

INTRODUCTION

FOR AN ETHNOGRAPHIC MICROHISTORY THROUGH RUINS



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Blind Spot or Epiphanies

While composing this edited volume,¹ we watched the German film *Blind Spot* (*Die Reise nach Lyon*, by Claudia von Alemann, 1981). We realized, as if in an epiphany, that it condenses many images and suggestions that came to mind when we had initially thought about the meaningfulness of dedicating an ethnographic endeavour to ruination. The protagonist of *Blind Spot*, Elizabeth, is a young historian who has left her husband and young child to try and understand the life of the feminist and socialist writer Flora Tristan. In particular, Elizabeth wants to grasp Flora's experience of Lyon, a city the writer mentioned in *Tour de France. Journal 1843–1844*, forging a new historiographical method.

After many scenes where we follow Elizabeth walking along Lyon's streets with a tape recorder and reading Flora Tristan's work while eating at a brasserie, we can glimpse Elizabeth's research goals at the beginning of the film's second half. Sitting in a French scholar's office, Elizabeth answers the latter's questions about her research. She shows the scholar her tape recorder and switches it on: recorded footsteps and sounds of her walking in Lyon are the material through which Elizabeth develops her research.

'What are you really looking for?'

'To imagine what she heard and saw, what she smelled, the colours, sounds and all that in Lyon, this city where she stayed so long. I am repeating her journey. My library and archive research are not enough for me'.

The scholar, a spectacled man in his fifties, considers that trying to sympathize with a historical character is challenging and not particularly historiographic in nature: identification and, therefore, the possibility that the historian is biased by her subjectivity, is a high risk. He continues: 'By means of the documents of the past and its people, the historian's effort is to erase himself behind the people he finds letting them speak.' However, Elizabeth thinks that history needs a deeper understanding of historical sources: 'I wonder if identifying with the pain, the suffering, the emotions of the women in the past can be transformed into action. Otherwise, it just remains passive understanding'. Dedicating an ethnographic volume to past ruins aims to show that, in accordance with Elizabeth's words, there exists a way of knowing the past that is embodied and deeply connects present and future projections.

At the end of the film, Elizabeth's identification with Flora becomes a form of incorporation, possession. She gets up abruptly at night and starts to vomit. In another scene, she enters the bathtub, rinses herself and then starts chanting a song whose lyrics represent an attempt to regain her own body ('take my body to me'). She becomes the vessel of Tristan's presence to the point of losing her subjectivity, like a modern medium. This book interrogates situations in which the past haunts the present.

Blind Spot is a film on presence, incarnation and traces, too. In her peregrinations, Elizabeth touches street fences and cemetery tombs and wears out her shoes by stepping on poorly paved streets. Touching and walking are the means through which Elizabeth can sense Tristan's presence. Reveries, emotional flashbacks and uncanny feelings are the signs that the past is talking through what remains of Lyon in Tristan's times. Tristan is present and, yet, absent from the scene and Elizabeth perceives her flesh whilst, at some point, feeling like somebody else. Materials and bodies reveal and conceal stories and lives from other times and spaces. Their complex assemblages determine heterogeneous atmospheres and affects. Valentina Napolitano (2015: 60) states, 'A trace animates a space between the flesh and the environment through condensations and negations of histories'. Lyon's outskirts are 'a material reminder' of Tristan and engaging with them means being part of 'affective circulations' (Napolitano 2015: 52).

This book interrogates how past traces suddenly reveal their presence through temporal disruptions and epiphanic flashes and how they lean on the background, creating an unconscious sense of past persistence. Like the protagonist of *Blind Spot*, this book shows that the past haunts the present and transforms it. In this book, haunting is taken to be a phenomenon both embodied and material together, as we argue in the following sections. As in a metamorphic process as experienced by Elizabeth, the past crosses the present, producing action. This crossing is materially visible and experienced

through material means, ruins. Actions and responses triggered by the past's crossings are not just the mirroring of the present and deep understanding (in the meaning of *Verstehen*) but also contain a future of possibilities oriented by past traumas and failures. How does Tristan's pain teach Elizabeth to move on as a feminist scholar? What can we learn, as anthropologists, from ruined landscapes? With this book, we want to approach a nonteleological perspective on time in which ethnography crucially determines and shapes the analysis of specific past traces, those of ruins.

Haunting Ruins: A Definition and a Microhistory

The title of this book, *Haunting Ruins*, encapsulates our reflections on the existing debate on hauntology and, more specifically, anthropological studies on hauntology. Our emphasis lies on elucidating the material manifestation of the past's impacts on the present and how those past influences can be grasped through haunting.

