

**CRUCIAN CONFUSION: MEMORY-MAKING ON THE ISLAND OF
ST. CROIX**

by
Justyce Bennett

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in American Material
Culture

Summer 2021

© 2021 Justyce Bennett
All Rights Reserved

**CRUCIAN CONFUSION: MEMORY-MAKING ON THE ISLAND OF
ST. CROIX**

by
Justyce Bennett

Approved: _____
Catharine Dann Roeber, Ph.D.
Professor in charge of thesis on behalf of the Advisory Committee

Approved: _____
Martin Brückner, Ph.D.
Director of the Winterthur Program in American Material Culture

Approved: _____
John Pelesko, Ph.D.
Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

Approved: _____
Louis F. Rossi, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Graduate and Professional Education and
Dean of the Graduate College

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Catharine Dann Roeber

Tom Guiler

Martin Brückner

Greg Landrey

Chase Markee

Laura Schmidt

Felix

Olasee Davis

Justin Dunnavant

Richard Schrader

Iris Ford

Steve Lenik

WPAMC 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	v
ABSTRACT	vi
Chapter	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 MAROON RIDGE	22
3 ESTATE SLOB	40
4 CRUZAN RUM.....	53
5 CONCLUSION	64
FIGURES	67

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Screenshot from realestate listing for Estate Mount Washington.	67
Figure 2	Detail from Reliable Map of St. Croix, 1754, Library of Congress	68
Figure 3	<i>Ham 's Bluff Lighthouse</i> . 2017. Photograph by author.	69
Figure 4	<i>Felix and His Machete</i> , 2017. Photograph by author.	70
Figure 5	<i>Maroon Ridge</i> , 2017. Photo my author.	71
Figure 6	<i>Reliable Map of St. Croix</i> , 1754, Library of Congress	72
Figure 7	Meeting with Dr. Dunnivant. 2017	73
Figure 8	<i>Baobab Plaque</i> , 2017. Photograph by author.....	74
Figure 9	CHANT Hamilton walking tour	75
Figure 10	<i>General View of House from the West</i> , Library of Congress Building Survey, 1984.....	76
Figure 11	<i>Body Slob (Estate)</i> , National Register of Historic Places, 1987.....	77
Figure 12	<i>Cruzan Label</i> , 2020, Photograph by author.....	78
Figure 13	<i>Cruzan Windmill</i> , 2017, Photograph by author.	79
Figure 14	<i>100 Things to Do</i> , Tourism website for St. Croix listing Plantation Ruins as a top attraction.....	80

ABSTRACT

In determining historic sites' merit for preservation on the island of St. Croix in the United States Virgin Islands (USVI), discomfort frequently arises between preservationists, historians and local communities. Experts' scholarly experience often comes in tension with the lived experiences of those who reside on the island. Differences of opinion about cultural heritage become even more fraught when relationships between interest groups mimic the power dynamics of colonialism. Black Crucian communities are often disenfranchised from their own local history in favor of that produced and directed by white foreigners. Sugar plantations, rum factories, and even natural landmarks like trees can easily become disassociated with their complicated colonial pasts. This thesis explores these tensions on the island of St. Croix by studying the history of imperialism, preservation, and material culture on the island. Through the use of case studies this thesis explores how and why Crucians prioritize certain histories and historic sites that support Crucian values and needs. Rather than being unattuned to cultural heritage, as some have suggested, Crucians advocate in multiple ways for preservation choices and techniques that more closely align with local knowledge of land, people, and material culture. Drawing on scholarship related to Black ecologies and the concept of rememory, this thesis highlights the importance of collaborative work between community members and preservationists to achieve local cultural sovereignty.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In 2017 I had the pleasure of participating in an archaeological excavation at a former sugar plantation site on the island of St. Croix. While I anticipated a rewarding learning experience and a fun time on a tropical island, I did not realize how profoundly the trip would change my understanding of what it means to engage in cultural heritage, and the need to center local knowledge in this work. This thesis is partly a personal account of historical reckoning, partly a history of St. Croix informed by material culture, and partly advocacy for centering local and Black ecologies in cultural heritage. I begin with an introduction to the main concepts that drive my work: rememory, Black ecologies, problems of the archives, and local cultural sovereignty. My following chapters begin with personal stories that stem from my visit to St. Croix and a local guide, Felix, who challenged and inspired me to see ruins and the material world on St. Croix in new ways. He became part of opening my eyes to new questions about how to see land, natural features like trees, relics and ruins, and tourist sites as much more complex spaces than I originally imagined as a young college student. My thesis centers on St. Croix, but I advocate for addressing the historical trauma of anti-Blackness and colonialism not only on this Caribbean island, but more generally at historical sites and museums throughout the US and its territories.

My first experience on the island was mere months before the devastating hurricanes Irma and Maria. When I was walking back from a hike with a friend we were stuck in a torrential downpour and hitchhiked back to the hotel. While we were in the car the nice couple who rescued us from being swept away in the rain started telling us about the culture of St. Croix, and how they were thinking about leaving the island because they could not find jobs. The husband was born and raised there, and joined the Navy because he said that was the only place he could find employment. The island he called home no longer felt welcoming or provided the support he and his partner needed. I tell this story often, usually as a funny anecdote centered on the downpour rescue as one of my many adventures as a 20-year-old spending the summer in the Caribbean. However recently when talking to Crucians still on the island, I realized how common this story was, how this was a symptom of imperialism, and how this has shaped the economic landscape of St. Croix after the hurricanes.

The ways in which natural disasters impact communities is racially and economically based. The response to these devastations is also racially based. Hurricane Katrina, while a natural disaster, is an example that many Americans know well. “Hurricane Katrina was deemed a ‘natural disaster,’ but the language that propped up this supposed naturalness only served to naturalize poor and Black agony,

distress and death.”¹ The materiality of segregation and hundreds of years of abuse left physical scars on the island, and the two hurricanes in 2017 revealed the fragile nature of St. Croix. Prior to the hurricanes young adults were already frequently leaving the island, which was the case for the couple who drove me back to the hotel, but after the hurricanes they fled out.² Young professionals and health care providers in the middle class left the island and continued leaving the island during the recovery period, leaving the population of the island a higher percentage of lower income communities and the elderly. With health care professionals leaving for the mainland, this left hospitals understaffed and created an even larger gap between the rich and the poor.³ The wealthy could go to Florida or another island for their care if it was needed, but those without the same resources were faced with limited options. This rift becomes greater still when considering health insurance. Since many lost their jobs they also lost their benefits, so even if they were able to find a hospital that could accommodate them, they might not be able to afford treatment.

1 Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, “No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean” in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines, 2007), 2.

2 Justin P. Dunnavant et al., “Assessing Heritage Resources in St. Croix Post-Hurricanes Irma and Maria,” *Transforming Anthropology* 26, no. 2 (2018): 162.

3 Ibid.

Natural disasters not only disrupt livelihoods, they disrupt history. The same hurricanes that upended the lives of so many on St. Croix also damaged the building that housed some of the archives and archaeological materials on the island. As I discuss below, natural disasters are not the only devastating factors that shaped and continue to shape St. Croix's historical and material memory. While this is a thesis that centers on thinking about the material world, it is important to emphasize that archives are often central to the interdisciplinary work of recovering a colonial past. But locating and using archives associated with St. Croix is a process made infinitely more difficult by the fractured nature of this archive, the favoring of a white history of the island and the emphasis on traditionally white historic storytelling in the dominant histories of St. Croix.⁴ My thesis has been shaped by the challenges I have faced while working on it more than I expected. When doing research for this thesis I ran into a problem almost immediately: the archives. Difficulty accessing archives shapes the attitudes Crucians have towards their history and historic preservation in general. This owes much to the long history of colonialism on the island.

4 S. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (January 2008): pp. 1-14.

St. Croix is a small island in the United States Virgin Islands. Indigenous people inhabited the island until earliest colonial settlement began in 1493.⁵ It was owned by seven different imperial powers, and is called the island of seven flags because of this. I am most interested in the period of history following 1733 when the Danish purchased the island from the French through 1917 when the West Indies were sold to the US in 1917. During WWI the islands were renamed the US Virgin Islands. The US continues to govern St. Croix today.⁶ Throughout its colonial history St. Croix was primarily an agricultural island, producing crops like tobacco and sugar. Emphasis on these cash crops in turn shaped a society where enslavement flourished. During emancipation in 1848 over 80% of the island was enslaved laborers.⁷ Due to the hundreds of years of burning down forests and exhaustive agriculture, much of the farmland is not suited for farming anymore, forcing the Crucians to rely on rum production and historical tourism for much of its economy and importation for its food and other supplies. In 1848 a large group of enslaved Crucians led by General Buddhoe took control of several smaller plantations and towns and demanded their freedom, which they were granted.⁸ Today historic preservation work on St. Croix can

5 Arnold R. Highfield, *Sainte Croix, 1650-1733: a Plantation Society in the French Antilles* (Christiansted, St. Croix, USVI: Antilles Press, 2013), 142.

6 Ibid.

7 Highfield, *Sainte Croix, 1650-1733: a Plantation Society in the French Antilles*, 81.

8 Ibid.

be very difficult since practitioners must navigate the constant fear of destruction through natural events, lasting racial inequality, and the threat of destruction for financial gain.

Like so many Caribbean locales, changing leadership, frequently moving people through forced labor and chosen mobility, and the location away from colonial centers shaped the disruption of a stable archive. The multilingual archives and the frequent relocation of archives both contribute to their fractured nature and limited access. When the Danish held the West Indies from 1733 to 1917 all the written records were written in Danish, despite the fact that the lingua franca was Dutch and Negerhollands, a form of Dutch Creole.⁹ The Danish language was not even taught to the populace until the 1860s. The main language spoken in St. Croix today is English. This hampers the accessibility of the archives to Crucians today. Not only are the records in Dutch, Danish, English and other languages, they are not held in any one central repository. Prior to the finalization of the sale of St. Croix to the United States, the Danish began to steadily move the West Indies archives to Denmark, with the last of the archives being moved from the Virgin Islands to Denmark in 1921.¹⁰ The sale

9 Jeannette A. Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, Connecticut: Libraries Unlimited, 2003), 44.

10 Ibid, 45.

of the Danish West Indies to the US included a stipulation that the archives also must be transferred to the US, not because the US had any particular interest in the archives, but because it was standard practice to consolidate records on the mainland. However, the urgency of establishing a Naval stronghold in the Caribbean took precedence over gaining access to the archives, so the US did not immediately make this transfer.¹¹ This lack of interest by the US encouraged Danish historians, museums, genealogists, and others to petition for Denmark to keep the archival records, and when this matter was brought up to the US Navy they handed most of the rest of the documents on St. Croix without any input from the Crucians. Further complicating the location of these documents is that in 1936 the US decided it did want the Virgin Islands's archives after establishing the National Archives of the United States, so historian Harold Larson was sent to Denmark to select documents he wished to bring back with him.¹² Most of these records relate to the topic of cession, but he also selected records based on his interests and those deemed "important" at the time. The records in the US have been given very little scholarly attention. Some documents have never been opened and some are marked "miscellaneous" and not placed with the rest of the Danish records. In short, to fully examine the records of St. Croix today requires flights to

11 Ibid, 46.

12 Ibid.

Denmark, the Netherlands, Washington, D.C. and other smaller archives worldwide.¹³ If imperialism made accessing the archives difficult, mother nature dealt the final blow. In 2017 hurricane Maria hit the Estate Whim Museum, severely damaging the building that holds its archives and destroying some of the records.¹⁴

When the archives are this inaccessible, and the written text gets taken away due to the heavy hand of imperialism, different ways of memorializing and passing down history take on greater importance. Oral history and material culture take precedence.¹⁵ Oral traditions in St. Croix are rich, powerful, and necessary. The traditions that are most important to Crucians center on emancipation in 1848 and the Fireburn labor revolt in 1878. These are celebrated at annual commemorative events and in more common occurrences of memory-making through story, song, and material commemorations. Unfortunately, since the information about these events are in court documents and tax records, both of which are in Denmark, the Crucians have few opportunities to corroborate their oral traditions. Occasionally Crucians will have

13 Ibid.

14 Dunnavant et al., “Assessing Heritage Resources in St. Croix Post-Hurricanes Irma and Maria,” 167.

15 Carrie Hamilton, “Evidence, Empathy and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories,” *The Oral History Reader*, March 2002, 347.

oral traditions that are later disputed by those with access to the archives, traditionally white European men.

For example, the story of emancipation led by Moses Gottlieb is important and widely known on the island. According to tradition, in 1848 Gottlieb started the process of removing all the gunpowder from Fort Fredrick and replacing it with sand. Then, hundreds of enslaved laborers went to the fort and demanded their freedom, and without any means to defend themselves the Danish had no choice but to relent.¹⁶ However, in 1994, during the 150 year anniversary of freedom, Caribbean historian Svend E. Holsoe, a Danish American scholar of Caribbean history, through studying the archives, revealed that Moses' name was most likely John Gottlieb and questioned whether he was involved in the planning of the rebellion, as the Crucians have suggested for decades.¹⁷ This difference caused controversy, as Moses Gottlieb is widely revered and considered a hero by islanders who cannot themselves easily participate in research or these factfinding missions due to inaccessible archives. Thus, a form of historical dependency is set up whereby Crucians are largely beholden to non-Crucians, often white historians as gatekeepers for their own history.¹⁸

16 Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History*, 45-46.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

I am interested in studying ruins and sites that have little written history because it allows space for an imagined past and romanticization. Ruins and natural features such as trees and landscapes have never left the island. With limited access to the written record, physical features and places take a more prominent role in the cultural legacy in St. Croix. Ruins pertaining to the hundreds of years of continued imperial intervention and enslavement cover the landscape. The interpretations of these ruins have grown beyond their built function.¹⁹ They are no longer just the remains of a sugar mill, but instead the backdrop of wedding venues, the sites of romantic myths, a marketing venture for the tourism industry, and a way to increase land value. Selling houses with ruins on them makes the property value that much more expensive (Figure 1).²⁰ Yet, despite the commercial and tourism uses they are still important for the memory making on the island. They are the most accessible “archive” that Crucians can access themselves to craft memory and history of their own.

Historian Eve Stoddard argues “As opposed to intact buildings, ruins could simultaneously signify a particular past and be open to imaginative recreations serving

19 Grant H. Cornwell and Eve W. Stoddard, “Reading Sugar Mill Ruins: ‘The Island Nobody Spoiled’ and Other Fantasies of Colonial Desire,” *South Atlantic Review* 66, no. 2 (2001): 35.

20 Estate Mount Washington advertises its ruins on its real estate page. Ruins have also been converted into condos and villas.

the needs of the present and the future...the heaps of stone can appear meaningless, but various readings are performed on them: archaeologists uncover a version of their pasts, painters represent them as creeping landscape of vines and stubbled soil, preservationists recapture them from the ruins of time as simulacra of their former selves; entrepreneurs appropriate them as nostalgic signifiers of the colonial imaginary; and tourists consume them through the codes made available to them by archaeologists, artists, preservationists, and entrepreneurs.”²¹ While I agree with these points, an important group that is left out of this understanding of ruins is that of the local population.

The relationship of the local population to ruins and sites of cultural heritage is complicated. On one hand the local population is “ruined”, meaning they, too are viewed as quaint or “natural” features of island life by archaeologists, tourists and other visitors. The local population is viewed as coexisting with the ruins.²² They belong along the ruins as a site to be viewed and setting the scene, and not as a group of people with agency and thoughts. They are as they were during enslavement, a natural resource for consumption.

21 Stoddard, “Reading Sugar Mill Ruins: ‘The Island Nobody Spoiled’ and Other Fantasies of Colonial Desire,” 135.

22 Ibid.

But ruins also open the imagination.²³ For local people themselves, ruins are connections to the past. The specifics of chronology and connection to “facts” from the archive is often not the most useful way ruins function to local Crucians. Ruins, both physical ruins and natural features that may be understood as ruins, have not only traveled through time but wear the time on their physical forms. And they serve as touchpoints for individual and collective histories that derive meaning from being shared by and preserved by local knowledge and stewardship. The sites included in this thesis, Maroon Ridge, the Grove Place Baobab Tree, and sugar mills and other sugar plantation features have a larger cultural significance to the Crucian people. In many cases these sites have been intentionally destroyed, left in ruins, or “preserved” off the beaten path by locals to prevent historical colonialism from occurring. These are sites to be shared by locals when they want, not to be managed or preserved or occupied fully by non-Crucians, even those who may be acting from “best practices” of traditional cultural heritage.

It is important to pause and discuss how “Crucian” is defined for the purposes of this thesis. The definition of who is “Crucian” is difficult. The simplest definition is anyone who lives on St. Croix, but for the purposes of this thesis I am specifically

23 Dora Apel. "Ruin Terrors and Pleasures." In *Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline*,. New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2015, 12.

focusing on Black Crucians who live on the island full time. Meaning, I am interested in the lives of Black folks living on the island who do not only come to the island during certain seasons. The reason for this is because those who have year-round experiences of the island know the challenges of the island much more than someone who only vacations there, and I am interested in sites that directly relate to Black history. This was a challenging definition to create because many Crucians have a narrower definition of “Crucian.” Race is not as significant of a qualifier as I am using in this thesis, generational ties to the island is the primary way to see how “Crucian” someone is. White or Black...if someone has family ties over generations, this tends to be considered “more Crucian.” Much of this is rooted in colonialism and it creates tension between those who were maybe born on another island but moved to St. Croix when they were young and those whose ancestors were born and raised on the island.

I am exploring St. Croix as a site of rememory.²⁴ Rememory is a concept explored by Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved*. I am looking at this term as it relates

²⁴ Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is the source of this term, other scholars have explored this term in a more modern context, including:

Brandi Thompson Summers, "The Changing Face of a Black Space: Cultural Tourism and the Spatialization of Nostalgia." In *Black in Place: The Spatial Aesthetics of Race in a Post-Chocolate City*, 86-110. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

Lisa Woolfork, "Slave Tourism and Rememory." In *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*, 98-131. University of Illinois Press, 2009.

to a traumatic history, such as slavery, and also as it relates to a personal experience and a collective memory. Morrison speaks about rememory in a Black frame. She specifically addresses Blackness and enslavement and place. The character Sethe explains it as “Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place-- the picture of it-- stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world.”²⁵ The longevity of a system like slavery can be felt throughout time, and on an island like St. Croix, where the entire island was carved out and shaped by the hands of enslaved labor, the trauma cannot be escaped.

Scholars have applied Morrison’s thoughts on Blackness and spatial navigation to different landscapes. Author Jonathan White in his “Rememories of Nevada: Tracing Lineages of the Present” explores an ethical challenge I have been thinking through with this thesis. He describes the Nevadan landscape and the romanticized past of cowboys.²⁶ He finds objects pertaining to Indigenous occupation of the land a

I am using it to relate directly and specifically to the Black experience and place. Other scholars have explored what this term means to other marginalized groups, but as Morrison applied this term specifically to Blackness and Black historical trauma in space, this is how I am using her term.

25 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Vancouver, BC: Langara College, 1987), 88.

26 Jonathan White, "Rememories of Nevada: Tracing Lineages of the Present," *Journal of American Studies* 41, no. 2 (2007), 375.

reminder that the land he was standing on was claimed through violence.²⁷ He is not Indigenous, nor was he present during the colonization process, but through the objects that still appear in the Nevadan dirt he experiences a rememory of a group he is not a part of. I am not from the Caribbean, so I do not know how it feels to navigate the land where there are hundreds of reminders of my ancestors' enslavement, but I do know the feeling tangentially as a biracial person living in the US. During my time as an undergraduate at St. Mary's College of Maryland I had the opportunity to do some archaeological work on campus. We ended up finding a ceramic piece that we believe was owned by an enslaved laborer. I did not know my college owned enslaved laborers until that moment, and having the thought that I was receiving an education from an institution that owned people like me shook me to my core. They may not have been my ancestors, but now looking at the landscape of my alma mater reminds me of the trauma my ancestors went through. Many Crucians' ancestors were from neighboring islands, so their ancestors were not directly impacted by particular objects, sites and landscapes on St. Croix proper. However, these objects, much like the erasure of Indigenous groups from Nevada and the ceramic piece from St. Mary's, serve as a constant reminder of white supremacy, and the Afro-Crucians, who may not

²⁷ Ibid.

be the descendants of the enslaved Crucians forced to work the land, still experience the trauma of the past in the material culture of St. Croix today.

Ideas of indigeneity and becoming Indigenous are deeply complicated. The book *Becoming Indigenous: Governing Imaginaries in the Anthropocene*, by David Chandler and Julian Reid, questions the notion many cultural historians and social scientists have of “becoming” Indigenous and adopting Indigenous beliefs and practices.²⁸ Understanding Indigenous relationships to the environment challenges western scholars, yet many have adopted frameworks of understanding that look to Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous relationships to the environment. Yet this work can ring hollow when practiced by people in non-marginalized groups. On St. Croix, there is a very real environmental concern on the island. Hurricanes are frequent, sea levels are rising, and erosion is destroying not only ruins but homes and the mountains. However, westerners “becoming Indigenous” and making claims to know the land and history best is not the solution and can even minimize the trauma of marginalized groups.²⁹ However, Black Crucians becoming “Indigenous” cannot be

28 David Chandler and Julian Reid, *Becoming Indigenous: Governing Imaginaries in the Anthropocene* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019).

29 Ibid, 7.

viewed in the same light as the settlers.³⁰ The Afro-Crucians shaped the landscape. They worked it, lived on it, and made it their own. This is their landscape as well.

Language around the loss of environment has been applied to the loss of cultural heritage resources. The notion that losing ruins is like losing history can be interpreted as being insulting to the Black Crucian people. In *A World of Many Worlds* Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena argue that the concern about the end of the world is a new concept for white people, but not one for Indigenous groups.³¹ “For the native people of the Americas, the end of the world already happened-- five centuries ago.”³² To the Black Crucians their end of the world also already happened. Their ancestors were kidnapped and enslaved, their history ripped from them by their oppressors, and they now have to watch as the landscape their ancestors built turns into vacation homes for the wealthy and the places that matter to them are dismissed. In the face of these changes they are expected to care about what happens with the remains of plantations. Danish history has become the only history of St. Croix that is

30 Cadena Marisol de la and Mario Blaser, *A World of Many Worlds* (Durham C.: Duke University Press, 2018).

31 Ibid, 3.

32 Ibid, 104.

valued and discussed.³³ Historic maps note important plantations and moments in Danish history while ignoring the environmental importance of some of the sites (Figure 2).

