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Sensing, tracing, walking: phenomenological investigations of ruins and afterlives of projects

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen growing scholarship on ruins and afterlives of projects framed around a range of contexts – modernity, colonialism, infrastructure and international development. While much of this literature overlaps with phenomenological preoccupations – notably, embodied and affective interconnections between people and places – few of these studies directly engage with phenomenology. Acknowledging some scholars' discomfort with the term, we are inspired by the critical turn among phenomenological thinkers to propose a closer conversation between the two bodies of literature. Such conversation, we argue, can enrich our understanding of ruins and afterlives with further philosophical, conceptual and methodological underpinning. In particular, we draw on ethnographic fieldwork on the remains of a colonial-cum-development intervention in southern Mozambique and on methodological directions oriented around movement and walking. We thus show how, in post-project contexts, phenomenological perspectives can help to trace intimacies between humans and the more-than-human away from grand narratives and consequentialist ends, and to understand experiences of ruins as embodied, affective and embedded within specific socio-historical contexts.

Introduction

Chokwe District, southern Mozambique, is home to what was once the country's largest state-owned farm, the Complexo Agro-industrial do Limpopo (CAIL).[1] The farm, established in 1977 as a successor to a colonial project known as the Colonato de Limpopo,[2] entered decline in the 1980s, in parallel to the country's transition from socialism to neoliberal capitalism (Pitcher 2002, 103–110). Part of the expansive project was known as the Parque das Máquinas ('the machines' ground'), which, as the name suggests, was used to store and repair tractors and other agricultural machinery managed by the farm's multiple cooperatives. Located in one of the villages that hosted CAIL, the site originally consisted in a vast expanse of land where the imported machinery was housed, with an elongated structure that served as a warehouse and as a vehicle repair workshop. While the project inherited some of its machinery from its colonial predecessor, post-independence state investment

and technical cooperation with the Soviet Block brought in new equipment and technol-ogies (Hermele 1988, 51). But the state's gradual disinvestment and lack of local technical training meant that the Parque soon became more of a dumping ground than a mainte-nance station. Various attempts at salvaging the farm's machinery and reviving agricultural production, such as under a mixed-ownership seed company (SEMOC) supported by the Mozambique-Nordic Agricultural Programme (MONAP), did not bear fruit. Already in the early 1980s, newspapers began documenting the dozens of unused tractors left in the Parque as they were turning into immobile remains, exposed to the elements and suscep-tible to rust.[3] The broken-down state of the machines, however, did not render them without use. In successive years, many of them were removed from their resting place, taken away and repurposed or otherwise stripped for parts. By the 2000s, only a few were left in the abandoned Parque. Still, the site remained laced with memories and affects, and continued to command symbolic importance among Chokwe's residents.

Around that time, a European couple arrived in Chokwe, driven by the recession of the late 2000s and poor financial prospects at home.[4] Adopting an entrepreneurial stance and promising to revive some of the facilities associated with the agricultural complex, the couple was granted control over a closed-down sausage factory and stewardship over the Parque das Máquinas by local village authorities.[5] The village's inhabitants, whose children once roamed the compound hunting for treasures and whose cattle used to graze those grounds unhindered, were neither consulted nor duly informed about this land allocation. These inhabitants soon found themselves barred from entering, as the new residents erected a brick wall around the premises, with a large wire gate for the passage of livestock. Kept at bay by the taciturn newcomers, the locals felt that, contrary to their developmentalist discourse, the new owners did not improve their lives and did not look after the sites under their care. Even the Parque's new wall, which is often the object of locals' ire, soon showed signs of deterioration, and in some parts gave way entirely. The land around the walled parameters became increasingly unkempt, and locals became concerned about dangerous animals, espe-cially snakes, proliferating in the rewilding bush.

It does not take much imagination to think of the Parque das Máquinas as a 'graveyard' of sorts (Mosca 1996, 33), filled with remains that still haunt people who feel left behind by modernity and progress (Alexander and Sanchez 2019; Stewart 1996). From the country's centre of mechanised agricultural activities, it was reduced to a dumping site for the skeletal remains of rusty metal corpses. From this perspective, the ground, like the rest of the CAIL farm, is an anachronistic remnant that drifted from its intended initial use: a ruin. However, this focus on the past does not tell the full story. In recent years, a growing literature has been dedicated to reframing 'lively ruins' (Finkelstein 2019) in a range of contexts, charac-terised by acknowledgement that ruins 'can be lively despite announcements of their death' (Tsing 2015, 6) and may actually generate new economies of ruderality – from the Latin *rudus*, meaning rubble – that thrive in disturbed landscapes (Bubandt and Tsing 2018; Stoetzer 2018). Such ideas are in line with Ann Laura Stoler's (2013) terminological shift from 'ruins' to 'ruinations', emphasising the processual, forward-facing nature of unfinished his-tories and their remains.

It is in this context of 'lively ruins' that this article offers a reflection on phenomenology and its place within this growing tradition. Phenomenology normally refers to 'the scientific

study of experience' and represents attempts 'to describe human consciousness in its lived immediacy, before it is subject to theoretical elaboration or conceptual systematizing' (Jackson 1996, 2). Such scholarship is especially attentive to the inherently spatial nature of human lives: Places are not merely passive stages for our actions. As Edward Casey writes,

> The relationship between self and place is not just one of reciprocal influence […] but also, more radically, of constitutive coingredience: each is essential to the being of the other. In effect, there is no place without self and no self without place. (2001, 684)

Many contemporary scholars of ruins, traces, and afterlives show awareness of phenomenological ideas and their contribution to the generation of non-binary understanding of the embodied, interwoven intimacies between people and the tangibles and intangibles in their surroundings. Even so, surprisingly few of them allude to phenomenological ideas and terminologies. While some phenomenological ideas are subsumed into more common contemporary paradigms, notably affect theory, we are left with the question posed by Yael Navaro-Yashin, 'what goes amiss in attempts by anthropologists and scholars in associated disciplines to discard old conceptual apparatuses with the introduction of new ones' (2009, 8). In posing this question in the context of her work on ruins, Navaro-Yashin reminds us that the dynamics of ruination are not limited to delapidated structures and their attendant affects, but can also be applied to more abstract areas such as changing conceptual and theoretical currents.

