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Colonial media ecologies

- Resounding the colonial archive with impressions from a field trip to Ghana

Abstract
In this mixed-media essay I document a field trip to Ghana where I, so to say, travel in the footsteps of the Danish colonizers to the Gold Coast in a bid to dialogically challenge the genre of the monologizing colonial travelogue[i]*. My methodological retracing of the slave route is inspired by Danish author Thorkild Hansen's book trilogy* Coast of Slaves*,* Ships of Slaves *and* Islands of Slaves *from the 1960s in which he visits the former Danish West Indies and the Gold Coast (in the, at the time of his visit, still very young Ghanaian nation, which had gained its independence from Great Britain in 1957). Hansen was one of the first Danish authors to voice a strong critique of the Danish colonial past and of a neglectful historiography through his docu-fiction. I was curious to explore in a parallel movement to Hansen's the landscape as prism and archive today. Hence, the 'reenactment' of the travelogue in this essay functions as an attempt to recast and refracture colonial narratives of past and present. My own documentary audio recordings from the field trip are presented here along with methodological reflections on how to voice dialogical narratives about colonialism in new digital media.*

Keywords: Transatlantic history, colonial archives, media ecologies, media archaeology, travelogue, contact zone, multi-modal knowledge

To travel is to move into new spaces with eyes already written over …
Ina Ferris (1999, p. 468)

From footprints to soundtracks
In February 2019 – according to the Gregorian calendar – I was in Ghana for the first time, on a field trip traveling along the old Guinean gold coast where the Europeans placed their 'feitorias' or factories and slave forts[ii] in the early days of the global seafaring trade that eventually turned into Western imperialism (this proto-capitalist and in part still ongoing civilizational project with its inherent exploitative use of resources, human and material, for the benefit of people in places far-removed from primary production). I also went further inland, all the way up north to Bolgatanga where I visited a present-day gold mining community still run by locals but under pressure by a strong Chinese interest in mining the land. My aim was to trace the impact of Danish coloniality and in addition to get an impression of what life is like in Ghana today. I was curious to see and experience firsthand the country I had been reading so much about as part of my research on Danish colonial history.

Juxtaposing theory, history and personal travel reflections, this essay is situated within the larger context of my practice-led research. It is the aim of my research to establish a framework for understanding colonial histories on the basis of their media-specific conditionings, as well as to develop an audio archive which re-visits and complements Thorkild Hansen's critical retracing and representation of Danish Transatlantic colonial history in his literary docu-fiction.

In the first part of the essay I introduce useful theoretical terms – *media ecology, contact zone, dialogical space* – which I later employ in my own travel documentation. Then I reflect on cultural heritage sites as media archives while also considering the difference between analog and digital terms of *dialogicality* when engaging with historical material. In the last part of the essay I concretely document my trip to Ghana with a particular emphasis on a visit to the former Danish plantation Frederiksgave in an attempt to open up one dialogical site where multiple stories of past and present intersect. I suggest that Frederiksgave might serve as a possible *material* colonial archive promising other starting points and points of views for trans-national shared and fragmented histories. This last, more open-ended part of the essay combines theoretical reflections with travel notes and audio recordings which serve the speculative purpose of investigating a concrete site as a potentially, with respect to stories and temporalities, multi-layered archive.

By integrating audio into my scholarly work, I aim to establish sensory ways of relating to the places and (his)stories of colonial ecologies. As listeners we are presented with sonic details often glossed over in written travelogues. Distances and proximities can be relayed and felt differently. These contingent and unfiltered details in combination with the idiosyncrasies of where I choose to point the microphone will perhaps reflect the complexity of a history comprised of "multiple protagonists, narrators and material agencies."[iii]

As will become clear, I am interested in investigating potentials for multi-directional perspectives and complex histories that do not easily add up or try to smooth out historical or contemporary conflicting views. Put differently, I wish to move beyond the narrative dominance of perspectives based on strong collective identities and coherent grand narratives in the formation of colonial history. Yet, I am obviously implicated in the documented stories by being a Danish citizen, a Danish speaker, and when I present myself, I am immediately cast in a specific role by the people I meet as a Dane and am as such considered a representative, owner and caretaker of Danish national history in particular. A role which I also by implication actively take upon me, even if I wish to trouble it, when I explore the genre of the travelogue by new medial means in this way.

I draw inspiration from Andreas Fickers and Annie van den Oever, who call for a media-sensitive approach to history, to emphasize exactly the multi-sensorial and media-specific modalities of knowledge formation. In "Experimental media archaeology: A plea for new directions" they write:

> In engaging with the historical artifacts, we aim at stimulating our sensorial appropriation of the past and thereby critically reflecting the (hidden or non-verbalized) tacit knowledge that informs our engagement with media technologies. In doing experimental media archaeology, we want to plead for a hands-on, ears-on, or an integral sensual approach towards media technologies (Fickers & Oever, 2013, p. 273).