Historical ecology is the study on how humans and the environment interact over a long period of time.³⁴ I focus on Black historical ecology and Black geography on the island to center the Black voice. When I started this thesis, I instinctively focused on plantations and the built environment. This, much like my hike to Maroon Ridge, was well-intentioned but also centered the colonial perspective. How am I supposed to study the rejection of a largely white narrative and colonialism while participating in an academic field that actively erases Blackness? The answer to this is through Black geographies and Black historical ecology. Space and race are linked. Space can be a tool for racial inequality, like gentrification, but race can also shape the understanding of space. Black geographies and historical ecology are not new fields, and the concerns of the Black space is also not new, but it is perhaps understudied.

33 Jeannette A. Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, Connecticut: Libraries Unlimited, 2003), 48.

34 Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, *Geographies and the Politics of Place* (Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines, 2007), vii

Bledsoe argues that “The subfield of Black geographies attends specifically to the spatial establishment of these emergent of being.”³⁵

Blackness on St. Croix is linked to the environment, to Afro-Crucians benefit and detriment. Violence done to the landscape is done to the Black body.³⁶ This feeling of the Black body being connected to the natural environment is felt even by the tourists that come on the island. The concept of humans being intertwined with nature is a field of thought that has been going on for some time. The enslaved laborers on the island gained an intimacy with the natural world on the island. DuTerte, a priest during French occupation of the island, was relieved of a toothache by a free Black man by using the sap of the mastwood tree.³⁷ Violence done to the environment by way of cutting down trees and exhausting soil during the sugar growing is mirrored in the violence perpetrated against Black Crucians during slavery. This link between the Black body and the environment is still felt with the continued exploitation of resources on the island.

35 Adam Bledsoe "Marronage as a Past and Present Geography in the Americas." *Southeastern Geographer* 57, no. 1, 2017, 31.

36 Katherine McKittrick, “No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean” (Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines, 2007), 5.

37 Arnold R. Highfield, *Sainte Croix, 1650-1733: a Plantation Society in the French Antilles* (Christiansted, St. Croix, USVI: Antilles Press, 2013), 116.

The University of Alabama's Office of Archaeological Research put together a document while working with the Virgin Island State Historic Preservation Office about the feasibility of making the entire island of St. Croix a historic district.³⁸ In the document they describe the importance of the entire island as a historic site. One of the sections was labelled "cultural attitudes" and explains the significance of the sites to the local Crucians. This section states that "despite the fact that the Territory's historical narrative figures prominently in the cultural construction of many native Virgin Islanders, the sites and structures associated with historic and prehistoric sites are frequently taken for granted or dismissed."³⁹ They blame this disinterest on the Crucians not appreciating "the aesthetic or communal value of historic structures in the Virgin Islands..." and that some "may view the remnants of historic sites as painful reminders of the oppression of enslaved individuals during the colonial era."⁴⁰

This was frustrating to read, because it paints the Crucians as being uninterested in their history. Crucians have great interest in their heritage, and the National Park Service's "St. Croix National Heritage Area Feasibility Study"

38 *Historic Preservation in the US Virgin Islands: Preserving our Past for our Future* (St. Croix, USVI: US University of Alabama, 2016), 33.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

completed in 2007 includes testimonies and letters in support of preservation.⁴¹ While reading these documents and opinion articles in Virgin Island newspapers, it is clear that there is an interest in preserving sites, but there is greater interest in the reuse of sites. The spiritual and historical significance of the natural environment were also not mentioned in the Alabama report. Both documents state that the environment is important and needs to be protected, because it is threatened by tourism and natural forces, but the focus is not on the significance the landscape and waterscape has to the Crucians. There is also a sort of fetishization of the ruins by historians and tourists alike. The priority was placed on the objects related to Black trauma, and not on Black survival. It is a mistake to eliminate a consideration of how spiritual or cultural factors shape the attitudes of the Crucians on the island towards historic preservation. The sections that follow delve deeper into the ways Black ecologies, Indigenous perspectives and rememory shape the cultural heritage of landscapes of resistance, remnants of sugar plantations, and centers for tourism in the form of rum factories.

⁴¹ *Feasibility Study for a St. Croix National Heritage Area* (St. Croix, USVI: US Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, 2010), 112.

Chapter 2

MAROON RIDGE

The second day that I was in St. Croix, USVI, the crew and I decided to take a hike up to Ham's Bluff Lighthouse (Figure 3). The lighthouse was built in 1915, and we had heard from the hotel concierge that the view from the top of the mountain was beautiful, so we called a taxi and headed out. Felix, our taxi driver for the duration of our fieldwork, asked us how much we knew about the mountain we were about to climb, and we told him we knew about the lighthouse and the view, but not much else. He decided that he would hike up with us and brought along his machete (Figure 4). The hike ended up taking a little under two hours through the woods, and when we got to the peak of the mountain the view took our breath away. The lighthouse looked a little worse for wear, but that was part of the charm, and we could see the other side of the island and views of the Atlantic Ocean as far as the eye could see. While we were taking in the views of blue water and tropical landscapes, Felix revealed to us why he escorted us up there. The mountain we were standing on was known as Maroon Ridge (Figure 5).⁴² He told us that the view we were admiring and taking countless pictures

42 I am using the word “maroon” when referring to a settlement of self-emancipated people. I am using “self-emancipated” to refer to a Black person who was held in bondage but freed themselves. I am using this term instead of “runaway, escapee, or fugitive” because these terms frame seeking freedom negatively. “Self-emancipated” gives the freedom seekers agency. Visit this website to learn more: “Language of Slavery,” National Parks Service (US Department of the Interior), accessed January 5, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/undergroundrailroad/language-of-slavery.htm>.

of was usually the last thing the self-emancipated Crucians saw before they threw themselves into the water, ending their lives. He did not want us to hike up this mountain and only care about the twentieth-century lighthouse when the very ground we were standing on had such a significance to the local population. This was not only a site for remembrance, but a site of hope. We could see the other Virgin Islands and the tops of the mountains in Puerto Rico, a place of freedom for enslaved Crucians. When standing on top of Maroon Ridge their freedom was literally within sight.

Maroon Ridge exposes the contradictions of cultural heritage on St. Croix that are revealed by sites that range from ecological parks to sugar mills, some well-known and some hidden like those at Maroon Ridge. There are no signs directing visitors where to go at Maroon Ridge, so without a Crucian guide many outsiders will only find the lighthouse. Fortunately for me, I had Felix as my guide the day we hiked up. Felix walked us through a chain link fence and we were all convinced we were trespassing. He assured us this was the way to the lighthouse, and even stopped to slice us up some coconut with his machete. This was a little jarring, as we had been told to have limited interactions with the environment. Based on experiences at many historic sites, we were familiar with a “don’t touch” and stay on the path approach. Preservation and conservation have often hold boundaries and limits as a central premise. When we landed on the island we were even told that we were not allowed to bring sea shells with us through to the states because it leads to the erosion of beaches. We needed to have a very hands-off approach. This was certainly not the case for

Felix. He not only sliced us open a coconut, he pointed out aloe plants, because I am sure we were all looking a little sunburnt, and took us off the trail. He showed us the way with the ease and comfort of someone who has been coming here for years. We all laughed and joked at the time about how difficult it was to keep up with him, but this difficulty helps to keep Maroon Ridge safe. I began to realize that if more “official” paths or signage was created, it might intrude on sacred space and a landscape that currently is largely accessible only to those who, like Felix, are in the know. Wasn’t this a form of cultural preservation as well?

St. Croix is an economically segregated island. The east end of the island is known for its beautiful views, gorgeous beaches, and resorts. It is also home to the Divi Carina Bay Casino, a popular destination for tourists due to St. Croix’s lax attitudes towards alcohol. The west end is much more residential and lower income. When looking at the tourism website of St. Croix’s regional guide it encourages tourists to go instead to the east end after participating in water sports and touring the rum factories in the west end. Maroon Ridge’s location in the west end makes it less accessible to the tourists and places it within the ungentrified and more local section of the island. If not totally secret, it remains a fairly under the radar place.

Maroon Ridge was a checkpoint in the “Maritime Underground Railroad” to freedom in the Caribbean.⁴³ A common pattern of escaping bondage on smaller islands was to leave the plantation, locate a boat, hide in a protected area and eventually sail to Puerto Rico or an island further away.⁴⁴ Maroon Ridge served as a launch point from St. Croix. Puerto Rico was the most common destination in the Danish West Indies due to its proximity and because of the alleged looser restrictions for enslaved people on their plantations.⁴⁵ Puerto Rico was not nearly as developed as a plantation economy as the Danish West Indies in the late eighteenth century, so the Spanish governor of Puerto Rico welcomed Crucians. While they would still be enslaved, there were seemingly more options to achieve or work toward freedom. Under Spanish law, once an enslaved person converted to Catholicism, they were to be granted their freedom, making this an enticing option for enslaved peoples in the Caribbean.⁴⁶ This is not to say the Puerto Rican government welcomed self-emancipated Crucians for completely altruistic reasons. They needed the labor, and they also provided information about rival islands in an increasingly hostile and

43 Faires, Nora. "Across the Border to Freedom: The International Underground Railroad Memorial and the Meanings of Migration." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 32, no. 2 (2013): 38-67.

44 Ibid, 99.

45 Ibid, 101.

46 Ibid, 101.

competitive intercolonial environment.⁴⁷ The appeal of Puerto Rico came to an end in 1767, however, when Puerto Rico and the Danish West Indies came to an agreement where the Puerto Ricans would return self-emancipated Crucians.⁴⁸ Despite the reputation of being a port towards freedom, only about three hundred reported Crucians made it to Puerto Rico. Hundreds of others perished in the water trying to escape, including an entire family that drowned after their boat sank because the pilot “had no pitch with which to caulk the hull,” according to German missionary C.G.A. Oldendorp.⁴⁹

What we do know about Maroon Ridge comes from a few reports from European missionaries, such as Oldendorp. Oldendorp described Maroon Ridge as being concealed by bushes and incredibly difficult to navigate. He does not describe activities within local communities of free and enslaved Crucians, because he did not fully know about them. Instead, he, like so many other settler colonial writers and diarists focused more on the reactions of enslavers. He and others described frequent hunts to recapture self-emancipated Crucians, and laws were created throughout the

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 C.G.A. Oldendorp, *Caribbean Mission. English Translation of A History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Karoma, 1987), 233.

eighteenth century in response to frequency of attempted escapes to Puerto Rico.⁵⁰ Stealing boats became a grievous offense, and there is evidence of enslavers cutting down trees near their property that were large enough to build canoes.⁵¹

Based on Oldendorp's writings and other anecdotal references to the mountain, historian Dr. George Tyson argues that Maroon Ridge was frequented most in the 1760s and 1770s.⁵² During this time it was the site of tragic suicide and a destination for self-emancipated people. He states that after the site was not visited as regularly, and by the time of emancipation in the nineteenth century the site had been abandoned. However, other evidence suggests that the mountains were still a destination. During the Labor Riots of 1878, known as Fireburn, after Black Crucians set fire to plantations due to continued racism post-emancipation, the Danish military were called in to kill or arrest the insurrectionists. According to oral traditions, many fled to Maroon Ridge.⁵³ While there perhaps was a decline in usage of the mountains as a place to flee enslavement prior to emancipation, the site never stopped being a

50 Lommarsh Roopnarine, "Maroon Resistance and Settlement On Danish St. Croix," *Journal of Third World Studies* 27, no. 2 (2010). 93.

