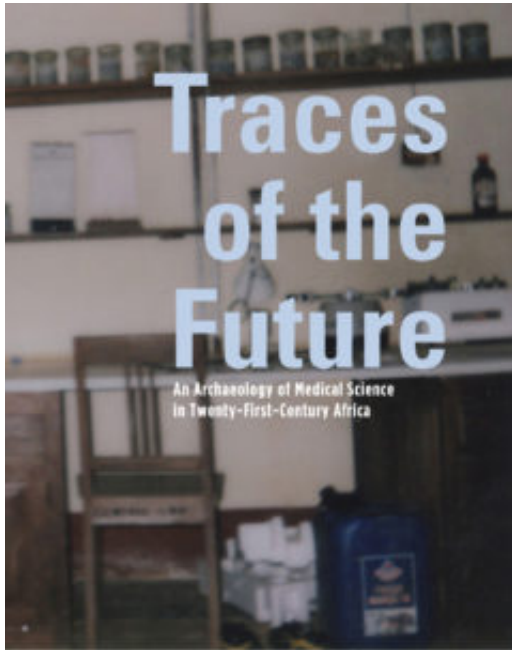


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## Book review: *Traces of the Future: An Archaeology of Medical Science in Africa*

2017-06-21 10:12:21

By Damien Droney



### [Traces of the Future: An Archaeology of Medical Science in Africa](#)

[Paul Wenzel Geissler](#), [Guillaume Lachenal](#), [John Manton](#), and [Noémi Tousignant](#), editors

Intellect Ltd./University of Chicago Press, 2016, 256 pages, 500 color plates

The first reaction to an encounter with *Traces of the Future: An Archaeology of Medical Science in Africa* is likely to be a set of questions. Firstly, “what is it?” This 7×9” hardcover book, brimming with pleasingly displayed full-color photographic contributions by 18 authors, resembles a museum exhibit as much as it does a conventional academic volume. The contributing authors themselves describe it as a “sutured assemblage” (12) and a “fragmentary and idiosyncratic” (27) result of collaborative research presented in “a book-like package” (12).

*Traces of the Future* is the remarkable product of a long-term collaborative research project by a group of anthropologists, historians, and photographers. It examines the legacies of twentieth century biosciences in Africa in five historical sites of transnational medical science. Each of these sites manifested dreams of medical modernity and social progress characteristic of the twentieth century, dreams which are unevenly remembered in these sites today. The book is driven by the diverse research objects that it assembles. Beyond some rewarding orienting essays, the bulk of the book appears as a profusion of material. Each chapter includes an array of images, including fieldwork snapshots, archival documents, blueprints, manuscripts of musical scores, and unearthed beakers. These images are interspersed with timelines, interview transcripts, fieldnote excerpts, quotes from academic literature, and essays.

It also features haunting professional art photographs of Amani Hill Research Station by Evgenia Arbugaeva and Mariele Neudecker. Arbugaeva's photos, which were previously presented in *National Geographic*, provocatively reenact mid-twentieth century scenes of science, now staged by retired Tanzanian men of science in dusty laboratories and overgrown gardens. Neudecker pictures Amani in the style of Dutch and Flemish *Vanitas* paintings that feature prominent symbols of death. These photographs evoke intensities of nostalgia and loss complicated by lasting legacies of exploitation.

One might wonder what a reader is meant to do with such a diverse array of materials. Working through this book produces the same feelings of pleasure and disorientation as pursuing archival research. Is this to be taken as a kit for do-it-yourself analysis, beautifully designed but with some assembly required? Indeed, the introductory essay is presented as a set of instructions for readers-*cum*-archaeologists who would work through the book's complicated stratigraphy to excavate futures past. However, the bewilderment is intentional and digging through the collection reveals a volume with powerful and cohesive theories of materiality, affect, and time.

The book approaches the material remains of the past not as clues for reading history or recreating past events, but as the already lively presence of the past in the present. This is thoroughly a study of science in early twenty-first century Africa, often characterized as the period of global health, but it is conducted with a sensitivity toward the traces of twentieth-century scientific activity. These archival documents, items of laboratory equipment, demolished buildings, and re-performances of prior modes of work manifest past orientations toward the future, thereby destabilizing and disarranging (16) present organizations of time, history, and possibility.