My research takes a *media ecological* approach by addressing colonial environments (in this context in particular cultural heritage sites) as historical archives and as what the media theorist John Durham Peters calls 'elemental media'. Peters defines media as nature-culture environments that speak to our current historical moment "in which we cannot think of computation without thinking about carbon, or of the cloud without thinking about data. Today natural facts are media, and cultural facts have elemental imprint" (Peters, 2015, p. 49). Through such an ecological framework I intend to read landscapes (plantation ruins, landscaped allées) as inscribed and (re-)readable in various also new materialist ways (for instance by reading colonial history from the perspective of distributed agency).

Furthermore, I do this within the context of a current ambition in academia and cultural institutions alike to decolonize colonial archives (Stoler, 2009; Osthoff, 2009; Fuentes, 2016). However, instead of reading archives 'along' or 'against the grain', I suggest an expansive view of what a colonial archive might be. In the search for narrative paths leading to overheard or perhaps even as yet unheard voices.

Stoler, Osthoff and Fuentes all show how colonial archives are producers of affective knowledge at the core of bureaucratic rationalities. Such reading strategies require going beyond the surface-level of archival information to regard the archive not as a mere storage facility but as a continually active producer of history. The decolonial gesture here, then, is to unfold other narratives than what the archivalia were intended to relate in their original use and to counter the inherent 'colonial aphasia' according to Stoler. Hence, I also regard landscapes (nature-culturally scaped land) as material articulations composed of intersecting and sometimes even contradictory narratives and potential new narratives in wait of proper reading strategies.

Now, in order to begin the journey, let us first establish a useful terminology for the terms on which we can encounter cultural heritage sites as media ecologies.

Travel writing and meetings in the contact zone

In Mary Louise Pratt's seminal work *Imperial Eyes – Travel Writing and Transculturation* she introduces the term 'contact zone', which she defines as follows:

> 'Contact zone' in my discussion is often synonymous with 'colonial frontier.' But while the latter term is grounded within a European expansionist perspective (the frontier is a frontier only with respect to Europe), 'contact zone' shifts the center of gravity and the point of view. It invokes the space and time where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect. The term 'contact' foregrounds the interactive, improvisational dimensions of imperial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by accounts of conquest and domination told from the invader's perspective. A 'contact' perspective emphasizes how subjects get constituted in and by their relations to each other (Pratt, 2008, p. 8).

Indeed, the first steps of colonialism in Africa took place in the coastal contact zones, and some of these places still exist to this day, some as ruins, others as cultural heritage sites or museums. Early Danish colonizers who documented their travels to these outposts and who are included as *voices from the archives* in Thorkild Hansen's fiction are, among others, Ludewig Ferdinand Römer (mid-eighteenth century) and Paul Erdmann Isert (late eighteenth century). Later, colonial critics arrived, such as Thorkild Hansen himself who wrote the book *Slavernes kyst* (En. *Coast of Slaves)* after his visit to Ghana in the mid 1960s.[iv]

Coast of Slaves is the first volume in a trilogy on 'the Danish triangular trade', an often-used euphemism for Danish Transatlantic slave trade in history books, and one of the first head-on critiques of the Danish national historiography about the country's role under colonialism. I was curious to explore in a parallel movement to Hansen's the landscape as prism and archive. In fact, my urge to visit the culturally composite places marked by the early Transatlantic proto-globalization[v] had taken a hold of me in the wake of reading his work. I wanted to see *and not least hear* for myself what was still left of the historical imprint, and find out how it is possible – or perhaps not – to relate to the remnants today, physically as well as by imagination.

Hansen visits places such as the slave fort ruins on the African coast and plantations in the Caribbean like an archaeologist in search of historical deposits as part of his research, and in *Coast of Slaves* these places are used as anchors and conveyors of the traumatic history. As readers we go back to them, with him, to commemorate events but also to search for some palpable remnants that will aid our relation to history and memory going forward.