While many of the above ideas may be expressed without explicit terminological recourse to phenomenology, we join other scholars in pointing to the benefit of a closer dialogue with phenomenology in the context of scholarship on ruins and afterlives (e.g. Fontein 2011, 718). As we show in the last part of this article, such closer engagement has the potential of not only enriching the scholarship on ruins and afterlives with further philosophical points of inspiration and conceptual underpinning, but also to clear the way for methodological directions. Such engagement can also facilitate bridge-building between scholarship on ruins and afterlives on the one hand, and areas that have long embraced phenomenological approaches, such as medical anthropology and anthropology of religion, on the other hand (Desjarlais and Throop 2011; Jackson 1996; Ram and Houston 2015). In the context of this special issue and its emphasis on ghost projects, we further argue that the phenomenological preoccupation with entangled, living co-presence replete with traces of the past undercuts a clear-cut view on project termination and opens new avenues for thinking about 'chrononecropolitics' (Starck 2023, 26) or the temporal pronouncement and ordering of what is alive and dead.

In turning our attention to such possible synergies, we avoid any single hegemonic conception of phenomenology and instead acknowledge the dynamic nature of the term at the hands of multiple authors over the years. It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a comprehensive survey of these additions and reinterpretations. Instead, we draw on the critical turn in contemporary phenomenology (Zigon and Throop 2023), which seems well positioned to respond to some of the concerns that social scientists long had with regard to phenomenology, as limitingly somatic, politically decontextualised, and insufficiently socially integrated. This being said, our own approach to phenomenology is open-ended and non-dogmatic in that we see phenomenology as a horizon for orientation rather than as a rigid, fully formed doctrine. Similar to Tim Ingold, whose 'home-grown phenomenology

[…] takes all kinds of liberties with the canonical texts' (Ingold 2021, 8), we draw on such writings inasmuch as they help to orient us towards the grasping of human–place entanglements around ruins and afterlives in a manner that is not forced by formal blueprints and grand narratives (Geissler 2015; Gez 2021; Lachenal 2022a; Geissler and Lachenal, 2016). Central to our perspective is the suggestion that the process of ruination is often accompanied by relaxation of top-down narratives, making room for appropriation of remains and legacies in local terms: as recognisable, dynamic, living 'places' rather than prospective, objective-driven, and manufactured 'sites' (Casey 2000, 185). Indeed, we argue that, while it may not take away from ethnographic challenges related to asymmetrical power dynamics and scholars' positionality, greater engagement with phenomenological ideas and phenomenologically inspired methods can help to recast the ends of projects through a non-reductionist, non-normative, open-ended, grassroots prism, thereby contributing to existing scholarly efforts to humanise ruins and afterlives.

The article begins with an introduction to the growing literature on ruins and afterlives, in which we inquire in particular about the extent to which this literature mobilises – or doesn't – phenomenological ideas. In the second section, we engage key critiques of phenomenological approaches, including their supposed Western bias and tendency for socio-political decontextualisation. In the third section, we consider how phenomenologically inspired methods could be brought into the study of ruins and afterlives through the intentional incorporation of motifs related to movement. In the conclusion, we bring the discussion to bear specifically on the special issue's theme of ghost projects.

Experiencing ruins and afterlives

Recent years have seen a growing body of scholarship on ruins, remains, and afterlives of interventions framed around a range of related contexts – modernity, colonialism, infrastructure projects, and development interventions. Contrary to the identification of ruins as 'bounded, self-contained, dead object, a relic of the past severed from the living geographies of the present' (Gordillo 2013, 324), the current wave of scholarship recognises ruins as vibrant and significant, tying together different temporalities, legacies and aspirations and often characterised by 'ambiguity, polysemy, and multiplicity' (Edensor 2005, 845). Rather than perceived through the prism of 'the over-and-done-with' (Edensor 2005, 829), much of this literature shies from terminologies related to 'incompletion' or 'the unachieved', instead embracing open-endedness and states of suspension (Gupta 2018). By insisting on 'a narrative that defies closure' (Lachenal 2024, 348), such perspectives take us away from a bottom-line objectives – and, oftentimes, externally assigned binaries of success versus failure – to appreciate processual, complex and often-unexpected mental and material ripples and residues, as projects 'remain, haunt and disturb landscapes, dreams and social relations in an often nebulous period of "project afterlives"' (Graan and Rommel 2024, 10).

But how to capture this ongoing vitality of the supposedly defunct, and the multiple manners in which people remain 'embroiled in the ruins which surrounded them' (Navaro-Yashin 2009, 15)? Within this literature, a strong emphasis is put on the connections between people and places, as well as on affects and on everyday somatic experiences. For example, Finkelstein (2019, 23), in her study on post-industrialisation in Mumbai, sets out

