



In Search of Lost Futures

Anthropological Explorations in
Multimodality, Deep
Interdisciplinarity, and
Autoethnography

Edited by
Magdalena Kazubowski-Houston ·
Mark Auslander

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FOREWORD

When the contributors to this volume completed their chapters, they could hardly have imagined the future in which the book would be published. While they were thinking about future imaginaries in their various contexts, the possibility of a global pandemic of the extent of COVID-19 was still only a theoretical possibility, possible yet impossible at the same time.

Images of possible future global disasters abound, and in some sense always have done. From apocalyptic biblical visions to dystopian disaster films, the idea of radical disruption to everyday life is actually quite familiar. For so many people to actually live through such a disruption, at least on the scale of the current COVID-19 pandemic, though, is a less common experience. While some research disciplines may build on world-visions and everyday expectations of continuity and “normality,” social anthropology is one discipline where radical inversions and dramatic diversity are relatively familiar concepts. We are well aware that narratives are not the same as experience, and that continuity and change are unreliably narrated. Borofsky (1987), for example, revealed how the imagination of the past could be deeply misleading, narratives of past continuities having been radically transformed between generations, just as Hobsbawm and Ranger famously de-bunked nationalist ideas of timeless tradition (1983). Anthropology and history have long formed a critical dialogue, but an equivalent examination of the changing nature of future imaginaries has only slowly taken hold in the discipline, despite long-standing concerns

with oracles, religious salvation, reincarnation, policy, and other forms of forward-looking temporal trajectories.

As the editors detail in the introductory chapter, a more substantial anthropology of the future has been emergent for some time, notably since the ASA conference and subsequent monograph published by Sandra Wallman in 1992, but it gained new momentum with the establishment of a Future Anthropologies Network in EASA in 2014. This network erupted with an enthusiasm not only for turning ethnographic attention to the future, but for doing so with a politicized and activist approach to rethinking what anthropology is for and how it can be done. The editors in this volume caution against overestimating the powers of anthropology to change the conditions that shape people's lives, but remain open for the potential for anthropology to open up new realms for intervention, and to reshape the way that imaginative futures are perceived, analyzed, and valued, whether or not these reach the intended outcomes envisaged by researchers or research participants.

Where this volume takes a major step forward is in embracing the world of performance, not only in acknowledging the notion that sociality is performative, but also by engaging head-on with the world of dramaturgy, theater, and visual media. The editors' ambition of generating a "dramaturgy of futures" is a moment of mind-opening theoretical and practical expansion, bringing ideas for method, pedagogy, and communication alongside new forms of sociality. Experimentation is at the heart of this exercise, open to cross-disciplinary and collaborative research through partnerships with trained artists. These challenge the expectations of both ethnography and performance through a meeting of different practices and conceptual approaches: interdisciplinarity that generates a new object while changing established disciplines, as the introduction makes clear. The editors' sensory sensibility offers a deeply reflective space in which risky ideas can be safely touched, tasted, and explored, by the authors and their research participants too. The future is not imagined solely through perceptual senses, but through action. Future possibilities can be acted out, embodied in ways that allow participants to consider how possible futures might feel. What would it feel like for a woman to cut wood with an axe or butcher a goat like a man? Jodie Asselin (this volume) shows how mastering "masculine" skills enables women to rethink who they are and how they are perceived by themselves as well as by others, and doing so through a training course that holds at bay the potential consequences of challenging gender stereotypes until

the women feel confident with their new skills and roles. For many of the participants Asselin describes, their motivation for reinvention calls on imagined or possible futures where such skills might be needed.

Magnat's chapter also shows how attention to sensory experience can shed new light on familiar stories. Magnat's chapter discusses how non-discursive sensory experience allowed Indigenous People in the "new world" to be rendered as colonized subjects, their use of voice and song proving distinctly unsettling to the expectations embedded in the colonial mentalities of Western settlers. Raised voices were experienced by colonizers as threatening and dangerous, but also as evidence of the need for control. Magnat demonstrates how notable philosophers and commentators used Western classifications of music to order Indigenous vocality into a hierarchy of evolution. Understanding Indigenous song as performative action is one way that political discourses can be decolonized, shifting attention from the manner of performance to the desired (future) conditions that songs might evoke and the reassertion of Indigenous modes of being.