Hauntology, initially defined by Jacques Derrida in his *Specters of Marx* (Derrida 2012), usually refers to the persistence of elements of the social, cultural and political past in the present. The perception of this persistence by human subjects as 'out of joint' (Derrida 2012: 21) from the present, as an uncanny disturbance, defines its ghostly nature. After Derrida, scholars in various fields of human science, spanning from sociology (Gordon 2008) to psychoanalysis (Corin 2020), have elaborated on the concept of hauntology, showing how Derrida's metaphorical and textual dimension of hauntology does not consider its ontological and relational (Hollan 2020) nature. According to these scholars, the past haunts the present, which is always related to someone. It manifests as a repressed, residual experience that lingers in the present in silence and out of interpretation. Like the Freudian uncanny, hauntology refers to past experiences deeply embodied and felt in present moments as simultaneously strange and proximal. In Corin's (2020: 444) words: 'a nucleus of experience inhabiting . . . as a dumb shadow'. As such, the scholarly corpus on hauntology usually refers to a traumatic past in which structures of inequalities, power abuses and governmentality are in continuity with the present (Gordon 2008).

Anthropological studies on hauntology, as argued in a retrospective analysis of the ethnographic corpus elaborated in the last two decades (Good et al. 2022), have emphasized the existential and experiential condition of being haunted, showing how haunting is an affective structure or nucleus. A clear example of haunting as emerging in ethnographic analysis is offered by the study of Carol Kidron (2009) on Holocaust survivors' descendants. The latter cannot provide a memory of their parents' experience of the

Holocaust as conventionally conceptualized by historical research. The holocaust is perceptually known by how their parents shaped domestic life and habits, such as adopting a zero-waste approach to food consumption or utilizing spoons they had crafted for surviving in the extermination camps to feed their children. A traumatic past, in other words, is not a significant disruption with present daily life but acquires a latent ontology or presence (Kleinberg 2017).

In the affective nucleus of haunting, we can observe that people must confront either troubling memories that appear as quasi-realities and intrude in present consciousness to the extent of being inter-generationally and somatically passed, or spectral presences that are ontologically perceived as distinct and codified within the local religious, social and cultural system (i.e. ancestors' angry ghosts; see Lincoln and Lincoln 2015). Our interpretation of the hauntology concept partly expands and differs from this scholarly corpus.

Our understanding of haunting extends beyond the traumatic or ghostly boundaries defined by the literature. Certainly, the case studies in the chapters of this book mostly offer an analysis of troubling memories. In the case of the fifth chapter, we have haunting presences both in terms of spectres' presences as conceived by Chinese folk religion and troubled memories that intersect with these presences.

However, there are also chapters in which the haunting, as classically framed, is more nuanced. Haunting presences do not necessarily occur for traumatic pasts only. However, they can be triggered when the present material landscape is perceived as corrupt, in ruins and no longer cherished, rather than being wounded or destroyed. Past hauntings, therefore, can speak of subjects' desire for a return to an uncorrupted past, which is not shaped by present precarity (both social and material), as in the case of the third chapter centred on an analysis of urban renewal in New Taipei City. The past haunts imperceptibly, leaving a sense of disconnection that is skillfully crafted to legitimize a current state of affairs, as in the case of the seventh chapter on how ancient Soba's ruins are reassembled in contemporary buildings to claim a glorious past, still shining through the present. The past can also haunt in order to protect the local cultural heritage from the exploitation of the Authorized Heritage Discourse (Smith 2006), as in the case of the sixth chapter, where the *paepae* is left decayed unnoticed in the forest to protect local knowledge from colonial exploitation.

Haunting must capture a broader dimension in which the disjointed past is made present as a crystallized moment with which subjects deal in daily life. In such a wider understanding of haunting, we want to propose more complex historiographic methods that consider materiality and human re-interpretations of the past and are not simply objective renderings of histo-

riographic facts, as Espírito Santo (2023) pointed out. As further explored in this introduction, the specific material features of ruins are particularly apt in showing the plasticity (Espírito Santo 2023: 12–13) of haunting and its dependence on material mediations for crossing the present. The importance of the material medium in making present the absent has a long and prolific tradition in the anthropology of religion (Meyer 2013, 2014; Morgan 2021), showing how spiritual presences, including ghosts, are felt as tangible through embodied responses. We extend these reflections from spiritual presences to presences of the past. The past haunts the present because *it is made present* by material means. We continue the debate on the anthropology of hauntology (Good et al. 2022) accounting for a materially mediated affective structure that is also part of heritage practices. As we frame it, hauntology enriches historiography, showing the need for living histories and microscale historiographies that intersect with single subjects' relationships with past traces.

Conventional historical analysis (through archival research) is limited and full of blind spots, as it cannot recover living experiences as they unfolded, only partial and biased bits – accounts realized by bureaucratic elites or literary fragments amended from daily life's deepness – as clearly stated by Elizabeth. Instead, living histories can be provided inferentially from historical sources and present experiences of past persistence.