to 'capture how my informants experience the lively ruins in which they live' and emphasises affective and sensorial connections between people and (ruined) places. Much of this literature is focused on the experiences of local populations, for whom life after a project's end is often characterised by nostalgia, but also by initiative, be it related to everyday maintenance and repairs (Carse and Kneas 2019; Greven 2023; Kovač and Ramella 2023) or to reappropriation, salvage, and scrapping of remains (Khatchadourian 2022; Smith 2019). Similarly, Tousignant (2018) explores how Senegalese toxicologists 'feel' the limits of their scientific capacity – through emotive dimensions such as frustration with unfulfilled research ambitions and experiences of hope and perseverance, as well as through material objects such as broken equipment. Another example geared towards the medical sphere is presented by Geissler (2011), who examines the continuous affective power of Kenya's once-vibrant Division of Vector-Borne Diseases under the Ministry of Health. The division's post-millennial demise is experienced by its ageing workers through nostalgia for the past and frustration with present-day stasis, while also informing their future longings, desires, and aspirations. It is the potency of subject–object relationships that draw many afterlives scholars towards affect theory, as it offers a framework and language for engaging with the more ephemeral, non-discursive qualities of ruins and remains. Following Massumi's (1995) distinction between affect (as pre-cognitive intensity) and emotion (as its social qualification), anthropologists have been drawn to the ways atmospheres, moods and bodily attunements emerge in relation to decaying infrastructures, examining how they can appear as 'affectively charged' (Navaro-Yashin 2009; Stewart 1996, 2007). Scholars further explore how spatial politics correspond to an 'engineering of affect' (Thrift 2004), a process through which decaying infrastructures and ruined landscapes become orchestrators of affective experience.

While in no way uniform in approach or in its specific object of study, much of this emerging scholarship on ruins and afterlives employs a forensic language of tracing – or, less commonly, tracking or trailing (M'charek 2023) – in reference to the sedimented hints that tie humans, nature and the built environment. This notion of traces, which ties together ethnographic research with history, archeology and Science and Technology Studies (STS), emphasises how entangled material remains are with everyday contemporary realities and how, even when treated as 'residuals', 'vestiges', and even 'waste', they can be highly consequential, both historically and at present (Fouéré 2024; Geissler 2023; Napolitano 2015). The emphasis on traces thus points to an entanglement that is both spatial and temporal: Napolitano (2015, 57) considers traces as 'imprints' and 'condensations' of 'histories and reminders of different worlds' within a given place, encapsulating complex interactions between memory, forgetfulness, and the presence of the past in the present. Traces, she argues, shed light on materiality and narratives equally, and present 'at once an analytical tool and an ethnographic site for inquiry' (2015, 47), especially with regard to marginalised histories uncaptured by official narratives. Borrowing from Isabelle Stengers (2013), M'charek calls for '*an art of paying attention*, where the past and future of traces are open and where there are endless traces that could invite attention and produce multiple accounts of reality, multiple accounts of what happened' (2023, 83, emphasis in the original).

We can begin to notice certain convergences – at times, overlaps – between this line of scholarship and phenomenology. Many of the ideas evoked in this literature draw on or otherwise resonate with phenomenological conceptions of interconnectedness, immersive embodiment, and emphasis on the experiential.[6] Since Heidegger, a key element within

phenomenological approaches is conceiving of human *Dasein* (1996) – 'existence' or 'there-being' – as always and already relationally situated in a context and with others, both human and non-human.[7] This already-present intersubjectivity is one of the 'conditions of our experience', conditions that 'constitute what it is to be human in all of its vast socio-historic diversity' (Zigon and Throop 2023, 5). Such situatedness – or deeply embedded 'dwelling' – also implies, as Merleau-Ponty notes, that our existence is always embodied. The body is not merely a container for a Cartesian mind-machine but an integral facet of our situated knowledge, which is continuously deepened through embodied actions and skilful practices. Read through these premises, phenomenologists are focused less on (intellectualised) collective representations and more on 'modalities of moments of experience' (Jackson 1996, 10). Lived experience as studied by phenomenologists 'cannot be reliably inferred from the way reality is discursively constructed and cognitively represented' (Jackson 2005, 140), because the fundamental modalities of being in the world are irreducible to a Cartesian dualism.

In the context of planned projects, phenomenology calls on us to 'bracket' external, top-down scripts and to immerse in everyday experiences, rediscovering 'the strangeness of things in their phenomenality' (Trigg 2012, 18). As critics long noted, project designs risk simplifying complex realities and may end up trapping communities within fixed and final objectives while artificially setting boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Bertoncin and Pase 2017; Scott 1998). While tracing can help to tie together complex and at times incoherent multiplicities of moments and layers, phenomenological inquiry complements such an approach by recognising that knowledge does not stand 'outside' of the conditions of experience; it emerges from action rather than action being dictated by the mind or by society (Ingold 2000; Jackson 2013). As Ingold (2011, 67) notes, 'life […] does not emanate from a world that already exists, populated by objects-as-such, but is rather immanent in the very process of that world's continual generation or coming-into-being'. Ingold's key notion of 'meshwork' (Ingold 2007, 80–82; 2011, 63–94) is one attempt to portray the inseparability between individuals and their environment, using the image of a densely imbricated landscape encompassing the human and non-human, the rational and intuitive, and the internal and external.

In our own work, which focuses more specifically on ruins and afterlives of international development projects, we draw inspiration from both phenomenology and affect theory to work against the grain of formal project plans, as associated with forward-looking, utility-minded positivism. The very tension between the immediacy of experience and international development inspires a nuanced gaze outside habitual modernist mindsets and opens a space for noticing affective textures and residual attachments. Especially in post-intervention contexts, when original logics dissipate and decaying remains are no longer tethered to project objectives, such an ethnographic mindset can help to 'transform [ruins] into vitality' (Kovač and Ramella 2023, 148). Rather than tracing projects back to their grand plans, we join other scholars in attending to their ongoing, in situ concreteness and meandering legacies, as they come to overlay with myriad other interventions, actions and moments.

