

Come to Your Senses

Ethnography of the Everyday Futuring

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Our practices of research, design, and strategy create landscapes of possibility. Anticipation, an approach that has informed much of the recent ethnographic work on the future, is shaped by how these symbolic and material landscapes, and the forms of agency they make possible, are distributed. This makes anticipation politically significant, prompting an empirical question of when and with respect to whose experience broader future visions occur. Seeking to bring attention to processes of future-making that capture these disparities, we ground anticipation in lived experience. Drawing on two long-term fieldworks, we recognize significant variability in how the future manifests in the course of practical and reflective engagements in everyday life. To explore these engagements, we turn to “future senses” of memory, foresight, voice, optimism, and yearning. We then demonstrate how “future senses” can be productively integrated within conversations about advancing not only more diverse future visions, but also more inclusive planning and strategy.

Keywords: anticipation; future senses; alternative futures; everyday futuring

INTRODUCTION

When we anticipate the future, we often look for what is timeless, identifying behaviors that are enduring, and what is new, taking into account “marginal” or emerging practices that indicate where the mainstream is headed. This approach tends to over-index on the individual as it focuses on what is achieved by an independent, autonomous subject rather than what is achieved intersubjectively, “by means of the ongoing experiences of working together” (Fine 2019, 16). More importantly, it takes an “outside observant” perspective to emerging practices, focusing on how behaviors reflect macro-level shifts and trends rather than “long-lived human needs” (Graffman 2013, 147). While never shutting out macro-level shifts and other conditions that shape our lives, we propose an approach to futuring or foresight work that suspends assumptions as to their impact and relevance in order to attend closely to how circumstances are lived and made meaningful “through time” (Stephan and Flaherty 2019, 4). In this view, what appears from the outside as a stable vision of the future is always to some extent an abstraction from “lived experience” (Stephan and Flaherty 2019, 5). By pushing forward an experiential, bottom-up perspective, we give agency to communities to do futuring or foresight work themselves. Rather than seeing the future as an observed social practice, “out there” for us to discover, this view recognizes and tracks how the future emerges from within communities, and how it manifests across the range of practical and reflective engagements in everyday life—what we might call “everyday futuring.”

Once we recognize that lived experience is essential to any reading of what the future might entail, then an analysis of anticipation takes on a new, distinctively political, relevance. To clarify this point, we might consider an anthropological approach to the future that makes anticipation legible through its association with prediction and planning practices (Adams et al. 2009; Appadurai 2013; Bear 2016; Guyer 2007). In contrast, an approach through lived experience shows that anticipation is not always a clear and distinctive

previewing of future possibilities. When we anticipate the future, therefore, we must ask when and with respect to whose experience anticipation of the future occurs, or to put it another way, how any orientation to the future comes about, “and how [...] vicissitudes and permutations might be related to one another” (Stephan and Flaherty 2019, 6).

As should be clear from what we stated above, anticipation makes the future sensible in the present, but it also highlights the vagueness of our circumstances or sets us up for disappointment. This depends “not only upon the actual course of events,” but upon the collective conditions within which anticipation is embedded (Stephan and Flaherty 2019, 11). It is for this reason that we take particular interest in how we anticipate alongside others, in collaboration with them, and on their behalves. Central to our approach are Marcus Bussey’s “future senses” of memory, foresight, voice, optimism, and yearning, which connect us to others. While we will discuss these senses at some length later in the paper, we want to note here that interactions that happen when we engage in these senses order our perceptions, inform our decisions, “and shape our dreams” (Bussey 2017, 50). Simply put, they project us into the future. This makes “future senses” an essential analytic lens for understanding future-making. Anticipation, we might add, is an effective means through which the intrinsic interconnections of these senses can be disclosed. The paper, therefore, takes up a multifold agenda of attending to experiential circumstances through which anticipation arises, and reflecting upon the nature of those experiences to better understand what the future might entail.

