

The Garden of Dinah's Delight

Proposal by La Vaughn Belle



I. PROJECT NARRATIVE:

Background

There are a particular set of dilemmas when thinking about memorializing Dinah's story. This woman comes through in the records without a clear birth or death date, without a last name, and without her own voice. Instead she is voiced through the lense, letters and diaries of her owners, employers and their family members and acquaintances. The previous 1912 memorial casts Dinah in a language that memorializes a myth of benign slavery and of the faithful servant-a narrative that serves to uphold the racial and gender hierarchies of colonial domesticity. It is remarkable that we know so little of Dinah and yet it's remarkable that we even know her at all. So many women like Dinah have become consigned to oblivion and rematerialized as a mythic Mammy. The construction of this archetype, although mostly associated with the American South, migrated across the United States and sits squarely in the crossroads of the construction of a national identity. She becomes part of a symbolic cosmology of how America chooses to

remember itself, as a benevolent empire with an affinity for freedom, despite the requisite subjugation and destruction left in its wake.

Concept

The belief that public sculpture can forge new relationships to power and place, rather than just memorialize the past, is the guiding principle behind my proposed monument. Public art has the power to produce new publics by generating new dialogues and collective experiences. Entitled, ***The Garden of Dinah's Delight***, my project aims to create a site of various intersecting and competing narratives. Discourses around the history of Stenton, the Quaker ideology, Dinah and the politics of black representation and slavery, and the dispossession of Native Americans of their land are tethered to this monument.

The Logan family of Stenton and the Quakers of Philadelphia were leaders in the botanical and horticultural world where the pursuit of knowledge becomes enshrined in the garden. These garden spaces are where the acquisition of knowledge occurs through the study of the natural world and leads to spiritual knowledge of what the Quakers call the “inward light”. Additionally, these gardens function as sites of social and intellectual exchange, where the politics of empire, domestication and possession intercourse. However, for the enslaved their garden spaces meant something different. Their gardens become outdoor sanctuaries, a means in which they grew produce to sell so that they might purchase their freedom, or a real and imagined space where they can reclaim their time and labor.

In the Stenton archives someone writes they are sending seeds for Dinah's garden. This small yet significant detail forms part of the inspiration for this project. It is one of the few tangible things that are known about her. Situated near the colonial revival garden, Dinah's garden combines elements that will change with the seasons and a garden that remains immutable and impervious to the elements. Like scientific approaches to the colonial gardens Dinah's garden can provide a space for the community to learn about other kinds of botanical knowledge that is rooted in African diasporic exchanges.

The pathways to the garden allude to the wampum belt at the archives at Stenton. History demonstrates that James Logan situated Stenton in a way that his property functioned as a kind of threshold to Philadelphia, a stopping point for both the transmission of goods and news and a stopping place for Native Americans. This

pathway references the significance of the Native Americans, their land and culture to the site.

Additionally the garden is formed in the shape of the Dikenga dia Kongo, a Kongolesé cosmogram that is part of the African diasporic graphic writing system that represent codes of shared ancestral knowledge and collective memory and mythology. The selection of plants in the garden will be based on what was typically grown for sustenance or medicinal use. Tomatoes, red pepper, eggplant, rice, okra, millet, sorghum, cowpeas, garden huckleberry, watermelons and leafy greens are examples of such varieties.

The Garden of Dinah's Delight also refers to a fictive garden, a metaphorical space grown out of Dinah's delight and satisfaction. The project questions how can the publicness of a monument also engender a kind of intimacy and a language of interiority? The title asks the viewer to ponder what leads to Dinah's delight? Attempts at an answer shifts the gaze from the exterior to the interior world of Dinah. Dinah's previous memorial also signals her interiority as it comments on her "presence of mind". However both her "presence of mind" and her faithfulness are only commemorated as it relates to whites- not to herself- and embody a narrative of colonial paternalism. In this monument creating a space where Dinah's faithfulness is to *herself* transforms the previous narrative.