Geissler and Lachenal (2016, 23) note that, in researching remains, the scholar might need to match the non-intentionality of the traces with an equivalent 'passive' scholarly stance. In Chokwe, much of our knowledge about the Parque was stumbled upon spontaneously. Repeatedly passing by the erected wall of the Parque with our interlocutors, we gradually came to appreciate its significance for them. Being kept out of the walled-up premises – and

from the sausage factory, which was similarly taken over by the newcomers – evoked complex affects and experiences of exclusion. The wall, to them, was at once an aesthetic eyesore, an affront to a long-guarded spirit of a place, and an act of betrayal for the fact that the reappropriation of the sites led to no '*retorno*' – return on investment – for the benefit of the community. Attesting to the deepening cleavage between the community and the European couple, residents reported fatal road accidents due to the Parque's new wall obstructing the range of vision for cars and trucks as they turn to enter the village. Rather than being seen as 'benign markers of boundaries', the new wall came to be associated with what Barua (2024, 97) calls the 'slow violence of infrastructure', which imposes itself on space and on people's bodies.

The absent-presence of phenomenology

We began to see how the growing literature on ruins and afterlives is attentive to embodied experiences of 'being in a place', including both intimate engagement with materiality and temporal – oftentimes, affective and emotional – gaps between what was, what is and what could have been. But while such preoccupations align with phenomenological ideas, the notion of phenomenology is notably absent from this literature.[8] To understand this tension, we turn to briefly consider key critiques and discomforts with phenomenology. We engage these concerns by drawing on critical phenomenological approaches, which we suggest can help to advance useful bridges.

A key critique levelled against phenomenological approaches, which resonates with current scholarship of ruins and afterlives, relates to the decontextualisation of experience from wider social and political contexts (Desjarlais and Throop 2011, 96; Knibbe and Versteeg 2008; Zigon and Throop 2023). For example, Navaro-Yashin (2009, 9), in her study of political ruins, notes that '"assemblages" of subjects and objects must be read as specific in their politics and history'. Such political components are particularly notable in the case of the ruined and cast out, which, since the work of Walter Benjamin, is held up and scrutinised for its exposure of the excesses of modernity (Benjamin 1999; Dawdy 2010). For Benjamin, delving into the socio-political histories of objects is incommensurable with phenomenology, which is geared towards 'the presentist immediacy of experience' (Dawdy 2010, 769). Indeed, from a critical perspective, phenomenology's preoccupation with experience may appear incurably presentist and thereby ill-equipped to explore the set of historical root causes that led to the present state. As Benjamin's ideas are a key inspiration for present scholarship on ruins and afterlives, his views on phenomenology may have special resonance within this literature.

While these challenges deserve lengthy discussion (see Schnegg 2024), it suffices to say that, among critical phenomenological thinkers, the past and its sometimes-lingering offences are not simply ignored, but rather are encapsulated in a manner that brings to mind Deleuze's (1994, 77) nuancing that a scar does not speak of a 'past wound', but of 'the present fact of having been wounded'. The lingering sediments in people and the environment can teach of past actions and dynamics of power, whose consequentiality means that the political is likely to find its way to the fore. This enduring nature of the past is especially clear in Ingold's work: 'the present is not marked off from a past that it has replaced or a future that will, in turn, replace it; it rather gathers the past and future into it, like refractions in a crystal ball' (1993, 159). Attention to such 'refractions' can bring back a wider social and political context

and help to articulate a critical political stance. For example, Zigon and Throop (2023) show how contemporary phenomenology takes a more critical perspective and explore how 'human experience is not only conditioned by those conditions of experience shared by all humans across time and space (e.g. being-in-the-world, relationality, worldliness, responsivity, embodiment, etc) but also by contingent historical and social structures' (Zigon and Throop 2023, 10). Archaeologists' recent movement towards exploring how 'relation to matter leads to a veritable phenomenology of the present' (Olivier 2013, 121; see also Dawdy 2016) offers examples of resistance to the artificial dissociation of the excavated object from the context of human–material engagement through skills and actions.

Another category of critique of phenomenology concerns its supposedly narrow focus on subjective and individual experience, which in turn relates to a specifically Western conception of highly subjective, atomised selfhood. For example, Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places* claims indebtedness to the phenomenological writing of Edward Casey (Basso 1996, 154n2) but argues against the tendency by 'some phenomenologists' to understand relations to places in terms of 'contemplative moments of social isolation'. Instead, Basso makes the case for communality and sharing as fundamental to people's intimate connections to places (1996, 109). While phenomenological approaches can at times read as radically subjective, a central idea among contemporary phenomenologists is that individuals are constituted by relations, using key notions such as intersubjectivity (Jackson 1998): even human intentions are 'embedded in an intersubjective world of experience' (Duranti 2015, 1). Remains of the past, including ruins and ghosts, gesture towards a basic, yet easily downplayed, knowledge: Our world is forever already inhabited by beings and former actions, and is laced with what Pina-Cabral (2017, 11) calls 'traces of others' (cf. Geisser and Lachenal 2016, 15).[9]

Another critique, which similarly hinges on phenomenology's Western orientation, suggests that the claim to capture human experience flattens differences between socio-cultural contexts and plays into Western impositions. Already in 1952, Frantz Fanon pointed to the limits of phenomenology when it comes to lived experiences of Black individuals under colonialism or racialised regimes by showing how the experience of racism disrupts the embodied sense of self and thus stands in opposition to the supposedly universal bodily schema, or the pre-reflective, intuitive sense of one's body in space (Ahmed 2007, 153; Fanon 1952). Furthermore, some scholars note that phenomenological conceptions of the body, and the notion of embodiment itself, may not be aligned with certain non-Western worldviews, which may associate different bodies with radically different realities and experiences (Vilaça 2005). For others, focusing exclusively on embodied experience risks overlooking experiences of transcendence, such as those found in religious traditions (Knibbe and Versteeg 2008, 57). In engaging these real critiques, we should remember that, rather than simply reproducing Western conceptions of experience, phenomenology has also been critical of some Western categories, such as – and especially relevant to our preoccupation with ruins and afterlives – in the case of time. As Dawdy (2016, 29) shows, phenomenological philosophers such as Husserl criticised conceptions of time as a 'steady sequence of linear events' as an abstract representation that is far removed from the lived experience. Furthermore, we ought to recall that contemporary phenomenological thinkers do not see themselves as exclusively committed to Western ideas. For example, while Ingold's work is inspired by Western philosophical and psychological ideas such as those of James Gibson, Gilles Deleuze and Martin Heidegger, he also draws from Southern cosmologies and ethnographic engagement with Indigenous communities in Australia and Africa, such as the Dogon