We begin with an overview of anthropological studies of the future, showing that they imply, but few explicitly engage with, “everyday futuring.” In response to this lacuna, we draw on two long-term fieldworks, one in Argentina, the other in England and Bosnia, to show how memory, foresight, voice, optimism, and yearning spark actions in the present and bring alternative futures into being. After laying this groundwork, we move on to the task of applying “future senses,” and previous experiences of long-term fieldwork, to our work in the corporate setting. While we have not until this point explicitly stated that we use “future senses” for research conducted for corporate clients, we do in fact advocate for their application either as a method, analytic frame, or ideological position in the corporate setting. The chief benefit of using “future senses” is that they make us aware of whose visions of the future we are attending to, and whose actions we are seeking to build upon to shape the future. This awareness, we might add, leads to more consciousness about prioritizing one group over another, and inspires us to diversify future visions we put forward to our clients to build around. In what follows, we show how “future senses,” far from being an isolated object of analysis, can be emplaced within and read into ongoing conversations about developing not only a better understanding of alternative futures, but also more inclusive planning and strategy.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES OF THE FUTURE

Anthropology is teeming with ideas about the future. This rich landscape offers studies of aspiration, hope, and uncertainty, “investigating the variety of roles future possibilities play in shaping the present” (Stephan and Flaherty 2019, 1). Many of these themes have taken on renewed force in recent years, accompanied by calls to turn our gaze toward the future (Bryant and Knight 2019; Pels 2015; Pink and Salazar 2017). In their introduction to “experiencing anticipation,” Christopher Stephan and Devin Flaherty argue that it is no

coincidence that anthropology has started to focus on the future in this present moment (Stephan and Flaherty 2019, 1). Note, for example, Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta's ethnography of call centers in India, where they observe, "The future was something with which all our informants [...] seemed obsessed, and as ethnographers we began to take the obsessions of our informants seriously" (Mankekar and Gupta 2017, 69). Such repeated ethnographic encounters with "interests in the future" have inspired anthropologists to argue that attention to the future is a decisive fixation of our times (Stephan and Flaherty 2019, 1). If the future looms larger than ever, "there could never be a better time for anthropological studies of anticipation" (Stephan and Flaherty 2019, 2). Indeed, building on his criticism that anthropology has little to say about the future, especially about it being a "cultural fact" of imagination in the present, Arjun Appadurai suggests that anticipation will be essential to understanding the ways in which we construct the future (Appadurai 2013, 298).

The literature on anticipation within anthropology has thus far been fragmented, reflecting different interpretations and usages. In what is one of its most common usages, anticipation is equated with speculation or prediction (Campbell 2014). This juxtaposes with studies in which anticipation is interpreted as an uncertain previewing of future possibilities (Molé 2010), and an affective state of anxiety or excitement (Hermez 2012). In spite of differences, many of these studies are pitched at the level of the macro-social, and arise out of ethnographers' recognition of power that distinguishes "some lives and futures from others" (Stephan and Flaherty 2019, 3). For this reason, the scope and aim of these studies have not afforded the prospect of foregrounding "everyday futuring," or the idea that, far from being something "out there," the future manifests in the course of practical and reflective engagements in everyday life. That said, as Rebecca Bryant suggests, attending to lived experience of anticipation is essential to understanding the constitution of "broader social and cultural temporalities" (Bryant 2013, 22). We see here an invitation to add to the examination and elaboration of anticipation as it emerges in lived experience. Practitioners doing ethnographic work tend to interweave references to lived experience, such as "lived futures," within accounts of macro-level social phenomena. Indeed, they rely on the idea that these phenomena have impacts and repercussions for people on the ground. "Everyday futuring" is different in that it takes as an object of analysis the way that people themselves perceive, attend to, and anticipate the future. Beyond this, attention to lived experience shows that anticipation draws upon socialized dispositions and plays a crucial role in moderating our relationships to others. In order to grasp how we anticipate alongside others, in collaboration with them, and on their behalves—and how these collective acts orient us toward the future—we now turn our attention to the concept of "future senses."

Future Senses

In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze suggests that people are not tied to the past and the present, "but they also echo to the future" (Deleuze 1994, 107; see also Deleuze and Guattari 1996). "Future senses" of memory, foresight, voice, optimism, and yearning point to the ways in which people echo to the future. These senses, according to Bussey, are by and large natural to us. We remember and anticipate. We act as if we were free agents. We cherish hopes for the future. We yearn for meaning and belonging. These senses also connect us to others. We remember and anticipate as communities. We act as co-creators.

We share our hopes, “and we yearn together for wonder and connection” (Bussey 2017, 50). The relational nature of these senses suggests a new modality for future-making in which relationships act as a “logic of anticipatory power” that allows us to rethink “economics, politics, science, art, and life” (Bussey 2006, 83). It has taken some time to reach this point so that “future senses” themselves can be described.

