

A photograph of a man in a blue shirt and grey trousers sitting in a black office chair at a wooden workbench. He is focused on a small yellow object in his hands. The workbench is cluttered with various tools, wires, and small components. A large, brass-colored lamp hangs over the workbench. The background features a wall with peeling yellow plaster and exposed red bricks. A television is mounted on the wall, displaying a collage of images including a man in a pink shirt and a woman in a white headscarf. The overall atmosphere is one of a busy, lived-in workspace.

Repair across Africa

Mending, Making
and Material Care

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Introduction: Acts of Repair in Contemporary Africa

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Drawing on fieldwork across Sub-Saharan Africa, this book assembles stories of repair. We start from a common-sense understanding of the term as the restoration of function or form to objects or material assemblages that have lost their original appearance or use-value. Spanning the region geographically and straddling the urban/rural divide, the cases presented are purposely heterogeneous in terms of scale, materiality and historical frames. A mundane object like a football or chair may raise similar issues as monumental architecture, infrastructure or even town-plans; long-used plant materials, wood or clay are entangled with plastic, copper wires or steel nails; while post-industrial hacking finds resonance with pre-colonial pottery, weaving and woodwork. At the same time, the repair of material things addressed in these contributions is often intertwined with that of immaterial relations – among living and dead, humans and non-humans – and involves relations over time, from family genealogies and local histories to the legacies of colonial and other forms of violence and global capitalism.

African cases hold a unique place in the growing body of literature concerning repair. While recent anthropological works have begun to position Africa as central to repair studies, the broader humanities scholarship on maintenance and repair has historically placed relatively little emphasis on the region. De Laet and Mol's seminal study of the 'bushpump' in Zimbabwe (2000) laid some groundwork by introducing themes of material agency, relationality, affect and care. Together with research on waste, remains and obsolete technologies (e.g. Dittmar and Tastevin 2016; Cross and Murray 2018; Ntapanta 2025), and studies of mobility, labour, and improvisation in technological systems (e.g. Hart 2016; Green-Simms 2017; Grace 2021) these works document how repair unfolds in diverse African settings – shaped by infrastructural and economic constraints, but also by creativity, technical ingenuity, and social adaptation. Alongside scholarship on architectural, infrastructural, and technological afterlives (e.g. Beisel and Schneider 2012; Tousignant 2013; Geissler et al. 2016; Smith 2019; Berre et al. 2022), this body of scholarship positions Africa at the forefront of global repair studies, illustrating how repair operates as a deeply embedded and dynamic practice shaped by the continent's diverse material and social contexts.

While such contributions remain relatively limited and, at times, do not fully foreground the specificity of African contexts, others emphasise the continuity of repair practices across the continent, bridging historical ruptures and change. On the one hand, older European anthropological accounts detail the ongoing processes that sustained earlier African life-worlds, encompassing activities such as weaving, house-building, agriculture and healing (e.g. Moore 1986; Feierman and Jantzen 1992; Devisch 1993). On the other hand, contemporary discussions by some African scholars foreground a continuity of innovation and adaptability in people's productive lives with technology on the continent – sometimes implying a specifically African capacity in this regard (e.g. Mavhunga 2017). Our aim is neither to reinforce cultural stereotypes, nor to suggest that 'Africans' possess an inherent cultural predisposition or skill for repair. Rather, we argue that non-repair and the ensuing waste are products of specific local histories and are contingent upon broader cultural, economic and historical circumstances, including, but not limited to, the influences of industrial capitalism and imperialism.

In this light, examining African situations of repair helps us, first, to think beyond the im- and explicit figure of 'post-ness' (post-industrial, post-socialist, post-modern) and the crisis framing that is prominent in recent repair literature. Such framing, we argue, reduces repair to a response to the perceived anomaly of dysfunction, which often presupposes an idealised and, if applied to the products of imperial modernism, often violent and unsustainable concept of

wholeness and order. As already De Laet and Mol's Zimbabwean bushpump-engineer had recognised, 'non-modern' repair is about forward-searching practices of modification rather than stabilisation or return (2000); and as recent scholarship on repair has noted, the common-sense contrast between repair and its opposites – brokenness, discard, abandonment and letting go – dissolves upon closer scrutiny (Martínez and Laviolette 2019; Strebel et al. 2019). Repair, in this understanding, is not about 'after'-lives referencing a prior state, but about being alive as such.