Like Hansen's travels, my retracing of the places of colonial history is not a story of personal guilt and repentance, but of finding ways of caring by exploring how we are all implicated together, yet differently. Hansen reinvigorates an – at the time of publication – almost absent discussion of Denmark's Transatlantic slavery in the heyday of the welfare state. In Denmark and the other Nordic countries, the decades after the Second World War saw the rise of a welfare state model characterized by a high level of redistribution of wealth and a drive towards egalitarianism, albeit within the narrow frame of a predominantly white national community, concomitant with a widespread economic upturn (Esping-Andersen, 1990). A political atmosphere which might have encouraged Hansen's focus on past injustices and inequality. Whereas people of Denmark today live in an invigorated moment of attention to colonialism, in part due to the many recent centennial initiatives marking the sale of the Danish West Indies (US Virgin Islands) to the US in 1917. Our times are also marked by the culturally influential identity movements from the US and elsewhere challenging the concept of universal man, and a global cultural angst with regard to the environmental sustainability of the capitalist, cosmopolitan way of life with colonial roots, while, to complicate matters even further, neo-nationalism is flourishing internationally.

Cultural heritage sites as dialogical space

Let us now turn to one of the primary components of the travelogue, namely the (heritage) sites where meetings between cultural others have been and continue to be established. As such they are places of translation and exchange of goods and information (on often unequal terms).

Anthropologist Karen Fog Olwig (2003) argues that the dominant Danish narratives about colonialism have not been confronted with the perception of history in the former Danish tropical colonies (the Danish overseas colonies also included a trading post in tropical Tranquebar, India), as the colonies were sold before the process of decolonization in the late twentieth century. One of the ambitions of my work is in turn to fill these gaps by documenting dialogical negotiations of shared history.

Similarly, Astrid Nonbo Andersen identifies a lack of reflection, particularly in relation to sites of memory, and the consequences hereof, for the conception of a certain national innocence, in her recent and seminal book *Ingen undskyldning* (2017, En. *No Apology*) as well as in the article "Vore gamle tropekolonier ..? Tropekolonierne som danske erindringssteder" (En. "Our Old Tropical Colonies..? The Tropical Colonies as Danish Sites of Memory") from which I quote the following[vi]:

> However, it is not without difficulty to lift the site of memory [she explicitly refers to Pierre Nora's term 'lieu de mémoire'] out of the nation state context in which it is born and into the hybrid context of the former colonies. Partly because the sites of memory are not only historical places but also homes for the locals. Partly because the surrounding context does not ascribe meaning to it unambiguously. And finally, because a willingness to identify with the places has been absent in Denmark for a long time. Another image of Denmark has pushed colonial history into the shadows. (Nonbo Andersen, 2010, p. 5[vii])

These are all important issues at stake in the process of recalibrating national and transnational histories in a dialogical process. However, following the idea of anthropologist Helle Jørgensen (2008, p. 13), historical places can be regarded as palimpsests, composed of layers of narratives. There is in fact not a singular all-encompassing grand narrative to adhere to.

In Jørgensen's article "Heritage Tourism in Tranquebar: Colonial Nostalgia or Postcolonial Encounter" she describes how guest books at cultural heritage sites and hotels in another former Danish colony, Tranquebar, in India, are currently being used to discuss the transnational negotiations of history. Jørgensen documents how both tourism and the wider Danish engagement in the development of Tranquebar as a heritage town make it emerge as a location of change and contestation.

In her readings she finds examples of a considerable Danish nostalgia but also of a reflexive engagement with colonial history and the question of how to relate to it. She reads the guest books as part of a dialogical discourse, an invitation to reflect on the shared history:

> Tourism becomes an occasion both to contemplate historic identities associated with what "we" did during the colonial period and how "they" in the former colony might think of "us" in the present. Thus, through tourism national narratives are reconnected with the notion that colonial history constitutes encounters which have had effects for both colonisers and colonised – and that these colonial encounters also have implications in present relations and identities (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 77).

The positions "we" and "they" in the above quote are obviously specific negotiations in their own right, as not all Danish citizens (non-white Danes, for instance) are able to or would even wish to claim this discursive role.

According to Pratt (2008, p. 3) much of the travel literature produced by the colonizers in the days of empire "gave European reading publics a sense of ownership, entitlement and familiarity with respect to the distant parts of the world that were being explored, invaded, invested in, and colonized." In fact, she considers travel books "one of the key instruments that made people 'at home' in Europe feel part of a planetary project; a key instrument, in other words, in creating the 'domestic subject' of empire" (Pratt, 2008, p. 3).

As such, travelogues can be considered a genre foundational to upholding colonial divisions which makes it interesting to investigate further – and to counter – the media specific circumstances around the production of empire and cultural hierarchies through travel writing, past and present. In the following I explore aspects of this media ecology in which we are all still culturally brought together across distances in the vast global afterlife of slavery and colonialization.

A sound documentary anno 2019

By turning to sound and the different sensory information it provides, I shift the specific medial circumstances and traits that pertain to for instance Thorkild Hansen's travel books. They condition the reception of history by the book medium with its tactile qualities which invites a special type of calm, immersed interaction with the reader at a distance in space and time, differing from the more simultaneous sharing of knowledge on the web, more similar to speech (Emerson, 2014; Hayles, 2012).