51 Arnold R. Highfield, *The Cultural History of the American Virgin Islands and the Danish West Indies: a Companion Guide* (Christiansted, St. Croix, Virgin Islands: Antilles Press, 2018), 96.

52 "Maroon Resistance and Settlement on Danish St. Croix," 102.

53 Isaac Dookhan and Richard B. Sheridan, *A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States* (Kingston, Jamaica: Canoe Press, 2011), 229.

launch point to freedom or death. Instead, people like Oldendorp stopped writing about it, effectively erasing the memory from settler colonial literature. Given that the Danish West Indies archives are scattered throughout Europe and the United States it is possible that government records or other documents do exist that simply remain uncovered.

The erasure of Maroon Ridge from the archival record ironically at times reveals its existence. The 1754 Beck Map of St. Croix documents the sugar economy on St. Croix. The Danish carved out hundreds of rectangular plantations on the island and divvied up the land for white imperialist claims. (Figure 6). This map is so detailed that it even illustrates the type of sugar mill used at different plantations, be it horse or wind powered. In contrast to this detail of the colonized land, however, is the location of Maroon Ridge. It is labelled “Uoptagne Grunde,” which means Unclaimed Ground (Figure 2). This is the only section of the map that has not been bounded into parcels in a Danish imperialist fashion. The Danish were aware the Ridge existed, but it was “unclaimed” by them. The land was thus “open” to claims of others by nature of use. Legal and structural obstacles prevented Black Crucians from owning land they cultivated and shaped. The unclaimed ground of Maroon Ridge, however, by tradition became “theirs”. But we must look beyond the traditional evidence of maps, fences, and houses to understand how this space was occupied and “owned.”

Maroon communities, particularly ones that were not intended to house people for extended periods of time, tend to leave behind very little physical evidence out of

necessity. When escaping bondage self-emancipators brought along few items and little was left behind.⁵⁴ Built structures were uncommon, because they would be easy to locate by potential captors and when discovered were frequently destroyed by enslavers. Instead, self-emancipated Crucians typically relied on environmental features that are already in place for shelter, including rocks and caves.⁵⁵ To evade recapture, the self-emancipated Crucians selected terrain that is inhospitable and challenging to navigate. The location of Maroon Ridge makes it nearly impossible to conduct archaeological research. Also, the location is on the side of a mountain overlooking the ocean, making the task potentially dangerous. Furthermore, Maroon Ridge is a large stretch of land and archaeologists are not sure where to even begin digging.⁵⁶ This preserved the site, but makes it a difficult one to understand and interpret. While shovel test pits are commonly used to figure out where larger quantities of artifacts are located on archaeological sites, and therefore where it would be in their best interest to invest their time and resources into excavating, this more likely than not would not be helpful for Maroon Ridge. Middens, usually a trash pit, are common features archaeologists look for when excavating, but none have been identified. The self-emancipated Crucians would have likely scattered trash and

54 Holly Norton, "The Challenge in Locating Maroon Refuge Sites at Maroon Ridge, St. Croix," *Journal of Caribbean Archaeology* 7 (2007), 7.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid, 6.

animal remains over larger plots of land or placed it in the ocean to make detection difficult.⁵⁷ Since there is not a centralized location of habitation, it is far too costly and time consuming to attempt to locate artifacts.

Not only is doing archaeology difficult, but deciding whether or not to pursue this work is an added challenge. Is the pursuit of this knowledge best interest of the Crucians? It depends who you ask. When I was on the island I personally experienced opposition from the local Crucians when I was digging at Estate Lower Bethlehem, a sugar plantation that was later turned into a sugar factory post-emancipation. As we dug, we started to find the faint outlines of bodies near a large and old tamarind tree on the site. This place was a burial ground, and the tree was a marker. I was naively excited about the prospect of finding such a sacred site. I did not want to disturb it, but I was happy to know it was there. This seemed a tangible connection to the past. Some members of the community stopped by, I was on the cover of the Virgin Islands's *Daily Newspaper*, and my two Professors and I went on a local radio show to talk about our work and why archaeology is so important to understanding the history of the island, especially given how the archives are inaccessible. I thought I was doing something that really mattered.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 7.

However, once I started walking around St. Croix and interacting with more people I began to realize just how complicated archaeology and historic sovereignty is on the island. I was told by several groups that they would rather us not be there, because the US Virgin Islands do not have a facility that can house archaeological artifacts. Whatever gets dug up gets taken away from the island to somewhere in the United States depending on who is in charge of the excavation. Frequently these are non-Crucians doing the work. This mirrors what happened with the Danish West Indies archives. Once the Danish sold the Virgin Islands to the US, Danish government officials took stewardship of most of the archives, and the documents were divided up amongst St. Croix's former imperial powers. Crucians do not have easy access to their documents, forcing Crucians, especially Black Crucians, to rely on "outsider" and frequently white scholarship to gather insights into their history.⁵⁸ As a result, Crucians of all backgrounds are protective of what history remains on the island. A common expression is that anthropologists are the handmaidens of colonialism, and it is difficult to argue good intentions when we were, in fact, digging up artifacts that would be returning to the mainland US with us.⁵⁹ Navigating these

58 Jeannette A. Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, Connecticut: Libraries Unlimited, 2003), 31.

59 The phrase "anthropology is the handmaiden of colonialism" gained popularity in the 1950s. It is unclear who created the term, but it is a criticism of the ways in which western anthropologists use anthropology as justifications for racism and conquests. This includes western archaeologists that remove artifacts from non-western countries.

tensions is not uncommon when working with marginalized populations anywhere in the world, but the consistent removal of cultural heritage and archival resources from St. Croix makes Crucians much more protective of what they have left, adding to the culture of distrust of historians and archaeologists.

I am not the only person who experienced this. Dr. Justin Dunnivant, professor of archaeology at Vanderbilt University, who led a team that worked directly with local Crucians on Estate Little Princess, faced backlash despite he and his crew's community engagement efforts. In an informal interview with him, he told me about a town hall where there was an intense argument amongst different constituents. During the argument, ideas of "who is Crucian" and therefore who has the final say in determining what happens to excavated artifacts was a heated topic.⁶⁰ Adding to the tensions were questions about stewardship of the land once the excavations finished. Would the land be turned over to the National Park Service, turned into a hotel, or could it be used for farming? Dunnivant described this scene as being "stuck in the middle of a family argument." This is not to say interactions with the Crucians are always this hostile. Dr. Dunnivant told me as soon as his crew told the Crucians they

A common example is British archaeologists looting Egyptian artifacts in the 19th and 20th centuries. For more information read: Herbert S. Lewis, "Was Anthropology the Child, the Tool, or the Handmaiden of Colonialism?," in *In Defense of Anthropology: an Investigation of the Critique of Anthropology* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction, 2014), pp. 73-105.

60 Informal Interview with Dr. Dunnivant, December 10, 2020.

would be working directly with children to teach them how to do their own archaeology and welcoming community involvement, they received a much warmer reception (Figure 7). So much apprehension is rooted in the fear of the local population not having a say in what gets done to their island, the very island their ancestors shaped. To refer back to the Alabama report, Crucians are not anti-history, anti-preservation, or anti-archaeology. But they want, and deserve, to be involved and informed in their own cultural heritage projects.

In 2017 the Caribbean was hit with two category five hurricanes within two weeks.⁶¹ These hurricanes revealed another previously mentioned problem in St. Croix: ideas of “Crucianess”. When the hurricanes ripped through the Caribbean many Crucians felt that Puerto Rico was getting more funding and attention from the American public than their own island and its residents. They felt left out and intentionally excluded from relief efforts. While looking back at the responses we know that even the Puerto Ricans were not receiving necessary aid, but to many Crucians this was yet another example of Puerto Ricans receiving aid while everyone else is left to the side.⁶² As Michael Walker, a Crucian local stated, “Everyone was

61 Justin Dunnivant, “Assessing Heritage Resources in St. Croix Post-Hurricanes Irma and Maria,” *Transforming Anthropology* 26, no. 2 (September 2018).

62 Samantha Artiga, “Health Care in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands: A Six-Month Check-Up After the Storms,” Kaiser Family Foundation, April 24, 2018.

looking at Puerto Rico, and no one was thinking about us.”⁶³ Crucians have historically had a general dislike and wariness of people from other islands because of island hopping and colonialism.⁶⁴ There is a common perception that those from other islands are taking the already very limited jobs and resources on the island, and this leads to discrimination of people not from the island. As a result, in determining “Crucianess” focus is heavily placed on family lineage. Race does not matter as much as how long your family has been on the island.⁶⁵ You could be white and only live on the island while on vacation, but if your family has been visiting this way on the island for several generations you are considered more Crucian than someone who is Black and first-generation Crucian, even if they were raised there and live there year round.⁶⁶

I understand this protectiveness very well. I thought that maybe I, as someone who has African American blood in my veins, knew instinctively about or better understood sites of enslavement. When I go to plantations in the United States and hear phrases like “servants and laborers worked in the kitchen,” or gaze upon the open landscape I feel the weight of my ancestors. The ornate dishware and beautiful flooring becomes oppressive when you know whose hands were maintaining them. I

63 Tim Craig, “Shredded Roofs, Shattered Lives,” *The Washington Post*, February 6, 2018.

64 *America’s Virgin Islands*, 405.

65 Ibid.

66 Informal Interview with Dunnivant, December 10, 2020.

arrogantly thought that when I went to the Caribbean to study plantations I would feel the same weight, but this time it was different. The difficult histories of plantations on St. Croix are hidden because by discussing them it would open up the possibility that Black Crucians lose these sites entirely. There is profitability in erasing the difficult and dark histories and instead presenting them as much more cheerful for investors and tourists. For example, it becomes more difficult to enjoy drinking rum when you learn that it was created by enslaved laborers who were forced to work on sugar plantations.

Crucian sovereignty over their own cultural heritage has been threatened multiple times in St. Croix's history. In the 1930s during the tourism boom after WWI, developers became interested in converting Maroon Ridge into vacation spots.⁶⁷ Two Rockefellers, Laurence and David, bought the land in 1976 and intended to donate it to the National Park System.⁶⁸ However, this did not occur and the pair sold the land to developers in 1984, with the exception of 1,000 acres of land, which was to be saved. The land was not saved because of the history surrounding Maroon Ridge, but because of the lighthouse and the view. The narrative was that the rest of the island was developed and, as one developer in 1933 described it, was "ravished by the hands of slavery," so this mountain needed to be saved to protect some of the natural

67 "Maroon Resistance and Settlement on Danish St. Croix," 102.

68 Ibid, 102.

environment.⁶⁹ The acres to be preserved were not specified, so this was a loophole that could be exploited. These 1,000 acres are what we now know as Maroon Ridge.⁷⁰ Between 1984 and 2006 Maroon Ridge was not discussed in tourism materials and was only visited regularly by locals and outsiders who happened to have a guide like Felix.