Carlo Ginzburg's (1993) methodological statement of a microhistory is well known. According to Ginzburg, microhistory starts by considering smaller-scale cases, such as the biographies of single characters from subaltern classes or not abundantly recorded as crucial participants of grand-scale events. A single life's journey can reveal how the most significant historical events, as well as socio-cultural beliefs and structures, were effective and impacted single subjects on an existential level, shaping their habitus. Small details and the meticulous comparison between local and broader archival sources can guide historians in reconstructing past lives that, without a microhistorical approach, would just be summarized by a number on a census or a trial transcription.

However, our adoption of ethnography as an essential guide in analysing past remnants adds a new layer to Ginzburg's microhistory. As Espírito Santo (2023: 35) claims, ethnographic microhistory shows social practices as temporal trajectories or histories-in-becoming. Ethnography looks at living forms of being following their daily progression. Thus, ethnography unravels forms of knowing the past that do not coincide with a transfer of facts and narrative between generations but are sensuous, embodied and perceptual. As such, ethnography cannot account for a historical chain of time ages but, instead, for specific experiences of time that have aura and are multiple, incarnated. Temporality, materiality, bodies and social imagery

are related in a triangular knot (Dawdy 2016) that varies according to the context.

As we have seen so far, ethnographies on how the past is known and experienced, what Elizabeth would term ‘active understanding’, unravel how the past viscerally haunts the present, making itself perceptible but without being articulated or explicable, deeply stratified in daily life.² In this perspective, the material remains of the past are deeply stratified as well, being subjected to atmospheric erosion and tears from usage. According to ethnographic microhistory, material artefacts and architecture must conserve the material decompositions and functionalization as a counter-monumental form of knowledge of the past (DeSilvey 2006, 2012, 2017; Sandler 2016; Grunfeld 2022).

Our relationship with the past is, however, dual and contradictory. The past is a trace of a historical event that must be preserved and transmitted by collective memory and an uncontrollable becoming emerging from daily life and relationally produced and affected. Ruins, in particular, exemplify our ambiguous engagement with the past, being both a past’s root and a relational discharge of emotional forces that affect and are affected by people (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 14).

Historically, ruins in Europe were past traces that acquired present values for nation building and, as such, must be preserved. Through preservation, though, ruins ceased to be transient and, in metamorphosis, a past shaped and corrupted by the passing of time became a fetish of the past (Edensor 2005). Ruins’ decomposition must be controlled and arranged according to aesthetically pleasing shapes and atmospheres, alluding to a past whose metamorphosis is arrested for the sake of the present. Ruins, conceived and managed as such, were commodified through paintings, postcards, photography or inserted within heritage sites (Stewart 2020). Therefore, there was a process of selection between various valuable ruins, whose meaning and preservation were helpful for the nation’s sake and derelict ruins, whose material traces evoked past failures, disruption and discard. Heritagized ruins can also result from the annihilation and waste of specific pasts and ways of life. As poignantly observed by Gordillo (2014), who quotes Taussig, Machu-Picchu’s ruins were crafted and shaped as archaeological relics by the sweat and blood of indigenous workers exploited by Spanish colonial archaeological missions.

The doubleness and ambiguity of the term ruin, reminding of something either fragile that must be preserved for the community’s sake or wasted, is maintained in the vocabulary. If one looks at the definition of ruin as provided by the Cambridge English Dictionary, ruin is ‘the process or state of being spoiled or destroyed’, ‘a situation in which a person or company has lost all their money or their reputation’, ‘the broken parts that are left

of an ancient building or town', 'the broken parts that are left of a building or town that has been destroyed by bombs, fire, etc.'. These definitions establish a break between the past and the present. On the one hand, the past is left in the present for its current needs. On the other hand, ruin is a wound that signals that the past wealth and positive features are no longer available. Ruins exist as trauma has occurred. The conceptual framework under which ruins are commonly perceived, especially within the context of heritage and memory, presupposes, therefore, a linear temporality, where past, present and future follow one another and interact with each other only in a passive way. The past in the present and the present in the future are completed and usable by current needs without exerting agency.

Our proposed ethnographically informed historiographic methods offer a fresh perspective on ruins, presenting them not as passive remnants of the past, but as active agents that continue to shape the present. This novel approach is based on our understanding of ruins as complex assemblages, where past hauntings, materiality, socio-political framework, subjective interpretations, and perceptions are intricately intertwined. By adopting the concept of assemblage, a key feature of the 'material turn' in human sciences (Latour 2005; Bennet 2010; Hazard 2013; Lancione 2016; De Landa 2006), we highlight the network of interdependencies that characterizes the phenomenon of haunting ruins. This network includes both human and non-human material and immaterial elements, all of which have equal agentic capacities and ontological properties.