Although Hansen's book trilogy could be said to harbor dialogical ambitions in relation to center-periphery issues of colonialism, and although it is written within a mass media horizon in the 1960s, the fact that the books were written in the Danish language at least defines a delimited audience and immediate ecology for the work. In fact, most likely Hansen's main concern has been a corrective and direct address to his contemporary Danish public's national self-perception with a then, and still, subdued understanding of its imperialist past.[viii]

An important effect of the style in Hansen's documentary is that the reader is invited into the process of historical inquiry. The Danish literary scholar Thomas Bredsdorff has suggested that twentieth-century media-technology created the foundation for the documentary method (cited in Stecher-Hansen, 1997, p. 23), and according to literary scholar Stecher-Hansen:

> The emphasis on epistemological concerns went hand in hand with new narrative strategies. The creation of an illusion of authenticity, the interjection of an interpretative narrator, the focus on the difficulties involved in a factual inquiry, and the invitation to the reader to take a critical look at the research process itself, these are all characteristics of the documentary method and of Thorkild Hansen's historical works in particular (Stecher-Hansen, 1997, p. 22).

Another aspect to consider which has undoubtedly influenced the approach to history we find in Hansen's work is the media climate and larger political circumstances of the late 60s. The trilogy is written in the cold war era,

charged with a cultural angst perhaps not so dissimilar to the ecological threat marking our present time, thus according to Thorkild Hansen: "If our times unexpectedly were hit by the other misfortune, to be remembered 200 years later, it would be for its odd, almost historical eagerness to be forgotten" (cited in Stecher-Hansen, 1997, p. 49).

By the same token political discourses influence our involvement in cultural heritage today, including our perception of what it means to be part of a community with which we either self-identify or become associated with[ix], – what do 'we' need to remember, why and how? If our view of the colonial era is under direct influence of the changed terms of access to historical sources and our adjusted response to the archives, what then happens to historical narratives and political discourses when cultural heritage archives become digitized and the accessibility is fundamentally changed? Or when new archives and reading strategies emerge?

In what sense, if any, has colonial heritage changed in light of a new media-horizon, with modern means of communication at our disposal, where for instance the possibility for dialogue between inhabitants of former colonies' centers and peripheries are seemingly enhanced. Is it true, as Marshall McLuhan said in 1964, when he coined the term "the global village", that the world has become more interconnected by means of modern technology?

Digital archives and new collectivities

Regarding Hansen's travelogues and my own as a media-historical cross-section, with approximately 50 years between them, inspires me to ask: What affordances in terms of relationality can certain types of archives provide when we compare written travelogues to acousmatic ones[x], and when we relate to history through a textual document versus a material manifestation, such as a plantation ruin or, as we shall see, a tamarind allée?

What kind of voice or meaning-overflow is generated when we focus on these media ecological measures? The fact that we – as researchers or tourists – return to a physical source, a real or imagined *imprinted landscape*, I believe allows us to think of history as materially layered and not strictly linear.

At least the transition from analog to digital archives creates new conditions for accessing and making use of cultural heritage artifacts and collections. In the process of digitization, it is likely that parts of analog archives that have previously been difficult for publics to access, parts that have been hidden away or even forgotten, will be exposed anew, and that stakeholders in other parts of the world will gain easier access to archivalia of interest to them.[xi] As can easily be imagined, this could pave the way for new historic accounts from a widened cultural and geographical scope.

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes in "Archive and Aspiration":

> Through personal websites, digital archives for all sorts of collectivities (both paid and free), storage sites in cyberspace for large data sets, and the possibility of sending pictures, sounds and text to multiple users with high speed and large amounts of high-quality information, the archive is gradually freed of the orbit of the state and its official networks. And instead of presenting itself as the accidental repository of default communities (like the nation), the archive returns to its more general status of being a deliberate site for the production of anticipated memories by intentional communities (Appadurai, 2003, p. 17).

There is, however, good reason to caution against an over-optimistic belief in the digital media realm's ability to bypass state control, when the alternative seems to be private tech giants' ownership of online archives. Tech giants represent a modern-day power-concentration with strong capitalist interests in selling and manipulating data (Zuboff, 2019). What goes to show, however, is the shifting dynamics of archiving and identification with the archives.

A promising line of inquiry in this respect is the budding field of postcolonial digital humanities which has been doing important critique as well as pushing the boundaries of media creative work.[xii] In Roopika Risam's book

New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis and Pedagogy (2018), she combines postcolonial studies with digital humanities and questions knowledge formation in the digital age. Digital humanities have been praised for its commitment to openness and shared knowledge. Risam challenges this by pointing to the role of colonial violence in the development of digital archives and how algorithms and natural language processing software used in digital humanities projects may (re-)produce universalist notions of the human.