As anthropologists rekindle their interest in temporalities outside of the homogenizing time of modernization and progress, this volume dives into the rhythms of life in the late-colonial and early-independence periods of high modernism in Africa. It finds a plethora of timelines, a multiplication of the temporalities of the development era. Indeed, unilineal timelines of development appear as rare accomplishments of synchronization, or temporary harmonizations of temporal experience. The diverse materials presented evoke the entanglements of different periods, but they are presented in such overabundance that they resist letting any single periodization sit undisturbed for too long. Presentist views of medical science are abetted by active processes of forgetting the past, accomplished through the neglect and destruction of materiality. If past temporalities are manifested by their material presence in things, then the destruction of archives represents the death of temporality and the loss of contemporary diversity in ways of doing science. In five multidimensional chapters, the authors excavate surviving relations to time, history, and progress across sites of transnational scientific work.

At Uzuakoli Leprosy Centre in Nigeria, John Manton introduces readers to a site of medical research that once set the international treatment standard for leprosy. However, this medical history is subject to active processes of forgetting as the site's archives become food for termites. While histories of once globally significant medical science are literally eaten away, surprising cultural legacies live on. The music of Ikoli Harcourt Whyte, a patient-activist instrumental in the founding of the center, continues to be remembered in Nigeria. Excerpts from a radio documentary on Whyte are recorded in the chapter, but despite Manton's efforts to seek "attunement" with the rhythms of life at Uzuakoli, the liveliness of Whyte's music is only partially captured by the musical notations left behind.

In the Cameroonian site Ayos, Guillaume Lachenal, John Manton, and Joseph Owona Ntsama find themselves steered onto well-worn paths of commemoration that seek to heroize Eugène Jamot, the French doctor who led the site in the 1920s and 1930s. The authors profile the "monument men" who guide visitors through the memorialized histories of Ayos, focusing on Jamot and the "Jamotains" whom he trained. Such practices of memorialization, they find, mystify the history of the place. In contrast, Ntsama works through documents seeking lively traces of his Jamotain father that depart from the memorialization practices endemic in Ayos. The authors also unearth pasts forgotten by heroic narratives of histories. They trace the site's founding as a sleeping sickness camp in German Kamerun, headed by a doctor who would become a prominent Nazi racial theorist. In pursuit of these undermemorialized pasts, the authors find oral histories of German-era mass graves that maintain their German place-name. Instead of telling Ayos as a story of Jamot, the savior

of Cameroon, the authors reinterpret it as a far more ambivalent site of sacrifice, of death and disposal in the name of progress.

At Amani in Tanzania, Geissler, Ann Kelly, Peter Mangesho, Manton, and René Gerrets excavate the scientific practices and social habits of a colonial hill station. Currently operated by a skeleton crew, Amani has gone through periods of being central to imperial and postcolonial science as well as stretches of near abandonment. In investigating the remains of its mid-twentieth century manifestations, the authors find long histories of transnational entanglement, bringing together British and Soviet scientists with East African colleagues and employees. Alongside unrealized blueprints and cherished photographs, they find spaces marking demolished buildings and the distinctive aesthetics complex of lawns, cars, and gardens that continue to grow, rust, and offer harvest in the twenty-first century. The most striking episode of this chapter deals with the uncomfortable reenactments of mid-twentieth century science involving a retired British entomologist and his Tanzanian former assistants. These reenactments end up performing the complicated intertwining of racial segregation, intimacy, and paternalism of the late colonial period in the present moment, clarifying the resonance of those dynamics today while unsettling stable depictions of temporality.

Noémi Tousignant introduces readers to Niakhar. This Senegalese site has been the object of demographic observation since the 1960s, initiated by the Senegalese government and administered by the French Institute for Development Research. Tousignant interprets this demographic work as a form of memory-making, producing documentation through repeated observation. The memories of these past encounters break into the present in the form of material traces of scientists, but also in popular forms of recollection. Indeed, Senegalese researchers recall diverse forms of engagement and interaction with communities of study, while children born in the area bear the names of past researchers. This chapter explores the continued life of research archives, as well as their planned-for obsolescence. It describes the interplay between private and institutional possession of archival materials, as well as the reemergence of archival data and the disposal of demographic material that has lapsed into presumed irrelevance.