The book's double focus on futures and imaginaries distinguishes two dimensions that are innately attached but whose scholarship has been remarkably distinct. The notion of imagination has lived its own life throughout Western thought, particularly in philosophy and aesthetics, with extended disputes over how to interpret Plato's association of imagination and representation, on whether art is technique or inspiration, and in many discussions about the relationship between perception and thought (see Cocking 1991). Warnock (1976) traces the idea of imagination as a form of consciousness from Hume and Kant to Coleridge and Wordsworth, highlighting the connection between image and imagination in affording a means for thought. She casts doubt on Hume's separation of memory and imagination, for example, highlighting the centrality of language. Yet much of this line of debate retains the connection between visual image and imagination, one that is rejected in anthropology, where the aural and haptic imagination is very much included, as amply demonstrated in this volume.

This trajectory can be seen as a foundation for anthropological elaborations of imagination, and notably Sneath et al's (2009) commitment to focusing on the technologies of imagination and the production of imaginative effects. Distancing themselves from a notion of social imaginaries that appears to reproduce the limitations of the idea of culture, they nevertheless focus on collective processes of imagination, rather than the

internal or “mentalist” approach common to the psychological sciences. They see imagination as an outcome of social practices, rather than a precursor, yet in doing so they concretize imagination as a means to other ends, pursuing imaginaries through technologies and marginalizing the possible aimlessness of fantasy and moving imaginaries back into a realm of discourse and practice.

Of course, some kinds of imaginative exercise serve exactly this purpose. While I opened the preface by suggesting that the contributors here could not have imagined that their work would be overtaken by a global pandemic, there are people whose main purpose in life is to imagine exactly that. Those who plan crisis responses, for example, must use different imaginative repertoires to conceptualize and preempt possible worlds. While they may be presented as using scientific modeling, these processes themselves rely heavily on the generative imagination of the modeler, in anticipating possible crucial factors and in evaluating the significance of others. This kind of exercise can be incorporated in the more common contemporary concept of the imagination, one that can be understood as indicating an ability to conjure the impossible as well as the possible, to bring the absent to presence, bring life to the dead or death to the living. Contemporary (Western) concepts of the imagination encompass both rational projection and magical thinking, reflecting an elasticity of human possibilities common to Western understanding of human consciousness. This concept of imagination is, like any other concept, temporally and geographically specific. And it raises interesting interdisciplinary questions. Given the anthropological concern with the past and a belated interest in futures, we might ask whether the imagination of the future is qualitatively or physiologically different from evocation of the past? Is it the same exercise of imaginative speculation to recall times past as it is to envisage times future? The editors’ nod to Proust’s famous work encourages us to consider such possibilities and to interrogate the complex layers of connection between mental process, collective narratives, social practices, and temporalities.

One of the challenges for future studies lies in the long-standing historical tendency to equate futures with modernities, either utopian or dystopian. For that reason, it is refreshing to see the mix of chapters in this volume that reframe future imaginaries in modernist countries with those that address Indigenous sovereignty or that decolonize future-making. Berglund and Kohtala’s chapter on “Materialist Activist Communities” in that archetypally modernist state of Finland reviews the often precarious

alternative activist groups to be found on the fringes of many European cities. These groups offer convivial spaces to remake material substances and hack the systems that hold cities in their particular capitalist frameworks. Maker groups have realized that the future and present of cities can be remade through material reinvention, from small-scale tinkering to more radical actions that inspire participants by embodying imaginative possibility. It is also ultimately refreshing to hear Berglund and Kohtala admit that “we sympathize with MACs but we do not always understand them” (p. 232). Perhaps they do not entirely make sense, or not the kind of sense that can be understood or explained (away). It is precisely in the uncertainty of future visions that creativity and imagination find room to play, offering activists the space to try out ideas that may or may not become feasible, seductive, or convincing.

