this best when he reflected "it is so customary to think of the historical past in terms of narrative, sequences, dates, and chronologies that we are apt to suppose these things attributes of the past itself. But they are not; we ourselves put them there" (2015, 219).

I engage with contemporary constructions and projections about the past as an innately human phenomenon in a cast study about St. Croix's windmills (Chapter 7), heritage sites that have long captured the fascination of resident and visiting researchers on the island (Highfield 2009; Ashur 2020). Despite a deluge of academic literature focused on the Caribbean sugar industry, windmills have seldom been approached from a heritage perspective, nor have they been explored as postcolonial remnants with cultural meaning(s) that have evolved beyond their historical use (see: 7.3). Through this case study I investigate how contemporary communities on St. Croix (re)construct meaning at colonial windmill sites across the island – and how these postcolonial interventions represent the dynamism and fluidity of heritage values by combining colonial records and previous research with recorded interviews. Indeed, in this way, heritage pasts, presents, and futures, operate as a dialectic that change on a moment-to-moment basis (Jones 2017). This notion is echoed by Atalay who, speaking to the role of the researcher within value-driven, ever-changing prism of heritage,

similarly urges researchers to consider "the socio-political context within which research is created," and arguing that there "is no value-free position from which a fully objective and detached ideal scholar exists" (2016, 52).

This inherent relativity can present challenges for researchers who embrace the inherent subjectivity of qualitative research, while striving to minimize biases that may potentially compromise the integrity of methodological design, data collection, analysis, and communication. In response, this research has incorporated archival data in combination with folk memory – aiming to subvert the common tiering and compartmentalizing of these two registers of knowledge which, while sometimes centered on aligned themes, convey different meanings, values, and forms of memory. To this end, Wylie (2014) highlights the importance of collaborative research in minimizing the risk of such biases in her statement: "some of the best, most compelling research in the social sciences is credible, not because it somehow transcends all interests and contexts of practice, but because it is self-consciously situated and brings diverse angles of vision to bear on its central claims" (2014, 68).

Braiding knowledge (Atalay 2012) works particularly well in addressing such research concerns – particularly as they relate to implicit bias and narrative authority. Wylie (2014) refers to 'self-conscious situating' as a means of subverting epistemic dominance by consciously situating knowledge, a notion that I applied within my own fieldwork. In particular, in Chapter 6, I forefront Afro-Crucian and West African perspectives and epistemologies in my interpretation and analysis of the meaning of the baobab tree – aiming to elevate these perspectives and by destabilizing epistemological hierarchies in favor of a wider perspective.

Certainly, the non-neutrality of the production, as well as the retention of archival materials, is frequently acknowledged as a theoretical concern, but less frequently mobilized as a methodological 'problem.' For example, in Chapter 8, which explores the memory and

commemoration of the Fireburn, I draw from Atalay (2012), Stoler (2016), and Stern (2006) to delve into the relationship between diverse ways of relating to the past. This is investigated in various ways – 1) by examining colonial archives (e.g., court documents, damage reports, and testimonial records), 2.) reflecting upon different memory registers (e.g., institutional and traditional knowledge), 3.) by investigating commemoration in contemporary art, activities and events, and material collections. The chapter engages with colonialism as a transregional legacy, engaging how different 'ways of knowing' have shaped collective memories about the Fireburn, and pursuing the tacit and underlying meaning(s) in understanding notions of the 'truth' to examine how they manifest as heritage. This aim is inspired the definition of heritage provided by Tunbridge and Ashworth, as a "contemporary product shaped from history" (1996, 20), as well as Harvey, who writes that their definition of heritage "conveys that heritage is subjective and filtered with reference to the present, whenever that present actually is" (2016, 20). Lastly, it resolves that both sources of data and methodology, despite their biases and limitations, when grounded in critically reflexive application, create prisms of understanding of our worlds and, ultimately, ourselves.

## 3.4 Intermingled Methods within Community-Based Research

As a study of community heritage, community is a principal element of the methodological framework of this dissertation. In the past quarter century, 'collaborative' and 'community-based' have become ubiquitous terms in cultural research (Moser et al. 2002; Agbe-Davies 2010; Flinn and Sexton 2018), a phenomenon that I discuss in greater detail in subsequent chapters. Briefly, collaborative research frequently includes communities on two levels – through direct involvement of communities themselves (e.g., project development and design, fieldwork and data collection, analysis, public outreach, etc.), and through the incorporation of community-sourced knowledge and perspectives (Moser et al. 2002). The

methodological framing for this dissertation is described as collaborative because it involved both these aspects of community-based research.

Braided knowledge, as method and theory, works particularly well in contemporary community heritage research. As Rodney Harrison suggests, contemporary heritage provides a nuanced and contextual study of "contemporary objects and places which are still in operation, which are themselves still actively operating and form part of the assemblage on the surface" (2013, 51). Indeed, as argued by Holtorf and Högberg (2020), heritage is as much about the present as it is about the past (and the future) a view that informed the sources of data and methods used in this research. In Chapters 6 and 7, interview and ethnographic data (e.g., participant and non-participant observation) were combined with archaeological data, material culture, and contemporary art, aiming to present a richer and more textured interpretation of baobab trees and windmills, situating them within a multi-temporal framework.

Intermingling sources of data was a significant aspect of the research design, particularly collaboration as method (Moser et al. 2002). Rashid et al. emphasize the possibilities for trans-disciplinary methodologies and "collaborative and creative (re)membering [as] an invitation to rememory, to rework the past-present-future" (2021, 401). On collaborative surveys to windmill sites (see: 7.2), conversations were not limited to windmills as the sole focus. Developing wider community insights was foundational to understanding the island and its social landscape.

Academic interventions into archives are not often collaborative, apart from community-based archives and their construction (Caswell 2023). However, much of the archival research undertaken for this study took on a collaborative approach. My work in the two primary repositories – the Florence Williams Library in Christiansted and the Landmarks Society Library at Estate Whim – involved significant guidance from communities on St.

Croix. In the Florence Williams Library, I engaged in collaborative archival research to collect data for my dissertation, more specifically about the Fireburn (Chapter 8), working alongside two project colleagues to develop a community workshop about archives – many of the documents were used in both this dissertation and the workshop. The collaborative nature of this archival research process enabled me to learn more about the materials through discussions both directly and tangentially relating to the documents.

In comparison, the setting of the Landmarks Society Library, itself, is collaborative – its small reading room often overcrowded with librarians, genealogists, historians, and members of the community. Visitors to the archives are seated around one large table, often sharing their research interests, journeys, and discoveries. The spatial configuration of the archive facilitates a co-creative aspect to research at the Landmarks Society – lively conversation made productive research on site unlikely, but I learned far more from participating in conversation and learning about various historical documents from fellow researchers.

The methodological ethos of this research emphasizes the significance of the co-creation of knowledge as a joint effort between researchers and communities of experts (Schofield 2016). Contemporary postcolonial discourse holds that communities are the ultimate experts in their own heritage and are therefore entitled to 'consultation' and 'participation' (Hoffman and Hoogland 2016). I would like to take this a step further and argue that in the context of this community-based project and the data it produced, it was me who was often 'consulting' and 'participating' in a heritage process that has been carried by communities on the island for generations prior to my arrival – and will continue long after I am gone. Instead, I position myself as a facilitator and communicator – drawing from a deep well of knowledge and identifying thematic connections, integrating memories and stories, and (re)configuring the documentary record. Through this work, I aim to "transgress some of

the epistemological boundaries" of postcolonial heritage studies (Riley and Harvey 2005, 15), destabilizing claims to objectivity and calling into question implicit and unconscious biases within the research legacies of the island, whilst privileging diverse ways of knowing and seeing the world.

## 3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided the intellectual and reflexive framework, considerations, and rationale for the methodology guiding this research. Discussing the notion of research ethics through the lens of positionality and reflexivity, I engaged with postcolonial research integrity and responsibility. I discussed the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity through hierarchies of knowledge and epistemic dominance. Lastly, I contextualized the use of mixed methods in community-based research.

The underlying ethos behind a research methodology is critical because it gives form to one's scholarly pursuits – research questions, aims and lines of inquiry, intention, sources and methods, analysis, and outcomes are all guided by ethos. This chapter has demonstrated a critical engagement of these variables in the context of this research. The following chapter provides the community context of St. Croix, seeking to connect this methodology with the social landscape of the island.

# Chapter 4
## Theoretical Framework

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical framework underpinning this dissertation, drawing from a wide body of knowledge, with a focus on foundational cultural theorists from the Caribbean such as Edouard Glissant (1990), Derek Walcott (2000), and Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1996). Building from these, it pulls inspiration from interdisciplinary scholars – bell hooks (1990, 2008, 2015), Laura Ann Stoler (2008, 2009, 2016), LaVaughn Belle (2019) and the Virgin Islands Studies Collective (Navarro et al. 2017; Sewer et al. 2024), Kevin Dawson (2018), Steve Stern (2006), Siân Jones (2017), and Deloughrey, Gosson, and Handley (2005). It begins with a summary of the literature inspiring the four substantive research chapters and their relevance to St. Croix, followed by a discussion of the three primary theoretical lenses through which I approach this work – postcolonialism, ecocriticism, and creole social theory. It concludes with a theoretical framework of island communities, as it pertains to this research.

I intend for this research to be culturally situated, by elevating culturally specific theoretical angles. I have therefore drawn from scholars from and/or focused on the Caribbean region, and particularly those who emphasize the entanglement of culture and nature, as an inspiration for the thematic elements and foundational theory of this work. By combining these perspectives with contemporary critical heritage scholarship, and integrating them within the contents of this study, I investigate material culture as a gateway to the immaterial – engaging how community and heritage are synchronous processes that underlie the negotiation of cultural meaning for people on St. Croix.

## 4.2 Water, Earth, Wind, and Fire: A Thematic Approach to St. Croix

The overriding structure of this dissertation takes a thematic approach; each substantive research chapter focuses on one of the four classical elements – water, earth, wind, and fire. The word "elemental" signifies the fundamental and primordial forces of nature (Kozak and Musson 2020) – carrying a strong connotation that the natural and human worlds are interconnected and interdependent – a view grounded in cosmology that spans space, time, and culture. Indeed, as argued by Jeffery Cohen and Lowell Duckert (2015), elemental matter is "inherently creative, motile, experimental, and impure because fire, water, air, and earth are never inert" (2) – a perspective that can be applied to the dynamic fluidity of heritage, community, and identity as well. To this end, the thematic structure of this dissertation is metaphoric and pragmatic, holding that the (re)creation of meaning is inherently relational – integrating this view within the study of nature, culture, and society bolsters the claim that fluidity is an inherent aspect of the universal human experience.



**Figure 14** An offering for the ancestors laid on the 175th Anniversary of the Emancipation of the Danish West Indies. The display includes various fruits (e.g., baobab, tamarind, soursop, watermelon, mango, etc.), coral and shells, candles, etc. (Zahedi 2023)

This approach was inspired by ethnographic observations and archaeological fieldwork undertaken for this study, which revealed longstanding practice of Obeah and West African-derived spirituality on St. Croix (Figure 14). During archaeological surveys, I frequently encountered offerings at heritage sites – assemblages of assorted items such as seeds, bottles, cigarettes, candles, shells, and coral. Research participants explained that these assemblages were tied to ritual practice of ancestral veneration on the island and that the objects signified the four elements – water, earth, air, and fire – required to summon spirits from beyond the material world we inhabit (Montgomery 2002; Cooper 2005).

According to some spiritual traditions present on St. Croix, the four classical elements are brought into combination and balance to achieve the fifth element – the divine (see: Chapter 7) (Adeleye 2017). Obeah, an Afro-Caribbean religion believed to have evolved from spiritual practices originating present-day Ghana (Case 2001, 42) and established as a distinct form of spirituality in the British West Indies (Simonsen 2021), encompasses a wide range of beliefs and traditions derived from various ethnic groups in West Africa (Crosson 2015) including the Akan (Nisbett 2021), Edo (Usuanlele 2016), and Igbo (Bilby and Handler 2004). Its legacy on St. Croix dates back to at least the 1750s (Simonsen 2016), in some segments of the community resisting religious suppression and proselytization:

> We have to understand now that the Christianization of the African descendant community really changed a lot. Our traditional storytelling continued, but there was this shadow of, 'Oh, that's evil; oh, that's obeah' (STX-13).

Oral history (STX-22), colonial archives (Oldendorp 1987), and academic scholarship (Carter 2022) evidence an endurance of Obeah despite significant punitive repercussions, which speaks to the fortitude of Africanity despite the seemingly insurmountable odds of colonialism (Herskovitz 1941). Although many people on St. Croix practice some form of Christianity, Obeah is not practiced in opposition to traditional religion, but instead covertly parallels it, as explained by one participant:

> [Obeah] was [hidden] behavior. Where I'm now finding out that so many people were practitioners. But you know, they were masking themselves in our churches (STX-20A).

This thematic approach is therefore two-fold: firstly, it is grounded within specific examples from my fieldwork, but secondly, it is anti-colonial, intending to subvert colonial dominances and the "involuntary situation of social death" (Olwig 1995, 31), which have long suppressed and marginalized ancestral traditions – and, in turn, how Caribbean heritage is approached. As articulated by STX-20B:

> Our relationship to power is so conditional – you know if you're a colony of an empire […] and you have a great deal of African retention, in fact – but that's not where you're going to find the power – in proximity to the Empire.

To this end, this approach aims to subvert this epistemic unevenness and elevate perspectives that are grounded in the Afro-Crucian worldview. The four case studies in this dissertation are inspired by elemental spiritual practices, aiming to venerate Afro-Crucian ancestors, grounded in the enduring presence and legacies of the people who were stolen from their West African homelands to St. Croix and elsewhere. Through these case studies, I engage with the diverse cultural legacies of the island – an investigation coral mining and masonry in the island's built environment (Chapter 5), the ethno-botanical significance and oral tradition tied to the baobab tree (Chapter 6), the (re)construction of symbolic meaning at colonial windmills (Chapter 7), and commemorative practice tied to the 1878 Fireburn (Chapter 8).

## 4.3 Postcolonialism, Ecocriticism and Creole Social Theory

The theories framing this overarching research approach are postcolonialism, ecocriticism, and creole social theory, which harmoniously underpin the dissertation as a whole. I mobilize postcolonial theory as a critical lens that examines the lingering impacts of colonialism on communities and cultures (Fanon 1961; Bhabha 1994; Mbembe 2000), to explore the social, economic, and political legacies of colonialism in the context of cultural heritage on St. Croix. Obfuscating the line between cultural and natural heritage, and incorporating a historical ecology perspective, I engage with ecocritical academic discourse

(e.g., DeLoughrey, Gosson, and Handley 2005) to explore the environmental consequences of colonialism and the socio-political structures that shape contemporary communities' relationships with the natural world. I apply creole social theory – which emphasizes the complex, hybrid, and dynamic nature of societies shaped by colonialism and enslavement (Paravinisi-Gerbert 2005) – to material and immaterial culture to demonstrate the creative nature of Crucian postcolonial heritage and identity.

By combining these theoretical standpoints, I delve into the relationship between colonialism and postcolonialism through a contemporary lens that engages the fluid nature of collective memory and identity (Morisson 1987; Halbwach 2020; Stern 2006) to show how these dynamic processes are at the heart of community-level negotiations regarding how meaning is ascribed to heritage (see: Chapters 6-8). To this end, I examine how heritage – as a creative process that involves the negotiation and (re)construction of meaning – is concurrent with the process of community, a political process by which social inclusion, exclusion, and belonging are negotiated. I moreover explore how the tensions between materiality and immateriality shape the synchronous processes of heritage and community, to examine what it means to be from and of St. Croix.

Whilst acknowledging the enduring nature of colonial trauma, I steer these theoretical perspectives toward interpretations that positively engage the island's multi-faceted and rich heritage, subverting the phenomenon that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) refers to as "the danger of the single story," in which Black identities are tied singularly and exclusively to legacies of oppression, destitution, and enslavement.

### 4.3.1 Postcolonialism

In the trenchant work, *the Repeating Island,* Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1996) represents the Caribbean as a region caught in an endless cycle of continuity and change, driven by the region's complex history of colonization, enslavement, and cultural exchange. Assuming this

perspective, Benítez-Rojo challenges traditional colonial notions of progress and linearity, instead advocating for a cultural rhythm unique to the Caribbean. Indeed, this perspective is shared by other postcolonial scholars from the region, who contend that colonialism cannot be viewed as a singular event or period, but instead permeates all aspects of the post/colonial realm (Walcott 1948, Fanon 1961, Kachua 2022). As explained by Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "coloniality survives colonialism; it is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time and every day" (2007, 243). I embed this perspective within this dissertation, approaching postcolonial community heritage as a multi-scalar phenomenon which is constantly (re)created and (re)shaped through the ascription of meaning and value.

Despite its popularity in academic discourse, postcolonialism is not a perfect theory. The prefix 'post,' in particular, has manifested a point of interdisciplinary contention – seemingly marking a beginning and end to colonialism. Gregory Ashcroft (1996), deliberated the spelling of the term, arguing for the semantically and symbolically value addition of a hyphen, resolving that its use is a "particular form of space-clearing gesture, a political notation which has a great deal to say about the materiality of political oppression" (23). Osmond Overby (2012), on the other hand, argues that a hyphen instead denotes a linear chronology, the elimination of the hyphen representing the concept "ideologically rather than temporally" (125). These arguments have relevance to the study of St. Croix because although the island is no longer a colony of Denmark, it is presently colonized by the U.S. and therefore cannot necessarily be described as *post*colonial (Bernard 2019).

As Overby (2012) notes, prior to the 1970s, postcolonial was a term primarily used synonymously with post-independence – a description that is complicated when applied to

the broader Caribbean, in which many islands are positioned within an ambiguous political matrix ranging from sovereign nation and colony to 'special municipality' (e.g., Bonaire, St. Eustatius, and Saba) and 'unincorporated territory' (e.g., Puerto Rico, St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix). In reference to this study and St. Croix, I apply the term 'postcolonial' to refer to the post-Danish colonial period on St. Croix, acknowledging that the island's specific colonial legacies are not only tied to colonialism as an institutional structure but can also be viewed through the lens of specific colonial relationships – taking care to distinguish and differentiate between the methods of colonialism imposed by Denmark and the U.S. as distinct colonizing experiences (Sewer 2018). To this end, I write the term in various ways throughout this dissertation – postcolonial, to refer to it asynchronously and (post)colonial or post/colonial to refer to the dialectic between coloniality and colonialism as a uniquely enduring and evolving phenomenon on the island, highlighting the difference between the Danish and American colonial periods of the island. The term 'colonial' is used in reference to the colonial past.

Postcolonialism is a broad, diverse, and complex interdisciplinary field and therefore, here I present how I have navigated and applied it as relevant to my fieldwork about heritage and community on St. Croix. A postcolonial theoretical stance critically examines colonialism and its effects by challenging and destabilizing enduring power structures, while counterbalancing dominant perspectives and amplifying marginalized points of view. It is a framework that does not passively interpret past wrongs, but rather acts as a call to action – engaging with issues of restitution, reclamation, and redress – striving to move beyond historical silences in order to recover culturally and historically accurate representations of the (post)colonial experience (Lydon and Rizvi 2010). In response, and in acknowledgement of the inherently political nature of heritage, I apply a postcolonial approach to my study of colonial windmills on St. Croix (Chapter 7), in which I engage with the process and

dissonance of ascribing symbolic meaning to colonial remnants. Drawing from a postcolonial framework, I decenter the epistemic dominance in scholarly engagement with windmills in favor of a multi-vocal and community-focused approach, while also emphasizing how colonial power dynamics are replicated through heritage tourism on St. Croix. In Chapter 5, I mobilize postcolonialism in my study of coral mining and masonry – examining the environmental impacts of colonialism and the ongoing legacy of coral mining in the face of global climate change. In Chapter 8, I examine the how socio-spatial power dynamics, (de)selective memory, and postcolonial silence is entangled within the politics of commemorating the Fireburn in Denmark and St. Croix.

I draw from Margaret Rodman's (2003) view that landscapes are "multi-local" (i.e., sharing features with other, overlapping landscapes) and "multi-vocal" (i.e., carrying and communicating different meanings to different people). This position is most fully applied in Chapters 6, 7, and 8 in which I explore the layering of space and meaning through postcolonial interventions with baobab trees, windmills, and the Fireburn – whilst also acknowledging that meaning can undergo constant re-negotiation and re-construction on both the individual and collective levels. As Barbara Bender (2006) suggests:

> The same place at the same moment will be experienced differently by different people; the same place and different moments will be experienced differently by the same person. That same person may even, at a given moment, hold conflicting feelings about a place (303).

For example, in the context of colonial windmills (Chapter 7), I apply this understanding to the complex series of negotiations experienced by individuals and groups on the island – in which windmills are linked to colonialism and enslavement, but also to the skill and ingenuity of the enslaved. I characterize postcolonial memory in contemporary St. Croix inherently dissonant – through fluidity and staticity, through joy and trauma, through indifference and passion, through colonial nostalgia and decolonial empowerment – as well

as how these experiences are multi-layered and can sometimes occur simultaneously (Stern 2006).

The concept of spiralized time is engaged more fully in Chapter 6, in which I explore the baobab tree as an ancestral mediator that disrupts linear conceptualizations of time. In tandem, I engage a postcolonial approach to the West African legacies of the baobab, emphasizing the reverberations, murmurs, and memories of precolonial African identity on St. Croix. This subversion of linear time is also applied in Chapter 8 – which engages with the politics of commemorating the Fireburn in Denmark and St. Croix – through an analysis of 'nervous' post/colonial landscapes (Byrne 2003) and epistemic anxieties (Stoler 2009), as they pertain to both the colonial and postcolonial dynamics between the metropole and colony.

**4.3.2 Ecocriticism**

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach which focuses on the relationship between humans and the environment – addressing ecological issues such as environmental degradation, exploitation, and stewardship. Coined by William Rueckert (1978), ecocriticism's ethical focus is similar to postcolonialism – aspiring toward environmental justice through a reframing and decolonization of the relationship between humans and the environment (Walcott 1978). In the context of postcolonial studies, ecocriticism explores the complex and layered relationships between colonialism and environment in various ways, among them, engaging the colonialist attitudes toward nature, which have perpetuated ideas about conquest and domination, and environmental degradation as a metaphor for the destructive impact of colonialism on Caribbean societies (Brathwaite 1973; Walcott 1990; Kincaid 1990). Ecocriticism, when applied in conjunction with postcolonialism, can be understood as a theory that holds humans in both passive and active interaction with the natural world – that is to say that humans both shape and are shaped by nature.

Postcolonial scholars have long explored the relationship between the natural world and the postcolonial Caribbean and, at times have been 'ecocritical' in focus, even if not explicitly defined as such (Walcott 1948; Glissant 1999). In *the Wretched of the Earth,* Franz Fanon (1967) describes colonization as an alienation from nature, the 'bestiality' of the colonizer, and a decolonial return to nature. He argues that "for a colonized people to have the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land – the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity" (Fanon 1967, 44).

As Edouard Glissant (1999, 11) posited, "landscape is its own monument; its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history." This view is expanded upon in Chapters 5 and 7, in my discussion of the ecological impacts of coral mining and the deforestation of the island, the latter of which makes colonial remnants, such as windmills, more prominent on St. Croix than other islands in the Caribbean. The use of ecocriticism, while still a relatively new theoretical perspective, is well-suited to the study of postcolonial community heritage because it emphasizes the destructive impacts of uneven power dynamics and colonial dominance through structural exploitation and extraction of both humans and the natural world. In this way, an ecocritical and postcolonial perspective help us to better understand the intricacies of past and present communities and their relationships with (post)colonial landscapes.

Building from this, I explore the intrinsic value of nature for communities on the island throughout this dissertation and especially in my study of colonial coral mining and its contemporary impacts (Chapter 5) – which interprets environmental stewardship as a restorative and decolonial action. By drawing from an ecocritical perspective in conjunction with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003), coral mining is read and analyzed through colonial archives, archaeology, ethnography, and contemporary art.

Benítez-Rojo (1996) argues that the colonial violence inflicted upon subjugated enslaved Africans and their descendants mirrored the colonial violence inflicted upon Caribbean islands, themselves. I mobilize this view in Chapter 5 through the study of colonial coral mining, an ecological event during which the enslaved were forced to mine living coral from the island's emergent reefs – archival references to injury and drowning (Haagensen 1758) moreover elicit parallels between human and non-human victims of colonial violence. Drawing inspiration from Derek Walcott's (1948) notion of affirmative vision of landscape, I engage the coral reefs on the island as socially, as well as biologically constructed – investigating how contemporary community relationships with coral ecosystems and their histories can be a meaningful pathway toward environmental justice and social equity.

In Chapter 6, I apply ecocritical theory to explore positive niches in anthropogenic environmental change, reflecting on the tradition of ecological and cultural stewardship through the introduction of the African baobab to St. Croix. This species and the culture of care it inspires counteracts against the destruction of the island's watershed and degradation of soil (Heilbuth 1845), because of the baobab's unique ability to retain vast amounts of water and its role in water cycling (STX-12). Exploring the destabilization of the nature/culture divide as a decolonial practice that disrupts the epistemic dominance of Euro-centric theories of knowledge, I draw from literary scholarship such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Ken Bugle's *The Abandoned Baobab* (1991), which represent precolonial West Africa as a multicultural landscape intrinsically bonded with the natural world. I moreover draw from bell hooks' texts "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance" (1990) and "Belonging: A Culture of Place" (2008), and Toni Morrison's text "Rootedness: Ancestor as Foundation" (1984) to examine how Afro-Crucian communities have cultivated space and place to maintain strong connections to homeland and ancestors.

Engaging with the materiality of baobab trees as colonial 'objects' and monuments, I position them as physical manifestations of community, identity, and social expression through a culture of care. In tandem, drawing from Cruz's (2014) study on sacred groves and trees in Mozambique I explore baobab trees as memory banks that anchor collective memory, historical events, and ancestral legacies within landscape.

### 4.3.3 Creole Social Theory

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, St. Croix is an enormously diverse community, shaped by various intersecting and overlapping cultures across time. Many describe the island as a 'melting pot' (STX-08) and the entanglement of African, European, American, and Indigenous heritages is a central aspect of Crucian identity. Creole social theory and its intrinsic processes are therefore foundation to the intellectual framework of this dissertation. Creole social theory holds that Europeans and Africans who settled in the Caribbean contributed "to the development of a distinctive society and culture that was neither European nor African, but Creole" (Bolland 1998).

The word 'creole' dates to the sixteenth century and is derived from the Portuguese word 'crioulo' – initially used to describe those of European descent born in the colonies, but by the seventeenth century, it was used to describe both Euro-Caribbean people and those of mixed European and African ancestry (Ligon 1657). Its application as a theoretical perspective emerged in the mid-twentieth century, primarily through the work of literary scholars such as Melville Herskovits (1937) and Lloyd Best (1968). Rejecting monolithic perspectives on race and essentializing African diasporic identity, Glissant (1958) forged an understanding of Caribbean identity that was distinct from a solely African identity – highlighting the creative and syncretic aspects of Caribbean identity.

I engage with creole social theory throughout this dissertation by exploring the intersection of heritage, identity, and memory – and understanding these human experiences

as processes that are continuously changing and adapting to accommodate shifting values, needs, and cultural influences. Indeed, drawing from the conceptual foundations of hybridity and the third space (Bhabha 1994) proponents of creolist social theory do not view colonialism and slavery as mere points in the past, but instead as the origin of contemporary Caribbean culture (Paravinisi-Gerbert 2011). Creolist scholars such as Jean Bernabé et al. (1990) use these specific points of reference as markers of a unique form of creativity, situated within the tangible and intangible heritage "left in the wake" of the colonialization of the Caribbean (Bernabé 1990, 886).

This view is foundational to the overall framework of how community is understood within this dissertation – as a creative process by which social value and meaning are negotiated. In Chapter 6, I examine how the social significance of the African baobab has evolved to accommodate diasporic and creolized communities on St. Croix, and through which Crucian identity – as distinct from African, European, or American identity – is performed. Indeed, creole social theory is particularly useful in post/colonial contexts such as St. Croix, which have long and complex histories of immigration and emigration. In Chapter 7, I apply this intellectual framework in conjunction with the politics of memory and belonging to show the ways in which the collective process and negotiation of windmills gives way to the polarization of distinct and diverse island identities, community affiliation, and enculturation on the island.

In reference to the embodied relationship between the human and natural worlds, Glissant contends "describing the landscape is not enough; the individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history" (1989, 106). Certainly, the realms of landscape and memory studies intuitively connect to postcolonial, ecocritical, and creole social theories through the cycle of change and adaptation – a lens I incorporate in my

understanding of community heritage on St. Croix. Drawing from Glissant (1997), I aim to do this by integrating the social and natural and – by extension, the temporal and spatial.

While creole social theory plays a significant role in the framing of this thesis, I am mindful of its critics, who argue that the theory is too broad and does not include the legacies of non-European and non-African Caribbean people in the cultivation of a creolized culture (Hall 2015). However, one might argue that this criticism is grounded in the way that creole social theory has been applied – remaining too generalized and not situated within the historical legacies of specific islands, rather than an issue with the theory itself. It should instead be approached as a general and conceptual framework, rather than an 'entrenched paradigm' (Hall 2015, 12). Combining elements of creole social theory with postcolonialism better situates it within a Crucian context, in which diverse communities are characterized by non-African and non-European identities as well (e.g., Indigenous, Palestinian, American, etc.). With creolized identity as a point of departure, claims and attachment to place can be the ultimate binding factor for both descendant and non-descendant communities on the island. Drawing from Glissant's (1997) notion of obfuscating and destabilizing the nature/culture binary, one might be tempted to forge comparisons to traditional (i.e., 'global north') distinctions between 'place' and 'space.'

Building from these themes, I explore the negotiation of symbolic meaning ascribed to colonial windmills and plantation landscapes by diverse communities on the island (Chapter 8). Drawing from Derek Walcott's epic *Omeros* (1990), I examine the relationship between mythology and history, privileging local knowledge and ancestral legacy as a means of elevating Crucian community perspectives and situating them within the socio-cultural context of the island. Aligning with creole social theory, Derek Walcott acknowledges the cumulative creative potential that comes from the history of Caribbean society, including

colonialism, whilst deviating from an academic legacy that marks the period of slavery as the single most defining characteristic of Caribbean identity.

In applying creole social theory as a conceptual approach within this research, I aim to highlight the creative and syncretic aspects of Crucian identity and how it relates to community – which is shaped through the cultural influences of diverse heritages. Mobilizing this view in the examination of St. Croix's baobab trees and windmills (Chapters 6 and 7), I examine how creolized communities on St. Croix negotiate and construct meaning. By combining elements of creole social theory with postcolonialism, I seek to situate this research within the specific socio-historical legacies of St. Croix, acknowledging that creolized identity facilitates social cohesion for ancestral communities on the island.

## 4.4 Islandness and Island Communities

Although 'community' may seem self-evident, in practice it is an enormously broad category, even on 'small' islands, and has diverse implications depending on its theoretical and methodological framing (Geoghegan and Renard 2002). In postcolonial research, community – and more specifically the 'local' community – has fallen into ubiquitous usage (Lyons and Marshall 2014, Hutchings and La Salle 2016, Roslan et al. 2021), a phenomenon Angela McClanahan has referred to as 'the cult of community' (2007). Indeed, as Laura Jane Smith and Emma Waterton note, the inclusion of a community element in heritage research has become "near mandatory" in the past quarter century (2009, 13) – an academic trend through which community has become an explanation, "rather than something to be explained" (Alleyne 2006, 608).

Community-based research is often framed as an opportunity for the field to "look inward" (Martindale and Lyons 2014, 430) in order to engage with the dominant epistemologies, ethics, and uneven power dynamics that have long plagued cultural research (Moser et al. 2002). However, as some have critically noted, this approach has frequently

fallen victim to on a heavier focus on the role and potential benefits of collaborative research to the *field*, rather than the altruistic claims toward the democratization of knowledge often implied (Hutchings and La Salle 2016). Additionally, scholars have criticized the unreflexive application of 'community' as a term that has become too comfortable, framing it as inherently harmonious – and in presuming oneness, inadvertently essentializing it (Smith and Waterton 2009; Gonzalez-Tennant 2014). They instead encourage a greater effort to critically engage with the uncomfortable aspects of community and the research of it – dissonance, social exclusion, and uneven power dynamics. Instead, a closer look at community itself – its patterns, implications, and process – can facilitate a greater understanding of human experience.

Islands present an interesting point of departure for investigating community. Superficially, they appear as paradigms for the study of cultural development – neat and perfectly bounded units of analysis (Evans 1973). Indeed, in the past, 'armchair anthropologists' viewed them this way (Schofield and George 1997), grounded in a theoretical perspective now known as social evolutionism – a theory, informing early anthropological/archaeological method and analysis, and popularized by scholars such as Edward Burnett Tylor (1871) – who never set foot on the islands he studied. Social evolutionism was rooted in a colonial mindset that viewed a unilinear and uniform progression of human societies, reinforcing paternalistic, determinist, and imperial worldviews (Kuklick 1996). Drawing from Darwinian evolutionary theory, particularly his work on the Galapagos Islands, it emphasized that islands were ideal laboratories for cultural research (Rainbird 2007).

Social evolutionism is now a discredited theory, but the notion of 'island laboratories' is still sometimes unconsciously applied to islands and island communities – although this idealized approach has long been a point of contention within the fields of anthropology,

archaeology, and heritage studies (Dawson et al. 2023; Fricke and Hoerman 2022). While islands have been a frequent focus in cultural research, it wasn't until the turn of the twenty-first century that 'island studies' emerged as a separate discipline (Baldacchino 2004). Godfrey Baldacchino (2004) emphasized the significance of 'islandness' as an interpretive lens, which he defined as a "state of tension between openness and closure" (274) – a characteristic that can be applied to 'community' as well. This latter point is one that is examined by resident communities on St. Croix – in which the notion of 'islandness' is interrogated, as explained by one interviewee:

> I've been deeply thinking just about what 'island' means. [...] Manhattan […] is an island, but people don't conceive of it in that way. It's not *our* kind of island. Like, our kinds of islands are *different* […] Manhattan is not seen that way, although it's a group of islands. Neither is Copenhagen. People don't think about Copenhagen as a group of islands, but it is. So, I [am] acutely aware that whatever we think of the Caribbean is a particular kind of fiction, a particular kind of island […] – both for outsiders, but insiders, too. Because what does it mean that you can constantly look out at other islands and be aware? What does that mean for us to feel that? […] and the expansiveness of that [is that] we're all connected. I mean, that's why we feel an earthquake that happens in Puerto Rico. We're actually just the tops of mountains (STX-14).

Karen Olwig (2007) discusses 'island' as it exists within the English socio-linguistic imagination – tied to a nature of "isolation" and contending that islands have traditionally been conceptualized, oriented, and rooted in the context of land, rather than water. Presenting an alternative perspective, she argues that for islanders, "the sea may be perceived instead as the body of water that clearly demarcates a place and, at the same time, links it to the rest of the world" (2007, 262) – a view echoed by Scott Fitzpatrick and Atholl Anderson (2008) who emphasize the interplay of connection and isolation on islands.

Both 'island' and 'community' are alluring 'units of analysis' because of their conceptual simplicity (Olwig 2007) – although as argued by Adam Grydehøj, it is difficult to escape their "certain submerged contradictions and hazy paradoxes" (2017, 5). For example,

in the past, community was generally defined by geographical space (Fitzhugh and Hunt 1997). This understanding of community long created problems in implementing heritage policy and as asserted by Lindström, defining communities geographically as 'local' implies that they are stable, bounded, and self-evident (2019) – which they seldom are. In recent years, the term has evolved to accommodate what Bradshaw (2009) refers to as the "post-place" community, in which networks of people are tied together by shared identity, values, and common interests. This understanding satisfies a tendency to engage with community primarily in terms of its positive and inclusive implications. However, as argued by Waterton and Smith, this view can also be understood to be "embedded with restrictive assumptions concerned with nostalgia, consensus, and homogeneity," failing to critically engage with the political tensions inherent to group dynamics (2009, 4).

Islands as "units of research" (Grydehøj 2017, 39) have presented similar challenges for scholars. Like 'community' they have fallen victim to idealistic visions of simplicity and cohesion (Rainbird 2007). Referring to islands as places that "defy territoriality," Grydehøj notes that the myth of the 'pure island race,' while alluring, is not an accurate depiction of the identities and experiences of islanders. Indeed, this aspect of islandness was frequently communicated during fieldwork, as described by one interviewee:

> My connection to St. Croix is that I'm a native. My great-great-grandmother was native to the Virgin Islands but was born in St. Thomas […] our great grandmother [was born in St. John in 1888]. My great grandfather came from Barbados […] and he married [redacted] who was white, and she came as a missionary […] for the Moravian Church […] So, my family is a kallaloo[11] […] kallaloo means they are mixed in white, Black or Native Americans – it's just kallaloo! (laughs) Some people say the U.S. is a melting pot. We is a melting pot, too (smiles and shrugs) (STX-8).

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[11] Kallaloo is the Caribbean name for amaranth, a vegetable that is similar to spinach. It is the main ingredient in a stew, also called kallaloo, which is widely consumed across the Caribbean region. The stew, which is what the interviewee refers to, is made from a variety of greens, onions, peppers, and seasonings. It is a nutritious staple food that can be consumed for breakfast, lunch, or dinner.

Crucian and non-Crucian participants during observation reflected on creolization, multiculturalism and intra-regionalism as a significant aspect of islandness. However, this tacit island perspective has been somewhat slow to catch in the academic arena, particularly in realm of colonial studies (Jean, Malatesta, and Jackobson 2024; Nava et al. 2024). This is partly because public funding for post/colonial research often prioritizes national interests and histories, and consequently research generally focuses more heavily on historical political groupings rather than the lived experiences of islanders (Hau'ofa 1993) – although this has begun to shift in recent years through various projects (e.g., Simonsen 2024; Roopnarine 2021).

(Post)colonial studies pose a second challenge in the study of islands by non-islanders – as noted by Hong Gang "a series of fixations on mainland, particular islands, and particular interpretations of the island/mainland dialectic" (2017, 23) is compounded by colonial relationships between the metropole and colony, a phenomenon I discuss in more detail in Chapter 8. Grydehøj notes that this issue is "complicated by the fact that it is often scholars from the metropole in question who are most active in undertaking research on these islands" moreover arguing that the pursuit of scholarship is "bound up in the colonial matrix of power, without reflecting upon the geo-politics of knowledge" (2017, 9).

Recognizing these issues as they pertain to postcolonial St. Croix, I apply Smith and Waterton's characterization of community as a "process" (2010, 15), by which individuals and collectives negotiate the parameters of membership and its shifting baseline in order to ascribe meaning, value, and identity to things that are shared. In the context of island communities, as Aidenn Foley et al. assert, "islandness is a contested concept, not just between disciplines, but also cultures entangled with what islands, island studies, and island identity are understood to be" (2003, 1800). Building from this, in the following section, I examine island identity as a complex dimension of community on St. Croix.

### 4.4.1 'Local' Communities

Island community studies are sometimes equated with studies of 'localness.' It quickly becomes apparent on St. Croix, that 'local,' and by extension, 'Crucian' (i.e., 'from' St. Croix), is a politically fraught term that reveals the ambiguities and ambivalences of the parameters of the inclusion on St. Croix, or the politics of belonging. Shalini Puri (2004) critiqued the notion of 'local' as a fixed category – echoing Stuart Hall's (1990) argument that the term 'local' erases the complexities of Caribbean identity and culture (Bell and Newby 2021; Davies 2014). Carole Boyce Davies (2011) similarly problematizes the notion of a fixed 'local' space within islands, contending that it ignores the Caribbean region's history of mobility, migration, and global connections.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) notions of 'fixity' (i.e., the process of the ideological construction of otherness) and 'hybridity' (i.e., the transformative process of cultural mixing) speak to the intrinsic tension between social inclusion and exclusion on St. Croix as they pertain to group (re)formation and solidarity. Fixity is a myth that implies repetition and rigidity, leading to an unchanging order – within the postcolonial context, it is used in the construction of the 'other,' ultimately establishing stereotypes and social divisions that rely upon an imagined 'fixity.' Hybridity, on the other hand, describes the emergence of new cultural forms that are derived from multiculturalism and is a means of postcolonial resistance. These two terms – fixity and hybridity – are useful when engaging with the intricate push-pull of tensions and harmonies inherent to community process, and in particular within complex postcolonial geographies of scaled identities. Christabel Devadoss raises this point by delving into how postcolonial approaches to diaspora confront and contest "colonial notions of purity regarding identity and place" – arguing that hybridity must be understood as more than a 'fusion of two binarized categories of identity' but instead destabilize the fixity of such frameworks (2023, 677-678). Applied to this research, they

establish a theoretical foundation to show how community and heritage are multi-scalar processes by which collectives, within and between themselves, negotiate value, meaning, and authority over the past and in the present. The dialectic of identity, belonging, and social inclusion can be ambiguous and fluid in creole island communities (Gangahar 2022), especially ones with long migration histories like St. Croix.

### 4.4.2 Nested Communities

Shared values and interests form a critical dimension of community on St. Croix, frequently manifesting in the form of formal and informal social groups that facilitate connection, dialogue, and social exchange. These structured groups are multi-layered and feed into larger groups based on commonalities between people. Seldom does one identify with only one such group – therefore, this characteristic of community is perhaps best understood through the lens of nestedness. First coined as an ecological term (Atmar and Patterson 1993), nestedness has also been applied to community (Harris 2014) – referring to how small networks are connected to larger ones – like a puzzle piece fitting into a bigger picture – creating a 'nested' structure.

Nestedness has been mobilized by heritage scholars, for example, Christopher Tilley's (1994) concept of 'nested landscapes' and Gregory Ashworth's (2020) analogies about social identity as hierarchies, like Russian nesting dolls. Nestedness caters to a non-essentializing approach to community – accommodating its vertical and horizonal, hierarchical and non-hierarchical dimensions (Knight 1999, 317). Indeed, communities are comprised of individuals that share membership with many other communities as well – these interacting dynamics simultaneously diffusing and concentrating power in multiple nuanced and uneven ways. Nestedness can therefore be helpful in cultivating a conceptual understanding of how communities operate as real-world entities.

Engaging community as a process – as a dynamic and ever-evolving ecosystem comprised of diverse nested groups – allows for fluid interpretations as they relate to heritage, identity, and memory. It moreover highlights the active tension and harmonies between individuals and, as noted by Dismas Masolo (2002), communities are "amorphous groupings definable more by the organizing beliefs, principles, and practices than by the bodies which inhabit them" (20). Collective meaning(s), value(s), and knowledge are (re)constructed and (re)negotiated through this interactive process, and therefore the importance of various communities in shaping heritage is intrinsic to it.

## 4.5 Conclusion

This theoretical framework has presented the foundational body of literature and theory that has informed this dissertation. Applying these theoretical lenses – postcolonialism, ecocriticism and creole social theory – this dissertation focuses on how communities on St. Croix negotiate meaning through heritage associated with the Danish colonial period. These conceptual frameworks are combined with various heritage perspectives such as spatial dynamics and powered landscapes, the politics of recognition, and memory studies which gave shape to many of the driving themes in the four primary case studies. In the chapters that follow, I expand upon these theories to examine postcolonial community heritage on St. Croix through four distinct case studies: coral, baobab trees, colonial windmills, and the Fireburn. Because each case study uses slightly different methods and data sets, this foundation theory is supplemented by additional theory that is relevant and supports their distinct framing.

# Chapter 5: Water
## The Sea is History: Colonial Coral Mining

### 5.1 Introduction

St. Croix is surrounded by the second longest barrier reef in the Caribbean. From the second quarter of the eighteenth century, vast quantities of living coral were mined from the island's emergent reefs by enslaved laborers, which were used in colonial masonry structures and processed into marine-based lime on the island – the evidence of this practice visible in the many coral structures that form its built environment. Yet the social and ecological impacts of colonial coral mining have seldom been considered in contemporary discussions regarding coral reef decline in the face of climate change. In tandem, these concerns are frequently centered on the loss of 'natural' heritage and often missing 'cultural' heritage as a significant piece of the puzzle.

This chapter draws on island and coastal archaeology, situated within a postcolonial and ecocritical theoretical framework, to examine and interpret coral mining as an understudied colonial legacy – investigating the use of Scleractinia "stony" corals in the colonial construction processes on the island after Denmark's colonization of the island, situating its consequences within a contemporary heritage framework. Although colonial coral mining has been referred to tangentially in artistic, archaeological, architectural, and archival scholarship in the Caribbean (Steiner 2020; Belle 2019; Dunnavant et al. 2018; Odewale et al. 2017; Kelly 2004; Sass 2000; Chapman 1991), there has been no comprehensive research of it until now. This case study, therefore, presents an untapped colonial history, contributing an entirely original subject area within Caribbean postcolonial studies.

The chapter begins by outlining the methods and sources of data, followed by a brief introduction to St. Croix's geology and coral reefs. Next, it presents the historical context of

coral mining on the island, which is cross-referenced with studies from elsewhere. It then

presents the archaeological results drawn from pedestrian survey, which located and

documented mined coral in standing structures on St. Croix. Lastly, it engages with

contemporary marine heritage to ground this history within a community heritage framework

– centered on symbolic meaning, memory, and postcolonialism. To this end, this study strives

to move beyond historical silences, allowing the enduring nature of coral to be represented

from the colonial period through the present day.

## 5.2 Sources and Methods

In this chapter, I present the historical and archaeological context of coral mining on

St. Croix and investigates the use, proportion, and distribution of coral within the built

environment. This data is triangulated with community data, framing the island's coral reefs

as cultural and natural heritage assets. It draws from archival, archaeological, and

ethnographic data to contextualize the history and extent of coral mining and its (re)use,

situating it within present-day concerns about coral reef decline.

Colonial accounts were consulted to establish a foundation of knowledge on the

history of coral mining. Although there is little historical documentation of the practice, two

18th century accounts were located (Haagensen 1758; West 1799). This historical data was

combined with contemporary data to establish a baseline understanding of the practice,

including ethnography drawn from participant observation and interviews (STX-03, STX-12,

STX-14, STX-18, STX-19, STX-20, STX-22, STX-23). Ethnographic data sought to bridge

historical and contemporary legacies of the island's coral reefs. This data represented diverse

communities on the island, ranging in age from undergraduate students to retirees and many

ethnicities (i.e., Afro-Crucian, Afro-Caribbean, and African American, Euro-American,

European, Indigenous American, Middle Eastern, Asian, and multi-ethnic individuals). Most

participants were university educated and middle or upper-middle income, but also included

fishers, tradespeople, and dive instructors. Between 2020 and 2024, participant observation involved over one hundred participants, who represented government and non-profit agencies, citizen science initiatives, social organizations, recreational SCUBA divers, tourists, business owners, fishers, artists, farmers, and members of the public. Terrestrial and marine archaeological surveys formed a primary data source. The surveys spanned the entire island, although walking surveys were concentrated in the two main towns of Christiansted and Frederiksted. Surveys were limited to publicly accessible sites or private sites when granted permission from landowners; therefore, although the results present a representative sample of coral masonry on the island, it is not a complete inventory.



**Figure 15** A partially exposed coral foundation in Christiansted (Zahedi 2023).

Between January 2021 and November 2023, I identified, surveyed, and documented 131 archaeological sites and freestanding structures with visible and exposed coral (Appendix D). These surveys were non-invasive and therefore coral identification was limited to structures featuring exposed coral (i.e., partially/unplastered) (Figure 15). This meant that

there were restrictions on the types of structures assessed; for example, at well-maintained sites, such as Fort Christianvaern, the masonry and material fabric beneath plaster was often not visible. Archival data was invaluable at this juncture – Hans West (1799) and Reimart Haagensen's (1758) accounts, for example, revealed that administrative and military buildings relied heavily on marine-based lime for their construction (1758, 10). In tandem, although this chapter discusses marine-based lime, it was not a primary focus of the study. It is suggested that future research on coral mining investigates the production of lime and its ties to coral mining in more depth.

## 5.3 Geological Formation of St. Croix's Barrier Reef

St. Croix's barrier reef is one of its most defining natural features, shaping its cultural development over thousands of years. For islanders the ocean embodies islandness – fishing, boating, free-diving, and 'liming'[12] at the beach are among the most treasured social activities. St. Croix's fishers are known for unique and elaborate fishing and trapping methods, a tangible and intangible practice that is ever-evolving (STX-20B; STX-23). The island's unique geology, which is distinct from its neighbors, has nurtured diverse marine habitats (e.g., coral reefs, seagrass beds, salt ponds, etc.), which support many species of fish, corals, and other marine animals, in turn, cultivating St. Croix's aquatic heritage.

Unlike many of its neighbors, which are volcanic or coral islands, St. Croix has a long and complex geological history – shaped, morphed, and ultimately, created, by the direct and indirect forces of subduction and tectonic activity (see: 2.3) (Whetten 1968, 1). The 'bowl' or central valley of the island is composed of limestone that is approximately 20 million years old, geologists asserting it is the remnants of an ancient coral reef, which established as the island emerged from the sea along the continental shelf (Nagle and Hubbard 1989). This

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[12] Liming is a Caribbean activity, a central practice and critical space for community building. Although sometimes referred to as simply 'hanging out' in public places, for example on the street or at the beach, it fulfills an important function within Caribbean society, as described by Fernandez Santana et al. it is an "ambit where meaning is negotiated, social and political discourses are elucidated and debated, and cultural products and spaces are collectively used (2019, 207).

coral reef, forming what is now known as the Kingshill Marl, was a bridge that connected two islands (Whetten 1968, 7). Tectonic pressure and subduction lifted and unified the islands, shaping the island's central valley bisected by the inlet now known as Salt River (Figure 16).

**EXPLANATION**

**Quaternary deposits**
- Qab  Alluvium, minor beach deposits
- Qr  Reef

**Pliocene rocks**
- Tbf  Blessing Formation

**Miocene rocks**

Kingshill Limestone
- Tmb  Mannings Bay Member
- Tlr  La Reine Member

**Cretaceous rocks**

Igneous intrusive rocks
- Kg  Gabbro
- Kd  Diorite
- Km  Mt. Eagle Group
- – – –  Contact—Dashed where inferred

Location area
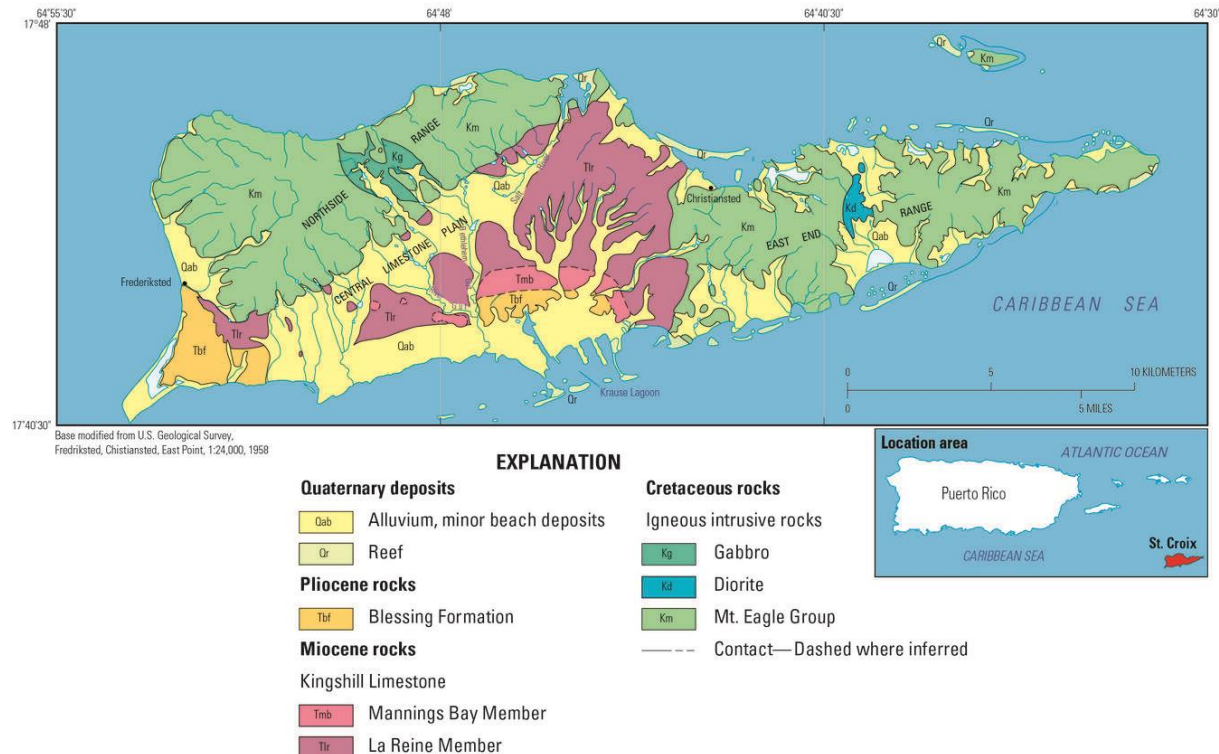
**Figure 16** The Kingshill Marl (i.e., Kingshill Limestone), is an ancient coral reef that once separated two distinct islands. The contemporary barrier reef structure can be seen along the island's eastern coast (U.S. Geological Survey 2016).

Several thousand years ago, a barrier reef began to establish itself around the island. Barrier reefs differ from other types of coral reefs in several ways – they are the rarest type of coral reef and form when fringing reefs slowly combine with one another, creating a wall-like structure that encourages coral polyps to settle and colonize the substrate (Ladd 2012). This forms a lagoon between the reef and the shoreline. St. Croix has the largest living reef of any Caribbean island, which includes its barrier reef – within the Americas, its barrier reef is one of the longest, and in the Caribbean, second only to Belize. St. Croix's barrier reef extends nearly the entirety of its eastern coast – protecting the coastline and shaping the heritage of the island over many generations.

In recent years, the emergence of island studies has sought to orient the notion of 'islandness' toward the sea – imagining island communities as simultaneously bounded and unbounded by the surrounding seas (Olwig 2007; Dawson 2018). Indeed, coral reefs may be incorporated into this perspective, as geographical, ecological, and cultural features that facilitate an expanded habitation space – obfuscating the line between land and sea, as well as the binaries between cultural and natural heritage. To this end, scholars hold that islands are both biologically and socially constructed (Baldacchino 2018; Lansing and Cox 2019).



**Figure 17** A *Pseudodiploria strigosa* coral skeleton in a building on St. Croix (Davies 2024).

Archaeological evidence suggests that anthropogenic impacts to the island's marine environment began long before the arrival of European colonists, indicated by substantial shell middens and a steady decline in fish size over time (Grouard et al. 2019). However, the colonial period marked an intensification of ecological degradation and destruction which, among other activities, included coral mining on St. Croix. From the eighteenth century onward, vast quantities of living coral were mined from emergent and submerged coral reefs

on the island, the skeletons of which are a defining feature of the island's colonial architecture (Figure 17).

## 5.4 Coral Reefs of St. Croix

In the US Virgin Islands, St. Croix is known as the 'Big Island,' although when compared with other inhabited islands in the Caribbean, it is medium-sized. Relative to geographical area, the island has a diverse submarine landscape – characterized by patch, fringe, and barrier reefs, seagrass beds, mangrove forests, bioluminescent lagoons, rocky outcrops, sand flats, and a deep underwater trench. The barrier reef dominates the eastern coast (Figure 18), and deep patch and fringe reefs are common to the northwest, west, and southwest coasts of the island.



**Figure 18** St. Croix's barrier reef, as seen from land (Zahedi 2024).

Fishing has long been an important part of St. Croix's cultural heritage; reef fish, locally known as 'pot fish' (e.g., snapper, parrot fish, red hind, blue runner, etc.) are the most prevalent locally sourced marine protein consumed on the island – a pillar of Crucian traditional cuisine. Because many of the island's coral reefs are close to land, St. Croix is renowned for some of the best shore diving in the Caribbean, and therefore attracts many SCUBA diving tourists. It has also drawn the interest of marine biologists – and several

research stations have been established on the island, from the Buck Island National

Monument (1968-present) and Fairleigh Dickinson University's West Indies Laboratory for

Underwater Research (1972-1990) to the Coral Innovation Hub at the Nature Conservancy

(2020-present) (Figure 19). According to recent estimates by the National Oceanic and

Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the ocean economy contributes to 21% of the total

employment and $1.1 billion in wages in the U.S. Virgin Islands (Gilbert 2024). It is

therefore important to position coral reefs as socially integrated, in addition to biologically

constructed, entities.