Memory is the first sense. People remember in communities. They also misremember, entering into shared “memories” that provoke reactions to events in other temporal and spatial contexts that appear to share some common thread of meaning, “such as an old communal hurt being recalled to galvanize a community into action” (Bussey 2017, 60). Memory, as a result, can be manipulated, even invented. Bussey’s comments find an interesting complement in Deleuze’s reading of *In Search of Lost Time*, where he suggests that memory interprets the signs in Marcel Proust’s novel inaccurately, and that the search is “oriented to the future, not to the past” (Deleuze 2000, 10). **Foresight** is the second sense. It is closely linked to memory, and like memory, “it is a natural human faculty,” which draws on experiential circumstances (Bussey 2017, 61). Central to foresight is the search for alternative futures that rely on anticipatory imagination, that is, reorienting imagination toward the future while freeing it from the burden of the past. **Voice** is the third sense. Memory and foresight, as will become clear, come to the aid of voice to provide people with reflective tools to “escape their own conditioning” (Bussey 2017, 63; see also Foucault 1982). This, to hark back to Bryant, aligns actions and aspirations with broader social and cultural temporalities. **Optimism** is the fourth sense. Dreaming and seeking, experimenting and testing, “these are the tools deployed by this sense that intuits that there is [...] more to life than meets the eye” (Bussey 2017, 63). To deny optimism greatly limits our capacity to approach others with an open heart and take the needed risks to make alternative futures that are better for many, not just a few. Optimism paves the way for the final sense of **yearning**. It wells up within us as a sense of dissatisfaction with what is and a curiosity for new possibilities and horizons. In this regard, we follow avenues of inquiry opened up by Mihai Nadin who suggests that a sensory reading of the present is “anticipatory in nature” and fosters resilience (Nadin 2010, 110).

We do not espouse a higher-level framework for all anthropological attention to the future. Rather, we turn to “future senses” to parochialize exclusive visions that have long obscured alternative futures. At a time when the pressure upon us to simply “follow trends” is high, such an approach is urgently needed—it shows that the future develops in perspectival showings of a fundamentally shared and mutually constituted present.

FUTURE SENSES IN OUR FIELDWORK

Our thinking about “future senses” is grounded in experience and observation. It comes out of our own long-term fieldworks. ¹ The first explores how former political prisoners in Argentina reorganized themselves when detention camps were converted into museums, and requested survivors’ testimonies to narrate these spaces. Their collective recounting of “memories of resistance”—instead of torture and other horrors they endured in prison—revealed how the former political prisoners worked to create a future where youth were inspired to act politically rather than fear government repression (Park 2017, 13). Similarly, in England and Bosnia, pro-Palestinian activists drew on what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls “minority histories” to anticipate alternative futures and identities that inhabit them

(Chakrabarty 2000, 97).² They engaged with the marginalized and stigmatized conceptualization of Muslims vis-à-vis Europe, “which culminated in the Srebrenica genocide,” on the one hand, and the Altab Ali murder, on the other, to give voice to youth worried about the future of their community (Jevtic 2017, 2). These worries, in turn, manifested in contemporary struggles for inclusion and representation. In what follows, we discuss the intrinsic interconnections of “future senses” through the lens of our own long-term fieldworks, paying close attention to how sensing is anticipatory, but anchored in “collections of cultural data we call memory” (Bussey 2017, 59).

Argentina

We draw from fieldwork conducted over two consecutive years in 2008 and 2009 with the Association of Former Political Prisoners of Córdoba, hereafter referred to as *ex-presos*, in Argentina. During the military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983, the state “disappeared” around 30,000 dissidents or suspected dissidents, and illegally detained and tortured 10,000 more. In the mid-2000s, hundreds of former torture camps were being identified and converted into *Espacios para la Memoria*, or Spaces for Memory. These memorialized spaces required the testimonies of former political prisoners to narrate these spaces and serve as legal witnesses of events that took place in these sites during the resumed trials of ex-military officials.

While most scholarship on Argentina’s transitional justice process, or how societies deal with legacies of human rights abuses, focuses on Buenos Aires, where the highest number of “disappearances” happened. Córdoba Province, located in the middle of the country, has its own unique history of “disappearances.” Córdoba is the original capital of Argentina, and is historically known as the hub of the labor movement and intellectuals—National University of Córdoba is the country’s oldest university. The particular history of Córdoba is one of the reasons why the Association was the first to organize—they were the most politically active. What makes the Association a useful case for exploring “future senses” is that they were also collective, that is, they engaged in anticipation and sensing as a group. Their sensing was relational. As we discuss below, the entire work of the Association was in fact undergirded by “future senses”—they engaged in memory, foresight, voice, optimism, and yearning in order to shape their country’s political future.

