

# ETNOFOOR

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Source: *Etnofoor*, Vol. 32, No. 1, Futures (2020), pp. 7-10

Published by: Stichting Etnofoor

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26924846>

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# Introduction

## Futures

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Thinking about futures and acts of future-making seem especially pertinent in these times of COVID-19. The current pandemic has thwarted or changed the capacity to imagine or build presents and futures for individuals, communities and governments. Horizons shift as societies prepare for a 'new normal' in times of COVID-19 based on even more insecure futures with changing roadmaps. Some futures available to us in the 'old normal' no longer seem available to us now, or they seem less available to some than to others. Who can sustain themselves for the foreseeable future by working from home and who will not cope with a society based on social distancing? As always, crises affect some people's presents and futures much harder than others.

Futures are, of course, always unequal and changing; and many of the articles in this issue profess to that.

The future is not a neutral temporality but one that is heavily contested and a fertile ground for hopes and anxieties. Many authors in this issue have positioned the future's role in the present at the centre of their analyses. This issue investigates how futural orientations take shape and how they impact our renderings of the past and present. How do hopes for or anxieties around certain futures shape everyday life? In addition to these questions, we showcase innovative ways for communicating analyses of the future, like the use of science fiction and a multimodal article that combines text, photos, art images, videos and music.

In her keynote address at the Dutch Anthropology Day 2019, Rebecca Bryant discusses how she 'became convinced that much of what we thought was a relationship to the past was actually much more a concern with the future' (11). Bryant demonstrates how the

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present is 'awakened' by futural orientations and shows that the ways in which we anticipate, look forward to, or speculate about the future permeate our everyday lives. Our futural orientations impact on practices in the present and our reflections on the past. Bryant encourages us therefore to make the study of the future central to any studies of the past and present and to focus on the active process of 'temporalising', rather than the static concept of 'temporality'. Building on the ideas of philosophers such as Hobbes and Heidegger, Bryant provides us with useful analytical tools for an anthropology of the future. She illustrates her arguments by drawing on her own ethnographic research on the conflict in Cyprus. Bryant identifies 'vernacular timespaces', periods in which we collectively experience 'the everyday ways in which temporality temporalises' (17), like a Time of War, a Time of the Referendum and a Time of Negotiations. She argues that in these different periods, time *feels* different. It is not difficult to see how her analytical vocabulary is fruitful in terms of gaining a deeper understanding of the time that we currently live in: the Time of COVID-19.

The three articles that follow the keynote focus, either implicitly or explicitly, on futural orientations and their impact on both mundane practices and the affective dimension of time. The authors discuss how people in precarious situations try to create and hold on to a future that is still possible and reachable within the limitations that they experience. Chitra Sangtani takes us to the informal settlements of Cairo and analyses contesting temporalities. On the one hand, she discusses the futural orientations of state officials, urban planners and real estate developers, who envision a 'slum-free' Cairo and imagine these sites as

tourist villages and global business hubs. In doing so, she demonstrates how future imaginations work as a form of present exclusion. On the other hand, Sangtani shares the stories and practices of residents of informal settlements who struggle against displacement. Despite the threat of eviction, violence and ongoing demolitions, the inhabitants of the informal settlements keep investing in building and renovation projects in and around their houses as a means of holding on to their future. Sangtani claims that 'It is precisely in situations of radical uncertainty that such labour assumes greater urgency' (34).

The photo essay by Anna Lisa Ramella brings the reader to Lake Naivasha in Kenya and the lives of laid-off or low-earning farm workers. In contrast to the slums of Cairo that are being threatened with transformation into a business hub, the place that Ramella portrays is (temporarily) left behind by global capitalism. She shows how her informants build a future by reusing and giving new functions to the remnants of a collapsed and deserted flower farm. Through her photos, Ramella explores the concept of 'material para-sites', stressing the process by which migrant workers 'shape and co-produce the settings of their own future-making beyond – or rather alongside – the existing formal job opportunities available to them' (46). Ramella shows how her informants find 'economic side paths' by building a future on material that is abandoned by others: re-using flower buckets, greenhouse foils, empty fertiliser bags and the ruins of a house.