Prior to my field trip to Ghana, I visited the US Virgin Islands (in 2015 and 2016), which led me to create the collaborative digital humanities prototype mapping project *Mapping a Colony*, as an intervention into the conditions under which Danish colonial archives are made available through digital platforms. The history of these archives is of course shaped by Danish colonial presence. When the Danish West Indies were sold to the US in 1917, without a referendum in the Virgin Islands, the Danish administration left the islands and most official archives, including images, photographs and maps, went to Copenhagen. *Mapping a Colony* sets out to show how places on the three continents – Africa, the Americas and Europe – were inherently entangled through colonial encounters while providing direct access, on a bilingual platform, to the recently digitized archival collections from the Danish National Archives, the National Museum of Denmark, the Royal Danish Library, Europeana, and the US Library of Congress.[xiii] *Mapping a Colony* created a new infrastructure for these digitized collections in order to disseminate the material to a wider public, while extending the collaborative contributions to include other voices than the ones already included in the archives. Our aim was also to show how land- and cityscapes have changed as a consequence of colonial history.

The common endeavor of the *Mapping a Colony* project and the field trip I am documenting here is thus to investigate the counter-narrative (to monologizing historiography) and dialogical potential of ways of accessing and narrating history through various types of archives: digital, analog and even environmental.

Landscape as prism and archive: Frederiksgave

In this last section of the essay I transition into a more reflective mode interweaving photographs, readings and impressions from my trip to Ghana. It is, however, beyond the scope of the present essay to present an integrating analysis. I include the diverse material rather as impressions that generate new questions to explore further in the future, given how they challenge existing knowledge.

All recordings are available as a playlist on SoundCloud, while the individual recordings will be accessible as hyperlinks in the text where they relate to the written content.[xiv]

My main interlocutors are: William Nsuiban, head of public relations at the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board, who works for the National Museum of Ghana, and who is also a PhD student at the University of Ghana; the chief of Sesemi, Nii Anum Mumli II of Sesemi; Anita Adjetey, the Cultural Officer at the Ga East Municipal Assembly (GEMA), and the now retired professor of archaeology, Henry Nii-Adziri Wellington.

When Thorkild Hansen came to see the former Danish plantation Frederiksgave, it was a ruin. However, recently it has been renovated with support from the Danish National Museum,[xv] and today – since 2007 – it stands completely rebuilt following historical drawings, on a steep hill with a view on a clear day to Legon Hill on the outskirts of Accra about 25 km away. I visited the cultural heritage site with William Nsuiban who works for the National Museum of Ghana.

In the article "Slavery and Resistance on Nineteenth Century Danish Plantations in Southeastern Gold Coast, Ghana" Yaw Bredwa-Mensah[xvi] describes the power-relations of plantation life (*in the recording I discuss the layout of space with William Nsuiban)* as they can be read through archaeological findings. The power dynamics of a place like Frederiksgave are visible in and through various control mechanisms, such as the physical layout

of the plantation, but also in the archaeological traces of how the enslaved reacted both in compliance with and against the impositions of the plantation owners.

Bredwa-Mensah reads the archaeological site as a source of information to fill in the gaps of the colonial ledgers:

> Despite the fact that tangible traces of slavery are often difficult to interpret without written and oral sources, the artifacts from sites associated with slavery serve as a compelling testimony to the human socio-cultural consequences emanating from enslavement (Bredwa-Mensah, 2008, p. 134).

A central point of his argument is that the site was constructed after the model of the Danish manor house and its manorial relations of production, but imposed on a Gold Coast terrain. The rigid geometric configurations of the plantation signified elegance, superiority, and power "manipulable from above and from the centre," as he states borrowing the quote from anthropologist James Scott.

At the same time the archaeological excavations bear witness to how the enslaved were familiar with and made use of the natural and cultural environment of the plantation complex and were able to carve out domains of their own for both domestic use and religious practices. As such the nature-culture landscape helps us quite literally to reconstruct an understanding of the dynamically born interdependent narratives of colonial relations as they took shape in the contact zone.[xvii]

Colonial narratives as layered and entangled encounters

When visiting the restored plantation of Frederiksgave I had to present myself and describe my errand to the local chief. I was quite surprised to be greeted by a local authority, but as it turns out his palace, as they called the office-like abode, was right next door. Before leaving we concluded the visit by offering the chief a small donation for the continued maintenance of the historical site.