**Figure 19** Coral conservationists from the Nature Conservancy monitor coral reefs in St. Croix (Zahedi 2023).

Tropical coral reefs are one of the Earth's most critically important life systems,

believed to be the most biodiverse ecosystems on the planet (Sheppard et al. 2017). Although

they occupy less than 1% of the ocean floor, they are home to 25% of all marine life

(Knowlton et al. 2010). Corals are marine invertebrates; most are colonial organisms,

composed of hundreds to hundreds of thousands of individual animals, called polyps, which

share a calcium carbonate skeleton (Figure 20). Coral reefs are formed through the deposition

of calcium carbonate by calcifying organisms, of which Scleractinia are the dominant force. This calcification is counteracted by erosion through the physical forces of the ocean, combined with the removal of rock by eroding organisms such as boring sponges, urchins, and parrotfish, which convert this calcium carbonate rock into sand and silt (Sheppard et al. 2007, 29). Therefore, for the continued accretion, and ultimately survival, of a coral reef ecosystem, net calcification must outweigh net bioerosion (Hubbard 1986).



**Figure 20**: *Orbicella faveolata* coral polyps (left), and an Orbicella *faveolata* skeleton (right).

St. Croix's coral reefs have been in decline since monitoring began in the 1970s (Arienzo 2008), climate change widely acknowledged as "the single greatest long-term threat to coral reefs" (Maynard et al. 2014, 3). Global influences, including the intensifying threat of bleaching events (Blondeau et al. 2020) and coral disease (e.g., white band disease [Mayor et. al 2006], stony coral tissue loss disease [Philley 2022]), have contributed to the steady loss of coral in St. Croix's waters. Compounding anthropogenic stressors (e.g., increasing temperatures, ocean acidification, overfishing, pollution, disease, erosion, and physical destruction [anchoring, coral collecting, etc.], etc.) threaten the long-term viability of this delicate and important ecosystem (Oliver et. al 2011), as the future of St. Croix's reefs hangs in the balance. Corals are typically slow-growing, with dense, massive reef-building species

growing at a rate of 0.3 – 2 cm/year, though growth rates in branching species can be up to 10 cm/year (Browne 2012; Thompson 2022). Thus, the practice of high-intensity extraction of coral for colonial construction, over a relatively abbreviated time period (i.e., 150-200 years), represents a significant tipping of the scale toward net erosion of targeted reefs on the island.

In the face of climate change, the threats to coastal communities who depend on coral reefs are not solely economic. Coral reefs, and especially barrier reefs, are a natural breakwater that protects coastlines from erosion caused by intensive wave action and storm surges. However, as argued by Borja Reguero et al. (2018), coral reefs are seldom assessed for their infrastructural benefits – a trait that is increasingly critical as climate change contributes to an increase in the occurrence and severity of tropical storms and hurricanes (Dunnavant et al. 2018).

Twentieth-century human activity was previously recognized as the catalyst for coral reef decline, but in the past quarter century researchers have pushed this timeline back centuries (Pandolfi et al. 2003). The colonial period marked a substantial increase in the intensity of environmental exploitation – with some scholars supporting the designation of the 'plantationocene' as the onset of the Anthropocene a model for anthropogenic environmental change (Davis et al. 2019), viewing plantations as a "central engine of capitalism, empire, industrialization, ecological destruction, geological change, and climate change" (Aikens et al. 2019).

Certainly, the evidence of colonial exploitation in particular its impact on reefs is visible within St. Croix's built environment. Coral has long been used as a construction material and source of lime for plaster, mortar, sugar production, and agriculture on the island (Haagensen 1758; West 1799; Lewisohn 1970) (Figure 21). As ecologists, conservationists, and the wider public seek to protect and restore the island's reefs, it is important that pre- and early industrial impacts are considered. This is because accurate ecological baselines are

essential to understanding how undisturbed reefs on St. Croix may have existed and functioned.
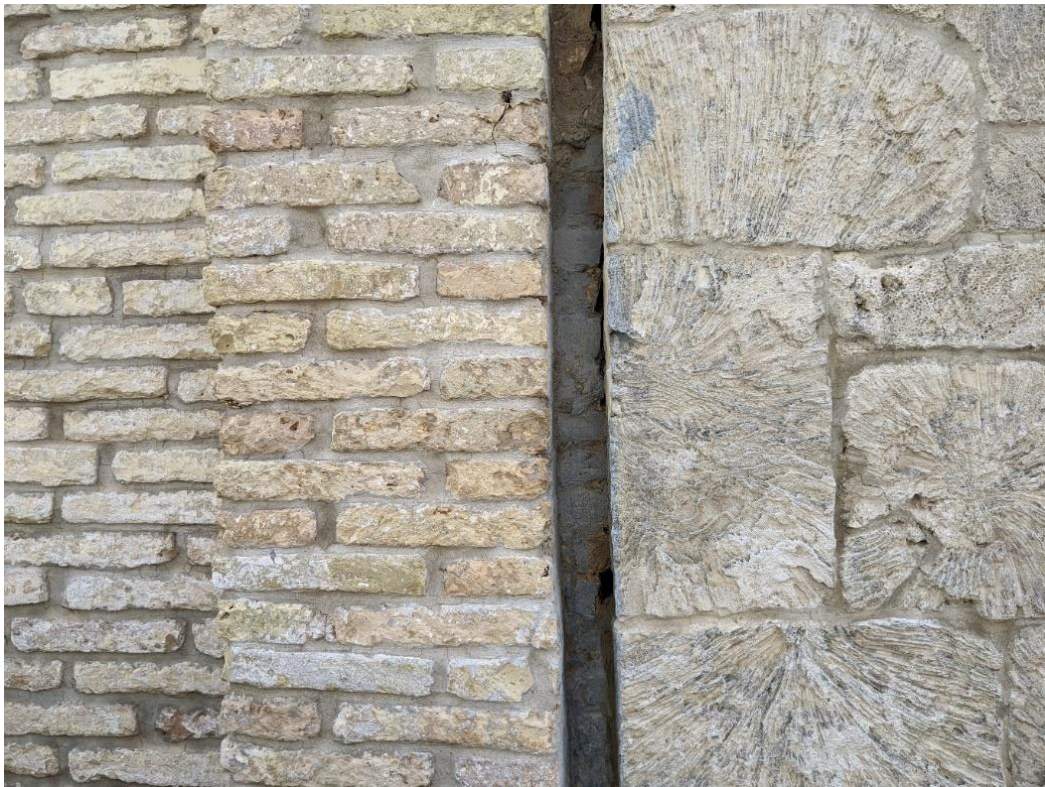


**Figure 21**: European ballast bricks and coral blocks are common masonry styles in St. Croix (Zahedi 2021).

As argued by Boivin and Crowther, "disciplines like archaeology that study the past have a critical role in shaping the future" (2022, 279). Critical heritage and archaeology present abundant opportunity when combined with the biological sciences, in examining how human activities have shaped, influenced, and impacted the natural world. In the Caribbean, there has been an intensifying call for research that emphasizes local and international collaboration, to enhance the outcomes of research about Caribbean biodiversity and historical ecology, especially as it pertains to colonial legacies (Mohammed et al. 2022). A critical heritage perspective presents an opportunity to incorporate interdisciplinary perspectives – historical ecology, archaeology, marine biology, anthropology – to ground this pressing matter within the contemporary social context. Investigating St. Croix's built environment as a colonial inheritance that bridges natural and cultural heritage presents an

opportunity for greater collaboration that enhances and diversifies the benefits of such research.

## 5.5 A Historical Perspective

St. Croix's distinct architecture has drawn scholarly attention since the 1950s (Peterson 1955). The island is home to some of the best-preserved Scandinavian colonial-era architecture in the Western hemisphere – relics of nearly two hundred years under Danish colonial rule (Figure 22).



**Figure 22** Christiansted, the capital of St. Croix with Fort Christiansvaern in the foreground (Go to St. Croix 2023)

St. Croix's coral masonry is among its most unique architectural characteristics. Many eighteenth and nineteenth structures across the island (e.g., walls, foundations, cisterns, etc.) are constructed with coral – either as the principal material or in combination with brick and local stones (Figure 23). Other Caribbean islands historically relied upon mined coral substrate from the terrestrial deposits commonly found on coral islands (i.e., an island formed from coral detritus and associated organic material) as a primary building material (e.g., Barbados [Smith and Watson 2009)] and Martinique [Mazabraud 2019]). However, mining from living coral reefs is less common, limited to coastal sites with robust coral environments, especially barrier reefs, such as that of St. Croix (Sass 2000; Kelly 2004; Steiner 2020). This can be attributed to a range of factors, including accessibility, geography,

and composition. On St. Croix, as was the case with sugar production and other colonial pursuits, coral mining was entirely reliant upon the labor of enslaved African and Afro-Caribbean people (Haagensen 1758), for many of whom aquatic heritage was a pillar of their traditional cultures.



**Figure 23** A structure in Christiansted built with a combination of several species of coral, brick, and locally quarried stone (Zahedi 2020).

## 5.5.1 West African Aquatic Heritage

Colonial accounts evidence that when Europeans first colonized the African continent, they encountered communities with substantial knowledge and expertise in swimming and free diving – skills that were quickly exploited by colonists for shipwreck salvage, rescue operations, fishing, and harvesting valuable items such as pearls and other marine treasures (Oldendorp 1987; Morgan 2012; Dawson 2018) (Figure 24). From the fifteenth century onward, colonial accounts reference the richness of West African aquatic heritage, positively describing individuals as 'amphibious,' 'ebony mermaid[s],' 'nymph,' 'triton,' 'fish,' and 'very expert swimmers' (see: Dawson 2018, 15-16; Smith 1970). Free-diving Africans were crucial to colonial salvage operations in West Africa, the Caribbean, and South America –

Europeans marveling at their ability to descend and retrieve presumably lost objects with a single breath (Moreno-Alvarez 2023).
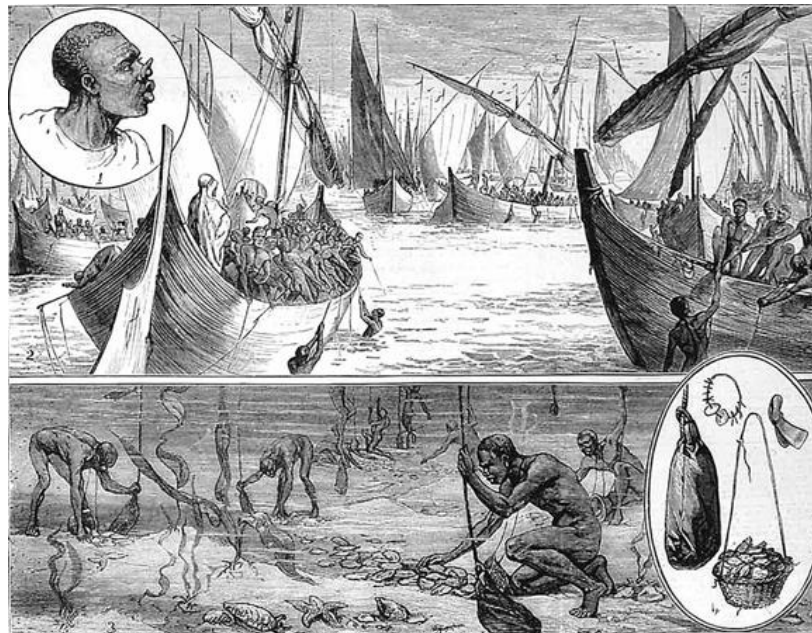


**Figure 24** African pearl divers in the Persian Gulf (The Graphic: An Illustrated Weekly Newspaper, 1881 [From Dawson 2019]).

In recent years, the centering of 'whiteness' has been the subject of increasing scrutiny in colonial studies (Reilly 2022; Straker 2011). One of the consequences of this academic bias is a historical under-articulation of the expertise and skill of African people and the colonial incentives to capture and enslave highly skilled individuals (Klein 2021), who were more 'valuable' to slave traders. It has been well-established that enslaved Africans represented a diverse range of expertise – naturalists, navigators, doctors, and craftspeople – and that they were lucrative to the social, economic, and political development of the Caribbean (Mpofu 2013; Smart 2019). Helene Birkeli (2022), for example, has written about the role enslaved African and Afro-Caribbean cartographers, navigators, and surveyors played in producing early colonial maps, such as P.L. Oxholm's renowned maps of St. Croix (1799). According to Wulf Joseph Wulff, a Dane in West Africa in the mid-19th century, he had never heard of an African drowning – and despite the poor swimming abilities of colonists and enduring oppressive colonial social dynamics, enslaved and free Africans

reliably rescued colonists when maritime accidents occurred (Winsnes 2015, 93). Ironically, African proficiency in swimming was viewed by Europeans as a sign of racial inferiority (Ray and Rich 2009, 15).



**Figure 25:** "The Coral Divers" by Winslow Homer (Homer 1898).

In tandem, African expertise in diving and swimming was brought to the Caribbean by the enslaved – a skill prized by Afro-Caribbean and European communities alike. Kevin Dawson described Bahamians as 'renowned divers' who provided entertainment by diving for sponges, coral, conch, and shellfish (2018, 82) – this eventually evolving into a form of tourism, famously depicted by the artist Winslow Homer during his travels to the Bahamas in the late 19th century (Figure 25).

In St. Croix, the 19th century tourist William Butterworth described two Black conch divers in Christiansted harbor – recalling their request for residual cooking fat from the bottom of a pot in his ship's galley, stating that when put on the surface of the water "they could see the conchs on the bottom much better" (Meader 2009, 130). Although colonial law prevented the enslaved from owning boats on St. Croix, in the 1820s Lt. Brady indicated that "[the enslaved] go out to fish upon rafts, no otherwise adapted to marine purposes than by possessing the property of flotation" (Meader 2009, 130). Brady noted that the poor quality of the crudely crafted boats was intentional, describing it as a "cultural skill worthy of attention"

– a security measure to assure suspicious planters that there was no intent of marronage (Meader 2009, 130). This supports the theory that the colonial social order was continually negotiated between colonial elite and enslaved communities, the latter of whom pushed boundaries and constantly challenged the constraints of their bondage. Enslaved divers could produce immense wealth for planters and other colonial elites – in some cases, using these abilities to purchase their own freedom (Morgan 2012, 9; Dawson 2019). Coral mining as practice likely evolved from colonial elites' awareness of African proficiency in swimming and diving and its traditional use in East Africa (Berti 2016).



**Figure 26** Monks Bath in the West End – a possible early limestone mining site (Zahedi 2021).

According to local knowledge, coastal mining on St. Croix began in the mid-1600s when the island was controlled by the Knights of Malta (see: 2.5). Monks Bath is a tidal pool on the West End, reportedly carved for monks to clean themselves – the evidence of other structures nearby suggests that the mined coral substrate may have been used elsewhere (Figure 26). Coral mining, on the other hand, is presumed to have begun later, although the timeline is somewhat unclear. Some plantations feature significant coral masonry possibly dating to the French colonial period on the island (e.g., Estate Rust op Twist and Estate Coakley Bay). Indeed, coral mining was also practiced on other islands in the French West

Indies, such as Martinique and St. Lucia (Mazabraud 2019; Sass 2000), perhaps supporting the idea that the practice was brought to St. Croix from the French islands. The earliest direct reference to coral mining on St. Croix is from 1758 during the Danish colonial period (Haagensen 1758).

**5.5.2 The Establishment of Coral Mining on St. Croix**

Throughout history and wherever it grows, coral has been used in masonry, although some of the earliest and most prominent examples of its use are from East Africa – in particular, Egypt and Kenya (Jiménez and Orejas 2017; Pollard 2012; Berti 2016). The first references to coral mining in the Caribbean date to the late 16th century, when Carlos Jiménez and Covadonga Orejas describe "teams of slaves under the scrutiny of foremen" dove for coral from shallow reefs on Panama's Caribbean coast (2017, 674).

Kevin Dawson describes swimming as an inherent 'struggle for survival,' noting that Black prowess in swimming, freediving, and other aquatic activities was capitalized upon by Europeans in their desperate pursuit for profit and power (2018, 15). LaVaughn Belle, speaking to this point, notes that coral mining on St. Croix represents a "set of skills and knowledge" in the built environment that remains undocumented – moreover evidencing the marginalization of narratives, labor, and expertise tied to Afro-Caribbean lifeways (2019, 36). To this point, it should be clearly stated that colonialism was reliant upon the exploitation of enslaved bodies and that intensive coral mining was a dangerous activity, and colonial accounts imply that injury and death were common (Haagensen 1758). Speaking to the symbolic nature of colonial violence, on might moreover note that the exploitation of coral landscapes mirrored the exploitation experienced by coral miners on St. Croix – the impacts of which remain to be explored from a heritage perspective (Benítez-Rojo 1996).

There is extraordinarily little written about colonial coral mining on St. Croix or elsewhere in the Caribbean. However, Reimart Haagensen, a civil servant and planter from

Denmark, arrived in St. Croix in 1739 and wrote in detail about his experience on the island – briefly discussing his first-hand accounts of coral mining and lime production. Haagensen's text is formatted as a journal, in which he describes daily life in the island(s) from the perspective of a Danish colonist – touching on subjects that include landscape and climate, economy, politics, society, and race. Haagensen's text is the one of the only identified record of coral mining in the Danish West Indies that exists, and therefore, despite its biases, it is an important source. On the practice of coral mining on St. Croix, he wrote:

> The reefs that grow out of the sea all around the island produce never-ending, limitless quantities of limestone. Just as fast as it is removed, it grows back again. And it is quite convenient to gather because the reef extends above the surface of the sea, with the result that the slaves can stand on it with the water not rising above their feet, except at high tide when it reaches to their thighs and often to their midsections. For that reason, one waits for low tide and calm weather to undertake this work. The sea is then calm. On such a day, more coral stones can be cut and gathered than on two other days. When the weather is good, one need not worry that one's slaves will get drowned or hurt. The slaves are not unaccustomed to standing naked the whole day long in the sea gathering stones, although when it is windy, it becomes very cold (Haagensen 1758, 10).

Disregarding Haagensen's unempathetic and colonial attitudes which do not dignify a response, given what is known of both modern and historical coral growth rates, Haagensen's description of a "never-ending" and "limitless" abundance of coral must be considered hyperbole. His portrayal of the barrier reef as extending above the surface is something that is rarely seen on contemporary St. Croix, though this is a common feature of barrier reefs elsewhere in the world. This might reflect an exaggeration on Haagensen's part, but it could also indicate the degree to which St. Croix's reefs have degraded over time and/or the effects of sea level rise. Haagensen goes on to explain the process by which coral was harvested and brought ashore:

> By this method, the stones are brought from the sea to land in the following manner. Two slaves row a boat from shore to the reef, or as it is called canoe, where 5 to 6 other slaves are standing, breaking off the stones with thick wooden sticks. When the boat arrives, they fill it

with stones, the slaves loosen the other ones until the boat returns. Working in this manner, one boat can make 12 to 16 trips back and forth with stones, sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on the distance of the reef from the land and if it is very uneven. The distance of the reef from the beach varies, but in most places there is a distance of 1000 feet to row (Haagensen 1758, 10).

Based on Haagensen's description, including the distance between the land and reef, it is likely that he references coral mining along the island's northern barrier reef – probably near Christiansted and to its east. Unfortunately, there are few references to colonial coral mining beyond Haagensen's account, and none offer as much detail; the next reference identified is from Hans West (1799), a teacher who lived on St. Croix in the 1790s. Although he does not directly attend to coral mining, he discusses the use of coral-based lime in Christiansted (1799, 140) and coral retrieved from the shoreline – the latter of which he reports was made into gravel, molded, and used for bridges, stairs, and other structures (139). He notes that at the lime kiln in Christiansted, limestone "as well as coral [was] piled for processing" (West 1799, 139).

Folk memory accounts describe other methods of coral extraction during the Danish colonial period:

My memory says they went out in flat-bottomed boats and sent young boys down with saws or even wire. The cut coral was then loaded up on the boats and set aside to allow the pieces to 'harden' (William Chapman, personal communication, November 9, 2023).

Indeed, it is likely that methods and uses of coral as a building material on the island changed over time and varied between locations. William Chapman's narrative is supported by research conducted elsewhere, which describes expert freedivers among enslaved people in the Caribbean and Central America (Stein 2020; Dawson 2018; Jiménez and Orejas 2017). Archaeological survey data suggests that coral mining was largely a localized practice, and therefore methods were likely adapted to accommodate the varied submarine landscape in different areas of the island – as was the case on other islands such as Guadeloupe (Kelly 2004).

Mining activities on St. Croix were largely unregulated until 1978 when environmental protection was enacted into law (12 V.I.C. § 911). Unlike commercial rock quarries and mahogany plantations, the reef was not 'owned,' and therefore, there seemed to be few if any restrictions on the quantity of coral that could be removed prior to the introduction of environmental protection legislation. Indeed, it is possible that coastal plantation sites were exploiting this 'free' resource and supplementing sugar profits through the production and sale of commercial lime – a colonial practice that Roger Matthiesen, a member of Danish Parliament, described in the context of the marine environment as the "cotton fields of the sea" (Belle 2019, 38).

### 5.5.3 Coral-based Lime and its Production

Because the skeletons of Scleractinia are comprised of calcium carbonate, the main source of lime, they became lucrative for coastal sites in lime production (West 1799). Lime was an important ingredient in mortar and plaster and played an essential role in the sugar industry (Bodin et al. 2021; Daley 2005). Many of the easternmost plantations on St. Croix struggled to make sugar a profitable crop and eventually transitioned to cotton production (Tyson 1992); it is possible that these sites, which had easy access to reefs and poor agricultural outputs utilized lime to supplement their meager profits (Haagensen 1758). Indeed, several lime kilns were identified during field surveys along the south shore on the east end of the island, including at Estates Cane Garden, Longford, and Great Pond.

Lime was used for purifying and clarifying cane juice (Verrand and Vidal 2004), and as a settling agent in the process of manufacturing raw sugar (Daley 2005, 207). In addition, lime can be used to increase soil pH, making it more alkaline and therefore better for sugar cultivation. Lime was produced from both locally quarried stone and coral on islands across the Caribbean and beyond, for example in Hawai´i and Australia (Verrand and Vidal 2004, Daley 2005). Ben Daley states that lime was mined from accessible reefs in the Great Barrier

Reef as a "cheap and chemically pure source of lime," which was likely also the case in St. Croix (2005, 207).

Archaeological research conducted on other Caribbean islands, Martinique and St. Lucia, for example (Stein 2020; Sass 2000), indicates that lime production contributed to significant degradation of the natural environment, to coral reefs, as well as forest landscapes; as Bodin et. al (2021) note, the operation of lime kilns relied upon the burning of substantial amounts of wood for fuel. In Martinique, mangrove and other ecologically valuable hardwoods were particularly desirable for lime kiln workers because they were slow burning (Bodin et. al 2021). David Knight (2000) indicates that lime kilns were frequently the first colonial structures erected in the Danish West Indies, as lime-based mortar and plaster were essential to construction and development.

Marine-based lime was a lucrative product for construction (STX-18). Florence Lewisohn discussed the process of coral mining and lime production in St. Croix:

> Great limestone blocks were hewn out of the wet sea coral or taken from a quarry, hauled to the site and used in the two-to-three-foot-thick walls. Local stone and ballast brick supplemented the coral blocks, held together with lime mortar made in the plantation kiln, then plastered over and usually painted... the planters usually made their own lime for mortaring the Great House and factory buildings... coral rock, alternated with rows of wood and stone, was burnt until the resulting lime sifted down through a grate in the floor (1970, 114).

The thickness of the walls in colonial buildings that Lewisohn notes are ecologically significant. While some buildings on the island feature coral 'rubble' in combination with other materials, others, especially within the barrier reef region of the island are constructed of corals of considerable size – because the size of coral is largely determined by age, many of these mined specimens were pillars of coral reproduction in St. Croix. In tandem, it is important to note the role of coral, especially large corals, as blue carbon sinks that absorb carbon dioxide and support marine life (James et al. 2024).

Although rarely the explicit focus of archaeological excavations on St. Croix, several lime kilns have been discovered at colonial sites, for example at Estate Cane Garden (Reifschneider and Bardolph 2020) – and are prevalent elsewhere on the island, at Estates St. George, Clifton Hill, Little Princess, and Butler Bay, and at Fort Frederik in Frederiksted. More extensive research on lime production, including lime kilns, has been conducted in the French Caribbean (e.g., Martinique [Bodin et al. 2021]). Locally, it seems that there was a preference for lime produced from coral in the 18th century, as explained by Haagensen:

> Most of the inhabitants burn lime from stones taken from the sea rather than from the land. Those seastones[13] are collected from the reefs that surround nearly the entire island; this makes things much easier for those plantations located near a beach. The lime that is produced from seastones is considered much better for use than that which is produced from stones on land. For that reason, the [Danish West India] Company has used only lime burned from seastones in their various buildings, namely the fort, the battery, the windmills, the cookhouses, and the cisterns. One thousand [barrels] of lime have probably been burned for my own buildings, as well as a few [barrels] sold from time to time (Haagensen, 1758, 10).

Haagensen's account regarding the use of lime in structures associated with the Danish West India Company is valuable for theorizing the timeline for coral mining, because it evidences that the practice began soon after the island was colonized by Denmark.

### 5.5.4 Braiding Knowledge

Folk memory and oral history can be particularly useful for research that is not well-represented in historical records. This is because archival and folk memory represent two distinct knowledge registers that communicate distinct types of human memory, and 'braiding' them can contribute to a wider understanding (see: 3.3). Indeed, oral accounts corroborate Haagensen's claim that corals harvested from the barrier reef in Christiansted were used in the construction of the fort and other administrative buildings during the

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[13] It is assumed that the 'seastones' that Haagensen refers to were corals.

colonial period (STX-12; STX-14; STX-18) – and recall undocumented instances in which

coral was 'blasted' from Christiansted harbor with dynamite in order to widen its entry

channel and accommodate marine shipping. Although no written records were located that

directly evidence structural demolition of the reef during the Danish colonial period, there

were several dredging permits issued in the 1960s that resulted in over 1.5. million cubic

yards of sand and 'rubble' (i.e., stone and coral) removed from the area (Dong et al. 1972,

29). In addition, as a book published by the American travel writer Harry Franck (1921)

describes, "a long reef with an exceedingly narrow entrance gives [Christiansted] a poor

harbor" (323) – although the contemporary reef remains tricky to navigate, it is indeed a very

popular harbor for resident and visiting boaters on St. Croix. This suggests a possible

modification of the harbor in the late 19th to mid-20th century – and participants recalled

stories of Christiansted harbor as so rich with coral that 18th and 19th century ship 'pilots'

were stationed on nearby Protestant Cay to assist visiting captains in navigating their ships

into the treacherous port, a story that was also referenced by West (1799, 139) (Figure 27).



**Figure 27** This image portrays Christiansted Harbor, then known as 'Kings Wharf,' in 1800. A house can be seen on Protestant Cay (background), which was where pilots were stationed to guide ships into harbor (Danish Maritime Museum 2024).

Archival and folk memory accounts suggest a long timeline of coral reef degradation

on St. Croix – although they do not provide a detailed scope of the degree of coral mining

(STX-03A/B; STX-22; STX-23A/B). The rapid decline of coral reef ecosystems on the island in the past fifty years witnessed by participants has been described as a substantial loss. One participant who arrived in St. Croix in the 1960s to carry out scientific research in St. Croix's famous (now defunct) underwater habitat, *Aegir,* lamented the significant change; when asked what the reefs looked like when she arrived, she sadly recalled, "Oh, it was just spectacular" and expressed that she did not wish to discuss the 'depressing' subject further (Appendix B). One fisherman described the "pristine" coral reefs at Buck Island in the 1950s, recalling catching 'maka' (i.e., rainbow parrotfish) that were 3.5' in size or larger – just before the site was closed to fishing activities in the early 1960s, supporting the theory that overfishing alone is not the sole reason for the decline of size and quantity reef fishes in coral reef environments (STX-23A). Another interviewee, describing the abundant fish on the island, stated, "You could walk on the [water] with so much fish that was there" (STX-18). Indeed, community concerns validate the need for greater insight into the historical ecology of St. Croix's coral reefs.

To investigate this further, archaeological surveys were conducted to identify and locate coral within the island's built environment, as well as theorize potential source reefs. The results of this fieldwork, drawn primarily from pedestrian and marine survey, provide the first inventory of coral masonry in the world.

## 5.6 An Archaeological Inventory

The ubiquity of coral masonry in St. Croix is an oft overlooked but distinct aspect of the island's built environment (Figure 28). This is partly because most research has conflated coral skeletons with coral stone – the latter, coral substrate quarried from terrestrial deposits which is a common building material across the Caribbean (Rezende 2016). Research about mined or collected coral skeletons, on the other hand, requires knowledge to be drawn from various disciplines – marine biology and archaeology, among them. As a researcher with a

background in postcolonial heritage and archaeology – and a penchant for the marine world – I applied my unique foundation of knowledge to this case study.

Archaeological fieldwork involved island-wide pedestrian surveys that sought to document the distribution, proportion, and masonry styles of coral structures on St. Croix. Terrestrial surveys were supplemented with marine surveys to theorize potential source reefs.



**Figure 28** 'The Trading Post' by Crucian contemporary artist LaVaughn Belle – an art installation that features reclaimed coral (Belle 2019, 41).

An assessment of standing structures and extant materials offered a deeper context regarding the scale of coral mining and the characteristics of its use. Archaeological survey data (n=131) revealed a wide and dense distribution of mined coral along the north and west coasts of the island, although coral was also identified along the south shore and at a few inland sites (Figure 29) (Appendix D).

This archaeological data was consistent with coral reef topography and ecology on the island, when cross-referenced with oceanic currents and assessments of reef accessibility. To this end, the windward south shore of the island, although rich in coral, is not shielded from the prevailing trade winds; its rough seas would likely complicate the task of mining from the barrier reef and therefore, it is reasonably expected that coral masonry would be less common in this area of the island. Indeed, upon close analysis of the variability between coral specimens (e.g., size, species, and quantity) across a range of sites, it is evident that coral

mining was largely a localized practice – coral specimens in the built environment consistent with the general composition of nearby reefs.
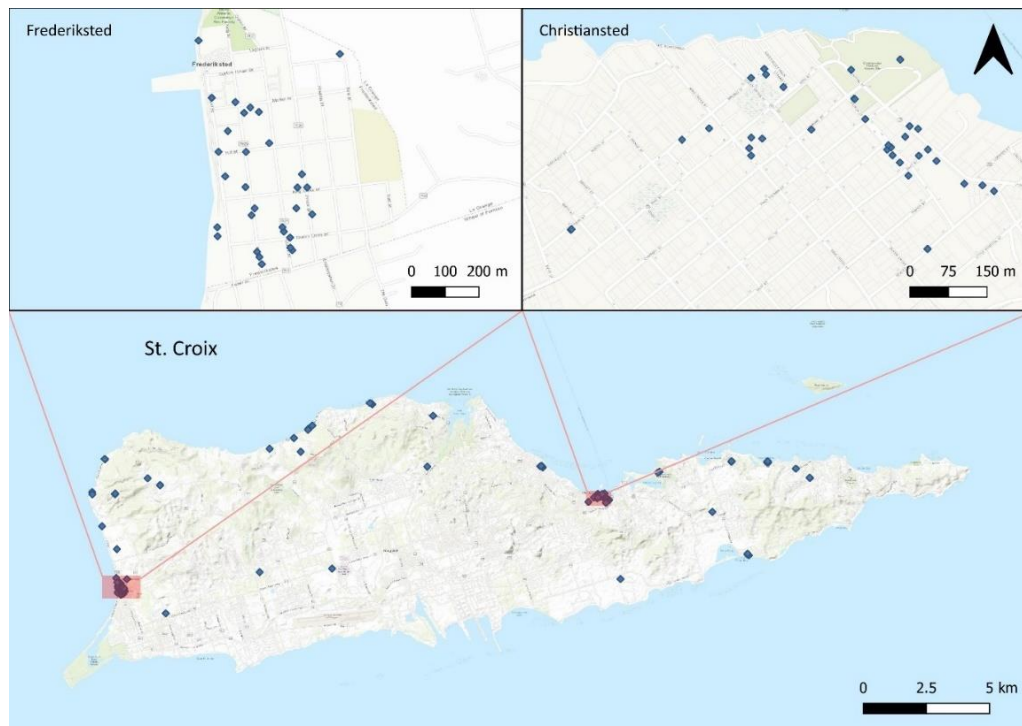


**Figure 29** This archeological survey sampled sites from across the island, including inland sites. The blue pins indicate sites where coral was visible. Although mid-island and southern coastal sites were also surveyed, coral was seldom identified in this areas. See: Appendix D for a larger version (Zahedi 2024).

### 5.6.1 Survey Results

Archaeological fieldwork revealed that coral masonry across colonial sites on the island was, for the most part, consistent with the underwater topography of the island – with frequent modified coral specimens identified adjacent to or near coral reefs, and rarely at inland sites and along the south shore. In addition to the presence or absence of modified coral, masonry styles were distinct across various coastal contexts, with abundant large masonry blocks at sites proximate to the barrier reef, and combined rubble masonry more common in other areas. Coral blocks included various coral species, but most commonly those known as 'brain corals.' These findings and the results of four distinct case study sites are discussed in more detail below.

Along St. Croix's northeastern coast, sites directly inland from the barrier reef (i.e., east of Salt River) frequently featured mined coral that was substantial in size (i.e., diameter

< 50cm). Corals this large were usually modified – partly or entirely shaped into masonry blocks. It seems likely that these specimens were harvested directly from the barrier reef, as Haagensen (1758) described. To the west of Salt River, where coral reef is abundant but there is no barrier reef, coral specimens were large (i.e., diameter > 40 cm) but usually unshaped – generally reflecting the patchy but extensive reefs that follow the northwestern coast. These corals may have been collected from the shore as West (1799) described.

The south shore sites generally featured mixed masonry, in which coral was combined with other materials such as local stone (e.g., 'blue bit' and limestone) and red or yellow ballast bricks. In Frederiksted and the west side of the island, where coral reefs are deep and patchy, small pieces of coral 'rubble' are most commonly identified – possibly harvested from the beach or close to shore. This masonry style has been documented elsewhere in the Caribbean (e.g., Barbados [Smith and Watson 2009]). In a few cases, coral was identified at inland sites although usually in small quantities – in this context, coral was likely not sourced specifically for construction but may have been brought to the respective site for cultural, spiritual, or other reasons.

Although various species of coral were identified – *Orbicella faveolata, Siderastrea sidereal, Acorapora palmata, Acorapora cervicornis,* and *Porites astreoides,* among others – the most common family of corals identified are referred to as "brain corals," and include *Montastrea cavernosa, Pseudodiploria clivosa, Pseudodiploria labyrinthiformis,* and *Pseudodiploria strigosa*. Of all species identified, *Pseudodiploria strigosa* was found most often and at nearly every site – at several sites, it was the only species of coral.

Coral species are a point of interest for several reasons. Species identification can contribute to knowledge about the average size of coral colonies and reef complexity, when compared with contemporary reef assessments. For example, although *Pseudodiploria strigosa* remains a common species in St. Croix's waters, the archaeological record evidences

specimens considered large by contemporary standards, suggesting a uniform decrease in colony size over time. Coral species also have unique habitat preferences, which can inform speculation as to how the corals were collected. *Porites astreoides,* for example, grows in both shallow and deep water; yet were most frequently identified on the northwest and west coast where 'rubble' masonry is common – suggesting that they might have been harvested close to shore or by freediving rather than directly mined from living reefs.

Coral masonry on the island is localized in style and aesthetic – supporting historical accounts that indicate that lime production was commercialized (Haagensen 1758), but coral mining may not have been. To present this variance across the island, the following section details the examination and assessment of four distinct sites on the island – Estate Great Pond, Estate Coakley Bay, #1 Strandgade, and Rust op Twist (Figure 30).
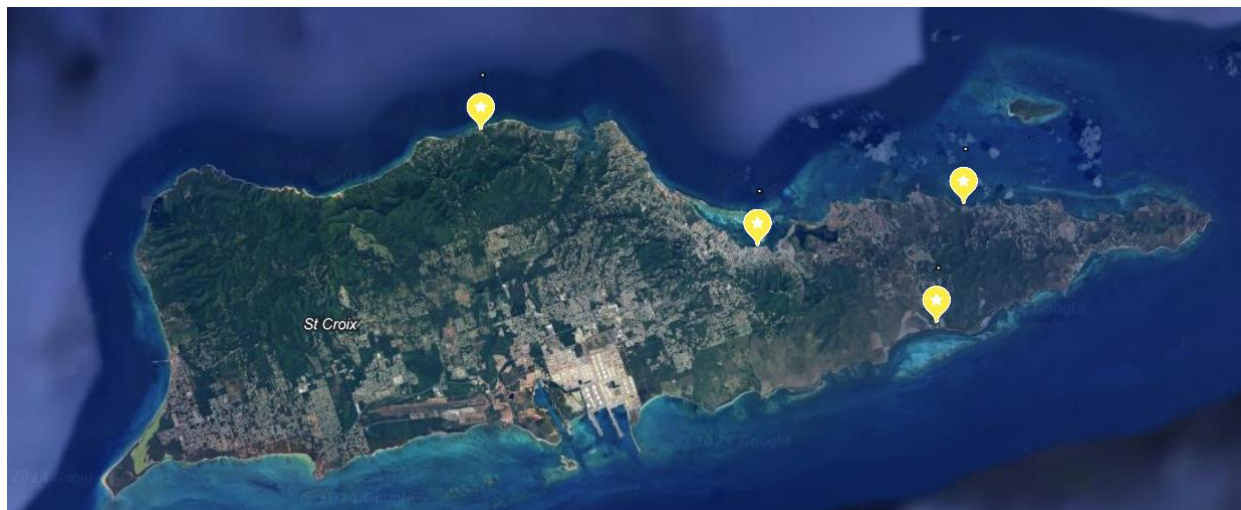


**Figure 30** The four sites indicated in this map represent distinct masonry styles and marine environments on the island (Zahedi 2023).

### 5.6.2 Estate Great Pond

Great Pond Bay is a natural harbor along St. Croix's south shore, and features a salt pond (i.e., 'Great Pond') to its northwest and barrier reef to its south (Figure 31). The marine lagoon inland from its barrier reef is comprised primarily of seagrass beds and sand flats. Great Pond is a biodiversity hot spot – home to some of the only remaining mangroves on the island, providing habitat for resident and migratory birds, and many species of fish and

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marine animals. It is also a culturally significant site – historically popular for fishing, crabbing, and salt gathering.

An increase in sediment load after Hurricanes Hugo (1989) and Maria (2017), and subsequent droughts, have caused the shallowing of the pond and a substantial die-off of its mangroves. Mangrove forests and salt ponds are significant support communities for coral reefs because they aid in filtration and mediate the release of terrestrial sediment into the sea (Mumby et al. 2004); in turn, coral reefs attenuate storm surge and wave action, protecting mangroves and salt ponds. Great Pond is therefore a complex but substantially degraded eco-zone on St. Croix – prompting concentrated restoration efforts from the local government and marine sector in recent years (USVI Department of Planning and Natural Resources 2024). The historical structures associated with Estate Great Pond, a colonial sugar and cotton estate, include a several buildings featuring mixed coral masonry and a lime kiln – offering a curious example of the potential impacts of coral mining on interdependent coastal ecosystems.
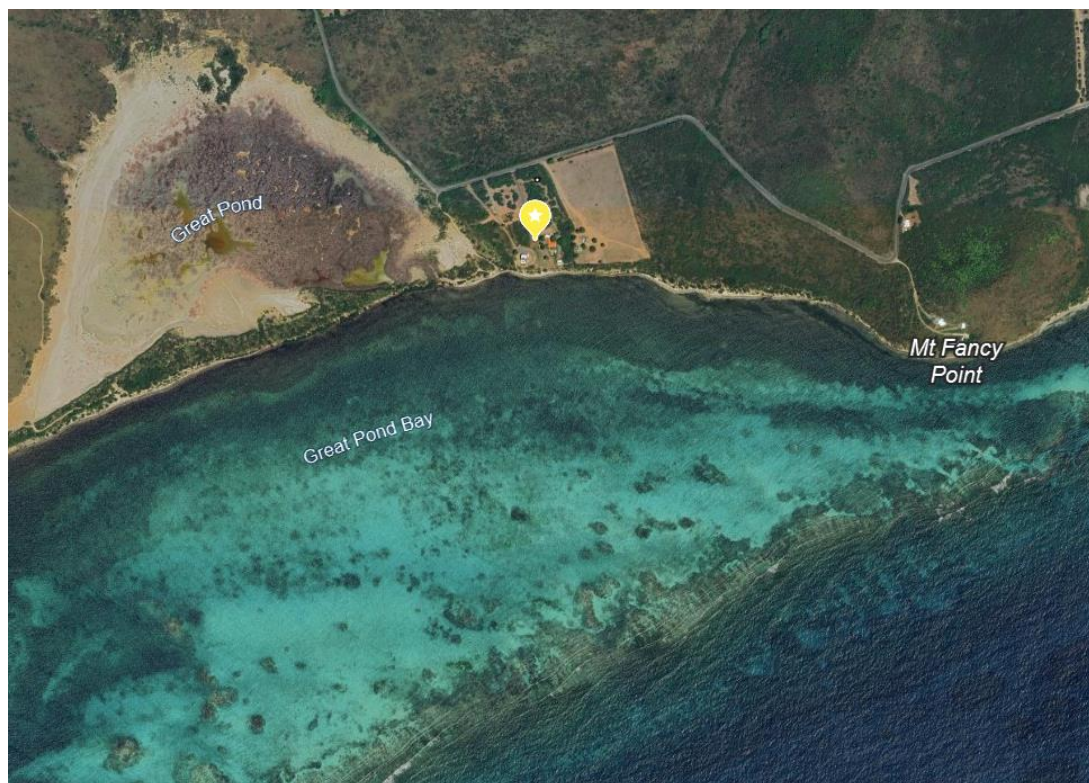


**Figure 31** Estate Great Pond is indicated by the yellow icon; its barrier reef is visible in the image (Google Earth 2024).

Estate Great Pond is one of the only sites on the south shore in which coral masonry was identified. The standing structures include a house, an outdoor 'summer' kitchen, an unidentified outbuilding, and the remnants of a lime kiln on the beach. The plantation kitchen has been restored and is now the office of the East End Marine Park, managed by the local government. The structures, except the lime kiln, were built with a combination of coral (< 40 cm), bricks and brick fragments, and a local stone known as 'blue bit' (Figure 32). The lime kiln suggests that nearby reefs were regularly mined during the colonial period. The lime kiln is constructed entirely with blue bit –a local igneous rock, which is resistant to high heat due to its volcanic properties.



**Figure 32** The masonry style at Estate Great Pond features coral, blue bit, and brick fragments (Zahedi 2020).

Estate Great Pond was initially established as a sugar and cotton plantation (Oxholm 1799), but by the early to mid-19th century, the site was no longer producing sugar (Tyson 1992). A sugar mill appears on historical maps (Parsons 1856), but according to oral history, the sugar mill was disassembled, its materials reused in other buildings such as the lime kiln – or possibly never built at all. William Cleveland (2023) has suggested that the ruins on the

beach are the remains of the sugar mill, although cross-analysis of historical map data and the 1925 U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey indicate that all the plantation structures, including the foundation of the sugar mill, were located approximately 50 meters from the coast. Given that there is no evidence of other historical structures on the beach nor evidence of significant erosion, it is unlikely that these remnants are the sugar mill. In addition, the circumference of the structure is much smaller than a standard mill on St. Croix, supporting local narratives that hold that the ruins are a lime kiln (Figure 33).



**Figure 33** Remnants of the lime kiln at Estate Great Pond. Part of the kiln can be seen in the water (Zahedi 2021).

The coral identified in the buildings at Estate Great Pond were significantly larger than those found at its nearshore reefs today. Its inland lagoon is relatively calm, but approaching the reef crest, the sea is rough – large swells and surges are common. The barrier reef in this part of the island, which faces windward, is difficult to access – likely complicating mining activities. Although the reef crest is shallow, theoretically enabling miners to stand on the reef as Haagensen described in his account (1758), the reef is far from shore, making back and forth journeys physically strenuous, exhausting, and, likely, inefficient. In tandem, the style of coral masonry – combined with other materials – is

characteristic of colonial sites that are not adjacent to the barrier reef. It is more likely that coral was collected from close to shore at Estate Great Pond.

Today, the submarine landscape of Great Pond inland from the barrier reef is primarily comprised of seagrass beds – suggesting a significant decline in patch reef systems in the bay. Hypothetically speaking, if the barrier reef were wider before intensive coral mining was established, it would offer greater protection on the reef crest for miners, and also nurture protected habitat for patchy reefs to establish closer to shore. Yet the distance of the barrier reef and the presumption of a short season due to wind and currents suggests this method was unlikely. Certainly, archaeological assessments indicate significant degradation of the reef at Great Pond since the establishment of the site during the early Danish period – a trajectory that may well have been influenced or exacerbated by coral mining.

### 5.6.3 Estate Coakley Bay

The Coakley Bay Estate, along the island's northeastern shore, is named for John Coakley Sr., who was recorded as the owner of the site in 1749, although the site had been established as a plantation during the French occupation of the island, when it was known as Grand Anse (i.e., Great Cove) (Appendix G). Coakley Bay is listed on the National Register of Historic Places (National Park Service 1976), and it seems most or all the surviving masonry structures were built during the Danish colonial period.

The site's animal mill appears in the second printing of
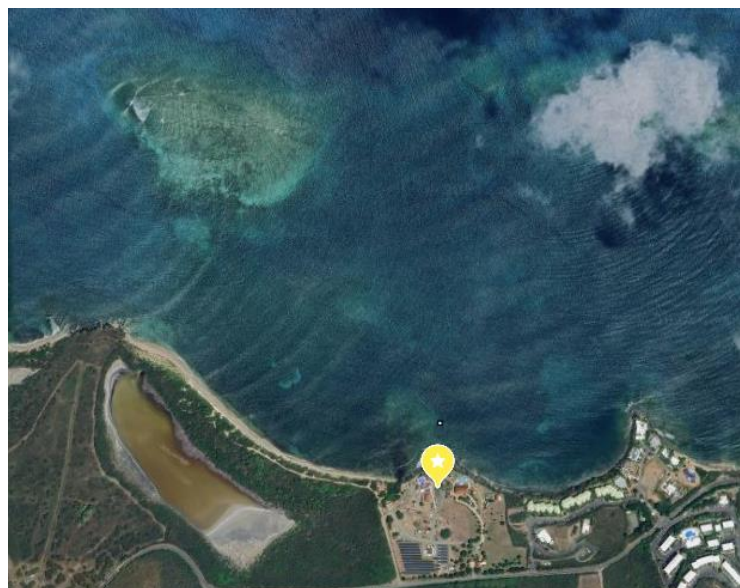


**Figure 34** The contemporary submarine landscape of Coakley Bay is primarily seagrass, with limited patchy coral reef. Two reef patches are identifiable at the top left and right of the image (Google Maps 2024).

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Beck's map (Beck 1754); the sugar mill first appears on Oxholm's map (Oxholm 1799), and the water mill, which features a capstone, dates to 1810 (National Park Service 1976). Peter Siegel's (2018) research about the historical ecology of St. Croix indicates that the Coakley Bay area historically included "multiple inflowing streams and mangroves" (296), and at its western-most point also features an inland salt pond. Today, the site has no freshwater or mangroves, with a seasonal salt pond (Figure 34).

Coral is abundant in nearly every structure at Estate Coakley Bay, including the animal mill (Beck 1754) and sugar mill (Oxholm 1799), suggesting a 40-year minimum timeline of coral mining at the site. The largest coral identified measures 61 cm in diameter and appears incomplete – indicating that the harvested specimen was larger. The site showcases various coral masonry styles – large coral blocks featured in cornerstones and in decorative details such as archways (Figure 35) – as the sole construction material in some of the prominent structures, and in combination with local stone in others.

Estate Coakley Bay is now a private residence, undergoing a major restoration including excavation, ground disturbance, demolition, and reconstruction – many of its historic materials, including coral, reused in contemporary structures. In turn, the site features combined masonry in structures dating from the 1750s through the present day.



**Figure 35** Shaped coral is featured in various structures at Estate Coakley Bay. This image depicts 'shaped' coral blocks used in the openings in the site's wind-powered sugarmill (Zahedi 2021).

Evidenced by the size and abundance of coral at Estate Coakley Bay, it was likely a productive coral mining site, although it is unclear where the coral was sourced. The large corals at Estate Coakley Bay contrast with its marine landscape, which is primarily comprised of seagrass beds and little coral. Coakley Bay marks a break in the barrier reef that continues to the east and west of the site. It is possible that the source reef for Estate Coakley Bay is now extinct.

The shoreline in this area is dynamic and therefore vulnerable to coastal erosion. In 2021-2023, I conducted rescue excavations of a burial ground at Coakley Bay beach – in the absence of coastal stabilization efforts, this erosion will likely continue, exposing more human remains and associated assemblages (Appendix G). I contend that the coastal destabilization at the site is a consequence of coral cover loss – as both fringing and barrier reefs offer protection from storm surge and intensive wave action.

### 5.6.4 #1 Strandgade

The evidence of coral mining is robust within St. Croix's urban centers, especially in Christiansted (Figure 36). According to Haagensen (1758), many of the colonial buildings in the capital city are partially or entirely constructed of coral and with marine-based lime – and he directly states that the Danish West Indies Company exclusively used marine-sourced lime in "the fort, battery, the windmills, the cookhouses, and the cisterns" (1758, 10). Yet, the traditional pastel-plaster buildings have been well-maintained which, while preserving the historical aesthetic and material fabric, presents somewhat of a predicament for archaeologists interested in visually and non-intrusively assessing masonry. However, one structure in the town's historic center, #1 Strandgade, is unplastered and represents an eye-catching example of a building constructed almost entirely out of coral.
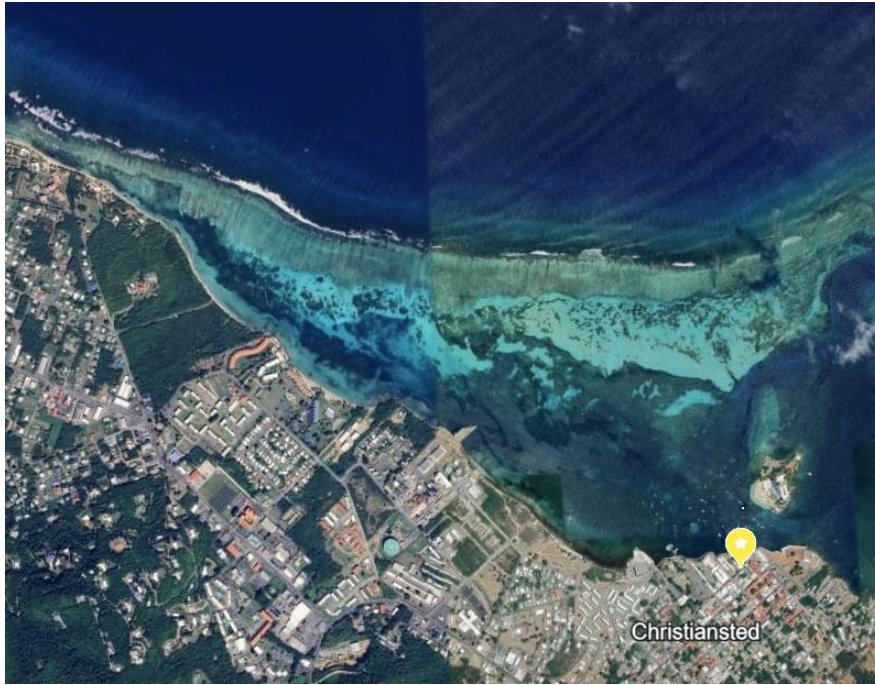
**Figure 36** Christiansted and its barrier reef; 1 Strandgade is indicated by the yellow pin on the lower right of the image (Google Earth 2024).

Strandgade is a historically significant street, the first laid out in Christiansted by Governor Frederik Moth in May 1735 (US Department of the Interior 1976). The building at #1 Strandgade was originally constructed in 1756 as a townhouse for a Danish doctor and is one of the oldest standing buildings in the island's capital. The building features various species of coral *Pseudodiploria strigosa, Siderastrea siderea,* and *Porites asteroides,* among others. The coral pieces have been precisely shaped into stackable blocks (Figure 37).



**Figure 37** Wall constructed entirely of *Pseudodiploria strigosa* that has been shaped into blocks (Zahedi 2020).

The building demonstrates coral masonry dating to the first quarter century of Danish colonization – although based upon assessment of the mortar, parts of the building have been reconstructed, likely reusing original materials. Its coral block masonry is common in Christiansted and some coral specimens are quite large (i.e., >51 cm). Although it is difficult to determine where the coral was sourced for the structure, local knowledge suggests coral mining in Christiansted on the adjacent reefs (e.g., Long Reef or Round Reef) in Christiansted Bay, mined as both a construction material and to widen the channel into the harbor to accommodate for increasing ship traffic.

**5.6.5 Estate Rust Op Twist**



**Figure 38** There is no barrier reef adjacent to Rust op Twist, which is indicated by the yellow icon on the map (Google Earth 2024).

Estate Rust op Twist (i.e., Dutch: "Rest after strife") is among the best-preserved plantation sites on St. Croix, located mid-island along the north shore (Figure 38). Established in 1755, it is representative of the evolution of the sugar industry over time – featuring an animal mill, windmill, and steam mill. The site was among the most productive early sugar estates on the island – by 1769, had more enslaved laborers than any other property in the same quarter (Dyer et al. 1968). The 1878 Fireburn effectively ended sugar production at the site – by 1880 only twenty-nine of its 300 acres were under cultivation, and by 1881 it had ceased

operations entirely (Dyer et al. 1968, 6). In the 1950s, the property was leased to the

University of Texas Marine Research Institute, who researched its potential for aquaculture,

conducting scientific investigations at the deep sea trench offshore (i.e., Virgin Islands

Basin).



**Figure 39** Coral 'rubble' is more commonly found along the northwestern and western coastlines of the island. This example is the animal mill at Rust Op Twist (Zahedi 2021).

Colonial maps indicate that the animal mill at Rust op Twist was constructed by the 1750s

(Beck 1754), the windmill by 1799 (Oxholm 1799), and steam mill in 1850 (National Park

Service 1977) – as coral is present in these structures, this represents a 100-year timeline of

coral collection at the site or nearby. As one interviewee reflected:

> There's a lot of coral in this windmill. I see a lot up here on the north shore. If we can talk
> about the Danes and what they were able to do – it was to exploit the local resources for their
> plantations (STX-18).

To this point, Rust op Twist marks a geographical shift in the submarine landscape and,

consequently, coral masonry style on St. Croix. Several of the colonial structures at the estate

feature small and large pieces of unshaped or crudely shaped coral rubble (i.e., < 40 cm)

(Figure 39). This masonry style was likely influenced by the underwater topography of this

part of the island, which is characterized by shallow patch reefs and a steep drop-off, known as 'the wall,' a popular SCUBA diving site. The beaches by the site are primarily rocky coral beaches, suggesting coral pieces in its buildings were harvested from the beach or recovered from shallow depths. The reefs close to Rust op Twist are among the healthiest on the island, supporting the theory that coral mining was more detrimental to their long-term viability than the practice of harvesting coral from nearby beaches.

**5.6.6 Summary**

The preceding case studies – Estate Great Pond, Estate Coakley Bay, #1 Strandgade, and Rust op Twist – were selected as representative samples of diverse masonry styles and submarine landscapes on St. Croix. Archaeological survey and analysis suggest that coral masonry styles were shaped and influenced by adjacent coral reefs – supporting the contention that coral mining was a localized practice at the island's coastal colonial sites. Some of these – for example Great Pond and Coakley Bay – reveal substantial change to the adjacent marine environment between the colonial period and the present day, with degradation rapidly intensifying in recent years. This downward trajectory is not surprising when accounting for the combined effects of coral mining and the compounding effects of contemporary anthropogenic impact (Blondeau et al. 2020). Yet most ecological research focuses primarily on the role of overfishing, coastal development, coral disease, and climate change on coral reef environments (Philley 2022; Blondeau et al. 2020; Oliver et al. 2011; Bythell et al. 1993; Hubbard 1986). However, these studies fail to consider the impacts of colonialism to coral reefs – relying upon ecological baselines that are not accurate and therefore misinforming restoration targets.

This study presents an alternative perspective, grounding coral reef ecology within a contemporary heritage framework. It provides insight into the history and archaeology of coral mining – a data set that is useful in theorizing the potential impact and extent of

colonial degradation of the island's reefs. In the barrier reef region where coral block masonry is common, mining operations likely concentrated on removal directly from the reef crest, as Haagensen (1758) described. As the removed coral colonies were shaped by onshore masons, pieces of broken coral and wastage were processed into lime. Given the turbulence of the reef crest at the break, coral mining was likely a seasonal activity. Building from this, future research might focus on the relationship between seasonal currents and coral spawning timelines – aiming to theorize the potential impacts of mining-induced stress on mature coral colonies, which may have caused reproductive failure. To this end, coral mining at the barrier reef may have impacted the coral substrate, possibly affecting the ability for coral to attach and colonize the reef crest, exacerbating reproductive failures. Along the south and mid-north shore, coral was frequently featured in combined masonry – together with local stone and ballast brick. Although coral was also identified on the west side of the island it was, for the most part, small, and unshaped – most likely harvested from the beach or the shallows.