It is also refreshing to see the range of scales addressed in the volume, from bodily experience to urban infrastructure, from single exhibition curation (such as Falls’ installation and resultant film or Auslander et al’s restorative exhibition project) to collective and ongoing development processes (a Cuban house renovation for Boudreault-Fournier) or design methodologies (in Pink, Osz, Fors, and Lanzeni’s chapter), and between state agencies (municipalities in Pawlak’s chapter) and activist collectives, close families (Kazubowski-Houston’s absent father and Nayyar’s dying relatives) and whole populations (Magnat), and with the anthropologists situated on all sides as independent researchers or embedded activists, as producers of exhibitions, films, and theater, and as community facilitators. This variety reminds us that future imaginaries do not fall easily into simple or normative taxonomies, just as imagination itself is impossible to pin down (Liao and Gendler 2019). There can be no refuge for anthropology in imagining optimism versus pessimism or aspiration versus bare life. Instead, we see a multiplicity of futures, some normative, others exploratory, some conventional, others experimental, some enduring, others collapsing, some anticipatory, others fearful, and some intentional while others are accidental.

Where anthropologists have paid significant attention to notions of the future has been in discussions of temporality, and notably those inspired by Jane Guyer’s assertions about the future horizons of evangelical Christianity and neoliberal governance (2007). The subsequent discussions about future horizons are apposite to current global concerns. In a time of doubt about the future, the horizons of that doubt are significant. Many of us have observed that declarations of climate emergency have led

to relatively little action, and only a very gradual shift in local, national, or international policies or strategies in contrast to the rapid and radical interventions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps the relatively distant (although rapidly approaching) horizons of climate change relate to a future whose shape continues to change, with new threats and fears tumbling one after another into our collective consciousness, to be rejected, denied, distanced, or acted on. The immediate consequences of the global pandemic, on the other hand, radically usurp the immediate future, raising doubt about the endurance of everyday life, of “normal” expectations of travel, of the acceptability of aspirations to fly long distances for leisure or to travel across continents to have a conversation (or “attend a conference”) while leaving the medium and more distant future potentially to resume. For many, death suddenly appears imminent, and health fragile, everyday life easily overturned and work re-evaluated. The pandemic response has also hastened the adoption, for many, of future-oriented or hitherto fantastical technologies, moving our sociality online and bringing dramatic consequences in relation to the infrastructures required to support these online lives. Investment in data centers suddenly seems more secure, expansion more likely, energy demands more urgent, and the pattern and shape of energy distribution suddenly shifting. Yet despite the temporary reprieve in greenhouse gas emissions, all the time, in the background, expectations about a “return” or “bounce back” suggest the continuation of the structural forces that encourage capitalist growth and climate catastrophe. Now, many people are discussing the idea of “bouncing forward” rather than back, but it remains to be seen whether the demonstration of global change we are living through at the time of writing is one that allays fears about the changes needed to combat climate change, or one that merely makes them even more palpable and frightening.

Whatever the world will be like once this book reaches print or reaches the library, the volume offers a welcome set of examples and ideas about how future orientations are not only imagined but embodied. They demonstrate the flexibility of future imaginaries, and the degree to which futures can and do change, often radically, whether as cities are rebuilt and redefined (Ringel’s chapter), as activists conjure the possibility of remaking society, or as performers enact the restoration of the disappeared who they know must already be dead (Batchelor’s chapter). They show us the fine line between knowing and not-knowing, the mechanism of re-imagining oneself, and the power of theater in reopening

possibilities that have been closed elsewhere, and the vital role of humor in both enabling transgressive imaginative thought and articulating it. This is a volume packed with ideas that will inspire and invigorate new ethnographic enterprises.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: In Search of Lost Futures

Magdalena Kazubowski-Houston and Mark Auslander

From February 2018 through January 2019, the Rubin Museum in New York featured an immersive installation, *R.T./S.R./V.S.*, by German artist Matti Braun as part of a larger exhibit titled *A Lost Future*. This multi-media assemblage of contemporary works explored how histories and speculative futures are shaped by globalization, technology, and economic development. Braun's installation, inspired by the lotus pond from an unproduced film—*The Alien*, by Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray—is a room transformed into a lake. Visitors “search for a future” by traversing haphazard paths composed of tree stumps sticking out of the water. Because the floor beneath the reflective surface of the water is black, walking from stump to stump feels vertiginous and mysterious; visitors see their own reflections floating above unknown depths and possibilities. Pathways meander until they eventually lead into the art worlds of other

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galleries. The installation, a meditation on lost futures, has the potential to evoke myriad moods, emotions, and powerful imaginings about what has been lost, what remains, what is hidden beneath surfaces, what is still to come, and what path needs to be taken.