William Nsuiban shows me remnants of a tamarind allée that used to stretch all the way from Christiansborg by the coast to Frederiksgave. The enslaved would carry the colonizers in hammocks in the shadow up to the plantation. Today there are 17 trees left at this particular spot. The sign has been put up by the National Museum in order to help preserve the allée. The attempt to preserve the allée is carried out in dialogue with neighboring villagers who do not necessarily share the ambition to consider the trees primarily as important historical agents when they can also serve as rather useful firewood, or, indeed, as a source of shade. In this environmental archive entangled narratives of past and present are caught in a power struggle for a possible future.

As I journeyed through the changing landscapes, I had brought along other contemporary literary travel companions. Among them African-American literature and history scholar Saidiya Hartman who has written a capturing book about her process of finding ways to relate to the afterlife of slavery within a North American context in *Lose Your Mother – A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007).

I also carried a copy of *Stones Tell Stories at Osu – Memories of a Host Community of the Danish Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade* by Henry Nii-Adziri Wellington, a now retired professor of archaeology from the University of Ghana, who had likewise been inspired to write about shared history after reading Thorkild Hansen. I was fortunate enough to meet Wellington at his home on the outskirts of Accra where I interviewed him about his own docu-fiction writing. In his book about the Danish influence in Osu stories are told from a local perspective and with an emphasis on oral history as he remembers it from his childhood and through the stories he was able to collect as part of his research.

Professor Wellington shares anecdotes from Osu in the courtyard of the Christiansborg slavefort, also known as Osu Castle.

In Ghana scenes of daily life combine with impressions from visits to historical sites, all of this I access in two ways simultaneously: Mentally, informing my imagination by reading how others have previously related to the places I go, and with my body – sensuously overloaded the first couple of days with unfamiliar sounds and smells, foods and views. All the while I am constantly engaged in a struggle to determine a proper solemnity at sites of mass murder. In other words, I experience the places I go in two rather distinct, and what you might even think of as mutually exclusive ways, as both a revisit and a very first encounter.

As part of my fieldwork I interviewed pundits and recorded interactions with travel companions (who in my case were a combination of Swedish and Danish NGO professionals and tourists) and people I met along the way while I also collected ambient recordings which might be included on the *Mapping a Colony* website at a later stage. My main focus has been the perception and creation of history in the different narratives I read and hear. How are they media- as well as site-dependent, and to what extent? And how does the erosion of the landscape tell stories in its own right?

A village of landless farmers in Koforidua, Ghana. We were all, visitors and villagers alike, equipped with mobile phones which we used to digitally document our meeting.

Where we speak from, and who we speak to

I came to Ghana with a – at least sort of – clear concept of history, an interest in exploring what a multi-perspectival approach to a shared colonial heritage would do, but as I progressed the concept of history itself – that had cut out my path – seemed to slowly erode under my feet. I became acutely aware of the context of modernity in which this travelogue is wrapped up and made possible.[xviii] Aside from being a researcher I was also an affluent tourist together with NGO professionals who were there to help landless farmers improve livestock farming skills in order to optimize their living conditions in the continued civilization building with a Western standard as the implicit norm.

Could I ask landless farmers struggling to live off the land about colonial history? Why did I hesitate? One important reason was my intuitive understanding of the culture of the villagers, hinged upon my preconceived notions of our different concepts of identity as well as types and levels of education. My immediate impression was that the villagers were primarily oriented toward belonging to a people around a shared language and its mythological history and not by a strong identification with for instance Ghana as a nation. Of course they had knowledge of modern cosmopolitan life via their phones, but not necessarily a comparable group- or self-identification to Westerners so attuned to the history of nations and the global world order. Perhaps unsurprisingly so, considering the fact that Ghana has only existed as an independent nation since 1957 with its borders laid down by the colonizing European nations in 1885 at the Berlin Conference.

The national perspective on history, as an integral part of the long humanist tradition that is the science of history in the Western world, is itself a construct deriving from an era of nation and civilization building, inseparable from the imperial drive. How did it resonate in these areas communicatively difficult to access (both in terms of transportation time, but also in terms of digital infrastructures), as such even *remote* in today's global village?

Contemporary Ghana is a country consisting of multiple peoples, speaking up to 96 different languages (with English as the official language) with their own histories of exploitation and slavery surrounded by an air of taboo. In modern day Ghana the relative wealth of the coastal regions compared to the Northern parts of the country are in part due to the coastal peoples' lucrative slave trade with the Europeans. According to Saidiya Hartman families of former enslaved people are still to this day stigmatized in Ghana. Indeed, Hartman's personal story

that I read at night in different hotel rooms is about coming to terms with this particular aspect of negotiating rather diverging views on the history of slavery from each side of the Atlantic.

In conclusion: Resonating uneasy reasonings

In an empty national museum currently under reconstruction due to asbestos found in the ceiling from 1957, I interviewed William Nsuiban from the National Museum of Ghana. Here a new exhibition is on the way, the first curated by Ghanaians and not the British. It served as a particularly well-suited backdrop for some of the fundamental questions that govern my research:

How do we negotiate and bridge the histories we have inherited, and how should some of the above factors play into discussions of for instance repatriation and restitution of cultural heritage and national responsibility? Where do artifacts of shared culture belong when the sharing was never one of mutual agreement, and when identities of various peoples today are no longer comparable to those of yesterday?[xix]

In this essay I have shown how we can address colonial environments through a *media ecological* and *media archeological* approach. This framework has enabled me to read landscapes as archives that can be inscribed and (re)read in various ways from multiple perspectives and, concordantly, how knowledge of history might be stored in other-than-text narratives. I have used the sound medium as a dialogical tool to shed light on often overlooked dimensions in the formation of historiography, through the often default perspective of the nation state, and I have demonstrated what a focus on other embodied imprints might allow in terms of knowledge formation and potentials for relationality.

In contrast to Hansen I explored the affordances of a polyphony of living voices (and not primarily voices from archival textual documents), and what sorts of tensions might present themselves by and through the specific roles we are ascribed in the Transatlantic narrative today. I suggested that the sound medium harbors a potential for a multi-perspectival and multi-voiced opening up of colonial archives, and I argued that the focus on physical sources, for instance various loci of contested history, in combination with digital media, prompts us to opt out of the usually modernity-informed and Western way of understanding history as a linear progression. This enables us to investigate further the multi-layered, non-linear fractions of narratives embedded in contemporary nature-culture environments.

Lene Asp Frederiksen *is a published writer of fiction, translator and editor. In 2017 she developed the digital humanities project* Mapping a Colony *(mappingacolony.org) with funding from Europeana, and in continuation of this work she is undertaking PhD research about colonial environments from a media-archaeological and ecological perspective at the University of Linköping. She has an MA in Radio from Goldsmiths College, University of London.*

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[i] I use the term monologizing throughout the article in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense. For Bakhtin, monological language is a corruption of an underlying dialogism. All signifying practices have an ultimate dialogical aim. Nevertheless, language use can maximize this dialogical nature or seek to minimize it.

[ii] Denmark-Norway had several trading posts and slave forts in Guinea (contemporary Ghana) but it was never a Dano-Norwegian colony. The presence on the Gold Coast lasted from mid-seventeenth century and until 1850 and was a prerequisite for the combined Transatlantic enterprise.

[iii] This is something the sound medium is particularly well-suited for, as Sanne Krogh Groth and Kristine Samson (2016) argue in their "Audio Paper Manifesto".

[iv] I wonder what it must have been like to experience the country in the early 1960s when Ghana's GDP was on the same level as that of South Korea and under the influence of the first president Kwame Nkrumah's advocacy for pan-Africanism, see here: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD.ZG?locations=GH-KR

[v] A globalization that accelerated from that point in time and which has had an all-pervasive impact on the formations of present-day collective identities that negotiate the legacy of slavery, the ownership of archives, and who formulates the (not always so) coherent grand narratives of nations.

[vi] In 2017, the Danish-West Indian archives were made more widely available after a mass digitization to mark the occasion of the centennial of the sale of the Danish West Indies to the US in 1917. This has spurred a whole array of new research around the Danish role under colonialism with a Transatlantic focus. Prior to that, research with an emphasis on the perspectives of the enslaved and colonizers has been relatively sparse in Denmark or instead simply focused on the administration, the navy or on other parts of the Danish colonial domain. For a thorough account of the historiography I refer to Nonbo Andersen, but will here briefly mention some of the recent research carried out in Denmark with an emphasis on the Caribbean connection: Louise Sebro (2009), Gunvor Simonsen (2007), Niklas Thode Jensen (2012), and with a focus on the Gold Coast: Pernille Ipsen (2016), Lill-Ann Körber (2015), and Frits Andersen (2018). Let me also point to the newly established Centre for the Study of the Literatures and Cultures of Slavery, and the collaborative research project The Legacy of Caribbean Colonialism both established in 2019 at the University of Aarhus.

[vii] My English translation from Danish in text: "Det er dog ikke uden problemer at løfte erindringsstedet ud af den nationalstatslige kontekst, det er født ud af, og over i den hybride kontekst, de tidligere kolonier udgør. Dels fordi erindringsstederne ikke blot er historiske steder men også hjem for de lokale. Dels fordi den omgivende kontekst ikke er

entydigt betydningsgivende. Og endelig fordi der i Danmark længe ikke har været en vilje til identifikation med stederne. Et andet Danmarksbillede har skygget for kolonihistorien" (Nonbo Andersen, 2010, p. 5).