This research evidences substantial and widespread coral mining on St. Croix that occurred over a period of one hundred years or more (1750-1850). Distinct coral masonry styles are reliably consistent with the general marine landscape, supporting the hypothesis that coral was harvested locally. Future research might involve quantitative and spatial analysis (e.g., Structure from Motion [SfM]) of colonial structures that predominantly feature coral masonry, to estimate the potential loss of coral cover and assess its implications – although preliminary visual estimates suggest it amounts to several thousand cubic meters.

In several cases, small pieces of coral were found in masonry structures at inland sites (e.g., Estate St. George, Estate Mount Victory, Estate Mount Washington). The presence of these specimens at sites far from the sea is curious and suggests they were not brought as a construction material but for other reasons. While archaeological investigations can offer insight into the tangible aspects of the island's built heritage, a contemporary heritage

framework can offer a deeper understanding regarding the social significance of coral for past and present communities on the island – a subject that is discussed in more detail in the subsequent section.

## 5.7 Coral Reefs as a Cultural Heritage Asset

Striving to gain a holistic and comprehensive grasp of the implications of coral reef decline in St. Croix, the issue must be situated within a socio-cultural framework. This is because coral reefs are not just a 'natural' heritage asset, but a cultural heritage asset as well – on St. Croix, as both ecological habitat and components of its built environment. Interdisciplinary sources (e.g., oral histories, archives, archaeological fieldwork, etc.) are seldom used in combination with coral research but they have the potential to inform rich accounts of the past and present. Drawing from ethnography and visual art, this section delves into the connection between coral reefs and contemporary communities on the island.

As one interviewee reflected, "the sea, for me, feels like a freedom space" (STX-20B), a notion that was echoed by other participants and highlights the tacit value of the sea for communities on the island. Indeed, highlighting enduring relationships between Crucian communities, the sea, and coral reefs, it is crucial to embed them within a heritage framework that accounts for enduring structural inequities including the socio-political and regionally specific vulnerabilities of climate change, as well as culturally embedded significances.

As suggested by Dawson (2018, 2019), Kesse (2023), Humphrey and Myth (2023), and others, African aquatic cultures were brought to the Caribbean and in turn shaped the cultural and natural heritage of the region in diverse ways. There are indeed social facets to coral that are not simply about utility, but are intertwined with inherited cultural, and sometimes spiritual connections:

> The reef to me, from a gardener's perspective, is like the rainforest. They have that similar connection of interconnection of species, creating an environment that does multiple things, but at the same time, it's being exploited by humans with the unawareness of humans […]

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And that's where I feel a lot of this ignorance comes from, like, focusing on what we can get from the ocean, the reef, the rainforest, versus what is it already giving us? What is it already sharing with us? What can we give to it, what can we share with it? And again, tying it in with my awareness of the stone masonry and whatnot it's like – yeah, we used to, as stone masons, take the coral, burn it down into the lime and use it for a mortar to stick things together (STX-12).

The notion of a reciprocal relationship between humans and the ocean was echoed by other participants (STX-19; STX-22); in the context of coral masonry, this sparked the most intrigue when encountered unexpectedly – for example in the rainforest. Although mined coral is most commonly identified in coastal contexts, in several cases small pieces of coral were found at inland sites. These coral artifacts represented a long timeline, from fragments embedded in colonial walls dating to the mid-eighteenth century and pieces of coral deliberately deposited in the contemporary past in ritual contexts. Carlos Jiménez and Covadonga Orejas discuss cross cultural examples of coral as spiritual objects – including brain coral in Micronesia, which are believed to host spirits, similar to Caribbean jumbie trees (see: 7.5); Hawaii, where coral cairns functioned as shrines, Cuban Ciboney coral idols; and in votive offerings in Roman, Aztec, and Pacific island contexts (2017, 665-671). Similarly, at Estate Mount Washington, a colonial sugar plantation that is privately owned and open to the public in western St. Croix, there is a stone labyrinth and at its center, a place to leave offerings marked with a large piece of coral.

Indeed, participants in St. Croix indicated that the presence of marine objects, especially coral and conch shells (see 8.5.1), were a component of Afro-Caribbean ancestral spiritual practice (STX-22). The significance of freshwater in Black Atlantic and West African spirituality, such as the pouring of libations, and the significance of the sea for Crucian communities – as a connector between African and the Caribbean (Helmreich 2011, 136), positions water – spatially and materially – as existing simultaneously between the natural and cultural realms of being. Coral and other marine objects (e.g., conch shells) were

also identified in spiritual or ancestral contexts – including the Baobab Tree at Estate Grove

Place (see: 6.4-6.6), the "Freedom" bust of General Buddhoe in Frederiksted (Bright 1998),

and burial sites in Christiansted and Frederiksted (Figure 40).



**Figure 40** A piece of coral, a lighter, and a bottle of beer are left as an offering to the ancestors at the base of a baobab tree in Grove Place. Coral is a frequently identified ritual offerings on the island (Zahedi 2021).

During fieldwork to a remote site located along the northwest coast of the island, a

participant and I encountered a small piece of coral in a colonial wall. Reflecting upon

the significance of the find, she said:

> African hands built this structure. Why did they put a piece of coral here? The sea was one of
> the only places they could escape slavery. Whether they were washing their clothes or
> bathing, it was just one moment of freedom. That's what the sea is. It still is, to me (Appendix
> B).

The notion of the ocean as a space of freedom or solace was a common theme amongst

interviewees and participants of diverse backgrounds – and coral reefs were indicated

valuable past, present, and future heritage assets for Crucian communities. In tandem, several

ancestral Virgin Islanders indicated fishing – specifically for reef fish species – was a form of

therapy, as explained by one multi-generational Crucian:

> So [my father] went fishing, he fed the family […] I was raised eating what we caught […]
> that was our food […] and in many cases, we ate like kings […] we're eating everything that
> comes out of the ocean […] He'd whistle, and we'd come out of there and it's time to go
> [fishing]. Play time's over. We got to go […] He lived a life of... He was a Korean war
> veteran, a marine in Korea. He saw a lot of combat. He was a forward observer for the
> artillery, which meant he was ahead of the front lines, acquiring targets and all that […] He
> came back up, messed up. Back then, we didn't know what PTSD was. So, he drank, drank
> himself. Many, many, many, many veterans come back and become alcoholics (STX-18).

These emotional responses and ties to the sea were complex – entangled within palimpsests

of identities and memories of St. Croix, and spatially linked to notions of precolonial Africa,

colonial Denmark, and the neocolonial U.S. As cultural artifacts mined coral elicited multi-

vocal and multi-scalar responses – tied to notions of the sea as a sanctuary space,

architectural heritage, ancestral artisanry, ecological sustainability, colonialism, and

enslavement. St. Croix visual artist, La Vaughn Belle, reflecting on Haagensen's account of

coral mining, stated:

> [Haagensen's] descriptions of the labor makes visible in the records what is often invisible in
> the structures, the perilous labor of African bodies that have built these societies, the veritable
> foundation of great wealth and industry (2019, 39).

Colonial wealth and its relationship to the exploitation of Black bodies and expertise is a

component of community-level postcolonial discourse in St. Croix – especially in reference

to Denmark leading the global ranks in terms of quality of life, the happiness index, and

median wealth per capita.

The relationship between the tangibility of colonial remnants and intangibility of

postcolonial inheritances is well-articulated by Belle, who ties together notions of invisibility

and the role it plays in postcolonial amnesia. The coral plinth of the *I Am Queen Mary*

memorial in Copenhagen, co-created by Belle and Afro-Danish artist Jeanette Ehlers is

constructed of coral block previously used in the foundation of a colonial structure – the coral

blocks excavated from the backyard of Belle's studio in Christiansted. Drawing on metaphoric 'foundations' – of colonialism, of built heritage, and of the island of St. Croix – she notes that the coral stones "[create] space for another kind of renewal, a continuation and an access to another kind of knowledge" (2019, 40).

These reflections are grounded within the broader realm of postcolonial thought across the Caribbean region. For example, obfuscating historical binaries between the dimensions of nature and culture, Derek Walcott's poem, "the Sea is History," reflects upon the symbolic and literal manifestations of colonial exploitation – reflecting upon the sea as a type of archive and noting that "to descend into it is to discover bone soldered by coral to bone" (1964, 364). Subverting representations of colonial hierarchy, hegemonic architecture, and social evolutionism, Walcott describes "colonnades of coral" and "bones ground by windmills into marl and cornmeal" – evoking metaphor in his representations of colonial silence as "dark ears … like a rumor without any echo" (1964, 362). Building on Walcott's exploration of the sea as a repository of colonial history, Edouard Glissant's similarly probes the landscape to reveal the ways in which memory and traditional knowledge are inscribed within the natural world – awaiting discovery from 'below' (1989).

Edouard Glissant similarly reflected upon landscape as a guardian of memory and by extension, a preserver of traditional epistemology within (post)colonial space (Hoving 2002) – noting "our landscape is its own monument … the trace that [it] signifies is visible from below" (Glissant 1989, 32). In combination with Belle (2019) and Walcott's (1964) ideas about submerged histories, Glissant's poetics of landscape and the notion of "below" can be viewed from various heritage angles: colonial standards of social hierarchy, the submersion (and emergence) of collective memory, or the archaeological principle of stratigraphy. To this end, allegory can play a significant role in collective understandings of heritage assets, such as coral reefs – through which communities explore the material and immaterial inheritances

of the past that are beneath and, at time, obscured by what is apparent at the surface. Just as stratigraphy reveals the layered histories of the earth, social stratigraphy can uncover the hidden, submerged, or obscured narratives of the past, allowing us to excavate and revalue the invisible heritage that lies beneath the surface of epistemic dominance (Dawdy 2016).

### 5.7.1 Reef Fishing as a Heritage Legacy

Coral reefs and their ties to Crucian communities were cited as an invisible heritage by several participants (STX-18; STX-19; STX-21; STX-22; STX-23). This perspective was shared by various community participants involved in coral reef conservation and restoration, who noted that the evidence of coral mining was hidden in plain sight – an aspect of the island's colonial heritage and architectural character that is frequently referenced but seldom discussed meaningfully (STX-14). Among these community-level concerns were ancestral stories tied to coral mining including its origins, its potential impact to contemporary reefs, and how to navigate local and federal historic preservation policies, which are founded on principles of authenticity – a challenging labyrinth of bureaucracy to navigate, given environmental protection legislation (STX-23A/23B).

Two Afro-Crucian interviewees, a father (fisherman), and son (marine biologist), discussed their frustrations with marine conservation activities falling largely into the hands on non-descendant residents of the island – leading to policies (e.g., no-take reserves) that attribute the primary blame for marine degradation to traditional activities, such as fishing – and under-reporting the destructive impacts of activities such as to tourism, construction, and unsustainable industry – economic activities that they attributed primarily to non-local investments (STX-23A and STX23-B).

Indeed, other fishers voiced resentment toward legislation restricting fishing activities at certain sites and during certain times of the year, noting that declining fish stocks were a result of 'colonialism' rather than overfishing (STX-22). In discussions about the significance

of coral reefs as habitats for juvenile fish, one fisher noted that the barrier reef on the island had been 'blown up' to accommodate luxury sailing vessels in the 1970s. Others complained about the loss of coral cover resulting from poor environmental legislation, which allows anchoring but imposes limits on the installation of marine buoys – anchors and anchor chains from large luxury ships periodically destroying large sections of reef.

St. Croix's fishing heritage is closely tied with coral reefs – reef fish such as parrot fish, grouper, and mutton are culinary staples on the island (STX-20b). Local cuisine is centered on various protein sources including goat, conch, chicken, and 'pot fish,' a catch-all term for reef fish caught by trap (Figure 41). Fishers selling pot fish along the roadside, out of large coolers in the beds of their pickup trucks, is a common sight on the island – especially, according to the Christian tradition, on Friday. In this way, the long-term viability of the island's reefs is central to the endurance of Crucian traditional culture and is at the forefront of collective consciousness and attention.



Making a fish pot, St. Croix, V. I. U. S. A.
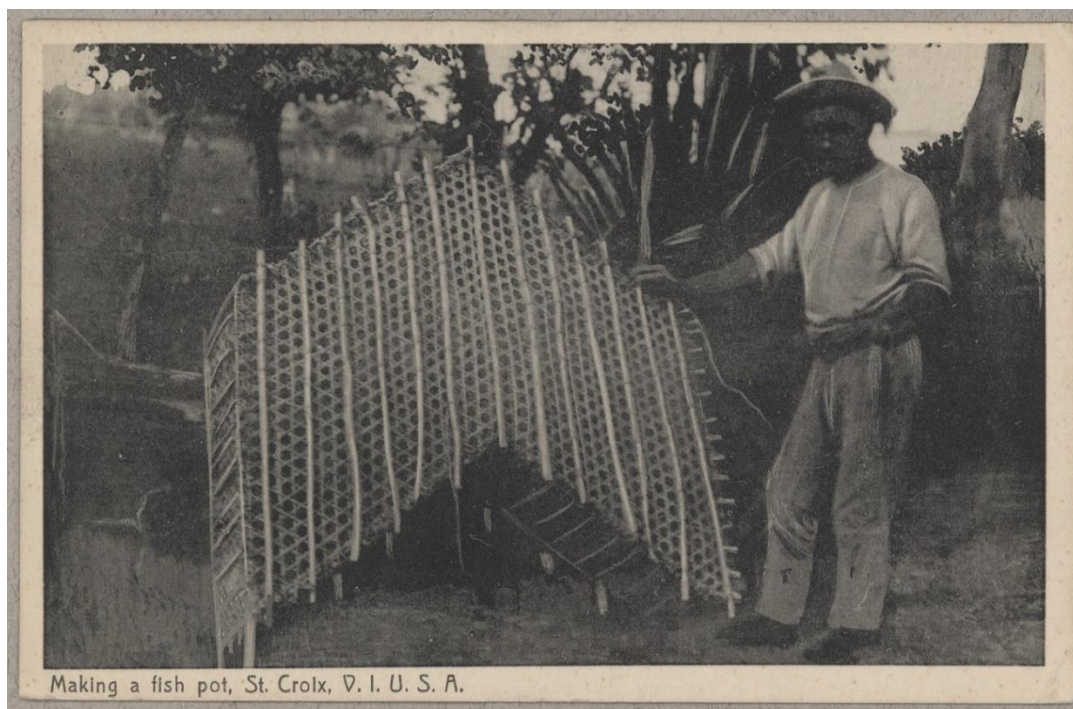
**Figure 41** St. Croix is renowned for elaborate fish pot designs (Danish National Archives, n.d.)

Crucian performance artist Paloma McGregor has long facilitated public discourse at the intersection of environment and history. Her performance piece "Building a Better Fish

Trap" (2011-present) is an emotive reflection on the loss of her fisher father and the legacy of

traditional knowledge he imparted – an iterative performance and practice of remembering.

Using community performance in "evolving her father's approach to engineering fish traps"

McGregor notes that he "used what was available, including repurposed industrial material to

make traps that last longer" (McGregor 2023). The evolving and iterative aspect of

McGregor's performance can be tied to notions of use and reuse – noting her father's

penchant for repurposing materials.



**Figure 42** Repurposed coral blocks which have been sliced into thin veneers to preserve the historic aesthetic whilst adhering to contemporary building and environmental codes (Zahedi 2024).

Resourcefulness – including the creative repurposing of materials – is a trait shared by

many islanders. Indeed, there are few communities in the world who understand the finity of

material resources more fully than those who live on islands. This resourcefulness is often

more pronounced on islands faced by chronic structural inequity and social stratification,

such as St. Croix, as explained by one interviewee:

> The reuse of stuff around here was extensive because people were dirt poor. Even the wealthy land families here. Okay. Yeah, we've got 400 acres, but we haven't got $400, you know, and so. And so that's where that came from (STX-04).

This resourcefulness is an aspect of 'islandness' that has been incorporated into contemporary coral masonry – as buildings erode and collapse, original materials are (re)configured, (re)shaped, and (re)used in new structures. For example, despite legislation prohibiting contemporary coral mining, renovations of several buildings along Hospital Street in Christiansted feature coral facades; stonemasons recovered coral block mined during the colonial period and sliced it into thin veneers to be used as stone cladding; this creative re-use of material enabled the preservation of an 'authentic' historic aesthetic, whilst adhering to contemporary building codes (Figure 42). One interviewee drew from this understanding, applying it to the notion of memory and storytelling through the process of stonemasonry:

> I am the son of a stonemason and a storyteller, griot culture bearers in their own rights. And because of that, my father works in the stone masons. He's a stonemason. My mother is a storyteller […]. And I'm a combination of both of them. Both of them have taught me their skills […] and guided me with their examples and showed me the carving of stones into beautiful art – and molding of experiences into stories that can teach and have a multiplicity of meaning. And also, the history that both those things carry together, the stone crafting and the story crafting, like how they carry a certain continuity of messages and skills, but also how it's deeply embedded in the culture to tell stories, to want to leave a mark in a stone that can survive the test of time, essentially (STX-12).

Building on the creative aspect of heritage and its intrinsic role in the co-construction of identity and memory, STX-12 engages tangible and intangible heritage as relational, and in turn, simultaneously static and fluid. Such connections with the island that are embodied and intimate, facilitating critical and intellectual discourse regarding colonial inheritances and legacies. As McGregor (2023) reflects, "the hope is to deepen the connection collaborators and audiences have with one another's legacies and the future of our embattled water spaces." Her terminology, *embattled* water spaces, is action-oriented, speaking to the notion that heritage is as much about the future as the past. In this way, emotive and creative

expression invites an alternative way of knowing and understanding multi-scalar change over time, while fostering an inclusive and scientifically rigorous space for sharing traditional knowledge (Figure 43).



**Figure 43** A fisherman's shanty in Altoona Lagoon on St. Croix (Zahedi 2021).

Certainly, in recent years, attention has been drawn away from material fabric and toward analysis of the intangible and relational in both the academic and policy sectors (Byrne 2003). The shift away from archaeology as the 'study of things' has implications within and outside the discipline. In terms of how evolving understandings of archaeology and heritage might benefit coral reef futures, situating the actions of past communities within the context of values, traditions, and identities that shape contemporary ones, will ultimately and undoubtedly supplement the efforts of conservationists and heritage researchers who work on behalf of associated communities.

## 5.8 Coral Reef Futures

Community, archaeological, and archival data have infrequently been used in combination to investigate degradation of coral reefs, although they have the potential to inform rich accounts of environmental and social history (Daley and Griggs 2008). The

intermingling of methods in this study on coral heritage in St. Croix allows for moving beyond historical silences – exploring colonial coral mining, its ties to enslavement, and its impact on the built heritage of the island as intertwined with present-day heritage concerns centered on contemporary coral reef degradation. In tandem, implementing this methodology speaks to the compounding impacts and enduring legacies of colonial activities in St. Croix during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Although there has been little scholarly attention on the effects of coral mining in the Caribbean, studies conducted elsewhere have demonstrated the potential impact of such an event. For example, Edgardo Gomez's study of the impact of contemporary coral mining in Indonesia and Malaysia illustrates:

> In Indonesia, corals are used in the construction of jetties, walls, fishing weirs, roads, and are burned as a source of lime […] Coral mining was believed to have caused the reduction in size to about one-half the original of the coral islands Ubi Besar and Niwana […] In Bali, the collection of corals for lime has resulted in serious environmental degradation […]. The extent of damage to reefs in Sabah inflicted by such an activity was estimated to be a loss in the order of 6.8 km of reef from per year (1983, 288).

Most studies of coral mining are focused on contemporary mining, although colonial mining is also worthy of scholarly attention. In St. Croix's case, coral mining was established at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, the period several proponents of the designation of the "Anthropocene" as a geological epoch have suggested as a potential 'start' (Albritton Johnson 2012). At the same time, given a lack of quantitative historical data and the limited nature of qualitative historical accounts, it is difficult to establish a baseline for coral reef ecology on St. Croix – therefore making comparative assessments, such as Gomez's (1983), difficult. For this reason, intermingling interdisciplinary data is a practical means of bridging the chasm between bodies of knowledge. For example, the archaeological fieldwork undertaken for this study indicates that coral mining on the island was extensive, intensive,

and substantial – a phenomenon perhaps best characterized as an 'ecological event' (Wolkovich et al. 2014).

Recent research emphasizes the social vulnerability of coastal communities in the face of coral reef degradation (Cinner et al. 2012). From declining fish stocks and structural degeneration of reefs resulting in increased storm surges, erosion, and flooding, to economic instability due to factors such as a potential loss of tourism revenue, Caribbean communities that rely upon coral reef ecosystems are directly threatened by coral reef damage. Communities on St. Croix demonstrated profound understanding of these risks, emphasizing the long-term viability of the island's surrounding reefs as a matter of public concern. Indeed, the imminent and compounding effects of climate change have made apparent how systemic inequities can be geographically-specific and are not uniformly experienced – and to this end, how often the communities who contribute the least to climate change are among the most vulnerable to its projected impacts (Page 2008).

In recent years, there has been a greater emphasis on the role of colonialism in ecological exploitation and, as a result, anthropogenic climate change (Mercer and Simpson 2023). Malhi (2017) referred to the period immediately preceding and continuing through the early Industrial Era as the "Plantationocene" highlighting how colonialism, slavery, and the plantation economy perpetuated environmental degradation (94). Certainly, the exploitation that characterized European colonialism in the Americas, "resulted in unprecedented changes in ecological processes" including the health of various species and ecosystems around the world, such as coral reefs (Lightfoot et al. 2013, 101).

Like many other Caribbean islands, St. Croix underwent multiple waves of exploitative modification to its environment – from its seventeenth-century French colonization and the clearing of native forests (Hardy 2017), to the twentieth-century construction of the Hess oil refinery along the island's south short (Bond 2017), both of

which have negatively impacted the islands coral reefs. Undoubtedly, the deforestation that occurred on St. Croix during the early colonial period had a significant negative impact on nearshore reefs, due to an increase in sediment load and a decrease in water quality (Maina et al. 2013), while the dredging of Krause Lagoon, one of the largest wetlands on the island, to construct to Hess oil refinery hindered the filtrations of pollutants and sediments and the regulation of water flow – unique characteristics of wetland habitats that support coral reefs (Johnson 2019).

According to Daley and Griggs, in aiming to restore reefs that are "clearly" far from pristine, archaeology and history offer insight into the "profound transformations of marine ecosystems resulting from human activities [and] should inform their contemporary environmental management... rather than concentrating solely on the most recent insult that leads to ecosystem collapse" (2008, 113). Given the recent environmental stressors impacting the reefs on St. Croix in combination with the effects of colonial coral mining, the island's coral ecosystems have degraded to a degree that recovery to 'pristine' status is unfortunately extremely unlikely. Nonetheless, scientific research and monitoring should be informed by accurate historical baselines to situate conservation efforts within the complete picture of coral reef decline.

In June 2020, Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease (SCTLD) was first reported in St. Croix's waters (Philley 2022). This highly infectious disease is fatal to coral colonies, resulting in rapid loss of reef-building coral species including all the species targeted for mining during the colonial period (Figure 44). Several programs were quickly initiated to limit the spread of SCTLD, led by both specialists and citizen scientists. Coral conservationists, who shared their substantial knowledge of the biological and ecological characteristics of corals and coral reefs (e.g., potential impacts of SCTLD), engaged with other specialists – artists, environmental activists, and fishers – who offered diverse

perspectives and nuanced understanding(s) of tacit connections between coral and

tangible/intangible heritage. Fishers, experts in temporal, rhythmic, and spatial dynamics of

the marine world, often inherited this knowledge through multi-generational traditional

knowledge (STX-23A/B); it was fishers – especially SCUBA diving fishers – who

demonstrated the most comprehensive and detailed knowledge of how fish and coral

communities have changed over time (STX-18, STX-20B, STX-22, STX-23A/B). Because

various communities on the island (e.g., fishers, ecologists, divers, activists, educators, etc.)

engage with marine heritage in different ways, their contributions to this study demonstrate

how diversifying sources of data across communities can produce a greater depth of

knowledge – that is inclusive of an intricate awareness of diverse relationships between

humans and the natural world.
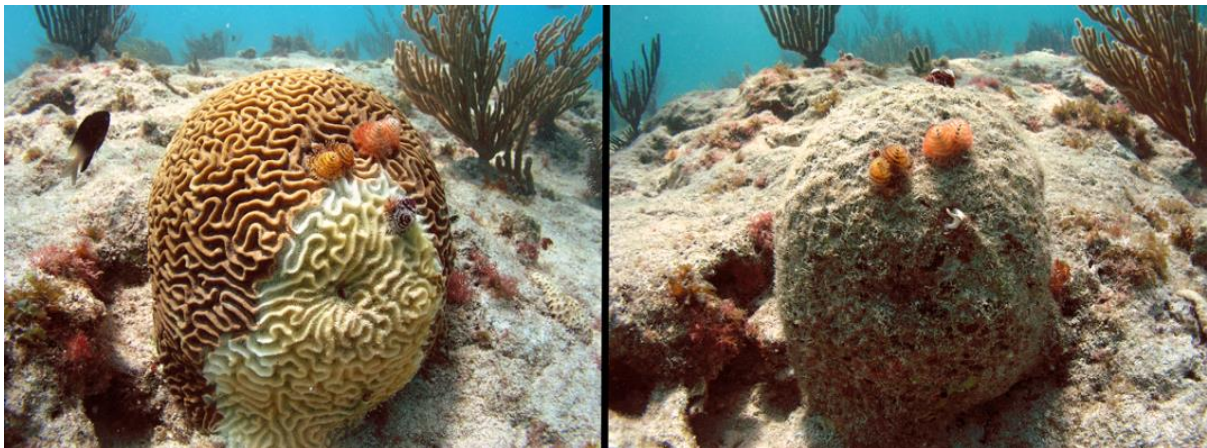


**Figure 44** A brain coral in Biscayne National Park, Florida infected with SCTLD. On the left image, the coral is seen in April 2015, and by April 2016 (right) it is completely dead (Isla Kuffner, 2016).

## 5.9 Conclusion

On St. Croix and beyond, diverse communities play a fundamental role in local

responses to the global challenges of coral reef decline and climate change. In the Caribbean,

the effects of climate change, coupled with the deterioration of coral reefs and sea level rise,

will inevitably affect the frequency, strength, and destructive forces of hurricanes – a point

that was communicated by several participants in reference to their commitment to ecological

sustainability and marine conservation. Intensive wave action, storm surge, and tsunamis are

additional concerns for islanders. Although tsunamis are uncommon on St. Croix, the island

sits at the periphery of an active tectonic plate boundary, between the North American and

the northwest corner of the Caribbean plates (USGS 2023).[14] The diminishing breakwater

provided by the island's barrier and fringing reefs was cited as a threat and a matter of public

concern.

The notion of 'collapse' is pervasive in discourse about climate change and its

looming effects (Canadell and Jackson 2021). However, integrating heritage perspectives that

center adaptability, sustainability, and continuity through cultures of care, might better

prepare humanity to respond to the challenges that lie ahead. Nicoll and Zerboni describe

culture as a "continuum, persisting through disasters and cycling through phenomena of

collapse and reorganization," moreover arguing that these transitions are 'essential' and

'integral' components of both human and environmental systems – contrasting with the

traditional view that "societies are a static construct that [can fail] irreversibly, literally

breaking down into ruins as a function of historical, climatic, and environmental stressors"

(2020, 120). In recent years, researchers have begun to focus on the nature of positive niche

construction and "restorative human ecology" (Loring 2020), a concept that offers a vision of

hope against the doom and gloom of coral reef futures. In shifting away from the notion of

'collapse,' there is ample opportunity for conservationists and ecologists, heritage

practitioners, archaeologists, historians, and the diverse public to co-create knowledge

through collaboration, mobilizing various methods and sources of data to better understand

what a 'pristine' coral reef might look like – adjusting restoration targets based on a more

comprehensive data set.

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[14] On November 18, 1867, the city of Frederiksted was struck by two tsunamis, approximately 8 meters in height, which caused significant damage to the waterfront and ships in the harbor, killing 24 people (Moore 2018).

This shift might be on the horizon – a significant grant opportunity resulted from a conversation about this case study with a participant, a government employee, who suggested an amendment to the Department of the Interior, Office of Insular Affairs – Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Funding, under which $2,048,569 is now available for "revegetating mined lands." At the time of writing, several organizations on St. Croix were in the process of submitting proposals for coral restoration at sites where coral mining historically occurred, including the Nature Conservancy, the Coral Reef Foundation, and the Department of Planning and Natural Resources. I have been involved in advising the proposal process for several organizations' funding applications and am thrilled that this research has highlighted this underexplored issue.

Based upon preliminary estimates, given the concentration of coral in the island's built environment in which some buildings feature coral masonry exclusively, it is likely that the total amount of coral mined from St. Croix's reefs exceeds several thousand cubic meters of coral, although specific quantitative data collection on the degree and analysis into the potential impact of coral loss has yet to be explored. This could be achieved through photogrammetric analysis of standing structures, focusing on specific source reefs – for example, the barrier reef in Christiansted. In addition, a focus on the history of commercial lime production on the island and its connection to coral mining would offer a more complete picture of coral mining as a colonial activity and environmental 'event.' This study has provided a foundation to a long understudied colonial practice and its ties to the contemporary heritage of St. Croix. It is hoped that future efforts incorporate this data into a wider study of colonial coral mining in the Caribbean and elsewhere. It is only through collaborative research that integrates natural and cultural heritage, that we can truly understand the value of coral reefs to humanity and the earth we call home.

# Chapter 6: Earth
## The Roots and Routes of the Crucian Baobab

### 6.1 Introduction

The monumental baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*), referred to as the 'tree of life,' is an icon of the African continent (Figure 45). Across the Atlantic Ocean, St. Croix is widely acknowledged in both literature (Rashford 1995, Nicholls 2006) and oral tradition (STX-14), as having more baobabs than anywhere else in the Caribbean – according to one estimate, over 100 (Repeating Island 2009). In mainland Africa, the baobab is a foundational species that has the ability to create entire ecosystems through nutrient and water cycling (Sanchez and Osborne 2010), but in the Caribbean, it is not a naturalized species. Instead, it relies upon human cultivation and stewardship to ensure its survival – a symbiotic practice that is both deeply rooted in its African origins and sustained by its evolving meaning for descendants of the enslaved Africans who brought the baobab to the Americas.



**Figure 45** A large baobab tree at Estate Shoy in St. Croix (Zahedi 2020).

Contemporary Crucian communities view baobab trees as a tangible point of connection between St. Croix and the African continent, evocative heritage symbols that lie at the junction of diverse narratives – enmeshed in Crucian culture and identity through their botanical, spiritual, mythological, and communal value. For many, baobab trees are embedded representations of the interplay between African[15] and Caribbean cultural legacies, which foreground a perpetual negotiation between temporal, physical, and metaphysical space, inspiring collective discourse on the meaning and (re)formation of heritage, identity, and memory.

Mobilizing these notions of cultural continuity and the enduring connection between Afro-Caribbean communities and their West African roots, this chapter investigates the baobab as a conduit for the (re)construction of 'homeplace,' and the (post)colonial endurance of spiritual, emotional, and spatial attachment to the African motherland. Toni Morrison (1984) reflected that a defining characteristic of Black expression is the "presence of an ancestor" which, in turn, nurtures community – a framework she refers to as "rootedness." Morrison's ideas about rootedness are useful when extended to non-human ancestors such as ancestral trees[16] in the Caribbean. Building from bell hooks' (2015) framework of 'homeplace' as a site of resistance and Whitney Battle-Baptiste's notion of 'homespace' (2011), this chapter contends that the meaning ascribed to baobab trees in St. Croix is borne of the unique socio-cultural legacies and historical context of the island.

This research encompasses frames of reference that are familiar to certain segments of the wider Crucian community but have not been applied within an academic framework –

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[15] This chapter discusses to "Africa" and "West Africa" in reference to both physical and conceptual space – recognizing the diversity of the African continent. I employ this general terminology to highlight 'Africa' as both a real and imagined homeland for diasporic people, as well as to acknowledge the arbitrary nature of modern-day borders, which do not necessarily reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of any one nation (see: 2.6-2.7).

[16] 'Ancestral tree' is a colloquial term in contemporary Crucian vernacular and is a title of respect used for particularly old, culturally significant, or otherwise monumental trees. Although it is often culturally applied to individual specimens of particular size or esteem, it is also applied to categories or species of tree (e.g., baobab, tamarind, kapok, etc.)

investigating the Crucian baobab as an interdimensional portal, ancestor and ancestral intermediary, and emblem of counter-discourse. This chapter aims to elevate Afro-Crucian perspectives, integrating them with academic scholarship to demonstrate the significant intellectual and creative value of community knowledge, as it pertains to advancing academic inquiry and the critical examination of (post)colonial inheritances and legacies.

Delving into the intersection of history, folk memory, and archaeology to understand the tacit value of the baobab and its role as an anchor for material and immaterial heritage within Afro-Crucian communities, it begins by introducing the research methods and sources of data. It then presents its theoretical underpinnings, followed by an ethnobotanical framing of the baobab in the African context, and a discussion of its provenance in the Caribbean during the colonial period through the present day, emphasizing its route to St. Croix. Finally, the baobabs of St. Croix are interpreted through three lenses –from a temporal perspective, which engages 'lifespan' as a multi-scalar phenomenon (i.e., baobab and human life cycles and lifespans as experienced by generational communities); from a spatial perspective, which draws on Crucian mythology that views the baobab as an interdimensional portal; and memory, which interprets the baobab as a living monument and an emblem of counter discourse – representing the Crucian baobab as a cultural prism that transcends materiality and connects communities across time and space. The aim of this exercise is to explore how the baobab trees of St. Croix are emblematic of wider discourse centered on the negotiation of heritage, identity, and memory in (post)colonial spaces within the wider global context. The tree, while rooted in African and broader Caribbean heritage, has taken on new meaning(s) within the Crucian context as a conduit of creole identity, which is explained in more detail in the proceeding sections.

## 6.2 Sources and Methods

In pursuit of bringing together these interpretive threads, the methods for this chapter were developed to combine archaeology and ethnography and drew from material, community, and archival sources through archaeological survey, participant and non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and historical research. This methodology co-mingles sources of data and methods to facilitate interpretive analysis that highlights the strengths of both the material and immaterial records (Atalay 2012). Taking an interdisciplinary approach, it draws from contemporary and historical archaeology, postcolonial community heritage, and cultural anthropology to structure a cohesive framework that merges previous scholarship with original research to explore the cultural nuances and intricacies of St. Croix's distinct baobab heritage.

In the preliminary stages of research, archaeological surveys were undertaken to identify and locate baobab trees and to document surface assemblages associated with specific trees. Drawing from previous research, especially Nicholls' (2006) survey for the US Virgin Islands Register of Big Trees, I identified several specimens of varying sizes and ages, from mature and fruiting trees through the presumed oldest baobab tree in the US Virgin Islands, which is located at Grove Place. In addition to the baobab trees on the USVI Register of Big Trees (n=7), I located 9 additional baobabs of substantial size (Appendix E). Wherever present, surface assemblages, and deliberately deposited materials (Harrison 2011) were recorded both around the bases of baobab trees and, when a hollow interior was identified, the central cavity of the tree. Although all but one of the trees on the USVI Register of Big Trees were located, knowledge bearers on the island indicated that some of the largest baobab trees on the island, including two additional trees of considerable size and age at Butler Bay had recently died – the result of Hurricane Maria and a subsequent drought, competition from other plants, and a lack of maintenance (STX-05A/B; STX-08).

Ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2020 and 2023 included participant and nonparticipant observation and semi-structured interviews, amounting to an approximate total of one hundred hours. Observation was conducted at commemorative events and during non-special occasions at the trees located at Grove Place, Butler Bay, the Christiansted Government Parking Lot, and the St. George Village Botanical Garden. These specific trees were selected because they are prominently located, easily accessible, and well-known within the community.

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted to supplement ethnographic and archaeological data, as well as to offer more detailed context about the baobab. Interviewees were selected as representative of the island community, who were knowledgeable about the baobab but had distinct perspectives representing a diverse knowledge base inclusive of academics, artists, environmental activists, and community elders – all Afro-Caribbean people between the ages of 30 and 65. One additional interview was conducted with two white non-Crucian landholders, and was included in connection with an event that occurred at an ancestral baobab tree on their property; their perspective was valuable in understanding contrasting viewpoints as well as the transmission of knowledge regarding the significance of the baobab to non-descendant resident communities on the island.

Historical research involved consultation of primary and secondary archival sources, such as photographs, colonial records, and newspaper articles. The Danish National Archives and the St. Croix Landmarks Society Library located at Estate Whim in St. Croix were the primary repositories explored, although online archival sources such as local newspapers (e.g., St. Croix Source and Daily News) were also consulted. Historic photographs were particularly useful in identifying baobab trees that were deceased, revealing the historical

nature of the trees, including the size and

number (Figure 46). Indeed, despite a loss

of many of the ancestral baobab trees,

community fieldwork revealed a collective

and dedicated effort to cultivate and plant

baobab seedlings across the island,

intending to recover the loss of well-known

heritage trees (STX-12) – and provided a

foundation to examining the baobab tree

through a folk/social memory framework.

After data were collected, observation and

interview data were triangulated with

research focused on baobabs in other



**Figure 46** An early 20th century image of a now-deceased baobab tree at Butler Bay (St. Croix Landmarks Society).

postcolonial places, with a specific focus on the Caribbean region.

In this study, a methodology blending archaeological and ethnographic approaches was developed to unravel the story of St. Croix's baobab trees, integrating diverse sources of data. This interdisciplinary approach enabled a nuanced exploration of the ethno-cultural significance and history legacy of the iconic baobab. Through critical data analysis and triangulation with broader scholarship, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between humans and baobab trees, shedding light on their past, present, and future in the socio-cultural landscape of St. Croix.

## 6.3 The Diasporic Baobab and Caribbean Landscapes

As reflected by DeLoughrey, Gosson, and Handley, "if diaspora constitutes much of the human experience in the Caribbean, it also constitutes the experience of plants and animals, a literal spreading of seeds, and the resultant adaptations that come necessary for

survival" (2005, 18). Emphasizing the interplay between people and ethno-botanicals within cultural landscapes, this chapter draws from diverse scholarship that highlights the diminishing relevance of the culture/nature divide in the study of postcolonial Caribbean heritage (Olwig 2013; Harrison 2015; Siegel 2018). In tandem, it aims to demonstrate the complex mediation and negotiation of postcolonial heritage, identity, and memory, which embody not only the material legacies of colonialism, but also the resilience of traditional epistemologies and the dynamic construction of creolized identity (Glissant 1989; Nicholls 2012; Hall 2015). Integrating these interpretive threads within the broader study of landscape and domestic space, it contends that through the (re)construction of 'home' in the colonial Caribbean, enslaved Africans cultivated a sense of agency, despite enslavement and subjugation, in collective and individual formulas of resistance and maintained continuity of their African heritage (Battle-Baptiste 2011) – a legacy that has profoundly shaped creolized identity on the island.

Although in recent years, heritage scholarship has confronted a historical over-articulation of the binary between culture and nature in the interpretation, management, and conservation of heritage, even as far as to render the divide 'obsolete' (van London et al. 2019, 3), it is still important to acknowledge that relativist theorizations of the culture/nature divide are epistemologically specific and culturally situated. Drawing from a Scandinavian perspective, Kenneth Olwig refers to the divide of nature 'versus' culture as a "contested patrimony" and "discursive position" largely influenced by heritage and legacy (2013, 1). His use of the word 'patrimony' is evocative when weighed against traditionally applied feminine ascriptions to nature and the natural world and masculine ascriptions of civilization and built heritage within the Global North context (Parashar 2016). Certainly, while the obfuscation of the line between natural and cultural heritage has become a common interpretive lens for international heritage scholars, it is necessary to explicitly state that this revised framework

has been a means of engaging heritage in the Afro-Caribbean context from its origins through the present – substantially influencing creole cultures and worldviews (Tiffin 2005).

The Caribbean represents a confluence of perspectives on the culture-nature divide, shaped by the epistemological foundations of European, African, and Indigenous cultures (Paravinisi-Gerbert 2005). Reflecting upon the legacies of colonialism in the Caribbean, of which its imprints extend well beyond the human realm and include drastic alteration of the natural world, twentieth and twenty-first century postcolonial scholars have articulated the inherent tensions between human and landscape – among these, the traumatic nature of separation from motherland for diasporic African communities and their descendants (Walcott 2000). Through the same lens, Edouard Glissant reflected that alienation from land is, itself, a form of violence, positing "the relationship with the land [for enslaved Africans] was even more threatened because the community [was] alienated from that land," reinforcing that "the individual, the community, and the land are inextricable in the process of creating history" (1999, 105-106). Mobilizing Derek Walcott (2000) and Glissant's frameworks, the dispersal of baobab trees across the globe by enslaved Africans can be considered both a performance of African identity and an act of resistance against their alienation from Africa. To this end, Jamaica Kincaid presents the entangled legacies of plants and people as a means of preserving origins and originary mythologies in her writings about gardening as an "exercise in memory" (1991, 9) – a concept I build upon later in this chapter.

### 6.3.1. Homeland, Homespace, and Yardspace

Building from postcolonial theory and the relationship between land and *home*land, as it applies to a domestic archaeology framework, scholars have sought to distinguish between 'house' and 'home' – a distinction that is powerful when explored in conjunction with identity, belonging, and emotional attachment within African diasporic communities (Delle and Clay 2022). While 'house' generally refers to physical space, 'home' can be distinctly

understood as a place created through social relationships, often tied closely to feelings of safety and comfort (hooks 2015). bell hooks developed a theoretical stance for understandings of Black enslaved domestic spaces, which she referred to as 'homeplace,' indicating 'home' as a site of resistance by highlighting the roles of diasporic African mothers in creating safe spaces within the domestic sphere as a form of resistance against institutionalized power (1990, 387). She reflected that for diasporic Black people, the construction of a homeplace, "however fragile and tenuous… had a radical political dimension… one's home place was the site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization – where one could resist" (1990, 384). Enslaved Africans who were suffering the loss of home – home*land* as well as the comfort of home*place* – satisfying this basic human need demanded (re)creation, (re)negotiation, and (re)construction within the Caribbean context. In the absence of access to most traditional and familiar forms of material culture, immaterial often took precedence in the cultivation of domestic space(s).

In recent years, various scholars have applied an expanded view of domestic space, in which outdoor spaces – referred to as 'yard space' are included within discourses of homespace and place (Heath and Bennet 2016). For example, Stanka Radovic writes about Caribbean 'yards' as "richly communal" and intimate places – which she describes as a "form of local resistance to the logic of material ownership" through "engaged participation" (2016, 40). Baobab trees and other 'jumbie' trees[17] are often associated with yard space on St. Croix, historically planted at the center of the enslaved workers' village, serving both practical function (e.g., shade, medicine, food, landmark, etc.) and satisfying social needs (e.g., collective meeting space, storytelling, intangible cultural transmission, etc.).

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[17] 'Jumbie' means spirit or ghost. Jumbie trees are usually large or ancient trees of several species – baobab, tamarind, and silk cotton among others. Although sometimes jumbie trees harbor evil spirits, and other times the term is used to describe a neutral or positive ancestral spiritual presence within the tree.

The baobabs of St. Croix were imported, germinated, and cultivated by Africans, and nurtured by descendant communities across generations, representing stewardship of both the tangible and intangible associations of the tree. Drawing from Toni Morisson (1984), the rootedness of the baobab – as a living monument – is an ancestor, itself, (STX-13) and therefore serves as a vector for various cultural interventions – spatiality, as a traveling legacy that links St. Croix to the world beyond; temporality, through connection between past and present communities; and memory, through their function as palimpsests (STX-08; STX-12; STX-13; STX-14). Embracing the intertwined narratives of baobab trees, notions of 'home,' and the negotiation of identity, this study engages the nuanced complexities of St. Croix's postcolonial heritage, offering a deeper understanding of cultural inheritance, transmission, and continuity – guided by direct acknowledgement of the enduring connections between humans and the natural world. The following sections provide a framework for understanding the baobab's provenance and social meaning on St. Croix.

### 6.3.2 The Tree of Life: *Adansonia digitata* in Africa

The baobab tree found on St. Croix is one of eight species of baobab – six are found in Madagascar, one in Australia, and one in mainland Africa (Ichumbaki 2019). The species found on St. Croix, *Adansonia digitata* (henceforth referred to as 'the' baobab – also locally known as 'guinea almond'), native to mainland Africa, is a morphologically diverse canopied tree easily identified by its massive, swollen trunk which supports a comparatively small crown, and its characteristic "tangled mass of small branches" (Korbo et al. 2012, 505). The bole (i.e., trunk) of a mature baobab measures 3-10 meters in diameter and it has an approximate height of 10-25 meters. The soft, smooth, and waxy bark varies in color between reddish-brown, reddish-purple, grayish-purple, and grayish-brown, and is fibrous and remarkably fire resistant, adapted to its native African savannah habitat, which is prone to

wildfire. Baobabs of significant age often feature a hollow interior which may or may not be accessible.

The scientific epithet of the baobab – *digitata* – is in reference to the hand-like appearance of the tree's palmately compound leaves, which feature five to seven leaflets. The leaves are bright green during the rainy season, changing to yellow and brown during the transition to the dry season, and are eventually shed completely. The tree's pungent and pendulous flowers emerge from the leaf axils, typically appearing once or twice a year after the rainy season, although it is not unusual for the tree to be dormant during periods of little rain or drought.



**Figure 47** The pod, fruit, and seeds of the baobab tree (Zahedi 2022).

The baobab's fruit is large and oblong, measuring up to forty-five centimeters in length. The fruit is encased in a gourd-like shell, surrounded by a velvety layer of fine hairs that vary in color (e.g., pale yellow, gold, yellowish-green, pale green, greenish brown, etc.).

The citrusy fruit consists of a dry, powder-like pulp surrounded by seeds, which are also edible (Figure 47). Consumed raw, roasted, ground into flour, or pressed into oil, the seeds have a nutty flavor. Nearly every part of the tree has practical or medicinal value – the fruit, seeds, flower, leaves, roots, and bark have been reported to treat a number of ailments from malaria to rashes (see: Kabore et al. 2011). The fibrous bark can be made into rope or weaving material for baskets, and the fruit and seeds are high in both macro- and micro-nutrients. In contemporary St. Croix, it seems that these practical uses of the baobab are uncommon, although they were reportedly practiced into the mid-twentieth century (STX-08; STX-12; STX-21).

Across the African continent, the shade beneath the baobab tree has traditionally served as a gathering space for elders, political leaders, and members of the elite class (Osibodu 2020, 31). From a practical perspective, the canopy of the tree created shade in eco-systems that characteristically have little shade (e.g., low-land savannah) making it practical as well as symbolic (Mathaba 2016). The baobab's significance as a social space and its spiritual associations are interrelated and seem to have mutually developed over a long period of time, evidenced by the archaeological record (Ichumbaki 2019). In East Africa, Elgidius Ichumbaki (2019) conducted archaeological survey and excavation at baobab trees, which revealed a rich tradition of spiritual practice – intact ceramics, ash, incense burners, etc. dating to the ninth century (16). Speaking to the African mainland as a large, diverse comparative, cross-culturally communities hold diverse spiritual beliefs about the baobab tree ranging from its apotropaic qualities, use in fertility and death rituals, association with ancestry and divinity, and political value (e.g., elders, monarchy, political leaders) (Rashford 2023a, Rashford 2023b).

Jean-Michele Pock Tsy et al. (2009), note a large distribution of baobab across a range of ecosystems across mainland Africa from low-land savannah, forested bushland, and

coastal sites – indicating the genetic differences between baobab populations in West and East Africa and based upon the phylogeographical analysis, they suggest a center of origin for the baobab in West Africa. Moreover, Pock Tsy et al. (2009) and Duvall (2007) argue that anthropogenic factors likely influenced the distribution, establishment, and reproduction of baobab trees across the African continent – citing its relatively low germination success-rate and its centralized presence and concentration in human settlement sites (Figure 48). In Sudan, Senegal, and among the !Kung of the Kalahari, baobab trees were deliberately protected and cultivated for use as natural cisterns, John Rashford notes that "there are places which would [otherwise] be uninhabitable" were in not for the baobab (1987, 59).

Because of its unusual appearance, the baobab has long been used as a landmark – designating boundaries, roads, villages, and other cultural features (Zorn 2010). In Southern Benin, the baobab is planted for various reasons – for example, to symbolize of the founding of a kingdom, to delimit the royal palace, or to commemorate the birth of a child (Atindehou et al. 2022, 479). Ichumbaki highlights the relationship between precolonial monumental structures and baobabs on the eastern coast of Africa, noting that it is unclear which came first, but that "the baobabs and the monumental ruins – are interlinked" (2019, 15). Indeed, across diverse African cultures, the baobab is a sacred "living monument" that represents ancestral wisdom and heritage (Watson



**Figure 48** A large baobab tree in Sudan in 1913 (Royal Danish Library).

2024, 1; Asaah 2020). Its longevity, as well as its ability to constantly renew itself during its annual cycle – the seasonal shedding of its leaves, its ability to store water, and its resistance to fire – as Véronique Tadjo posits, connects humans to the past, present, and future (2021).

The baobab tree is entangled in the colonial legacies of Africa and the diaspora (e.g., St. Croix, Martinique, Barbados, etc.), sometimes becoming a feature within landscapes of enslavement. Benjamin Kankpeyeng (2009) cited archival reports of African captives who were chained to baobab trees in West Africa prior to embarking on the Middle Passage; the Danish botanist Paul Erdmann Isert, who traveled to West Africa in 1783, described baobab trees growing near Fredensborg slave fort in Ningo, Ghana, as a "sacred tree infested with bats" (Adams 1972, 32). Additionally, Joachim Agamba draws on oral history that recalls bullets still lodged in a baobab tree, behind which Dagaba warriors hid during slave raids in the eighteenth century (2006, 62). Senegalese writer Marietou Mbaye Bileoma (pseudonym: Ken Bugul) describes the symbolic significance of the baobab tree as a "silent witness" to colonialism, representing precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Africa all at once (1982, 97).

**6.3.3 The Routes of the Baobab**

During the early colonial period, the baobab also became an object of the botanical trade. David Livingstone (1861) noted that the tree was introduced to India and Sri Lanka by both Portuguese missionaries and enslaved Africans in the early 16th century. The spread of the baobab tree outside of Africa followed colonial trade routes; *Adansonia digitata* dispersed around the world, from South and Central America to the Caribbean, South and Southeast Asia and beyond. Karen Bell et al. conducted a comparative study using genetic analysis and historical documentary evidence of colonial oceanic trade between Africa and Asia, indicating that the genetic variability between baobab trees from West Africa, Southeast India and Malaysia is consistent with colonial networks and the routes taken by the English, Dutch, and French (2015, 12-13). They argue that this evidence supports the theory of "multiple

introductions" of baobabs dispersed by the agency of enslaved Africans and, perhaps to a lesser degree, colonial botanists who transferred plants for commercial and ornamental purposes (Bell et al. 2015, 13). In tandem, further analysis tracing the dispersal of baobabs in the Caribbean which utilizes genetic, historical, and cultural evidence could provide greater insight into the provenance of the baobab through the colonial period, including its introduction to St. Croix and the wider Caribbean.

The first documented baobab trees in the Americas have been traced to Brazil, and like colonial specimens found in South Asia, were most likely carried by enslaved Africans aboard European slave vessels beginning in the mid-16th century (Rashford 2022). However, the first documentary record of the baobab's presence in the Caribbean archipelago was in Martinique in the mid-18th century (Hughes 1750) – although it may well have been present elsewhere. According to John Rashford (2022), an unpublished manuscript reported a baobab tree growing in the Botanic Garden on St. Vincent in 1800, cultivated from seeds acquired by colonial collectors in Tobago. Other nineteenth century accounts similarly describe the baobab as an item of the colonial botanical trade and indicating it as a "cultivated ornamental" (Grisebach 1864).

The eighteenth century was a period of considerable botanical exploration, documentation, and collection in the Caribbean and elsewhere. In 1799, Hans West published the first listing of plants in St. Croix, which includes 540 species – many of these specimens now held in Denmark's National Herbarium in Copenhagen. However, the baobab and several common native and introduced plants are, curiously, not included (West 1799). Yet as highlighted by Jens Soelberg, Olasee Davis, and Anna Katharina Jäger, early studies were not dedicated to the ethnobotany of enslaved people (2016, 76) and therefore these omissions are somewhat unsurprising. The first direct reference to baobab trees in St. Croix is from Heinreich Eggers, who described them as naturalized in St. Croix's wooded valleys –

indicating there were baobab trees located in Prosperity and Crequis (i.e., Creque Dam) and noting that the "acid pulp of the fruit [was] used for lemonade" (1879, 31).

On St. Croix, surviving historic specimens are most frequently located in Afro-Caribbean contexts, supporting oral history that the ornamental cultivation of the baobab by Europeans was secondary to its cultivation by enslaved Africans and their descendants, for whom the tree had cultural, spiritual, and medicinal value. The species' provenance in the Danish West Indies is somewhat unclear, although local accounts hold that baobabs on St. Croix are direct descendants of tress from West Africa, rather than arriving on the island via the inter-colonial trade from elsewhere in the Caribbean (STX-08, STX-12, STX-13). Because baobab trees do not produce annual tree rings, sometimes producing many rings in a season and sometimes none at all, common tree-dating methodologies such as dendrochronology are not accurate, complicating the task of verifying the baobab's legacy on the island. Crucian knowledge regarding the age of specific baobab specimens demonstrated that size is not always an indicator of age – as trees planted near guts or wells can grow to a considerable size in a relatively short time span (STX-04; STX-13). Radio-carbon dating, however, could provide more insight on the genetic origin and relative age of the specimens found on St. Croix.

According to one origin story, the baobab was first brought to the island by an enslaved Igbo prince, who hid the seed in his cheek, the natural enzymes present in his saliva germinating the seed, which he planted at Grove Place during the early colonial period (Figure 49) (STX-12, STX-13).[18] Others believe that the seeds were brought by "enslaved folks, in the hair plus around the neck" (STX-08), serving both a practical function as

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[18] This origin story for the baobab tree follows other oral histories of elite West African who were enslaved and stolen to St. Croix. For example, the queen Venus fell in love with a Danish colonial officer and willingly accompanied him to the Danish West Indies. Believing herself to be his wife, she slept in his quarters during the Trans-Atlantic voyage. Upon arrival in St. Croix, she was promptly sold and lived the rest of her life in bondage (see: STX-22).

consumable rations during the Trans-Atlantic voyage, as well as apotropaic and spiritual objects. The Ghanian heritage scholar, William Nsuiban, on the baobab's route to St. Croix, reflected "maybe the enslaved Africans, you know, they swallowed the baobab seeds – so maybe an enslaved person swallowed it and passed it out, and it germinated" (Asp 2019); indeed, baobab trees in Africa are germinated naturally this way, passing through the digestive tract of the bush baby (STX-08).



**Figure 49** The Grove Place Baobab tree, believed to be the first baobab planted on St. Croix (Zahedi 2020).

Crucian knowledge holds that baobab seeds were consciously brought to St. Croix in the eighteenth century – a narrative viewed with academic skepticism, perpetuating an unfortunate historical inclination to delegitimize and dismiss oral history and folk memory as 'mythological.' Many skeptics have cited Hans West's (1799) inventory – a list that is widely known to be incomplete – as proof that the baobab was a later arrival to the Danish West Indies, imported as an ornamental plant by colonial Europeans. This delegitimizing discourse echoes deep-rooted cynicism that enslaved Africans transported cultural objects from Africa

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to the Americas during the Trans-Atlantic crossing, typically pointing to a lack of strong documentary or archaeological evidence indicating otherwise (Posnansky 2002). But contemporary research has revealed evidence of amulets and personal adornments, for example glass beads and cowrie shells, at burial sites and in archival accounts, that suggest the history is much more complex than previously understood (LaRoche 1994; Fricke and Zahedi 2020).

Although primary documents frequently indicate that enslaved Africans were stripped of their personal belongings prior to the Atlantic crossing, it may have been possible to smuggle small objects such as beads or seeds if they were discretely hidden, for example woven into hair, a claim supported by archaeological evidence that shows African material heritage in Caribbean colonial contexts (Webster 2023). Additionally, archival evidence indicates there may have been some instances in which small objects were permitted. Jerome Handler notes that in some cases, the enslaved wore beads around their necks they brought from Africa or given to them by their captors on board, citing two eighteenth century accounts (2006, 12). For example, according to a surgeon aboard a British vessel in the 1780s, "the women are furnished with beads for the purpose of affording them some diversion" (Falconbridge 1788, 210) (Figure 50).