These moods and emotions were especially intensified at the time of writing, in March 2020, when most of the world came to an unprecedented halt because of the COVID-19 pandemic. With newly imposed measures of social distancing, lockdowns, and rising deaths worldwide, the future evoked a plethora of new meanings. It seems we may yet need to traverse many more haphazard paths before we find—if ever—that which has been lost.

Taking the immersive installation as a cue, *In Search of Lost Futures* asks: How can we study people's forays into the future ethnographically? Anthropologists can expound on the contested terrains of the past, excavating struggles that have been erased or ignored or bringing to light marginalized voices that should be foregrounded. We are keen to decolonize historical narratives of all genres—from films and novels to museum exhibitions and performances—and to propose new strategies for reconfiguring how we frame the past, with particular emphasis on uncovering the creative agency of the underrepresented. But hopeful explorations of the future seem to be in short supply.

Young people often find it difficult to articulate optimistic trajectories for near or distant futures. They can easily describe dystopic scenarios born of climate change, rising sea levels, genetic technologies run amok, artificial intelligence, or even the zombie apocalypse. In contrast, they often dismiss positive visions of the future as naive. The dominant assumption has often seemed to be that individuals or local communities will have relatively little creative agency when it comes to redirecting or ameliorating global forces. The future is often imaged as an unstoppable tsunami, flattening everything in its path. Yet, clearly, the vast majority of human beings are still actively planning on there being a future. Babies are still being conceived and birthed, crops planted, mortgages signed, couples married, education pursued, investments made, and cities planned.

Not all of these plans are supported within the dominant protocols of neoliberal capitalism. Around the globe, we have reports of nonnormative futures being cultivated and anticipated by those who choose to reduce their carbon footprint, live off the grid, forge new kinds of community online and in face-to-face proximity, build powerful social

movements, spearhead artistic initiatives, and develop revolutionary technologies. Against the odds, alternative futures are being conceived and even birthed, albeit often far from the media spotlight. Futures are firmly grounded in the different ways we anticipate them, fear them, hope for them, or pilfer from them for our own profit. Today, in the age of COVID-19, our understandings and imaginings of the future are being tossed in even more vertiginous directions. Politicians, scientists, and the media are telling us that the future of this world lies in our own hands that by taking appropriate measures of social distancing and staying at home we can divert the tide of the pandemic. The future is suddenly presented as ours to change, despite the fear, panic, and hopelessness that many of us might feel in these uncertain and surreal times.

The future has been lost to the discipline of anthropology, and we are urgently in need of analytic frameworks, approaches, and field methods to tease out these emergent yearnings for divergent futures. Appropriately, then, our volume title inverts that of Marcel Proust's multivolume masterpiece *In Search of Lost Time*. Our contemporary predicament often seems to be a continuing quest in search of once-grand futures that may seem forever beyond our reach. Like a visitor navigating through the *R.T./S.R./V.S.* installation, this volume maps out the first steps toward a rigorous and responsible anthropology of the future. The idea emerged out of a panel presentation for the Future Anthropologies Network (FAN) titled "Possible/Plausible/Probable/Preferable: Concepts and Techniques for Realizing Futures" convened by Magdalena Kazubowski-Houston and Simone Abram at the 2016 European Association of Social Anthropologists' annual meeting in Milan, Italy. The volume is a sequel to FAN's first volume, *Anthropologies and Futures*, published in 2017 by Bloomsbury and edited by Salazar et al. It also came out of work conducted by members of the Centre for Imaginative Ethnography—an international cybercollective committed to advancing transdisciplinary research that bridges anthropology, ethnography, the creative arts, and digital media and concerns itself with questions of social justice and transformation. Here, we ask: How can we capture the contours of worlds yet to be when the people with whom we work find it difficult to articulate their visions of the future? How do we characterize a habitus that is not yet fully realized, that is only in the process of becoming? How do we map a matrix of anticipated outcomes, proximate and distant, even (and especially) when there are no blueprints on how to get us from here to there?

