An Anthropology of Common Ground

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'I struggle to keep the tension’, writes philosopher of science Helen Verran in relation to her ethnography of numerical practices in Nigeria.1 This book takes up a similar challenge in analysing a collaborative reconstruction of a former Danish plantation in Ghana. The reconstruction project explicitly addressed what was termed ‘our common past’, and my ambition is to explore what happens when differences in such collaborative heritage work meet and awkwardly interact, without glossing over the tensions involved.

Focusing on the reconstruction of a particular plantation named Frederiksgave, this book argues for the need to nurture a common ground, by which I mean a carefully cultivated here-and-now where difference is practised in encounters and engaged with in collective action.2 Engaging a common ground in no way implies agreement or harmony, but only the insistence that heritage is continuously and collectively made. In paying close attention to the diverse efforts invested in the complex creation of what came together as ‘The Common Heritage Project’, I want to show what heritage can also be, how it challenges perceived orthodoxies, reconfigures power relations and brings about collectives, and how postcolonial heritage work might actively make use of such ambiguities. If there is a conclusion to the book, then it is to stress – and indeed nurture – the inconclusive quality of Frederiksgave.

A common ground, then, entails a new possibility for critique, in that it implies a shared engagement across difference where nobody yet knows the outcomes. In consequence, the purpose of critique is not only to stimulate like-minded academics, but also to potentially open up the field of analysis to all engaged parties committed to working together on some project or other. In such work around a common concern, tearing apart, rejecting or sorting out
will not do. Instead, a generative critique – as Verran calls it – offers something new: a moment of hope and the glimpse of a promise that the future could be different from the past. I cannot think of a more appropriate inspiration for my ethnography of a collaborative heritage project addressing the former Danish involvement in slavery and resource exploitation in Ghana. To me, such a project is simply an opportunity for answering in the positive to the question: Can we imagine futures different from the past? Engaging in heritage work on the colonial era must not solely be about replication. Donna Haraway, quoting Jacques Derrida, has beautifully addressed the issue as follows: ‘Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task, it remains before us.’

This change in focus from givenness to task captures my overall approach to the reconstruction of the plantation. Seeing inheritance as something that remains before us points to what I most wanted to do when conducting my fieldwork, engaging the material and writing up this book. I wanted to take the unsettled character of encounters and collaborative practices as the relevant unit of analysis, and let emergency and contingency play their part, in an attempt to keep the tensions implied by Haraway’s words: ‘staying with the trouble’ (2009, 2016).

I first heard of the Common Heritage Project in 2006. It was officially presented as a collaboration between the Danish National Museum, the University of Ghana, Ghana Museum and Monuments Board and the people of Sesemi, the small village bordering the former Danish plantation. In the course of the project, the partners involved had started to worry about the future sustainability of the site, and therefore needed someone who could come up with suggestions to make the site economically sustainable when the private grant funding the project ran out. For a short while, that ‘someone’ was me. I was fascinated by the idea of different institutions and possibly different interests joining their efforts to reconstruct a former Danish plantation in Ghana and turn it into a museum, and the site itself seemed to offer many exciting opportunities for a fieldwork-based analysis of heritage work. The question of how ‘we’ in common could turn such a site into an attraction simply intrigued me. Encouraged by people from the National Museum, I pursued the issue in doctoral research on how the former plantation came into being, and how its commonness was enacted. How was the reconstruction made at the physical site, and which stories and
materials contended to be included in our ‘common past’ on the posters, in the buildings, and on the guided tours? Further, how to develop forms of relational Science and Technology Studies (STS) and anthropological inquiry that explores knowledge production and histories in the making?

In order to address these questions, I have engaged with a conceptual apparatus that may not be common in heritage studies, but that I find speaks to my concern with emergent common worlds, and thus to my ethnographic interest and experiences. Studying the emergent and unsettled nature of collaboration and a violent and traumatic past is a risky endeavour. Awkwardness, disagreement and neglect are shadows that accompany the fine words about the merit of collaboration across difference and ‘the necessity and importance of knowing one’s history’ – as it was often framed by people involved in the reconstruction project. On such difficult ground, inviting or allowing an anthropologist into one’s circle is a generous move. There is no guarantee that one will feel comfortable with the end result of the work. Furthermore, people might not recognise themselves, and might not recognise the project or the themes discussed. However, and crucially, I have no ambition to represent the people involved in the creation of my object of study; I do not believe in any such privileged access to the field. I see my research as the product of my engagement with an emerging field, an engagement that at times felt awkward, but that I nevertheless aspired to carry out in a fruitful way.

This book, in consequence, is fundamentally not about the particular people involved in the Frederiksgave project. They are not my object of study. Instead, my object is the Frederiksgave project itself, as it was continuously qualified and made to appear in different ways by a collective of participants throughout my fieldwork. The reconstruction project is thus a site of encounters in which many divergent histories come together without weaving themselves into a single thread. This irreducible multiplicity of sameness and difference, I argue, is paradoxically what constitutes a common ground – to be nurtured or ignored. Collaboration, accordingly, can be seen as accomplished through the awkwardness of things and ideas not quite fitting together, rather than through agreement.

I label the attention to these emerging awkward encounters an anthropology of common ground. There is also a methodological point to this, namely
that there is no way of looking upon the world from the outside, as a distant observer harvesting bits of empirical stuff to think about elsewhere. We, too, must keep the tension, share the ground and take responsibility for co-creating our objects of interest. Distinctions between data and theory are too blurred for anthropologists to withdraw from the world we study. Throughout my work I have taken great pleasure in exploring how, when analysing, we continuously create our objects as we find them, and how analysis always entails a moment of finding as well as of creation; this double movement does not challenge our authority as anthropologists or experts, but rather makes us aware of our own metaphysics.

The book is full of detailed stories. In this sense I follow a long fieldwork-based knowledge tradition, where attention to particularities and relations of all kinds dominate. In addition to being integral to my disciplinary training, I see focusing on the wealth of details as a political choice, in that details interrupt assumptions about autonomous entities. They disturb categories, because the relations they enfold continuously expand, transform, neglect and point in different directions. The many details about particular ‘small’ situations, objects and encounters present in the book are not so much a matter of gathering ‘enough’ ethnographic material for an argument to hold, but more a matter of providing ample images, stories, conversations and details for people to think through, thereby destabilising both heritage work and collaboration, and arguing that these activities are made up of just such seemingly insignificant episodes. This is another way of describing the common ground I want to engage. Part of my argument is thus enfolded in the style of writing – staying with the troublesome minutiae that continuously generated the Common Heritage Project in ways that go well beyond any project plans or distinct mission statements. In this vein, let me quote Anna Tsing: ‘To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a method. And why not make the strong claim and call it a science, an addition to knowledge? Its research object is contaminated diversity; its unit of analysis is the indeterminate encounter.’ In this book, I engage this method in an attempt to craft an anthropology of common ground.
Fig. 0.0  Humid wall in Elmina Coast Castle, 2006, Elmina, Ghana.