Secondly, while this book centres on specific, concrete cases of repair, it also contributes to the ongoing discussions about reparation, social repair and healing in response to the harms caused by imperialism. However, unlike much of the existing literature on reparations, which often focuses on economic compensation, legal frameworks, or processes of forgiveness in post-conflict contexts, this volume shifts the focus back to the material and social processes of repair. By emphasising repair as a tangible, everyday practice, we explore how these acts of mending material objects, infrastructures and relationships carry broader implications for healing and continuity. In doing so, we build on recent anthropological and artistic scholarship where repair occupies a nuanced space between a practical act and a metaphor for broader restorative processes (e.g. Carreau 2022, see also on the visual arts below). This focus on repair processes allows us to examine how communities navigate damage and loss not only through formalised reparation mechanisms but also through embedded, everyday practices that reshape material worlds, relationships, and historical narratives, while also expanding the scope of what reparation can mean.

Beyond brokenness

Our volume primarily draws inspiration from the recent ground-breaking work by Martínez and Laviolette who challenge the narrow modernist rendering of repair as a mere restoration of function (2019). The latter perspective is premised on the notion of a functioning system – a world that operates seamlessly where any disruption, or 'brokenness' constitutes a failure-event that momentarily disturbs the established order, and that is subsequently rectified through repair (Martínez and Laviolette 2019). The underlying modernist fiction of stability and durability is counterfactual, ecologically and socially unsustainable, and can be, in the context of its imperialist imposition, inherently violent. Against these 'dialectics of repair and brokenness', Martínez and Laviolette advocate for perceiving the gap that breakage reveals 'between should and is' as an affective space for deploying and expressing care (2019: 3). They assert that care for the failing object is inherently relational involving the creation and fixing of social relations (see also Mattern 2018). Furthermore, they propose that repairing material things in the present can amount to a form of 'world-building', and reconstructive practice that has the potential to also heal historical wrongs and social damages.

What distinguishes our volume, with its ethnographic and regional focus, is a different starting point from that of Martínez and Laviolette, who centre on metropolitan realms of colonial-industrial capitalism, and its historically and geographically unique understanding of the material world as a functioning whole, which is a focus of their cultural critique (2019: 2). By contrast, for many of the 'repairers' in the chapters that follow, this fiction of a seamless functioning system would seem far-fetched. In this sense, Martínez and Laviolette's insights may not appear as surprising within the contexts in which the chapters unfold as they are characterised by continuous tinkering and ongoing material world-making. For the repairers in this book, the idea that

an object's effect on the world relies on ongoing human work, rather than being independent of it, seems evident. Likewise, they recognise that the care bestowed upon materials and tools extends beyond their immediate function, encompassing social relationships and relations across time. This ontological and experiential difference is not merely a response to specific present economic or social conditions (i.e. of material crisis) but can draw on modes of living (as repair) passed on from previous generations.

In other words, many individuals featured in this book not only make a life through repair but also experience their lives as a continuous process of repair-work and world-making. Repair here is less a response to breakage and more a practice of life-making, adaptation and transformation – a practice that weaves together the past and hopes for the future along the suture of the present. Most authors in this volume acknowledge a specific quality to repair in contemporary Africa and use the social life and cultural forms of repair on the continent to extend and nuance existing scholarly discussions on repair. We contend that these repair cases across Africa offer valuable insights for grappling with the challenges of damage and loss in our contemporary world to regain a sense of – and any hope for – justice and continuity. This distinctiveness is shaped by different, if intertwined, aspects including precolonial cultural traditions, worldviews and object-relations; the impact of imperialist capitalism on these older ways of being with things, and the profound and lasting economic and material precarity left behind by colonial occupation and postcolonial exploitation. For some, these practices also offer a hopeful propensity to imagine and enact future human ways of living beyond the current impasse.