The choice to depict a body reflects a nuanced discourse of aspiration and containment. The idealized mammy figure set the contours of the faithful slave narrative¹. This part of American iconography is important to be challenged and transformed, not avoided in fear of reproducing reductive stereotypes. The antidote to reductive tropes is complicating them, adding layers and nuance and creating tensions among them. In the figuration of ***The Garden of Dinah's Delight*** tensions exist between the maternal and the sexual, between vulnerability and dominance and between the individual and the collective. Her posture announces her self-determined presence yet her angled gaze signals she is equally aware of ours.

Visual Description

The Garden of Dinah's Delight is a monument that comprises of three main elements: a figure, a representational garden in the figure's head and skirt, and a real garden. The life-sized figure sits with her arms akimbo. Differently from the standing mammy figurines she is seated and with her chest unclothed. Instead her body merges into a

¹ McElya, Micki, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth Century America*, Harvard University Press, London, 2007

skirt encircled in a garden of plants and flowers. At her waist is a quilted golden apron transforming this element of a servant's uniform into a gilded piece of armor. Like her skirt her headdress is also a combination of garden plants and flowers. She sits on a stone bench and surrounded in a garden in the shape of the circular cosmogram with four quadrants. Inside each quadrant will be a variety of plants, flowers and herbs typical of an enslaved garden and also that represent native plants and imported African diasporic species. The quadrants will be divided using a pathway reminiscent of the wampum belts that form a significant part of exchange and currency in Native American relations.

Fabrication Process

The fabrication process will consist of the artist creating a small model in clay of the figure that would be sent to a fabricator to digitally scan and resize to full scale. The fabricator will then cast the work in bronze and apply the desired patinas to create the various colors and effects. The presented flowers in the head and skirt will be created digitally and 3d printed. These will also be cast in bronze with a patina applied to give it a realist effect. The figure is seated on stone a stone bench surrounded by a garden. The garden construction plans to incorporate the community as a way to learn and engage with the gardens of the enslaved and the larger aims and narratives of the project.

Connection to Artist's Practice

My work is often concerned with coloniality, both it's historical import but also its imaginative hold on our present. Although I am very familiar with colonial mansions and historic spaces and mine them frequently for my work, Dinah presented a particular set of challenges. First, there was so little information about her and what was known was encased in the mammy archetype. Additionally, there is the tension of the impeccably preserved colonial landscape of Stenton and a desire to create a work that would interrupt its narrative yet still align visually with the space. These are challenges that I have had to face in the I Am Queen Mary project at the Danish West Indian warehouse in Copenhagen and the Great House project at the Whim Plantation museum in St. Croix. One of the things I learned from the I Am Queen Mary project is the polemics around the representation of black women's bodies in public space. In that particular project there was a lot of critical dialogue around her being depicted in a seated position as she had often been depicted in paintings and drawings in a standing or other dynamic posture. However, through this project I came to understand the power of sitting, not just as a counter to black women's bodies in constant labor, but also as a representation of an interiority and an inner world that is often neglected in black

figuration. My work at the Great House was about making insertions into the colonial mansion that would highlight subdued narratives and generate new knowledge around these spaces. My hope for this project is similar. The aim is that both the figure and the garden will generate dialogue around what it means to be an enslaved worker and a domestic servant and how their insertion into the Stenton landscape can produce new narratives that counter the colonial silences.

II. DIGITAL RENDERING



The monument's figure will be made in bronze with the bench in stone. The figure's dimensions are slightly larger than human scale with a height of 67", a width of 34" and a depth of 39". The dimensions of the bench are height 20" x width 54" x depth 30".

The diameter of the circular garden is 11'.

The color of the bronze will be a dark patina with apron in gold and part of the headdress in gold. The flowers in the skirt and headdress will be natural colors of the represented plants.

The approximate weight of the figure is 350 lbs and the stone bench is approximately 500 lbs.



Inspiration



Sample garden of the enslaved put together by the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice at Brown University