In 2006 the Throgmartin Company proposed a vacation resort development valued at more \$500 million that would take up more than 2,500 acres in the Maroon Ridge area. In the development plans the company emphasized they would not touch the lighthouse, but did not mention anything about the history of self-emancipated Crucians.⁷¹ This led to multiple organizations on St. Croix to form the St. Croix Community Action for a Maroon Park, or CAMP.⁷² CAMP proposed the creation of a natural park on the island and both emphasized the biodiversity and centered Black history. By proposing this as a park or a botanical garden it ensured that the land and Ridge will never be developed. Ecology professor and environmental activist on the island, Olasee Davis, brought forward the idea that this site is tied to the Underground

⁶⁹ *America's Virgin Islands*, 137.

⁷⁰ Maroon Resistance and Settlement on Danish St. Croix, 103.

⁷¹ Source Staff, "Developers Propose Major Resort for St. Croix," *The St. Croix Source*, December 14, 2005, <https://stcroixsource.com/2005/12/14/developers-propose-major-resort-st-croix/>.

⁷² Staff, "Not for Profit: St. Croix Community Action for a Maroon Park," *The St. Croix Source*, 2006.

Railroad, and CAMP began circulating petitions that outlined the group's goals, which include: "We the undersigned believe that establishing the Maroon Territorial Park is the best and wisest method of preserving and managing the outstanding cultural, historical, educational, economic, ecological, recreational, and spiritual values inherent to the northwest quadrant of St. Croix..."⁷³ The inclusion of "spiritual values" speaks to the acknowledgement of the lives lost on this mountain and its importance to Black Crucians specifically. Today the site's associations are well known to locals but are still relatively obscured to tourists, who are shielded from the unvarnished past as they hike, drink, and swim. This is largely done to keep tourist dollars flowing and to the mind of some, to not "upset" tourists with less pleasant aspects of the island culture. But are complicated histories and robust tourism incompatible?

St. Croix is covered in violent reminders of slavery. Sugar mill ruins are littered across the landscape to the point where it is impossible to drive five minutes without encountering one. Yet these sugar mills are now sugar-coated in a narrative that diminishes, at best, and eradicates, at worst, the real violence of colonialism. A popular site for tourists on the island is Estate Mount Washington. It is currently open for visits from the public, but it is currently being offered for sale. The real estate listing boasts of a "Fully renovated Great House" and ruins of a sugar plantation

73 Ibid.

(Figure 1). When I visited the site I was horrified when I came across the ruins of a building with bars on the window, and felt physically ill when I saw that listed as one of the unique features on the property is a two story dungeon. Black trauma and Black pain have become a commodity on the island. Sites that have the potential to tell such a compelling story about the resistance to enslavement and to connect Black people to their history have been turned into a marketing opportunity.

Physical reminders of Black trauma can be cathartic and show physical proof of the violence. This is necessary at a time when traumatic histories, including those related to slavery or the Holocaust, are often denied or lightened to appease the public. However, profiting from this trauma is a problem as well. Estate Mount Washington does not contextualize the trauma nor does it prepare the viewers mentally for what they are about to see. There is a sense that history is a marketing opportunity for tourists and for the future homeowner, but that acknowledgement of trauma would disrupt positive associations and financial gain. But there are good examples of sites in the US that are reconciling these seemingly disparate ideas including presidential homes such as Montpelier or Monticello.⁷⁴ These sites both grapple with complex and

⁷⁴ “The Mere Distinction of Colour: 6 Ways Understanding Slavery Will Change How You Understand American Freedom,” Montpelier (Montpelier, n.d.), <https://www.montpelier.org/learn/6-ways-that-understanding-slavery-will-change-how-you-understand-american-freedom>.

“Slavery at Monticello,” Monticello, n.d., <https://www.monticello.org/slavery/>.

often painful histories as well as entice visitors. Kitchens where enslaved cooks worked or dining rooms where free and enslaved Black laborers served or even fields where agricultural workers toiled enhance interpretive narratives. While these sites make an argument for not shying away from addressing trauma, they often do so through buildings and domestic settings. Seeing tangible locations outfitted with “authentic” or reproduction furnishings, foods, and bodies of reenactors creates a visceral connection to a lived past of enslaved and free Black individuals. More challenging as historical contact points are natural features, rocks and ridges and bodies of water, that also serve as touchpoints for complicated histories. The chapter that follows discusses one such natural feature that stands at the center of Crucians’ collective memory of Fireburn, an even that is both erased and hypervisible.

Chapter 3

ESTATE SLOB

While I was doing archeology at Estate Lower Bethlehem I had the pleasure of eating tamarinds from a several hundred year old tamarind tree. The enslaved laborers on this plantation buried the bodies of their loved ones around this tree, attesting to the importance the natural environment had on the Crucians. One day, back in the taxi with Felix, we told him how much we loved tamarinds. He cautioned us to be careful with how many we eat because as a child he would get stomach pains from eating so many every day. We naively bragged about how large the tree at Lower Bethlehem was, and how spiritually significant it was. As if to prove to us just how little we understand of St. Croix he took us to Grove Place, where a Baobab tree much larger and much more stunning made its home. The Grove Place Baobab was not a site I had heard about before making my way to the island, and I was blown away by its beauty. The plaque at the base of the tree stated that the tree was at least 250 years old and was the site of shelter, food, and worship.

This tree specifically has a deep cultural significance on the island, but it is not the only one. Baobab trees, while common in Africa are special to St. Croix. There are more of these trees on this island than anywhere else in the western hemisphere, and as such they hold a place of pride on the island. Through these trees, Afro-Crucians have carved out space for themselves and their culture into the landscape of the island. A local tradition of descendant groups suggests that enslaved Africans wore necklaces

with baobab seeds on them.⁷⁵ Even if they were kidnapped and forced to labor on this new land, they held a part of what they knew with them, and that is in the form of the baobab tree. I continued to read the plaque on the Grove Place Baobab Tree and saw that it stated that “Under this tree, some of the women, who joined Queen Mary Thomas, in the rebellion of 1878, were burned alive. (Figure 8)”

The event that this sign recalls is one known best as Fireburn, an 1878 labor rebellion. Fireburn is one of the most sacred historical events on the island. Despite the Crucians gaining freedom in 1848 this “freedom” was severely limited. It has been stated that, “If Emancipation in 1848 liberated the enslaved population of the Danish West Indies, then 30 years later, Fireburn attacked the last vestiges of peonage³.” The event began when a Black man fell and cut his foot at a local tavern and was taken by police.⁷⁶ A rumor quickly spread that he was a victim of police brutality and died while in police custody. This led to a riot. Fort Frederick, the same fort attacked during the emancipation insurrection, was the first site of conflict in Fireburn.⁷⁷ The gates were ripped off and soldiers responded with gunfire. This caused even more

⁷⁵ *Feasibility Study for a St. Croix National Heritage Area* (St. Croix, USVI: US Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, 2010), 41.

⁷⁶ William W. Boyer, *America's Virgin Islands: a History of Human Rights and Wrongs* (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2010), 247.

⁷⁷ Johannes Postma, *Slave Revolts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 99.

chaos, as more people, predominantly former enslaved people, joined in the conflict.⁷⁸ Businesses were burned down and homes were sacked. When more guards arrived the workers left the town and started setting fire to sugar cane fields. This is what the archival records tell us, but Crucians know there is much more to the story.

The Danish have historically minimized their involvement and the violence that occurred during Fireburn.⁷⁹ Also, there are inconsistencies in the telling of the planning of Fireburn. The Crucians highlight four women, who they refer to as the “Queens of Fireburn,” who led the revolt that secured the Black Crucians more equality. Queen Mary was of important significance, and she is considered to be the leader of the riots. Streets are named after the women and there are songs about their bravery and heroics, and yet there is doubt placed upon their existence and their role in the conflicts. This distrust of historical memory is frustrating to many Crucians, as they feel this is yet another example of how their traditions, history, and culture are being undermined by outsiders.

St. Croix’s archival problems are also placed in full view when discussing Fireburn. The Crucians have no way of easily consulting the archives to see if there

78 Ibid.

79 Jeannette A. Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, Connecticut: Libraries Unlimited, 2003), 44.

are any clues about what occurred during Fireburn. Even if the archives were readily available, it is doubtful that documents pertaining to the private lives of Afro-Crucians would abound. The documents related to Fireburn record the Danish officers' points of view and downplay the Danish role in the violence.⁸⁰ The dismissal of the oral history is racialized and gendered in that the role of the four Black women becomes minimized in favor of a colonial Danish perspective. The Black folks living on the island who tell the history of their ancestors are constantly dismissed while European scholars' interpretations are pushed to the forefront.⁸¹ In St. Croix, as in so many examples in United States history, Black folks are prevented or dissuaded from acting as stewards of their own history. This has caused a very real tension between historians and Crucians. The effect is that the white, non-Crucian narratives prevail. This structural issue of white narratives predominating makes it easy for folks to claim that Crucians do not care about preserving their history or historic sites.

The favoring of a white perspective and a whitewashed history is evident in the sites that are preserved and the history that gets presented to tourists. When I traveled to St. Croix *Hamilton* the musical was on Broadway and was well received. Since

80 Ibid.

81 Sian Cobb, "Danish King's Bust Removed to Make Way for Emancipation History," *The St. Croix Source*, April 5, 2021, <https://stcroixsource.com/2021/03/29/danish-kingss-bust-removed-to-make-way-for-emancipation-history/>.

Alexander Hamilton has ties to St. Croix, many tourists came to the island wanting to visit Hamilton-related sites. (Figure 9)⁸² For example, people visiting Fort Frederiksted learn that Hamilton's mother was held in one of the cells, but they do not hear the powerful story of how enslaved laborers replaced all the gunpowder at this fort with sand before taking it over and claiming freedom without shedding any blood.⁸³ This is but one example of how a famous name became attached to many sites on St. Croix, including Estate Slob. Attaching a European history to a site is a way to legitimize it as an important part of history.

A site that resists the link that European history is a site where European history is perhaps at its most brutal: the aforementioned Grove Place Baobab Tree. While this site is tied to trauma with the deaths of the women, it is also a site of violent resistance. Baobabs were brought to the island during the slave trade, and by tradition, this tree was the site of horrific deaths in an attempt to gain rights. For Europeans to acknowledge the significance of the tree would mean to acknowledge the cruelty they have inflicted on the Crucian people, and so this tree stays rooted in Afro-Crucian consciousness, but largely absent from white-dominant tourist-centric

82 There has been an uptick in Alexander Hamilton themed tours on the island in the past few years, including: CHANT Hamilton Walking Tour.

83 Jeannette A. Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, Connecticut: Libraries Unlimited, 2003), 44.

histories. This allows Afro-Crucians to shape the narrative around the tree, and it no longer is a reminder of a brutal history, but instead a sign of life and resilience that is mirrored in the Black diaspora.

Another site that underscores how traditional narratives both dominate and have created value in site preservation is Estate Slob. St. Croix is covered in ruins. Each ruin tells a story and has survived events like emancipation and Fireburn, but not all of them are on the National Register. Estate Slob did make the cut. Estate Slob, located about 200 yards from Christiansted, one of the two towns on the island, is in a section of St. Croix known as King's Quarters. King's Quarters was known for its sugar production and by 1754 thirty-four of the thirty-five plantations were primarily or exclusively producing sugar.⁸⁴ Slob was seen in maps, sketches, and was mentioned by travelers who were visiting the Danish West Indies⁸⁵. By the early nineteenth century Estate Slob was one of the largest sugar plantations on the island.⁸⁶ It had a sugar factory, windmill, great house, and a large slave village. In 1847 Slob had about 200 acres for sugar production and 135 enslaved laborers at the estate. Artists visited the plantation to sketch some of the buildings and it is present on a few maps.⁸⁷ This

84 *Slob Historic District*, National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 3.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

contrasts with some of the hundreds of other plantations that have very little documentary record as easily accessible. Part of why Slob made it onto the register is because of this more extensive documentary and material record and because it was rebuilt several times throughout its history post-Fireburn. It held a physical presence on the landscape stronger than similar plantations.