The image on this book's cover offers a glimpse into the layered, everyday worlds of repair that the contributions explore: craftsmanship, temporal endurance, inherited knowledge and care for the material. The Seye brothers' workshop in Saint-Louis, Senegal, sits like a pocket of analogue time in a digitised world. Shelves sag under the weight of old radios, VHS players, tangled wires and dusty tools – objects that speak to nostalgia as well as continuity and care. Part atelier, part archive, the shop also holds traces of kinship. It was opened in the 1950s by their father after returning from the Second World War. A soldier (*tirailleur*) in the French colonial army, he later became a respected typing instructor in Dakar. 'A great *dactylographe*', Mamadou, who appears on the book's cover, recalls with pride.

Each morning, Mamadou arrives first, coaxing life from cracked remotes, sipping *ataya* (green tea), chatting with neighbours and friends. 'We work like cousins', he says coming in less for money than for companionship. 'I retired fifteen years ago', he shrugs, 'but I still love it'. The trade, while passed down, was also learned. 'You become a blacksmith by forging (*c'est en forgeant, qu'on devient forgeron*)', his brother Souleymane, shown in the photograph below, explains. 'When a father works on something and the child joins during school holidays, it starts out as an obligation but over time, that sense of duty turns into love.' Love, here, is slow and tactile, born of solder fumes, split cables, and long afternoons spent watching, then doing. This form of attachment recalls what De Laet and Mol describe as the scope of love for technologies, not only tied to function, but also to the ways technologies act and entangle people in ongoing relations (De Laet and Mol 2000: 252).

Both brothers went on to study electronics formally, learning to read resistors, measure voltage, and diagnose faults with precision. Once, the shop flourished. Now, the flow of customers has slowed, and there is no apprentice anymore, as planned obsolescence and the rise of sealed, irreparable digital devices have eroded the need for the analogue machines stacked around



I.1: Souleymane Seye in his repair workshop in Saint Louis, Senegal. March 2025. Photograph by Charline Kopf.

them – the VHS players, cassette decks, radios, tangles of wiring and aging CRT televisions visible in the photo (Figure I.1). Still, each day, the brothers return, sharing the high-walled atelier, the tools, and the latest news.

Their workshop brings into view several of the book's central concerns: the intimate ties between repair, memory, and craft; the long afterlives of skill and technology; and the slow transformations of value across generations. It traces a technological history as well as a social and familial trajectory shaped by postwar return, urban respectability, and inherited practices of work. Repair here is not so much about restoring objects alone than about sustaining relationships, places, and ways of being in the world. And while care and affection run deep, so too do signs of wear and disuse. These are reminders that repair is rarely pure devotion, but also shaped by scarcity and everyday constraints. This is not to romanticise repair, but to attend to its ambivalent, material conditions. This sensibility, grounded in lived practice, also finds resonance in broader artistic and political reflections on repair and its potential to address historical wounds that the next section explores.

From reparations back to repair

Fostering these broader reflections on repair and more metaphorical ‘broken-world’ thinking (Jackson 2014: 221; 2015) or ‘planetary’ repair (Mbembe 2017) within an African context, Franco-Algerian artist Kader Attia has left indelible marks not only in the realm of the arts but also in anthropology. He spent two decades exploring ideas and images of injury and healing, to reflect on what he calls ‘an infinite process of *Repair*, which is closely linked to loss and wounds, to recuperation and re-appropriation.’¹ His work creates striking juxtapositions such as pairing disturbing photographs of French WWI veterans subjected to reparative surgery with African art pieces showcasing visible repair (Attia and Gautier 2014). Attia’s work underscores Africa’s central position in both artistic and academic dialogues of repair, contributing to the discussions on the restitution of postcolonial collections in European museums exhibiting African art – a conversation which the *Sarr and Savoy Report* on the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage has given renewed prominence in public debate (2018; see also Cousin et al. 2023).