**Figure 50** African woman adorned with long strings of beads (de Grandpré, 1786-1787).

Ultimately, while the seeds of the baobab tree may have arrived on the island in several ways, Crucian knowledge testifies that the tree was of enormous significance to

enslaved Africans, who cultivated and nurtured the tree over many generations. In tracing the journey of the baobab tree to the St. Croix, a complex narrative emerges, interwoven with historical accounts, oral traditions, and archaeological insights. While the exact provenance of the baobabs on St. Croix remains unclear, the enduring presence of the iconic baobab in Afro-Caribbean contexts speaks to their profound cultural significance as a living testament to resilience, adaptation, and the bond between humans and the natural world. As Crucian communities continue to cultivate and nurture the baobab, its symbolic resonance serves to transcend continents, embodying a timeless connection to ancestral wisdom and African identity.

## 6.4 The Baobab as Ancestor and Intergenerational Pathway

The baobab tree's epithet, the 'tree of life,' has multicultural significance. In West African, this symbolism is frequently centered on the baobab's ties to the cycle of life (Watson 2024). This association is multi-scalar – applying to the tree itself (e.g., the seasonal shedding of its leaves), its habitat (e.g., promoting water cycling during the dry season), and as a metaphor for cultures who live in close relationship with the earth (Sidibe et al. 2002). Diverse West African belief systems highlight the baobab's significance in birth, death, and rebirth – an intellectual framework that has spread to the Caribbean (Rashford 2023). Communities on St. Croix emphasized the baobab's role as a mediator or 'living link' that connects ancestral and descendant communities (STX-08, STX-12, STX-13, STX-14) (Blicharska and Mikusinski 2014, 904). Ancient baobabs, particularly the tree at Grove Place, are considered by some as ancestors in and of themselves (STX-12; STX-13). Several participants described the baobab as the ultimate portal between worlds — a mediator between the physical and spiritual realms and situated between ancestral and contemporary communities.

The Grove Place Baobab, commonly believed to be the oldest baobab in the Virgin Islands and thought by some to be the oldest in the Caribbean, was frequently tied to the notion of origins – the act of physically planting the seed metaphorically signifying the planting of an African presence and, by extension, African legacy on St. Croix (STX-08; STX-12; STX-13). Indeed, this narrative parallels West African practice of planting a baobab to demarcate the founding of a kingdom (Wickens 2008). At the same time, on St. Croix the memory of this planting 'event' and ensuing encounters with the tree, including consumption of the fruit, differs from diverse West African philosophies and is instead more closely tied to ancestral connection than territorial domain. Speaking to this, one interviewee explained:

> This tree can provide so much solace and so much memory […] That's the magic of it. That's what it does. When I taste this fruit, I don't know why I like it, but I love it. It tastes unlike anything else to me because it takes […] my cells, my grandfather, grandmother's cells that live in me back to that African experience, back to that African environment (STX-12).

The correlation of memory and biology was mentioned by other interviewees (STX-01), although more commonly in reference to intergenerational trauma (STX-01). Certainly, while contemporary research in has highlighted the transgenerational epigenetic effects of stress and trauma (see: Jawaid et al. 2018), epigenetic memory studies have seldom focused on the possibility of non-traumatic memories similarly influencing the genetics of descendant populations – a topic that could perhaps offer deep insight into the relationship between DNA and diverse human experiences.

In tandem, although discourse about anthropogenic ecological shifts frequently highlight the negative human impacts on the environment, some participants expressed the role traditional culture can play in constructing *positive* anthropogenic niches – as expressed by STX-12:

> We can affect our environment not just in negative, adverse ways, but in positive, productive, developmental advanced ways. And yes, we can cause the rain to fall more by propagating certain kinds of trees. And by doing that, we can cause perpetual prosperity for all that look to walk upon this land or come into contact with this environment […]so that idea can take seed

and take root and just grow so much fruits that can feed generations of humanity to come. That's why I do it. That's why I'm drawn to the baobab tree, because it represents, yes, the tree of life – the tree that can give so much.

STX-12 reflects upon the baobab as a threshold space that grants access to the ancestral domain – emphasizing the baobab's ability to mediate across time by transcending physical space (STX-08). Through this perspective the tree, or in this case its fruit, activates both intergenerational memory and a spiritual convening with ancestors, obfuscating linear conceptualizations of time by articulating both the material and immaterial characteristics of the tree – especially through ideas about lineage. The fruit, as indicated above, but also the act of touching the tree was communicated as a means of forging emotional and spiritual connection to the ancestral realm (Appendix B).

### 6.4.1 A Palaver Tree

The baobab's role as a palaver tree on the African continent and in St. Croix speaks to its social function as a culturally charged and emotive space. M. Dores Cruz notes that "sacred trees… [display] a spiritual dimension that goes beyond the domestication of the natural world… [and] are *loci* of power that confer authority to those in charge of serving the ancestors because by presiding over the well-being of the spiritual world, they are ensuring the well-being of the living community" (2014, 128). Certainly, this duality, in which the baobab connects living and ancestral communities, whilst also serving contemporary social functions, is not purely symbolic. The shade beneath the tree, for example, can be a cultural and political space that exists somewhere along the spectrum between spatial and social arenas of being. In turn, they can transform into powerful spaces that facilitate community engagement, cultural transmission, and the performance of identity.

The Grove Place Baobab, long characterized as a palaver tree, is also an activist space with historical ties to the labor union movements led by civil rights and free press advocate David Hamilton Jackson (1884-1946). In the early twentieth century, Jackson held

community meetings beneath the baobab tree – the West African-derived use of the baobab shade-space was reactivated by contemporary meanings and needs, inspired by culturally-embedded historical significance. Its role as an activist space during the Danish colonial period, may have moreover derived from its importance as a spiritual place with significance that predates colonialism. In this way, the baobab's material and immaterial legacy can represent physical manifestations of social relations and the negotiation of identity – ultimately reifying the relationships between contemporary and ancestral communities (Cruz 2014, 127).

Jackson's legacy is memorialized in present-day St. Croix on Liberty Day, also known as Bull and Bread Day, on November 1, during which his advocacy is celebrated and remembered. This government-sponsored annual tradition sometimes inspires contemporary activism (e.g., protests) as seen in 2023, when dozens of activists disrupted the schedule of events to demand a government response to the island's crumbling infrastructure, lack of investment in education and healthcare, and power and utilities equity – arguing that political inaction on several major issues faced by Crucian communities was disrespectful to Jackson's memory (Appendix B). During participant observation of the protest and government-sponsored activities Liberty Day in 2023 in Grove Place, there were several people gathered under the baobab tree. Taking the opportunity to complete an archaeological survey at the tree, I recorded an offering that had been left at the base of the baobab presumably before the event. It consisted of a large piece of coral, an empty beer bottle, and a lighter – marking the fourth offering I recorded at the site in a two-year period.

### 6.4.2 Ancestral Veneration

The practice of leaving offerings is a form of ancestral veneration in St. Croix and the wider Caribbean, drawn from West African tradition, and represents the entanglement of material and immaterial heritage (see: 5.2). Symbolically significant objects such as candles

and other burnt materials (e.g., partially consumed cigarettes and ''spliffs'[19]), personal

artifacts (e.g., beads, coins, etc.), vessels (e.g., water, liquor, and beer bottles and modified

calabash shells), and natural items (e.g., coral, shell, kenips, kola nuts, etc.) are among the

frequently identified materials associated with these types of offerings on the island (Figure

51).



**Figure 51** An offering at the base of a baobab tree (Zahedi 2023).

Offerings, shrines, and altars are based on the notion of reciprocity between living and

past communities and were described to communicate and connect with ancestors – often

used as a means to summon the wisdom of or pay reverence to the ancestors. Various objects

or classes of objects hold distinct meanings and are often placed in a specific order. One

common sequence on the island involves burning material that produces smoke, which

cleanses the area, lighting a candle, which summons the ancestor or spirit, and sprinkling

water which claims the space. Object assemblages vary, although materials that represent

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[19] Spliff: (n.) a West Indian term for marijuana cigarette, usually containing no tobacco (i.e., joint)

earth, air, fire, and water are placed because these are the four elements believed to be necessary to create the human spirit and can therefore serve as a gateway between the spiritual and physical realms (see: 4.2).

Other forms of ancestral veneration, such as libation ceremonies, were also observed at baobab trees on numerous occasions. In Africa, libation ceremonies are performed as a mediation ritual, "an act of rekindling the relationship between the living and the dead" (Ganusah 2000, 280), the performance of the ceremony moreover reaffirming the symbolic nature of the baobab as a portal between worlds. During the 175th Commemoration of Emancipation on July 3, 2023, a libation ceremony was held at the Butler Bay Baobab. During this event, drops of water were poured from a calabash shell and the names of each individual arrested subsequent to the freedom rebellion were read aloud. Conveying the significance of speaking the names of those who were arrested, one interviewee explained:

> Well, as long as a name is spoken, you have not been lost. As long as your name is called, your memory lives, your lineage lives. When there's no one left to call your name, you no longer exist. For people of African descent, of the diaspora, who had come through the period of enslavement, all we had was a name. Nobody was documenting whatever else we were doing in our lives. In telling those stories, stories and calling the names of the ancestors and passing on the oral history, the full persons continue to live through those stories (STX-13).

The baobab's role as a location for the ceremony extended beyond holding space – baobab pods used as percussion instruments – shaken like maracas and struck together to create music. While acknowledging the enormous diversity of African music, ethno-musicologists emphasize rhythm and percussion as a "uniting entity" that characterizes the continent's musical heritage (Nadich 2023, 12). These ethno-musical practices followed enslaved Africans stolen to the Caribbean, where they became embedded within the heritage legacies of various islands. The integration of baobab fruit as a percussion instrument during this event was, moreover, embodied within a long legacy of interaction with specific aspects of the baobab tree (Figure 52).

**Figure 52** The dedication of the Butler Bay Baobab tree. One musician (center) can be seen using baobab pods as a percussion instrument. The baobab is in the background (Zahedi 2023).

Rhythmic soundscapes of colonial spaces, including plantations, became fundamental to the establishment of Afro-Caribbean identities and societies, Martin Munro arguing that rhythm moreover played a "central role in resistance to colonial domination" (2011, 27), through communication, cultural preservation, spiritual practice, community building, and subversion (see: 8.9).

Baobab trees also serve as spiritual sites, calling upon ancestors, and inspired by creolized combinations of Black Atlantic and West African religion, including Voodoo, Obeah, and Yoruba – an Afro-Caribbean ethnobotanical phenomenon indicated elsewhere, for example Martinique and Cuba (Paravinisi-Gerbert 2005; Kubayanda 2002). While such spiritual practices often leaving tangible material behind (e.g., offerings), they sometimes left no material trace, as explained by one interviewee:

> I came home with such a malaise [after visiting the baobab tree] that I didn't… I was like 'This ain't mine. This is not totally mine.' I don't know what I picked up there, but I felt so heavy… so [he] said to me. 'This is what you should do. Go [to the baobab tree] with an egg

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and do a clean off, which actually [I had done for me before], so I was familiar with the ritual. And it's a very longstanding Yoruba type of … you kind of [motioning around body] do the egg around your body and it's supposed to clean off a particular kind of energy… then you're supposed to throw it at a crossroads, but don't look back (STX-11).

Ritual practice at baobab trees varied and participants communicated the spiritual dimensions of the tree as non-denominational and universal, aligned with the general development of different forms of Afro-Caribbean spirituality on the island. According to Edwin Weinstein, a psychologist working on St. Croix in the 1960s, there is "no incompatibility between [Judeo-Christian] religion and obeah" (1962, 147). Indeed, it is difficult to understand the degree to which Obeah and other West Indian spirituality is practiced on the island – nor its provenance or timeline (STX-20A/B; STX-21). This contrasts with sites associated with organized religion on the island (e.g., churches, cemeteries, etc.) which, while often inclusive and accommodating to outsiders, are generally communities associated with loosely 'official' membership. The baobab tree as a sacred, ancestral space is, instead, pluralistic and interfaith.

As ancestral spaces, kinship and descent were foundational to the baobab's use as an intergenerational pathway. This was implicit in conversations with various participants at baobab trees – in the absence of ancestral ties to St. Croix, the Caribbean, or Africa, one may struggle to connect with their ancestors through the baobab (e.g., the author, for one), although it can still be a spiritual or culturally meaningful space for 'outsiders' (STX-05A/B; STX-11). To this end, while baobabs are indeed an aspect of the broader heritage of the island, they hold spiritual significance that is specific to Afro-Caribbean communities. This can be attributed to various beliefs tied to the baobab – its status as an ancestor and as a spiritual vessel, in addition to its origins and provenance.

**6.4.3 Living Links**

During one visit to the Grove Place Baobab, two men stopped to talk to me, and I told them about my interest in the tree, to which one replied "Oh, yes, the tree. Some people, they like to touch the tree; they say there's spirits in there" (Appendix B). The belief in spirit or

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'jumbie' trees, which are inhabited by spirits or ghosts, is common throughout the Caribbean and is thought to have originated in Trinidad and Tobago – islands with a long history of migration to and from St. Croix. However, there are also references to similar beliefs in West Africa. For example, Edward Parrinder indicates that some African communities associate the baobab with fertility and that "the souls of those about to be born may be said to live in trees" (1970, 54) – a belief that simultaneously portraying them as vessels and thresholds for the spiritual realm.

The association between baobab trees and fertility seems quite clear within the African ecological context – the tree is a succulent, absorbing and retaining substantial amounts of water in hot and dry habitats – creating its own ecosystem by facilitating water and nutrient cycling, as well as providing shelter and food for a variety of animals. In parts of West Africa, newborns are cleansed in baobab bark soaked in water and offerings at the base of the tree for fertility (Doumbia and Doumbia 2014, 55). Widely regarded as a fertility tree (Doumbia and Doumbia 2014), the tree is tied both to ensuring a productive rainy season and reproductive success for humans (Emboden 1974). Frederik Simoons indicates that in the Limpopo Valley, rock paintings depict women with baobab seedpods instead of breasts (1998, 272), and elsewhere the fruit itself, which can produce up to 300 seeds in a pod, is viewed as a fertility symbol.

Participants in St. Croix similarly indicated the baobab tree as a fertility tree. During fieldwork at the La Reine Farm Market in 2021, I was pregnant with my daughter and was encouraged to consume the baobab fruit throughout my pregnancy and the postpartum period to boost and sustain lactation; I was also told that the magnesium in the baobab fruit would help with prenatal cramping and labor contractions (Appendix B). When I returned after my daughter was born, the same vendor was pleased to see my plump and healthy baby –

referring to her as 'titi gyul,' (e.g., 'titty girl') and attributing my ample breastmilk supply as confirmation of the baobab's nutritional value.

In Africa, the baobab is associated with birthing rituals. John Rashford's study of the Hazda people of Northern Tanzania, explored the baobab as a birthing tree (2023). According the Hadza cosmology, their first ancestors were born inside the baobab, and it is therefore a place where some women still give birth –identified as a place where their community was born (2023). Citing the BBC documentary *Bushcraft,* Rashford notes one woman's experience:

> I have nine children, eight girls and one boy and I gave birth to all of them inside the baobab tree. I stay in the tree for a month each time until the baby's umbilical cord came away. It is part of our culture. I and my ancestors have given birth in the baobab tree (2023, 273).

The Grove Place Baobab has also been described as a 'birthing tree.' One oft-recited story on the island recalls the interior cavity of the Grove Place Baobab serving as sanctuary for a woman in labor during a hurricane on St. Croix, although when this occurred varies between retellings – anywhere between the 18th century and the 1970s. Oral history can function differently at different time depths, although details can sometimes become obscured by cyclical notions of time. At the same time, oral histories and folk memories, while sometimes not reflecting historical 'fact,' can indicate deeper cultural significance, symbolic truths, and emotional resonances that highlight crucial facets of community heritage and identity (López Oro 2021) – or as, STX-12 reflected, 'What's a century to that tree?'

The 'planting' of placentas at the base of ancestral trees has also reportedly emerged as a birthing ritual on the island. Three participants indicated that they had planted placentas at the Grove Place Baobab, as explained by one interviewee:

> I feel it's a deep connection with my heart to connect that way, and that particular tree at Grove – like how I grew up, we would bury our placenta by a tree. It would be sacred. That's where I buried my son's placenta, at that tree at Grove. And it's very sacred to me to the degree that they say, 'the home is where the heart is,' that's my home. That baobab tree is my

home. Because that's where my heart is connected, deeply rooted in the earth like the baobab tree (STX-12).

There are numerous ethnographic parallels referencing planting placentas at various trees from cross-global cultures, including diverse ethnic and cultural groups across the African continent (Shroff 2017, 101; Saura et al. 2002, 127; Wickens 2008, 49). In Niger, the placenta is referred to as the 'traveling companion' that bridges the gap between worlds and planting the placenta ensures future fertility and an enduring connection between ancestors and descendants by allegorically linking birth and death with planting and burial rituals (Cooper 2019, 127).

In St. Croix the burying of one's 'naval string' (i.e., umbilical cord) is a symbolic means of establishing ancestral ties and connection to land and is an important rite of passage – derived from African spiritual practice and transmitted to the Americas (Mosby 2001). As one interviewee explained, in reference to Crucian-born students leaving the island:

> [They] have a piece of what we call the naval string buried. Like a piece of their soul is tied somewhere in the heart so that they could remember who they are and have a desire to come back – kind of like a glowing ember that just doesn't die – when they are old enough, it activates (STX-22).

In this way, trees can stand as a profound symbol of interconnectedness, bridging the physical and spiritual worlds and forging an enduring path between ancestors and their descendants across cultures through burial rituals intimately tied to birth, rebirth, and death.

STX-08 reflects on his "[rootedness] in the earth like the baobab tree," a point that was echoed by other participants when discussing the notion of 'Crucian-ness' (STX-13; STX-22). While some descendant participants tied Crucian identity to lineage and ancestral connection to the island, others indicated that someone was 'from' St. Croix if they were 'byaan ya" (i.e., born here) – birthright being attributed to rootedness and specifically, being born physically on the island.

Mobilizing Morisson's notion of 'rootedness' (1984), one participant explained that the baobab connected her to all her ancestors, noting that her African ancestors communicated with her as clearly as more recent ones and reflecting that the ancestral realm was timeless. Speaking to his 'African-ness' another participant explained that rootedness for descendants of enslaved Africans also had to reconcile with the intergenerational trauma of being uprooted, emphasizing that convening with his ancestors was about seeking guidance from them but also demonstrating his gratitude for their sacrifice and making them proud. This is consistent with studies of ancestral trees elsewhere in the Caribbean, for example Joseph Kubayanda (2002) who noted that ancestral trees, including baobab trees, "symbolically provide strength and sustenance against the possibilities of extinction of the self and Africanity" (115). The longing to sustain this connection to oneself, ancestors, and ultimately, to Africa, is evident on St. Croix. The rich genealogical archives and a dedicated team of volunteer librarians at the St. Croix Landmarks Society Library have helped countless Crucians trace their ancestry, many of them in pursuit to finding their African roots. As reflected by one participant who visited a plantation she had linked to her family through genealogical research:

> [Estate Carlton] gave me the most emotional experience. Because that's where my family came from. And to be on the same … space they were walking on. And it wasn't just like one family. It was documented – brothers, sisters, and they never got off that system. Their whole family was on – you know, even after emancipation because a lot of people were like 'where do we go?' – their family was still there. And I got emotional there because I was like I'm here. And here. Like, I… I… I'm here (STX-01).

Communicating 'rootedness' as a psycho-spiritual phenomenon, Morisson posited "when you kill the ancestors, you kill yourself" reaffirming the notion that one's sense of self is dependent upon 'ancestor as foundation' (1984, 341). Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi similarly described the search for ancestors as a "strategy for survival," which "[brings] awareness of one's 'entanglement,' that is one's present and inferiority, and leading to an exodus, that is

one's descendance and future" (1993, 212). Following this interpretive thread, perhaps the Africans who brought the seeds of the baobab to St. Croix, did so in this spirit – the spirit of continuity, of legacy, and of rootedness – driven by a wish for their descendants to remain aware of their presence through an ancillary ancestor – the baobab tree. The baobab therefore is positioned within the collective imagination as a pathway between contemporary Afro-Caribbean communities and ancestral ones, and by extension, the continuity and resilience of the African 'self.' In the next section, I discuss this point further – examining the transregional spatial dimensions of baobab trees as 'portals' between St. Croix and Africa.

## 6.5 Spatial Dimensions of the Baobab

The multifaceted significance of baobab trees extends beyond their material presence, encompassing spiritual dimensions that bridge tangible and intangible heritage. Archaeological and ethnographic fieldwork unveiled baobabs as monumental symbols and intermediaries to other realms, evidenced by ritualistic offerings and practices observed around them. Afro-Caribbean ritualistic practices at baobabs, rooted in reclaiming African identity, highlight the adaptive nature of cultural forms within contemporary social landscapes (Kubanyanda 2002). To this end, the hollow center of some baobabs can function as spiritually charged spaces, reflecting a continuum between St. Croix and an ancestral motherland (i.e., Africa) (Figure 53). Transmitted by oral tradition and academic publication alike (Nicolls 2006), narratives of baobabs as portals that facilitate journeys 'back' to Africa, evoke a nostalgic longing for cultural roots and ancestral wisdom, transcending physical distances to connect diasporic Africans with their homeland. Through this lens, the baobab emerges not only as a botanical specimen but as a potent symbol of the resilience and continuity of Afro-Caribbean heritage and collective memory across time and space.

**Figure 53** The hollow center of a baobab tree in Butler Bay, which contains artifacts dating from the 18th century to the present (Zahedi 2022).

Interdimensional portals, or openings in the fabric of time and space that grant access to other realms, perhaps seem better suited to science fiction than heritage studies. At the same time, portals have long been conceptually linked to the study of material culture, represented as physical thresholds or liminal points at which one enters or leaves a space, including architectural features such as doorways (Hume 2020), intangible heritage practices, such as cosmological or shamanic rituals (McLaren and Gray 2017), or symbolic heritage, through rites of passage that draw from visual or aesthetic culture to portray ethnographic parallels.

## 6.5.1 Jumbie Baobabs as Archaeological Features

Baobabs are frequently cited, on St. Croix and elsewhere, as apotropaic symbols which serve as guardians that mediate between good and evil spirits, their protective role moreover drawing parallels to universal notions of motherhood (Faleye 2023). Ethnographic observations and interviews indicate that baobab trees on St. Croix were frequently planted "in the [enslaved] village to protect from evil spirits making an entrance" (STX-08), a

practice drawn from West Africa where baobabs are traditionally planted as central landmarks within villages, in some cultures representing the "founding of kingdoms" (Atindehou et al. 2022, 483). According to the Moravian missionary Christian Oldendorp, who conducted ethnographic research on St. Croix from 1767-1768, sacred groves were "dwelling places of individual deities" – apotropaic spaces that not accessible to ordinary people, but who could make offerings via mystics who could channel the divine (1987, 187-199) – the baobab's use as an "altar shrine" moreover substantiated by participants (STX-08). This research sought to investigate this assertation further, comparing and contrasting West African and Crucian baobab planting practices to examine it as a form of creole heritage.

Previous surveys conducted on St. Croix sought to document the spatial distribution of baobabs on the island (Nicholls 2006), although often little emphasis was placed on interpreting specific locations of individual baobabs in relationship to other cultural features within archaeological contexts. There were, however, exceptions. John Rashford, for example, indicated the common presence of tamarind seedlings near 'village trees,' an occurrence he attributed to the shade beneath the baobab serving as a social space, where people would consume tamarind fruit and "watch cock fights, play dominoes... clean fish, [roast] pigs, and children [would play] hide and seek and spin the bottle" (1997, 23). This behavior was observed during data collection for this study as well – the baobab tree in the Christiansted Government Lot, for example, serving as a popular liming spot for young men playing cards or dominoes, drinking beer, smoking marijuana, washing cars, and listening to music – two ever-present chairs beneath the tree moreover nurturing an inviting spirit, in essence facilitating the feeling of a front porch or living room.

Although the role of baobab trees as 'village trees' has been acknowledged by researchers in St. Croix (Flewellen et al. 2022), this study identified baobabs in diverse locations – in addition to plantation villages, also in historic urban neighborhoods (i.e., Water

Gut, Christiansted), adjacent to factory ruins (i.e., Estate Butler Bay; Estate Shoy), and, in some cases, in seemingly arbitrary locations that were not well-contextualized among other landscape features (i.e., Estate Union and Mount Washington, Spring Gut, Estate Northside, Estate St. George). This evidence does not serve to dispute folk memory and oral testimony that denote the baobab tree's role as a central feature within the village, but instead suggests that it served additional historical functions in St. Croix that diverged from traditional African practices, serving as multivocal landscape features that evolved to encompass deeper, more varied, and creolized cultural value than previously acknowledged.

To this end, baobabs identified through pedestrian survey represent only a small sample of specimens who survived the colonial period to the present. Archival photographs held at the St. Croix Landmarks Society Library that date to the early twentieth century show several examples of ancestral baobabs that are now deceased, including several at Butler Bay. The legacy of the late Veronica Gordon, a prominent 'bush woman' on the island must be highlighted (STX-08). A lifelong advocate for the planting of baobab trees across the island, she and her students planted many of the 'younger' trees (i.e., less than 70 years old) on the island – reportedly improving the germination success of the seeds consuming them and passing them through her digestive tract (STX-13). Although not buried at Grove Place, her memorial was held at the baobab tree in veneration of her role as a culture bearer and teacher (STX-08).

Drawing from a spatial perspective and Victor Turner's view that "portals define thresholds and liminality presenting new possibilities for being" (1974, 231), it is interesting to note the presence of baobab trees near factory buildings on historic plantation sites, given their ascription as an apotropaic tree (e.g., Butler Bay, Buccaneer Hotel). Enslaved communities spent a significant portion of their time within factory complexes. They may have planted spiritual trees (i.e., baobab and other culturally significant trees such as

tamarind), as a protective measure, activating a spirit of resistance and cultivating spaces of to perform identity, in contexts where they would otherwise feel powerless and subjugated. In this way, the African baobab within the Caribbean context, may have taken on new meaning for communities of the African diaspora, encompassing both traditional and adaptive meaning(s).

Archaeological and ethnographic research demonstrated a dynamic relationship between the tangible and intangible dimensions of the baobab tree, indicating the trees themselves as monuments and as intermediaries to other realms. Pedestrian surveys revealed in situ artifact assemblages dating from the late eighteenth century through the contemporary period, both around the base and inside the hollow cavities of the trees at Grove Place and Butler Bay. As discussed previously, the practice of leaving ritualistic materials at the base of baobab trees seems to be derived from West Africa (Paravinisi-Gerbert 2005), although it has been documented in other parts of the world as well (O'Connor et al. 2022). In Southern Benin, offerings are left at the base of trees for orishas (i.e., deities) that associated with specific tree species – trees representing portals between the earth and sky, are a tangible access point to the spiritual realm (Atindehou et al. 2022, 483). On St. Croix, such Afro-derived ritualistic practices at baobab trees and other cultural sites (e.g., sugar mills) were expressed as a form of re-Africanization.

Monumental, sacred, or otherwise 'ancestral' trees are frequently associated with archaeological sites, in addition to often existing as archaeological sites, themselves (Ichumbaki 2019). Further research, such as archaeological excavations at St. Croix's baobab trees would likely provide insight into the temporality of such practices on the island. As explained by M. Dores Cruz, such trees serve to anchor in "space spiritual forces that unite the community of descendants, while creating a continuum between living descendants and ancestors" in which "worlds of human reality, ancestors, and nature blend into each other

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rather than being in stark disjunction" (2014, 125). Indeed, the 'anchoring' provided by baobab trees on the island folds the intangible into the tangible – the archaeological context serving as a physical manifestation of spiritual forms.

**6.5.2 An Interdimensional Portal to Homeland Africa**

The hollow center of mature baobab trees has contributed to its symbolic value in cultures across time and is a feature of some St. Croix specimens, most prominently the Grove Place and Butler Bay Baobabs. These two trees are hollow and their interiors accessible, revealed through archaeological and ethnographic research as socially charged spaces that chronicled several centuries of human activity – and to this end, inter-generational transmission and multiple introductions of traditional knowledge. At the Butler Bay Baobab, colonial ballast brick was embedded in the interior bark of the tree; modified conch shell fragments, a contemporary bottle, and a pink painted cinderblock were also documented. In completing ethnographic fieldwork at the Butler Bay Baobab between 2022-2024, it was evident that observation data supported the archaeological evidence, deliberately deposited objects demonstrating that practices were ongoing at the site that were simultaneously tangible and intangible; in one example, a participant recalled using the interior of the tree as a dollhouse as a child in the 1960s.

The interiors of baobab trees were indicated by some participants as spiritual or magical. Among the most pervasive stories was the notion of the hollow as a 'portal' between worlds:

> We were told as children that if we went to the baobab and the moon is full, the hole will open up… and we could go *back* to Africa (STX-14 [emphasis added]).

Drawing from bell hooks' (1990) notion of 'homeplace' and emphasizing the intentionality of the inclusion of 'back' in reference to Africa, is an implied connection between both the spatial and temporal dimensions and nostalgia for a precolonial 'mother' Africa and St. Croix. This thought – a return 'back' to Africa – seemingly refers to an Africa that transcends time, space, and memory, a homeland that is simultaneously real and imagined. At the same

time, research conducted on other islands indicates that beliefs surrounding the baobab tree as a portal are not unique to St. Croix or the Virgin Islands. In colonial St. Lucia, Claire Robertson reported:

> Another location for this practice was around a baobab tree. Those involved would hold hands and dance around the tree after setting a fire around it. They would then disappear into the smoke. They could thus transport themselves to any place on St. Lucia and re-materialize there, a concept with obvious implications for escape (2000, 115-116).

There are several explanations for this parallel – first, the theory that the baobab-portal connection is derived from West African beliefs and was brought to the Caribbean by enslaved Africans. However, St. Croix also has a long history of immigration from St. Lucia, beginning in during the British occupation of the island in the early nineteenth century and into the present day. Indeed, it is likely that this extended period of connection between the two islands was punctuated by cultural exchange and multi-layered creolization, including the evolution of spiritual beliefs. Robertson moreover raises an interesting point by positioning the notion of escape and marronage within the context of tree portals, an assertation that is moreover supported by historical narratives and mythology from other islands. Ancestral trees in Tobago, for example, were similarly viewed as portals 'back' to Africa (Joseph 2022).

In one famous example, the African sorceress, "Gang Gang Sarah," who rejected her enslavement, climbed to the top of a kapok tree, and leapt into the sky, falling to the ground, and dying. However, according to spiritual belief, it is understood that she 'flew' back to Africa, some believing that to fly one must first leave their physical body behind (Joseph 2022).

In St. Croix, a full moon return 'back' to Africa has taken on new meaning in the contemporary period, coming to represent maintaining a connection to cultural identity, ancestral wisdom, and an African homeland, as one interviewee reflected:

So, I said it's a way back home. When I was in my younger years and I asked that question, the elders told me […] it is a spirit tree, and it is a portal. So that, yes, they would deliberately be like, hey, we got to bring this portal to where we're going so, we can jump back and go home whenever we need to. I hear about a tribe from what is now called Angola, but before it was called Ndungo, and that they were some of the first Africans to be brought here on the island as prisoners of war by the [Danish]. And when they came, they took off and started maroon camps on Maroon Ridge and those different communities, and […] they have that deep connection with nature, that tribe, that kingdom of people. And when they landed, when they established themselves here, that's one of the first things they would do. They would plant this sacred tree to have that connection, connection to back home, connection to the land, connection back to their spirituality (STX-12).

Drawing from this reflection, 'Africa' transcends physical space, instead conceptualized as 'origin' and the proverbial mother – both a real place and a (re)imagined place. In one example, Sharisse McCafferty and Geoffrey McCafferty emphasize the dialectic relationship between tangible, intangible, and symbolic heritage in a cross-cultural analysis of caves – viewing them as thresholds that represent the 'earth mother,' signifying the vagina, or the ultimate portal between worlds (2008, 26). Such feminized parallels have similarly been ascribed to the baobab, drawn from diverse African belief systems which represent the tree as a fertility symbol that lies at the intersection of tangible, intangible, and symbolic heritage (Sidibe and Williams 2002).

From a visual standpoint, it is interesting to forge comparisons between the portal-like qualities of cave entrances, hollowed baobab trees, and vaginas – liminal spaces that symbolically demarcate transition and transformation. Indeed, the feminine attributes of the baobab tree – its fruitfulness, its association with water, its 'pregnant shape,' its breast-like seed pods, and its presence in Yoruba creation narratives speak to the maternal role it plays across diverse ethnic groups and cultures in Africa (Rashford 2023, 272). In tandem, one might note the comparisons between the maternal symbology of the baobab with cross-cultural references to Africa as the mother continent and birthplace of humanity (Matholeni et al. 2020), an analogy that was articulated by participants in this study. From a Crucian

perspective, long-living baobabs, also known as 'ancestral' or 'jumbie' trees are represented as matriarchs, progenies of Mother Africa, therefore playing a foundational role in the transmission of heritage and identity for diasporic Africans.

In the postcolonial novel, *The Abandoned Baobab*, the baobab is portrayed as "a symbol of a previous life" (Bugul 1982, 12) and, simultaneously, a sacred symbol of resilience – and, building from this within the Caribbean context, a symbol that enduringly connects diasporic Africans to ancestral homelands. Through this lens, the baobab and its presence on St. Croix extend beyond its physical distribution or specific number. Instead, its tangible and intangible elements are embedded within contemporary and ancestral community landscapes through the continuity and dynamism of Afro-Caribbean heritage, the performance and negotiation of identity, and the co-construction of collective memory.

In this way, the baobab tree exists as a symbol deeply entrenched in Afro-Caribbean heritage, embodying the convergence of cultural, spiritual, and historical significance. Across diverse African belief systems and Afro-Caribbean communities, the baobab transcends its material limits to become a portal bridging tangible and intangible realms. Through archaeological and ethnographic explorations, it emerges not just as a tree but as a conduit for cultural continuity, identity formation, and collective memory, embodying the enduring legacy of African diasporic communities and their yearning for connection to ancestral homelands. As a potent emblem of survival and cultural reclamation, the baobab tree stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of Afro-Caribbean heritage, perpetuating narratives that enrich our understanding of the past while shaping a future grounded in ancestral wisdom and tradition. The section that follows builds upon this notion – engaging with various community-level interpretations of the baobab as a monument on St. Croix.

## 6.6 Palimpsest of Memory: The Baobab as Monument

In St. Croix and elsewhere, baobab trees have frequently been referred to as 'living monuments' (Mishra et al. 2019) and 'witnesses' (STX-12; STX-13). This message was also conveyed to non-descendant visitors to the island, as one interviewee from Denmark reflected:

> We were told about the baobab traveling as seeds from West Africa to the Caribbean and how that, of course, has a particular meaning. But also, the fact that this tree has seen something that no other living creature has seen and experienced […] that left a great impact on me (STX-11).

Tracing the etymology of the word 'monument,' which is derived from the Latin *moneo* meaning 'to remind,' the notion of a 'living' monument represents a new paradigm that departs from static or monolithic characterizations of the past, instead characterized by a relational and fluid engagement with the past – Agnes Eross (2017), exploring the notion of 'failure' and 'neglect' of monuments, notes the "constant dynamic flow of memory-[re]making," moreover emphasizing the importance of continuity and social practice in commemoration and memory (20). This understanding aligns with Crucian perspectives regarding the significance of baobabs as 'monuments,' which do not memorialize singular historical events but are instead focal points that stimulate contemporary discourse on identity, heritage, and collective memory for African diasporic communities. In tandem, they are experienced as both material entities and social constructs that signify ongoing (re)articulations of the dialectic relationship between the past, present, and future.

Indeed, contemporary scholarship has included more flexible understandings of monuments in the context of social memory, and monumental trees have become a distinct category within heritage in both the academic and public realms (Cannizzaro and Corinto 2014, 29). Although in the past academic scholarship focused on monumental trees highlighted their value almost exclusively through the lens of antiquity, size, and aesthetic, in

recent years there has been a notable shift toward viewing significant trees as ever-evolving entities and, to some degree, companion species with humans (Cloke and Jones 2020). Roothaan (2018), explores this concept from a West African historical perspective, indicating the importance of a framework that engages "the plural meanings of trees" that are "not biased by the colonial outlook" (2018, 136-137) – a task that is more easily said than done, considering that cultural forms such as 'monuments' are frequently associated with colonial modes of remembering (Blaagaard 2019).

Subversive engagement with such terminology has increased in recent years; for example, Simaan's research on the connection between olive growers, olive trees, and resistance highlights Palestine as a "conceptual space," exploring the notions of continuity, belonging, and environment through "rooted-resistance-companionship" (2017, 510). Intertwined with the Palestinian notion of *sumud* (i.e., steadfast resilience), the olive tree represents connection with ancestors and by extension, the land. In this way the symbolic value of the olive tree speaks to the belief that value is not inherent, and instead is creatively developed, co-evolving with cultural communities over time – a memory framework that is moreover relevant to community-level valuation of Crucian baobab.

In recent years, there has been an intensifying focus on the social construction of landscape as central to "the debate over the social construction of memory" (Cruz 2014, 127), a sentiment that was echoed by diverse participants in this case study. In the context of homespace (Battle-Baptiste 2011), the baobab's role as a palaver tree, a monument, and an ancestor itself firmly anchors it within the social imagination, as one participant described a 'witness to history' (STX-13). From this perspective, monuments can serve two purposes – they can symbolize official or "authorized heritage discourse" (Smith 2006) and they can represent folk memory as "reminders [that are] intrinsically [and dynamically] temporal" (Neumann 2019, 331).

Although sharing elements with built monuments (e.g., statues, tombs, temples, etc.), the baobab is a natural monument and therefore has attributes that are clearly distinct from constructed monuments. At the same time, the baobab is a *cultivated* natural monument, which differentiates it from other types of natural monuments (e.g., waterfalls, rock forms, sea mounts, cliffs, etc.). Joanna Pietrzak-Zawadka notes that monumental trees differ from other types of monuments because they often depend on consistent and enduring social stewardship for their survival, arguing that unlike built monuments they cannot be restored and are therefore intertwined within a culture of care (2016, 162). Within Caribbean colonial contexts, including St. Croix, the social constructions of landscape and memory were synchronous with physical, sometimes violent, manipulation of the natural environment by colonial human agents that have abstracted the island away from its 'natural' state (Walcott 2000; Glissant 1999).

As ancillary objects of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, baobab trees on St. Croix exist in the liminal space between natural and built monuments – anthropized natural monuments that are conceptualized by communities as both 'created' and 'creating' (Gosden and Head 1994). In West Africa, the planting of baobab tree marks the founding of a kingdom or as a central feature within the village (Atindehou 2022) may be considered, in some ways, a traditional way of viewing monuments, integrated within a Global North framework – they are cultural landmarks that are 'erected' as event-markers that turn "space into (our) place" (Boccagni et al. 2023, 154).

Ethnographic research revealed that St. Croix's baobab trees were viewed as monuments – as, or more, valuable to African descendant communities as the architectural heritage associated with the enslaved class (e.g., domestic spaces, sugar mills, etc.) (STX-12; STX-13; STX-14). These references are telling, given the differential rates of survival and treatment of colonial remnants on the island. While big houses, sugar mills or otherwise

grandiose features of plantation complexes are frequently well-maintained and preserved, structures associated with the lifeways of the enslaved are frequently not as well preserved, if at all. In tandem, community-level (i.e., 'unofficial') recognition of trees as heritage sites is an interesting point of inquiry in the context of colonial-era inheritances because they are in some ways hidden in plain site as 'natural' monuments that are ambiguous, frequently tied to specific locations and therefore connected to socially embedded and culturally relative past political activities. Trees, and especially ancestral or jumbie trees (e.g., baobab, but also kapok, tamarind, saman, etc.), are frequently found within historical contexts associated with the enslaved class and their descendants, moreover, incorporated into the "landscape of slavery" manifesting an archaeological records themselves (Rashford 2022, 143). This is especially interesting when cross-referenced with scholarship that indicates baobab trees growing alongside monumental structures in East Africa (Ichumbaki 2019) or symbolizing the founding of a kingdom in Southern Benin (Atindehou et al. 2022, 479).

### 6.6.1 Grove Place – A Contested Narrative

The Grove Place Baobab is situated within this framework – intentionally erected to with intention to establish African presence and agency in St. Croix (STX-12). The recognition of this particular tree is multi-vocal – lying at the junction between 'official' and 'unofficial' heritage. The Grove Place Baobab, which has been officially recognized as a heritage site, is listed on the local register – designated by the St. Croix Historic Preservation Commission in 2008. Other baobabs that are recognized as 'official' heritage, for example the Baobab in the Christiansted Government Lot do not hold the same community-level value, demonstrating that recognition itself cannot establish meaning or relevance. Indeed, official recognition can sometimes reaffirm the challenges and political nature of commemoration. For instance, at the Grove Place Baobab its corresponding bronze plaque signals tensions between archival and oral legacies which can sometimes manifest as

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contested heritage – a dissonance that occurs across scales, at both a local and international level. The Grove Place plaque reads:

> Baobab Tree (Adansonia digitata) 194 and 194A Grove Place: This specimen originated in West Africa, noted as one of the oldest life forms on the planet. These trees provide food, medicine, shelter, and places of worship. This tree is over 250 years old. Under this tree, some of the women, who joined Queen Mary Thomas, in the rebellion of 1878, were burned alive – Placed by St. Croix Historic Preservation Committee 2008.

At face value, this plaque seems to pose no issue. It begins with relatively common knowledge about the baobab, followed by a brief anecdote that anchors its significance within the island's local history. However, according to several participants including one local expert who has conducted research on several baobab specimens on the island and in the territory (STX-08), the tree has never been dated and the age of the tree is a point of dispute – with some believing that it is much older than 250 years, and others, that it is younger (STX-04; STX-12).

The final sentence on the plaque is a point of much contestation. The narrative that women were burned alive under the tree has sparked tensions within Crucian communities, and between Danish and Crucian researchers regarding the perceived objectivity of archives versus the perceived subjectivity of folk memory in knowing the past– a long held point of frustration between the two communities (STX-14). Indeed, the plaque does not indicate context of regarding the immolation of the unnamed women – although it seems to imply that the event was punitive as it references Queen Mary Thomas and the Fireburn. Other participants indicated that the event was conflated with the events of the Fireburn but occurred much earlier – when enslaved people were executed for allegedly practicing Obeah (STX-22).

Indeed, there is some disagreement as to whether the event occurred at all. At a meeting of the Society of Virgin Islands Historians, Danish translator Jens Villumsen, who

has been working on translating Danish records into English, presented his interpretation of documents related to the 1878 Fireburn. In reference to the plaque, he noted:

> Let's see if the files can confirm or disprove parts of this historic tradition. What happened at Grove Place […] the text at the sign under the Grove Place Baobab is not [fully] correct because Queen Mary had no other leading women in her gang. Queen Mary and her gang had not been at Grove Place and Queen Mary's gang was active Thursday October 3rd, and the incident at Grove Place was on Wednesday October 2nd (Society of Virgin Island Historians 2022).

According to colonial accounts, the fire started in a storeroom when barrels of rum were ignited, and the women's skirts caught fire. According to the Central Directorate (1883), fourteen (114) or sixteen (489) women were burned alive after rum barrels caught fire at Grove Place during the Fireburn, and M. Melchior, the Danish planter who owned the property reported $8,900 in damages to buildings and products which included the manager's residence, stables, smith shop, inventory, furniture, one mule and 25 sheep (359). There is no mention of the baobab tree at all.

The Fireburn archives are notably detailed, although it is important to note that Villumsen's translation of the documents was the second translation of the documents – the interrogations following the Fireburn are known to have been conducted in English and were later translated into Danish; the documents were then transcribed and translated back into English – a process, it must be emphasized, that is not free from interpretation. Of additional note is the political nature of post-Fireburn trial proceedings and court martial, which relied heavily on witness testimonies and systemically privileged elite accounts of the Fireburn over non-elite ones.

Regarding Villumsen's assertation that the women were not associated with Queen Mary, some members of the audience dismissed his argument as simply missing the point. After Villumsen's presentation, Frandelle Gerard, a key figure and culture bearer on the island, assigned the role of primary respondent, clarified:

> When one says it was the women who joined Queen Mary in the revolt who died at the tree – it doesn't mean they were *with* the queen. It suggests they were also engaged in the fight against the colonial power. And the tree itself we know would not have survived the big fire or people hanging from the tree, but it has become a symbol, and it stands as a memorial to the people [who died in the warehouse] adjacent to the tree… so it is a memorial… It is memorialized in the oral history of Grove Place that has gone from generation to generation of Crucians.

Indeed, Gerard's point speaks to the broader challenge of cross-cultural communication in the aftermath of Danish colonialism in the Caribbean, as well as a staunch adherence to 'fact-based,' apolitical, and defensive approach to history – as automatically outranking and inherently opposition to folk memory, which participants indicate has become expected of Danish researchers who visit the island (see: 3.1-3.3).

Crucian scholars voiced the complex negotiation between Crucian/Danish narratives when accessing colonial archives in Denmark, one interviewee asking, "do we want to be the ones who keep dismantling our oral histories using Danish archives?" (STX-14). Indeed, this question is based on the ultimate conundrum faced by researchers in both places – a hierarchy of knowledge that privileges archives over oral histories Despite ambiguity within the oral legacy, it is also important to note the colonial archives are not without their own biases – even in the case of 'meticulous' record-keepers, such as the Danish Empire (Simonsen 2021). It is moreover important to note that the Fireburn report does not include specific information on the deaths of the women – not even their names or a consistent number of deaths – only that they had died because of the fire in the factory.

Given the proximity of the baobab tree to the factory at Estate Grove Place, it is possible that both narratives are true – that the women were victim to a fire in the factory storeroom, that some or all of them escaped, and later died beneath the tree. The Virgin Islands Studies Collection (VISCO), a consortium of interdisciplinary, postcolonial, and feminist scholars explored the connections between the Grove Place Baobab and the Fireburn

in a forthcoming publication in which they framed the narrative as a counter-discourse, viewing the baobab tree as a "living archive, a monument" and "contested memory space" (2024, 1). Tiphanie Yanique, a member of VISCO writes:

> To say that the women were burned beneath a baobab tree for their action in the Fireburn Rebellion is to say that they transcended. To be burnt at the African tree means the ashes make it into the hallow, to the portal that leads one back to Africa. This version of the story says that the women escape, their souls do not settle on colonized soil. To say they died in the factory where sugarcane was turned to molasses and rum is to say they died as they lived – at the scene of their subjugation. No. Let us tell the story this way: the women died beneath the baobab tree (2024, 21).

Yanique's point elevates and synthesizes the diverse, meanings, and symbolic value of the baobab tree for Afro-Caribbean communities – highlighting its role as a sacred homeplace, a space of resistance, and its temporal-spatial linkages to Africa – grounded in a decolonial perspective that holds that descendant communities can (and should) have narrative authority over their own histories. In tandem, one participant spoke about the danger of 'dismantling' local narratives through colonial archives:

> Through Facebook, every year now, people post that story about these women getting burned [at the baobab tree] […] there is no record of that anywhere […] So for me, I don't believe that that actually occurred […] [I think] they were burned in the factory, then that somehow that narrative leaps onto the tree, which is fascinating […] What does that story mean? What does that mean? To say that these women were burnt like witches (STX-14)?

STX-14 forefronts an interesting point; perhaps story 'leaping' to the tree speaks to the way thematic elements of the story are enmeshed in the broader story of the island – of colonial legacies, the trauma of enslavement and forced alienation from Africa, and the struggle for liberation. One might argue that this is the reason history is (re)told at all – the significance of historical narrative, seldom lies in the specific details and instead is driven by the deeper meaning of what history tells us about ourselves.

Derek Walcott tackles this notion in his writings, which wrangle with the relationships between history and mythology (1990) and myth and memory (1998), reflecting upon how

myths shape cultural identity and inform collective memory, moreover, highlighting the importance of storytelling and oral tradition in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage. Myths, according to Walcott, serve as a lens through which individuals and communities understand their past, present, and by extension, their future(s). Walcott's ideas on myth and memory work particularly well with Toni Morisson's concept of rememory, which refers to the act of recalling and revisiting past experiences and traumas – often sparked by tangible cues (1987).

Mobilizing the notion of the baobab as a sacred monument and Walcott's ideas about myth and memory, it is moreover important to investigate the Grove Place/Fireburn narrative and its role in unearthing foundational, albeit fragmentary, aspects of the Afro-Crucian legacy and, by extension, heritage at large. The prospect of the baobab as a site of violence, immolation, and punishment for those who fought to secure their own liberation is a painful one – the baobab as an entity intimately tied to its African origins and used in this way, at best a violation of human rights, and at worst, cultural genocide. From a folk memory framework, it is understandably an emotionally traumatic narrative to engage with for communities with cultural or spiritual ties to the tree. De Jong and Rowlands articulate that heritage is not "an objectification of memory" but instead "always emergent" because it is "produced in a context of discourses on roots, ownership, nationalism, and a global politics of recognition" (2016, 25). Drawing from the concepts of myth and (re)memory, one might consider how the processing of collective trauma can occur through retellings of the past – these retellings can engage with the past in different ways – conveying both thematic elements and historical truths in conjunction and conversation with one another, that destabilize false notions of an 'objective' truth. Hadiya Sewer speaks to this point in her discussion on the Grove Place Baobab tree, asserting:

> The (Danish) written archive shifts the blame onto those who led and participated in the resistance. The collective memory of this predominantly Black community shifts the blame onto the purveyors of the plantation system (2024, 20).

Certainly, of note here is the contemporary role of official archives and the historical role of archives – to create systems of knowledge that control narratives (Stoler 2013, Jimerson 2006). Gayatri Spivak describes the colonial archive as "the nerve center of colonial rule," noting that it was "first and foremost a hall of mirrors [through which] colonial administrators constructed a selective image of the social order" (1985, 249); and indeed, in some cases, colonial portray the colonial elite as the victims of those they colonized (see: 8.5). Nicole Aljoe et al. present the contemporary challenge of digitizing colonial archives as a paradox that "aspire to knowledge and transparency, but in its coloniality it enacts erasure and violence" (2015, 260). Speaking to Sewer's point (2024, 20), subverting Euro-centric interpretations of colonial documents by "[shifting] the blame onto the purveyors of the plantation system" might be an effective antidote to enduring power dynamics and hierarchies of knowledge.

Such subversions of colonial modes of knowing (e.g., the archives) are emerging in contemporary public discourse on the island – as communities on the island seek to create knowledge by exploring the contents of colonial archives whilst remaining critical of them. Indeed, landscapes and their constituent parts, like ancestral trees, play a role in shaping identity – however, as inquired by Norman Fairclough "whose identity is it?" (2003, 2). Drawing from the baobab as a site of decolonial intervention, the question emerges – who has the right to speak? The Grove Place Baobab, among others in St. Croix, is the site of much of this collective work. It represents a palimpsest of community memories, (re)interpretation of the past, and local production of counter-discourse. Perhaps neither archival nor traditional knowledge will (or can) reveal the ultimate truth but perhaps this is admissible when

measured against the contemporary fight for radical reform and social justice for Crucian communities. As one participant conveyed:

> At the time, they were deemed witches […] [immolation] was used to pacify any potential revolution or any revolutionary thought, because they did that. And children and fathers and mothers and uncles and grandparents and grandchildren stayed there and watched. They were called to watch and witness. And they said, this is Grove (STX-12).

As monuments, baobab trees exist simultaneous as living heritage and historical sites, inspiring complex and sometimes challenging interactions between various communities – activists, artists, environmentalists, historians, griots, and culture bearers – which occur across different scales, diverse communities, as well as broader entities such as islands and island groups, territories, and nations. In turn, these dynamic interventions highlight the enduring ambivalences, harmonies, and tensions between across communities in St. Croix, the Virgin Islands, Denmark, and West Africa.

Heritage scholarship highlights the aesthetic and political functions of monuments and memorials, which Federico Bellentani and Mario Panico highlight often "promote selective historical narratives," and are "essential for the articulation of the national politics of memory and identity," noting that only once established, they become social objects that are open to public reinterpretation (2016, 28). As monuments, baobabs, too, inherently carry political meaning(s), reflecting diverse perspectives and contested narratives – consequently, they contribute to synchronous, and sometimes incongruent, struggles for recognition. This is because despite the baobab's status as an African icon, it is steeped in a colonial history that ties it to many ethnicities, communities, and legacies, including its symbolic role in the histories of other islands – as well as how it is viewed as shared colonial heritage between St. Croix and Denmark (STX-11). It therefore plays a functional role in facilitating the negotiation of community at multiple scales, inextricably tied to both the joys and traumas of the island's storied past.

## 6.7 Conclusion

The baobab trees of St. Croix are cultural prisms that refract notions of Crucian heritage, identity, and memory – disrupting linear conceptualizations of time, obfuscating the tangible dimensions of space, and challenging the binary between myth and history. As living links between the human and ancestral realms, they sustain connections between contemporary communities to past ones and are ties to the cycles of birth, life, and death. They are also understood as portals that connect the island to the rest of the world and the worlds beyond. Characterized by some as living monuments, they are, to some degree, contested heritage arenas through which communities negotiate epistemic theories of truth, oscillating between colonial and traditional bodies of knowledge.

The baobab itself reifies this role within Crucian society – its roots serving as a foundation, its branches reaching for a promise of the future, and its gentle monumentality establishing a tacit but powerful presence. For many, the baobab is a sacred being – embodied within a culture of care that ensures its survival, and in exchange, offering sanctuary space, guidance, and connection. In reference to this legacy and the descendants who will, one day, assume the role of stewardship of St. Croix's baobab trees, one interviewee reflected:

> Thank you. Thank you for taking those steps I couldn't. Thank you for going through that deeper water that I couldn't. Thank you for climbing that higher mountain that I couldn't. I'm so grateful. Thank you. Thank you. I am grateful. Thank you. Thank you (STX-12).

This chapter has left many questions unanswered, among them – why are there so many baobab trees on St. Croix? When posed, participants had no direct answer – and yet, through their material presence, their immaterial significance is evident. Crucian communities engage with the baobab in diverse ways, constructing and reconstructing its meaning as it corresponds to contemporary heritage – its challenges and its victories. Whether viewed as interdimensional portals, ancestors, or monuments, the baobab serves as a prism by which

individuals and collectives negotiate their understandings of memory, history, legacy, identity, and the self.

# Chapter 7: Wind
# Emotive, Symbolic, and Dissonant Windmills

## 7.1 Introduction

This chapter is a study of the colonial wind-powered sugarmills of St. Croix – how they are embedded within the wider context of the island's postcolonial landscape, and how they are experienced by different communities on the island. As archaeological remnants, St. Croix's windmills[20] are hyper-visual symbols of colonialism, which evoke a range of responses from visitors and islanders. This chapter, therefore, aims to explore the ways in which the island's many windmills are socially incorporated as both material and immaterial heritage, and as simultaneously as contemporary and historic sites, and to present the ways they are encountered, understood, and redefined by the diverse public.

It begins with a brief description of sources of data and methods research methods, followed by an archaeological and historical context of St. Croix's windmills. It then discusses contemporary community engagement with windmills before moving into an analysis of the wider implications of this study – focusing on how contested heritage, such as windmills, are site of memory that are embedded within wider political and economic challenges on the island – in particular, heritage tourism. The purpose of this exercise is to contribute to a deeper contextual understanding of the ways in which communities on St. Croix navigate and negotiate heritage, identity, and memory through the material remnants of the Danish colonial period.

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[20] It should be noted that on St. Croix, colonial windmills are locally referred to as sugarmills; the inclusion of the term 'sugar' contextualizes their historic usage and ties them to the broader history of enslavement. There are three types of colonial sugar mills on the island: wind-powered, animal-powered, and steam-powered. In this chapter, the term 'windmill' is used because it specifically focuses on wind-powered sugar mills. This is not intended to diminish or disrespect the local preference for the term 'sugarmill,' but instead to appropriately situate them within the historical context. Elsewhere in this dissertation, I have used the more general term, 'sugarmills' and the specific term 'windmill.'

Although windmills have long been a focus in Caribbean colonial studies, they have seldom been approached from a community heritage perspective, despite existing prominently within the contemporary landscape of many islands with sugar histories. A heritage approach enables a holistic and wide perspective, that positions windmills as both archaeological sites and *living* heritage sites that are embedded within the everyday lives of Caribbean communities (Figure 54).



**Figure 54** A windmill located on private property on St. Croix (Zahedi 2021).

The windmills of St. Croix were, in a literal sense, the gears that propelled the colonial machine (STX-13). After enslaved laborers had finished clearing, tilling, planting, cultivating, and harvesting sugarcane, the milling process was the first of a series of final steps undertaken before the culminating products – molasses and unrefined sugar – were exported to the metropole. Although other aspects of sugar manufacturing were arguably more active and labor-intensive (STX-04), through time windmills have emerged as emblems of the colonial agricultural landscape – central features of the plantation complex and, by extension, signifiers of the historical legacies and contemporary inheritances of Danish colonialism (Meniketti 2015, 33) (Figure 55).

