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From contact zones to generative encounters - creating a 'common past' in Ghana

Taking the point of departure in a “Common Heritage Project” between the National Museum of Denmark and the University of Ghana, this paper explores the notion of collaboration in the process of creating a “common past”. From 2004-07 the two partners have excavated and reconstructed a ruin of a former 19th century Danish plantation in Ghana and turned the newly constructed site into a museum. Besides preserving a physical trace of former Danish engagement on the West African coast, the project's goal was to tell visitors about the “common past” of Denmark and Ghana - a past neither well known to people in Ghana nor in Denmark. Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of “contact zones” and later James Clifford’s use of it in a museum setting seemed highly relevant to my research but my fieldwork pushed me to further develop a vocabulary that actively could describe encounters that were not between already given entities. What I experienced during fieldwork could be understood in other ways than starting out my analysis with a classical cultural relativism of say Danes encountering Ghanaians. Recent anthropological writings by Helen Verran and Anna Tsing on various types of collaborative work have helped me analyze the collaborative work of the Common Heritage Project by taking point of departure in the “here and now” and engage in “the sticky materiality”. Following from this my focus is on the various generative encounters produced by the activities of the “Common Heritage Project” that results in ideas, sites, stories and other entities. I call these encounters generative since they qualify our notions of heritage rather than merely deconstruct them. Instead of merely pointing out what is wrong according to an already known logic, these generative encounters, I will argue, hold the possibility to explore and change, if wanted, the outcome of encounters in realizing that differences are not given but something that we make continuously.