This focus on repair also appears in recent anthropological publications such as Deborah Thomas’ work on political violence in Jamaica (2019) where she shifts from the concept of reparation to repair. In related work with Leniqueca Welcome, Thomas explores how repair figures centrally in efforts to decolonise knowledge production and methodology, highlighting the potential of multimodal and collective forms of research to challenge colonial epistemologies (Welcome and Thomas 2021). These questions feel particularly urgent in African Studies, where necessary epistemic questions have sparked renewed debates about the ethical and political stakes of research, and where repair is increasingly mobilised as a way to reimagine not only restitution or healing, but as a way to decolonise academia and reimagine knowledge, relation, and accountability (e.g. Nyamnjoh 2019).

Ferdinand De Jong’s book *Decolonizing Heritage. Time to Repair in Senegal* (2022) expands debates on reparation and restitution beyond legal considerations, delving into imaginative processes and techniques. De Jong’s work highlights how repair serves as an encompassing framework where ‘heritage in Senegal is a technique for the decolonization of time, repair of trauma, and reclamation of the self’ (De Jong 2022: 32). Similarly, Thomas Cousins examines the post-Apartheid era by reflecting on the ‘work of repair’ conceptualised around the isiZulu term of *amandla* meaning strength and capacity (Cousins 2023). The practice of *amandla* emerges in everyday scenes around plantations, grounded in mutual incompleteness, a becoming-with-others and a relational effort to absorb the wounds of colonial displacement and racialised exploitation.

In conventional legal discourses, reparation is commonly associated with transitional justice in post-conflict situations and economic compensation for victims of crime, following the United Nations’ principles on rights to remedy and reparation for gross human rights and humanitarian law breaches (Greiff 2006; OHCHR 2005). These large-scale legal and economic reparations generally involve the International Criminal Court and national courts where reparations are negotiated in the form of economic compensation from victim funds, or in terms of apologies and symbolic acts. While scholarly discussions on these reparations highlight significant critical issues, such as the use of victim imagery to legitimise justice interventions and the depoliticisation of victims’ voices (Kendall and Nouwen 2013), there is increasing critique of this formalised economic reparation as it often proves insufficient in amount, kind and timing. Victims of crime and violence frequently turn to what Gilmore and Moffett (2021) call ‘self-repair’ and

‘informal repair’ to address their past wounds. In this context, the imposition of externally conceived forms of reparation, such as Western mental health interventions, risk exacerbating rather than remediating harm (see e.g. Torre 2023). The chapters in this book focus attention back to repair processes that are informal, slow and materially grounded. This theme also resonates with Morreira’s work on slow repair in the context of transitional justice in Zimbabwe (2022). She contends that conventional discourses and projects on national healing often centre on political violence and individual suffering, inadvertently neglecting the deeper and more pervasive social traumas. Through her study of community endeavours in Kufunda village, Morreira suggests that its residents employ various cultural frameworks that perceive these traumas as continuous rather than confined to the past. As a result, they advocate for a gradual and slow approach to social repair and reconciliation.

Inspired by these debates, this book turns to everyday practices of material repair, which in some cases can also be considered forms of everyday life reparation. While these informal kinds of repair cannot and should not replace larger-scale legal and economic reparation, we focus here on quotidian and material forms of repair because these have received less attention and acknowledgement. As the discussion on ‘reparations’ demonstrates, the increasing conceptual utility of repair lies in the way it moves across scales – from minute material objects to broader expectations at the level of the nation-state and beyond – and in its capacity to bridge distinct temporalities, at once gesturing to the past while allowing a projection in the future.