One of the main responsibilities that *ex-presos* had was to lend their memories and testimonies to *Espacios para la Memoria*. Up to 600 torture camps are known to have existed across the country. In Córdoba, two former torture camps have been turned into institutions—D2, the former center for police intelligence that became an *archivo* (archive), as well as a museum and community space, and *La Perla*, a military base that was, in 2009, in the process of being turned into a memorialized space. The Association had elected members most in need of a job to work full-time at the *Archivo*, while others were part of the volunteer group that cleaned and prepared *La Perla* for the public.

In the *Archivo*, *ex-presos* gave tours to students, local visitors, and international groups, such as the United Nations. In one wing of the *Archivo* was a memorialized space to people who were “disappeared” at D2. Their families and friends donated personal items for display—journals, dresses, sweaters, books, photos, a typewriter, and paintings. *Ex-presos* told the stories of these *compañeros*—who they were, what they liked, who they dated, what they cared about, who their families and friends were, and how they spent their time. In another

room, visitors had the opportunity to browse the books that had been censored by the dictatorship, such as *The Little Prince* and mathematics textbooks that involved group work. *Ex-presos* recalled smuggling and hiding books, and circulated photographs and newspaper clippings from that era of the military burning piles of books. *Ex-presos* often had to explain to younger visitors why these books were threatening. They also recounted stories of breaking a dictatorship-era law against meeting in groups larger than three to debate writings and politics. At *La Perla*, the tour focused on what had happened there—how they were blindfolded, tortured, and where they believed others were killed in massive graves on site. *Ex-presos* who acted as docents shared how they tried to support each other even as they were prohibited from communicating with each other, how they sang songs in protest, or how they remembered each other's names and voices to tell their families that they had seen them.

The memory work that *ex-presos* did on a daily basis reflected Bussey's "future senses." The repetitive and intersubjective nature of this work reflected the collective sense of **memory**—*ex-presos* told the same stories but riffed upon each other's versions, finished each other's sentences, reminisced together, answered questions, and smiled ruefully at the other's recounting of the past. These memories resurfaced decades later, within a particular political context, and were, therefore, bound to be unstable, contradictory, and inconsistent. That said, what was consistent across the memory work that *ex-presos* did on a daily basis was a desire to make an intervention into how history was written, remembered, and reinforced. This work, in its summation, sought to reach youth in large numbers, to offer an alternative view of what they had read or been told. When speaking to *D2* or *La Perla* visitors, *ex-presos* also emphasized the importance of pushing for bills that would have an impact on the future—tax policy, media regulation, or education reform. *Ex-presos* saw themselves as being in a privileged position because they had the benefit of knowing history, knowing how to lobby, and knowing how to engage the politically indifferent in conversations over coffee. Simply put, they exercised **foresight** through their engagement with youth on contemporary issues. The goal of subversion or reinscription of historical narratives was also essential to a style of representation embedded in *ex-presos* activism. Notably, when the Association debated what to present at the *Archivo* or museum, they often chose to present themselves in an active, strong light, not as passive, damaged torture victims. Even as they fought for reparations as compensation for the past harms that still affected them, the collective sense of **voice** that they exercised publicly was one of defiance, of youthful humor and spirit. The memory work that *ex-presos* did on a daily basis was implicitly and explicitly suffused with **optimism**. They were seeking to inspire and educate youth, to rectify historical narratives, within the very walls of the clandestine centers of detention where they were once tortured. By reclaiming and redefining these spaces they declared that their work mattered, and expressed a **yearning** for it to impact how they would be remembered.