[viii] As Nonbo Andersen observes in *Ingen undskyldning* (my translation into English): "The Danish colonial rule in the Danish West Indies *was* challenged by the locals throughout the history of the Danish West Indies. The most well-known examples are the slave insurrection on St. John in 1733, the emancipation of the enslaved in 1848, the *Fireburn* on St. Croix in 1878, and the union leader D. Hamilton Jackson. On the other hand, it is not until 1998 that West Indian voices actively begin to interfere with the Danish narratives about the shared colonial era. With a few exceptions, people in the Virgin Islands do not speak Danish and have therefore not been able to participate in the public debate" (Nonbo Andersen, 2017, p. 57).

[ix] I want to emphasize here that we risk neglecting an important dimension of the *world system* of the time in question when Europeans first traveled to the Gold Coast, if our main or sole perspective on history is through the narrow lens of the modern nation state which is a later construct. The colonial era was marked by a global scale trade-network composed of international companies and financially mobile elites, so that even small-scale players in imperialistic terms, such as Sweden, could in fact be the home of major actors in the colonial enterprise, as indeed was the case with the Swedish iron industry (Schnakenbourg, 2013).

[x] Acousmatic sound understood in the original Greek sense, when the source of sound remains veiled or unseen, as was the case for the pupils of Pythagoras who only had access to his voice. The term has later been theorized by French composer Pierre Schaeffer in *Traité des objets musicaux* from 1966.

[xi] Obviously, digital archives also privilege certain visitors over others, for one those with access to the internet. You might not need to travel far to gain access, yet many of the recently digitized Danish archives require a working knowledge of Danish, as much of the archival metadata has not been translated. In addition, many search functions are complicated and require some degree of training.

[xii] See for instance the annual Caribbean Digital conference and sx archipelagos: a small axe platform for digital practice.

[xiii] The project received seed money from Europeana (a website portal for European digital cultural heritage, integrating digitized material from national libraries throughout Europe), and in November 2017 we launched phase one in the shape of a prototype website with the aim to disseminate information about colonial history by way of a digital map which connects the colonial past to our present.

[xiv]Track 1: I read an excerpt about Frederiksgave in Danish from Thorkild Hansen's book *Slavernes kyst*.
Tracks 2, 3, 4: In conversation with William Nsuiban who took me to Frederiksgave.
Tracks 5, 6, 7: In conversation with the chief of Sesemi, translated by Anita Adjetey.
Track 8: Counting trees with William Nsuiban and Anita Anita Adjetey.
Tracks 9, 10: From interview with professor Wellington
Track 11: Professor Wellington in the Christiansborg courtyard.
Track 12: Excerpt from guided tour of Elmina Castle.
Track 13: Recording of talking drums from NGO durbar in the Bolgatanga area.
Track 14: En route to Accra, in conversation with William Nsuiban.
Track 15: In conversation with the chief of Sesemi, translated by Anita Adjetey.
Tracks 16, 17: From interview with William Nsuiban at the National Museum of Ghana.
(Thanks to Mikkel Meyer for help with post-production.)

[xv] The restoration project is documented on the Danish National Museum's website: https://natmus.dk/historisk-viden/forskning/forskningsprojekter/ghana-initiativet/frederiksgave-projektet/

[xvi] The late Yaw Bredwa-Mensah was head of the Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies at the University of Ghana and one of the initiators of the excavation and reconstruction of Frederiksgave where he lies buried today.

[xvii] Another interesting study investigating colonial power-relations and the different roles afforded to colonial subjects in specific areas, both center and periphery, within the Danish colonial domain is Gísli Pálsson's *The Man Who Stole Himself* about the enslaved Hans Jonathan who was born on St. Croix in the Danish West Indies yet grew up and lived as an adult in Copenhagen where he famously went to trial to claim his freedom but lost the case and managed to escape to another Danish, yet Nordic, colony, Iceland.

[xviii] For an interesting perspective on epistemological questions on modernity and coloniality I recommend Rolando Vazquez' article "Precedence, Earth and the Anthropocene: Decolonizing design". He claims that: "The geopolitics of knowledge reproduce the modern/colonial divide in terms of knowledge, imposing modernity as the only valid epistemic territory and erasing other worlds of meaning." (2017, p. 89).

[xix] Louise Sebro (2013) shows in her study of the St. John slave revolt in 1733 how the Transatlantic entanglement created new creole identities in the Caribbean.