Viewing ruins as complex assemblages also has practical implications, as it allows us to understand how their haunting can change depending on the relationships within the assemblage. In our interpretation of ruin assemblages, Lefebvre's insight into rhythmic assemblages is particularly useful. In his critique of *longue durée*, Lefebvre advocated for a study of time and changes that are not abstract but tangible, examining how temporal presences 'intervene in the every day' (Lefebvre 2004: 26) rather than being temporal finished products. Rhythm, since it is 'a vibration before becoming sense's sensory action' (Ikoniadou 2014: 13), is a fitting term to capture the temporal forces at play when engaging with ruins. Subjects may not articulate these temporal forces of ruins within a theory of time. As the following chapters demonstrate, not every ethnography described has addressed time perceptions. What is consistent throughout the chapters is that subjects are influenced by ruins' temporal forces, by their hauntings and future projections and experience embodied reactions, creative impulses, traumatic memories or regrets towards a 'before' that is no longer there. In our perspective, rhythmic assemblages should be seen as processes in which we can observe ambiguous relationships with the past's material remains that are still in use.

As rhythmic assemblages, ruins are also crossed by moral and political forces that turn them into heritage specimens, collective *lieux de mémoire* or discharged items that can be left rotting or reused for purposes other than memorialization. How each ethnographic context morally manages ruins as cherished relics or filthy abjectness can also make foreseeable future evolutions, where past affordances still haunt. To make this previous statement more straightforward to readers, we take the example of a deconsecrated church as offered by Beekers (2016). Although Dutch churches are no longer used as ritual spaces and have lost any sacred agency, material remnants, such as the mark of incense on their walls or a mosaic representing the cross, remind them of their sacred past, making their contemporary and future usages controversial. Deconsecrated churches are usually converted into libraries or social spaces for community gatherings. They are rarely transformed into nightclubs or dance studios as these would be seen as inappropriate destinations of usage for their past functions, unless their sacred traces are wholly erased. Beekers (2016) calls this persistence of the 'sacred residue'. The past in ruins plays a similar residual function that still conditions subsequent practices and usages.

To conclude this section, we want to return to Elizabeth's possession of Tristan's past experience. Ruins materially suggest the presence of a past experience. As in the case of Lyon's streets, ruins are the material channels through which past presences and occasional engagement with people's bodies are made. As such, ruins reveal the importance of an ethnographic microhistory for understanding and, possibly, foreseeing the living conditions of being. Inserting our endeavour within the theoretical framework of ethnographic microhistory and defining ruins as a dialectical tension between heritage commodification and fetishism on the one hand and living, counter monumental, visceral and perceptual experience on the other, we now guide readers to an ethnographic methodology for researching about ruins.

Ethnographies of Ruins

This book's chapters serve as valuable ethnographic portraits, guiding readers to explore ruined contexts in geographically distant and heterogeneous locations. However, within these diverse settings, there is a common thread – an ambiance resonating with the 'family resemblance' inherent in spaces undergoing processes of ruination and decay. Of course, the authors adopted different methodologies, but all the research's results stemmed from extensive and in-depth fieldwork experiences. Throughout these endeavours, ethnographers maintain close proximity to the ruins they describe and the

subjects who inhabit, frequent or transform these ruined spaces. Indeed, this was our criteria for selecting contributions: we were looking for ethnographies that arise directly from fieldwork and using them as a starting point to engage with ruination theory, thereby contributing to developing its epistemological framework. With this approach, we aimed to underscore the centrality of fieldwork in anthropology. As noted by Sherry Ortner, 'Whatever else an ethnographic study may include – archival research, questionnaires, interviews, textual investigations (from comic books to sacred books) and more – long-term participant observation is its irreducible minimum' (Ortner 1997: 61). Furthermore, the chapters in this volume demonstrate how fieldwork is crucial not only when investigating the present but also when the subject of our interest encompasses the past and its material manifestations. How, then, does one navigate the field when aiming to produce an ethnographic microhistory of contexts in ruin?

Scales. First and foremost, the ethnographer must bring into focus his or her gaze and positionality by beginning with a reduction in scale, both spatially and temporally. The very definition of micro-history implies a deliberate selection of circumscribed and localized research objects and subjects. It does not necessarily involve an extreme micro-scale reduction, characteristic of postmodern interpretive practices, which, as Handelman (2005) cautions, risks producing an 'atemporal microhistory' and consequent partial depoliticization of our ethnographic accounts. Carr and Lampert (2016) highlight how the scales chosen for our analysis of contexts, as well as the scales produced and experienced by our interlocutors in the field, are never given or neutral. Observation scales are indeed practices and processes, inherently political: 'scales are ways of seeing and standing in the world, and as such, they are also instruments for political, ritual, professional, and everyday action' (Carr and Lampert 2016: 10). Distancing oneself from a solely macro-social approach and choosing to consider biographical trajectories, family events and life histories of social actors allows for a 'scale play' (Revel 1996) that leads to an analysis where the 'micro, macro, and agency' (Fenske 2007) of subjects and objects involved in our research intersect for a better understanding of local and global relationships within ruination contexts. Jean and John Comaroff (2003) suggest that scale issues are the key challenge in ethnography. They propose attempting to practise ethnography on an 'awkward scale', articulating the complexity of the local with that of the global. According to them, it is not just about avoiding the dissolution of the local into the global; the real challenge is 'to establish an anthropology-for-the-present on an ethnographic base that dissolves the *a priori* breach between theory and method: an anthropology, of multiple dimensions, that seeks to explain the manner in which the local and the translocal construct each other, producing at once difference and sameness, conjuncture and