Dina Zbeidy also studies the process of future-making in times of radical uncertainty. Drawing on ethnographic research among Syrian refugees in

Jordan, Zbeidy argues that marriages play an important role in refugees' orientations to the future. Her informants, like the residents of the informal settlements in Cairo and the deserted flower farm in Naivasha, experience serious limitations in their ability to orient themselves towards their new futures. Zbeidy argues that her informants' investment in marriage planning is 'considered a fundamental path toward rebuilding kin relations and social networks, finding intimacies, and gaining a sense of home amidst the daily troubles and difficulties of displacement' (72). In this way, marriage is an attainable and desirable practice to imagine different and better futures.

In Eric Orlowski's article on Swedish microchip implantation enthusiasts, quite a different futural orientation arises. While the futural orientations discussed in the previous articles are rooted in historical, current or future precarity, Orlowski's informants are driven by a belief in future technological innovations and a focus on improving the human body. While the subdermal implants have little to no current practical use, users see themselves as acting towards a desired techno-utopian future. Someday, they believe, the technology will help humans overcome the limitations of their bodies. By getting 'chipped' now, Orlowski's interlocutors want to set chip implant development in motion. It is thus more the anticipation of the potential technological development than any current benefits that motivates the actions of users.

In the next article, Peter Pels discusses the interaction between human culture, psychology and biology. He takes the so-called 'Generalized Unsafety Theory of Stress' (GUTS) as a starting point. This psychological theory holds 'that – contrary to the common percep-

tion that (coping with) stress is triggered by stressors – our embodied response to stress is always "on", *unless* we perceive indicators of safety that may inhibit it' (93) and thus stop our evolutionary 'fight or flight' response. However, the human response to stress cannot be explained through evolutionary mechanisms alone, Pels holds, but needs to include the 'formative role of cultural representations [...] and the power relations that they feed on and into as well' (104). In his article, Pels connects GUTS with the anthropology of the future. Inspired by works on witchcraft and racial discrimination, he investigates how stress responses get shaped over time and how culture can become 'second nature'.

The last two articles of this issue showcase innovative ways of presenting anthropological research on the future. The future is put centre stage in a surprising way in Kayla Rush's science fiction article based on her fieldwork with artists in Northern Ireland. The article starts with a dark story about the Last Artist, the final recipient of public art subsidies on a planetary colony. Rush's interlocutors have experienced severe austerity measures since 2012. Funding problems are common and artists have dystopian imaginations of the future. Rush uses science fiction to lay bare the affective dimensions of the futures imagined by her interlocutors. By writing grotesque ethnography and dislocating elements of imagined futures to other worlds and times, she forces us to look differently at the anxieties her informants have about the future and how this impacts their present.

Another novel approach to discussing the anthropology of the future is found in the article of Silke Baas, Louisanne van Hooff, Weera Koopman, Alex-

andra Michelle Lopez, Julie McBrien and Naomi Veenhoven. The authors provide us with a multi-modal literature review, the co-creation of the lecturer and students of a course on the anthropology of the future. The article text is put in conversation with videos, music and images in order to bring in the messiness and liveliness of learning and writing together. Based on their class discussions of several recent books that deal with futures, the authors close this special issue by drawing four lessons that can serve as a basis for researching the future.

An anthropology of the future helps us to gain insight into the ways in which people deal with their historic, current and future precarity, anxieties and hopes. By placing the future at the centre of their analysis, the articles of this issue shed light on the different ways in which people navigate their present and engage in future-making projects. Seemingly mundane activities such as reusing abandoned materials, house renovations and marriage show the efforts people make to orient themselves towards their futures in highly uncertain conditions. The use of seemingly useless technology speaks to the future promises it holds for some. By studying the futures that people strive for, we gain a deeper understanding of their presents and pasts.