Our project bridges these distinct approaches of repair by focusing on detailed studies of acts of repair grounded in materiality while acknowledging ongoing discussions about reparations owed to African societies for the harms done by colonial capitalism and during armed conflicts. Rather than juxtaposing repair and reparation, we use the doublet ‘repairing’ and ‘mending’ in this volume to highlight a continuum of practices: from creating and making, to maintaining, mending, repairing, restituting, restoring, embellishing and beyond. The distinction is a matter of nuance: the objects undergoing repair and mending often differ, since mending is mainly associated with textiles and vessels whereas the term repair is commonly used to describe the fixing of engines and technical things. Additionally, mending may be craftier and less focused on restoring a perfect object compared to repair. The focus on this continuum, and the freedom that each contributor had to explore it, is precisely what enables us to offer various articulations of repair as concrete act and sometimes, as figure of speech.

The cross-disciplinary nature of this project allows for a particularly diverse exploration of these differences. Bringing together authors from different continents and various disciplines, including historians, anthropologists, musicologists, architects, scholars in urban studies and archaeologists, the contributions foreground in different ways the relational nature of repair. In the following part, we will discuss our selection of stories further and pursue some of the reflections that arise from their juxtaposition.

The work and ethos of repair

Repair, as suggested earlier, is here seen as an intrinsic part of human living-with-things, rather than a distinct mode of intervention triggered only by the anomaly of breakdown (Leigh Star 1999; see also on the vanishing or temporarily suspended practices of repair in industrial heartlands, e.g. Bond et al. 2013). Many contributors to this volume instead highlight the making and

crafting, shedding light on different forms of professional ethos and skills, traditions and apprenticeship of repair – an eagerness to fix materials and a desire to act. This is also reflected in the choice of words that interlocutors use to designate repair: in Bambara and in Luo, one way to say repair is ‘to make’. These skills and the expertise (Mavhunga 2017) required to repair everyday objects become apparent for example in the chapter on the repair of ‘whaleboats’ (baleinières) on Congo’s inland waterways. Here, Peter Lambertz demonstrates how the crucial skill that keeps a baleinière operational is the savvy sealing and waterproofing of its planks – a technique with a long history that consists of filling gaps with a composite of bitumen and sawdust or sand. This resonates with Coss-Corzo’s concept of ‘patchwork’, which describes the embodied expertise and practical knowledge required to repair Mexico City’s water infrastructure (2021). As several contributions in this volume underscore, such skills are central not only to the maintenance of everyday objects but also integral to professional identities (e.g. Tousignant 2018; Kopf 2020, Kopf and Phelan 2024; Mususa 2022).

Focusing on these relational dynamics, the chapters also reveal the intimate connections and affective entanglements that repair fosters, creating, strengthening, sometimes restoring or occasionally eroding relationships between families, neighbours and fellow workers. This is seen in Sarah-Jane Phelan’s chapter, which follows cobbler Jacques’ efforts at patching and mending shoes and footballs at a market in Ouagadougou, passing on his skills and passion to a young apprentice in a deeply unsettling political and economic crisis. Similar networks of support and mutual help among neighbours are highlighted in two chapters set in South Africa. Evelien Storme’s chapter focuses on a Public Works women’s group that logs and records repairs needed in their neighbourhood – from leaking roofs, faulty taps, to blocked stormwater drains – with city authorities. Angela Storey’s chapter, meanwhile, follows residents of an informal settlement in Cape Town who create ‘pulled lines’ or ‘people’s connections’ by extending plastic and metal lines to increase access to water, sanitation and electricity. These community-led connections reclaim delivery and redistribution, revitalising the community itself. In northern Uganda, Kirsten Nielsen’s chapter further examines the relational and material nature of repair through residents’ efforts to fix their electrical systems in a village with unstable electricity. What emerges from these chapters is a narrative of communities piecing together their own material access and, through such small, everyday acts, working to repair broken systems of governance and distribution (see also Simone 2004).