disjuncture' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003: 172). Indeed, as Gavin Smith (2014) reminds us, spatial scales are always closely tied to temporal scales. Therefore, the focus on social practices intertwining between the local and the global is intricately connected to studying temporal trajectories and historicities entangled in the subjects and objects intersecting in our field research. This is even more pronounced when analysing the relationship with ruins, which, as we have seen, themselves generate temporality and historicity.

Historicity. Hirsh and Stewart (2005: 262) define historicity as 'the manner in which persons operating under the constraints of social ideologies make sense of the past, while anticipating the future', but more importantly as 'a dynamic social situation open to ethnographic investigation'. The historicity embedded in research objects is contextual, depending on the questions and needs of the present – and in the present it can and should be investigated. Ethnography can assist in revealing continuously changing experienced historicities and their effects on daily politics and practices. Laura Bear (2016: 448) emphasizes how 'ethnography has challenged the existence of a single chronopolitics of speed or time scarcity'. In his ethnographic account of the 'slow violence' experienced by residents of a village in rural Russia, Alexander Vorbrugg (2022: 456) observes: 'Villagers in this study often pointed to the ruins of buildings and infrastructures around them to make sense of the complex temporalities of slow loss and decay. They employed ruins as 'trans-temporal hinges', as heuristic devices that allow us to connect phenomena across time, to create links to a vanished past that remains relevant, and to map complex timescapes'. Observing the interaction of local actors with ruins and their usage in constructing their sense of space, time and historicity is valuable for ethnographers aiming to understand the impact of ruination processes on the communities involved in their research fieldwork. This involves capturing the stratification of temporalities in an 'uncanny present' (Bryant 2016) where past and future delineate themselves as horizons of meaning and starting points for action. The past, as noted by Sharon Macdonald (2013: 79), 'is not only discussed and thought about; it is also materialized in bodies, things, buildings, and places'. This leads us to discussions, increasingly entrenched in anthropological studies, on the embodied, emplaced, sensory, material and affective aspects of human experience.

Being There. Besides serving as sites for projecting one's sense of historicity, ruined places are primarily characterized by their materiality. As mentioned above, they are objects marked by an incomplete, often uncanny and haunted materiality. The 'sacred' dimension of some ruined landscapes also prompts consideration of reflections within the 'ontological turn' (Viveiros de Castro 1998), particularly the well-established 'material turn' (Henare et al. 2007) prominent in studies of religions (Hazard 2013). This turn identi-

fies an agency that enables matter to be an active producer of transcendence and meaning, as well as an active actor in social relationships. Ethnographers observe and practise proximity with ruins, recognizing them as ‘not inert material expressions of politically deployed languages of belonging and authority, but rather are active and affective in complex ways, so we should envisage historical, material, and conceptual proximities as involving active, changing engagements between peoples, things, epistemologies, and even ontologies’ (Fontein 2011: 722). For ethnographers, exploring ruins with their bodies and analysing both the discourses produced around the ruins and the somatic effects of frequenting them often comes naturally. The sensations produced by ruined landscapes can be apprehended by the ethnographer only through ‘walking among the ruins’ (Edensor 2016) and directing their ‘somatic modes of attention’ (Csordas 1993) toward the incorporation of a ‘subjective experience of ruins’ (Dobraszczyk 2017: 15). This incorporation intertwines with the researcher’s accumulated experiences during the time spent on the field. The anthropologist’s fieldwork, typically involving full immersion in a local context, generates unique knowledge modes. The Italian anthropologist Leonardo Piasere (2002), reflecting on methodological practices for every ‘imperfect ethnographer’ engaged in fieldwork, identifies two modes of being on the field that we find useful to recall here. Drawing on Olivier de Sardan’s (1995) reflections on systematically combining interaction, observation and ‘impregnation’ (the involuntary recording of information and sensations that constitutes the peculiarity of ethnographic fieldwork) and Unni Wikan’s (1992) concepts of resonance and empathy, Piasere suggests thinking of knowledge acquired on the field as something gained through ‘impregnating resonance’ (Piasere 2002: 164) when intentionally and consciously curving the experience (i.e. moving away from the familiar to explore unknown fields). To describe this mode of knowledge, Piasere employs the neologism ‘perduction’, referring to ‘understanding through frequentation’ (Piasere 2002: 56). This seems the most apt way to describe the fieldwork methodology emerging from the chapters in this book. The intimacy cultivated in the field with local actors through constant interaction and the repetition of solitary or collective visits to the ruins under investigation is central in all the experiences documented by the authors. An essential element that emerges from frequenting ruins is a constant perception of haunting. As aptly described by Laura Bear (2007: 55), ‘every ruin (or place) must have its ghost, and that ghost proves the irrefutable connection between the past and the present as a physical experience’.