in Mali (2000, 83–84) or Songhay in Niger (2000, 250). Such a dialogue is a welcome one, and in the context of our research in Eastern Africa, there is room to further explore alignment with the work of African scholars who seek to engage reality in non-reductionist, non-binary and non-anthropocentric ways (e.g. Mudimbe 1988; Nyamnjoh 2017; Senghor 1970).

In short, the discomfort with phenomenology among scholars of ruins and afterlives seems to stem from a conception of the term as overly narrow: limitingly somatic, politically decontextualised and insufficiently socially integrated. One example of the discomfort with phenomenology within this tradition is found in Finkelstein's (2019) work on 'lively ruins' at a semi-operational Mumbai textile mill. On the one hand, Finkelstein's perspective has much to do with phenomenology. Focusing on affects, she explores how 'feelings about and engagements with infrastructure are just as critical as an exploration of how these buildings come to be' (2019, 22). The aching bodies of her interlocutors, workers at the city's only still-functioning textile mill, thus become central within her exploration of their perception of the slowly decaying infrastructure but are also entangled with neoliberal development and state policies that are equally experienced as embodied and affective. At the same time, Finkelstein carefully distances herself from phenomenology, which she sees as too narrowly oriented towards bodily sensations. This narrowness she emphasises several times in her book, arguing that her approach to engaging bodies and landscapes 'pushes beyond a phenomenological sense' (2019, 25). Coming back to the walled-up Parque in Chokwe, we can see how critical phenomenology, which is attuned to the political and historical circumstances that condition today's lived experience, can offer a relationally grounded, historically sensitive mode of inquiry. Passing by the grounds with our interlocutors, we often learned of their dislike towards the newcomers. In unfiltered daily conversations, we heard complaints about the European couple – sometimes referred to as colonial-like settlers (*colonos*) – such as allegations that the European woman beats her domestic workers, conjuring images of colonial violence. As Bourdieu ([1977] 2013, 78) has written with regard to his concept of *habitus*, 'history turned into nature':[10] The idea that multiple pasts sediment in bodies and landscapes is in line with phenomenological approaches, which consider memory as not merely confined to the mind but as entangled with bodies and places (Casey 2000). The wall, which concretises the tensions with the European couple, also reanimates memories of colonial violence both symbolic and physical that rarely come to mind in abstract conversations about the colonial past. In reworking such accounts ethnographically, we pay attention not only to what is said but to how memory surfaces in embodied gestures, spatial practices and materiality, such as 'the wall', which reveal layered affective and historical entanglements.

Among our interlocutors, those who remembered the socialist state farm spoke of it with nostalgia, reverently identifying it as '*herança*' to be preserved and eventually revived. As one former worker on the farm explained, 'legacies ought not be sabotaged' (*herança, não podemos sabotar*). More controversially, the contested wall brought back colonial memories, including colonial nostalgia for a time when the site supposedly benefitted the community as a whole.[11] This rule was apparently broken by the newcomers, who, in their irreverence, 'know what they are doing inside, but we don't. […] Nothing is happening! And it's for their own consumption' (our translation). The new wall, in other words, underlay deep selfishness, which manifested in a lack of care towards the sites and towards the community, a fracture expressed through rumours about what is actually happening inside the compound – possibly illegal, possibly occult. These rumours eventually resulted in appeals by residents to

local authorities, though these appeals remained unheeded. Rather than taking these rumours as symbolic or metaphorical representations, we read them as expressions of sedimented histories – where the colonial and post-socialist pasts surface affectively and corporeally in the present, shaping how people sense, interpret and contest the ongoing transformation of the site. In this case, it reveals how 'ghosts of the [colonial and postcolonial] past are very present in mundane reality and irrupt into conscious awareness' (James 2008, 139). Ironically, fast-emerging breakages in the wall were pointed out to us as further evidence that the new *donos* are failing to look after the land entrusted to them.

Methodological directions: walking with ruins

What would it mean to approach ruins and afterlives through a phenomenological prism? For the sake of brevity, we will engage this question through one methodological approach, namely walking. In our work in Mozambique and elsewhere in Eastern Africa, we note the intuitive appeal of movement, and walking in particular, as symbolically and affectively connoted with the pursuit of 'breakthroughs' and 'progress' on the one hand and 'idleness', 'aimlessness' or 'blockage' on the other hand (Rahier 2024). In the context of ruins and afterlives, such human walks – full of hurdles, zigzagging and spirals – contrast with the straight lines of rational, progress-hungry modernist design (Ingold 2007, 152).

