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Virtual Visits to Places of Pain: The Digital Kormantin Project

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Videogame engines and other digital media platforms make it possible to transcend time and space and create approximations of visits to heritage sites in the present and, through careful research, historicized versions of the same sites in the past. The NEH-funded project *Black Past Lives Matter: Digital Kormantin* brings together an international and interdisciplinary group of scholars and practitioners to create three interrelated virtual tours of Fort Kormantin/Amsterdam, a gold and slave trade fort in Ghana and



Fig. 1. Ruins of Fort Amsterdam in Abandze, Ghana, 2018

UNESCO World Heritage Site as it is today, during an archaeological dig in 2019, and as it stood in 1790 in the waning years of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

HEADING 1

My talk will briefly provide an overview of the digital archaeology fieldwork conducted in 2017-2019 to document the site and create high resolution 3D models of the site at different moments and then review the challenges of transforming them into assets capable of rendering within Unity on typical consumer laptops and devices. At present, we have multiple optimized models of the site, close and distant landscape terrains, and are starting to assemble the first of the three virtual tours in Unity 2021 HDRP, I will then turn from these technical aspects of project design and development to consider methodological research, ethical, political, and experiential issues that arose during data collection and are emerging as we work to create virtual visits to complex

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Fig. 2. Fort Amsterdam ruins with a superimposed digital reconstruction of the fort in 1790

and emotionally charged places of global commerce, incarceration, and suffering. In particular, we are highly mindful of the multiple (and perhaps irreconcilable) audiences who will avail themselves of the virtual visit opportunities we envision, and especially its reception among African Diaspora descendants of enslaved people with historical or imagined connections to Kormantin.

CONCLUSION

Digital History and Archaeology draws upon traditional research methods but is itself a form of research in generating new questions and sensitivity to different historical and contemporary perspectives. The polyvocality of creating three related, overlapping, but distinct virtual visitor experiences of the same place draws attention to both the power and promise of accessing important but remote historical sites and also the many interpretive intellectual and ethical choices that their creators must make as they create them.

Keywords— *Digital Archaeology, Digital History, African Diaspora, Public Archaeology, Ghana, African Slave Trade, Virtual Tourism, Thanotourism*

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