Memory and Heritage. The spectres haunting ruins take a specific form: they are the ‘ghosts of memory’ (Carsten 2007). The framework of memory is polysemic, constituting simultaneously a perspective, a method and a field

of investigation. Historicity and temporality often (though not always, and not necessarily) involve forms of memory linked to spaces. This is especially true for places in ruins: memories of landscapes as they were before the processes of ruination and decay; memories of the people who inhabited them (or even died there); memories of futures envisioned and projected onto those spaces before ruination transformed them and much more. A microhistorical ethnography of ruins thus captures in the narrative forms of memory, commemorative practices and somatic expressions of memories a privileged means of initiating a critical analysis of how the past is used in the present and of connections that this process has with spaces and materiality. Memory serves a hermeneutic function; the interpretation of past events occurs in the present based on memory forms. Even in studying memories, we can engage in scaling exercises. In our fieldwork, we encounter autobiographical memories, family memories, as well as memories shared by broader social groups. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) referred to the latter as 'collective memory'. Italian anthropologist Francesca Cappelletto highlights how, compared to 'collective memory', the working concept of 'group memory' is more useful for ethnographers. Indeed, the concept of 'group' incorporates the notion of intersubjectivity: 'while the notion of collective is abstract, the intersubjective, it is argued, is incorporated: 'incorporated memories' are the plurality of those particular memories which make a social time-space into something familiar' (Cappelletto 2005: 10). Intersubjective relations and the re-actualization of the past through collective remembering and storytelling allow individuals to produce a memory that does not align with precise records of past events or the evocation of unrelated individual life trajectories. An analysis leading the ethnographer from personal stories to public memories must, therefore, involve a deep understanding of the intersubjective dynamics underpinning these memories. Of course, the construction of public memories is not merely a bottom-up process; it often takes on a top-down imposition. This is particularly evident in the heritage policies regarding spaces, including ruined ones. Ruins are often part of that 'difficult heritage' (Macdonald 2009), uncanny materiality that haunts our present and narratives of the past – but national public memory policies do not admit to the dimension of decay. Observing how ruins are handled, 'cleaned', endowed with meanings to consider them as 'national' or 'common' heritage, and thus as objects useful for identity politics, is helpful for the ethnographer to understand the interplay between local and translocal power dynamics. As we will see in this book's chapters, national policies do not always act undisturbed on ruined spaces. Ruins open a dialogical space between institutional politics of memory as well as grassroots claims on the past that can work in synergy or, conversely, in conflict with each other. This is evident, for example, in the heritage policies about disaster

ruins, where the intimate memorialization needs of survivors often clash with the desire to promote official and monumental narratives for tourism purposes (Le Mentec and Zhang 2017).

Ruins are not merely material remaining, but also resistant, counter-hegemonic thoughts to venture the future otherwise. Fieldwork allows us to reflect on possible ways to think ruins and difficult traces of the past beyond the Western-centric categories of the abject and the residual, in favour of a resilient and counter-hegemonic perspective in which ruined worlds can be generative of something new (DeSilvey 2017; Martínez 2018).

A Brief Description of the Book

This volume presents different ethnographies that combine distant and nearby contexts and places, providing heterogeneous pictures of ruined spaces. These narratives explore the ways in which subjects and communities engage with ruins, encompassing their inhabitation, avoidance, heritagization, and emotional and practical experiences within these environments, often embedded with cultural and religious significance. Our endeavour does not seek to draw direct comparisons, but rather aims to foster a dialogue between chapters that elucidates similarities and differences arising from diverse fieldwork conducted within contexts marked by ruination and decay.

The book starts with the section entitled ‘Ethnographic Lenses for Ruination’, which consists of two chapters in which ethnography is explored as a methodological tool for articulating new ways of understanding temporalities and the relationships between people and spaces. The first chapter, written by Francesco Danesi della Sala, delves into the temporal and political affordances responsible for the vanishing of both habitats and local livelihoods. His ethnography unveils conflicting temporalities in which Po River Delta (Italy) is, at the same time, a space in which pre-industrial life cohabits with the industrial boom and its aftermath. How the Po River Delta appears now is a series of temporal retentions and political interventions in the landscape that have corresponded to processes of marginalization of specific areas and people. Through his ethnography, Danesi della Sala suggests that Po River Delta’s ruination leads to a critical rewriting of historical processes, revealing their deep, stratified consequences, particularly failures and marginalization and how different temporalities ‘bite back’, subverting any temporal teleological sequence.