ANTHROPOLOGICAL FORAYS INTO THE FUTURE

Anthropology has traditionally neglected the future as a subject of inquiry, even though the future has always been part and parcel of the anthropological imagination. A concern for the future was evident in the salvage anthropologists' colonial project to document "cultures" and "traditions" for posterity (Pels 2015: 779) and in Margaret Mead's recognition, back in the 1970s, of the importance of studying future possibilities and potentials (Mead 1971, 2005). There were also some early attempts, largely bypassed by the mainstream, to envisage the role that anthropology might play in studying life beyond Earth (Maruyama and Harkins 1975). And in the 1980s, an anticipatory anthropology briefly emerged, but because it focused on microlevel processes, it had very little impact (Riner 1987; Salazar et al. 2017: 6–7; Textor 1978).

Anthropology's neglect of the future can be attributed to the discipline's preoccupation with the past, evident in its early focus on the classification of "cultures," "customs," and "traditions" according to Western conceptions of technological progress, which, to this date, reverberate in the discourses of development (Escobar 1991; Pels 2015: 787). American anthropology in particular has been vested in history since Franz Boas critiqued social evolutionism and adopted historical particularism in the early twentieth century. For Boas, "the whole problem of cultural history appears to us as a historical problem. In order to understand history, it is necessary to know not only how things are, but how they come to be" (Boas 1920: 314). Although anthropologists today have problematized "culture" and "tradition" as sets of practices, processes, and actions that are co-emergent with history, power, and politics, the discipline's focus on the past is deeply entrenched and has been cemented by its ongoing project of self-reflexivity, of exposing and critiquing its own colonial and imperialist legacy (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Pels 2015: 779).

When anthropologists do shift their focus away from the past toward the future, they tend to be preoccupied with demarcating—according to Western notions of time as linear—ontological differences in approaches to time. They ask, for instance, how the past has influenced the present and, by default, the future. Analyses of memory, nostalgia, the past, and history and how they inform societal transformation have been the focus, while the future continues to lurk in the margins (Bryant and Knight

2019: 7–8). These works frequently engage with the future as problematic and uncertain, displaced, or as a site of nostalgia and yearning (Guyer 2007; Hell and Schönle 2010; Piot 2010; Rosenberg and Harding 2005; Wallman 1992). Even in recent studies on prediction (Puri 2015), divination (Stein Frankle and Stein 2005), and dreaming (Stewart 2012), the future has been tackled predominantly through the lens of historicity (Bryant and Knight 2019: 10). Charles Stewart (2012: 2), for example, explores the future as part of historical consciousness—namely, as “basic assumptions a society makes about the shape of time and the relationship of events in the past, present, and future.” Anthropology’s neglect of the future can also be attributed to the fact that the future is often problematically associated with modernity and progress. In addition, some of the approaches that emerged in 1990s and early 2000s failed to gain traction because, rather than building their own theoretical basis, they primarily supported existing theoretical turns (Salazar et al. 2017: 8–9).

Only recently has the future grabbed the attention of anthropologists. It surfaced assertively in recent debates on the cosmos, extraterrestrial travel, and alien life forms and arguments that make room for hope, anticipation, and speculation (Battaglia 2005; Doyle 2005; Valentine 2016, 2017). This interest in futurism and science fiction (Rosenberg and Harding 2005), however, has rarely translated into an exploration of how futures are imagined, anticipated, and lived in everyday contexts (Bryant and Knight 2019: 12). The future also figures prominently in works that grapple with urban planning (Abram and Weszkalnys 2013), world mappings (Messerli 2016), scientific modeling of climate change (Hastrup and Skrydstrup 2013; Kirksey 2015; Schneider-Mayerson 2015), environmental politics (Mathews and Barnes 2016), biotechnology and the life sciences (Helmreich 2009), economentality (Mitchell 2014), design anthropology (Gunn et al. 2013; Akama et al. 2018), and the uncanny (Lepselter 2005, 2016). Similarly, studies on the impact of globalization on life opportunities have begun to seriously consider humans as future makers (Appadurai 2013; Bear 2014; Miyazaki 2004; Nielsen 2014; Pandian 2012; Wallman 1992). Anand Pandian (2012: 508), drawing on his work with South Indian popular filmmakers, stresses the importance of paying attention to the ways “the time yet to come” emerges and is experienced in the present moment. He conceives of time as “the generative weave of what we feel and do, trespassing any clear line that might be drawn between subjects and objects of anthropological research” (ibid.: 549).