Historic events most remembered at Estate Slob are rooted in iconoclasm and destruction. Fireburn earned its name because of the use of fire to literally destroy buildings and sites pertaining to enslavement and the continued subjugation of Black people living on the island. Some of the lasting legacies of Fireburn includes the damage to the buildings. Estate Slob was one of the estates that was severely damaged. Many of the Black laborers on the estate joined in on the quest for equality and burnt down some of the outbuildings and the Great House. The roof of the Great House caved in and both it and the upper level were destroyed. For other sites, this would be the end. Yet a different set of circumstances occurred at Slob.

Between 1878 and 2017 many of the buildings in the Slob historic district were rebuilt and were being reused. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1987. Prior to 2017 estate Slob had a village for enslaved workers that had five cottages dating to the late eighteenth century, two additional worker's buildings built in the early nineteenth century, the Great House, once three stories, was modified to two because they could not repair the third story that had caved in, the stables, a windmill for crushing sugarcane, a cistern from the mid-nineteenth century, a factory

from 1840, and a watermill tower from 1760⁸⁸. During the 1940s onward these buildings were used as offices, private residences, and storage buildings.⁸⁹ There is still an impressive documentary record of the estate to this point. Before 1984 the buildings were abandoned and started to decay, and we know this because in 1984 the Greathouse was included in the Historic American Buildings Survey (Figure 10). The landscaping around the buildings is overgrown and the staircase at the entrance is almost completely destroyed. The survey states that much of the interior was in poor condition.

This changed sometime between then and 1987. The National Park Service has images of the estate on its Flickr page from November 12, 1987 that were likely a part of the National Register Nomination. The image labelled “Greathouse” has a sign that reads “Government of the Virgin Islands Department of Health: Maternal, Child Health, C--- Children, Family Planning Services Administration Building (Figure 11).” There are several cars parked out front, a decorative palm tree and some other shrubbery line the parking lot, and an American flag juts out of the group directly in front of the door. However, sometime after 1987 but before 2017 the estate was again abandoned and left to decay.

88 *Slob Historic District*, National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 5.

89 Ibid.

Despite Slob's proximity to the largest town and its better-known history, other than those who worked in the government offices, many local Crucians have never seen the site and probably never will. Despite its status on the National Register, this estate appears to be relatively forgotten. Unless a visitor actively seeks the plantation it would be easy to never know it was ever there. Cycles of use and disuse and natural disasters obscure this site. The two category five hurricanes hit the island in 2017 within two weeks of each other and effectively halted recording of the history of the site.⁹⁰ Many buildings did not survive, in fact 90% of buildings in the US Virgin Islands were damaged or destroyed, and most of the buildings pertaining to Slob were destroyed as well⁸.

Currently Slob is left in ruins with only the top of the watermill tower appearing above the overgrown brush. I suppose if Slob is an indicator of the treatment of ruins on the island, I can see why some historians and preservationists think Crucians do not care about their historic sites. However, this neglects the fact that there were prioritization shifts after the hurricanes. The funding that would have gone towards cultural resources needed to go instead towards emergency services. For whatever reason Slob was selected as an important site on the island and prior to 1987 was given much attention by non-Crucians. Yet the disasters like Irma and Maria

90 Justin P. Dunnivant et al., "Assessing Heritage Resources in St. Croix Post-Hurricanes Irma and Maria," *Transforming Anthropology* 26, no. 2 (2018): 162.

shifted the perspective to address basic needs of food, water and the other issues of health, safety and economic stability. And leaving Estate Slob as a ruin did nothing to minimize its role as a place of memory for Fireburn. In fact, as a ruin, it more directly relates to the iconoclastic actions of the four Queens and other participants in Fireburn. However, to get a full picture of the attitudes we must look at the treatment of other sites, especially the natural ones.

Let's return to the Grove Place Baobab. It too, like the Estate Slob ruin or the site of Maroon Ridge embodies the strength and memory of Crucians. In the National Park Service report, a Crucian named Michael Hartlage spoke about the importance of the baobab tree on the island. He states: "...This tree, like the islands inhabitants over the decades, refuses to die, refuses to give in, but instead gives all willing to appreciate her, a gift of awe inspiring hope."⁹¹ The plantations experienced Fireburn, but so did the baobab tree. However, the plantations are in ruins while the tree still stands to give life. The tree is a survivor, much like Afro-Crucians. In 2002 there was a push to make the 300 year old Grove Place baobab tree a protected object. Olasee Davis, ecologist at the University of the Virgin Islands, spoke about his desire for the tree to be a

⁹¹ *Feasibility Study for a St. Croix National Heritage Area* (St. Croix, USVI: US Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, 2010), 42.

protected landmark on the island.⁹² He said in a 2002 interview, “I don’t think people really understand the significance of the tree... It needs to be taken care of. It has not been getting the respect it deserves.”⁹³

Just when the tree at Grove Place was about to receive the attention it deserved, the hurricanes happened. The hurricanes not only destroyed trees, but also highlight the island’s gradual disconnection to the importance of the trees. Davis argues that in preparation for hurricane season many local Crucians cut down the trees in their front yards, despite the fact that studies have shown that trees can block some of the wind caused during hurricanes. Not only this, the trees along the Queen Mary Highway were cut down after the hurricanes. Olasee Davis wrote an article in the daily newspaper of the Virgin Islands pleading with the Crucians to remember how important the trees are to them and how destroying them disrupts their history and

92 Olasee Davis, “Our Trees Deserve Our Mercy,” *The Virgin Islands Daily News*, December 1, 2017, http://www.virginislandsdailynews.com/opinion/our-trees-deserve-our-mercy/article_927781e3-e69e-58c2-8167-9d3d0ba2dda7.html.

93 Easter, Makeda. “POC History Quietly Wins a Spotlight on National Trust's 2021 Endangered Places List.” *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, June 9, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2021-06-09/national-trust-historic-preservation-endangered-places-list-2021?fbclid=IwAR0yU9nAqBq6gN3sH189bzLloRCISZcAKgwIworgkQfOYwylw4ehGnRK2Gc>.

spirituality, as well as actively endangering their lives by removing shields during hurricanes and tropical storms.⁹⁴

Reading his pleas are painful. After researching Black ecology and visiting St. Croix mere months before the hurricanes destroyed much of the landscape I learned just how important the trees are. The trees serve more of a purpose than providing food and shelter for Crucians. These were sites of radical liberation. They physically stand in the way of the continued encroaching of the island by the wealthy building vacation homes on the ground. These trees provide a direct connection to Africa. When the enslaved Crucians were forced to reshape the island, the baobab tree was a way for the Crucians to reshape it into something that belonged to them. The ruins are left to decay, but the importance of the natural environment cannot be overstated. Destroying trees along the road named after Queen Mary herself feels especially harmful. The path was named for her, and if Black spirituality is linked to the trees, what does it symbolize when the trees around her are destroyed?

The destruction of the trees in recent years mirrors the destruction of the trees when the Crucians were enslaved on the island. In the oral tradition on the island it was said that enslavers would burn down trees in areas they believed to be Maroon

94 Ibid.

colonies to prevent self-emancipated Crucians from finding a way off the island. The burning down of these trees very much symbolizes the suppression of freedom.

As the Grove Place baobab example suggests, the natural environment can hold sacred connections to the past. Even more importantly, material remains of the natural environment, perhaps even more than ruins of colonial architecture, factor prominently in determining the viable and Crucian-centric cultural heritage in the future. While these may seem like abstract ideas, in fact, questions of environmental and cultural stewardship are often centered right under the noses of the tourists who come to St. Croix to swim, play, and drink rum.

Chapter 4

CRUZAN RUM

One of the moments I am most embarrassed to think about is my enthusiasm surrounding rum on St. Croix. I was twenty, so not yet legally old enough to drink in the states, so when I found out St. Croix is known for its rum and the drinking age was eighteen I was so excited to imbibe. I went out on the town and received repeated recommendations for the “Cruzan Confusion,” a drink concocted from all the Cruzan Rum they have at the bar mixed with pineapple juice. This is advertised as being the drink of the island, much like how National Bohemian beer or “Natty Boh’s” is the drink of Baltimore. So naturally, when my friends and I found out the Cruzan Rum factory was a short taxi ride from our hotel we called up Felix and he carted us out to the factory. On the way he told us that St. Croix’s main appeal is the rum industry. He said most of his work during the summer months is bringing vacationers from the east side of the island where all of the resorts are to the various distilleries around the island. Cruzan and Captain Morgan are the two largest. We asked him if it was worth going to Captain Morgan and he rolled his eyes, stating the facility is not “Crucian” and is a bit of an eyesore.

Cruzan Rum, not to be confused with “Crucian” the people, has an interesting and complicated history. The narrative that the Cruzan Rum Factory promotes is that of a long heritage on the island. The back of the bottle tells the story of the company: “In 1760, a sugar mill began crushing cane at the current site of the Cruzan Rum distillery on the island of St. Croix. Since the early 1800s, the Nelthropp family has

lived on and been an integral part of this legendary island's rich history. For our flavored rums, we use only the finest natural ingredients. Continuing our proud tradition, we offer this distinctive selection of tropical rums, each with a natural fruit flavor (Figure 12)."⁹⁵ The company heavily relies on its family's history on the island to lend authenticity to the brand. This sets Cruzan apart from other rum companies on the island, who do not have this entrenched history.

Like many historic sites, Cruzan takes great pride in discussing its history and the colonial history of St. Croix. When I toured the factory, the first thing I saw were the ruins of a sugar plantation surrounded by the flags of all the imperial powers that laid claim to the island (Figure 13).⁹⁶ To some, this may be a celebratory and commemorative sight, but to others, this is a chilling representation of colonial trauma. This visual made an impression, but not for the reasons I am sure the Nelthropp family intended. They likely wanted to draw the connection between their rum business with the age of conquest and imperialism, adding history to their brand. However, there is more complex history at play here that underscores the fraught nature of Crucian cultural heritage.

⁹⁵ This story is printed on every bottle of Cruzan rum.

⁹⁶ St. Croix is often referred to as the land of 7 Flags for the seven imperial powers, including France, Spain, Knights of Malta, England, Denmark, and the US.

The Cruzan factory and its entrance can illustrate the connection between the imperial powers and the resources they extracted from the island. St. Croix was known for its sugar production, and the land was viewed by these colonial powers as a means to get this sugar.⁹⁷ The history of the sugar trade is also the history of imperialism. The implications of this interpretation are even more devastating when considering this display is on the grounds of a rum distillery. St. Croix was historically used for sugar production and rum distilling, and it still is. The economy and the tourism industry rely on the rum production on the island, the same thing the island relied on hundreds of years ago.

Sugar mills blur the distinction between the natural world and industry. The central siting of a sugar mill ruin at the entrance of the Cruzan factory is no coincidence. It marks past by indicating nothing about the heat and horror of working at a sugar processing site. Instead, the ruin is a relic of an imagined past. The physical institution of the Cruzan Rum factory may celebrate the Nelthropp family, but it is no monument to the Crucian people. The romanticization of the sugar mill ruins obscures the human toll of sugar manufacturing and a history of enslavement and also minimizes the continued pollution of land and water caused by the current factory site.