In the growing literature on ruins and afterlives, scholars explore the use of embodied research methods, attentive to the sensations evoked by ruined landscapes (Gamberi and Calzana 2025). Multiple scholars recommend to turn our 'somatic modes of attention' (Csordas 1993) towards the incorporation of a 'subjective experience of ruins' (Dobraszczyk 2017, 15) and to deliberately slow down to trace connections, foster imagination and establish relationships between seemingly separate elements (M'charek 2023). In particular, several scholars describe practices related to walking, which they pursue either as a deliberate method or as a de facto one (e.g. Aalders 2020; Edensor 2016; Gez 2021; Gordillo 2014; Yarrow 2017). Such 'walking through ruins' (Edensor 2016) resonates with ambulant methods such as 'walking interviews', 'talking whilst walking' and 'go-alongs' (Anderson 2004; Carpiano 2009; Kusenbach 2003), which mostly involve the following of local 'docents' (Chang 2017) – better yet, 'place-makers' or 'animators' (Basso 1996) – who lead the way. When accompanying local guides, such walking also has methodological value as it can help to loosen communication barriers around difficult or oppressive experiences that left people tongue-tied or 'aphasic' (Hunt 2019; Stoler 2016), and supposedly encourage spontaneous discussions in a manner that minimises power imbalance and helps to cultivate trust (Butler and Derrett 2014; Trell and Van Hoven 2010). In practice, such intentions deserve critical consideration, mindful of the various power asymmetries within the ethnographic research context.

It is notable that, while writing on walking as method acknowledges indebtedness to phenomenology (e.g. Anderson 2004; Carpiano 2009; Kusenbach 2003), scholars of ruins and afterlives who apply such methods do not make similar allusions. To bridge this theoretical gap, we can consider the contributions of Ingold, whose phenomenological approach is deeply tied to movement (Ingold 2011; Ingold and Vergunst 2008). For Ingold, being in the world is anything but static. Rather, it is deeply processual, interactive and ambulatory, so much so that he would eventually question the suitability of the phenomenological notion of 'dwelling' as possibly too sedentary (2011, 12–13). This idea of being as geared towards movement is captured by Ingold's notion of 'wayfaring': 'not to be in place but to be along

paths' (2011, 12). Unsurprisingly then, for Ingold, our embodied being in the world is best encapsulated through the physical act of walking: in the same way that the senses cannot be detached from the totality of our experience within a place, the act of walking is irreducible to the mechanics of locomotion (Solnit 2000). Not every act of walking, however, engages the environment in a similar way, and in everyday life, walks are often reduced to a functional transect locomotion from point A to B (Ingold 2007). Such paths are 'destination-oriented' lines, geared towards 'transport movement' that contrasts with the 'wayfaring' movement that acknowledges the meshwork of life through immersion in the environment. Still, 'wayfaring' and 'transport movement' are not necessarily exclusive of one another, and indeed, they 'may operate side by side in a delicate balance' (Ingold 2007, 77). While they may not evoke the same terminologies, Ingold's ideas of embeddedness within a meshwork of threads traversed through an ambulatory approach resonate with several of the authors on ruins and afterlives, such as Geissler and Lachenal (2016, 23) and their suggestion of sensorial navigation by 'a researcher in motion, tiptoeing, porous, distributed, pervaded by smells and textures, fingers upon the surface of the real, open to contingency and entanglement'. The intuitive appeal of walking in such contexts and its evocative and revelatory power has been demonstrated by Lachenal (2016), 82), who employs Global Positioning System (GPS) tracking and hand-drawn maps to mark his walks and guided tours in Ayos (Cameroon) and Amani Hill (Tanzania), tracing their medical colonial legacies (see also Ghyselen et al. 2017; Lachenal 2022b, 52–57).

In Chokwe, the Portuguese imperial power, and later on, the socialist Mozambican government, planned the location and distance between sites of production and residents' homes, taking design decisions that determine residents' daily commutes from their homes to the *machamba* (fields) or to the factories and other agro-industrial sites such as the Parque das Máquinas. Today still, it may appear that everyday spatial trajectories follow such functional 'transport movement' from the house and back. However, as we accompany farmers along their everyday itineraries, we discover that the trails of movement are actually full of wayfaring, as farmers heading to their *machambas* are 'ever attentive to the landscape that unfolds along the path, and to living animal inhabitants' (Ingold 2007, 87). Through a combination of guided and non-guided, spontaneous walks, we learned to spot, and trace, dislocated remains, thereby enriching our understanding of the creative reappropriations and unexpected consequences of CAIL's ruination. This embodied approach, we noted, helps to activate a geographic reconstruction of multiple historical layers and to evoke subtle memories while locating them alongside the contemporary. In so doing, we keep in mind Ingold's insistence that the ground on which we step is never 'laminated' but always encompasses a layered multiplicity (Ingold 2022, xxi). Every present moment introduces change, since walking on a path that was already treaded 'is in itself to place a new layer over the ground' (Ingold 2022, xxiv). While walking, Chokwe's farmers are on the lookout for dangers: studying traces of animals, 'smelling' the presence of snakes, and attending closely to the rustling of weeds. Snakes, in particular, are associated with abandoned places, indicating how ruination allows for the 'flourishing of other forms of life' and especially of 'feral animals' (Ruiz-Serna 2021, 511). As we accompany them, farmers often halt to instruct us how to decipher traces within the environment, gradually edifying us in what Anna Tsing (2015) calls the 'arts of noticing'. At times, this attention to the environment may be thrust upon us by what Edensor (2007, 228) calls 'powerful sensual intrusions', leading to sudden change of plans. Farmers might, for example, take a detour to avoid a canal where snakes or other dangerous animals,

such as crocodiles, seem to lurk, or conversely, spot the far-away silhouette of a close neigh-bour and decide to change course and catch up with her. As researchers accompanying our interlocutors, we are constantly reminded of the conditions of our embodied selves in the intersection of class, gender and race. Even as we try to mitigate power imbalances through these common walks, our positionality as outsiders-researchers remains inscribed in our way of occupying space, both physically and metaphorically.

