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Of Golden Anniversaries and Bicentennials: the Convergence of Memory, Tourism, and Public History in Ghana in 2007

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The year 2007 will mark the 50th anniversary of the first post-colonial, sub-Saharan African nation, Ghana, which gained its independence from the British in 1957. But 2007 also marks another significant historic struggle over human rights and self-determination, the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade by Great Britain and the United States in 1807. Each of these seminal anniversaries represents different yet related and overlapping historical narratives. Ghana's golden anniversary speaks to a national narrative with transnational roots, while the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade signals an international saga with moral implications, and both anniversaries seem to converge in Ghana today around issues of memory, tourism and public history.

I wish to draw attention to how these two anniversaries, and the historical legacies they imply, are inextricably linked by the presence of the former slave

forts and castles that line the coast of present day Ghana. Built by European trading powers from 1482 to 1787, these formidable structures today stand as the physical embodiment of the slave trade's past, on the one hand, and of Ghana's long struggle to independence, on the other. This connection has not gone unnoticed by Ghana's Ministry of Tourism, whose ambitious "Joseph Project" seeks to capitalize on the convergence of these two anniversaries to promote further links between Ghana and its African diaspora through tourism and public history initiatives as well as other incentives that will make it easier for African Americans to make material investments in Ghana. Proposed for 2007, the Joseph Project additionally seeks to time two popular festivals designed to attract diasporic Africans to Ghana, Panafest and Emancipation Day, to converge during the same period in late July, and also hopes to establish a new museum, a concert of atonement and a pilgrimage walk to significant sites of the slave trade.

In the pages that follow, I consider the significance of the convergence of these two anniversaries for heritage tourism initiatives in Ghana by focusing on the proposed goals of the Joseph Project and its likely impact on the interpretation of public history at the sites of the slave trade. I would like to suggest that the Joseph Project in part, by drawing its inspiration from these two converging anniversaries, also acknowledges different ways of remembering the past that have characterized how public history and tourism initiatives have been fraught with contradiction at the most popular tourist sites in Ghana, Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle.