

Call for potential contributions to an edited volume

Mending and repairing across Africa

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The proposed volume brings together diverse, sometimes potentially contradictory, moments and stories of mending and repairing mundane objects from cloth, boats, videotapes to rails also intertwined with these of minds, crops, lives, persons and relations as they emerge across African histories and geographies.

Over the last decades, a burgeoning literature on practices of repair and maintenance has emerged across a wide range of disciplines, from STS, heritage studies, archaeology, history, philosophy to anthropology, looking at instances of fixing, restoring and repairing (see for example Strebel et al. 2019). This curiosity is often linked to an equivalent interest in breakdown, loss, ruination and failure; both have first arisen in specific historical situations of political-economic or ideological breakdown. Whether in, postcolonial, postsocialist or (post)industrial settings, roads are deteriorating, power grids are breaking down, the public good is crumbling and infrastructures are failing. But also novel creations such as new highways, not-yet finished buildings, electrification, public systems often involve repair from the very beginning, due to misunderstandings, problems with the material, unequal expectations or other issues.

By adding the term mending to the conceptual field of repair and maintenance, we want to highlight also the more ancient, traditional practices of stitching and mending objects, fabrics or tools, buildings or vessels and the socialities that surround them as long-established modes of engaging with material objects in Africa. Indeed, the attention to mending allows for considering a wide array of techniques beyond a focus on new technologies and modernist architectures and infrastructures, thus foregrounding material relations with the past, such as nostalgia, memorialisation and restoration.

While previously repairing was mainly used with reference to objects and the act of mending also encompassed people and human relations,¹ both repair and mending have more recently been oriented towards larger restorative processes such as the maintenance of future liveability under the lasting damage of the Anthropocene (Tsing et al. 2017), sometimes linking concrete repair practices to such larger moral and political visions. With Achille Mbembe's application of the ancient notion of 'world-repairing' to the legacies of imperialism and racism (2020), and the ongoing debates about reparations for historical damages of colonialism and the restitution of artefacts appropriated under colonial conditions, reparation and repair then also imply another more future-oriented layer of meaning.²

In that sense, this edited volume will engage with the temporalities and materialities of repairing and mending particular objects of material assemblages, to make sense not only of the past that objects and relationships contain but also of the futures that they hold.

Temporalities and materialities of mending and repairing

The terms mending and repairing enable us to capture the different temporalities inherent in practices that put broken things back together or sustain their function and social role. Indeed, while these processes sometimes involve 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 they can also involve a redefinition, improvement, innovation or transformation (Graham and Thrift 2007, Martinez and Laviolette 2019). Mending can entail artful and aesthetic skills, adding bits and pieces to the broken object and thereby sometimes altering the purpose and functionality of the objects, whereas tinkering can reveal the importance of ingenuity in order to restore, if not an object, its functionality. While some of these practices acknowledge the ongoing modifications of the object and the incremental and transformative process, others attempt to hide them.

¹ For example, to mend relationships, mend hearts, to be on the mend, to mend one's ways.

² The Sarr and Savoy report represents a more widely mediatized political intervention in longer debates, on which see de L'Estoile (2007), Mensah et al. (2007), Modest and Mears (2012), and recently Hicks (2020).

What goes into these different forms of labour and temporalities is often ‘care’ - for things and the people involved (de Laet and Mol 2000, Mol et al. 2010, Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). This then emphasises the material fragility and the ongoing process of deterioration in which objects find themselves (Anand et al. 2018, Denis and Pontille 2015). Materially, the incremental nature of mending described above is then often revealed through the cracks and traces of repair inscribed in the object or situation and the ambiguities that come with it, whether in specific artefacts or in human and environmental ecologies and lives. For example, exhibitions of repaired ethnographic artefacts at the Pitt Rivers and the Museum of the Quai Branly demonstrate how the reparation of broken artefacts, mundane or ritual, results in visible scars.³ These, in turn, become traces, objects in their own right, that accrue meaning and narrative as exemplified in the work by French-Algerian artist Kader Attia.⁴ By opening the discussion on the durability and vulnerability of materials and relations and the lasting pain that becomes part of the object or life, it also points to the often imperfect and sometimes temporary nature of mending practices. Looking at the rough texture of mud-walls that have been continuously smeared, the visible repairs of baskets and bowls, or the patchwork resulting from textiles stitched together, allows us to explore the relationship between on-going and open-ended repair and mending as restoration and stabilization, preservation or reconstitution.

The ethics of mending and repairing

Mending can also become an expression of care where the repair of objects is crucial for the functioning of the larger relations they are part of. This often challenges our age of disposable culture where broken and obsolete objects are directly replaced and encourages us to rethink our relationship to the material and ecological in the Anthropocene (DeSilvey and Ryan 2018). Going beyond a material focus on the restoration of physical degradations, it becomes then an exercise in ‘broken world thinking’ (Jackson 2014) amidst the ruins of colonialism, capitalism and socialism and an incentive to think the world differently (Martinez 2018, Mbembe 2020, Tsing 2015).

That it is a continuous process, often left unresolved, also means that it does not necessarily end once the actual mending is over for mending does not always provide a solution. This applies to broken pots and electronics, but is also for example the case when the metaphor of mending and repairing is applied to the reparation and return of looted objects: This too will always be a fragmented and incomplete project whose objective is not to revert to a previous state but rather highlights the impossibility to return to a place and time before colonialism, and the lasting need to live up to irrevocable damage. In this sense, a concept like mending might be (if unhandy) a more apposite term for the political project envisaged by Mbembe (2020) or Sarr and Savoy (2018).

Importantly, we also want to avoid representing mending as solely tinkering and the people engaging in these practices as merely unskilled workers (Mavhunga 2017: 7). This would obscure the technical, professional and technological expertise, knowledge or know-how that practices of mending and repair often require. Yet, at the same time, we want to resist romanticizing certain forms of mending which pit underrated labour against consumption and discard. Especially outside the post-industrialized West, the reasons behind certain forms of mending, repair and maintenance are more ambiguous and complex (see for example Chalfin 2019). Indeed, the chapters will also address situations and moments where people are tired of having to mend things and where repair does not to involve care or can even be antithetical to care.

Form of the book

The number and length of chapters will be adjusted according to the abstracts received and the texture might vary: Whereas some contributions can be purely narrative and text, others can take a more image-

³ <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/en/exhibitions-and-events/at-the-museum/exhibitions/event-details/e/objets-blesses-36621/> and <https://pittrivers-object.blogspot.com/2015/05/temporary-exhibition-preserving-what-is.html>.

⁴ Interview with Kader Attia by Gabriele Sassone (2018), “Conversations: Injury and Repair: Kader Attia”, Mousse Magazine, online: <http://moussemagazine.it/injury-and-repair-kader-attia-2018/>, <https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2012/kader-attia-documenta>.

based or curated form, alternating throughout the book. Yet, we suggest that each chapter takes its point of departure in a material object, assemblage, substance or presence. Please send an abstract of max 300 words and max 5 photos to charline.kopf@sai.uio.no by 15 January 2021.

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