These senses led to processes of future-making. To clarify, we might consider how, due to their engagement in "future senses," half of the Association reactivated their allegiance to a pro-Peronist/Kirchner political party and re-engaged in politics outside of their role as *ex-desaparecidos*. The memory work that *ex-presos* did on a daily basis also shifted how the public viewed *ex-desaparecidos*, and how *ex-presos* viewed themselves in history. The splitting and formation of a political organization engaged with present politics, and not with the past, and a historiographical shift in the victim-perpetrator binary, we might add, are proof of the future *ex-presos* constructed. This is not to suggest that collective efforts toward a specific

political project always come to fruition. Rather, observing over time a group of people engaging more with present political issues, after initially organizing in response to the memory explosion in Argentina's transitional justice process, provided a window into how the role of human rights groups was shifting from memory politics to legislative politics. In addition, by virtue of inserting themselves into the memory spaces, *ex-presos* were shifting the public narrative about the dictatorship. They shifted the focus from the victim-perpetrator binary to recalling people's commitment to various political projects during the Cold War. "Future senses," therefore, are not about trotting out a list of better predictions. They are about the work that is happening on the ground—what people are actually doing to conjure up the future *they* want.

What can we learn from the work of *ex-presos* in terms of "future senses?" One, the engagement with a group lends itself to a study of the social nature of humans and what is created by a collective, as opposed to individual actions within a collective or social group. Two, we are able to see what is socially negotiated, with close attention to the work and tension that go into developing group positions and decisions, as opposed to simply recording the aspirations, beliefs, and needs of an individual. Lastly, this case reveals the productive nature of investigating agendas—political, social, and personal—and how group support for these agendas leads to political activities.

England and Bosnia

The theme of "future senses" carries through fieldwork from England and Bosnia. For four years, from 2009 to 2013, we explored the ways in which pro-Palestinian activism acted as a catalyst around which different discourses on the duties of Muslims and the future of the Islamic community (*umma*) were articulated. Through ethnographic detail, we showed that these discourses were tightly intertwined with local histories and social and cultural contexts, and had as much to do with the plight of Palestinians as they did with the complexities and contingencies of daily Muslim lives in England and Bosnia. In an interesting contrast to the work of *ex-presos*, these discourses were not oriented toward politics as it is conventionally understood—their purpose was not to influence state policy or to mobilize voting blocs. Rather, they were political in a way described by Hannah Arendt—the activities of people who, through the exercise of their agency in contexts of public interaction, "shape the conditions of their collective existence" (Arendt 1958, 64, cited in Hirschkind 2006, 8). In order to flesh out the perspective we develop here, it is useful to examine "future senses" deployed in the context of different discourses on religious obligation, with pro-Palestinian activism as the case in point.

In a plethora of pro-Palestinian initiatives, led by churches, student associations, and trade unions, some of the most innovative ones came from Tower Hamlets, a working-class borough in London, and its Bangladeshi community, which suffered excessively from unemployment, lack of public services, and poor housing conditions. Stari Grad, an old borough in Sarajevo, at the same time, had a recent history of violence that paved the way for strong symbolic ties with the Palestinian people. Anxiety, fear, and hope were all at different times evoked by **memory**, which resulted in different imaginaries of pro-Palestinian activism. In Tower Hamlets, it was a sign of commitment to Islam that inspired hope amid local expressions of racism, most notably the murder of Altab Ali, a 25-year-old Bangladeshi clothing worker. In Stari Grad, it was an emotional response to anxiety and fear

that echoed through an extensive history of international hypocrisy and double standards on human rights. In *The Foresight Principle*, Richard Slaughter suggests that **foresight** needs honing to enable us to deal with “simultaneous and interconnected crises” for which memory on its own is not enough of a guide (Slaughter 1995, 5). Consider, for example, activists who contrasted the parochialism of their elders with a set of welfare needs in Tower Hamlets and a set of geopolitical issues that they believed to be relevant to all Muslims, most notably Palestine. In this, simultaneous and interconnected crises became crucial elements in future-making. Activists drew on lived experience to bring to bear new possibilities and horizons, whether in acts of providing religious instruction or charity. These, we might add, were political acts in that they posed a threat to exclusive visions that rendered Muslims invisible. Similarly, in Stari Grad, activists articulated their calls to religious obligation within a larger discourse on the present plight of the *umma*, which culminated in references to the Srebrenica genocide. The point of such discourse was not victimhood per se, but its role in destabilizing the present and opening up the future. For these activists, it was the doing that mattered. It is, therefore, not surprising that the collective sense of **voice** appeared often during fieldwork. Bussey suggests that voice must be instituted in the doing “as actions build culture, so new cultures emerge from new actions that are reflective of new choices, new values, and new imaginative configurations” (Bussey 2017, 63). These choices, values, and imaginative configurations, in turn, informed **optimism** among activists. Optimism enabled them to continue doing their work despite state surveillance and scrutiny. Lastly, **yearning** emerged as an itch to transgress political pressures, to question and reframe mantras of the present. It pushed anticipatory imagination forward, provoking new explorations of religious obligation in England and Bosnia.