97 William W. Boyer, *America's Virgin Islands: a History of Human Rights and Wrongs* (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2010).

It is not only the Cruzan sugar mill ruin that masks the difficult history of these buildings. On the Crucian tourism website one of the top “100 Activities” to do is exploring sugar mill ruins (Figure 13).⁹⁸ Some of these ruins have been converted into homes and resorts, and there are even cases of property owners constructing their own reproduction sugar mill “ruins” to up the property value.⁹⁹ The sugar mill ruins are not the only instance of sites of Black trauma being romanticized. Plantation houses and landscapes are also now often considered not only for their substantive architecture and grand designs, but as sites of memory and trauma. Sites such as the John Dickinson Plantation in Delaware and other mainland plantation sites have been recognized as International Sites of Conscience for these entangled pasts.¹⁰⁰ There has been push back against fetishization of sites of enslavement in the continental US. Traditionally white sororities and fraternities have been scrutinized in recent years for throwing antebellum themed parties, and the popular social media site Pinterest has

98 “St. Croix Blog, Explore Sugar Mill & Plantation Ruins,” GoToStCroix.com, April 26, 2021, <https://www.gotostcroix.com/st-croix-blog/explore-sugar-mill-plantation-ruins/>.

99 Grant H. Cornwell and Eve W. Stoddard, “Reading Sugar Mill Ruins: ‘The Island Nobody Spoiled’ and Other Fantasies of Colonial Desire,” *South Atlantic Review* 66, no. 2 (2001): <https://doi.org/10.2307/3201872>, 137.

100 “John Dickinson Plantation Named a Member of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience,” Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs - State of Delaware, April 5, 2021, <https://history.delaware.gov/2021/02/24/dickinson-plantation-named-site-of-conscience/>.

stopped allowing plantations to be advertised as wedding destinations.¹⁰¹

Unfortunately, this attitude has not substantively made its way to the Virgin Islands.

The ruins, while clear indicators of slavery, have been almost stripped from their historical context. Ruins like those at Cruzan Rum or Estate Slob are portrayed as the remnants of the distant past, not the scars from a long and recent history. In contrast, sites like Whitney Plantation in Louisiana engage in conversations around the pain inflicted on Black people through enslavement, sugar, and agriculture that rested on forced labor. This centers the traumatic history that is hidden behind the beautiful exterior of these plantations.¹⁰² Yet, this practice of engaging with these traumatic histories in honest and straightforward fashion has not yet taken hold on St. Croix.

This is not a surprise as tourism and rum are main economic drivers on the island. This has been the case since the tourism boom in the 1930s-1950s when the Virgin Islands needed to financially recover after the world wars. In the 1960s, it was stated by the Virgin Island tourism board that, “While the problems resulting from the reactions of poor Negroes to serving affluent whites is inescapable, a brighter future

101 Abbey Crain | acrain@al.com, “UA Takes Steps to Avoid Culturally Insensitive Parties,” *al*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.al.com/news/2019/02/ua-takes-steps-to-avoid-culturally-insensitive-parties-but-some-continue.html>.

102 Sarah Payne, “Study the South Through the Words of Those Who Experienced It,” Center for the Study of Southern Culture, n.d., <https://southernstudies.olemiss.edu/study-the-south/through-the-words-of-those-who-experienced-it/>.

lies in a more lucid and wider appreciation in host areas of the economic necessity for tourism... the possible crime, juvenile delinquency, and illusory values which may result from the introduction of large numbers of affluent visitors into poor host areas are the “industrial hazards” of tourism.”¹⁰³ The “industrial hazards” of tourism came to life. The economic system of St. Croix is reliant on tourism, and the racial dynamics occurring prior to emancipation continue today, and the ruins of the plantations are a reminder of this modern-day colonialism.

Despite the intentional historical amnesia towards the violence of rum and sugar on the island, there is one surprising place where one can hear about slavery in rum production: Captain Morgan’s. I did not visit Captain Morgan’s rum distillery while I was in St. Croix, mostly because I was told only tourists go there and I was dead set on only doing what the locals do. When I spoke to Dr. Dunnivant he told me how when he worked with Captain Morgan’s they did not shy away from the use of enslaved labor in the history of rum production. However, this was not because they wanted to be open and honest about their brand’s history, it was to center themselves as the rum company on the island that did not use enslaved labor. I think a large part of this is to also distance themselves from the fact that the namesake of the rum

103 William W. Boyer, *America's Virgin Islands: a History of Human Rights and Wrongs* (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2010), 266.

company was a prolific enslaver.¹⁰⁴ Captain Morgan's is a relatively young company, so they do not have the same legacy that Cruzan does. So, they can speak about slavery because they do not have that same very traumatic history. This is not altruism; this is a marketing opportunity and performative activism. Ultimately, their company would have never existed without slavery. Anything sitting upon the landscape of St. Croix, and anything benefitting from rum and sugar, owe their successes to or benefits from the legacies of the systems of slavery.

In any of these cases, romanticization hides violence. The sugar mills have become almost emblematic of St. Croix. The smiling faces of mostly white tourists getting married and touring these ruins hides the brutal history of enslavement (Figure 14 and 15). These ruins are no longer in use, and have not been for decades, but their existence on the island still brings hundreds of visitors every year.¹⁰⁵ The removal of context is also the deniability of the violence these mills have inflicted on Afro-Crucians. These ruins are no longer the remnants of enslavement, literal scars that still

104 Ben Johnson, "Sir Henry Morgan," Historic UK, n.d., <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofWales/Sir-Henry-Morgan/>.

105 Bethaney Lee, "Tourism Figures Rise, But V.I. Is 'Under Siege' on Cruise Ship Arrivals," *The St. Croix Source*, November 21, 2019, <https://stcroixsource.com/2019/11/21/tourism-figures-rise-but-v-i-is-under-seige-on-cruise-ship-arrivals/>.

have not healed, but instead are these abstracted architectural elements that seemingly spring naturally from the ground and are in service of a romantic landscape.¹⁰⁶

One example of this damage related to an incident at the Hovensa Oil refinery on St. Croix in 1974. This refinery on St. Croix released large amounts of toxins into the Crucian air.¹⁰⁷ The next year the refinery closed, leaving thousands unemployed. The Crucians, who had been complaining about the contaminations for over a decade, booed EPA officials off the stage when they started their investigations for their delayed response. The closing of the refinery meant that Hovensa no longer had an obligation to clean up the mess they had created. The closure also increased unemployment on the island to 20 percent.¹⁰⁸ While the refinery remained closed for

106 Grant H. Cornwell and Eve W. Stoddard, "Reading Sugar Mill Ruins: 'The Island Nobody Spoiled' and Other Fantasies of Colonial Desire," *South Atlantic Review* 66, no. 2 (2001): <https://doi.org/10.2307/3201872>, 134.

107 "Hovensa to Close 500,000 b/d Virgin Islands Refinery," *StackPath*, n.d., <https://www.ogj.com/refining-processing/refining/operations/article/17273310/hovensa-to-close-500000-bd-virgin-islands-refinery#:~:text=Hovensa%20LLC%20is%20closing%20its,joint%20venture%20of%20Hess%20Corp.&text=Venezuela%20SA%20reported.-.After%20the%20shutdown%2C%20the%20Hovensa%20complex%20will%20operate%20as%20an,and%20were%20projected%20to%20continue>.

108 David Bond, "After Oil," *Anthropology News*, April 22, 2020, https://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2020/04/22/after-oil/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=after-oil.

decades, after the hurricanes hit the island in 2017 the refinery reopened. One might imagine that the Crucians would welcome environmental protections.

The African-Caribbean Reparations and Resettlement Alliance, ACRRA, publicly released a letter to Cruzan Rum Cruzan VIRIL (the parent company of Cruzan that is owned by the Nelthropp family) urging them to pay reparations for their ties to enslavement and colonial practices. The letter primarily focuses on acknowledging how the company was literally built on the backs on enslaved laborers. What was most troubling to me, however, was this paragraph:

“Ruins of rum production during the slavery era, this sugar mill is located on the grounds of the Cruzan Rum factory. This is not a discussion about rum tax revenues, contributions to the University of the Virgin Islands, good corporate citizenship, or the impact on tourism; for, truly these things are beyond our reproach. This conversation regards the principle of human rights in business; it concerns repair and making reparations. The reckoning, however difficult, is about enslaved, uncompensated and unrecognized laborers, the honoring of their contributions and life sacrifices, and the disclosing of records that will inform their descendants and make them whole.”¹⁰⁹

109 Virgin Islands Source, “Activist Moorhead's Reparations Push Gains Global Audience,” *St. Thomas Source*, December 12, 2009,

The “disclosing of records” made me pause for a moment. ACRRA had reason to believe the Nelthropp family had records that they were keeping private. This would make sense, because myself and other researchers have been having difficulty finding information that supports the assertions made by Cruzan about their history on the island.¹¹⁰ With no one able to counter their history, they can make whatever story they want. This is a perversion of what the Afro-Crucians have to go through to have a history, they rely on oral histories because their documents are intentionally kept away from them. The Nelthropps create stories to sell merchandise and to relieve themselves of contributing to the history of racism on the island.

Cruzan seems oblivious to the optics, because they even named two of their runs after Estate Diamond. Cruzan has ignored the calls of symbolic reparations and continues to produce false and romantic narratives about enslavement on the island. These discussions play out in words and in legal discussions, but as I want to emphasize, they also are material discussions. The mill ruins, the trees, the landscape features all play an important role in these conversations between Crucians and non-Crucians, industry and residents about the nature of historical memory, the legacies of enslavement and freedom, and the wellbeing of residents on St. Croix today. The

<https://stthomassource.com/content/2009/12/12/activist-moorheads-reparations-push-gains-global-audience/>.

110 Jeannette A. Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, Connecticut: Libraries Unlimited, 2003)

history of slavery is a history of violence. The violence done to the environment, the violence done to Black bodies, and the violence done to Black history.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

The landscape of St. Croix is more than just “land.” It has cultural, religious, and historical importance to those who navigate it. The selling of the land to different imperial powers and creation of borders between plantations left a negative impact on the environment and on some of the material and cultural heritage. Where there is resistance and a willingness to forgo these imperialistic and violent claims to land is power for the Crucian people. Maroon Ridge was not listed on maps because the Danish could never truly own it, the water Crucians used as a life force and even as a path towards freedom could not be entirely contained, and when the oppressed sought more rights they did so by destroying plantations. The history, good and bad, of this island can be traced by what has been left on this landscape.

When trying to figure out how to tell the story of the island through these material remains of mills, trees, and ruins, it is easy to at times make a few mistakes. The Alabama report was not malicious, in fact I agree with several of the points made. The Caribbean is home to some of the most extreme weather conditions, and Hurricanes Irma and Maria prove this. If there are resources available to stabilize and protect cultural heritage sites this should be a priority. The Alabama report is trying to address real inequities in preservation that overlooked and excluded Black, Indigenous, and other sites related to non-white histories. In the continental US there is a history of routinely neglecting not only sites pertaining to people of color, but entire histories. Black histories are not taught in textbooks and schools, and historic

sites about people of color are not getting the necessary funding or attention to keep them standing. The National Trust for Historic Preservation lists every year the most endangered historic sites, usually to help them get the attention they need or to encourage people to learn about them before they are completely lost. This year the 11 sites they selected were all related to POC histories.¹¹¹ While they did not say this was an intentional decision to address the disparities preservation, it is another pattern in organizations making conscious efforts to diversify their mission.

With this in mind, it is difficult for me to completely fault the Alabama and VISHPO report, because as an undergraduate student, I would have also tried to save as much on St. Croix as possible. However, it was through my work with the community that I realized sometimes good intentions can overpower the needs of the people they were trying to help. From listening to the Crucians I learned that preserving dark histories is not always empowering, especially when it erases or overpowers Black triumphs. Researching and writing this has proven that historians

111 Makeda Easter, "POC History Quietly Wins a Spotlight on National Trust's 2021 Endangered Places List," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles Times, June 9, 2021), <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2021-06-09/national-trust-historic-preservation-endangered-places-list-2021?fbclid=IwAR0yU9nAqBq6gN3sH189bzLloRCISZcAKgwIworgkQfOYwylw4ehGnRK2Gc>.

and preservationists owe their work to the public and they need to serve the community.

Crucian communities are struggling to shake off the yoke of imperialism. Unfortunately, imperialism is deeply rooted in preservation on the island. Shifting to focus from built structures that were used to actively harm and oppress Black people to elements of the natural environment the Afro Crucians care for more can strengthen interactions between historians and Crucians. There is a lot of good historians can do on the island. There are archaeologists working with local communities to teach them how to one day lead crews of their own, and there are historians recording oral histories of the Black community. There are activists who use preservation to prevent the gradual takeover of the island by resorts and hotels, much like what activists working with CAMP.

While there are blind spots for preservationists on the island, there is history rooted in Blackness and the Black experience that need to be saved from destruction by natural disasters and continued imperialism. This thesis serves, not as a source of answers, but as a reminder that collaborative work and an awareness of St. Croix's colonial history must shape the approach to preservation work. Cultural heritage thrives best when local sovereignty is recognized, and it is our responsibility as stewards of the material past to support this process on St. Croix for a more vibrant future.

FIGURES

Figure 1:

rainforest valley on St. Croix's lush West End. The magnificent view overlooks green hills, above tree tops, down the length of a Nature Preserve and out to the blue Caribbean Sea. It will take your breath away!

Amongst banana, avocado and citrus trees on the tranquil grounds below the Great house is 18th century stone ruins of a sugar factory, boiling shed, molasses cistern, two story dungeon, and stone remains of a 17-cottage village. The center piece of the ruins is the restored "cockpit" animal mill complete with 18th century wooden crushing machinery. The original animal stables were restored for the owner's antique shop and are presently used as a yoga and art studio.

A labyrinth, a walking path of prayer and meditation built by the present owners, is positioned amongst the ruins and the fruit trees. A stone bell tower, housing an 18th century bell, overlooks the peaceful plantation ruins and landscaped grounds. Century old trees grace the property and provide cool shade, amazing color, and nice breezes on hot summer days.

Over the years the Great house, grounds and ruins have been the background for photos of brides and models, films, and catalogs. Mt. Washington has been featured in magazines such as Colonial Homes/Traditional Homes, Gourmet, Architectural Digest, Coastal Living, and British Vogue. The grounds and Great house have been the site for a Danish film and featured in a major Copenhagen newspaper, and was featured in an episode of "The Bachelor."

The Great house and furniture collection have been featured on the St. Thomas television show "Inside Out," as well as photographed in Caribbean Elegance by Michael Connors. On more than one occasion, Mt. Washington has been the centerpiece house on the St. Croix Landmarks House Tours as well as being featured in island publications such as Island News, St. Croix This Week, and Vacation St. Croix.

- 2 Bed/2 Bath Cottages
- Artist Studio
- Fully Furnished
- Orchard
- Pond
- Stone Bell Tower
- 18th Century Stone Ruins
- Generator
- 3 Wells
- Fruit Trees
- Workshop
- Boat Shed
- Labrynth

Figure 1 Screenshot from realestate listing for Estate Mount Washington.

Figure 2:

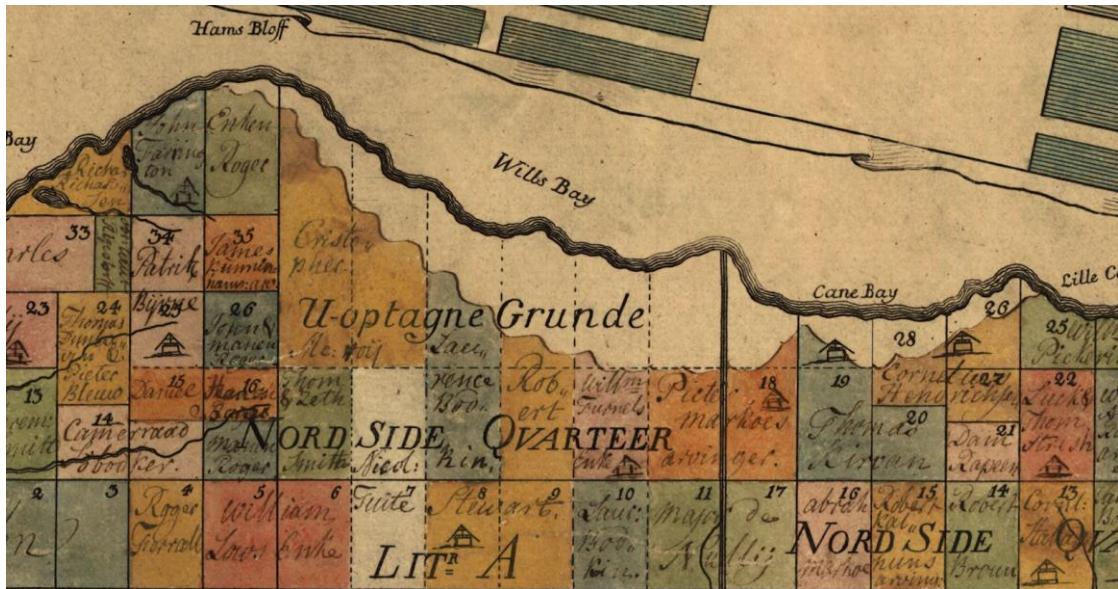


Figure 2 Detail from Reliable Map of St. Croix, 1754, Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division

Figure 3:



Figure 3 *Ham's Bluff Lighthouse*. 2017. Photograph by author.

Figure 4:



Figure 4 *Felix and His Machete*, 2017. Photograph by author.

Figure 5:



Figure 5 *Maroon Ridge*, 2017. Photograph by author.

Figure 6:

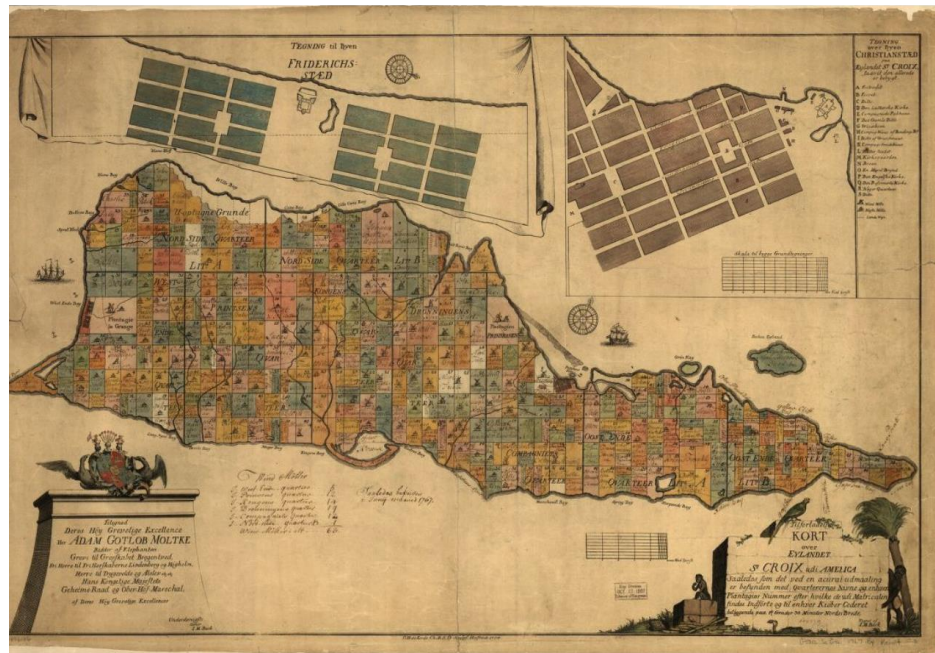


Figure 6 *Reliable Map of St. Croix, 1754, Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division*

Figure 7:



Figure 7 Meeting with Dr. Dunnavant. 2017. Photograph by author.

Figure 8:



Figure 8 *Baobab Plaque*, 2017. Photograph by author.

Figure 9:



Figure 9 CHANT Hamilton walking tour, Screenshot taken from <https://www.gotostcroix.com/>

Figure 10:



Figure 10 *General View of House from the West*, call HABS VI,1-KING,1—1,
Library of Congress Building Survey, 1984

Figure 11:



Figure 11 *Body Slob (Estate)*, National Register of Historic Places, 1987,
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/nationalregister/4026330444/in/photostream/>

Figure 12:



Figure 12 *Cruzan Label*, 2020, Photograph by author.

Figure 13:



Figure 13 *Cruzan Windmill*, 2017, Photograph by author.

Figure 14:

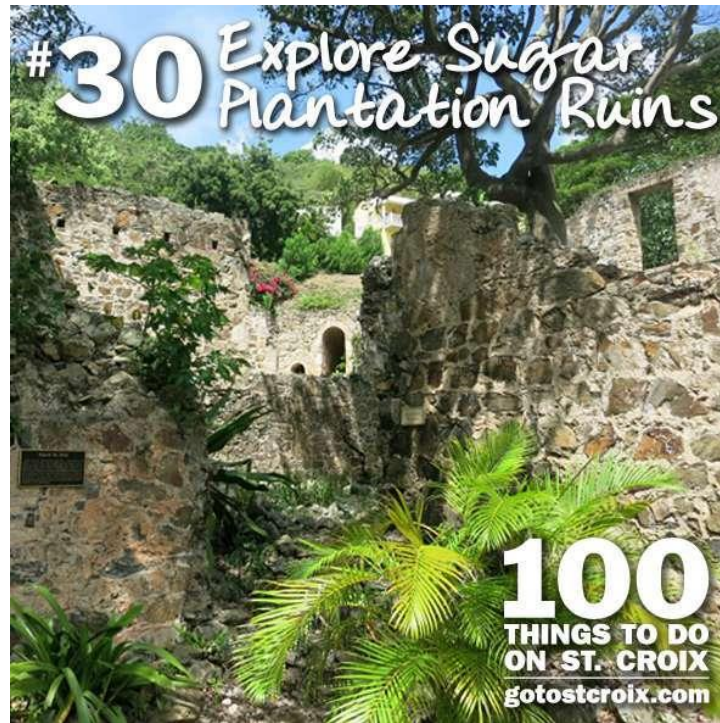


Figure 14 *100 Things to Do*, Tourism website for St. Croix listing Plantation Ruins as a top attraction, Screenshot taken from <https://www.gotostcroix.com/>