Katiana Le Mentec’s chapter, on the other hand, shows the potentialities of ethnography in understanding embodied perceptions and engagements with spaces that a specific community or group of people considers to be

affected through transformation or destruction. She calls the different entanglements and engagements between spaces and people ‘anthropotopia’. Through the ethnographic case of the Three Gorges Dam Reservoir (China), she demonstrates the sheer variety of anthropotopias involved within the same ruined landscape.

Therefore, both Danesi della Sala and Le Mentec call readers’ attention to the multiple temporal and perceptual forces that ruins involve and how ethnographic methods can disclose their complexity and multivocality by maintaining their diversity and contradictions. The latter inspires an active understanding of ruination by transforming past hauntings into action – to rephrase the words of *Blind Spot*’s heroine.

The following chapters describe some traits of ruination that emerged through different fieldwork sites. Understanding, through Danesi della Sala and Le Mentec’s insights, that temporalities and emotions are stratified and contradictory, the other authors retrace temporal and emotional reverberations from different perspectives. Taking the chapters as a whole, they highlight some central nodes of ruination. We must warn readers that this portrait of ruination cannot be exhaustive and complete, given the potentially infinite dynamics that the assemblage between materiality and people entails, as already emphasized by other anthropologists (Severi 2018). However, the conceptual knots readers can find in each chapter guide them in making sense of ruins from an anthropological perspective, leaving space for other research that can and must be conducted within a contemporary world that is falling apart. How are ruins useful for our anthropological endeavours in making the world plural?

The second section of this book, ‘Hauntings’, focuses on the existential, moral and perceptual consequences of engaging with ruins on a subjective and collective level. The section comprises three chapters. The first, crafted by Valentina Gamberi, offers a micro-scale anthropotopia with an ethnography of fieldwork female friends engaging with ruins as a way through which to make sense of their personal life trajectories and social bonds with other residents in the district of Xinzhuang, New Taipei City (Taiwan). Engaging with ruins rediscovers and acknowledges collective and family traumas connected with rampant industrialization, neoliberalism and urban renewals: residents are haunted and alienated by skyscrapers, building speculations and demolitions. Yet ruins are also the material through which female residents can build new forms of solidarity and regain and reclaim aspects of their childhood and adolescence that they had lost during their professional affirmation. Gamberi captured, through her ethnography, the moment in which her female friends reappropriated the narrative of their life and family stories without a planned project of political action or heritagization.

Moving from the subjective transformations through engaging with ruins to the collective dimension, readers can see how moral and political dynamics become more prevalent in dealing with ruins, especially if they result from disasters or political violence. How is the perception of time, space and historicity affected in contexts of violence, trauma and dissonant memories? Chiara Calzana and Fang-I Chu's chapters show how ruins trigger both resistance and a sense of the contagious, filthy and abject. Creative and disordering forces are co-present in ruins and can be collectively managed. Chiara Calzana, in her ethnography on the remembrance of the Vajont Dam disaster (northern Italy), in which 1,917 people lost their lives in 1963, claims, quoting Primo Levi, the value of ruins as a means of resistance of survivors to political manipulation and oblivion. As already noted by Danesi della Sala, ruins are often produced as the result of marginalization. Political goals determine who and what can be ruined and where ruins can be left. The Vajont Dam case highlights how in the past political elites deliberately shaped the memory of the disaster as a 'natural tragedy' rather than the result of political, environmental and capitalist greed and failures. Shaping a narrative on the Vajont Dam disaster that relieves the responsibility of politicians and entrepreneurs has been accompanied by the neglect of the scattered tragedy's material ruins and by a specific politics of monumentalization connected to the attempt of 'touristification' of disaster memory. Survivors and ruins' duress, however, offer a counteraltar to political manipulations of the past. Continuing to remember the deceased and villages in ruins through personalized mourning and counterpreservation are forms of resistance and accountability. In this case, the past must haunt the present, bringing responsibilities to the fore.

Fang-I Chu's ethnography of the Thirteen Squadron's cemetery of the political prison complex on Green Island (Taiwan) shows the other side of the coin involved in the ruined landscape. As Navaro-Yashin (2009) before her, Chu claims that engaging with remnants of a violent past entails a sense of guilt and abjectness that can significantly disrupt the lives of those residing around the ruined landscape. The abject is rephrased in this case according to Chinese folk religious lenses as filthy and contagious. The White Terror's victims are angry ghosts that take revenge on living people and, therefore, demand a series of rituals and interdictions to appease them and prevent them from disrupting daily life on Green Island.