Repair as material practice and metaphor

While this edited volume puts an important emphasis on the different layers and interactions of material repair, e.g. between the repair of objects and bodies, landscapes and livelihoods, it also highlights the distinct challenges posed by materials like concrete and plastic (Chalfin and Alhassan 2026), or industrial and electronic commodities. These materials, emblematic of modernity, often radicalise the stark dichotomy between functioning product and waste due to their specific materiality and temporality – commodified objects designed for use, eventual obsolescence and replacement, which profoundly shapes the dynamics and possibilities of repair. Such materials claim unchangeable solidity and rely on an aesthetics of traceless smoothness (e.g., Geissler and Prince 2010: 344–51; see also Han 2018). The smartphones discussed in the contributions by Issa Fofana and Issa Togola, Medaas as well as Janine Patricia Santos, are a case

in point. While this type of material and design can, but does not always, hinder repair practices, these chapters also highlight the ingenious approaches to phone repair and plastic mending that counteract these challenges. However, this in-built-modernity often carries class-based elements or connotations of social humiliation, especially when a mended electronic device cannot be fully restored to its original seamless function, or when the visible signs of mending mark industrial goods with the scars of handicraft mending. Far from romanticising the creativity of repair, some contributions shed light on the nuanced decision-making processes involved. For example, in Phelan's chapter, the assessment of an item's value, subject to changing circumstances, determines if an act of repair is deemed worthwhile or not.

Other contributions draw inspiration from the literature dealing with reparatory justice claims and the restitution of objects to Africa that often takes repair as a metaphor for healing. Rather than a one-off act of restoration and restitution that could imply an all too easy solution to the harm done, our stories show how attending to material acts of repair is an ongoing and always incomplete practice. Anthropologist Morais and musicologist Ferrara's chapter provides a compelling example through their study of *timbila* repair, a traditional Mozambican xylophone. Repairing the *timbila* – in both its material and sonic aspects – is a continuous process of adaptation and transformation rather than a single restoration, as it negotiates colonial legacies and adapts to evolving social and economic circumstances. The practices examined by the authors challenge the static, purist view of the UNESCO understanding of heritage, which framed the *timbila* as a fixed tradition threatened by disappearing.

This continuous balancing of repair, reparation and unrepair is particularly evident around architecture. In the chapter on *La Casa Verde* in Equatorial Guinea, architect Laida Memba-Ikuga and anthropologist Alba Valenciano-Mañé look at the recent interventions of recuperation and destruction of colonial architecture, reflecting on the Equatorial Guinean society's ambivalent relationship with its uncomfortable heritage. *La Casa Verde* has undergone many phases of repair without ever being fully restored for public use. Linking the material, physical reparations of the building to the need to come to terms with the country's problematic past, the authors tease out the different regimes of memory that lie behind the house's phases of stagnation and (dis)repair.

In a similar vein, the dialogue between critical urbanist Emilio Distretti and heritage conservator Abel Assefa elaborates on the question of repair in relation to architectural case studies in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Starting from the modernist architecture of the Italian occupation, they expand to other layers of Ethiopian history to think about how repair addresses a double 'wound': the material decay caused by structural events and the destruction and violence caused by (post)colonial oppression(s). Architectural historians, Robby Fivez and Simon De Nys-Ketels meanwhile, home in on absences in colonial archives and photographs of the Fort Shinkakasa in the Congo Free State to reinterpret colonial histories of repair and uncover untold narratives of architectural *métissage*. By tracing how the colonial state used forced labour for the repair of three types of buildings, they suggest that architectural exchange occurred, albeit shaped by deeply asymmetric power relations.

The contributions' fine grained ethnographic attention to the physical processes of mending reveals how the material, metonymic and metaphorical layers are deeply entwined. While foregrounding forms of material repair, we hence demonstrate how efforts to mend physical objects can also resonate beyond the material realm, shaping and reflecting on the enduring, and often materially embedded, legacies of imperialist capitalism.

Times, temporalities and repair after modernity

Studies of repair provide a lens into the multi-layered temporalities and temporal orientations of societies. They render visible the individual and collective labour put into acts of repair, the time they require and the processes they involve. While some of these processes entail going back to previous technical systems, they do not always mean a 're'-turn to the initial object or former state: maintenance and repair might imply a restoration, but both can also involve an adaptation, improvement, innovation or transformation (Graham and Thrift 2007; Martínez and Laviolette 2019). These overlapping temporalities are here highlighted by the African interlocutors in the chapters, rural and urban, ordinary and elite, who rely on and opt for practices of repair. Such temporal orientations are complex and cannot be subsumed in a dichotomy between past and future.