**Figure 55** Royal Copenhagen Commemorative Plate featuring a windmill. This plate depicts the mill at the Annaberg Plantation in St. John. The Annaberg Plantation shares many features with Crucian plantations, including the use of coral masonry in several structures (see: Chapter 5).

This chapter draws from Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell's ideas on heritage, affect, and emotion – who argue for a 'pragmatic approach' that begins with an understanding "that emotions are not only culturally, historically, and socially mediated, but also have moral and political consequences and impacts" (2015, 443). I explore the windmills as emotionally charged spaces that are inexplicably tied to "the enquiry into [the] meaning[s]" and negotiations of the past and, by extension, the present (Tarlow 2000, 720) – whilst arguing that the political nature of heritage must be incorporated into studies of the interplay between emotion and memory which, as Smith and Campbell argue, is "informed by people's culturally and socially diverse affective responses" (2015, 443). Building from this, I explore how individual emotional responses and engagements with windmills are embedded within the interstices between the material and social realms – engaging with windmills sites of dissonance in relationship to contested approaches to heritage tourism on the island. The following section positions windmills within the existing body of scholarship,

which intends to better situate them within the contemporary community framework implemented in the sections that follow.

## 7.2 Sources and Methods

This chapter incorporates fieldwork that was carried out on St. Croix between January 2021 and March 2024. Applying the theory of 'braided knowledge' (Atalay 2012), the research was informed by multiple strands of evidence that include conventional archaeological and historical methods, such as pedestrian survey and archival research, as well as anthropological methods, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews – these data were then 'braided,' applying a non-hierarchical approach to their analysis.

Because windmills have been a frequent subject of study on the island, preliminary research was centered on engaging with the frameworks informing the existing body of scholarship. Drawing on archaeological (Hayes 2000; Mankowski et al. 2000; Baumgardt 2009), architectural (Ashur 2020; Cleveland 2023), historical (Dookhan 1974; Hopkins 1989; Tyson 1992; Highfield 2009), and heritage studies (Cornwell and Stoddard 2001), this portion of the research sought to highlight a long-standing tradition of academic engagement with plantation remnants. These 'traditional' frameworks are contrasted with interdisciplinary postcolonial engagement with windmills – primarily from a contemporary art and folk memory perspective. This approach is not intended to diminish the substantial research previously conducted about windmills on St. Croix and elsewhere, but instead to contend that diverse registers of knowledge can inform distinct and holistic understandings of the past. In tandem, this chapter aims to elevate historically marginalized perspectives and present an alternative to dominant and authorized heritage discourses as related to contemporary heritage tourism in the Caribbean.

Indeed, despite windmills receiving considerable academic attention over the past century, there are clear and significant gaps in the literature – and although many studies explicitly indicate windmills as a 'symbol' of the island (i.e., Ashur 2020), there is a lack of in-depth explanation as why they are a point of interest beyond their substantial number and historical use. In tandem, while advertised as tourist attractions, their contested and complex legacies are seldom directly engaged.

There are exceptions; studies from other islands, for example Cornwell and Stoddard's work in St. John (2001), and Rothenberg's work in Montserrat (2021), have positioned colonial windmills as representations of elitism, power, and control – although these studies often fail to capture the nuance of diverse Caribbean communities and socio-political dynamics – frequently projecting assumptive identity (e.g., race, class, community membership, etc.) as categorical variable and thereby falling risk to confirmation bias.

This study was therefore developed in response to this significant gap in knowledge regarding how windmills are approached by diverse and multicultural communities on the island and draws from long-term and situated experiences of communities on St. Croix. Its interdisciplinary and contemporary heritage approach deviates from previous research by incorporating diverse intersectional perspectives from communities who represent various connections to the island and its multi-layered history. Mobilizing a collaborative archaeological approach inspired by Edward Gonzalez-Tennant (2014), the methods and sources sought to elevate the perspectives and experiences of the communities on St Croix – through pedestrian survey, participant observation, and community interviews.

To borrow from Luisita Lopez Torregrosa, "[St. Croix] lets you in slowly. The island reveals itself cautiously, at its own unhurried pace. You'll miss it if you turn away too quickly" (2014). Indeed, the significant time I spent on the island enabled a slow approach to this research, through which I was able to connect with various individuals and groups on the

island, and who shed light on a more complicated picture of windmill heritage than might appear at first glance. To this end, I engaged a deliberate, careful, and reflexive approach to this research – aiming to embrace the ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding the windmills within, between, and across communities on the island. In tandem, as Gregory Ashworth (2011) has argued, heritage as a contemporary process is inherently dissonant, serving multiple, often competing, social, economic, and political needs.

Regarding the symbolic nature of the windmills, participants hold diverse perspectives. Although frequently presented as sites of 'contested' heritage, it is important to acknowledge that communities are formed of individuals and are not monolithic. To this end, discourse centered on contested heritage in the Caribbean is often positioned along racial lines. However, this view is not only homogenizing, it is also often untrue. To this end, while perspectives about the symbolic nature of heritage on St. Croix are frequently aligned with one's racial affiliation, this 'issue' is often intersectional and driven by contemporary power dynamics – which are more complex than racial binaries.

The methodological ethos that guided this fieldwork holds that collaborative and community-based research is as rigorous and scientific as conventional archaeological research (Moser et al. 2002) – and that folk memory, rather than 'competing' with a more conventional framework, details a distinct register of knowledge that has been underarticulated and under-exercised within cultural research in the Caribbean. This epistemological philosophy is held by many archaeological and heritage theorists including Sonya Atalay (2002) and Alison Wylie (2014), who aspire toward an enhanced, transformed archaeology that is unhindered by an adherence to materiality alone.

Such perspectives moreover follow intensifying calls by academic voices to consider contemporary approaches in the preservation, management, and interpretation of sites of 'material memory.' For example, McAtackney's research on the Magdalene Laundries in

Ireland, mobilizes a contemporary archaeological framework which she contends "[require] us to grapple with the realities of material change, transformation, entanglement, and by necessity, impermanence" (2022, 229). McAtackney's argument works particularly well when applied to sites of contested, dissonant, or difficult heritage such as the windmills of St. Croix because it speaks to how social meaning is not static or unchanging. Indeed, by acknowledging the diverse perspectives of communities on the island as a reflection of the contemporary world, rather the impossible challenge of interpreting the colonial past, this study builds on the wide body of heritage scholarship by contributing to collective understandings regarding how the world is experienced within diverse postcolonial communities.

Pedestrian surveys involved visits to over seventy windmills on the island between 2021 and 2024 and were often collaborative, including between 1 and 20 participants. Participants ranged in age from mid-thirties through late seventies; belonged to diverse socio-economic classes, included ancestral, resident, and non-resident individuals; and represented various racial identities (e.g., Black, white, Indigenous, multi-racial, etc.) and diverse nationalities (e.g., St. Croix, Virgin Islands, 'Down Island,' Continental, Denmark, Palestine, Puerto Rico, etc.). Because windmills are facets of the island's heritage landscape that are ubiquitous – encountered, engaged, and considered by the diverse public(s) on the island – this research approached windmills as a shared colonial inheritance and form of living heritage. To this end, I engaged anyone with an expressed connection to St. Croix and interested in windmills – with no specific 'qualifications' for participation. This framework differs slightly from approaches taken elsewhere in this dissertation, such as Chapter 7, which specifically drew from Afro-Crucian perspectives on baobab trees and their collective meaning. This is because windmills and baobab trees, although sometimes engaged and conceptualized in similar ways, are 'claimed' as heritage by different segments of St. Croix's

communities. The community approach taken in these two chapters was shaped in response to cultural cues and distinct engagements with diverse heritage sites.



**Figure 56** There are two windmills at Castle Coakley, and the site is open to the public (Zahedi 2021).



**Figure 57** A challenging walk through the bush brought this windmill into view, although vegetation and Africanized bees prevented a closer look (Zahedi 2021).

Pedestrian surveys included visits to easily accessible sites, for example the windmills at Castle Coakley (Figure 56), and difficult-to-access mills (Figure 57). Because there is no contemporary map of St. Croix's windmills, I relied on historical maps to locate them (Beck 1754; Oxholm 1799; Parsons 1864); in some cases, the windmills could not be found due to overgrowth of vegetation or lack of accurate GPS coordinates and, consequently, an inability to successfully navigate to the site in question. For example, an attempt to locate the windmill at Estate Punch on the west side of the island was fruitless, due to the ambiguity of historical maps which do not include topographic information and overgrowth of the bush – covered in scratches and dehydrated, the team decided to instead explore nearby Estate Mount Victory and enjoy mangoes from the many trees around the property. When sites were on private property, I requested permission from the landowner with varied levels of success[21].



**Figure 58** A windmill that is visible, but inaccessible due to the overgrowth of vegetation (Zahedi 2022).

Observation data was collected at visits to windmills, but also at community events, public lectures, art openings, and elsewhere over the three-year period that data were

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[21] Accessibility to windmills on private property presents challenges for communities who have deep connections to the island, including descendants of individuals who lived on the sites in question. Several large estates on the island are owned by seasonal residents who might not have the same understanding of the significance of the material remnants. It is also important to note that racial privilege can make it easier for certain individuals (e.g., the author, for one) to access private sites. This is one example of how racism directly affects Black communities on the island.

collected. This data was supplemented with eight semi-structured interviews – some of the interviewees had collaborated on surveys, others had not. Pulling from Jon Anderson's (2004) ideas about 'conversations in place' and the socio-spatial character of human knowledge, when possible, interviews were recorded in windmills, at sites chosen by the interviewee. Interviewees were selected based on interest and knowledge about windmills, and represented descendant, local, resident, and visiting research communities from diverse backgrounds including artists, historians and archaeologists, plantation owners, and community elders. Mobilizing a critical heritage and collaborative archaeology approach, this case study aims to provide deeper insight into the symbolic meaning of St. Croix's windmills and, by elevating diverse community perspectives, highlight some of the challenges and opportunities of interpreting (post)colonial heritage sites.

## 7.3 Windmills in View

St. Croix is known for its many colonial windmills – while many exist as archaeological remnants in various states of preservation, others stand as examples of adaptive reuse, incorporated into contemporary structures (e.g., homes, schools, churches, etc.). Estimates regarding the number of remaining colonial windmills on St. Croix vary, although the contemporary figure is believed to lie between 100 and 150 (STX-04; Cleveland 2023). Several attempts have been made to document the number of windmills across the island, but due to the overgrowth of vegetation and other obstacles, an exact figure has never been produced.

As visually enticing and prominent structures, St. Croix's windmills have long captured the attention of ancestral, resident, and visiting communities. Perhaps in part due to their ubiquity, windmills have become heritage icons of the island – at times, controversially appearing in travel brochures, as logos, and in tourist trinkets. Because of their intrinsic ties to colonialism and enslavement, they are contested sites, at times sparking tension between

communities on the island regarding their position, role, and meaning as (post)colonial material inheritances. Indeed, the windmills are hyper-visual, yet ambivalent residues of the Danish colonial era – eliciting positive, negative, mixed, and neutral responses from a diverse community of islanders (Kiddey 2020).



**Figure 59** Windmills are a common feature in romantic and idyllic renderings of the island's postcolonial landscape (Zahedi 2024).

Some view St. Croix's windmills as apolitical and aesthetically pleasing feats of architecture – evoking sentimental longings, wistful affections, and a romantic retrospective gaze toward the colonial past (STX-03, STX-04, STX-07) (Figure 59). For others, they are structures that represent colonialism and exploitation – powerful, emotive cenotaphs that generate discourse regarding postcolonial memory, social justice, and decolonization (STX-01; STX-13). Although contested and holding complex, layered, and multi-vocal meanings, the windmills remain mutually agreed upon as significant heritage assets – and to this end, embody the ways in which contemporary concerns and values ascribed to heritage can be diverse, unifying, and, at times, divisive (Jones 2016).
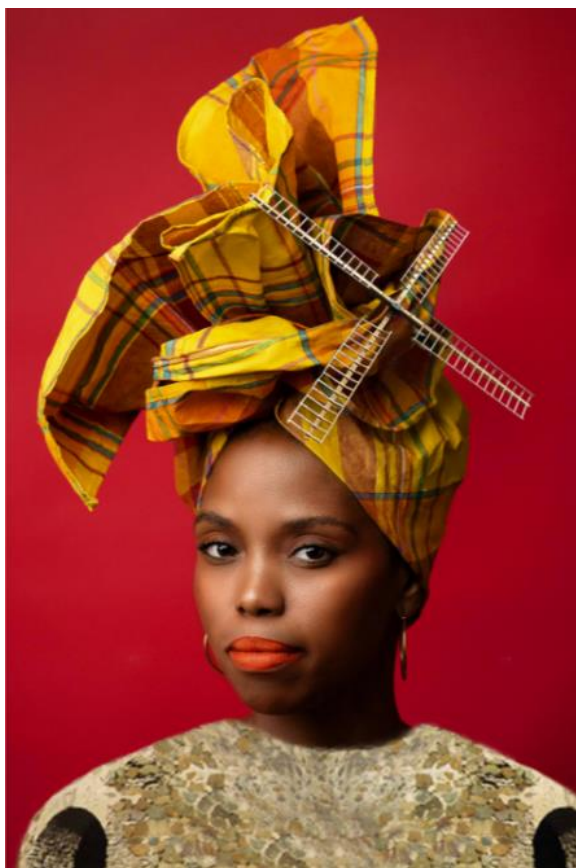
**Figure 60** Windmills are also featured in contemporary postcolonial art. This image was created by the renowned Crucian artist Chalana Brown (Brown 2019).

There is broad public acknowledgement of windmills as symbolic heritage, although their underlying and tacit meaning(s) are ambiguous and have only recently begun to be elaborated upon in the public or academic discourse emanating from St. Croix (Hayes 2000; Ashur 2020; Flewellen 2019) – most notably through the Crucian artist Chalana Brown's work, *Claiming Spaces: The African Story of the Sugarmill* (2021) (Figure 60). In turn, they have become, to borrow from Brian Alleyne, something that explains "rather than something to be explained" (2002, 608). Consequently, the windmills of St. Croix stand as dissonant objects, embodying the multifaceted legacies of colonialism and inviting community engagement with the nuanced, often contradictory, meanings that underlie their significance as symbols of the island's past, present, and future.

The colonial period in the Caribbean was characterized by an intensification of capitalist-based exploitation and extraction during which the region exported a wide array of trade goods, including but not limited to spices, cocoa, coffee, and indigo – although it was sugar that characterized the economy of the region (Greene 2022). Indeed, the name the English gave to the Antilles, the 'sugar islands,' as suggested by Fraginals, was "a geographical label with an economic, mercantile flavor as distinct as it was apt" (1976, 15). Although sugar cultivation in St. Croix didn't begin until the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the Danish were eager to quickly make the island profitable, investing significant

resources in infrastructure and development and actively encouraging planters from other islands to invest in St. Croix – consequently, despite its late entry into the lucrative sugar business, it rapidly became a successful and competitive market (Thurland 2014) (see: 2.6).

The island's sugar industry intensified through the long eighteenth century, before beginning to decline in the second quarter of the nineteenth century – the result of the popularization of the sugar beet in Europe, as well as escalating global support for the abolition of slavery (Crowley 2016). Sugar remained a vital industry on the island through the mid-twentieth century, when St. Croix's economy transitioned to manufacturing and tourism (Thurland 2014) – although the sugar era remains at the fore of public memory for many on the island into the present day. As St. Croix shifted from an agricultural economy to a tourism economy in the mid-twentieth century, the scenic hilltop locations of many windmills became a focal point, sparking increased interest in them from researchers and the public alike.

### 7.3.1 Objects of the Academic Gaze

In St. Croix and the wider Caribbean, the mercantile, mechanical, and industrial aspects of the sugar economy have been a frequent focus of study (Dookhan 1974). While early investigations on St. Croix were heavily focused on prehistoric archaeology (Hatt 1924) and colonial institutional or architectural history (e.g., public schools, government structures, military barracks, etc.) (de Fine Licht 1962), beginning in the 1970s researchers began to turn their attention toward the island's agricultural and industrial heritage (Figueredo 1974, 1978). From that point onward, the interest in the colonial period was primarily centered on the remnants of monumental 'ruins' such as great houses and plantation structures. Windmills were no exception, both as specific features and within the broader study of colonial landscapes (Highfield 2009; Hayes 2001). This interest in windmills is not unique to academic legacies on St. Croix – but includes other islands with colonial sugar histories such

as Montserrat (Cherry and Rothenberg 2021), Antigua (Goodwin 1994), Jamaica (Satchell 2004), and Nevis (Meniketti 2015). In particular, windmills have been a point of interest for researchers, although they are sometimes presented through a somewhat neutral perspective that distances them from their ties to colonialism and exploitation.

Among the many challenges of completing a holistic plantation archaeology in the Caribbean, is that while structures associated with the planter and elite classes were often maintained over time (e.g., the big house, overseer's house, etc.), structures related to sugar production and enslaved lifeways have generally not been as well preserved. In tandem, the enduring legacies of colonialism – among them, intersectional structural inequity and, on many islands, ongoing colonization – have resulted in continuous inhabitation of estates by the wealthy, sometimes descendants of the colonial elite, who have often maintained and/or resided in 'grand' plantation structures, as sites associated with enslavement have fallen into disrepair.

Historic preservation is a relatively recent movement in the U.S., beginning in 1966 when the National Historic Preservation Act was signed into law; although this led to a more proactive approach to heritage preservation, valuation criteria still tended to emphasize 'architectural significance,' the result being that modest although socially significant structures (e.g., plantation villages, enslaved housing, etc.) were often excluded from consideration and conservation. In tandem, historical and archaeological research in the Caribbean has traditionally focused more heavily on elite European lifeways and perspectives (Hayes 2000, 6), although this has arguably begun to shift in recent years (Jensen 1998; Franklin et al. 2020; Dunnavant 2021).

Because of the enduring nature of windmills as historic structures and their visual prominence, they have long served as useful points of reference in locating associated plantation structures (Clement 1997). Windmills, because of their cylindrical shape, sound

construction, and visual prominence are among the most enduring structures associated with enslavement on St. Croix, often surviving other components of the plantation complex. In part *because* of their unusual shape, windmills piqued the interest of elite plantation owners, and as a result, their preservation was often prioritized over other structures. Additionally, windmills were historically seen as industrial and somewhat neutral plantation structures, conceptually distinct and removed from the negative and exploitative associations typically attributed to plantation sites (see: Bennet 2021). To this end, they have been viewed, to some degree, as 'value-free' heritage.

Conventional archaeological research on St. Croix and elsewhere in the Caribbean has often focused on windmills primarily through a materialist lens – emphasizing plantation configuration, material fabric, and mode of construction (Hopkins 1989, Hayes 2000, Meniketti 2006). This approach has generally overshadowed the human element of their historical use and function. For example, Goodwin's (1994) study of Betty's Hope windmill in Antigua presents the 'problem' of understanding how cane juice was transported from the mill to the factory; despite its focus on the spatial dynamics and the operation of the plantation, the study makes no reference to the enslaved workers who operated the machinery at all.

Cornwall and Stoddard (2001) drew from Cosgrove's (1985) notion of reading landscapes in their 'reading' of sugarmills on St. John, another island in the former Danish West Indies. They presented sugarmills as contested spaces (2001, 133), arguing against romanticized historical discourses marketed to tourists and toward 'local' perspectives that highlight the complexity of postcolonial identity and memory. Indeed, their paper deviated from the conventional material and architectural study of plantation remnants, instead emphasizing a social value-based approach to heritage. However, despite the many strengths of Cornwall and Stoddard's engagement with the politics of memory and space tied to St.

John's sugar mills, their polarized view of 'local' versus tourist communities fails to accurately capture the intricacies of small island communities – in which 'local' can be applied as a homogenizing term – nor do they address the contemporary dynamics of power inherent to tourism and the influence of contemporary American colonialism on the island (see: Tuck 2009). St. John, in particular, is a curious case study by which to partition community into 'resident' and 'tourist;' the island has long suffered intra-community tensions, largely between wealthy resident Continentals (e.g., Robert Oppenheimer, Laurence Rockefeller, Kenny Chesney, etc.), who have driven up the cost of living, and ancestral St. Johnians, many of whom can no longer afford to live on the island (Fortwangler 2007; 2009; Sewer 2018). To this end, Cornwall and Stoddard's (2001) study, despite its positive intentions, falls into the common trap of imagining Caribbean island communities as simply distinguished between 'insider' and 'outsider.'

### 7.3.2 The Postcolonial Turn

In recent years, there has been a shift in focus toward the symbolic and contemporary value of windmills, within both the academic and public arenas (Rothenberg 2021). This follows the interdisciplinary 'decolonial turn,' which marks a general shift away from privileging 'colonizer' perspectives, and instead toward the perspectives and experiences of marginalized communities (Flewellen et. al 2020; Maldonado-Torres and Cavooris 2017). Certainly, postcolonial and decolonial studies have depreciated the conventional emphasis on the material and economic conditions of coloniality, instead calling attention to the complex social dynamics, hybridization, and peopling of the Caribbean, as well as the influence of material remnants on the politics of memory (Sesma 2019).

Building from discourse centered on colonial dimensions of power, academic literature has often re-articulated windmills as sites that represent hierarchies of power and mediated control, perpetuating a theoretical binary of the oppressive planter and an obedient

enslaved population (Rothenberg 2021, Delle 2014). Although this view is understandable within theoretical perspectives pertaining to the spatial influence of power within the plantation landscape, it risks perpetuating the myth that enslaved people were not actualized outside their relationship with their oppressors and that such sites have no life beyond their intended creation through the present day.

Reflecting that windmills "exist within a creolized space and a creole history" (Cornwell and Stoddard 2001, 137), it is important that researchers are mindful of their multi-layered history by incorporating methodologies that allow for creole, ambiguous, and ambivalent perspectives to come to the fore. Intending to shed the 'archaeologist's gaze' (which emphasizes the operative use of plantation sites) in favor of a heritage perspective (which allows for their meanings to continuously evolve through the present), the value of community-sourced and collaborative data cannot be understated (Kiddey 2020). Such sources are a viable pathway toward heritage research that draws on the transformative and nuanced legacies of colonial remnants and are inclusive of the contemporary interventions and negotiations of meaning that occur within postcolonial communities. Despite existing as colonial relics, windmills are active, embedded, and multi-faceted living heritage sites with value to diverse contemporary communities who experience them as an aspect of everyday heritage.

A contemporary heritage framework can unearth a deeper understanding of how windmills are experienced by communities on the island who reflect upon their multi-temporal relevance and (post)colonial afterlives. Sian Jones argues that the significance of the historic environment must encompass the social values held by contemporary communities, which are "fluid, culturally specific forms of value embedded in experience" – moreover arguing that meaning is integral to the production of social value (2016, 22-25). Indeed, symbolic meaning, memory, and spiritual attachment – although often not obvious to

disinterested or uninformed observers – can be linked to broader cultural meanings that include the understanding of the self (Jones 2016; Smith and Campbell 2015). To this end, colonial remnants such as windmills cannot be separated from their contemporary meanings because their materiality, history, and legacy are (re)activated and embodied within the present. In tandem, such understandings allow for multivocal experiences on an individual and collective level, which engage the notion that multi-scalar negotiations of meaning can be complex (Bender 2006).

### 7.3.3 Sites of Memory

Several participants referred to St. Croix's windmills as 'memory banks' or 'witnesses' (Appendix B; STX-01; STX-11; STX-13), a description that parallels the notion of 'lieux de memoire' (i.e., the site of memory) (Nora 1996). Indeed, building from Pierre Nora's ideas that 'sites' of memory are created through the relationship between memory and history – often used to reinforce dominant narratives and power structures – windmills can be explored as places that where the past is both held and remembered, and where identity can be negotiated and performed. To this end, certain segments of the island's community have engaged windmills as spaces that destabilize, critique, and challenge the enduring legacies of colonial domains of power and, by extension, seek to amplify marginalized perspectives (Brown 2021). In this way, the complex and powerful emotions – anger, resentment, longing, hope, reverence, compassion, pride, wonder, ambivalence, etc. – evoked by colonial heritage sites such as windmills transcend materiality and reify the tacit cultural values that are embedded within communities across time.

Paul Connerton has written about the relationship between collective and individual memory, arguing that experiences of the present depend upon knowledge form the past – contending that negotiations and experiences of the present are influenced by "recollections of the past" which can be highly diverse (1989, 2). Applying Connerton's theoretical lens to

the legacy of scholarly engagement with windmills, can reveal how academic interpretations and (re)articulations that privilege the perspectives of the colonial elite, in direct opposition to descendant perspectives, can exacerbate festering tensions, manifesting as contentious and contested heritage.

While individual and collective memory exist in relationship, they serve distinct functions in the production of heritage and identity. For example, communal memory (and forgetting) is often selective and reflects the interests of groups within the collective, a notion Lotman et al. refer to as "the nonhereditary memory of the community" (1978, 215). One might moreover understand the relationship between collective and individual memory as a mosaic, with shared memories between individuals varying in detail and strength despite common elements and individual memory representing specific points of view within the collective memory (Gensburger 2016). Despite differing in their finer details, such considerations relay the dialectic relationship between the (re)construction of memory and the entangled and fluid nature of postcolonial heritage. In the context of St. Croix's windmills, it is important to be mindful that collective memory is inherently relational – often generated through the prism of community heritage. To this end, the social and material world are co-constitutive (Harris and Sorensen 2010, 145). Windmills as symbols, then, are mediums by which identity, memory, and community are (re)negotiated on the island.

### 7.3.4 Colonial Remnants and Postcolonial Landscapes

In St. Croix, windmills have been long been sites of interest for researchers and the public alike – although scarce attention has been paid as to *why* they are a point of fascination. The most common answer for this has been that they are numerous. However, this explanation does not satisfy why windmills, as a form of 'symbolic heritage,' eclipse other commonly encountered colonial remnants (e.g., wells, sugar kettles, various types of sugarmills, etc.). In tandem, the argument that they are alluring simply because they are

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numerous, does not appropriately engage how the island's unique history, geography, and spatial order have also contributed to the perception of their numbers, how they are received by the diverse public, nor their eminence as compared with other islands.

Despite existing as colonial remnants, St. Croix's windmills often remain integrated within the island's contemporary landscape in distinct and impactful ways. This is in part because the evolution of St. Croix spatial layout, which has been significantly influenced by its colonial spatial order – with most neighborhoods on the island retaining their colonial 'estate' names and therefore enduringly referencing colonial spatial politics. Moreover, to understand how windmills have become such a point of interest, one must first understand how they exist in contemporary St. Croix and, to this end, how they are encountered.

The exact number of standing windmills on St. Croix is not known. An island-wide survey conducted in 2021-2022 by William Cleveland estimated that the contemporary number is around 140 (Cleveland 2023). Of these, they exist in various states of preservation, more-or-less consistently spaced across the island. Many are positioned prominently on hilltops or in open fields. Others are hidden from view – located on private property, behind fences or have been surrendered to the fast-growing bush and scrubland (Figure 61). They often remain undisturbed, signifying the passage of time. Others have been modified, converted for modern purposes such as cisterns (e.g., Estate Rattan) and rock-climbing walls (e.g., Estate Canaan), or incorporated into modern structures such as schools (e.g., Estate Williams Delight) and houses (e.g., Estate Beeston Hill).

**Figure 61** On the left, a windmill surrendered to the bush (Zahedi 2023), and on the right, the Estate Beeston Hill mill, which has been incorporated into a luxury home (Cleveland 2024).

Based on analysis of colonial maps (Oxholm 1754; Parsons 1864), the total number of windmills constructed on St. Croix is believed to lie somewhere between 180 and 200. However, there is some uncertainty regarding the true number, as some historical maps seem to indicate planned, but not completed windmills. For example, a windmill icon appears on Parson's (1856) map of Estate Castle Nugent, but not in earlier or later maps (Cleveland 2023) – and neither the remnants nor footprints of a windmill were located during field survey at Castle Nugent in 2022. In addition, of the windmills that were constructed, several (e.g., Estate Petronella, Estate Spring Garden, Estate Mount Steward, etc.) were lost to natural disaster, deferred maintenance, or to time. Some may have been deconstructed, their materials incorporated into other buildings (e.g., possibly Estate Great Pond, 5.6.2).

The numerous windmills on the island is a point of pride for many – with several participants indicating that St. Croix was second only to Barbados in number, although this is difficult to verify. According to Mohammed Patel (2023), a 1721 survey of Barbados listed 320 windmills – and by 1848, there were reportedly 506 windmills on the island – far

surpassing the approximately 200 once found on St. Croix. Colonial maps can inform

historical estimates but do not necessarily indicate the number of windmills still standing. In

many cases, there are historic inventories for individual estates – especially for sites on local

and national registers – but whole-island inventories are uncommon. The language used in

historic assessments and inventories can also pose challenges because it is not standardized

across the region. In one instance, a 2019 survey in Barbados identified only one windmill

but 145 'mill walls' (Patel 2023). A closer look reveals that the term 'mill walls'

encompasses any masonry windmill structure – from footprints to compete towers.

'Sugarmill,' on the other hand, referred only to complete and operative windmills.

During the colonial era, other sugar-producing islands had far more sugar plantations, and

presumably windmills, than St. Croix, especially islands in the Greater Antilles – such as

Cuba, which had over 1,000 sugar plantations at its peak. In Cuba's case, an island with a

much longer, more productive, and profitable sugar industry than St. Croix, many of the

colonial mills were replaced by modern ones to accommodate increasing demand through the

twentieth century (Dye 1993) – and the number of standing colonial windmills could not be

verified.

The visibility of windmills on St. Croix might also play a role in the degree to which

they are registered by members of the public. The island has no remaining primary-growth

forests, and its secondary-growth forests are fragmented and dominated by young trees

(Daley 2010). Centuries of deforestation and intensive land use have degraded the soil. This

is possibly a consequence of the unsustainable agricultural model imposed by colonial

Denmark, which is discussed in colonial accounts:

> The island [i.e., St. Croix] was only recently brought under tillage, the soil consequently rich,
> and vegetation luxuriant […] but a gold mine may also be exhausted […] when the same soil
> is in continual cultivation, without rest or manure [...] Had the planters at first introduced a
> system of agriculture based on more correct principles, their estates would have yielded a
> pretty even or average crop but herein lay their error. They had at once taken all their lands

> into immediate cultivation […] to produce the utmost possible out of the property; and when
> at last, thus impoverished, it commenced giving diminished returns, it was too late to adopt a
> more judicious system of agriculture […] add this to the constant diminution of the periodical
> rains, which many attributed to destroying the woods (Heilbuth 1845, 18-19).

It is difficult to assess the ecological consequences of St. Croix's colonial sugar industry – although the island's scant tree cover, propensity for drought, and drying of natural streams and guts, none of which flow continuously today, are telling. In turn, the absence of tall trees and the dominance of woody shrubs (e.g., tan tan) on the island makes other towering landscape features, such as windmills, more exposed, and thereby visible, across the island.

On heavily and diversely forested islands (e.g., Puerto Rico, Dominica, Jamaica, etc.), windmills and other archaeological structures are more easily obscured from view by vegetation – perhaps concealing their number. In addition, on St. Croix, there is a tradition of constructing windmill replicas – taking form as landmarks (e.g., Henry E. Rohlsen Airport), sentinels (e.g., Grapetree Bay Resort), or to conceal unsightly infrastructure (e.g., Tamarind Reef Resort), which may inflate the perception of the number across the island (STX-03) (Figure 62).



**Figure 62** On the left, a contemporary mill replica at Tamarind Reef Resort, and on the right, a modern building designed as a windmill at the RT Park, University of the Virgin Islands (Zahedi, 2024).

Participants expressed that windmills are intuitive heritage symbols, due to their prevalence, but also their visual prominence on diverse landscapes across the island. At the same time, some individuals noted that as archaeological remnants they tend to fade into the background of

landscapes, perhaps counterintuitively, due to their prevalence and are 'hidden in plain sight.' As one participant recalled following a collaborative survey to a windmill located near a property she frequently visited as a child:

> There it was! A sugar mill! […] But in my memories, I do not recall any sugar mill around there! And I played on that property. How could I have not seen it?! (STX-01).

The phenomenon in which individuals or communities become unintentionally blind to everyday heritage, even unusual or otherwise monumental heritage, is documented in other contexts, particularly in World War II 'dark' heritage in Northern Europe. Postiglione and Lenzini (2019), for example, explore the "forgotten" heritage of Atlantic Wall bunkers, despite their omnipresence across the post-war coastal landscape. And while World War II bunkers in Northern Europe, colonial windmills in St. Croix, and other examples of ubiquitous heritage are often framed in archaeological or historical contexts within both the public and academic realms, it is frequently artists who call attention to their significance as enduring symbols of cultural legacies, as well as playing a practical role in their documentation and interpretation.

For example, the Crucian artist Chalana Brown's photography project, 'Claiming Spaces' (2020-present) aims to photograph every windmill on St. Croix and reclaim the African legacies, identities, and memories tied to plantation spaces (Figure 63). Across the Atlantic in the Netherlands, the Dutch artist Hendrik Dijk's project 'Gone from Concrete,' similarly aims to photograph the nearly six hundred New Dutch Waterline bunkers that were constructed by the Dutch to protect against German invasion during WWII (Figure 64). In both cases, artist-led documentation, interpretation, and narrative storytelling around heritage that is 'hidden in plain view,' communicate the embodied nature of the 'everyday heritage' (Mosler 209) that is associated with difficult pasts and present in contemporary landscapes – speaking to the spatial-temporal ambiguities and connections that characterize them, as well as the (re)negotiation and (re)construction of memory at such sites. These artists, who

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reimagine them, play a crucial role in (re)creating them as living sites with cultural meanings that can change through time.



**Figure 63** Claiming Spaces, Chalana Brown 2020
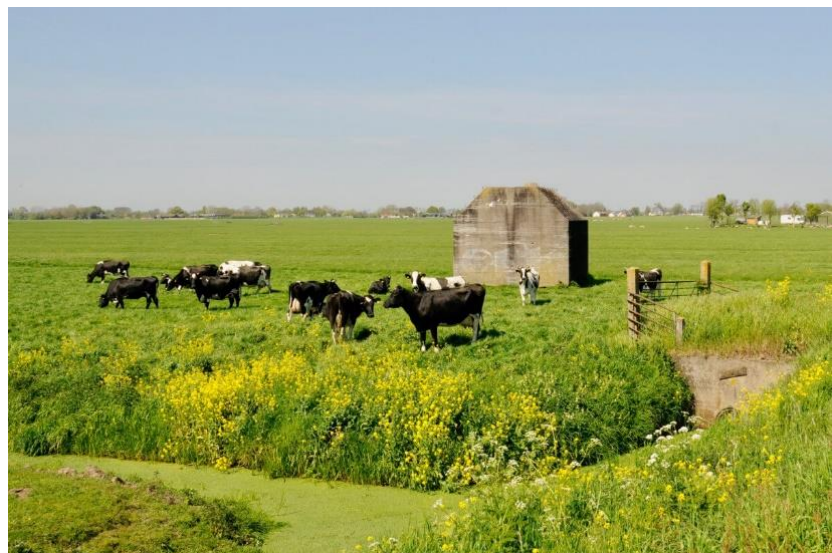


**Figure 64** Gone from Concrete, Hendrik Dijk 2021

Architecturally speaking, the structural soundness of the conically shaped windmills has played a considerable role in their long-term preservation and survival, moreover, to do with the quality of the stonemasonry and craftsmanship behind their construction, something that descendant populations referenced with enormous pride (STX-12). As one interviewee wondered: "What information came to them to create a structure that would be around forever? There's more to it than just a structure. Everything else crumbled down, but this didn't" (STX-03). Indeed, the emphasis on architectural design and durability was also cited

as a testament to the legacy of the enslaved communities who constructed them (STX-07). Their endurance was therefore noted as an opportunity to honor ancestral legacies, particularly by descendant or Afro-Caribbean community participants, who described them as places of reverence that represent the enduring presence of the ancestors across time and space (STX-01).

## 7.4 Symbols of (Re)Memory

For many individuals and communities on the island, windmills are symbolic of the entangled and embodied relationship between collective memory, ancestral legacy, and creole identity – a sentiment that recalls Toni Morisson's concept of (re)memory (1987), Steve Stern's 'memory knots' (2006), and Pierre Nora's 'lieux de memoire' (1989). Aiming to situate their contested status as symbolic heritage within St. Croix's contemporary social landscape, I engage descendant communities as a primary community to highlight how intergenerational memory and community affiliation can activate deep connections and emotive experiences with windmills. Although in some ways, windmills can be understood as 'dark heritage' (STX-02; STX-03A/B; STX-05/B; STX-13) because they are also viewed as *living* heritage sites, they can also spark positive reflections and deep reverence for ancestors (STX-01; STX-12; STX-22) – and therefore evoke ambiguous, ambivalent, and sometimes conflicting emotional responses for individuals.

At the same time, these powerful emotional responses are not universal or shared evenly across all segments of the Crucian community. Although several non-descendant participants described intense and poignant experiences at windmill sites (STX-03; STX-05A/5B; STX-11) there is a clear difference between *how* the sites are encountered and engaged by enduringly connected descendant communities and empathetic non-descendant communities. As STX-13 reflected:

I think it's a symbol of a time that, depending on who you were, was a symbol of prosperity and beauty and elegance, or a symbol of enslavement and torture, and lack of freedom. If you were to put that symbol up and then have everybody decide: "are you on this side or that side?" It's a clear color divide as well.

To this end, there was an obliged onus expressed by descendant communities tied to windmill sites, to honor their enslaved ancestors and their memories (STX-01; STX-12; STX-13).

For non-descendant communities, on the other hand, there is a tacit and inherent privilege – in the choice to either actively and critically engage or entirely bypass challenging and traumatic collective memory[22] often activated for descendant communities at windmill sites (STX-02; STX-03; STX-07). In this sense, windmills have become emotionally complex spaces through which contemporary communities negotiate shared meanings and diverse understandings about postcolonial heritage. Manifesting within postcolonial social landscapes as what heritage scholars refer to as the politics of memory (and forgetting), the root of the mills' contested status is revealed – often a byproduct of enduring dimensions of colonial power (Figure 65). Indeed, diverse members of St. Croix's community openly acknowledge this distinction. Asking one Crucian-born, non-descendant, non-white interviewee about what windmills symbolize, she responded, "That's such a bittersweet question, right? Because it would depend on who you asked" (STX-03A).

This research has sought to identify and interpret how communities on the island engage with heritage, although I am cautious to distinguish along racial lines – firstly, because of how interethnic and creolized the island is, racial presentation does not necessary translate to racial identity and, secondly, because race alone does not necessarily correlate with community affiliation or cultural awareness.

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[22] This theoretical approach differentiates between descendant and non-descendant communities in the context of windmill heritage. It does not argue that *all* non-descendant communities avoid or avert colonial memory – but instead that there is an underlying privilege held by non-descendant communities through which they can select to maintain an ignorance of the colonial past, or simply, not think about it – despite these communities sometimes representing multi-generational ties to the island.

**Figure 65** A performance artist at an Emancipation Day commemorative performance in Frederiksted (Zahedi 2022)

As cultural objects, windmills lie at the junction of identity and memory – both of which are interdimensional phenomena that inform the heritage process. Individual memory is inherently dynamic, influencing the "processing of subjective experience and building up a social identity" (Assman 2006, 213) – these individual memories, when shared, become intergenerational memory, which can in turn develop into social or collective memory. The emergent collective memories can transcend the individual categories of identity (e.g., race, class, ethnicity, gender, etc., and their intersections) from which they came (i.e., descendant or non-descendant Crucian communities) – and in turn, individual memories can be shaped by collective frameworks that define group identity and provide a shared understanding of the past (Halbwachs 2020). This synchronous characteristic of social memory can reinforce social ties and forge new communal affiliations that are predicated on shared beliefs and values – in the case of windmill heritage, a mutual spirit of empathy and dedication to reparative social justice.

For many communities on St. Croix, and descendant communities in particular, windmills have functional, material, and symbolic meaning – activating ancestral memory, a point communicated by this descendant participant:

> The mills tell the stories of the people who aren't physically here anymore. And those persons were contracted to these spaces and their family members, and their family members, and their family members. And so, although you might not know their names – this structure bears their name – their spirits (STX-01).

The notion that windmills are cenotaphs for the enslaved has long been held by certain segments of the descendant community on St. Croix and is becoming increasingly common among non-descendant communities as well – at times extending to other components of plantation landscapes. The St. George Village Botanical Garden, which is located on the grounds of the Estate St. George sugar plantation, designated the ruins of the site's sugar factory the "1000 Orchid Memorial



**Figure 66** The libation ceremony held at the 1000 Orchid Memorial Garden on St. Croix (Tom Callahan 2023).

Garden," dedicated to the memory of all those who "lived, worked, and died" on the property (The Garden St. Croix 2023). The memorial garden established by the primarily non-descendant boards, staff, and volunteers of the botanical garden and the St. Croix Orchid Society – but the dedication was a West African libation ceremony (Figure 66), led by several prominent descendant culture bearers. This was the first 'official' West African ceremony held at the garden and demonstrates that ancestral communities' efforts to reclaim history, culture, and memory are gaining traction within the wider community on the island. Libation

ceremonies and other cultural expressions (e.g., prayer, drumming, singing, etc.) are sometimes connected to ritual practice such as placing offerings for ancestors at sites of enslavement, and in particular, windmill sites.

During a pedestrian survey to the Ham's Bluff site in 2021, participants and I encountered two offerings left approximately five meters from the entrance of the windmill. The offerings consisted of burnt red candles and cigarettes, coins, and an uneaten apple (Figure 67). The red candles and apples have distinct significance within the Ifa/Yoruba faith – calling to Shango, the fire Orisha (deity) (Montgomery 2017, 12). One participant explained that this category of offering is a Yoruba 'call to ancestors' – presumably associated with several gun-related deaths that had occurred the previous weekend. I was later informed by Afro-Caribbean spiritual practitioners (e.g., Yoruba, Obeah, Voodoo, etc.) that one must leave offerings for the ancestors when visiting windmills – at the very least, water and food (e.g., kenip fruits, kola nuts, tamarind seed pods, etc.). This practice, placing water and food, differs from other categories of offerings (see: Chapters 5 and 7), tied to acknowledging ancestral presence and paying respect, but not necessarily seeking to convene with or access the spiritual realm.



**Figure 67** An offering consisting of a candle, burnt cigarettes, and an apple at a windmill near Ham's Bluff (Zahedi 2020).

Several participants and interviewees indicated windmills as profoundly spiritual spaces – referring to them as monuments and 'witnesses' (STX-01; STX-03A/B; STX-11; STX-13) – reflecting that this was why they have become focal points for contemporary spiritual and ritual practice. The performance of spirituality at mills was noted as a subversion of institutional and colonially-imposed religion – a means of activating pre-colonial memory and identity. As one interviewee stated: "this is the magic place – a portal to the past" (STX-03).



**Figure 68** Some participants described windmills as 'portals' to the past (Zahedi 2020).

Windmills were frequently described by diverse participants, but especially by descendant participants, as spiritual, ancestral, and magical (STX-01, STX-03, STX-05, STX-11) – some of whom described them as 'portals,' indicating their shape as a means to accessing the spiritual realm (STX-03) (Figure 68). This characterization is consistent with cross-cultural examples of tall or freestanding built heritage (e.g., steeples and cathedrals), mountains (i.e., as residences for deities), or flying animals (e.g., birds, bats, etc.) associated with the divine, celestial or otherwise heavenly bodies (Latham 2019; Bernbaum 2006; Johan

2019). While this connection was not explicitly communicated through interviews or participant observation, a connection might be extrapolated by contemporary reuse of various windmills in both conventional and unconventional spiritual contexts, for example, a burial at Rust op Twist and the mill at St. Ann's Catholic Church in Barren Spot, which has been fitted with stained glass and converted into a prayer room – the noise-cancelling effect of its thick masonry walls moreover reinforcing an atmosphere of solemn reverence.

Many participants indicated that built heritage – particularly sites associated with enslavement (e.g., windmills, Forts Christiansvaern and Frederik, the botanical garden, etc.) were contemplative spaces that foster postcolonial reconciliatory experiences and 'work' (STX-01; STX-02; STX-03; STX-07; STX-11; STX-13). This sentiment was shared by both descendant and non-descendant participants:

> Then you start to think about, who were these people? Who built this? What were the living conditions back then? [….] 18th, 19th century was a period where humanity really was mean to each other. Just absolutely horrible to each other. How can we use this as a way to heal? (STX-07).

The notion that heritage spaces provide an opportunity for mediating contested or unresolved pasts has, in recent years, become a focus for heritage scholars in postcolonial spaces worldwide, particularly for those who engage in participatory research (Gonzalez-Tennant 2014; Whittington and Waterton 2021). Whittington and Waterton's (2021) paper, for example, presents visitor responses to climbing the Australian heritage site Uluru (a now prohibited but long contested activity), and engage with the enduring colonial mindsets and the wide range of emotional entanglements regarding the practice. Such studies foreground the complexity of heritage preservation, management, and interpretation in the context of diverse contemporary communities. However, a lack of official recognition for windmills on St. Croix, whether as symbols or collectively protected structures, poses a challenge to the feasibility of similar frameworks on a local scale.

Despite many on the island viewing windmills as solemn spaces, this is by no means universal. Vast segments of St. Croix's contemporary community do not view windmills as sites of memory, but rather as alluring and apolitical feats of colonial architecture. Even among non-descendants who view them as solemn spaces, they are still subject to contested practices such as weddings (STX-3A/B; STX5A/B). In this way, the question of the St. Croix windmill 'symbol' is a contested 'elephant in the room,' in which communities with "passive frames of mind" negotiate with cognitive dissonance to undermine their colonial legacies, while other communities actively seek "recognition and empathy," and as Smith and Campbell assert, "not just for past wrongs, but to sustain a lively sense of engagement with contemporary racial politics" (2015, 443). Speaking to the emotive aspects of windmills for some communities, the notion of "memory knots" (Stern 2006) is useful – through this term, Steve Stern (2006) speaks to complex and entangled narratives, highlighting memory as an asynchronous phenomenon, and mobilizing 'knots' as a metaphor to reflect fragmented experiences, conflicting emotions, and unstable narratives in the context of contested heritage. In combination, Smith and Campbell (2015) and Stern's (2006) ideas obfuscate the line between past and present, emphasizing how emotion and memory are intertwined – as well as how authorized heritage discourses and political dominance can often overrule empathetic approaches to postcolonial material heritage.

The concept of rememory can provide a useful framework for understanding the root of this dissonance within the context of postcolonial memory (Morisson 1987) – rather than recalling a specific 'happening,' rememory refers to the act of recalling and reinterpreting memories, often in a way that challenges or rewrites the original narrative, allowing individuals to reprocess, reconcile, or rediscover their past experiences. Because rememory acknowledges that memories are not fixed, but can be revisited, reframed, and re-understood, it is relevant to the theoretical underpinnings of collective memory. Applied to windmills and

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other forms of postcolonial heritage, rememory can refer to the lingering memories and legacies of colonialism that affect contemporary communities through intergenerational trauma, cultural disruption, historical silencing, and systemic oppression. In this way, (re)rememory is constructed by both individuals and collectives and is grounded in present concerns, values, and circumstances (McDowell 2016, 42). The notion of rememory is compatible with the concept of *lieu de memoire*, a physical place that acts as a 'container' or site of memory (Nora 1989). Rememory and *lieu de memoire* both hold that tangible objects (or places) both hold and activate memory – a point that parallels participant reflections about windmills on St. Croix.

These frameworks are useful in understanding how memory is constructed, negotiated, and contested and colonial sites. Merging these ideas with the notion of 'memory knots' (Stern 2006), through which conflicting narratives converge and challenge dominant historical accounts and symbolic representations, one can engage windmills as sites of dissonance –*living* sites of everyday heritage for people on the island – which are embedded within contemporary political dimensions of intersectional power. This section has discussed their significance to contemporary communities. Yet, windmills are almost exclusively 'owned' or maintained by non-descendant communities, as explained by STX-13:

> A lot of the time, the mills are under – well, the land that the mills are on is owned by the same class of people who is not interested in looking into that deeper history. How should communities here on the island approach issues around access and maintenance and interpretation when there's limited ways that they can actually physically engage with those sites, whether it's fences, whether it's dogs, people can't really access those properties. They're on private land.

The lack of access to windmills was cited as a significant issue in the Virgin Islands (STX-01; STX-07). In tandem, because windmills are not classified as 'official' and protected heritage, how they are interpreted largely falls into the hands of those without an ancestral, or even longstanding, connection to the particular plantation sites, the island, or the Caribbean.

As previously discussed, descendant participants communicated a responsibility to remember and honor their ancestors tied to plantation landscapes – for non-descendant communities, on the other hand, there is a choice to either engage or avoid their more complex symbolism and inherited dynamics of power and dominance– allowing for a detached and passive 'gaze' toward an ahistorical and apolitical understanding of the windmills (Smith and Campbell 2015). These contrasting perspectives lie at opposing ends of the community spectrum, stoking dissonance in which the windmills are a symbolic target and manifest as contested heritage. In the following section, I discuss this dissonance in the context of contemporary St. Croix.

## 7.5 Symbols of Dissonance

John Turnbridge and Gregory Ashworth (1996) argue that heritage is inherently dissonant due to its complex and often contradictory nature – suggesting that this dissonance is not only inevitable, but it is *essential* for a nuanced understanding of heritage. The dissonance centered on windmills on St. Croix can be viewed as a manifestation of these tensions, with diverse groups attributing various competing meanings and values to the structures. However, the contested nature of the windmills is not purely theoretical but has practical implications as well. Several points of contention emerge regarding windmills as contemporary heritage sites – chief among them, adaptive reuse and reappropriation.

### 7.5.1 Adaptive Reuse

From the 20th century onward, several windmills on the island have been modified – converted into cisterns (e.g., Estate Little Princess and Estate Rattan), incorporated into houses (e.g., Estate North Star and Estate Beeston Hill), church structures (e.g., Estate Barren Spot), schools (e.g., Estate Williams Delight), or modified for recreational use (i.e., Estate Diamond and Estate Canaan). Communities on the island generally hold diverse and at times ambivalent points of view regarding these modifications – ranging from enthusiasm to

indifference to disgust. For the most part, the varied responses to adaptive reuse of windmills stem from how (or if) they are understood as colonial remnants with ties to enslavement. In tandem, communities who have differential ties and connections to the island, may have contrasting views on their contemporary meaning in St. Croix.

This dissonance is not solely abstract. Adaptive reuse of windmills, especially when the structures are incorporated into privately owned or domestic structures, often results in a loss of public access to them. Because some view them as ancestral sites, participants noted that denying access was a violation of the human right to heritage – some going as far as to say one cannot 'own' a windmill, only the land upon which it sits – a point contended by one Crucian, non-descendant interviewee:

> If it's your land, you can do whatever the hell you want with it. I'm using the extreme case to say, okay, and people keep on coming to say, "all the windmills are protected." No, they are not. There's a couple of them that are because they are on the National Register. The rest of them you can bulldoze legally. You can bulldoze them. I'm not saying I'm recommending it but… (STX-04).

Indeed, some of these frustrations have emerged from the lack of 'official' protection of the windmills – local heritage legislation pertaining to modification and access stoking social tensions emerging from the autonomous management and informal stewardship of the sites. Some descendant participants indicated that they felt the government was not appropriately or adequately addressing their desires and needs for access and protection of sites tied to their ancestors.

For example, the windmill at Cotton Valley in the East End had long been a popular site for resident and tourist visitors alike (Figure 69) – one descendant interviewee stating:

> I like this space here in Cotton Valley because… it shows a great example to our tourism department and our government how just a small trail could really just put ecotourism and heritage tourism on the map for the Virgin Islands. It's not overgrown too much, and neither is it too commercialized (STX-01).

To the disappointment of many members of the public, after the site was purchased in 2023 the new owners put up a chain and a 'no trespassing sign.' Within some segments of the descendant community, this political issue is amplified on the grassroots scale because of the wealth, power, and political sway of certain factions of the non-descendant elite community, who form the majority of landholders with windmills on their properties. Over the four-year fieldwork period, only a select few windmills were identified under the stewardship of descendant people – among them, the windmills at Estates LaVallee, Nicholas, and Whim.



**Figure 69** The windmill at Estate Cotton Valley (Zahedi 2020).

None of the identified windmills stewarded by descendant communities on the island were modified or converted. Although not all descendant participants conveyed disapproval of adaptive reuse, many expressed significant opposition – one interviewee expressing her confusion and disappointment with the conversion of the windmill at Estate Canaan into a climbing wall:

> Even if it didn't have to do with enslavement – if you were in Denmark, if you were in Scotland, you wouldn't do that to a historical structure. I think that was very disrespectful…. You wouldn't do that to a historical structure in Europe … so why would you do it on this tiny island? (STX-01)

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Tourist misbehavior long been a point of discussion and ethical dilemma in the context of dark heritage (Hartman et al. 2018) – frequently attributed to moral disengagement or lack of emotional connection (Muzzo 2021). In St. Croix, however, 'inappropriate' behavior was cited as a *community* issue rather than a tourist issue – several participants describing attitudes held by some residents toward the windmills as 'colonial.'

There are several windmills on the island that have been converted or incorporated into contemporary – and usually luxury – homes (Figure 70). This form of adaptive reuse was polarizing. One descendant elder declared her disapproval, stating "We [i.e., descendant communities] do not live in the mills" (Appendix B). For others, reflecting upon mills as solemn, ancestral places, were more forthcoming about feeling confused, rather than disrespected, as to why one would want to live in a building so closely and controversially associated with the history of enslavement at all.



**Figure 70** A stately home in St. Croix, with the kitchen located in the historic windmill (New York Times 2021)

Not all forms of adaptive reuse were considered taboo. One interviewee expressed support and appreciation for the windmill modification at Estate Barren Spot, which had been converted into a prayer room at St. Ann's Catholic Church:

> I liked the prayer room! I liked that – because that's the part where we talk about you go for healing, you go for reverence, you go – it's a spiritual space. I like that. I like that a lot. But – that doesn't make money. You see what I'm saying? That's a special space (STX-01).

These perspectives highlight the intricacies of the negotiation and valuation of windmills that occurs on an individual level, and suggest that, for many, intentions are more important than adhering to specific regulatory frameworks. Indeed, this point demonstrates that the contested nature of the windmills as a 'symbol' was less to do with disagreement on how to manage them but was a question of the moral obligation to engage with the past, the source of dissonance centered on, at best, disengagement, or at worst, a lack of basic human empathy.

**7.5.2 Contested Stewards**

The valuing criteria of windmills presented another point of contestation. As discussed in the previous section, for substantial segments of the descendant community, windmills were viewed as postcolonial inheritances that were more than merely architectural forms, but living heritage sites that hold deep, and emotional meaning tied to identity and memory (STX-13). Yet several non-descendant participants actively disputed this claim – arguing that it was largely because of the non-descendent community's commitment to historic preservation that the windmills remained standing at all (STX-07; STX-18). This tension regarding who 'cares' more was emphasized in Annalisa Bolin's (2024) research on legitimizing and delegitimizing claims to heritage rights at the Landmarks Society Museum at Estate Whim on St. Croix – arguing that the claims to heritage should not solely focus on "the value of heritage to a group, but rather on the group's value to heritage itself" (Bolin 2024, 1).

Indeed, non-descendant participants representing the historic preservation community recalled the numerous collapsing or otherwise deteriorating windmills on St. Croix in the 1970s – arguing that it was their efforts in the 1980s to conserve and reinforce colonial remnants that 'saved' the windmills. Documentary evidence of this was scarce, although during pedestrian surveys I observed several windmill structures that had been reinforced with wrought iron. This restoration initiative was a response to alleged calls to deconstruct or 'tear down' windmills by 'local' (i.e., Black) communities on the island. As one interviewee recalled:

> When I first did my research, there was a lot of people like, oh, we should just tear all the sugar mills down because it's got bad connotations. I'm like, I don't think that's a good idea because if you do, then that's just one less teaching opportunity that you have. And I think too that if you start to tear down stuff like that, you cannot replace it (STX-07).

This view suggests that preservation organizations on the island, the majority of which have been run largely by elite, non-descendant, and usually white communities, were tasks with rescuing heritage *from* and *for* descendant communities, a claim several participants branded as white (heritage) saviorism, which that has historically justified colonial stewardship and gatekeeping of heritage by non-descendant communities (Giblin, Ramos, and Grout 2019; STX-11). Indeed, this narrative was dismissed by descendant participants, who noted the tendency for resident elite communities to characterize all Black communities on the island as 'local' regardless of their affiliation or ties to the island – moreover arguing that a few loud voices did not represent the opinions of the entire Black population on the island. Others contended that such narratives fuelled support for historic preservation organizations that had an established record of disinterest in collaborating with 'local' communities and who were primarily motivated by maintaining ownership – and consequently, interpretive authority – over plantation remnants and other colonial heritage sites.