Phenomenological methods invite us to pay special attention to the employment of senses in people's ongoing perceptual engagement with the environment. Our interlocutors' attention, we noticed, became especially sharp around the Parque. With its loaded history, rewilding bush and questionable entrepreneurs hiding behind the much-despised wall, Chokwe residents saw the Parque as emblematic of a wider decay. As the newly erected wall around the Parque limited residents' movements and obscured their vision, other senses and skills of perception gained greater prominence. An elderly farmer who used to work for CAIL recounted how the Parque became infested with '*mambas*' and '*jiboias*' – poisonous snakes feared for their fatal bites. The farmer admitted that he never actually saw a snake around the compound, but explained that he can *smell* them ('*dá para sentir o cheiro*'), as well as *hear* them, as these snakes omit loud bleats that sound like small goats, especially at night ('*à noite gritam como se fossem cabritos*'). If we, the researchers, were unable to perceive these nuances, it was because of our inexperience with such matters, whereas those who work closely with the land develop adept skills of perception ('*esses que vêm do campo, eles conseguem sentir o cheiro da cobra*'). Concern with the uptake in snakes around the poorly kept compound extended to other residents, who similarly cautioned us about their unusual behaviour. From this example, we see how phenomenological attunement to 'beings-in-landscapes allows multispecies histories to come into view' (Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt 2019, S187). Chokwe's farmers seemed to suggest that embodiment is relational and con-nects not only between human bodies but also between humans and the more-than-human.

Furthermore, the motif of movement applies not only to human and animals, but also to things (Bogost 2012). While phenomenological approaches depart from materialist insis-tence on the agency of non-human entities or the symmetrical treatment of human and non-human actors (Latour 1996, 1991), they are highly attentive to materiality as part of people's embodied entwinement with the environment. Navaro-Yashin has invited us to consider the 'embroilment of subjects with objects' beyond the 'flat' network proposed by Latour, while also taking into account 'historical contingency and political specificity' (2009, 9). This is particularly relevant for a critical phenomenology of projects' afterlives. Against the always-unstable flows of materials in the environment, Ingold argues that modern society aims, 'through feats of engineering, to construct a material world that matches its expecta-tions, that is, a world of discrete, well-ordered objects' (2010, 9). However, the end of a project often implies a process of entropy that displaces things away from their original place and use (Ntapanta 2024). Ironically, while the Parque das Máquinas is stripped from its rusty remains and is regarded as empty, machinery remains can be found all around the village, in the streets and inside houses: tractor parts come to demarcate the edge of family plots; a metal disc from an agricultural machine has been turned into a coffee table in a resident's living room. While such reuses can be cast in terms of affective attachment and a desire to salvage mementoes, a more opportunistic interpretation draws attention to the emergence of a 'ruins economy' (Khatchadourian 2022, 340). While walking along the roads of Chokwe's villages, old remains are scattered all around: some are left to rot and to blend with the

undergrowth while others are jacked up on stones, entertaining the faint hope of eventual revival. These remains may appear abandoned, but villagers know their rightful owner who may eventually claim and repurpose them: maybe to build a pig pen or to extract spare parts for other machines.

Instead of conclusion: phenomenology, ghosts and afterlives

In this article, we explored how phenomenological ideas align with the growing body of literature on ruins and afterlives. While several authors acknowledge their indebtedness to such ideas, the phenomenological link is mostly left implicit. We proposed that an explicit conversation with phenomenology could contribute to our understanding of how the gaps left in the wake of ruination come to bear on the 'embodied, intersubjective, temporally informed engagement with the world' (Desjarlais and Throop 2011, 92). In the case of development projects such as we saw in Chokwe, their termination lends itself to all manners of disjuncture – such as between intended plans and local appropriation over time, between aspirations and manifest realities, and between experts and beneficiaries. Taking in the intimate entwinement between people and their environment, the tensions between projected aspirations and actual realities, and the emphasis on movement and becoming, we are invited to move with a curious, non-hierarchical and non-binary mindset and to embrace a non-positivistic toolkit that is attentive to the wide panoply of embodied legacies and lingering traces.

Tying back to the title of this special issue, phenomenological elaborations help us to understand the ghostly entities that inhabit – or 'haunt' – projects' remains. Rather than identifying them as dead objects that are abstracted from 'the affective and social configurations of the present' (Gordillo 2014, 19), phenomenological directions can provide us with epistemological openness with which to sense ghostly present-absences associated with past projects by transcending the binarism of the visible/invisible, the dead/alive or the intended/unintended. To the extent that we pursue the terminology, we agree with Edensor that 'ghostly remnants […] demand improvisatory interpretations, unpredictable responses, and noncognitive, sensual apprehension' (2005, 844–845). From a methodological perspective, phenomenological approaches open up directions for engaging with the spectral nature of 'ghost stories' (Aalders 2020; Edensor 2005; Meekings 2019): In the case of the Parque das Máquinas, the site presented itself as something of a 'twilight zone' (González-Ruibal 2019, 132), suspended in a state of 'limbo' (Schubiger 2025) between abandonment and revitalisation, between a playground and a graveyard, between the public and the private, between the 'modern' and the 'wild'. Its unresolved suspension of a determined future – what Carse and Kneas (2019, 23) call 'the suspended futures of the present' – is captured through oxymoronic terms such as the 'permanently temporary' (Yarrow 2017, 579) or 'permanent liminality' (Szakolczai 2016, in Alexander and Sanchez 2019, 5). The venomous, cunningly deceptive snakes that are said to have taken over the site, unseen but sensed by the skilled among the locals, are a manifestation of an in-betweenness also inherent in the notion of ghosts. Like the ghosts of modernity, the absent-presence of these malevolent powers conveys an elusive feeling that something isn't quite right and channels anxieties about the undersides of development and so-called progress (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Johnson 2013).

At the same time, phenomenological readings help us to be mindful of the risk of reifying the ghosts of the past. If, indeed, such ruins are forever lively and not merely 'remembered

anticipation of a future' (Yarrow 2017, 568), then to conceive of them in purely hauntological terms risks outweighing the past and ignoring cumulative changes over time. Indeed, as scholars of ruins and afterlives show, projects' temporal ends can be highly generative, as the relaxation of delimiting scripts invites new resourcefulness and all manners of vitality and versatility (Bertoncin and Pase 2017; Gez 2021; Kovač and Ramella 2023). In this regard, phenomenology's entanglements of temporalities – captured through Ingold's image of the crystal ball – and its discomfort with hierarchies of experiences invite us to consider the meandering of legacies as they cross with others, are reappropriated and ever-renew themselves. Phenomenological ideas thus invite us to conceive of a non-dualistic world of possibilities that can straddle current gaps between planning, implementation and long-term (re)use. Not only is the Parque more than a graveyard in the sense of 'the over-and-done-with' (Edensor 2005, 829), so are its ghosts – colonial, postcolonial, contemporary, prospective – multiple, shifting and continuously negotiated.

Lastly, to think about ghosts from a phenomenological perspective we need to bracket preconceived ideas about the familiar world and to entertain the actual experience of ghosts, as opposed to their abstracted conception as metaphors or as aestheticised ideas (Trigg 2012). From this perspective, it is all the more important to reflect on the suitability of more-than-human terminologies to specific contexts. How do our interlocutors speak about their experience of ending (Martinez 2018), of ruins and afterlives? In our work in Mozambique and in Eastern Africa more broadly, the terminology of ghosts raises conceptual-linguistic challenges. In many non-Western cosmologies, ghosts carry ontological status incorporated into everyday life, allowing them to credibly make autonomous claims and to act as moral agents (Kwon 2008). Attentive to this, we note that our interlocutors seldom opted for hauntological terminology. Around Chokwe, people spoke of projects as having been 'abandoned' (*abandonaram*) – e.g. by 'the Portuguese' or by 'the Swedes'.[12] Elsewhere, in Swahili-speaking contexts in Kenya and Tanzania, interlocutors similarly did not refer to ghosts but rather anthropomorphised former interventions as 'dying' (*kufa*) or 'going to sleep' (*kuenda kulala*), and pointed to their ability to 'resurrect' (*kufufua*).[13] Nostalgic about these projects' (lost) potential to make their lives better, our interlocutors used a different macabre lexicon to express the lingering presence associated with such sites and to 'mourn' (Alexander and Sanchez 2019, 13) what they saw as failed promises and missed opportunities.

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Notes

1. For the sake of simplicity, we refer to ethnographic activities undertaken by some of us as involving all of us. Fieldwork in Chokwe was conducted over a total of five months in 2023 and 2024.
2. The *Colonato* was initiated in the 1950s as a mixed colonial settlement where Portuguese and Mozambican farmers were to live together. The ambitious scheme consisted in 14 villages and included factories, housing and a variety of social services (Lopes 1968; Matine 2015). The project also boasted a massive irrigation system that remains to this day the largest in the country (Abbas 2018). The Parque das Máquinas existed in its current location already during the days of the Colonato.
3. 'CAIL: os homens e as máquinas', *Tempo* (Maputo), 7 March 1982; 'Proteção de maquinaria é deficiente', *Tempo* (Maputo), 3 March 1982.
4. Information about our interlocutors is kept to a minimum in consideration of anonymity.
5. Both colonial and socialist interventions aimed at independence from imports: food produced in this region, and its processing through facilities such as the sausage factory, was intended to contribute to the nation's self-sufficiency.

6. See e.g. Morrison's (2020) discussion about the fine line between affect and phenomenology in the work of Sara Ahmed and Judith Butler.
7. Heidegger's work was preceded by Hegel's (1807) seminal work *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (The Phenomenology of Spirit). Even though Heidegger was shaped by Husserl's tradition more than Hegel's, he disagrees with both on several aspects. In the context of this article and this special issue, it is worth noting Heidegger's conception of temporality and its divergence from Hegel. For Heidegger (1996), time is not a sequence of precise 'nows' but a unified phenomenon encompassing past, present and future, both interrelated and influencing each other (Sinnerbrink 2007).
8. For example, in our sample of 40 key texts on ruins and afterlives from recent years, we found almost no engagement with the term 'phenomenology'. Similarly, Geissler's (2023) thorough review article on the anthropology of modern traces does not explicitly engage the term. Also notable is Aalders' (2020) doctoral work on ghost lines along the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia-Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor in Kenya, which, despite referencing Ingold 90 times, does not mention phenomenology.
9. Pina-Cabral does not consider himself a phenomenological researcher but is nonetheless inspired by such literature.
10. Although Bourdieu formulated several critiques of phenomenology (Throop and Murphy 2002), authors such as Thomas Csordas (1993) actually mobilised his notion of *habitus* in the service of phenomenology.
11. Bissell (2005) suggests that nostalgic colonial discourses among formerly colonised people are entangled with ambiguous and conflicting memories and often underlie critiques against the present.
12. In the Changana-speaking areas of Southern Mozambique, many spirits lead earthly lives before transitioning to a spiritual existence: they are 'souls of people who have had a historical existence' (Cavallo 2013, 111). Among these, ancestors are distinguished from foreign spirits that demand to be pacified and integrated as family spirits (Honwana 2002), such as in the case of those who died in the civil war (Igreja, Dias-Lambranca, and Richters 2008).
13. In Swahili cosmology, ghosts (better known as jinns – *majini* – or spirits – *mapepo*) are not understood as the dead returning to the realm of the living but rather constitute a distinct category of living being, who share lived realities and sometimes-troublesome relations with both humans and animals (Larsen 2008).

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