Pursuing James Ferguson's reflections on African modernities and afterlives (1999), scholars have emphasised the affective relations to modernity and development as a deferred promise and considered nostalgia as a tool for political critique and demands for potentially better futures (Lachenal and Mbodj-Pouye 2014; Mbembe 2020; Geissler and Tousignant 2020). Extending from this initial interest in nostalgia, the literature on the 'afterlives' of residual material forms after colonial and post-colonial forms of modernity shows the manifold ways in which such remains can be variously repaired or neglected, or, more often, used (sometimes used up) as resources for the continuation of life after rupture and material damage (for Africa, see e.g.; Geissler et al. 2016; Kopf 2020; Gez 2022; Kovač and Ramella 2023). This work highlights how material transformation extends beyond mere restoration but is deeply entangled with the persistence of historical traces, showing how the residues of past colonial and postcolonial structures and unfulfilled promises shape contemporary possibilities for repair and reimagining.

Such afterlives are, however, rarely uncontested; they often serve as sites where tensions between repair and disrepair emerge, reflecting deliberate choices to engage with, reshape or relinquish material legacies (e.g., Geissler 2014; Smith 2019; Berre et al. 2022). Such tensions are further mediated by generational and gendered perspectives, as different experiences, expectations and relationships to the past shape how repair practices are understood and enacted. Focusing on repair allows to push this exploration of plural, temporal-material entanglements further: repair can be future-oriented even while ostensibly aiming at restoring previous stages when it is framed as putting things right or making up for lost time. At the same time, repair is often tethered to material and affective traces of colonial and postcolonial histories that continue to shape how people navigate, transform and rework their environments and attendant objects in the present.

Some contributions of this edited volume show how these overlapping temporalities are etched into the built environment, offering tangible examples of repair as a way to grapple with the entanglements of past and future future (see also Berre et al. 2022). Focusing on the layered histories of places and buildings provides a lens for understanding diverse perspectives on repair within specific settings. Silvia Balzan, for example, examines the Khovo Lar, a building that has endured both a military socialist regime and civil war yet continues to serve students despite its advanced state of disrepair. Architect Ola Uduku, in turn, explores Freedom Park in Lagos, arguing that it exemplifies a unique form of urban repair: the transformation of a former colonial prison into a vibrant cultural space. This ongoing reinterpretation and repurposing of space, Uduku suggests, goes beyond physical and infrastructural renewal to signify cultural and political reclamation.

Through the chapters' various engagements with renovations, ruins, resistance, remediation and reparative processes, the authors of this edited volume raise questions concerning the relationship between past and future as it emerges from repair, urging us to rethink endings and beginnings.

Repair as critique and disrepair as letting go

The positive emphasis that certain chapters put on repair does not mean that people always 'want' to repair or take particular pleasure or pride in it. In a global context dominated by modernist commodity regimes and the attendant aesthetic and value-regimes putting a premium on newness, the gap between the perfection of industrial commodities, or the smooth functioning of infrastructures, and the often all-too visible improvisation and tinkering involved in repair can be a source of frustration accentuating global political and economic hierarchies. As the stories show, the repair practices are not devoid of the criticism of the historically derived conditions of inequality and deprivation under which they occur. It is also here that the potential of repair as critique resides, and where the chapters highlight the emancipatory potential that processes of mending can entail.

A nuanced examination of the labour involved in maintaining infrastructures or objects shows how repair can both reinforce and challenge inequality, precarity and the differing valuations placed on labour (Stokes and de Coss-Corzo 2023). These politics of repair simultaneously sustain and disrupt existing power dynamics, highlighting how repair practices carry political significance that intersects with broader social and material transformations. In the chapters below, readers will encounter moments where people probably would prefer 'new' objects and places rather than having to repair old ones such as the chapters on phone repairers in Bamako, Dar es Salaam or Lomé, or the study of post-disaster housing reconstruction in Malawi by Tanja Hendriks illustrate. Other cases show dissatisfaction with the inability to fully restore objects to their former functionality, using appropriate materials and tools – having instead to live with improvised solutions. Such frustrations often translate into explicit political critique of national and transnational orders as in Storme's and Storey's chapters set in post-Apartheid contexts, where demands for adequate infrastructure are linked to broader calls for racial and social justice.