Finally, Geissler and Ruth Prince examine three institutions in Kisumu, a city in Kenya that has long been an important site of transnational research. They delicately trace memories of past science alongside current incarnations of research. Presented in the chapter are ethnographic descriptions and historical newspaper accounts of “Russia,” a hospital funded by the Soviet Union. This hospital became the place of state violence at its opening ceremony in 1969, when first head of state Jomo Kenyatta’s presidential guard opened fire on Soviet-aligned

opposition supporters. “Russia” is (strikingly) now home to research funded by the US National Institutes of Health. The authors also visit the Kenya Ministry of Health’s Division of Vector-Borne Diseases, where Geissler himself conducted parasitology research in the 1990s. The government division reinvented itself following the structural adjustment of the 1980s to embrace transnational projects, moving from contract to contract to fund research activities. Today, the division operates at minimal capacity, waiting for a new project to restart research. Finally, the parastatal Kenya Medical Research Institute has become the new partner of these international research projects, reordering their research priorities to accommodate the NIH. This chapter senses the traces of older patterns of science in Kisumu that were consonant with promises of full employment, populist understandings of citizenship, and utopian visions of the future, but also with authoritarian government and state violence. These forms of science are remembered by many, but they are also subject to active processes of forgetting promoted by current global health initiatives with narrower visions of development.

The hermeneutic strategy of this book is to multiply objects of analysis, to place them in relation to each other in ways that facilitates interpretation but discourages pat conclusions. The volume makes effective use of juxtaposition. The authors point out that new American NIH funded research is housed in buildings that signal earlier Soviet and Panafrican research orientations. Quotes from Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* stand alongside the activity schedule of a practically deactivated government research division. Alongside past manifestations of science, global health appears antagonistic towards memory, invested in forgetting prior modes of science as it embraces relatively narrow visions of development with different fault lines of inequality and exclusion.

Just as striking, however, are those remnants of past science that seem indifferent to existing narratives of history altogether. It is hard to put together a narrative of scientific progress, colonial trauma, or postcolonial promise based on the materials presented. Embraceable visions of progress remain elusive in this book, as do smoking-gun depictions of colonial violence. From the rumored excavation of mass graves at Ayos to the “man-baiting” of biting insects at Amani, one wonders how scientific practices reenact and amplify other colonial traumas. Likewise, the book does not pin down familiar topics of analysis such as race, class, or gender in ways that offer concrete takeaways, but an active reader would find more than enough on those topics.

In an epilogue, Iruka Okeke asks about the histories left out of this archaeology of medical science, wondering how a consideration of the legacies of African-led research in African universities could provide often-overlooked grounds for excavating futures of African science.

Indeed, this excavation of the affective life of science in sites that hosted transnational research projects in the mid-twentieth century should inspire an attunement to the intensities and possibilities of science outside of its presumed epicenters. As the authors write about the unrealized promises of Amani Hill Research station, “it never quite becomes home, it never really changes itself or the world, and eventually one must leave it” (111).

This book makes original, invigorating contributions to scholarship on the colonial heritage of science, the history of transnational research collaborations, and African medical sciences. It is also recommended for those interested in mid-twentieth century narratives of progress. It shows the multiplicity of these timelines, presenting material as an accumulation of traces heaped up in the contemporary moment, fertilizing contemporary discourse about the future. Perhaps its most distinctive contribution is to the practice and presentation of qualitative research. Those interested in experimental ethnography, ethnographic archaeology, collaborative research, and novel modes of representation should find much to grapple with. Those interested in affect, nostalgia, or ruins will find a fresh and rewarding treatment of these nodes of analysis. Indeed, each chapter works to resist trope, following the productive discomfort of not hearing familiar stories or, just as discomfiting, hearing too many stories to summarize. This book gives the reader too much provocative material to construct a stable narrative about the past, but perhaps just enough to tell some new stories about the future.

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**AMA citation**

Droney D. Book review: *Traces of the Future: An Archaeology of Medical Science in Africa*. *Somatosphere*. 2017. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=13587>. Accessed June 21, 2017.

**APA citation**

Droney, Damien. (2017). *Book review: Traces of the Future: An Archaeology of Medical Science in Africa*. Retrieved June 21, 2017, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=13587>

**Chicago citation**

Droney, Damien. 2017. Book review: *Traces of the Future: An Archaeology of Medical Science in Africa*. Somatosphere. <http://somatosphere.net/?p=13587> (accessed June 21, 2017).

**Harvard citation**

Droney, D 2017, *Book review: Traces of the Future: An Archaeology of Medical Science in Africa*, Somatosphere. Retrieved June 21, 2017, from <<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13587>>

**MLA citation**

Droney, Damien. "Book review: Traces of the Future: An Archaeology of Medical Science in Africa." 21 Jun. 2017. Somatosphere. Accessed 21 Jun. 2017.<<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13587>>