

## Past futures and future pasts. Why anthropologists should look at other people's ruins



In this paper I reflect upon an anthropological-historical study of scientific and medical infrastructures in Africa – remains of once progressive 20th century projects, "Traces of the Future". I will explore the theoretical-methodological possibilities, and challenges, of ethnographic research on ruins and traces, and ask what it is that makes ethnography uniquely suited for the study of material vestiges, and what ethnography becomes in the process? Moreover, I will confront the question, why we should study ruins at all – and other people's ruins at that? I will argue that the anthropological study of strangers' lost hopes – the material traces left by their now faded expectations and desires – is more than titillating "ruin porn", seeking aesthetic pleasure and contemplation in others' failure and suffering. Attention to other people's past futures is a condition of meaningful engagement with them. And, equally importantly, tracing the leftovers of their anticipation, opens our eyes for the

vulnerability of our own present, and destabilises our own assumptions of progress and durability. Their past futures are mementos of our future pasts – helping us to recognise the ruins-to-be that we live with – and might serve as call to defend the present and its hopes.

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