This can be sore spot for some people on island, stemming from historic preservation decisions, management, and interpretation falling largely into the hands of those with access

to funding but without ancestral ties to the island, or to the Caribbean (STX-13; STX-14; STX20A/B). Moreover, this frustration exemplifies the root of long-held resentments between conflicting interest groups, in which non-descendant elite involved in historic preservation proclaim their altruistic intentions to 'teach' descendant communities about the value of their own heritage – despite descendant communities developing their own organizations, practices, and resources for cultural and historical transmission whilst overcoming a myriad of systemic barriers including structural inequitable access to funding – an agenda was expressed as demeaning, condescending, and colonial.

Although the autonomous management of windmills and other forms of colonial heritage has often achieved high levels of success in terms of maintaining, preserving, and conserving the built environment, the interpretation of this heritage has frequently presented sterile, uncritical, and unempathetic narratives of the colonial era – which positively detail the ways in which colonialism was administered at elite levels, while presenting enslaved people as a mere footnote, if mentioned at all (Appendix B). As one HGTV real estate show hosted by a non-descendant Crucian presented the history of the mills:

> On the island there is about 168 sugarmills. These are these round stone structures that are beautiful. You'll see them sitting up on the hillside just kind of scattered around the island. And this is where they would process the sugarcane. And they are just gorgeous relics of history that are still here to remind us of our past (HGTV 2014).

Of note are positive descriptions of colonial remnants as "beautiful" and "gorgeous relics of history," and the avoidance of discomforting terms such as 'slavery,' 'colonialism,' 'plantation,' or 'exploitation.' The description bypasses the use of 'slave' or 'enslaved person' entirely – employing an uncomfortable and unspecified 'they' in its place.

On the other hand, descendant participants also expressed a frustration with white-led narratives that implement narratives created around the exploitation of marginalized people's trauma (STX-05A/B; STX-11) – in which hopeless, macabre, and vulgar interpretation replicates coloniality by centering white guilt and casting descendant communities as solely

defined by the enslavement and abuse of their ancestors (Hartman 1986; Wood 2000). As noted by David Lambert, this interpretive approach "unwittingly reinforce[s] perceptions and stereotypes about the region, its histories, and its peoples […] that continue to have disempowering effects today (2004, 3). This 'whitewashing' (STX-01) of colonial narratives is enduring on the island – by which "the Black subject is rendered a blank page for white guilt to inscribe" (Wood 2000, 6) is present in public-facing interpretation, such as informational signage, guided tours, and travel brochures.

### 7.5.3 Moral Disengagement and Reappropriation

In January of 2023, a Facebook post about windmills on a Virgin Islands Photography page sparked a social media uproar and deluge of comments. It stated:

> After much discussion and conversation, [we've decided] NO posting of sugar mill or plantation photos unless: you are West Indian and want to share. Explanation: the mills and plantations are a complicated issue for many Caribbean people. Many see them as places of genocide, rape, torture, and horror. To keep this space a safe place for Caribbean people, we are banning any new posts of the mills by those who may not understand this complex issue and inadvertently offend…. Thank you for your respect and understanding (Virgin Islands Photography Club 2023).

The 118 responses were representative of a wide range of positions and attitudes regarding how windmills are engaged, represented, and interpreted by contemporary communities – some expressing anger toward the new 'rule,' and others relaying their dedicated support. Despite a clear division between some members of the group, several communicated that the new rule led them to reflect upon the meaning of the windmills and fostered a new understanding about their history:

> I had not thought about these issues regarding the sugar mills until mentioned here. I had seen them as interesting architecture for photos… because of this post I look at the sugar mills differently. Thank you (Virgin Islands Photography Club, 2023).

This comment and several similar ones indicated that non-descendant residents and visitors to the island had not been adequately exposed to descendant perspectives about

windmill heritage and history – and various responses expressed a desire for critical and empathetic interpretive signage at such sites. In the context of 'contested' plantation heritage, this demonstrates a sincere interest toward deeper understanding about the heavy symbolism it holds for descendent communities, by non-descendent communities – suggesting that there is significant opportunity for discussion toward an equitable and representative portrayal of the meaning of the windmills. Because St. Croix is such a racially segregated society, online communities offer opportunity to foster discourse between communities who do not usually engage with one another – perhaps this is an effective strategy toward increasing trans-cultural discourse on the island.

Many were strongly in favor of the new rule, including one member who stated, "flowers and candles should be laid in these spaces" (Virgin Islands Photography Club 2023). Other members of the group voiced their disapproval of the policy, many arguing that "history is not to be erased" but rather to be "learned from," – some reducing the post to "race baiting"[23] (Virgin Islands Photography Group, 2023).

Indeed, this post is indicative of wider public discourse on the island regarding appropriate and culturally sensitive behaviors at windmill sites – which some descendent participants described as a colonial 'fascination' with windmills, through which they are viewed primarily as aesthetic and romantic architectural forms or, alternatively, a strange draw to the macabre – both approaches missing their nuanced symbolism. Ethnographic observation at various public events, interviews, and collaborative surveys deemed certain activities hosted in or around windmills as disrespectful – and perhaps the most provocative and inciting activity – weddings.

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[23] It should be noted that the administrator who posted the image and responded to comments is a white ancestral Virgin Islander.

### 7.5.4 Sacred Spaces, not Party Places

In recent years, 'plantation weddings' have become socially taboo on the mainland U.S. (Holmes 2022), although plantations and remain popular wedding venues in the Caribbean. Various digital platforms – among them Pinterest, the Knot, and Airbnb – have suspended promoting plantations as wedding venues and vacation rentals. As argued by Rashad Robinson, president of Color of Change, a racial justice organization, "you have a multi-multimillion-dollar industry that makes money off of glorifying sites of human rights atrocities" (Murphy 2019).



**Figure 71** Windmill weddings are a major point of contention on the island, as demonstrated by these contrasting social media posts, which refer to the windmill at the Buccaneer Hotel (left: GoToSt.Croix 2024, right: Vintage Caribbean 2024).

St. Croix is a popular wedding destination and its plantations, especially windmills, are actively promoted as ceremonial venues – a point of fierce contention between communities on the island – at times dividing communities, families, and sometimes couples (Figure 71). For many, the problematic nature of plantation weddings seems clear, as one participant questioned, "[why] would you want to get married at Auschwitz?" (Appendix B).

Several former sugar plantations on St. Croix – among them the Buccaneer Hotel (i.e., Estate Shoy), the St. George Village Botanical Garden (i.e., Estate St. George), the

Featherleaf Inn (i.e., Estate Butler Bay), the Grange Estate (i.e., Estate Grange), Estate Cane Garden, and various others – are popular wedding venues. Although advertised as historical wedding venues, there is scant reference to colonialism nor enslavement:

> If you're looking for a romantic venue that will transport you to another time, then Cane Garden is the place for you. Once a sugarcane plantation, Estate Cane Garden is rich with history (Estate Cane Garden 2023).

Because many maintained windmills and plantation grounds on St. Croix are privately held, it is largely up to autonomous stewards to decide how to manage them – and in tandem, how to advertise and interpret them as the pillar of their business ventures. Indeed, on the topic of weddings, plantation owners held diverse positions, ranging from enthusiasm to discomfort. In one instance, the owners of a business located on one estate explained the complexity of feeling reluctant to host weddings at the windmill, whilst having to balance the needs of their business:

> And we had someone else who's lived on the island for many, many years just like, calling and saying 'please, please can I have my wedding [at the windmill]? I really, *really* want to have it there.' […] And I said, no sorry, it's just not ready yet. We don't have the ability to do that […] but I think historic spaces should be preserved, and they should be used […] I think we need to look at the deeper issue of: how do we want to do historic preservation? And how do we want to *fund* historic preservation? (STX-05B).

In this particular case although the site[24] is now open for weddings, the business owners have prioritized also hosting culturally engaged events and offer discounts for local organizations. Other property owners expressed a similar ambiguity regarding how to approach weddings at windmills on their properties:

> **STX-03B:** Yeah, for me they symbolize love, peace, and they don't they symbolize slavery […] At the end of the day, it symbolizes the colonial people that came here […] they took over the land, they made the people work, they chained them. There's nothing good about it. It was all bad. It's just we're making it happy now. We've made it a happy place […] we choose to [view them positively] and some people choose to be stuck. And they can't get past what happened. So, there's people like you can't even say the word. We're very sensitive

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[24] Although the site is open for weddings, at the time of submitting this dissertation the windmill was not.

saying 'plantage' or plantation on all art […] like, plantations were a big thing for weddings, and then it became a *bad* thing for weddings.

**STX-03A:** They went on Airbnb and VRBO and took all of the plantations out if they saw a keyword plantation because of what it signified.

**STX-03B:** And we still have weddings. People still want to get married here – that happens.

While the above interviewees argue that the decision to advertise their windmills and plantations as wedding venues was approached with sensitivity and that they felt ambivalent about it, it should also be explicitly stated that both sites are multi-million-dollar properties (STX-03; STX-05) that *actively* advertise themselves as wedding venues. In tandem, the conflicted moralizing of this issue by plantation-owning interviewees might also be a means of saving face amidst the recognition that this use of sites of enslavement is openly upsetting and disgusting for substantial segments of the island community (STX-22). Ultimately, such business ventures are enormously profitable for property owners on an island plagued by systemic inequity, in which nearly one third of people live under the federal poverty line (US Census 2020).

The wedding discussion was not limited to property owners – non-plantation owning participants also held diverse positions which, although generally divided along color lines, were not always. In one example, a descendant participant explained discomfort with a relative who decided to get married at a plantation; despite serving as maid of honor, when she found out the location of the service, she felt conflicted about attending at all. Ultimately, while she decided to attend the wedding in support of her family, she refused to participate in photographs at the site. In this case, as with the business owners above, individuals felt tension and ambivalence in balancing their personal beliefs and the behaviors of their close community, moreover, reiterating that such negotiations are complex and circumstantial.

The systemic inequalities and uneven power dynamics that endure as a result of colonialism on the island have resulted in a stratified socio-economic society on the island

which, historically, manifested in landownership and historical interpretation falling largely into the hands of the white and wealthy. However, in recent years, the proverbial pendulum has swung back, and descendant communities have become leaders in the public interpretation of the island's colonial history, including taking administrative control of the historically 'elite' organization, St. Croix Landmarks Society (Bolin 2024). Although it is unclear what prompted this intellectual shift, participants cited both the proliferation of social media and the centennial of the "Transfer" as events that nurtured community discourse on topics such as decolonial theory, social justice, (post)colonial trauma, and ownership of the past. Several participants also communicated that the period following hurricanes is the best time to look for 'ruins' because the stripping effect of hurricane-force winds make structures more visible in places where they are typically obscured by bush (STX-07). That Hurricane Maria and the Centennial of Transfer both occurred in the same year, likely influenced both the resurgence in local interest in colonial remnants, as well as the emergence of a local 'decolonial turn' in St. Croix and the former Danish West Indies more broadly.

Indeed, despite the ever-present din surrounding windmills as contested symbols, there is opportunity for common ground. As demonstrated by the comments section of the Virgin Islands Photography Club's Facebook post (2023), non-descendent communities are interested in developing deeper awareness and insight into the contemporary meaning of windmills – and adopting perspectives that are driven by empathy and a commitment to social justice. Perhaps facilitating more opportunities to do so – whether online or off – could help break some intra-community tensions on the island.

## 7.6 Heritage Interpretation and Tourism

In her book, *The Sugar Industry on St. Croix,* Crucian historian Karen Thurland writes:

> I vividly remember the fields of sugar cane around my house in Estate La Grande Princess…
> eating pieces of sugar cane was a special treat for everyone and those little pieces of sugar

cane were like candy to us. As a young girl, I witnessed the dramatic change on St. Croix from an agrarian society to an industrial economy and tourist-oriented destination (2014, 1). In the mid-twentieth century, St. Croix, like many other Caribbean islands, transitioned from agriculture to tourism, a regional phenomenon that has been written about widely (Weaver 2004; Jordan and Jolliffe 2013; Monzote 2013). Despite an overarching emphasis on the environmental (Monzote 2013), political (Guilbault and Rommen 2019), and socio-economic (Wong 2015) impacts of this shift, particularly in regard to postcolonial and plantation tourism (Körber 2017), there has been relatively little concentration on the community-level negotiations of interpreting and marketing colonial built heritage for tourist 'consumption' in the Caribbean – although research on this subject is prolific elsewhere, particularly in the American South (Harnay 2022; Bright et al. 2018; D'Harlingue 2015). Indeed, recent contemporary circumstances, including the designation of St. Croix as a National Heritage Area (2022) necessitates a closer examination of the island's colonial heritage including windmills, which critically engages present-day meaning(s) within a growing heritage tourism economy.



**Figure 72** A home built into the remains of the sugar factory at Estate Castle Coakley (Zahedi 2024).

Although the sugar industry was most lucrative on St. Croix during the Danish colonial period, it existed before and continued after, forming a significant component of the island's economy through the mid-twentieth century – a living memory for many people on the island. This includes ancestral descendant communities on St. Croix, as well as more recent immigrants to the island who came to the island to work in sugar agriculture and production, some of whom have ties to colonial sugar histories on other islands. Many ancestral communities remained living on estates that were deeply intertwined with their personal family histories, as described by one interviewee:

> Remember that people, a lot of the working class on this island, were still cutting cane in the early '60s [...] They're descendant of the enslaved, and they're still living in the homes that were built for their ancestors 150 years before (STX-04).

Many abandoned 'workers' villages' can be seen across the island and, in their derelict state, offer a biographical look into change over time – a combination of lime mortar and concrete, quarried coral substrate and cinder block, wooden lintels and rebar – evidencing that plantation remnants might not be relegated to as distant a past as it might seem on the surface. Some villages remain occupied into the present, for example at Estate LaVallee. In other cases, plantation structures have been adapted for contemporary use (Figure 72).

**7.6.1 Plantation Museums – Toward Empathetic Interpretation**

Indeed, in many ways sugar plantations, which include windmills, form a significant aspect of the contemporary landscape. Despite diverse participants indicating that plantations and windmills were contemplative spaces (STX-01; STX-02; STX-03A/B; STX-05A/B), they are seldom interpreted this way as tourist attractions.

Both historic houses (e.g., Estate Whim Museum; the Grange Estate; Lawaetz Museum, etc.) and leisure grounds (e.g., Estate St. George; Estate Butler Bay; Estate Little Princess, etc.) are attractions for tourists to St. Croix – and it is important to be mindful that plantation museums are "constructed and marketed in selective ways to reaffirm long-

standing patterns of social power and inequality" (Bright et al. 2018, 14). In tandem, there is

a political dynamic inherent to tourism which is compounded in a postcolonial context –

presenting selective views of the past, which privilege narratives tied to the elite class over

the enslaved has contemporary implications – including delivering heritage tourism as a

"product" and "set of social values" about the past (Bright et al. 2008, 3). To this end

windmills, conceptualized as heritage symbols, emerge as political symbols as well.

Across many conversations with individuals representing various communities –

plantation owners, descendant Afro-Crucians, non-descendant white Crucians, historians,

artists, activists, and others – a point of disconnect that became apparent was the notion of

ancestral ties to windmills. As explained by one interviewee:

> Everybody romanticizes their own history, and particularly if you're going to sell it to a bunch
> of tourists, you've got to romanticize this, because the tourists don't want the boring real-life
> history. If my ancestor was here, I might want to know something about him. But if my
> ancestor wasn't here, I'm not interested in much of the nitty gritty history. I'm interested in the
> romantic, large-scale history, and that's just the way it is (STX-04).

Tourism presents a challenging juncture for communities on the island because it exacerbates

the enduring tensions regarding memories and interpretations of the past – in particular, the

centering of the perspectives of enslaved people over those of the colonial elite. While

Turnbridge and Ashworth (1996) contend that heritage is inherently dissonant, it is also

important to note that deeply rooted and systemic inequities can pose a significant challenge

within postcolonial contexts, which often result in an uneven playing field within the heritage

industry. Alderman (2010) notes that memorializing enslavement is more complex than

simply adding other narratives into existing interpretations – it requires a reclamation and

recovering of marginalized and erased narratives, a process that can often be contentious.

For those working in the tourism industry, there is no existing structure or guidance on

how to appropriately address the island's colonial history – leaving the unofficial but

dominant discourse, which underplays violence, exploitation, and trauma, in favor of a more

'pleasant' narrative driving the narrative consumed by tourists. Tour operators on St. Croix indicated that they found themselves ill-equipped to navigate complex societal debates about windmills, negotiating between offering a 'selective' history and reconciling their own discomfort in presenting a full and critical discussion of slavery:

> And I find that perhaps I have in the beginning, living here, I was not really as concerned about [the windmills]. It seemed like, well, it's kind of cute little thing, looks like a symbol, and that there were so many of them. That was sort of an icon. I learned through my association with and reading, studying the history, that it wasn't really such a jolly reminder of the past […] so it's been hard for me as a tour guide […] I felt that it was important to not make it too miserable in my rendition of the history, but still make people aware of [it] (STX-02).

The point about not wanting to make history too 'miserable' was echoed by others in the tourism industry, who described the delicate balance of presenting the island's colonial history while not 'depressing' tourists. The potential for negative emotional responses from tourists was cited as a chief concern for tour operators, many of whom owned their own independent businesses that rely upon customer reviews and word of mouth for advertising. Although not explicitly stated, the above interviewee also implied an anxiety, uncertainty, and discomfort to fully engage with the history of enslavement – despite the Danish colonial theme of her tour.

Indeed, in the context of windmill tourism on St. Croix, the emotional comfort of a largely white and non-Crucian community of tour operators and largely white and non-Caribbean community of tourists was a central issue cited by descendant participants – moreover evidencing that moral relativism and emotional distancing the history of enslavement creates space for contested engagement. Speaking to the tangible effects of this non-attachment in practice, one interviewee noted:

> [The windmills] are a point of fascination in their romanticization by Europeans because they're beautiful, and they draw you in. They are edifices that capture your attention. It is only recently that people of African Crucian descent are beginning to… challenge the way those

> buildings and edifices are being treated … once we start talking about the function and [there is] the realization that those mills were, in fact, the engines of the sugar industrial complex, [and] enslaved people were driving that engine, both literally and figuratively, and [their] blood… was drawn in those buildings by the process that was used to crush sugar from it – some people don't want to hear that story (STX-13).

Although windmills are a common aspect of tour itineraries, they remain somewhat disconnected from the human toll of their historic use – and in turn, continue to present as commodified 'value-neutral' heritage (Bright et al. 2018, 3). To this end, crafting comfortable and positive emotional experiences for the tourism community, despite emotionally challenging or 'dark' subject matter seems to be, for many, a priority over communicating and interpreting such sites with empathy, accuracy, and responsibility.



**Figure 73** "The Planters Chair" Exhibit at Estate Whim Museum (Belle 2011).

During fieldwork, I attended tours at various former plantations, two of which were during 'Cruise Ship Days.' Despite an apparent discomfort engaging directly with the history of enslavement, the interpretive strategy mobilized by various non-descendant docents encouraged tour groups to retrospectively view themselves in the position of the planter's family – a framework traditionally utilized in plantation museums in the U.S. to "identify with and form emotional bonds with individuals from the past" (Modlin, Alderman, and Gentry 2011, 4). During a visit to a historic Great House, I was encouraged by the site manager to sit in and fully recline in a replica planters chair. The assumed seating position in a planter's chair is a vulnerable position for many women, demonstrating his unawareness of

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the intersectional dimensions of the object's symbolism – the historical function and meaning of the object, as well as the assumed seated posture (Figure 73). I was invited to reflect upon how relaxing such a position must have been for the planter reclined on the porch after a day of 'hard work' in the Caribbean heat.

## 7.6.2 The Emotive Museum – It's not Black and White

In plantation museums on St. Croix, interpretive strategies centering on emotional engagement with the experiences of past people is often centered on the experiences of the white elite, while the complex range of emotions experienced by the enslaved and/or laboring class are often left uninterpreted – archaeological remnants, such as windmills, frequently left largely to speak for themselves. When interpreted as sites of enslavement, the interpretive language implemented is frequently either detached and apolitical (STX-02) or violent and jarring (STX-05) – neither of which adequately represent their deeper meaning, especially as it pertains to contemporary descendant communities on the island. The centering of whiteness in the commodification of windmills for tourists and non-descendant consumption was cited as a concern for some, as one interviewee confided:

> I'm afraid of the commercializing and whitewashing of the mills. Because as much as I do want people to come here, I want people to understand the African narrative of the things that happen here. However, we live in a free country. Persons can say what they want and feel what they want. But I mean, socially, can we not see … how things have been whitewashed in the past? (STX-01).

This point illustrates the way that windmills can potentially serve as conduits of postcolonial discourse across the island – highlighting contemporary intra- and inter-community tensions, the value of multi-cultural perspectives in the interpretation of heritage, and the politics of recognition. Indeed, it gives weight to the affective and emotional nature of 'heritage that hurts' (Uzzell and Ballantyne 1998).

The notion of 'hot interpretation,' which uses emotive and challenging heritage as prompt for visitors to (re)examine their own beliefs and experiences and increase social

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awareness, may work especially well in this context (Uzzell 1996). For example, Ballantyne and Uzzell mobilize 'hot interpretation' in facilitating community healing in post-Apartheid South Africa, claiming its benefits in promoting reconciliation through emotional engagement within heritage spaces (1993). Although hot interpretation is frequently applied to post-war contexts, many of these spaces share elements with the (post)colonial Caribbean, including tense or otherwise fractured social fabric, economic decline, resentment toward enduring systemic inequalities, and a reluctance to engage with events relegated to the past (i.e., enslavement, colonialism, etc.) – an approach increasingly applied by contemporary artists in the Caribbean, for example LaVaughn Belle and Monica Marin's (2011) exhibition *The Great House: A Reimagining of Place and Power*.

Several participants argued that if tour operators were uncomfortable engaging with the legacies of colonialism and enslavement, that they should not include such sites on their itineraries. The point was also raised that tour operators were partly or largely to blame for tourists' lack of historical awareness. Given the response of several members of the Virgin Islands Photography Club to the post about photographing windmills, there seems to be an ignorant but receptive community who welcome more open discourse regarding the history and contemporary value of windmills for descendant communities. Several participants expressed frustration that the limited nature of interpretation of the windmills both at the sites themselves and in printed or web-based resources was a hindrance to public education and understanding of the mills, for tourists, residents, and locals alike.

The 'erasure' of African and Afro-Caribbean legacies was frequently cited as symptomatic of a wider problem in the retelling of the island's history, which has long been expressed as embedded in a white European (i.e., colonial) perspective, as expressed by this participant:

> When you think of Castle Coakley, you hear the name, it's already associated with a
> European person because the gentleman's name is Coakley Lexham. So, his legacy has lived

> on. … But when you go to all these other places, like Negro Bay and so forth, like what story tells? What story tells? (STX-01).

Certainly, this point speaks to historical naming practices that resulted in the glorified personification of grand 'European' estates and the marginalization of African spaces. It moreover reiterates the notion of colonial inheritances; despite many plantation properties changing hands numerous times over the past two hundred years, on contemporary St. Croix most retain their colonial estate names. Indeed, the overemphasis on architecture, and the underemphasis of historical context seems to remedy some discomfort faced by non-descendant communities in fully engaging the windmills as symbolic heritage.

The 'beauty' as one aspect of the windmills was shared across communities. However, the frustration communicated by several participants was that a singular view of the mills as *only* beautiful was inherently problematic. In turn, this point of difference manifested as a contention between the architectural significance of the windmills as 'beautiful' historic sites that evoked a romanticized look at the colonial past, or as living heritage sites that are emotive, reverent, living heritage sites. As one non-descendant community member recalled: "I remember the beautiful windmill, that conical shape that's so traditional it sticks right into your mind, looking over us" (STX-09). Indeed, the visual prominence of the windmills – their unique shape, towering quality, and fine stonemasonry (STX-12) – often becomes the primary attraction for communities who lack knowledge or interest in their historical context.

Participants expressed that despite the dissonant foci on windmills as archaeological objects by non-local communities, that as contested cultural sites they facilitated opportunities for cross-cultural reconciliation between diverse communities on the island. In this way, windmills inadvertently served as unifying spaces, despite dissonant understandings of the politics and poetics of space (Bachelard 1958), as explained by this interviewee:

> Sometimes people see the beauty of your home, but you don't see it. For a long time, persons from the Continental U.S. and from Europe – they saw the beauty... But for locals – it hasn't been like that – the narrative has been erasure, in our minds. And that's not entirely our fault

because (laughs) we didn't know the narrative! And now we are like "Oh… I see what you were seeing! It *is* beautiful. But they were seeing it as – "it's a beautiful structure" but (pause) there is also so much colonial trauma – I'm not saying we can recall it, but we have to get over colonial trauma – we have to reconcile with these spaces in order to push ourselves forward [and embrace] our own spaces and our own identities (STX-01).

Such perspectives speak to the embodied nature of heritage sites which can arouse powerful and emotional experiences for individuals and collectives. Speaking to concerns that the promotion of cultural heritage has been "little more than a cynical attempt to exploit and satisfy the public's appetite for reconstructing and fabricating comforting and nostalgic images of, and myths about the past," Uzzell contends that interpretation can instead play an important role in "enhancing people's awareness, understanding and appreciation of time and place" (1996, 219). In the context of windmills, which have strong affective impact on certain individuals and communities on the island, the emotional entanglement and resonance of this heritage is reflects deeper community needs regarding the politics of recognition and memory (Smith and Campbell 2015).

Tourism presents significant challenges to communities on the island – both in terms of the commodification of heritage and a pervasive discomfort with engaging with the painful and shameful legacy of colonialism. Although often presented as unempathetic and uneducated 'villains,' tourists are among the most receptive and complacent consumers of heritage (Pearce 2019) – arriving to the island to accept the narrative presented to them and largely viewing museums and interpretive materials as historical 'fact' (STX-03B; STX-12). Tourism is often situated as a postcolonial heritage 'problem,' however the dissonant nature of heritage interpretation on the island is more correctly framed as a community issue – by which contemporary dimensions of intersectional power enduringly marginalize more empathetic and equitable representations of the past and present (Whittington and Waterton 2021).

Certainly, the debate surrounding the windmills of St. Croix highlights the complex and often contentious nature of heritage tourism. Although largely regarded as 'symbols' of the island, the significance and meaning of the windmills is interpreted and approached in diverse ways, largely stemming from a lack of discourse between certain communities on the island. As the island continues to rely on attracting and sustaining communities of tourists, unless this issue is addressed, tension will continue to build. In the context of drafting a management plan for St. Croix's heritage area, it is therefore essential to acknowledge and address the emotional complexity and diverse attachments to windmills and other forms of colonial heritage – striving toward more inclusive, empathetic, and nuanced approaches to the island's history.

In this way, the enduring legacies of colonialism and their complex repercussions are represented through the symbolic heritage of St. Croix's windmills. These legacies, while unresolved, continue to shape the contemporary worlds and realities of communities on the island today. As the diverse public negotiate the value(s) and meaning(s) of the archaeological remnants of the past, they participate in performing the intangible aspects of culture that drive our shared humanity. These tacit universals – lineage, love, admiration, pride, pain, and loss – are encapsulated by conversations and memories at windmill sites. As communities flesh out these tensions, deeper insight, reconciliation, and understanding of the past will undoubtedly come to the fore.

## 7.7 Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the windmills of St. Croix, contending that they are multivocal sites that hold a wide range of meanings among, between, and within the diverse public(s). As cultural symbols they represent the ongoing mitigated relationships between memory and identity in which the meanings and symbolism around sites of enduring heritage are evolving and changing all the time. As revealed by interviews and participant

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observation, windmills are not merely relics of the colonial past but are living heritage sites with contemporary social meaning to the communities on the island who engage with (or avoid) them.

Indeed, for many, windmills served as highly emotive heritage sites that could assist in unlocking collective ancestral memories and drive deep personal inquiry into notions of the self in the context of the universal, particularly for descendant individuals. Participants expressed reverence and pride for their ancestors, as well as gratitude and a sense of bittersweet contentedness, perhaps best expressed through the words of this participant:

> And I got emotional there. Because you heard the saying "you are your ancestors' wildest dreams?" (STX-01).

For communities around the world, such as those on St. Croix, cultural remnants (e.g., windmills) are not valued simply because they are 'old' but instead, their value is socially constructed in the way that they are still present and interwoven in everyday life. Despite the enduring materiality of the island's windmills, their symbolic significance constantly undergoes micro- and macro- shifts depending on contemporary circumstances pertaining to economic, political, and societal needs. As Harrison and Rose (2016) contend "the processes and practices of keeping the past alive in the present, like the practice and processes of keeping the future alive in the present, is collaborative" (264). This perspective presents such challenges as opportunities, allowing the complexity of dissonant heritage, like St. Croix's windmills, to initiate productive discourse that, ultimately, has the potential to increase social cohesion by facilitating cross-cultural understanding.

For Caribbean descendant communities, Puerto Rican decolonial scholar Nelson Maldanano-Torres perhaps stated it best when he said: "we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday" (2007, 243). This notion is perhaps at the heart of the dissonance surrounding St. Croix's windmills. Although as archaeological sites, windmills are seldom disengaged from their colonial context – they are sometimes distanced from their *post*colonial context.

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Although this distinction seems small for those who lack ancestral or personal connections to them, for others, the enduring legacy of colonialism is omnipresent, across both material and immaterial landscapes. When asked what the windmills represent, one interviewee shared:

> It's a place of reflection. Reverence. Appreciation. Healing. So, to me, that's what it embodies. That's how I see it" (STX-12).

As ubiquitous and hyper-visual 'symbols,' windmills are at the heart of community-level discourse of the island's (post)colonial heritage and its wider implications. For diverse communities on the island, the meanings ascribed to windmills are often far more complex than colonialization or enslavement. While they exist as tangible remnants of the colonial past, their meaning for various communities, especially descendant communities, reflects the intangible weight of the colonial past and the memory of those who endured enslavement – this memory distilled into the contemporary world as a heritage legacy that represents the endurance, resilience, and power of the human spirit. The question that remains is: how to include this in a tourism brochure?

# Chapter 8: Fire
# Embers of Resistance: The Fireburn of 1878

## 8.1 Introduction

Among the most pivotal moments in the collective memory of contemporary Crucians is the Fireburn of 1878 – a multi-day uprising during which Afro-Caribbean laborers living in St. Croix under the exploitative Labor Act of 1849 burned nearly two-thirds of the plantations on the island in pursuit of social, economic, and political justice (see: 2.7) (Figure 74). In St. Croix and the US Virgin Islands, the Fireburn has long captured the fascination of scholars and the wider public (Armstrong 1971; Highfield 1983; Tyson 2014; Navarro et al. 2019; White 2023). In Denmark, an intensifying interest in its Caribbean colonial history emerged in the years leading up to and following the 2017 Centennial of the Transfer – Fireburn taking center stage due to its prominence and various funded Fireburn-related projects tied to the occasion (Halberg 2018; Østergaard Hansen 2017; Petersen 2020).
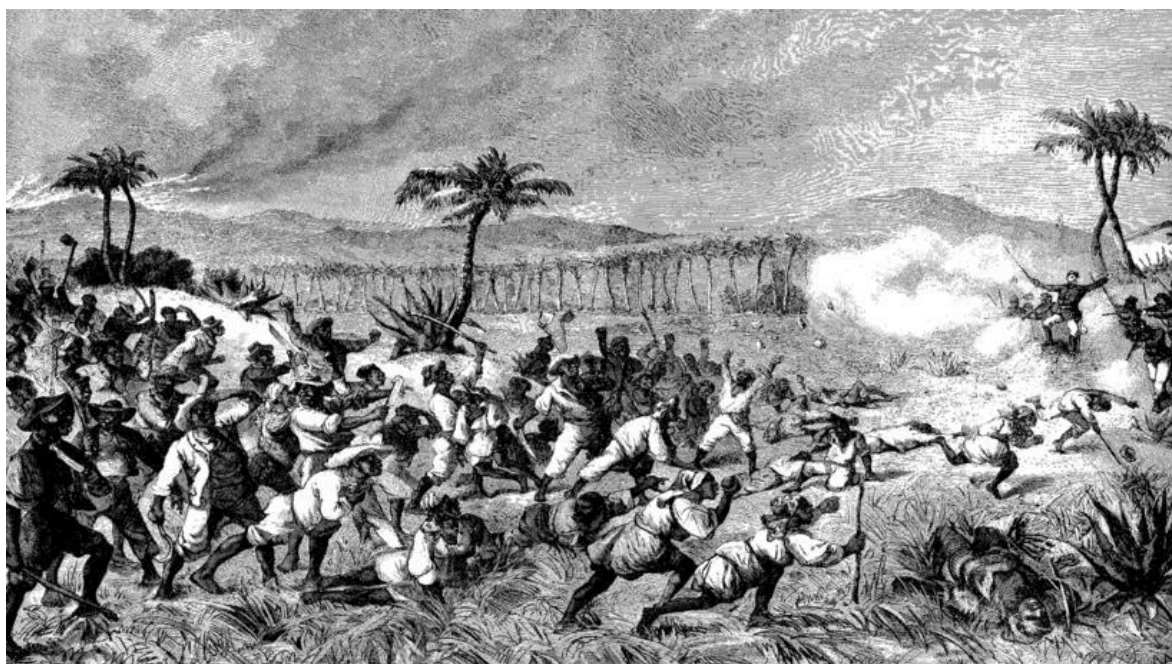


**Figure 74** A historical depiction of the Fireburn (Illustreret Tidende 1878).

Historically, the little discourse in Denmark about their West Indian colonies has often been described as a form of cultural "amnesia" (see: Blaagaard 2010), "shaped as a postcolonial nostalgic longing" (Andersen 2020, 52) centered on the loss of its former 'paradises' in the Caribbean. Temi Odumosu, writing on a Nordic predisposition toward an exceptionalist self-perception, reflects that Denmark has largely seen itself as "separate from or untouched by the afterlife of colonialism." (2019: 618). This is despite the significant wealth it amassed from the sale of the islands ($25 million, $660 billion adjusted for inflation) - and the progressive social programs it was able to establish as a result – contributing to a national forgetting and (de)selective memory of its colonial history. The Transfer has, in many ways, facilitated a compartmentalization of Denmark's colonial and contemporary legacies – by which national narratives disentangle the Danish Empire from the Danish Social Welfare State. Among the most critical voices about Denmark's memory politics come from within Denmark (Berisha 2022; Andersen 2020; Jensen 2019) – evidencing that this postcolonial struggle is both internal and transregional.

Lindqvist, noting the success of Denmark's "distancing… from the unsavory aspects of their colonial history" (2013, 54), attributes it to several factors – firstly, the downplaying of Denmark's role in Trans-Atlantic slavery relative to other colonial nations (2.6.1); secondly, a lack of immigration from the Danish West Indies to Denmark and, as a result, a lack of national confrontation with the colonial past and; thirdly, strategic depictions of the 'cosmopolitan' nature of the Danish West Indies, which defer the responsibilities for colonial activities, including acts of brutality, to non-Danish planters. Indeed, peer-reviewed articles with titles such as "How Danish were the Danish West Indies?" (Kühl 2020) perpetuate the narrative that despite existing under Danish colonial rule, it was actually other Europeans who were the 'real' colonial actors in the Danish West Indies, thereby distancing Denmark from its colonial history.

Drawing from this discourse within Denmark and in St. Croix, this chapter examines Denmark's colonial legacy as a transregional phenomenon, drawing from the Fireburn as a primary case study – and examines material heritage (e.g., archives, museum collections, and historical sites) in Denmark as an expanded field of "imperial debris" (Stoler 2009), which tether it to its former colonies. It argues that Denmark's material custody over colonial records and objects enduringly replicates colonial structures by perpetuating uneven power dynamics, through which Denmark, as a former empire, is able to retain narrative dominance and control over the story it tells about a shared past.

This contemporary heritage discourse, which teeters between portraying Denmark as a 'benevolent' colonizer, and downplaying or denying its colonial legacy entirely – can be attributed to various contemporary factors, not least of which is a fear of the loss of national pride, through which self-constructions of modern "Danish-ness" (e.g., equality, peace, humility, collective well-being, etc.) are under threat (Shain 2024, 242). In response, this chapter contends that by pivoting its narrative approach, in which Denmark 'leans into' the entangled and complex nature of its postcolonial legacy, historical events such as the Fireburn, can instead function to *reaffirm* and *reinforce* contemporary Danish values – so long as they are commemorated and interpreted as significant to *Danish,* rather than solely Danish West Indian, heritage. This perspective contributes to academic discourse by demonstrating how embracing the discomfort and dissonance inherent to the postcolonial process and highlighting the notion of sharedness, offers profound opportunities for the co-creation of knowledge, reconciliation, and postcolonial redress.

In this chapter, I seek to address substantial gaps in the bridging of spatially constituted (post)colonial historiographies and contemporary discourse, drawing from landscape studies (Byrne 2003; Radovic 2014; Spencer-Wood 2010), memory studies (Thrift 1999; Stoler 2009; Bastian 2006), and the politics of commemoration (Blaagaard 2019;

Jensen 2019; Körber 2017). In doing so, I aim to reframe the Fireburn as a profoundly entangled legacy that enduringly bonds Denmark and St. Croix through history and heritage, whilst eliciting diverse emotional responses regarding self-representation, postcolonial identity, and the future.

The chapter begins by presenting the sources of data and methods for this research, followed by a brief discussion about the Fireburn, which provides a foundation for the contemporary debates about colonial heritage in St. Croix and Denmark. Building upon Denis Byrnes' notion of 'nervous landscapes' (2003) to encompass a contemporary framework, I explore how postcolonial discourse about the Fireburn is spatially constituted – in Denmark, by upholding colonial 'aphasia' (Grøn 2017) and preserving self-representations of colonial benevolence and mildness – and in St. Croix, by (re)activating discussions centered on the politics of (mis)recognition, Crucian identity, and "postcolonial residues," that include tangible colonial remnants as well as intangible inheritances, such as globalized structural inequality (Hall 2001). Drawing on Stanka Radovic's (2014) ideas about the spatial dimensions of colonial violence, I then investigate the reluctance and resistance to postcolonial discourse in contemporary Denmark as a modern 'nervous landscape' in which postcolonial reckoning challenges deeply held notions of Danish identity and activates the fear of engaging with wider calls for reparative justice. This is explored through a case study about dissonant representations and memories of Queen Mary Thomas, one of the leaders of the Fireburn. Next, I engage with the polarity of historical silence and sound through a postcolonial material lens – this idea is grounded in the interpretation of two sonic objects from St. Croix on display in contemporary Danish Museums – the 'tutu' (i.e., conch shell trumpet) (*Voices from the Colonies,* National Museum Denmark 2024) and plantation bell from Estate La Grange (Danish National Maritime Museum 2024). These objects are deeply

intertwined within microhistories of the Fireburn, although they are not interpreted as such in the Danish Museum context – therefore representing a 'deafening' postcolonial silence. Through this lens, this chapter aims to contribute to contemporary scholarship by critically engaging with (post)colonial memory and ambiguity and bridge spatial-temporal narrative dissonances between enduringly connected communities (i.e., St. Croix and Denmark) – delving into the nuanced and complex transcultural debates surrounding the Fireburn, how it is remembered, and its significance within our contemporary world(s).

## 8.2 Sources and Methods

This chapter and its focus – the Fireburn – were inspired by conversations and observations of countless community events, meetings, lectures, exhibitions, and other public programs about colonialism and postcolonialism in St. Croix, Denmark, and online between 2020 and 2024. As a dual resident of St. Croix and Denmark during this period, I gained unique and valuable insights into the precarious tensions, contested narratives, and multifaceted perspectives regarding this seminal event for communities in both places.

Ancillary to many discussions in St. Croix and Denmark was an implicit presumption of an incompatibility between Traditional Knowledge (e.g., oral history, spiritual and ritual practice, artistic expression) and Institutional Knowledge (e.g., archives, museum collections, historic buildings, etc.), between and within communities in both places (STX-05; STX-11, STX-13, STX-14). Although communities in Denmark and St. Croix held heterogenous views on this front, emanating from this discourse was the view that Traditional Knowledge was primarily 'stored' in St. Croix, and Institutional Knowledge, in Denmark. Although this situation, to some degree, pertains to historical differences in epistemological legacies and traditions in African Diasporic and European contexts, the topic of custody and 'ownership' of colonial collections emerged as a key issue – provoking emotional responses from individuals in both places.

Jeanette Bastian, who has written extensively on archival custody of materials relating to the Danish West Indies, reflected, "on March 31, 1917, a small group of islands in the Caribbean began losing its memory" (2001, 96). Subsequent to the Transfer, colonial records in the Danish West Indies were splintered – some removed to Denmark, others to the U.S., some left in the 'former' colonies, while others, whether intentionally, by negligence, or due to disaster, were destroyed (see: 2.8). Today, the vast majority of these colonial documents are held in physical repositories across seas and oceans. Bastian (2004) discusses this postcolonial issue through the notion of 'owning' memory and how archival records reflect (or do not reflect) the colonial past and how limited access to primary historical records has affected how people in the US Virgin Islands construct memory – a 'search' for memory satisfied through public commemoration and folk tradition.

Attending to this epistemological issue, the Virgin Islands Studies Collective (VISCO), has written about the Fireburn by consulting colonial archives, whilst directly attending to the 'gaps and silences in the archives' (Navarro et al. 2017). Tami Navarro et al. engage with the prison records of the four queens of the Fireburn, who were sentenced to life imprisonment at the Women's Prison in Christianshavn, Denmark (although they were returned to St. Croix in 1887) – delving into the notion of 'embodied knowledge' (2017, 21), through a Black feminist and decolonial lens. This academic intervention speaks to the undercurrent of postcolonial reality for people in Denmark's former colonies – tied to notions of positionality, representation, and who has the 'right' to speak. As a transregional phenomenon, the question of postcolonial ownership over collections is aimed toward a reckoning about the rights of access to information about one's ancestors, and a fundamental right to self-representation and agency – many Crucians arguing that for centuries, they had been written 'about,' often in Danish, in both colonial records and contemporary scholarship,

whilst provided little opportunity to balance the scales – through repatriation, access,

selection, and reparative justice (Kahina 2013; STX-13; STX-14).

**8.2.1 Registers of Postcolonial Memory**

Because of culturally-situated differences in epistemological traditions, this issue has

been in some respects, perpetuated by an over-articulation of oral history and 'traditional'

knowledge as the *only* meaningful knowledge to descendant communities on St. Croix (STX-

09) – a false narrative that has maintained that colonial collections are 'safer' in Denmark,

where its community of 'experts' are more responsible and, therefore, appropriately

appointed, keepers of 'institutional' knowledge (STX-11; STX-13). This perspective has

stemmed from a general failure for Danish institutions to work collaboratively or consult with

communities on St. Croix about their needs and desires – as one Danish interviewee

critiqued, "I understand where it's coming from but it's a bit tone deaf to me; it's often a tone

of, 'they can't really look after it in the Virgin Islands – they don't know how'" (STX-11).

To this point, although five million colonial records were digitized as part of the

centenary programming (Rigsarkivet 2024), there were several issues caused directly by a

lack of collaboration. Among the frustrations highlighted by people on St. Croix: the failure

to transcribe and translate many of the documents, poor searchability and rampant

mislabeling, and a lack of consultation in the selection and prioritization of certain collections

over others. Regarding the last point, one descendant Crucian interviewee reflected:

> I think [one of the things to be done] is the unedited digitization of documents. And by that, I
> mean, don't select out those documents that you feel might reflect badly on you […] [and
> there must be] a concerted effort to translate, because they are absolutely no use to us if
> they're not [translated] (STX-13).

Centering the points discussed above, this chapter focuses on postcolonial partial and

selective histories and how they connect to postcolonial contested heritage and identity. STX-

13 described their perception that archival curation and selective access is implicitly and

explicitly, a means of self-preservation for institutions and communities in Denmark. I

contend that although institutional and traditional knowledge have often been presented as competing truths – with institutional knowledge presenting the objective, 'factual' European perspective and traditional knowledge presenting the subjective 'mythical' Caribbean perspective (Swain 2003) – a collaborative, layered, and integrated approach to knowledge construction can provide a more clear understanding of the past and its relevance in the present, but most importantly, function toward postcolonial redress and reconciliation.

Within academic communities in Denmark and, to some extent, St. Croix, institutional knowledge has been conventionally thought to *authenticate* the past, while traditional knowledge has been dismissed as unreliable – a *distortion* of the past (STX-09). This position has been raised as inherently problematic by oral historians, heritage scholars, and affected communities (Ritchie 2014, 10). Yet these two registers of knowledge to not necessarily represent 'competing' truths, but instead document different approaches, understandings, and categories of knowledge entirely (STX-11; STX-15A/B; Ngoepe 2020). At the same time, this imagined 'competition' underlies the dilemma of "interpreting the history of the colonized through the records of the colonizer" (Bastian 2003, back cover). To this point, one participant recalled an experience in Denmark during the Centenary:

> It's our archive. It's of us, our shared history, but from a totally different perspective that we barely recognize […] there was like an 'off-ness' […] I just remember watching […] and [was] like 'my belly hurts' […] it was just this feeling of this is our story, but not really (STX-14).

The understanding that colonial records were created, ordered, and retained to satisfy the specific needs of colonial agents, points to their intrinsic limitations. Mobilizing braided knowledge (Atalay 2012) to show how other forms of knowledge (e.g., oral history and contemporary art) can present a clearer view of how the colonial conditions in which they were created, has shaped the past, present, and future heritage of both St. Croix and Denmark (Figure 75).

**Figure 75** Three Fireburn Queens (Jackson 2019).

Despite staunch resistance from 'traditionalists,' the notion of archives as only one

potential source of knowledge of many others, has become fairly mainstream in recent years

(Jimerson 2006). Indeed, postcolonial researchers consulting and delving into archives have

increasingly confronted their inherent politics – challenging and destabilizing the notion of

historical 'fact' by attending to their inherent biases (Gaillet 2012). This perspective has

spread to Denmark, where unofficial and grassroots archives, have risen to this task. The

Fireburn Files (2024) is one such project, an unfunded, volunteer-run digital archive that

hosts translated colonial records about the Fireburn, spearheaded by Danish researchers Helle

Stenum and Bertha Rex Coley. It prominently asserts:

> The Fireburn Files Project is NOT about finding the ultimate truth about the past, but an
> attempt to facilitate the creation of a shared platform of accessible historical sources both
> written and oral, for dialogue, interpretations, accounts, exploration and understanding of
> Fireburn and its implications (Fireburn Files 2024).

This ethos aligns well with the work of other scholars, for example Mpho Ngoepe (2020)

who applies archival principles to oral history within an African context – highlighting how

archives and oral histories can complement one another and shed light on what he refers to as

the "whole truth" (307). By hosting both oral histories and archival documents on the

Fireburn Files website, the project aspires toward an anti-hierarchical approach to knowledge

– although at the time of writing, the oral history section of the website was still forthcoming (2024).

**8.2.2 Sources of Data**

Recasting this epistemological 'issue,' in which the 'truth' about colonial pasts is contested between postcolonial island and metropolitan Denmark, this research drew from both institutional and traditional knowledge – archives, exhibitions, public programs, contemporary art, interviews, and participant observation – to investigate memory through material culture tied to the Fireburn. In response to community-level grievances regarding archival access in St. Croix and mobilizing a problem-based and solution-oriented approach, I consulted only digital and paper-based archives available to communities physically located on St. Croix (e.g., Danish National Archives West Indies Collection, Florence Williams Library, Landmarks Society Library, National Parks Service Archives, the Fireburn Files, etc.). This method enabled me to fully engage and empathize with local frustrations and attitudes over enduring dimensions of colonial power – manifesting within the material record – providing me with personal insight on the opportunities and obstacles encountered by scholars on the island.

In Denmark, I explored engagement with its former Caribbean colonies through materiality – examining historical and artistic postcolonial interventions, which included exhibitions, collections, and contemporary art installations. I supplemented this fieldwork with interviews from communities with an interest in the Fireburn in both Denmark and St. Croix – although most of the interviewees were involved in research about the Fireburn, they represented many disciplines – activists, artists, tour guides, teachers, and academics.

Seeking to obfuscate the line between post/colonial socio-temporal dynamics by acknowledging "cultural production under conditions of coloniality – separation, bias, [and] asymmetrical power relations" (Odumosu 2019, 618), the following section presents the

context for postcolonial memory and commemoration within Denmark and St. Croix, in order to ground notions of self-representation, authorized heritage, and 'imaginative geographies' (Said 1995) through a contemporary and transregional lens.

## 8.3 Spatiality and Materiality

In Denmark, a number of postcolonial researchers have advocated for a re-examination of the nation's colonial past, encouraging a shift away from discourse that nurtures colonial nostalgia and myths of colonial mildness, in favor of narratives that are representative, inclusive, and, at times, confronting – despite an atmosphere of public, political, and academic reluctance toward reinterpreting the colonial past (Andersen 2020; Thisted 2009, Körber 2017). Among key postcolonial debates, the "(de)selective" nature of Denmark's memory politics (Berisha 2022) and "Eurocentric" commemorative practice (Jensen 2019) – established discourses that have long portrayed Denmark as a "tiny, benevolent, and thoroughly humanistic nation" (Thisted 2009, 147), and in turn, downplay its colonial legacy to support a collective identity that is tied to the contemporary Danish values – among them, democracy, equality, and humility (Stachurska-Kounta 2024).

Whitewashed, sanitized, and revisionist historiographies about the Danish West Indies in Denmark (STX-11; STX-15A/B) and the Virgin Islands (STX-01; STX-13; STX-14), have long perpetuated the myth of colonial mildness, depicting Denmark as a 'good' colonizer (STX-15A) – emphasizing 'smallness' to minimize its instrumental role in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and colonization of the Caribbean. This 'authorized heritage discourse' (Smith 2006) is pervasive in Danish public spaces, for example at the National Museum Denmark:

> The Danish monarchy held *small* territories in Asia, Africa and America […] In the West Indies new societies based on slavery were created on three *small* islands (Voices of the Colonies, National Museum Denmark 2020 [emphasis added]).

As interdisciplinary scholars have turned their attention toward critical and empathetic engagement with the painful and, perhaps, uncomfortable aspects of Danish colonial history,

including its role within the broader history of human trafficking and enslavement, institutionalized physical and psychological abuse, and cultural genocide, there has been a proliferation of interdisciplinary literature focused on the history of the Danish West Indies. The Fireburn has emerged as a prominent historical event for researchers in Denmark (Halberg and Coley 2016; Grøn 2017; Lingner 2018; Riemann 2018) – this is perhaps unsurprising, given the profound meaning it holds for the people of St. Croix (Navarro et al. 2019) and the monumental destruction it caused to the many plantations in operation on the island (Persons 2018).

At the same time, it is crucial to highlight the specific circumstances of the Fireburn that have established it as a less confronting and destabilizing event to Danish authorized heritage. The Fireburn occurred thirty years after the abolition of slavery in the Danish West Indies, and in this way, does not directly challenge the closely held national myths that foster Danish collective pride (e.g., Denmark's pioneering role in abolishing the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade) (see: 2.6). At its root, the Fireburn was not technically a 'slave' rebellion, therefore not threatening the veracity of this narrative. It is instead presented as an 'uprising' of the rural poor, who were underpaid – an economic system that has been compared to 'serfdom' (Jensen 1998), a historical phenomenon well understood in the European context. This analogy defers the blame for structural exploitation to the elite – whether the landed aristocracy in Denmark or wealthy planters in the Danish West Indies – framing the Fireburn as a hegemonic history rather than a peoples' history, and thereby failing to properly situate it within the wider legacy of institutional colonialism, from which Denmark, and its citizens, substantially benefitted. Moreover, because the Fireburn occurred *post*-emancipation, it is in some ways more palatable and approachable than the contested story of the 1848 Emancipation (2.6.3), an equally pivotal event that draws significant parallels to the Fireburn – and even occurred at the exact same place (i.e., Fort Frederik). This point does not intend to

diminish the noteworthy endeavors of Danish scholars who have focused on the Fireburn, but instead to highlight how postcolonial research can be embedded in and informed by its point of origin, in turn, shaped by increased pressure for postcolonial researchers' to 'stay in their lane,' amidst a national crackdown on 'academic activism' in Denmark (McAtackney 2022), for fear of sabotaging their own careers. I raise this point instead to advocate for equitable and sustainable collaborations between scholars in Denmark and St. Croix – which has the dual benefit of protecting progressive Danish academics and amplifying the voices of Virgin Islanders.

### 8.3.1 The Postcolonial Turn and Counter progressive Backlash in Denmark

Circling back to the recent 'postcolonial turn' toward critical engagement with Denmark's colonial past, I note that this movement has been largely led by female-identifying scholars – both in Denmark and the Virgin Islands (Halberg 2016; Stenum 2021; Belle 2019; Navarro et al. 2017; Odumosu 2019; Odewale 2019). This follows a global trend of interdisciplinary critique toward gendered colonial discourses (Morgensen 2015), the colonial roots socio-cultural research (Moro-Abadía 2006), and decentering of dominant stories about "great white men" (Polsky 2023). To this point, one Danish interviewee (STX-11) reflected on her reluctance to enter a field dominated by 'old, white men:'

> [I felt] I don't know how I should enter this field at all, and I don't feel compelled to do it. I don't know anything – and not because of a shame that I am Danish – it wasn't a feeling of shame that I, as a Danish person, had a history that had been part of something violent and terrible. But it was more like, 'no, I don't identify with the people *in this field* […] I had an idea it would be a very traditional, conservative history that I didn't want to… I didn't know how to do anything about it.

Although individuals of any gender can excel in postcolonial critical heritage research, there is a there is a clear gender imbalance within postcolonial studies in Denmark and St. Croix, in which female-identifying scholars have taken a leadership role in driving substantial changes to how colonial heritage is approached (Körber 2017; Agostinho 2019; Flewellen 2019;

Naum 2024; Bolin 2024). There are likely many reasons for this disparity, although it is worth noting that women, who have often been excluded from dominant historical narratives, through socialization and personal experience, have an intimate understanding of patriarchal power structures and intersectional issues. To this end, women have generally been more drawn to feminist methodologies which tend to prioritize community-oriented approaches and reciprocity in research, aligning with postcolonial critical heritage principles (Battle-Baptiste 2011). In the case of the Fireburn, one such women-led postcolonial intervention – *I Am Queen Mary* (Belle and Ehlers 2019) – sparked significant academic and public discourse about colonialism and resistance, receiving international acclaim as the first monument to a Black woman in Denmark (White 2023).

Unfortunately, progress, discussion, and collaborative research aspiring toward a more nuanced and honest understanding of Denmark's colonial past has been impeded by the resurgence of right-wing opposition to academic and public discourse on historic colonialism, race, gender, and migration (Grøn 2022). This counter-progressive pushback was largely triggered by the revival of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the summer of 2020 – which, in Denmark, culminated with the toppling of Frederik V bust into Copenhagen harbor, an event led by Art Academy Department Head Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld (Buckley 2021). Her subsequent firing evidences that such 'activism' is harshly punished in Denmark, despite its international reputation as a progressive and democratic nation. As a result, the proverbial pendulum has swung back, and the Danish academic community has faced demands from parliament to "curtail so-called 'academic activism'" (McAtackney 2022, 172).

At the center of this debate is the enduring political dimensions of colonial spatiality and materiality. Denmark, which retains official custody of colonial collections that document a shared history, is by default the steward of institutional knowledge – the interpretation of such collections largely relegated to formal 'authorized' exhibitions (*Voices*

*from the Colonies* 2017), heavily mediated access, and, apart from a select few interventions led almost exclusively by contemporary artists (Ehlers and Belle 2018; Stenum and Belle 2013; Akoi et al. 2024), is wholly absent from the built environment and landscapes of Denmark. St. Croix, on the other hand, has limited formal infrastructure (e.g., few museums and limited collections) – but exists in what Nigel Thrift (1999) referred to as 'a world of cinders,' in which colonial residues and 'imperial debris' (Stoler 2009) actively shape the contemporary island, and the experiences of those who call it home (Figure 76).



**Figure 76** Ceramic fragments, locally known as 'chaney,' picked up during a survey on St. Croix (Zahedi 2023).

There has been extensive research about the Fireburn in both St. Croix and Denmark, although there has been little attention paid to the roots of this transregional asymmetry, nor a focus on community and grassroots perspectives – in which postcolonial scholars in Denmark face enormous hurdles in their efforts toward transparency and authenticity in regard to the nation's colonial past (STX-15), and postcolonial researchers in the Virgin Islands struggle to

secure the funding, epistemic equity, and access to (or repatriation of) their own material heritage (STX-14) – both groups growing increasingly frustrated.