The last section of this book, 'Curating Ruins', reflects on how emotions, forms of engagement and remembrance examined on a subjective and collective dimension affect forms of contemporary heritagization of ruins. Giacomo Nericì's ethnography on the heritagization of the *paepae* (stone house foundation) in the Marquesas Islands (French Polynesia) extends what Chu examined as filthy and contagious in Green Island. According to

the Marquesan, past ruins emanate ancestors' force or *mana* that is intimate and secret. Sharing ruins with others external from the ancestors' kinship is considered dangerous, due to the unknown power embodied by the ruins. Consequently, ruins must be abandoned in secret forest areas, preventing past forces from being shared with and appropriated by others. In a land that experienced colonial violence through missionaries' conversions, allowing ancestors' ruins to rot is a form of resistance and local agency.

Maciej Kurcz, on the other hand, shows how Soba's ruins (Sudan) are appropriated, literally incorporated in recent past and contemporary architecture as a way through which to politically legitimize the new Soba and celebrate past Soba as the cradle of the social and cultural values of Soba's inhabitants. Ruins, in this case, act as socio-cultural glues for the present and future community's expectations and plans, making the past intimately embedded with the present.

Francisco Martínez's afterword takes readers on the initial considerations of this introduction, namely the temporal dimension of ruins. In particular, he elaborates on Gavin Lucas's (2013) concept of different speeds of ruins. The multiple and contradictory rhythms, speeds and temporalities embedded by ruins and ruined assemblages demand anthropologists understand, through ethnography, how people can benefit from certain temporal innuendos, shaping a series of possibilities that transgress simple binarisms such as fetishized preservation and traumatic repetitions.

The chapters of this book dialogue with each other on many topics. The first, as we have seen, is certainly the relationship between materiality and temporality: time affects ruined matter, but ruined matter itself produces a new temporality, and is a medium for memory and for thinking about the past. This is evident in all the chapters, from the ruined industrial landscape on the Po River Delta and the archeological ruins of ancient Soba – a matter that embodies a grandiose past now lost – to the material traces of disasters and a traumatic past narrated by Le Mentec and Calzana. The second fundamental issue is the relationship between ruins and processes of heritagization: in all the chapters there are questions about the value of ruins and private and collective practices, institutional or from below, aimed at avoiding or accelerating the process of ruination. Different grassroots cultural approaches to heritage also come into play: there are ruins that it is good to keep hidden and let decay, as in the case of the *paepae* in the Marquesas Islands, while there are other ruins that locals would like to bring out of oblivion and transform into common heritage, such as the ruins of the Vajont houses. However, there are also divergent institutional approaches to heritage preservation. In China, for instance, we observe a trend towards the commodification of disaster ruins for tourism purposes, albeit met with resistance from survivors. Conversely, in the case of the neighbourhoods

of old Xinzhuang in New Taipei City, as documented by Gamberi, there is ambiguity towards their gradual dissolution and the loss of associated memories, facilitated by a new urban development agenda for the city. Finally, a central part of the dialogue is the differences and similarities in the perception of ruins as haunted places. If the ruins of the prison on Green Island (Taiwan) and the ruined spaces of the disasters that Chu and Le Mentec tell us about are real angry ghosts, the Vajont Valley ruins are places of reconciliation with the souls of the dead. But the ruins are also haunted by ghosts more violent than those of the dead: on the Po River Delta and in the Vajont Valley, but also among the streets of New Taipei City, it is the ghosts of capitalism that wander, while among the old houses of Soba it is the spectre of colonialism that holds sway.

Through the dialogue between the chapters in this volume we discover how the interplay between materiality and temporality underscores the nuanced ways in which ruins serve as conduits for memory and reflection across diverse cultural and historical contexts. Moreover, the divergent approaches to heritage preservation and the multifaceted perceptions of ruins as haunted spaces illuminate the complex interrelations between past, present and future narratives embedded within these decaying landscapes.

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Notes

1. This book collects a selection of papers presented at the EASA 2022 conference panel ‘Haunting Pasts, Future Utopias: An Anthropology of Ruins’, which was convened by Valentina Gamberi and Chiara Calzana. All sections of this introduction were discussed and elaborated on together by the editors. However, Valentina Gamberi wrote the first section (corresponding to the paragraphs ‘Blind Spot or Epiphanies’ and ‘Haunting Ruins: A Definition and a Microhistory’), while Chiara Calzana the second one (‘Ethnographies of Ruins’). Valentina Gamberi and Chiara Calzana cowrote the third section (‘A Brief Description of the Book’).
2. See also Khan (2022), where even the act of breathing among several female generations in her family bears temporal legacies and affordances – cf. Stoler’s concepts of ruination and duress (Stoler 2008, 2013).

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