As should be clear from what we stated above, taking “future senses” as both a principle for action and as an active space of imagination pushes at the limits of what is recognizable as religious obligation in England and Bosnia. In an atmosphere saturated by debates about cultural fitness of Muslims in Europe, which depict the values engendered within the largest segments of Muslim communities as incompatible with the ways of life, social norms, and values of Europe, “future senses” serve as a central source of motivation and means by which Muslims in Europe collectively conceptualize their position, as well as action they need to take in order to change that position and create a better future. Unlike their parents and grandparents, new generations of Muslims in Europe are resistant to the apprehensions of the dominant or mainstream society. They see Europe as their home, and they look for new ideas and interpretations of religious obligation that are compatible with the day-to-day realities of life in Europe. Pro-Palestinian activism points to one possibility in a plethora of new choices, new values, and new imaginative configurations.

Particular configurations of choices, values, and imaginaries differentially inflect patterns of attention, reflection upon, and elaboration of “what is anticipated” (Stephan and Flaherty 2019, 6). This variability renders anticipation a valuable object of analysis. It nuances but also challenges us to rethink our planning and strategy. We often assume that clients are the ones who will create the future based on our insights of what we think is to come. What we suggest instead is to study what people are doing in the present to create a better future. In short, our projects should not be suggestions of contexts and behaviors to favor and design for, but rather strategies for clients to tap into the memory, foresight, voice, optimism, and yearning of people working together toward the future.

FUTURE SENSES IN OUR CONSULTING WORK

The cases outlined above show that the future is developed in interpersonal engagements in everyday life. “Future senses,” as the lens through which these engagements are explored, have vast implications for how we see our role as practitioners and how we work as ethnographers. We will now discuss how we have drawn upon our previous experiences of long-term fieldwork in the corporate setting of social science-based consulting. The academic tools we bring to our work are not always made explicit to our clients, but they inform the way we frame, conduct, analyze, and apply our findings to provide direction on how to position our clients for the future.

First, one way we have applied a method and theory of “future senses” has been to change our unit of analysis. We have shifted from theorizing on individuals to theorizing on “interacting groups” (Fine 2003, 41). The dominant model is to contextualize individual behaviors within the literature or expert views on macro-level social phenomena. What we suggest instead is that a study of groups where the members work together to make things happen casts light on the everyday. For example, for a tech client, our investigation of fan communities who meet in-person and virtually allowed us to see the formation of what Ray Oldenburg calls a “third place” on online platforms (Oldenburg 1989, 25). We have long discussed how our interactions have shifted with the Internet and social media. But our observation of fans on platforms, such as Discord, regarded their gatherings as being at a café, where they see regulars and meet new fans. Their perception of platforms as a “third place,” superior to a physical one, where they make, maintain, and grow their communities, gave us insight into how a major socialization shift has taken place and where the future has developed.

We have observed how groups engage in mundane acts like informal conversations, as in the case of fan communities, to conjure a future that fits their visions and reflects their needs and desires. Focusing on groups or collectives of people has widened our lens not only in terms of a number of individuals involved in the research, but has also enabled us to investigate what people are committed to—being part of something bigger than themselves, we argue, indicates a level of commitment toward making a specific future possible. For example, for a non-profit client, study of Jewish congregations allowed us to see how religious communities maintain and grow religious institutions, and how their approach leads to a future with more or less religious affiliations. How these communities meet and interact in day-to-day presents, in this sense, informed our perspective on possible futures.

Anthropologists approach communities as not just observers but as theorists—we want to understand the customs, rules, moral codes, and histories that one gains from becoming a member or familiar, and accepted, figure within a community. How one enters a community, anthropologists are taught, is extremely important because it will shape how you are seen, trusted, and regarded. Communities are not always defined or formal, they could be a section of a city, a loosely affiliated network, or an investment into a shared identity, and they are more likely not to have a defined platform than have one. All anthropologists are in one way or another drawing the lines of a community by seeking to enter it, but these lines should be defined by those being studied—not the anthropologist. In the corporate setting, we are, along with our clients, drawing the lines of a community and defining what activities we will observe and ask about. But studying “future senses” is about tracing the interactions that people themselves are engaged in, and that they deem to be important. To shift our practice,

we should be—before having conversations with clients—connecting with a broad range of communities and establishing our relationships, such that when we want to bring forth insights, we are doing so by drawing from the multiplicity of collective acts being done in the everyday—with or without explicit agendas.