This asymmetry widens the chasm between memory and forgetting, between sound and silence, and "in between curiosities of knowing and unknowing" (Rashid and Jocson 2021, 401), particularly in decolonizing interventions that integrate knowledge and epistemological frameworks – and in turn, forge intercultural dialogue and understanding between communities in Denmark and St. Croix. In tandem, an enduring challenge faced by postcolonial researchers in Denmark is the pressure to mediate between Danish and Caribbean audiences – on the one hand, their work admonished as too critical for Denmark and, on the other, not critical enough for St. Croix.

Building from Nigel Thrift's description of the plantation landscape as a "world of cinders" haunting particular places in the present and despite leaving only faint traces, "still [testifying] to the fire" (1999, 314), the following section investigates the representation of the Fireburn through the lens of Denis Byrne's (2016) 'nervous landscapes' and Laura Ann Stoler's (2013) 'imperial debris,' to show how postcolonial fears of loss are perpetuated by a structural distancing and silencing of Danish colonial heritage. It begins by presenting a brief description of St. Croix's colonial spatial order during the post-emancipation period to ground this narrative within a Crucian legacy of resistance to colonial subjugation, before moving into a wider discussion of the contemporary commemorative landscape.

**8.3.2 The Colonial Spatial Order**

Caribbean postcolonial scholars, in tandem with engaging the socio-political legacies of colonialism, emphasize its impact on spatial politics (Benítez-Rojo 1997). Although sometimes abstracted by metaphor, which can obscure the materiality of the "colonial roots of spatial destitution" and the problems it creates (Radovic 2014, 35), the tangible dimensions of space both shape and reflect social relations (Delle 1998, 3). While this is frequently

framed through the lens of the past, the spatial dimensions of colonial power often remain alive, albeit sometimes marginalized or invisible, in our contemporary world (Bailey 2024; Byrne 2003; Thrift 1999).

In St. Croix, the "micro-managerial" (Birkeli 2022) Danish spatial order and its multi-scalar plantation regimes, were designed and configured to support an economic model based on exploitation, therefore manifesting as 'power domains' that were simultaneously material and symbolic (Orser 1990). Elizabeth Kryder-Reid indicated the role of space as a means for elite classes to 'negotiate' and 'communicate' their social identities, publicly demonstrating their control over the laws of perspective, through which they created "both a spatial and social order which they controlled" (1994, 132). On this point, James Delle argued that to understand how social relations are negotiated "space must be understood as a material tool that can be manipulated to various purposes" (1993, 3). Indeed, space as a material tool can be applied across scales – plantations, districts, cities, islands, nations, empires, and oceans.

Describing the colonial spatial order as a 'nervous landscape,' Byrne (2003) has argued that while spatial confines restricted the presence and movement of colonized people to preserve the dominance of the colonizer, there were 'gaps' that presented opportunities to exercise autonomy and subvert the system. This has also been investigated within Caribbean archaeology (Bates, Chenoweth, and Delle 2016), for example through Marco Meniketti's (2016) archaeological investigations on Nevis, which suggest that the elite class attempted to maintain the colonial spatial order within a post-emancipation landscape they no longer dominated or fully controlled. To this end, tension was inherent to the plantation system – arising because although the power of the plantocracy was pervasive, subversion was still always possible.

The hierarchical ambiguity emerging from this spatial order contributed to mutual mistrust between the planter and labor classes (Bailey 2024, 136). Building from Byrnes'

notion of nervous landscapes, Megan Bailey posits that the violence embedded within colonial systems of dominance was largely driven by the fear of loss – of status, material wealth, and power (2024, 25). Similarly, Suzanne Spencer-Wood's notion of 'powered cultural landscapes,' describes how power dynamics can be expressed through human manipulation of the land, imagining landscapes as "intersectional arenas of power struggle that are both constructed and reinforced by dominant hierarchies" (2010, 464). The inherent fragility of the colonial spatial order – predicated on the fear of loss – was well understood by the labor class on St. Croix.

The threat of resistance therefore created an atmosphere of nervousness among colonial elites, which manifested as social tension. Speaking to the relationship between fear and power, Martin Hall argued that legislative control of women in patriarchal systems indicated men's fear of women's power rather than women's powerlessness (2000, 40), an argument that is applicable to colonial institutions as well. Arson, in particular, was an effective means of subversion and empowerment at the margins of the colonial hierarchy (Heuman 2014). Thirty years before the Fireburn, fear of arson was a pillar of the 1848 Emancipation movement on St. Croix (see: 2.6.3). Although often recalled as a largely peaceful event during which the benevolent Peter Von Scholten heroically freed the 'unfree,' scholarly evidence indicates that this narrative underrepresents the tactical role white fear – and the threat of fire – played in the pursuit of liberation (Lewis 2014, 2; Hansen 1917, 305-307). Regarding the Emancipation Rebellion on St. Croix, a published letter from Chamberlin Von Scholten, Governor Von Scholten's brother stated:

> Nevertheless, it was the opinion of everyone that only the prompt emancipation of the slaves would save the island from further destruction. And now a considerable number of negroes had assembled together in the Fort yard […] the commander was besought not to fire for fear that in their desire for revenge the negroes would burn down the town and destroy every white person who might fall into their hands (Hansen 1917, 305-307).

These fears were realized in the days that followed emancipation, when the police shot down a group of newly-emancipated people near Christiansted, reigniting the rage of the laboring class, as John Knox recalled, "[On the night of July 3] fires everywhere were visible, lighting up the very heavens… the fires [were burning in St. Croix on the 4th] being visible by their reflection in St. Thomas, aroused the worst fears for the fate of that island" (1852, 115-117). Martial law was imposed, and although technically free, laborers were forced to go back to the plantations they had been liberated from.

Subsequent to the enactment of the Labor Act of 1849 (see: 2.6.3-2.7), the recycling of pre-emancipation dimensions of space reinforced the dynamics that upheld the colonial order, perpetuating a system of exploitation for the island's laboring class and, by extension, fueling resentment and a yearning for the liberation they had been promised. Free laborers on St. Croix quickly realized that their newfound 'free' status did not translate to socio-economic mobility. The plantation economy's instability, exacerbated by factors such as the declining value of sugarcane, droughts, and storms, disproportionately affected laborers, who withstood the worst of financial downturns (Lewisohn 1970). The system under the Labor Act was referred to as 'slavery' in international journals long after emancipation – calling freedom in the Danish West Indies a 'mockery' and 'delusion' (New York Herald 1878), contradicting the pervasive narrative of Danish colonial mildness and benevolence.

### 8.3.3 The Fireburn

On October 1, 1878 – the first day of the Fireburn – it was signal fires and the bellow of the *tutu* (i.e., conch shell trumpet) emanating from Frederiksted that lured laborers from country estates to join in the rebellion. Fire eventually came to encompass almost the entirety of the lower town, and the colonial elite could do nothing but stand by, in their abject powerlessness. When a division of soldiers arrived from Christiansted the following morning, the crowd was diffused; the Danish military unknowingly contributed to the progression of

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the Fireburn by dispersing the crowd, after which laborers broke into smaller groups in turn

enabling them to cover more ground.

Colonial records reveal that rebel laborers leveraged their understanding of the

colonial spatial order to topple it during the Fireburn – evidenced by rebels' routes across the

island, strategic and disordered burning, and communicating via tutu, the sound of which

could carry far distances (Commission of Inquiry 1879) (STX-13). Although they lacked the

social, political, and economic power of the colonial elite, laborers used their strength in

numbers to carry out their mission – dispersing and reassembling orchestrate an atmosphere

of utter chaos, which confused and disoriented their adversaries – toppling the 'micro-

managerial' configuration of the island, long used as a means of suppressing the labor class

(Birkeli 2022; McKittrick 2013). Tactical destruction of vital colonial infrastructure

moreover disrupted elite modalities of spatial dominance, according to one oral history:

> The telegraph connection between the island's two towns had been cut by the rioters, so a
> message had to be dispatched to Christiansted on horseback to ask for help (Armstrong 1971,
> 24).

With two to four 'captains' and 'queens' leading each group of rebel laborers, fires were

ignited across the island – nearly reaching Christiansted (Trial Protocol 1878). The rebellion

gained momentum and as it moved further east, country laborers joined the cause – looting

and burning storehouses, rum cellars, factories, planters' homes, cane fields, and everything

else along their path (Tyson 2014).

By the time martial law was declared on October 5th, nearly two-thirds of the island

had been burnt (Figure 77). Twelve men were sentenced to death and immediately executed,

and 431 laborers were arrested (Trial Protocol 1878). Historical estimates regarding the total

number of rebel casualties vary between 100 (Perry 2008) and 250 (New York Herald 1878),

depending on the source; this discrepancy is attributed to the difference between colonial

'official' numbers and estimates that include retaliatory beatings, lynchings, and murders by

volunteer militia, who were unhindered by the military chain of command. The Fireburn
trials continued for two years after the event, during which hundreds of people were
interrogated (Commission of Inquiry 1878-1880).
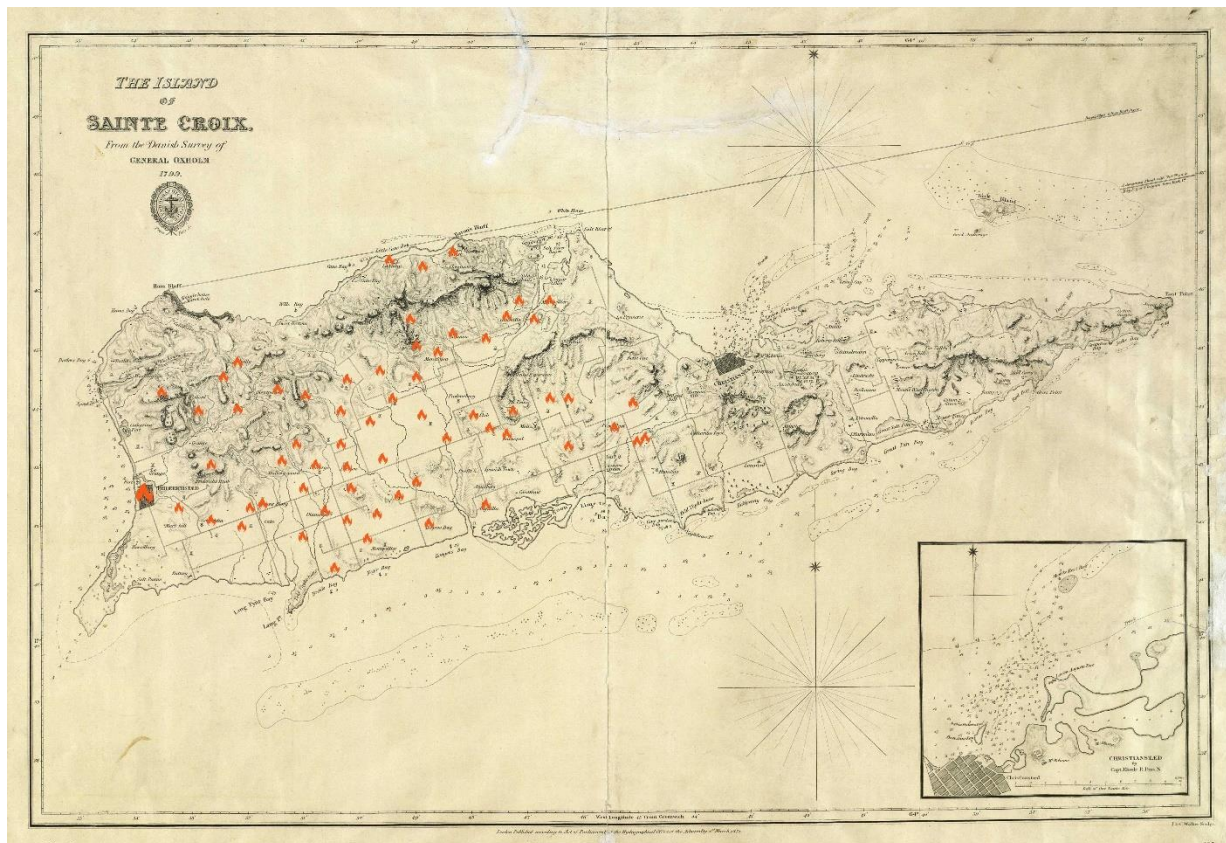


Figure 77 A map of the extent of the Fireburn (Zahedi 2024 [base map: Oxholm 1799]).

### 8.3.4 Between the Discourses of Metropole and Colony

The 'Transfer' (1917) occurred thirty-nine years after the Fireburn – an event that, in
Denmark, has steadily evolved into a sentimental regret for the 'loss' of a former 'paradise.'
The Transfer enforced a political and economic distance between the two places – including
the removal of official records and material collections. Frederik Cooper and Laura Ann
Stoler, argue that the 'tensions of empire' can be spatially constituted because "colonial
states' organized knowledge constrains the scholar who returns to those archives (oral as well
as writing) in an attempt to analyze the colonial situation" (1997, 4). These tensions can be
compounded by dissolution of formal political affiliations, in which selective and curated
access to collections can replicate the conditions of colonial spatial control and, in turn,

influence how the past is understood. To this end, historiography – which is embedded within notions of inclusion and exclusion, selection and selection, dominance and marginalization – plays a significant role in memory (re)construction and identity (re)formation, establishing nationalized and 'official' heritage discourse.

Building from this, Jonathan Friedman reflected that the "construction of a past […] selectively organizes events in a relation of continuity with a contemporary subject" (1992, 837). In the century since the Transfer, Denmark has undergone significant societal shifts – most notably the establishment of the social welfare state (Brandal, Bratberg, and Thorsen 2013) – which have underpinned the evolution of its contemporary social identity. Collective social values – equality, tolerance, humility, trust, social justice – tied to 'Danish-ness,' are foundational to how people in Denmark represent and present themselves, as the champions of a more humane, sustainable, and peaceful world (Swain 2024). Yet this self-projection has been increasingly contested from within Denmark – critiques largely emanating from migration scholars who deny the notion that Denmark is 'post-racial' (Gudrun Jensen, Weibel, and Vitus 2017).

In tandem, such glorified self-projections of Danish identity are contested by the postcolonial perspectives of many communities on St. Croix, which hold directly Denmark responsible for stealing Africans to the Caribbean and violently exploiting them and their descendants for centuries. As explained by one 86-year-old descendant interviewee:

> I wasn't born in Danish time. I haven't forgotten because […] my parents live in Danish time, and I never thought about those things – what hurt them so hard to talk about or not. My grandparents never talk about their life before I was born. We didn't. I don't think that we Black people talk a lot about what happened because I can't remember my grandmother telling me nothing about the Danish era (STX-21).

Although forms of Danish memory, archives among them, have become part of the Crucian postcolonial register of knowledge, there is little presence of Crucian memories in Danish postcolonial registers of knowledge. This unidirectional transmission of knowledge

perpetuates a distance between the two places, hindering Denmark's ability to engage in its

own form of postcolonial reconciliation – a phenomenon that has left the nation suspended in

a state of reticent nervousness.

Despite significant effort and investment in breaking the historical 'silence' during the

Centenary in Denmark, several Crucian participants described the lack of representation from

the Virgin Islands as disappointing:

> Our voices are not there. All of these archives were being produced around the Centenary and
> very few Virgin Islands voices (STX-14).

Indeed, the title 'voices from' in the National Museum's exhibit about Denmark's former

colonies (i.e., *Voices from the Colonies* 2017) implies collaboration – a visitor expectation

that is immediately shattered upon visiting the Danish West Indies segment of the exhibit,

which perpetuates a detached, uncritical, and largely unempathetic colonial story (Holm

2021), in which nearly every 'voice' is Danish. Ultimately, the upholding of Danish

authorized narratives that downplay its colonial legacy – including sentimental or nostalgic

longing – is reliant upon a sustained socio-political estrangement between the two places and

the thwarting of collaborative efforts between Danish and Crucian researchers. However,

transcultural interchange is something that was expressed as positive by both Danish and

Crucian researchers, as this Danish visiting researcher to St. Croix explained:

> And then we had a meeting [in St. Croix] with [Crucian scholar], and she was all of a sudden
> talking about Fireburn. And we were like, 'Whoa, we have not heard about this, despite the fact
> we have studied hard.' So again, this, whoa, that's weird that we heard about a lot of other stuff,
> but not this. And she was underlining how important an event it was and how it was celebrated
> and remembered […] So we were confronted with the fact that we really had tried to study
> using Danish material, Danish books that we could find in a library or in the bookstores. And
> we had this very concrete feeling that, well, there is a lot of history that we have not been able
> to access through those books. And then we went home and […] all of us wanted to have some
> exchange that would be ongoing like this (STX-11).

This interviewee speaks to a point of frustration for postcolonial scholars in Denmark and St.

Croix, who are invested in facilitating and nurturing discussions that, although perhaps

initially destabilizing and uncomfortable, in the long term will contribute to *more* stability and trust between the two places.

Lars Jensen writes on the need for a 'colonial restaging,' which deviates from a reinterpretation of historical events and processes – seeing "the colonial as a process of actively reformulated, reinserting, and reasserting a benevolently informed account of Danish colonialism" (2020, 89-90). To this end, memorializing colonialism is more complex than simply adding other narratives into existing interpretations – it requires a reclamation and recovering or marginalized and erased narratives, a process that can often be contentious (Alderman 2010).

Offering a pathway to alternative heritage discourse within Denmark, Henrik Holm calls for a center for colonialism in Denmark, rather than an "add-on to an existing museum in Denmark" (2021, 149). However, one must exercise caution in taking this approach – while a (de)colonial center might contribute to 'breaking' the postcolonial silence that plagues Denmark, it is not a substitute for a critical reinterpretation of Danish history. Lonnie Bunch (2007), the Director of the American Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C., warns of inadvertently further marginalizing Black history by failing to integrate Black narratives, experiences, and perspectives within the broader interpretation about of the past. Bunch instead calls for "transcending the rosy glow of the past,'" "resisting monolithic depictions of the past," "embracing ambiguity," and "finding a new integration that re-centers [Black] history" within the wider context (2007, 45). This is feasible within Denmark, but it requires a critical and collaborative effort to decentering whiteness and overcoming the fear of talking about race (Dewhurst and Hendrik 2018) – as STX-13 argued, "it is important that we can say people were hurt; this is what happened." As the saying goes – the only way is through.

While collecting data for this case study, I requested interviews with several Danish scholars specialized in research about the Danish West Indies, many of whom have included interview data from Crucian communities in their own publications. Of these, only five researchers agreed to interviews (STX-02; STX-11; STX-15A/B, due to scheduling conflicts one additional interview was not completed). This lack of response evidences an enduring extractivism (STX-13) and lack of decolonization in action (Waterton et al. 2023) – as well as a reluctance toward postcolonial interchange, adhering to a historiographical tradition that demarcates colonialism as something that happened in the Danish colonies, but not in Denmark (Odumosu 2019). Reluctance toward the co-construction of knowledge through interview participation signals that some researchers in Denmark can engage with and write *about* Danish colonialism but owning the Fireburn as a legacy that is as Danish as it is West Indian, tied to domestic landscapes, institutions, heritage, and collective memory, is one step too far. This issue stems from a failure to critically implement postcolonialism and anti-racism as theory *and* method – as well as a tendency to abstract away from how colonial processes can be replicated and reinforced through contemporary practice. I will expand upon this point in the following section.

**8.3.5 The Postcolonial Spatial Order**

The imbalance between self-representation and representation by the (colonial) 'other' – in which one community retains narrative dominance in the depiction of the other – might seem purely theoretical, it has tangible effects within the realms of postcolonial heritage, identity, and memory. To this end, despite a shared history, the historiographies of the Fireburn have long been nationalized and separated. The focal points of Fireburn narratives are centered on different trajectories between Denmark and the former Danish West Indies in the postcolonial period but are moreover rooted in different experiences of colonialism between the colonizer and the colonized.

There are spatial dimensions to enduring postcolonial tensions – Matthijs Kuipers arguing that "ocean space is the missing link between metropole and colony" and highlighting the ocean as a cross-section of empire (2020, 226). To this end, space can be defined as a continuous area or expanse, as well as the *distance* between two points. In many ways, it is the space between places – Denmark and St. Croix – within which postcolonial dissonance is suspended, a phenomenon that is compounded by the severed 'official' relationship between Denmark and its Caribbean colonies – which has heightened the perception of this distance over time. In this way, 'distance' between the metropole and its former colonies is multi-dimensional – spatial, temporal, cognitive, and emotional.

In Denmark, these historiographies tend to focus on casting spatial-temporal distance between it and its colonial legacies – manifesting in an interpretation of colonial history largely relegated to museum spaces and not within Danish contemporary landscapes or built heritage (e.g., colonial warehouses, stately homes, palaces, prisons, administrative offices, etc.). Despite the efforts of some researchers in Denmark and St. Croix to confront postcolonial dissonance by highlighting Trans-Atlantic connections, notably Helle Stenum's 'Warehouse to Warehouse' exhibition[25] (2014), the 'I Am Queen Mary' installation (Ehlers and Belle 2018), and 'Voices in the Shadows of Monuments' (Akoi-Jackson et al. 2022), the colonial dimensions of space have not become an integrated part of the authorized heritage discourse within metropolitan Denmark.

In June 2024, I co-organized an archival workshop with Finding Your Archives a Home (FYAH) at Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism (CHANT) that focused on the political nature of colonial archives and access. One attendee expressed that the frustrations of researchers in St. Croix directed at Denmark were grounded in distance, an obstacle that

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[25] "Warehouse to Warehouse" was a planned exhibition at two storage houses in Denmark and St. Croix that sought to encourage greater narrative cohesion between the two places. It unfortunately did not come to fruition due to a lack of funding.

limited opportunities – beyond the issue of access itself – for intercultural dialogue, equitable research collaborations, and postcolonial healing. These frustrations are compounded by intersectional concerns and inequities that prevent researchers of St. Croix from pursuing, accessing, and securing the same funding streams available to researchers from Danish institutions (STX-13; STX-14). Consequently, (post)colonial projects led by academics representing Denmark frequently reflect Danish interests and perspectives – research questions, methodological design, data collection, and analysis devoid of substantive influence of the Crucian perspective. Manifesting as an ontological and epistemological unevenness, this has resulted in an alienation of people in St. Croix from research about their own heritage.

In addition, participants in this study highlighted that the selective nature of archival translation and digitization, a tendency to publish academic research about the Danish West Indies in Danish rather than English (Halberg 2016; Peters et al. 2016; Wolf-Taestensen 2023), and significant funding streams to bring Danish scholars to St. Croix but not Crucian scholars to Denmark demonstrates the spatial dimensions of discomfort toward honestly confronting colonialism in Danish spaces – and without strategic safeguards in place, as one interviewee discussed:

> But again, the coloniality […] shows up so much in the financial differences of who we are. He was able to get five artists to come, and we couldn't raise any money, neither from their side or ours, to bring any artists over there (STX-14).

Matthijs Kuipers reflected that "a prominent characteristic shared by virtually all colonial societies is the gap between imagery and ideology of empire on the one hand, and the 'reality on the ground' on the other" (2020, 224), an insight that can be extrapolated to encompass postcolonial nostalgia in Denmark, as well as the dissonance between contemporary Danish identity and the enduring memory of Danish colonialism in St. Croix. In the following

section, I examine various depictions of the Fireburn and Queen Mary, in Denmark and in St. Croix to engage this postcolonial process in motion.

## 8.4 Remembering Queen Mary

On March 31, 2018, one hundred and one years after the Transfer of the Danish West Indies, 'I Am Queen Mary' (Ehlers and Belle 2018), a monumental art installation at the entrance of the West Indian Warehouse in Copenhagen, was inaugurated as the first monument to a Black woman in Denmark (Figure 78). The monument was a powerful spatial intervention that established a grand and commanding decolonial presence on the waterfront in Copenhagen. Although a prominent figure in St. Croix, almost



**Figure 78** I Am Queen Mary, co-created by Jeanette Ehlers and LaVaughn Belle (Zahedi 2020).

synonymous with Fireburn itself, Queen Mary was little known in Denmark before 'I Am Queen Mary' (STX-11; STX-14; STX-15). Public responses to the monument were divided – ranging from appreciation and celebration (Petersen 2021) to shame and anger (Grøn 2019) – and the installation provoked critical discourse through which citizens interrogated notions of national identity and state memory.

At the root of this dissonance is how Queen Mary has been remembered and commemorated in Denmark and St. Croix – and the role public art plays in inspiring the postcolonial process. The collective ambivalence toward 'I Am Queen Mary' was emotionally-charged, because the Fireburn monument was not just about memory, but *commemoration* –therefore, "[decentralizing] the patriotic narrative of state memory"

(Petersen 2021, 256), challenging contemporary principles of "Danish-ness" (e.g., equality, democracy, humility, fairness, etc.), and activating the fear of a lost sense of national moral character. If Queen Mary Thomas is a hero, Denmark must be the villain.

### 9.4.1 A Postcolonial Identity Crisis

Denmark's attitude of reluctance and defensiveness toward its colonial history was characterized by Doron Eldar (2024) as a "postcolonial identity crisis," which challenges the dominant understandings and self-representations of Danish exceptionalism in the context of its colonial past. Indeed, events tied to the Centenary quickly became politicized by the right-wing, particularly in reference to whether Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen would offer a symbolic apology for slavery during the commemoration of the Transfer in St. Croix and St. Thomas in 2017 (STX-20A/B).

Evading responsibility by temporal distance, conservative parliamentary candidate Nikolaj Bøgh stated "I think it is ahistorical – it is taking our morality and putting it down on some people who lived 200 and 300 years ago" (Den Korte Avis 2017); others suggested that it was instead the Danish population that deserved an apology "from the Radical Left for the immeasurable damage the party has caused to Danish society" (Pittelkow 2017). The notion that a symbolic apology would be an affront to Denmark's *morality* is largely tied to contemporary notions of national pride and identity, which are at odds with its history of actively contributing to crimes against humanity during the European colonial era. This contrasts with the Crucian perspective, which holds that long after slavery had been abolished, Denmark sold 'a free people' to another nation – a sale that resulted in a hefty profit for Denmark (Nelson 2016).

Danish historical mythology tied to notions of smallness, mildness, and benevolence are anchored in romanticized historiographical depictions of Denmark as a colonial empire. This collective representation of the Danish colonial empire differs from other European

countries, who though marginalizing narratives tied to colonial brutality, have commonly glorified and magnified legacies of empire, and the economic prosperity it brought. The Netherlands – roughly equal in Denmark in size and socially, politically, and economically similar in structure – had long positively referred to its era of colonial expansion as a "Golden Age," a term traditionally evoking a sense of national pride toward its historical prestige, although in recent years it has rapidly fallen into disuse (Meuwese 2021). Paul Bijl attributes the "Golden Age" narrative to a national myth that imagines the Netherlands as a historically white nation that has been 'victimized' by Black and Brown immigrants from the colonies and elsewhere (2013, 2). The authorized narrative in Denmark, in contrast, has instead downplayed its role as a colonial 'player' – grounding its colonial legacy through the perspective of contemporary Danish values such as the unwritten Scandinavian social code *Janteloven,* which discourages elitism and promotes humility. Indeed, the narrative of humble and mild Danish colonists has also been implemented to represent Denmark as, at times, the victim of those it colonized (see: 8.4.1 and 8.4.2).

Although scholars have long described nationalized discourses in both nations as 'colonial nostalgia,' in both Denmark and the Netherlands, postcolonial memory has frequently been described as 'colonial nostalgia' (Bijl 2013; Andersen 2019), these narrative traditions are distinct and underpinned by different ways of linking contemporary identity to the past. Indeed, as argued by Bijl although colonial nostalgia is often dismissed as "simple conservatism," it is broader than it is traditionally recognized – speaking to a complex process of memory and identity formation, by which multiple forms of nostalgia layer into one another (2013, 1). To this end, communal nostalgia is one of the ways that contemporary communities relate to the past – through which they are able to see themselves in the actions of their ancestors.

### 8.4.2 Representing Queen Mary

At times, the symbolic depiction of Denmark – domestically and internationally – as a small, democratic, and benevolent nation has upheld the view that the nation was a 'good' colonizer (STX-15A) – so good, in fact, that it sometimes even became the victim of the people it colonized – most prominently within historical and fictional narratives of the Fireburn (Figure 79). Lindqvist has written on the role popular literature about Denmark's colonial history has played in shaping postcolonial memory – particularly in producing (post)colonial nostalgia and ambiguity during the post-Transfer period, which distanced Danes from "unsavory aspects of their colonial history" (2013, 54).

Lucie Hørlyk's account of the Fireburn, for example, depicts Queen Mary as an angry racist, who "had distinguished herself by an insatiable desire to see white people's houses burn" (1969, 16) and grossly exaggerating her criminal record, delegitimizing her history and contemporary prominence as a feminist symbol of liberation. Hørlyk vilifies Queen Mary, describing her as a criminal, and paints Danish colonists as her victims – a narrative perpetuated within academic literature which often discredits her heroism, instead portraying her through the racist trope of the 'angry Black woman,' who was "possessed by the devil" (Tyson 2014, 149). In the



**Figure 79** A woodcut of Queen Mary from Taylor's *Leaflets on the Danish West Indies* (1888). In Denmark, another image from the same text is often used to represent the Queen, which depicts an androgynous and unattractive woman who appears far older than Queen Mary, who was 30 years at the time of the Fireburn. This 'mistake' was noted in several examples during fieldwork in Denmark, including in the National Museum's exhibit *Voices from the Colonies.*

contemporary context of 'I Am Queen Mary,' these narratives have been reactivated and right-wing criticisms of the installation included bitterness toward the depiction of a "condemned criminal," in a public space (Grøn 2017, 163).

Although more recent academic interpretations of the Fireburn tend to acknowledge the poor labor conditions in post-emancipation St. Croix (Halberg and Coley 2017), nationalized narratives within Danish public institutions often still espouse invalidating discourse in their depictions of Fireburn 'heroes.' For example, the Danish National Archives' Fireburn webpage describes Queen Mary as "somewhat intoxicated" and references her previous arrests, casting the Fireburn through the backdrop of criminality – rather than a justified resistance against institutional, structural, and racialized injustice (Rigsarkivet 2024). This representation of Queen Mary upholds a narrative that the Fireburn was an uncontrolled, drunken riot and not a legitimate rebellion against colonial oppression (Roopnarine 2020, 699), which endured even after the Emancipation of the Danish West Indies – a depiction that safeguards official narratives that downplay the brutality of Danish colonialism, relegating it to a shorter timespan (i.e., pre-1848).

Curiously, this seems to be somewhat of a contemporary depiction of the Fireburn queen(s); according to Angalia Williams Harrigan of St. Croix:

> People knew to talk about the three queens because they were on a coin. They were on a Danish coin, and I think that was a 50-cent piece. Up to when the Americans took over, we still had the Danish money (Thurland 2009, 15).

Commemorative re-enactments of Queen Mary have a long legacy in St. Croix, according to oral histories, and date at least to the 1970s – in which she is depicted as a hero and revolutionary (STX-14). However, commemorative storytelling of the Fireburn dates to far earlier, as explained by Harrigan, who was born in St. Croix in 1916:

> It was only on holidays that we heard about Queen Mary. And oh boy, as a child, I got excited when I saw the people dancing to that song about Queen Mary… People didn't talk

about Queen Mary them because you ain't want them to kill nobody for you. If they knew you had family that was involved, they would go after them" (Thurland 2009, 14-15). Harrigan's account suggests a little discussed ramification of the Fireburn – that punitive actions carried out by colonial agents continued decades after the event itself. This is indicative of not only the degree of devastation caused by the Fireburn, but also evidences that early commemorative practice of the Fireburn was a form of resistance in St. Croix in itself – well into the twentieth century. Re-enactments of Queen Mary was the primary means of Fireburn commemoration until quite recently, according to various participants who recalled this history as one primarily communicated and conveyed through performance (STX-01; STX-14; STX-13).

References elsewhere in Karen Thurland's (2009) collection of oral histories indicate that early commemoration of the Fireburn and Queen Mary was transmitted through song – specifically the Crucian folk song "Queen Mary, oh where you gon' go burn," which is believed to have been written just after the Fireburn (Appendix F). In the absence of written records that document the Fireburn participants' unfiltered perspectives on the event and looming threat of retribution action for involvement – even fifty years after the fact – folk memory, which includes intangible heritage such as music, is an important repository of knowledge on St. Croix (STX-13).

In recent years, Virgin Islanders have responded to colonial depictions of the 'criminal' Queen Mary Thomas by incorporating decolonializing perspectives – for example the esteemed Virgin Islands author Tiphanie Yanique, who wrote a fictionalized monologue of the queen:

> Now the Danish men say I here in this jail for burning the land. But the mothers here in this Denmark? They say I hear for beating my boys. I confess to both. But what kind of ting it is, what kind of ignorance it take for these men and these mothers to not see me as they own? I labor hard as any Danish man. I love my children as hard as any Danish mother. But is a different world they in. Is which land and which bodies—that is the difference.

> These Danes, you Danes, you have a land here where your man body could work and receive a decent pay. A land where the mothers can love their children bodies gentle like and trust that gentle love alone will protect their children. Their queen make sure they have that here. She my queen, too, I gather. But my body back in St. Croix ain receiving the same pay, and my boy's bodies ain receiving the same protection (Ehlers and Yanique 2018, 50).

Decolonial interventions like Yanique's deny the notion of benevolent colonial rule, in favor of distinctly representing the experiences of those subjected to that rule. Referencing the spatial dimensions of 'queendom' through the lens of colonial subjugation, she disrupts authorized narratives of the monarchy's 'peaceful' authority over its overseas territories. In 2004, Crucian historian Wayne James' discovery of the fourth queen of the Fireburn, Susanna 'Bottom Belly' Abramsen, reignited a fervor for unearthing lost heroes and stories tied to the event (Dixon 2020). James' travels to Denmark to conduct archival research and his significant contribution to the legacy of the Fireburn was widely celebrated – while simultaneously sparking political discourse over the notion of archival custody and lack of access to ancestral history, a conversation that has built in recent years (Navarro et al. 2019; Querrard 2024).

Despite the tensions and ambiguities within postcolonial discourses in Denmark and St. Croix, an awareness of the spatial dimensions of postcolonial dominance have again given Crucians an upper hand, even if ephemerally. During the Fireburn, rebel laborers mobilized their knowledge of how the political dimensions of space were long used to control them in order to topple the colonial social order. Similarly, contemporary postcolonial scholars from Denmark and St. Croix have actively challenged Denmark's intellectual distancing from its colonial past through spatial interventions in Denmark, such as 'I Am Queen Mary' (2018), which have disrupted colonial amnesia and nostalgia.

In recent years, postcolonial interventions have focused on the role of monuments in commemoration, national identity, and the politics of space (Knudsen and Andersen 2019). Jensen notes how 'gifting' monuments has historically challenged postcolonial self-

representation and in particular, "unwarranted" busts of David Hamilton Jackson and General Buddhoe (2020, 105) (STX-11). Indeed, from a spatial perspective, the erection of monuments by Black artists in Denmark is a decolonial intervention that disrupts silent postcolonial landscapes by bringing challenging colonial legacies into the public realm and, in a literal and figurative sense, command space. In tandem, anthropological research on social aspects of gift exchange has long viewed gifting as a mechanism for obligatory reciprocity (Komter 2007) – hinting that this is perhaps an effective strategy for gently encouraging postcolonial redress.

It is of equal importance to note that 'I Am Queen Mary,' despite a few loud voices from the Danish right-wing, has been mostly well-received by Danish audiences. Participatory media responses (e.g., Google Reviews, TripAdvisor, Facebook, etc.) indicate positive public engagement and interest – including one review titled "sculpture leads to google" (TripAdvisor 2024), a resounding testimony that postcolonial interventions, such as these, contribute to public education about colonial history – and in the absence of an alternative, when prompted the public will engage in self-directed (un)learning about colonialism. These responses moreover suggest that audiences in Denmark are receptive to this use of Danish space and are interested in unearthing this 'forgotten' aspect of their history – despite the implicit reticence within conventional colonial discourse (STX-11; STX-15A/B). In tandem, by reconciling spatial disconnects that feed postcolonial dissonance and striving toward dispelling historical myths such as colonial mildness, nostalgia, and benevolence, the long-marginalized perspectives of Crucians have ushered in a new chapter in Denmark's postcolonial journey. Though frequently confronted by reluctance, avoidance, and sometimes denialism, these decolonial interventions play a significant role in breaking tensions between Denmark and its former colonies in the Caribbean.

## 8.5 Silence and Sound in Danish Collections

Postcolonial discourse in Denmark has frequently focused on the notions of "silence" and "voicelessness" of Danish colonial histories (Jensen 2018, 128) – or what Michel-Rolph Trouilot described as historical "formulas of silence" (2015, 6). Calls to elevate the "voices of the oppressed" (Bastian 2006, 267) have been engaged creatively by interdisciplinary scholars and contemporary artists, in particular, have used sound as a poetic antidote to postcolonial silence (Odumosu 2019; Ehlers and Yanique 2018). This notion was engaged in the Danish National Museum's exhibit, *Voices from the Colonies,* which opened in 2017 – although, as I argue in this section, the noticeable absence of voices *from* the former Danish West Indies detracts from its intended poignance and impact – largely failing to achieve its aim to 'break' the historical silence.

Danish 'official' narratives have long distanced Denmark from its colonial history – relegating colonial actions to exotic and faraway places like St. Croix – with its coconut trees, plantation ruins, and quaint streets, many of which have retained their Danish names – once part of the Kingdom of Denmark, but always remaining distinct from metropolitan Denmark (Jensen 2015). This 'imagined geography' of empire (Said 1978) has proven convenient to upholding a lack of engagement with the onus of postcolonial redress, predicated on the presumptive absence of a relevant material context within Denmark. Although, this narrative of the colonial past is sometimes regarded as outright denialism, it more generally manifests as a distancing, avoidance, or silencing through which narratives that uphold national pride dominate and narratives that elicit feelings of national shame are marginalized (Odumosu 2019). From a postcolonial perspective, the perception of distance can alleviate some of the anxieties tied to Danish authorized heritage discourse that is contested by communities within the former colonies.

(Post)colonial discussions are, for the most part, solely relegated to museum spaces in Denmark. Odumosu (2019) calls attention to postcolonial silence through "the prism of material heritage," emphasizing that "Denmark left the US Virgin Islands with *things* and negotiated a significant bulk of colonial documents" (621 [emphasis added]), a claim that discredits the implicit presumption of an absence of colonial material context within Denmark. Weaving together these interpretive threads, the next section investigates postcolonial silence through colonial collections in Denmark and St. Croix – focusing specifically on the interpretation of two sonic objects that represent the dissonant transregional memory of the Fireburn: the conch shell and the plantation bell from Estate La Grange. Within these case studies, I draw inspiration from Odumosu's 2017 exhibition at the National Gallery of Denmark, *What Lies Unspoken: Sounding the Colonial Archive,* which she describes as a "participatory sound intervention" (2019, 619). The notion of 'sounding,' a maritime process that measures oceanic depth through sonic resonance, evokes Derek Walcott's (1978) imaginings of the sea as a vault or archive – an idea that I mobilize to explore the spatial-temporal distances between Denmark and St. Croix. Odumosu's participatory soundscape builds from colonial imagery that is entrenched in 'distorted' colonial gaze – and she engages archives as arenas that reify issues of "voice, presence/absence, and of who matters and why" (2019, 617).

The tutu and the plantation bell served similar functions during the colonial era – collectively understood by elite and non-elite communities as both a call to order and a call to disorder. The tutu was a particularly effective means of communication because its resonant sound carries across long distances (e.g., cane fields) – the soundscape presenting a 'gap' in the colonial spatial order. Referring to plantation soundscapes, Helene Birkeli describes work songs as an example of the 'rhythmic counterculture' that operates within colonial labor regimes (2020, 19). Noting the lack of access to timepieces, she explains how enslaved and

free communities "collectively marked time through sound, as the blowing of the conch shell or the striking of bells signaled the beginning or end of the workday" (Birkeli 2020, 18).

The notion of sound as a subversion of quotidian colonial soundscapes was described by several participants, who noted that drums, plantation bells, and conch shells could be used to destabilize the colonial order, as explained by STX-13:

> At the very edge of Maroon Ridge, I became very aware of sound, the lack of sound, and then how sound carried. […]. Voices would carry for miles. Periodically, the wind would [pick up] and you'd hear the sounds from the beaches coming up. This northwestern end of the island, which is where a lot of that activity took place in [1848], was a place just where sound carried and where the tradition of the talking drums and the traditions of drumming was never really eradicated. It was outlawed, but it was not eradicated. Bamboula was outlawed, but it was not eradicated. The people were told to listen for the signal. That signal was a blown conch, drummers drumming, or the plantation bells being rung. There's this cacophony of sound that then begins... Those plantations were quite close together. You start at one, it's going to run down very quickly. If all of them then begin with the drumming and the conch shells, you've got an orchestra going. Then add to that the voices, add to that... African folk songs, they start to move, they start to move in a rhythm, and with that rhythm comes sound. I could just imagine that you've had... [Butler Bay] was the planning center, but the calls went out from North Side to Butler Bay, up to Mount Victory, up to Rose Hill. You can just see that circle all the way up to the top of the hills and then back down through Oxford.

Building upon Byre's notion of 'nervous landscapes,' to include quotidian soundscapes as an integral part of the confines of the colonial spatial order, the tedium of the plantation bell and the conch shell, signified an adherence to order by controlling the movement of enslaved and free laborers on plantations and marking the progression of the work day. Yet, they could also summon a reversal of power – a call to rebellion, which tipped the balance of the colonial soundscape of white dominance and Black subjugation to one of white fear and Black empowerment – revealing cracks in the micro-managerial spatial order (Birkeli 2022) that presented opportunities to exercise autonomy and subvert the system.

In the following section, I engage with the conch shell and plantation bell from Estate La Grange, two objects on display in Denmark, which represent the relationship between

(de)selective memory, collective identity, and postcolonial heritage – and are moreover allegorically linked to the binary opposition of postcolonial silence and sound. Drawing from Stoler's (2016) notion of 'imperial duress' – which refers to the coercive aspects of colonial power relations that shape the postcolonial landscape – the following section(s) explore how colonial collections inform collective identity, enabling cultural forgetting and colonial aphasia through interpretation that is grounded in 'epistemic anxieties' (Stoler 2008).

### 8.5.1 The Tutu, the Fireburn, and the Critical Museum

In many cultures, fire and water are symbolically opposed. In Black Atlantic spiritual practice, however, they are seen as complementary forces that are used in conjunction for purification rituals and ancestral offerings, for example among Rastafarian (Sibanda 2017), Vodou (Derby 2015), and Obeah (Cooper 2005) practitioners. The conch shell trumpet (i.e.,

the 'tutu') is entangled within the legacy and memory of the Fireburn, object used to summon rebel laborers to resist and, ultimately, topple the colonial order. References to the conch shell are ubiquitous within colonial records about the Fireburn – as evidence of defendants' intent and guilt, and to convey the loss of control of colonial elites (Central Board of Colonies 1878; Planters Inquiry 1883). In this section, I examine the precolonial, colonial, and decolonial ascriptions of the conch shell



**Figure 80** Emancipatory conch blower (Brown 2024)

and investigate how its legacy is obfuscated through national discourses which inform interpretation within contemporary museum space in Denmark.

During participant observation at the fish market in Frederiksted (2021), an elder demonstrated how to modify the conch into a tutu. He indicated his preference for the deep, resonant, trombone-like sound of the large shells, noting that the smaller shells are higher in pitch and therefore less effective in carrying sound over far distances. On St. Croix, the tutu is frequently blown as a call to ceremony – particularly during commemorative or cultural events (Figure 80). Archaeological evidence indicates that the cultural significance of marine shells in West Africa extends thousands of years, long predating the European colonization of the region (Green 2019).

Large mollusk-shells are common to West African coastal environments and side-blown trumpets made of animal horns are prevalent across the continent (Kaminski 2007) – although there is little evidence of mollusk-shell trumpets in the West African context, they are found in India (Sonak 2017), Greece (Bowyer 2016), Peru (Heller 2015), and elsewhere. The conch shell trumpet's use during the colonial period in the Caribbean seems to be derived from Taino tradition or Europe (Atkinson 2010). Indeed, precolonial heritage was adapted to colonial contexts in West Africa and later, the Caribbean, where traditional materials and customs (e.g., marine shells, horn trumpets) were adapted and creolized.

The significance of the conch for diverse diasporic Africans in the Caribbean has been well-documented in archaeological and historical research (Chenoweth 2018), including in mortuary practice on St. Croix:

> It was a picturesque slave custom to outline each earthen mound with lustrous pink conch shells, so that a slave graveyard was a thing of reflected pink and white beauty, glowing in the soft light as the slaves must have expected the pearly clouds of heaven to do when their days of sorrow were done (Lewisohn 1970, 119).

This anglicizing of enslaved burial practices may have been projected by Lewisohn, but it could also accurately represent the entangling of Black Atlantic and West African spirituality in the West Indies. In July 2024, the Director of the State Historic Preservation Office requested my assistance in reassembling the remains of Anna Heegaard, which were recently

returned to St. Croix, after controversially being exhumed by Danish archaeologists and removed to Denmark for testing – the excavation report indicates that she, too, was buried with conch shells when she passed in 1859 (Rimstad and Schjellerup Jørkov 2019). As Anna Heegaard was known to be Lutheran, this supports the assertation that the conch shell's spiritual significance was non-denominational.

To this end, archaeological fieldwork conducted for this study suggested that the conch shell was associated with spiritual and cultural practice during the colonial period. In one case during a pedestrian survey in 2020, I identified conch shell fragments in an artifact assemblage that was embedded within the interior bark of a baobab tree – suggesting cultural or ritual meaning (see: 6.4-6.5). Items such as the conch shell reflect personal use, agency, and community in enslaved and free Black contexts and are thematically connected to resistance because they were tools used to promote group cohesion and self-identity (Bailey 2024, 90). In tandem, many scholars argue that the practice of West African or West African-derived religious practice (e.g., voodoo, obeah, etc.) can be interpreted as a form of resistance against dominant hegemony (Wilkie 1995).



**Figure 81** St. Croix, date unknown (Danish National Maritime Museum)

The tutu was a familiar sound within the plantation sphere, indicating the passage of time and an adherence to the schedule of plantation operations. According to Reimert Haagensen's account:

> At three to four o'clock in the morning, a shell, shaped like a "snail house" is blown on all the plantations. This extremely large shell produces a sound much like a horn. The Blacks are obliged to obey it by rising immediately and walking to the fields even though it is still dark (Haagensen 1758, 49).

The tutu was blown again to break for lunch, to call the return to the fields, and to mark the end of the workday. Its resounding call was a predictable, habituated, and integrated aspect of the quotidian colonial soundscape – its tedium signifying an adherence to order and controlling the movements of laborers on plantations by marking the progression of the workday.

The tutu could also summon a reversal of power – a call to rebellion – which tipped the balance of the colonial soundscape from one of white dominance and Black subjugation to one of white fear and Black empowerment. References to the tutu appear throughout Fireburn archives and are tied to notions of pre-meditation, progression, order and disorder, and culpability. Colonial archives and oral histories recalling the atmosphere on October 1, 1878, in Frederiksted use sensory descriptions of the heat of the fire and the sound of the tutu to convey the loss of control – for example Dr. C.E. Taylor a Fireburn witness:

> The heat was intense and the fierceness of the flames became unbearable; house after house caught fire […] the entire Bay street was blazing with three other streets behind it… the heavens were illuminated for miles around […] the puncheons of rum stored up in the warehouses began to burst one after the other with a report like a cannon […] the women – and they seemed the worst – danced and sang, or rather howled, the men joined the chorus, clashed their sticks, **blew their shells**, and set fire. Shrieking, yelling, and leaping, their lithe forms lightened up by the glare around them (Lewisohn 1970, 313-314).

Fireburn testimonies also refer to the collection and preparation of conch shells as evidence of intent, for example W.F. Heyliger, the owner of Estate Concordia, who argued that the paining of conch shells in advance was "proof" that the Fireburn was pre-meditated (Planters

Inquiry 1879, 22). Colonial accounts include countless testimonies which reveal that conch blowing was evidence of guilt and, at times, was used to justify harsh sentencing that included execution (Court Marshall Protocol 1878, 7).

Despite the inherently anti-colonial associations of the conch shell in the Danish West Indies, it seems that colonists did not view them this way exclusively (Figure 82). The aesthetic qualities of the conch shell seemed to also capture their interest, and countless specimens were brought back on return voyages to Europe from the Caribbean. Many are now displayed in contemporary museums, including a lacquered cabinet at Rosenborg that contained Queen Charlotte Amalie's personal collection of conch shells (Kongernes Samling 2024) and an attractive collection of scrimshaw in the National Museum of Denmark (2020).



**Figure 82** Conch shells in Denmark, date unknown (National Danish Maritime Museum)

The *Voices from the Colonies* exhibit (2017-present) at the National Museum also features two conch shells in a display about plantation social dynamics. According to the exhibit text, "conch shells were used to decorate the edges of garden paths on the plantation, St. Croix, 1900s." While this was indeed one usage of the conch shell, the omission of narratives tied to the wider colonial symbolism of the conch shell is curious and especially so given that this particular exhibit was opened to mark the 2017 Centenary of the Transfer –

and the title of the exhibit, 'Voices *from* the Colonies' implies that interpretation reflects diverse, and perhaps confronting, colonial perspectives. Unfortunately, this blatant whitewashing clearly evidences how little collaboration was involved in the interpretation of colonial objects tied to the islands.

The felt absence of a critical and postcolonial angle within the *Voices from the Colonies* exhibit replicates passive and Euro-centric perspectives about Denmark's relationship to the Danish West Indies – the museum's presumed intention to spark an empathetic response from audiences largely tied to the personal stories and 'voices' of white colonists, sometimes strategically distancing these perspectives from the realities of Danish colonialism and circumstances sparking a subversion to it. For example, an adjacent interpretive display reads:

> Nanna Arendrup was five in 1878, the year her family's plantation on St. Croix was burned to the ground during the Fireburn uprising… the Arendrup family lost everything during the Fireburn except the silverware the family's cook had hidden in the well (Voices of the Colonies 2021*).*

The curators' decision to present the Fireburn through the perspective of a Danish child is a questionable interpretive strategy – perhaps stemming from representing the Fireburn as a labor rebellion rather than a 'slave' rebellion, a technicality that somewhat distances it from destabilizing national mythology. It protects the notion of colonial innocence and victimizes colonists through the lens of material loss while almost entirely disregarding the context in which such material loss occurred. In comparison, the museum interprets the context for the Fireburn through the following:

> The formerly enslaved continue to work as labourers on the plantations but the conditions are appalling. In 1878 the plantation laborers on St. Croix rebel. The plantations on the island and large sections of the town of Frederiksted are burnt to the ground (Voices of the Colonies 2021).

The lack of detail and emotive language within interpretive text that represents the perspective of the colonized and subjugated is jarring – and demonstrates how the voices of

the oppressed are abstracted and homogenized and the voices of the oppressors are empathized and personalized in practice. With the vast colonial collections and archives housed in Denmark which present unfettered opportunities for unearthing and revealing long marginalized histories about the colonial past, there is simply no excuse for this curatorial sloppiness. Henrik Holm of the National Gallery in Denmark argued that the *Voices from the Colonies* exhibit is a "nice but superficial symbolic act with no profound consequences for […] the entire museum exhibit or the self-understanding behind having it at all" (2021, 147).

Indeed, it is unlikely that curators in Denmark will be able to achieve representative and inclusive postcolonial interpretation within the museum space unaided. Progress on this front relies upon the direct and equitable inclusion of Crucian experts – many of whom have had significant success in researching the Danish West Indies, West Africa, and Denmark, despite restricted access to research materials and little to no funding. Their creativity, knowledge, perspective and their potential to forge new and collaborative pathways cannot be overstated. As argued by the esteemed feminist Audre Lorde, who spent the last seven years of her life on St. Croix, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house; they may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (1984, 110).

Objects such as the tutu obfuscate the line between the colonial and postcolonial – holding multi-temporal significance – and are rife with opportunity to prompt sustained dialogue on shared histories and enduring legacies. As a cultural symbol tied to commemoration and ancestral reverence, the tutu is a sacred object that encourages deep reflection of the past and sparks the dream of equitable, just, and decolonial futures.

**8.5.2 The La Grange Plantation Bell, its Replica, and Repatriation**

In the back of Fort Frederik in Frederiksted, there is a small exhibition about the Danish West Indies. In the months leading to July 3, 2023, there were countless activities and

events organized on St. Croix to commemorate the 175th anniversary of the Emancipation of the Danish West Indies. As part of the commemorative program, I assisted with the redesign and reinterpret the historical exhibit, which had fallen into a severe state of disrepair in the years following Hurricane Maria (2017), together with Chief Curator of the Territory, Monica Marin. There are a few displayed objects in the museum, among them some artifacts from the Fredensborg Slave Ship and, perhaps most prominently, a large, cracked plantation bell. I learned from Marin, that the bell was a replica of one from Estate La Grange and that the original bell was in Denmark.

Estate La Grange is a historically significant site, tied to various legacies of colonial resistance – marronage, emancipation, and the Fireburn. Built on the foundation of a seventeenth century plantation dating to the French colonial period, Estate La Grange was described by Governor Fredeik Moth as one of the best preserved estates when the island was purchased by Denmark and, given its proximity to La Grange Gut, at that time a small river, was in a desirable location (Davis 2023). At



Figure 83 Replica La Grange Plantation bell, located at Fort Frederik, St. Croix (Monica Marin 2024)

that time, the development of St. Croix was primarily concentrated on the eastern, more established end of the island. Consequently, Estate La Grange was poorly guarded and eventually became a haven for maroons (Davis 2023). Historical accounts indicate that in

1747 and 1748, colonial agents raided a maroon settlement at La Grange, subsequently establishing a fort nearby to restore the colonial social order (Davis 2023).

Moses Gottleib, also known as General Buddhoe, who led the 1848 Emancipation Rebellion on St. Croix, was born on Estate La Grange (see: 2.6.3). Together with his collaborators, General Buddhoe summoned thousands of enslaved protestors to Estate La Grange by ringing the plantation bell – building a coalition of 8,000 enslaved laborers who marched into Frederiksted to demand their freedom (Tyson 2009). The plantation bell is damaged, with a sizeable fracture that runs along its shoulder. Traditional knowledge and museum accession records hold that the bell was cracked during the Fireburn – rung to summon participants and dismantled during the rebellion.

G.A. Hagemann purchased Estate La Grange in 1894 and brought the original plantation bell back to Denmark, after he sold the plantation in 1922 – subsequently donating it to the National Danish Maritime Museum. The plantation bell is currently on display at the museum, but I was informed that after the exhibit is deinstalled in September 2024, it will be returned to storage. Apart from the object label, which indicates the year it was cast – 1778 – and its ties to Estate La Grange (but not St. Croix), there is little context provided about the bell. It is interpreted as such:

> Once, the bell controlled the work on the enslaved. But during uprisings, its [*original typo*] also summoned people to fight. Today it is thus also a symbol of liberation.

The ring of the plantation bell was an integrated aspect of the colonial soundscape, mediating temporal control, and struck at regular intervals (e.g., to mark the beginning or end of the work day). As indicated in the Maritime Museum's interpretive text, plantation bells were important tools in rebellion and resistance. The plantation bell from Estate La Grange is, arguably, among the most historically significant objects from the Virgin Islands in the Maritime Museum's collection and offers substantial opportunity to interpret Danish colonial history.

During a special exhibition in 1997, the original bell was on temporary loan in Ghana, after which a copy was made and the replica bell was sent to St. Croix (STX-11). The replica bell, on display at Fort Frederik, is interpreted by the following:

> Cast in 1778 for Heinrich Schimmelman, owner of Estate La Grange, this bell is a symbol of servitude and freedom. For seventy years it rang enslaved laborers to work in the fields and factory. On July 3, 1848, it rang to assemble Crucian freedom fighters for their march on [Frederiksted] and rang again to celebrate their emancipation. During the 'Fireburn' insurrection of 1878 it was torn down and broken into its present condition. It was later sent back to Denmark and placed in the Danish Maritime Museum.

> The bell is a gift to the people of the Virgin Islands from the people of Norway in commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of Emancipation. Its casting was funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development (NORAD) as part of UNESCO's Slave Route Project.

The object is, according to local accounts, the only object removed to Denmark from St. Croix which has been replicated – a clear indication of its mutual significance. Contemporary museum scholarship is rife with discourse centered on contested objects, authenticity and value, and replication (Payne and Gibson 2023), increasingly focusing on the epistemic and ontological challenges posed by duplication – with some researchers arguing that replicas represent "degenerations of the original" according to some communities and worldviews (Isaac 2011, 211). There have been various unsuccessful attempts to repatriate the bell to St. Croix – with the curator of the Maritime Museum at the time, Benjamin Asmussen, arguing that the bell was not as historically significant as scholars from the Virgin Islands contend, one Danish scholar explaining:

> He had just started his position in the Naval Museum at this time. And you can sense that he was the new person; okay, 'write a case why this bell should stay with us.' So, he writes a paper about how this is false – that it's true that it was broken in the Fireburn, because that's very clearly stated in all the papers that belong to that bell. But the whole thing about this bell having been used in emancipation – it's probably a mix up with the bell that is in Emancipation Garden in St. Thomas, because that's also a broken bell… (STX-11).