Refusal to repair, or the deliberate choice against repair, can also have transformative potential. Disrepair becomes here intentional. If repair is conceived of not as restoration of a supposedly normal state of stability and functioning, but as continuous mode of being in and towards the material world, then disrepair and decay are not necessarily perceived as rupture or abandonment, but as inherent to the being of things. In this case, the intentional non-repair of a material object, allowing ever-present entropy to take its course, can also contribute to the repair of human lives, bodies or social relations linked to this object. Sometimes, the stabilisation or maintenance of a given object may even be detrimental to the processes of life.

For example, Sam Derbyshire's chapter on the repair and stylistic transformation of the *ekichielong*, a small, portable wooden stool in northern Kenya, argues that repair is not suitable for all objects. Similarly, Éric Jolly's chapter on objects collected during the Dakar–Djibouti mission shows how repair practices often intended to illustrate damage and repair processes themselves, rather than reverting the object to a pre-damaged state. This acknowledgement – even appreciation – of visible repair as a way of 'coming to terms' with wider processes of

transformation resonates with recent discussions on post-Anthropocene heritage. These argue that one important part of living with and beyond the Anthropocene may imply finding ways of ‘letting go’, that is conscious and consensual modes of allowing decay and disappearance to take its course. These perspectives resonate with recent heritage debates about ‘curated decay’ (DeSilvey 2017), which frames intentional disrepair and allowing materials to deteriorate as meaningful strategies for engaging with material legacies.

Adeline Masquelier’s work brings an original twist to these ideas on intentional disrepair, exploring the temporalities of ruination and repair in Niger. In line with other African ethnographies that have documented the creative vitality of ‘unrepair’ – the positive appreciation of decay in buildings, household utensils or graves, on account of their association with living and dead persons (Geissler and Prince 2010) – Masquelier attends to the ways that human repair projects, such as rebuilding a wall, may intersect or even collide with the intentionality of non-human presences. What may be seen as repair by humans is experienced as ruination by spirits. By highlighting how human repair practices ripple into the spiritual domain, her work reveals how material repair influences more-than-human entities such as spirits.

This interplay between material repair, intentional disrepair, and their broader implications is particularly evident in the context of colonial architecture and town-planning. The idea of ‘letting go’ of the material remains of the past (see DeSilvey 2017) and attended-to-disappearance as form of heritage speaks particularly well to the material embodiments of imperialism, such as the fascist architecture in Eritrea discussed by Distretti and Abel: rather than preservation, such sites call for creative modes of re-use, partition and appropriation – or conscious abandonment and even decisive erasure. As Berre et al. (2022) explore, the contestation of architectural decay and restoration reveals its complex role in negotiating historical legacies. In such cases, withholding repair, along with the collective efforts and reflections invested in the process of falling apart, might affect repair both in concrete material terms – such as a colonial town-plan being gradually erased and adjusted to meet the inhabitants’ needs – and in a metaphorical sense, as acts of reparation and redress.

The various contributions of the book help us think through these issues, not in terms of binary choices between repair and reparation, repair and letting go, making and mending, but rather in terms of a spectrum of transitions, moral and ethical decisions as well as aesthetic choices. Once visibly repaired, a damage can index neglect, it may stand as an icon of care. As the following chapters reveal, such interpretations often depend on who undertakes the work of mending and repairing, and the tools and resources they have at their disposal to restore damaged objects, ecologies and communities.

Note

1. Kader Attia, ‘Biography’, Kader Attia website, accessed 13.11.2025, <http://kaderattia.de/biography/>.

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