Those in the Virgin Islands argue it is impossible for the LaGrange Bell to have been 'mixed up' with the bell in St. Thomas – firstly, because historical accounts clearly indicate that the

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Emancipation Rebellion began at the Estate LaGrange, where General Buddhoe lived (Knox 1852) and secondly, because Emancipation is a *Crucian* legacy and did not happen in St. Thomas (Hansen 1917).

This delegitimizing discourse sparks frustration and anger within vast segments of the Crucian community – whom have long voiced dissatisfaction regarding objects and archives from St. Croix on display, or worse, in storage, at institutions in Denmark – arguing that online access is not an appropriate substitute for physical custody, especially in light of the little effort made by cultural institutions in Denmark to partner and collaborate with specialists from the former colonies to interpret collections with shared histories.

In the case of the plantation bell from Estate La Grange, it is entangled within contemporary heritage challenges tied to postcolonial and transregional rights, responsibilities, and redress – therefore offering significant opportunity to spark public discourse on Danish colonial legacies. The object, from a commemorative perspective, is powerful for both Danish and Crucian audiences – although as it stands, its uncontextualized interpretation and the plan to return the bell to storage at the imminent closing of the current exhibit poses the question of whether a rightful return of the object to St. Croix instead is (over)due. To this end, one must critically interrogate the onus of postcolonial responsibility as it relates to the 'imperial duress' (Stoler 2016) of colonial collections by examining how objects tied to the Danish West Indies and held in Denmark's custody are interpreted for largely white and Danish audiences.

The absence of nearly any context about the plantation bell from Estate La Grange in the Maritime Museum's interpretation is symptomatic of an epistemic anxiety within cultural institutions in Denmark – spaces that are tasked with communicating the nation's 'official' history to the public – an anxiety that is apparent within ambiguous and ambivalent language about object provenances, cultural relevance, and historical legacy. As the interpretive text

states, "during uprisings [it] also summoned people to fight." This statement might seem innocuous, but its neutrality highlights the postcolonial anxieties inherent to its lack of explicitness. In turn, it removes Denmark as a subject within its own colonial narrative – the plantation bell summoned people to fight against who, what, and, most importantly, why?

## 8.6 Conclusion

The material devastation resulting from the arson that has come to represent the Fireburn has been a frequent focus in retrospective and interdisciplinary interpretation (Persons 2018). However, despite significant interest in the Fireburn in Denmark and in St. Croix, there has been little emphasis on the spatial, material, and figurative dimensions of fire that have shaped its emergence as a powerful and enduring symbol of de/colonialism for contemporary communities in both places. In this chapter, I have interrogated this gap within the literature – examining it from various disciplinary perspectives such as contemporary art, museum studies, critical heritage, and history. From a cross-cultural perspective, 'fire' as a symbol can represent the full spectrum and complexity of human emotions – love, passion, desire, anger, jealousy, and rebirth. In this way, the Fireburn is a profound and emotive lens through which to engage the multivocality of the postcolonial landscape between Denmark and its former colonies.

Tourism marketing on the island and to Danish visitors, emphasizes the notion of a paradise 'lost' in emotional terms – playing on evocative themes such as its former prosperity, and a spirit of regret and enduring congeniality. Yet these themes are contested by the ubiquitous and emblematic associations of fire manifested within various cultural forms (e.g., contemporary art, music, handcrafted goods, honorifics such as the 'Keepers of the Flame' award, etc.), that become quickly apparent to newcomers on the island. For Crucian communities, the symbolic meaning of the 'flame' is undisputed – it stands for the Fireburn, and represents solidarity, resistance, determination, ancestral reverence, and transformation –

unifying markers of the spirit and identity of St. Croix. The Crucian folk song inquires – "Ah [Queen Mary], where you gon' go burn?" – a question rooted in a history of colonial subjugation but oriented toward the future. Indeed, in our contemporary world, this old folk song may have an evolved meaning – as a sustained call to memory and as a reminder to continue to fight for social equity and justice.

The spatial-temporal distance between Denmark and its former Caribbean colonies is an emotional landscape. And yet, Temi Odumosu's participatory foray into the colonial archives has revealed that "emotionally poignant" interventions that strive to disrupt historical silences and deviate from the authorized heritage discourses that are oft accompanied by "institutional rigidity" are welcomed by the Danish public (201, 624). Although it has been long embedded within a tradition of postcolonial aphasia, ambiguity, and ambivalence – subverting the turn away from Denmark's 'dark' colonial legacy in favor of a turn toward equitable postcolonial futures – shifting to critical, anti-racist, and anti-colonial engagement with the histographies, interpretations, and material/immaterial legacies of the Fireburn can serve as a powerful testament to the postcolonial process and how evolving notions of heritage shape our collective understandings of the world. And yet, this new chapter in Denmark's story depends upon a shedding of its fears – of loss of identity and national pride – a willingness to engage with discomfort, and sincere respect for profound, transcultural understanding and postcolonial redress.

# Chapter 9
## Conclusion

## 9.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I presented the culmination of four years of heritage

research in St. Croix, US Virgin Islands, which sought to answer the question:

> How does the diverse public in St. Croix navigate, negotiate, and reinterpret the meaning of (post)colonial heritage tied to the Danish colonial period (1733-1917), and in what ways does social memory mediate the intersections, tensions, and solidarities that shape collective identity and community?

The focus of this dissertation has been the enduring material and immaterial legacies of

Danish colonialism on St. Croix, and how memory and meaning are negotiated within,

between, and across diverse contemporary communities – situating this multilayered heritage

within present values, desires, and needs – a process that can be diverse, unifying, and at

times, divisive. The Virgin Islands author, Tiphanie Yanique once reflected, "an island can be

a world" (2010, 13). Indeed, islands are often conceptualized as a combination of smallness

and remoteness (Rainbird 2007, 20). Yet Yanique's (2010) view of island worlds, islanders,

and islandness also speaks to their inherent fluidity – a tension between ephemerality and

enduringness – and as Cyprian Broodbank (2000) holds, the continuous alteration of

islandscapes through time.

Mobilizing a theoretical framework which draws from postcolonial (Walcott 1990,

2005; Morrison 1987; Benítez-Rojo 1996; Navarro et al. 2017), ecocritical (Glissant 1990;

Olwig 2013; Paravinisi-Gerbert 2005; Handler, DeLoughrey, and Gosson 2005), and social

creole (Bernabé 1989; Hall 2015; Glissant 1989) perspectives, I have argued that heritage,

memory, and identity are in perpetual flux and that it is through the collective *process* of

assigning meaning and value, that community is (re)created. The primary case studies are

centered on colonial coral masonry, diasporic baobab trees, contested windmills, and

commemoration of the Fireburn, engage with this subject from diverse and interdisciplinary angles – examining how architectural legacies, 'natural' monuments, social landscapes, and collective memory exist as heritage 'spaces' through which postcolonial identity is performed and meaning is negotiated. In pursuing these lines of inquiry, I contributed to the body of knowledge regarding how heterogenous communities engage with the enduring nature of colonialism – and how tangible and intangible postcolonial residues are interwoven into the everyday lives of the people who call St. Croix home. It is in this way that the island can be, as Yanique posits, a 'world.'

## 9.2 Negotiating Heritage, Negotiating Identity

St. Croix has long been an alluring 'unit of analysis' (Curet 2004) for historians and archaeologists – although it is only recently that it has been approached from a heritage perspective (Bolin 2014; Bennet 2021). Implementing a critical heritage framework in the study of island communities satisfies the need to view islands as sociocultural constructs that are both bounded and unbounded entities (Olwig 2010) – in order to more fully engage with their intricacies and nuances. Indeed, the purpose of this doctoral research has been to investigate 'colonial' heritage on the island as a phenomenon by which communities reflect upon the past, through the lens of their contemporary lives. In this dissertation, I aimed to depart from normative academic approaches that frame (post)colonial heritage as intrinsically 'dark' and, taking the lead from Crucian communities, to instead understand it as ambiguous, layered, and enormously complex. This community-informed perspective sought to reconceptualize the island in a way informed by island perceptions – evading the blind-spots that often coincide with studies of islands, almost entirely pursued by outside researchers who are rarely islanders themselves (Baldacchino 2004).

Denmark and its colonization of St. Croix played a substantial role in shaping the island – its built environment, its spatial configuration, and history, and its society. Over one

hundred years later, this enduring legacy continues to have a powerful influence and presence in the lives of Crucian communities, who represent various levels of connection to this heritage – while many are the direct descendants of enslaved Africans brought to the Danish West Indies, others are from other islands in the Caribbean, the U.S., Denmark, or elsewhere. Because St. Croix is so multicultural, the memories, legacies, and narratives tied to its colonial history are often contested. Although many scholars have argued that heritage, itself, is inherently dissonant (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996), one must remain mindful of the unique structural and intersectional inequities, socio-political hierarchies, and uneven power dynamics experienced by contemporary Caribbean communities – which continue to marginalize certain segments of the population on St. Croix.

Building from this perspective, this dissertation has critically engaged what forms of knowledge, and *whose* knowledge, is most prominent in the study of postcolonial heritage – an approach that sought to present a more representative glimpse into the nature of the island beneath its surface. Through its four main case studies, which approached the island from diverse interdisciplinary angles – it argues that the negotiation of the island's postcolonial heritage *is* the process of community – through which islanders describe what it means to be from and of St. Croix.

## 9.3 Discoveries and Insights

In pursuit of answering its overarching research question, this dissertation has engaged with various categories and classifications of heritage, distinct registers of knowledge, intermingled methods and sources of data, and different configurations and approaches to community. This guiding ethos and methodological technique were implemented to satisfy an intellectual curiosity rooted in an understanding that communities and heritage are multidimensional – instead leaning into the ambiguities, ambivalences, tensions, and solidarities that embody the contemporary island. To this end, this research has been

ontologically interpretive, and therefore primarily seeks to understand and identify meanings rather than justify causes – aiming to inspire new questions and directions for future research.

This dissertation has contributed to our collective knowledge, as a comprehensive and unified piece of research and, in addition, introducing original, creative, and thematic case studies that drew from the four classical elements: water, earth, wind, and fire. This thematic approach sought to bridge the ancestral traditions of Afro-Caribbean communities with the contemporary cultural heritage of St. Croix, examining this connection through various categories and understandings of heritage.

Highlighting St. Croix's unique and rich aquatic and marine heritage, Chapter 5 presented the history of colonial coral mining, and coral masonry within the island's built environment – examining how coral reefs exist as both biologically and socially constituted components of St. Croix's landscape. This study drew from colonial accounts, archaeological field data, marine survey, and ethnographic insights to demonstrate how colonial legacies can be simultaneously erased and visible in the present world – building on discourses tied to invisible heritage that is 'hidden in plain sight' (Barba 2024), the marginalization of Black ingenuity and labor (Dawson 2018), and an affirmative vision of landscape (Walcott 1948). This case study also provided the first inventory of coral masonry in the world, introducing new data and insight into this understudied colonial practice.

St. Croix is, as one participant referred to it, 'an island of superlatives' (STX-13) – drawing inspiration from this epithet and claims that St. Croix has the most baobab trees of any Caribbean island, Chapter 6 is a study of Afro-Caribbean traditional knowledge, memory, and understandings about the island's baobab trees. It introduced oral histories and ancestral stories about the baobab trees to academic discourse; although such discussions are familiar to descendant communities in St. Croix, this chapter rearticulated them as a form of contemporary heritage and delves into how storytelling, communal memory, and place-

making are inherent to shaping collective identity and cultivating community. In this chapter, I explored how institutional and traditional registers of knowledge represent different ways of knowing, engaging baobab trees as a prism of heritage that mediates between time and space – connecting past and present communities (Morrison 1984), representing a metaphysical pathway to 'homeplace' (hooks 1990), and existing as 'witnesses' and ancestors, themselves (STX-11; STX-12; STX-13; Belle et al. 2024; Bugul 1982).

Departing from the Afro-Caribbean focus of Chapter 6, I reinstated a broad and inclusive presentation of 'community' in Chapter 7 – a case study about the island's many colonial windmills as a contested heritage symbol of the island. In this chapter, I delved into remnant structures of colonial plantations and their material afterlives, exploring the ways they are engaged, encountered, and understood by the diverse public, and how the symbolic meaning ascribed to heritage can be diverse, contested, and ambivalent. Situating colonial windmills as a form of 'imperial debris' (Stoler 2013), I investigated how they spark postcolonial discourse and reflect the contemporary concerns of a highly stratified and heterogenous island community (e.g., intersectional inequality, rights to heritage, tourism, etc.). Within this tension, I examined how the negotiation of postcolonial heritage can obfuscate the parameters of community, in turn shaping the social norms, values, and codes that govern communal membership and belonging. Lastly, I situated this theoretical foundation within a practical framework – questioning the implications of contested symbolic heritage for a postcolonial island sustained by tourism.

Drawing from postcolonial discourse focused on the 'tensions of empire' (Stoler and Cooper 1997), colonial nostalgia (Anderson 2020), and 'nervous landscapes' (Byrne 2003), Chapter 8 directly engages the enduring socio-political ties between St. Croix and Denmark through a case study about social identity, material culture, and commemoration of the Fireburn. Subversively reactivating the colonial mentality that the 'metropole' is center, and

'colony' is peripheral (Hau'ofa 1993), and situating the ocean as a cross-section of empire, I examined the postcolonial dimensions of epistemic and narrative dominance through space and sound. This theoretical framework was anchored within interpretations of (post)colonial material culture in Denmark demonstrating how postcolonial silence suggests an underlying fear of destabilizing or losing claims to contemporary notions of Danish exceptionalism. I argued that these contemporary concerns support the argument that social memories more closely reflect present our values, desires, and needs, than historical 'fact.' I contended that a commitment to equitable and sustainable collaborative partnerships between communities in Denmark and St. Croix, which nurture inter-cultural exchange and discourse, is an effective means of alleviating this postcolonial tension.

Independently and collectively, these four case studies engaged the ambiguities of identity, memory, and community that underpin St. Croix's postcolonial heritage – arguing that they both reflect and are reflected by our contemporary world(s). This dissertation has focused on St. Croix as a site of study, although it has broader relevance, in particular to diverse postcolonial communities in the Caribbean and elsewhere.

## 9.4 Future Directions

In attending to its primary research question, this dissertation has introduced many new ones. In doing so, it opens the door to future research opportunities and endeavors. The community-based framework that underlies this project has reiterated and reaffirmed a pressing need for greater equity and collaboration in Caribbean research that incorporates interdisciplinary and multicultural perspectives. As discussed throughout this dissertation, one of the enduring legacies of colonialism in St. Croix has been an extractive approach to research, which has seldom viewed Crucian and Caribbean people as equal partners in intellectual pursuits. It is therefore stressed that future research on St. Croix be approached equitably and ethically – this requires a commitment to mutually beneficial and sustainable

research that appropriately compensates people on the island for their time, knowledge, and efforts – and by extension, the significant value and contribution they make to academia.

### 9.4.1 Recommendations for Practitioners

This research involved significant and substantial consideration about the theory and ethics regarding how to conduct research in formerly and presently colonized communities. It moreover aimed to provide a methodological framework that inspires a future legacy of honest, transparent, and equitable collaborations between research partners in Denmark and the US Virgin Islands, that are mindful of how Denmark's colonial heritage has continued to shape the way how people from Denmark approach communities in the Virgin Islands. Although in the past this has been framed almost exclusively in terms of a pressing need to issue a 'symbolic apology' for slavery, it is also important to consider how colonialism has been replicated in various ways in the century since the Transfer, most notably by visiting researchers.

Repairing the legacy of scientific colonialism in the Danish West Indies and elsewhere in the Caribbean will take significant effort, but it is not a lost cause. The establishment of a new legacy – one predicated on equity and sustainability – depends on a commitment to reciprocity. As evidenced within this work, conducting research about communities from which one does not come is a delicate task with many ethical gray areas. Because each community, heritage, and place is different, there is no 'one size fits all' in approach, and therefore researchers must approach this academic responsibility with humility and reflexivity – honoring the uniqueness of every space. As poignantly reflected by STX-01:

> We think about, all those things are Africanized things. We took European culture and put parts of our culture in it as well […]. We just need to notice that we're very impactful people in the world. I know we have been in oppressed state, undoubtedly. I love to see the enculturation of all of the world's people on each other. I think that's the whole purpose, because no other culture is more relevant than the other culture. But a beautiful enculturation of this whole planet. I think that's how we see each other with equity.

Indeed, there are many ways to approach this undertaking – however, above all, researchers that lead with empathy rarely do injustice to a community and a people. To take an empathetic approach to research, researchers must learn to see themselves in the communities in which they work. Indeed, this is much easier said than done. It requires an honest engagement with one's positionality, ego, and biases – a process that can be uncomfortable and confronting (see: 3.2). And yet, in the end, it reveals that what we have in common is much larger than the details that divide us – a realization that is grounding and satisfying.

### 9.4.2 The Postcolonial Elephant in the Room

Denmark substantially benefitted from colonialism, at the expense of hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans and millions of their descendants on St. Croix and in the Danish West Indies. In 1848, planters were financially compensated for their lost 'profits,' awarded fifty West Indian dollars per 'slave' (Hall 1992); although technically free, the newly emancipated were subjected to many more decades of exploitative labor – thirty years later, the New York Herald (1878) calling 'freedom' in the Danish West Indies a "mockery" and a "delusion." On March 31, 1917, the islands and "a free people were sold without any input" (Nelson 2016), for twenty-five million dollars (approximately $661 billion in today's value, adjusted for inflation; compared with Denmark's $410 billion current GDP).

One hundred years later, on March 31, 2017, the people in the Virgin Islands eagerly anticipated an official apology from Denmark regarding its colonial past – a largely symbolic action – but Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen's speech came and went, with an acknowledgement but no direct apology (STX-20A/B). Several months later Anders Samuelsen, the Danish Foreign Minister, issued a direct apology to Ghana, but not to the US Virgin Islands (Hamilton 2017) – leaving the descendants of enslaved people in St. Croix feeling marginalized and forgotten.

As stated by one Danish participant in this research, "an apology also means reparations – those two things go together, and they don't really work without each other" (STX-11). Calls for reparations from various groups and entities in the US Virgin Islands have gained little traction in Denmark – critics contending that the period of enslavement is a distant memory, and that contemporary Danes should not suffer the consequences of the immoral actions of their ancestors (Berisha 2022), a point that disregards the substantial profit secured by Denmark as a result of the sale. One visitor to a museum in Denmark critiquing an exhibition about labor and exploitation in the Danish West Indies, suggested that the exhibit might have taken a more sympathetic approach, positively focusing on the "good things that the money from the sale was spent on" (STX-11). Indeed, this presents a significant gap in our existing knowledge which would offer insight into how contemporary Danes continue to benefit from the Danish West Indies – a project developed in collaboration with the Virgin Islands could moreover present a significant opportunity to foster greater intercultural understanding between both places.

To this end, although reparations have often been posed as a 'punishment' for wrongdoing that would solely benefit the U.S. Virgin Islands, an approach that more specifically targets postcolonial redress, reparative justice, and collective healing will benefit Denmark, as well. The many projects that emerged from Centenary funding clearly demonstrated that the Danish public is, on the whole, supportive and interested in learning more about the former Danish West Indies. Reparations can take many forms – funding (e.g., education, fellowships, research funding, etc.), institutions (e.g., museums, research centers, laboratories, etc.), and social programs (e.g., healing initiatives, mental health services, cultural revitalization, etc.), among others – although consulting and collaborating directly with communities in the islands is necessary to ensure that such efforts are appropriate, locally supported, and sustainable. In particular, contributing to the development of

infrastructure to repatriate or facilitate shared ownership of colonial records and collections would offer opportunities to enhance and build equitable research partnerships between institutions. To this end, the prospect of this form of postcolonial redress can only benefit communities in both places – providing a direct pathway to cultivating long-term connections between people with a shared history. Denmark's colonial legacy is tethered to Denmark, just as it is to St. Croix. It, therefore, must be approached as a history that is shared – a legacy that connects rather than divides. This call does not speak to an enduringly nostalgic and rose-tinted gaze toward the colonial past, but instead champions a forward look toward the unwritten and boundless future.

## 9.5 Final Thoughts

The word 'island' is often used as a metaphor for isolation or boundedness (Rainbird 2007). This dissertation, which represents a substantial piece of work about postcolonial community heritage on a small, geographically isolated island in the Caribbean, has sought to prove that islands are anything but – rather they are instead socially constructed entities that are often 'usefully ambiguous' (Gosden and Head 1994), presenting an opportunity for us to see the bigger picture of our social worlds. In this study of St. Croix, I have examined the enduring material and immaterial legacies of Danish colonialism that remain entangled within the contemporary lives of diverse communities on the island. It hopes to cultivate deeper insight into how people (re)create meaning through the world around them – and through this effort, explore new ways of understanding the experiences of the people who call this place home.

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# APPENDIX A

## Description of Interviewees

**STX-01:** Afro-Crucian artist and scholar

**STX-02:** Danish resident of St. Croix

**STX-03A/B:** St. Croix-born owners of sugar estate, sisters

**STX-04:** White Crucian heritage professional

**STX-05A/B:** White American owners of a sugar estate, partners

**STX-06:** [omitted]

**STX-07:** Former resident of St. Croix – researcher

**STX-08:** Afro-Crucian Heritage Specialist and Environmentalist

**STX-09:** Long-term resident of St. Croix – heritage scholar

**STX-10:** Afro-Crucian performance artist and writer

**STX-11:** Danish researcher, living in Denmark

**STX-12:** Afro-Crucian musician and environmentalist

**STX-13:** Afro-Crucian heritage scholar

**STX-14:** Afro-Caribbean artist and scholar

**STX-15A/B:** Danish researchers, living in Denmark

**STX-16:** [omitted]

**STX-17:** Crucian-born Palestinian/Puerto Rican

**STX-18:** Multi-ethnic Crucian government worker

**STX-19:** Afro-Crucian marine biologist

**STX-20A/B:** Two Crucian artists and activists

**STX-21:** 86 year old Afro-Crucian

**STX-22:** Multi-ethnic Crucian teacher

**STX-23A/B:** Afro-Crucian father and son

# APPENDIX B
# Field Notes [Redacted from this version]

# APPENDIX C

**Subject:** Re: Ethnography Project

 Thank you for your email.  Before I accept or decline your offer, please kindly spell out the details of your project for me. What will be the final result of your research? Will you produce a video or audiotape? Will you do a book for sale? What will be my role and how will I benefit?

I am asking you this because I have been interviewed by several Danes in the past. They came, videotaped knowledge that I freely provided, and I never heard from them again.

Respectfully,

███████████████

# APPENDIX D

## CORAL MASONRY SURVEY

| Latitude | Longitude |
|----------|-----------|
| 17.70218 | -64.8654 |
| 17.70905 | -64.8821 |
| 17.70925 | -64.8822 |
| 17.70939 | -64.8823 |
| 17.70944 | -64.8813 |
| 17.70951 | -64.8813 |
| 17.70979 | -64.8813 |
| 17.70983 | -64.8834 |
| 17.70996 | -64.8815 |
| 17.71008 | -64.8834 |
| 17.71008 | -64.8815 |
| 17.71042 | -64.8824 |
| 17.71044 | -64.8807 |
| 17.71061 | -64.8823 |
| 17.71062 | -64.8812 |
| 17.7112  | -64.8811 |
| 17.7112  | -64.8808 |
| 17.71121 | -64.8826 |
| 17.71151 | -64.8831 |
| 17.71157 | -64.881 |
| 17.71219 | -64.8826 |
| 17.71219 | -64.8833 |
| 17.71244 | -64.8819 |
| 17.71277 | -64.8831 |
| 17.71328 | -64.8826 |
| 17.71331 | -64.8822 |
| 17.71344 | -64.8824 |
| 17.71359 | -64.8829 |
| 17.71493 | -64.8799 |
| 17.71498 | -64.6958 |
| 17.71531 | -64.8839 |
| 17.71754 | -64.8304 |
| 17.71887 | -64.8034 |
| 17.72382 | -64.6479 |
| 17.7242  | -64.6485 |
| 17.72441 | -64.6484 |
| 17.72613 | -64.8836 |
| 17.73468 | -64.8892 |
| 17.74004 | -64.6615 |
| 17.74342 | -64.7012 |
| 17.74377 | -64.7078 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 17.74448 | -64.7 |
| 17.74458 | -64.7002 |
| 17.74461 | -64.7006 |
| 17.74476 | -64.7016 |
| 17.745 | -64.7017 |
| 17.74503 | -64.7011 |
| 17.74513 | -64.7014 |
| 17.74513 | -64.7019 |
| 17.74524 | -64.702 |
| 17.74524 | -64.7012 |
| 17.74527 | -64.7045 |
| 17.74528 | -64.7019 |
| 17.74532 | -64.7019 |
| 17.74546 | -64.7045 |
| 17.74548 | -64.7016 |
| 17.74561 | -64.7034 |
| 17.74562 | -64.7014 |
| 17.74563 | -64.7052 |
| 17.74567 | -64.7016 |
| 17.7458 | -64.7024 |
| 17.74617 | -64.7026 |
| 17.74656 | -64.7045 |
| 17.74668 | -64.8843 |
| 17.7467 | -64.8844 |
| 17.74686 | -64.8843 |
| 17.74689 | -64.7017 |
| 17.74743 | -64.8928 |
| 17.74996 | -64.8675 |
| 17.7501 | -64.8675 |
| 17.75258 | -64.8722 |
| 17.75267 | -64.6251 |
| 17.75282 | -64.6252 |
| 17.75501 | -64.6812 |
| 17.75619 | -64.6304 |
| 17.75621 | -64.6303 |
| 17.75666 | -64.7248 |
| 17.75679 | -64.725 |
| 17.75694 | -64.7679 |
| 17.75696 | -64.725 |
| 17.75707 | -64.7257 |
| 17.75716 | -64.7251 |
| 17.75717 | -64.7254 |
| 17.75841 | -64.6408 |
| 17.75848 | -64.641 |
| 17.75858 | -64.6411 |
| 17.7586 | -64.6408 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 17.75873 | -64.6544 |
| 17.75877 | -64.6411 |
| 17.75877 | -64.641 |
| 17.75896 | -64.6409 |
| 17.75899 | -64.6543 |
| 17.7597 | -64.8881 |
| 17.75978 | -64.8882 |
| 17.76249 | -64.8151 |
| 17.76362 | -64.8267 |
| 17.76762 | -64.8176 |
| 17.77101 | -64.8122 |
| 17.77226 | -64.8108 |
| 17.77592 | -64.7657 |
| 17.78021 | -64.7884 |
| 17.78041 | -64.7886 |
| 17.78067 | -64.7893 |
| 17.74342 | -64.7012 |
| 17.74378 | -64.7078 |
| 17.74617 | -64.7026 |
| 17.74667 | -64.8843 |
| 17.74669 | -64.8844 |
| 17.74686 | -64.8843 |
| 17.74689 | -64.7017 |
| 17.74997 | -64.8675 |
| 17.75969 | -64.8881 |
| 17.75978 | -64.8882 |
| 17.7625 | -64.8151 |
| 17.76361 | -64.8267 |
| 17.76761 | -64.8176 |
| 17.771 | -64.8123 |
| 17.77225 | -64.8108 |
| 17.77592 | -64.7657 |
| 17.74658 | -64.8928 |
| 17.74662 | -64.7042 |
| 17.74672 | -64.7042 |
| 17.74639 | -64.7039 |
| 17.74542 | -64.7057 |
| 17.74513 | -64.7045 |
| 17.74544 | -64.7043 |
| 17.7467 | -64.7026 |
| 17.71371 | -64.8835 |
| 17.77067 | -64.8123 |
| 17.7547 | -64.6819 |

Christiansted

Frederiksted

St. Croix
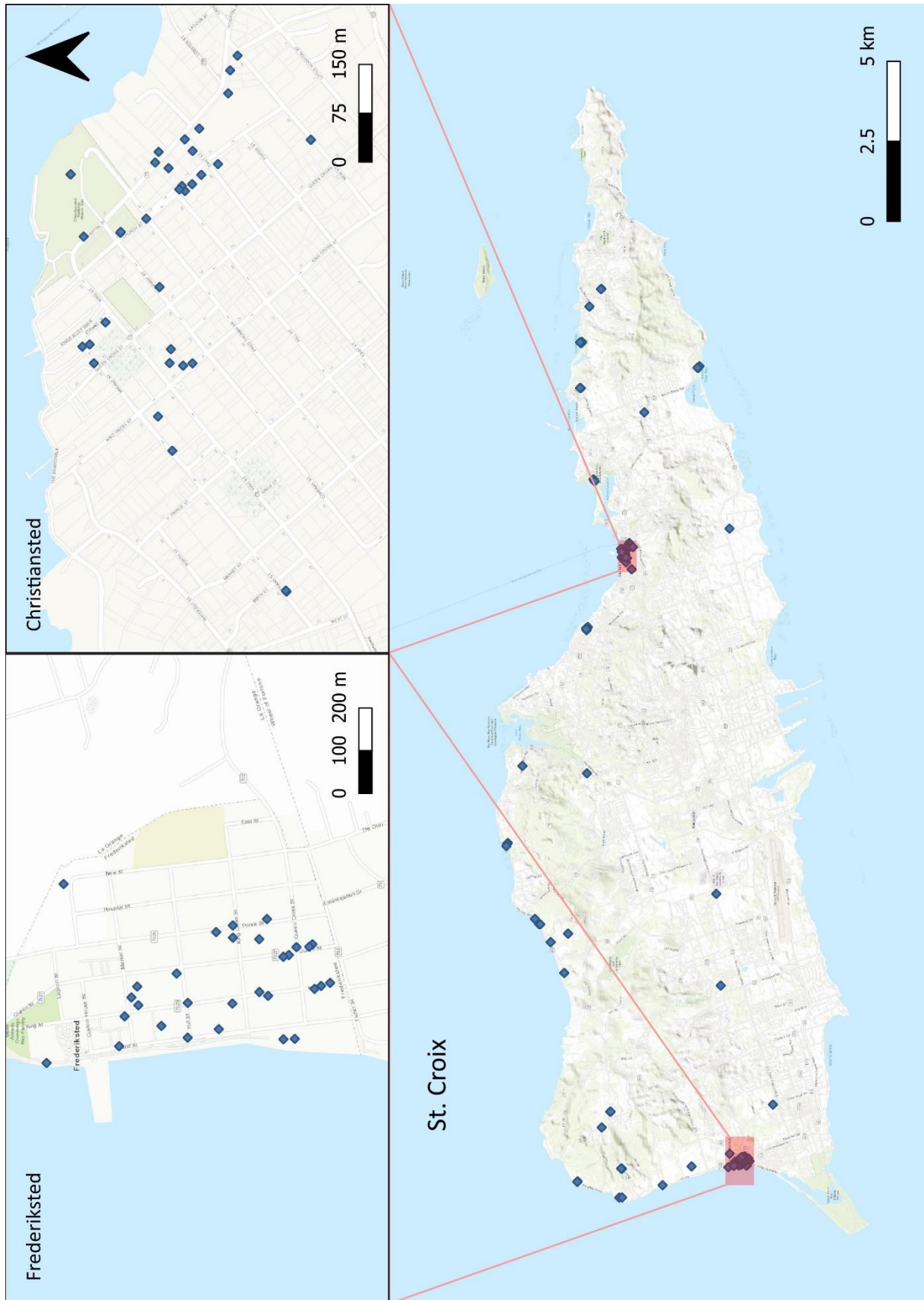
# APPENDIX E

## USVI Register of Big Trees
## Robert W. Nicholls

| ID | Location |
|---|---|
| 1 | Grove Place |
| 10 | Beresford Manor |
| 12 | Government Parking Lot Christiansted |
| 18 | Sprat Plantation [Sprat Hall?] |
| 19 | Butler Bay |
| 22 | Prince/Hill Street Frederiksted |
| 60 | Butler Bay |

| Additional Specimens IDed by Zahedi |
|---|
| Estate Northside |
| Southgate Preserve |
| Union and Mt. Washington |
| Estate Shoys |
| Spring Gut |
| Estate St. George |
| Estate Whim |
| Estate Mt. Victory |
| Ridge to Reef Farm |

Baobab specimen 22 was not located during fieldwork

# APPENDIX F

## Queen Mary (Carisou Song)

Queen Mary, oh where you gon' go burn?

Queen Mary oh where you gon' go burn?


Don't ask me nothin' at all. Just give me the match and oil.

Bassin Jailhouse, ah there the money there.

Don't ask me nothin' at all. Just give me the match and oil.

Bassin Jailhouse, ah there the money there.


Queen Mary, oh where you gon' go burn?

Queen Mary, oh where you gon' go burn?

Don't ask me nothin' at all. Just give me the match and trash.

Bassin Jailhouse, ah there the money there.

Don't ask me nothin' at all. Just give me the match and trash.


Bassin Jailhouse, ah there the money there.

We gon' burn Bassin come down,

And when we reach the factory, we'll burn am level down.


**To listen to an audio recording of the song:**

Stanley and the Ten Sleepless Nights (2017, November 18). *Queen Mary* [Video]. Youtube.

    URL https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXZhw46spSc

Gladys A. Abraham Elementary School Culture Choir (2010, October 2). *Queen Mary*

    [Video]. Youtube. URL https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93yCzZ-G1pY

# APPENDIX G

Coakley Bay Burial Ground

Archaeological Report Part II

January 2022

Prepared by Pardis Zahedi, M.A./PhD Candidate

Aarhus University, Denmark

## 1.1 Introduction

Coakley Bay is a beach on the northern shore of the East End Quarter, St. Croix, USVI. According to oral history, the beach, which is adjacent to an eighteenth and nineteenth century sugar and cotton plantation (Coakley Bay Estate), is a burial site; the most pronounced rumors have been centered on the eastern shore area. In 2006 St. Croix archaeologist David Hayes found a damaged right femur and fibula along the western portion of the beach. His subsequent excavation of the adjacent Coakley Bay estate produced two burials on the west side of a contemporary beach access road (Hayes 2006). However when he conducted a test survey of the sandy beach area, it revealed no evidence of further burials.

In September of 2020, a beachcomber encountered two crania and a femur in the sand at Coakley Bay, which were identified to be human. Over the course of the succeeding months, several other remains were exposed in the sand, resulting from seasonal intensive wave action and erosion of the beach and sand. Coakley Bay Beach is a dynamic shoreline, seasonally alternating between sandy and rocky soil composition, and consequently, archaeological remains below the surface of the sand are particularly vulnerable to coastal erosion.

On June 29, 2021, visiting archaeologists from the University of Texas encountered an exposed spine and tibia on the west side of Coakley Bay Beach during a recreational visit to the beach. At the request of the Territory Archaeologist David Brewer of the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), archaeologist Pardis Zahedi, and East End Marine Park Ranger, John Farchette, recorded the remains and removed them from the site. Three weeks later, more remains were revealed on the eastern side of the beach. The remains were excavated, recovered, and transferred to the State Historic Preservation Office. A report was prepared and submitted to Mr. Brewer.

Subsequent to the discovery of these remains, Zahedi was contacted by a member of the public via Facebook (October 2021) who alerted her to the presence of more remains evident at Coakley Bay. As Zahedi was in Denmark at the time, she instructed the individual to contact Mr. Brewer or Mr. Farchette and alert them to the presence of the exposed skeletal remains. They were removed by Mr. Farchette and transferred to the State Historic Preservation office.

On January 4, 2022, Zahedi was alerted by a different member of the public about the presence of additional human remains at Coakley Bay. She immediately drove to the beach to examine the site, and identified two separate burials, one at the eastern end of the beach and one west of the first beach access point. Zahedi alerted Mr. Farchette to the presence of the additional remains, and he requested that she remove them. Mr. Brewer was not on island and therefore unable to carry out the excavation himself.

On January 5, 2022 Zahedi conducted a complete excavation of the burial on the western side of the beach, and a partial excavation of the burial on the eastern side of the beach. She determined that only a partial excavation was necessary for the second burial, as further archaeological work would have compromised the stability of the beach. Zahedi's husband, Matthew Davies assisted with the excavation by providing support and conducting a snorkel survey to recover remains that were no longer in context.

Both burials were located within fifty feet of the seaward line of low tide and to the seaward side of natural vegetation, which places the responsibility for the archaeological work within the hands of the U.S. Virgin Islands Government and the State Historic Preservation Office.

This brief report is a summary of the excavations.



Figure 4 Aerial Image of St. Croix indicating Coakley Bay

## 1.2 Area of Study

The Coakley Bay Estate is a sprawling eighteenth and nineteenth century plantation site, inclusive of several historic structures in various states of preservation (restored great house, a carriage house, hospital, sugar factory, detached kitchen, windmill, and enslaved village). Contemporary additions constructed in recent years include a swimming pool, contemporary beach access road, and solar field. Several of the historic structures have been rebuilt.

The burial area sits on the periphery of the property boundary along the shoreline which follows the northern coast of the island. The known burial area covers a distance of approximately 75 meters, running parallel to the shore along a west/east axis; the extent to which the remains fall on the north/south axis has yet to be determined. As excavations have been limited to conservative recovery of vulnerable remains, it is possible that the burial ground extends further west than currently understood. The known burial area ends on the eastern side of the beach to a water gut.

## 1.3 Historical Context

According to the National Parks Service, the first settlers of Coakley Bay were Saladoid-era people who established a village near the beachside (NPS 2021). As little of the archaeological focus in the area has been focused on the indigenous period, our understanding of early people's occupation and activity in the area is limited.

The primary known period of occupation at Coakley Bay is the colonial period. The Coakleys were a prominent British family with extensive landholdings in Anguilla and, later, St. Croix. After the Danish purchased St. Croix from the French in 1733, the Danes, who were relative latecomers to the colonial 'game' in the Caribbean, were eager to develop the island and offered land for competitive rates to prominent planters from across the Caribbean region. William Coakley, Sr. and John Coakley, Sr. were two brothers living in Anguilla who came to St. Croix in the 1740s. William Coakley acquired a large plantation after marrying Widow Barrow, who had inherited the property from her late husband; by 1765, William had transferred ownership to his brother (John) and returned to Anguilla. The property stayed in the Coakley family through the latter part of the eighteenth century. Toward the end of the eighteenth century and through the nineteenth century, the property changed hands several times between families (see Table 1). Through the colonial period, Coakley Bay had a significant population of enslaved individuals living and laboring on the property (Table 1). The enslaved village is located on the eastern side of the property.

In 1976, Estate Coakley Bay was added to the Register of Historic Places. It is currently under private ownership by David Johnson.

**Table 1. Coakley Bay Estate Ownership (Rigsarkivet 1737-1915)**

| Date | Owners | Additional Residents | Product |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1741 | Widow Barrow | 11 enslaved | Cotton |
| 1745 | Widow Barrow & W. Coakley | 28 enslaved | Cotton and Sugar |
| 1750 | W. Coakley | Unknown | Cotton and Sugar |
| 1755 | W. Coakley | 79 enslaved, 2 free | |
| 1761 | W. Coakley | 34 enslaved, 3 free | |
| 1765 | J. Coakley | 43 enslaved, 3 free | |
| 1770 | E. Coakley | 43 enslaved, 3 free | |
| 1775 | J. Coakley Sr. | 61 enslaved, 2 free | |
| 1780 | J. Coakley & J. Carden | 85 enslaved, 4 free | |
| 1792 | J. Carden | 144 enslaved, 9 free | Sugar |
| 1796 | J. Carden | 150 enslaved, 9 free | Sugar and Pasture |
| 1804 | J. Sheriff | 158 enslaved, 3 free | Sugar and Pasture |
| 1814 | J. Sheriff & heirs | 149 enslaved, 5 free | Sugar and Pasture |
| 1825 | H. Carden | 137 enslaved, 5 free | Sugar and Pasture |
| 1845 | D. Rogers | 127 enslaved, 2 free | |
| 1855 | R. Finlay and J. Roche | 58 residents | |
| 1867 | J.J. Lund | 46 residents | |
| 1879 | D. de Leon | 10 residents | Pasture |
| 1895-1938 | Penthany family | Unknown | Cotton and Pasture |
| 1938 | Municipality of St. Croix for most of estate | | |
| 1947 | The Billmans (Schonhoven) | | |
| 1952 | The Heyns (Penathy) | | |
| 1988 | TK Properties | | |
| 2001 | Paul and Genevieve Due | | |
| | David Johnson | | |

## 2.1 Methodology

The archaeologist, Pardis Zahedi, has become familiar with the burial site at Coakley Bay, having conducted regular monitoring of the beach since first learning about the presence of human remains along the shoreline in September 2020. She also conducted an excavation at

the site in July 2021, in which two burials were removed and transferred to SHPO. Her survey fieldwork over the past 1.5 years and her experience working on excavation has provided information about the potential scope of the site and has informed this report.

After receiving a public 'tip' regarding the presence of additional remains at Coakley Bay on January 4, 2022, Zahedi conducted a walking survey of the site which confirmed the presence of two burials. The first burial (herein referred to as Burial 03) was located east of the first beach access point, two meters west of the water gut (see Figure 2). Immediately visible was a femur entangled in the roots of a tree, as well as a spine and pelvic bone exposed in the profile of the soil. A tibia, three vertebrae and a coccyx were found in the immediate vicinity. One meter to the west, the bottom of an adult mandible was found. Less than one meter to the west of the mandible was a partial rib bone. It is presumed that these remains belong to the same individual. As some of the remains were above the surface of the sand and located within the zone of the active shoreline, Zahedi collected a GPS point and removed them.



Figure 2   Burial 3 was eroding from the cliff edge

Although she initially assumed these were the only visible remains on the beach, she continued the survey heading westward from the first beach access point and approximately 15 meters from Burial 03, she found the crown of a cranium, which was clearly too small to belong to Burial 03, who was determined to be an adult. Approximately three to four meters west of the top of the cranium, she identified a coffin with the remains of a child. The bottom portion of the cranium and the bottom mandible were visible in the soil.

Zahedi contacted Mr. Farcette who requested that she conduct an excavation. As one of the burials (Burial 04) was located within the tidal zone (see Figure 3), Zahedi determined that it was pertinent to remove them as soon as possible; after assessing the tidal forecast, she scheduled the excavation for the afternoon of January 5, 2022.



Figure 3 Burial 4 was visible on the west side of Coakley Beach. On the right side of the image the exposed cranium and teeth are visible

On January 5, 2022, after arriving to the site, Zahedi removed the vulnerable remains from Burial 03, which required no excavation. Unfortunately, the tide was not as low as she had hoped, and so after clearing the roots from around Burial 04 and taking preliminary photographs, Zahedi and Davies built a berm around the excavation area to minimize the

impact of the sea on their work. They briefly considered revisiting a site another day but were concerned that the burial might be washed away at the next high tide.

The excavation was carried out primarily with brushes, as Zahedi anticipated it would be difficult to remove the coffin in context (though she optimistically hoped they might). The area around the burial was excavated to 15 cm, although the soil removed from the burial itself did not extend beyond 2-5 cm. Due to the nature of composition, it was not possible to remove the coffin, as it was disintegrated and had a powder-like consistency. The burial was photographed and drawn; Zahedi will also provide a photogrammetry 3-d model of the burial for Mr. Brewer's records, if he so requests. Since the wood could not be removed in full, Zahedi collected samples from two different parts of the coffin for future analysis.

Considering that this site is highly vulnerable to beach erosion and potential looters, it is recommended that the Territorial Archaeologist assess the site, respond, and take further steps moving forward.

## 2.2 Previous Reports of Human Remains at Coakley Bay

Although the request to remove the remains from the site was not issued until June 30, 2021, Ms. Zahedi conducted regular surveys of the site in order to document exposed remains at Coakley Bay Beach. She reported all exposed remains to the East End Marine Park Ranger (Mr. Farchette), who reported to the Virgin Islands Police Department (VIPD). The table below indicates human remains reported to VIPD and/or collected by VIPD on four separate dates between September 2020 and February 2021; asterisks indicate cases in which members of the public identified and/or reported remains, including one instance in which the discovery was posted to a private Facebook account.

**Table 2. Remains Previously Exposed at Coakley Bay**

| Date | Type | Condition | In situ? | Recovered? |
|------|------|-----------|----------|------------|
| 09/24/2020 | Cranium* | Nearly complete | Disturbed | VIPD |
| 09/24/2020 | Sacrum* | Partial | Disturbed | VIPD |
| 9/24/2020 | Femur* | Nearly complete | Disturbed | VIPD |
| 9/24/2020 | Tibia* | Nearly complete | Disturbed | VIPD |
| 9/24/2020 | Fibula* | Nearly complete | Disturbed | VIPD |
| 09/24/2020 | Humerus (2)* | Partial | Disturbed | VIPD |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 09/24/2020 | Femur* | Partial | Disturbed | VIPD |
| 09/24/2020 | Cranium* | Partial (crown) | Disturbed | VIPD |
| 10/31/2020 | Cranium* | Complete | Exposed | Reported |
| 10/31/2020 | Humerus | Complete | Exposed | Reported |
| 10/31/2020 | Unidentified | Poor condition | Exposed | Reported |
| 11/23/2020 | Tibia | Complete | Exposed | Reported |
| 11/23/2020 | Unidentified | Partial (unidentifiable) | Exposed | Reported |
| 11/23/2020 | Pubis | Partial | Partially buried | Reported |
| 11/23/2020 | Pubis | Partial | Partially buried | Reported |
| 11/23/2020 | Scapula | Partial (broken) | Partially buried | Reported |
| 11/23/2020 | Rib (2) | Complete | Exposed | Reported |
| 11/23/2020 | Radius | Partial | Partially buried | Reported |
| 11/23/2020 | Humerus | Partial | Partially buried | Reported |
| 12/29/2010 | Unidentified | Poor Condition | Partially buried | Reported |
| 12/29/2020 | Femur | Unknown | Partially buried | Reported |
| 12/29/2020 | Humerus | Unknown | Partially buried | Reported |
| 12/29/2020 | Vertebra | Unknown | Partially buried | Reported |
| 02/4/2021 | Unidentified | Partial | Partially buried | Reported |
| 02/04/2021 | Femur | Unknown | Partially buried | Reported |
| 02/04/2021 | Femur | Unknown | Partially buried | Reported |

**Figure 5** Remains disturbed by beachcomber 9/24/2020

Table 3 and 4 describe remains excavated by Zahedi in July 2020.

**Table 3. Skeletal Remains: Burial 01**

| Bone* | Condition |
|---|---|
| Tibia (left) | Poor, incomplete |
| Tibial Tuberosity (left) | Poor, fragment |
| Patella (left) | Moderate, incomplete |
| Pubis (left) | Poor, incomplete |
| Illium (left) | Moderate, incomplete |
| Sacrum | Poor |
| Illium (right) | Fragment |
| Lumbar Vertebrae (L01-L05) | Moderate (exposed) |
| Thoracic Vertebrae (T09-12) | Moderate (exposed) |
| Thoracic Vertebrae (T01-T08) | Poor (tranverse processes) |
| Cervical Spine (C03-C07) | Poor, incomplete |
| Mandible | Poor, partial (left) |
| Humerus (left) | Good |
| Ulna (left) | Good |
| Radius (left) | Good |
| Carpals | Good, intact |
| Meta-carpals | Good, intact |
| Proximal phalanges (5) | Good, intact |
| Intermediate phalanges (4) | Good, intact |
| Distal phalanges (1) | Moderate |
| Ribs (9) | Poor, splintered |
| Teeth (4 molars, 1 premolar with caries) | Good |

*Torso removal prioritized minimal disruption to skeletal positioning. As a result, some bones and objects may not be identified in this report.

**Table 5. Skeletal Remains Burial 02**

| Bone | Condition |
|---|---|
| Femur | Good |
| Left Pubis | Moderate (diseased) |
| Left Illium | Moderate (diseased) |
| Lumbar Vertabrae (2) | Moderate (diseased) |
| Metacarpal Bones (5) | Good |
| Proximal Phalanges (3) | Moderate |
| Middle Phalanges (3) | Moderate |
| Distal Phalanges (3) | Moderate |
| Proximal Phalanx (thumb) | Moderate |
| Distal Phalanx (thumb) | Moderate |
| Fibula (out of context, found in water) | Poor (incomplete) |

In addition to the human remains found at the site, Burial 01 revealed several buttons and nails which were collected, documented, and sent to the State Historic Preservation Office.

## 3.1 Burial 03

On the eastern side of the first beach access point at Coakley Bay, Zahedi identified a femur entangled in the roots of a maho tree [17.7587666, -64.6428419]. Directly to the west of the exposed femur was the bottom mandible of an adult (age and sex undetermined). A tibia, coccyx, and several vertebrae were also identified within the vicinity.

In the profile of the sand, there are additional vertebrae, and a pelvic bone exposed. Due to the unstable nature of the beach at this location, Zahedi determined it was not necessary to remove those remains at the time, as removal would have further contributed to the destabilization of the beach.

Remains removed for Burial 03 were collected without penetration of the soil, as all were surface finds. After removing the remains, Mr. Davies conducted a snorkel survey of the immediate vicinity and collected a femur and tibia, presumably belonging to the same individual. Due to the algae cover on the remains, it is estimated that they had been under water for some time.

The individual was oriented with the crown of his or her head toward the west, and feet facing east; this suggests Judeo-Christian traditional burial practice and is consistent with other burials found on site.

**Table 5: Burial 03 Skeletal Remains**

| Bone | Condition |
|---|---|
| Femur (right) | Moderate |
| Tibia (right) | Moderate |
| Femur (left) (found out of context, in sea) | Poor, significant algal growth |
| Tibia (left) (found out of context,  in sea) | Poor, significant algal growth |

| | |
|---|---|
| Bottom mandible, 9 teeth in place | Moderate, incomplete |
| 2 teeth | Good |
| Coccyx | Good |
| Ribs (2) | Poor, partial |
| Metatarsal | Moderate |
| Vertebrae (3 complete, 1 partial) | Moderate to poor (osteophytes present) |

## 3.2 Burial 04

On the western side of the first beach access point at Coakley Bay, Zahedi and Davies encountered a fragment of a cranium. Further down the beach, heading westward, they encountered a skeleton in a coffin. Upon initial assessment, it was difficult to ascertain whether the top or bottom of the coffin was visible.

Unfortunately, most of the remains belonging to Burial 04 had been washed out, as they were located within the tidal zone of a dynamic shoreline. Recovered remains are listed in the table below (Table 6). Due to constant moisture and salt exposure, the bones and cultural material were fragile and unstable.

The individual was buried in the Judeo-Christian tradition, with the feet pointed toward the east and crown toward the west. The presence of a coffin suggests that the individual had a European-style burial indicating that

Based on preliminary skeletal analysis, the individual was estimated to be approximately 4.5 years of age. This was determined by the individuals presumed height (91 cm) and dental analysis.

In addition to the wood taken for sampling from the coffin, three iron nails were found in context.

**Table 6: Burial 04 Skeletal Remains**

| Bone | Condition |
|---|---|
| Bottom Mandible, 8 teeth in place | Poor (fragile) |
| 1 tooth | Good |
| Cranium fragments | Poor (fragile, roots growing throughout) |
| Rib fragments (15) | Poor |
| Tibia (right) | Poor |
| Fibula (right) | Poor |
| Radius (right) | Poor |
| Ulna (right) | Poor |
| Humerus (right) | Poor |
| Bone fragments (unidentified) | Poor |
| Wrought iron nails (3) | Good/Moderate |
| Wood (samples) | Poor (powdery consistency) |

## 4.1 Analysis

Osteoarchaeological and further analysis of both Burial 03 and 04 will be deferred to the State Historic Preservation Office, who is in possession of the remains.

## 5.1 Conclusions

The excavations of Burials 03 and 04 provide further evidence that Coakley Bay contains an extensive burial site dating to the mid to late nineteenth century. Based upon the material

evidence and property ownership records (Table 1), the burials likely predate the Penthany ownership of the property (1895). The presence of wrought iron nails suggest that Burial 04 dates to the pre-emancipation period (1848).

Because the only archaeological objects found in situ were remnants of a wood coffin and iron nails, it is difficult to draw major conclusions about socio-economic class or race. However, the positioning of the burials suggests that the individuals were Christian (or at least buried according to Christian tradition).

The burial ground is not indicated on historical maps of the site, suggesting that it was not a cemetery associated with the planter class. Moreover, given the history of the site and historical occupants, the overwhelming majority being enslaved individuals before 1848, it is very possible that this burial ground is Afro-Caribbean.

It is recommended that further analysis be conducted on the bones and teeth, which will reveal more detailed information about the individuals. Although it is unclear whether the human remains are Afro-Caribbean, European, indigenous, or creole, because of the nature of colonial archival documentation, there is little insight into the lifeways of those who were members of the lower classes in St. Croix colonial society. Bio-archaeological analysis has the potential to reveal information including but not limited to genetics, nutrition, pathology, and working conditions.

Erosion continues to threaten the coastline, which will undoubtedly reveal more human remains. The site is highly vulnerable to further degradation and lost archaeological context. Although reversing damage to the site is not possible, there are steps that the Department of Planning and Natural Resources can take to better preserve to site (i.e. planting stabilizing trees, retaining wall, etc.); however, as Coakley Bay Beach is a dynamic and seasonal beach, it is important that steps taken to stabilize the site do not create additional ecological concerns. The archaeologist, Pardis Zahedi, suggests immediate archaeological recovery be conducted and the coastline stabilized through the construction of a retaining wall.

As Burials 02 (Zahedi 2021) and 04 are located within the intertidal zone, the responsibility for excavation falls on the Virgin Islands Government and the State Historic Preservation Office. Burials 01 (Zahedi 2021) and 03 are located at the periphery of the natural vegetation line, relegating the financial responsibility for archaeological recovery on the landowner, Mr. David Johnson. It is recommended that the Virgin Islands Government proceed with archaeological excavation immediately. Due to the public nature of the beach and the manner

in which Zahedi has been alerted about the presence of remains (via members of the public), this has become a public issue that affects the citizens of St. Croix and the Virgin Islands. It is unclear whether or not looting has become an issue at the site as the situation is currently unmanaged.

Coastal erosion is a major issue across the Virgin Islands. The beaches on the east side of St. Croix are particularly vulnerable due to various factors affecting the barrier reef, which historically provided some level of protection against erosion due to wave action. However, future mitigation measures to protect further erosion are costly and time intensive. Undoubtedly, as the beach continues to wash away, more human remains will be exposed and without intervention, their archaeological contexts and consequently, valuable historical information, lost.

## 5.3 Final Thoughts

It is unsettling and upsetting to find human remains, especially for members of the public, which includes residents and tourists, visiting the site in order to beach-walk or snorkel.

Human remains are, arguably, the most sensitive of archaeological recoveries. Cross-culturally, people both within and outside the archaeological sector underline the importance of treating ancestral remains with respect and dignity. Rescue excavations such as this one are bittersweet; on the one hand, they demonstrate the vulnerability of the archaeological record while reminding us of a whole range of ethical considerations to do with excavating ancestral remains. On the other hand, they provide deeper context into the past and the enduring nature of humankind.

The burial ground at Coakley Bay is of significant value to the archaeological record and to the people of the Virgin Islands, as well as wider Caribbean. As so little is understood about the lifeways of those who lived on the island during the Danish colonial era, the site holds wealth of information about the people who created St. Croix's socio-cultural and built landscape. It is the responsibility and privilege of archaeologists to ensure that the contributions of people of the past are remembered by present and future generations.

**AMMENDMENT**

On November 5, 2023, Zahedi was again alerted by a visiting researcher about the presence of human remains on the beach at Coakley Bay. Zahedi contacted the State Historic Preservation Office, Senior Territorial Archaeologist Mr. David Brewer to request clearance to assess the site and recover the remains, which he granted.

A period of heavy rain through October and November 2023 contributed to further erosion of the shoreline on the eastern side of the beach at Coakley Bay, adjacent to Mr. Johnson's property. Zahedi reports significant erosion along the fence line, and recommends that a retaining wall is constructed in order to minimize future erosion.

**Recovered Remains 11-6-2023**

Entangled amongst the roots, Zahedi identified several bone fragments, presumably belonging to three separate individuals. See table below for recovered remains, conditions and GPS coordinates. The table is cross-referenced with images of the remains in situ:

| Bone | Condition | Location | Figure |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ulna | Poor | 17.759050, -64.642322 | A |
| Vertebrate | Moderate | 17.759060, -64.642349 | B |
| Femur | Poor (partial) | 17.759018, -64.642141 | C |
| Unidentified (ulna/radius) | Poor (partial) | 17.759018, -64.642141 | D |
| Pelvis | Poor (partial) | 17.759, -64.642143 | E |

**Figure A - Ulna**

**Figure B - Vertabrate**



**Figure C - Femur**

**Figure D – Unidentified (Ulna/Radius)**



**Figure E - Pelvis**

# APPENDIX H
# INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS
## [Redacted]