Second, we have used “future senses” as an analytic frame or a set of concepts to filter our data. Rather than focusing on unmet needs and challenges, we analyzed how the very act of groups coming and working together in the everyday was a shift that opened a door for future shifts to take place. For example, for a healthcare client, we observed how a ballroom community offered young members a chance to express themselves through dance, poses, and outfits, and earn respect from others within a community that was separate from the social pecking order that they had encountered in the dominant or mainstream society. The ways in which a ballroom community communicated what was valued, produced norms, and engaged in competitions opened up more possibilities for individuals within it. Being part of a ballroom community also suggested certain benefits for individuals that had a protective effect on their health. Gaining entry into competitions, for example, required HIV testing. Being part of a ballroom community, therefore, allowed them to be aware of who was sick and who was not. These insights into how to engage with a ballroom community and how to make health interventions was predicated upon understanding the future that this group was oriented toward—gaining social status within a ballroom community helped energize and propel a shared desire to overcome socioeconomic struggles and pursue upward mobility.

Third, we believe that “future senses” offer a useful lens into non-culturally dominant ways of envisioning the future, and what the future might entail, because we are identifying and amplifying specific agendas. The cases of *ex-presos* and pro-Palestinian activists mentioned earlier feature groups with specific agendas to make a specific future possible. As ethnographers, we can identify and amplify groups’ agendas that diversify how we see the future. This would require identifying clients who are DEI minded or who are seeking less visible or alternative agendas to the dominant ones. As stated earlier, we must ask when and with respect to whose experience anticipation of the future occurs. For example, for a tech client, we explored experiences of black communities in navigating various forms of racial injustice, and how social media served to amplify these injustices or to circumvent them. We, as a result, observed the role of black communities in building support networks and change movements, especially how these communities helped each other address specific forms of inequalities. The ways in which black creative communities collectively contributed expressions of black culture into the mainstream, in this sense, reflected their shared agenda to counter reductive norms and representations.

“Future senses,” as a method, analytic frame, or ideological position, call upon us to become a part of communities as anthropologists. Through the process of striving to become accepted into and learn the “rules” of communities, we develop a perspective on where the future is headed as it emerges from within communities. There is a difference between explaining a historical shift in order to say, “This is where the future is headed, and this is how you should position yourself to meet it,” and actively ingratiating oneself within communities to say, “This is the future they are building, and my perspective is built on being a part of their everyday life and seeing how they live.” Our argument is not about accuracy of guessing the future but rather about having a different relationship to our subjects, and thereby gaining a different perspective on future visions and how they emerge.

CONCLUSION

Our reflection on “future senses” in general, and suggestion to integrate “future senses” in our practices of research, design, and strategy in particular, has been an adventure into possibility, and new ways of thinking and doing. As should be clear, we are invested in embracing more deeply an experiential, bottom-up perspective when using ethnography in order to provide new insights into the relational nature of future-making. To us, this is meaningful work that calls us to question the idea of the “over there” subject as the object of analysis—something that knowledge can be extracted from and inserted “here.” Rather, we locate the possibility of agency—to perceive, attend to, and anticipate the future—within the “empirical particulars of the group being observed” (Fine 2003, 44).

In grounding anticipation in lived experience, moreover, we offer a framework for approaching the way the future develops in different social and cultural contexts, and show how integral the future is to the present. Such an approach has the potential to reveal realities often overlooked in broader future visions, including the inequalities which such visions, strategies, and plans tend to reproduce. Lived experience, we might add, differs across time and space, across cultures and countries. Capturing these disparities, and exploring how they come about, is the first step in creating diverse kinds of potential instead of simply “following trends.” As Ákos Östör noted some decades ago, “There are many worlds, human beings are the world makers, and the future is still open ended” (Östör 1993, 88).

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NOTES

1. While these fieldworks were conducted individually, we opt to use an inclusive first person plural pronoun—“our,” “us,” and “we”—for clarity and consistency.
2. For the sake of brevity, Bosnia and Herzegovina is referred to as “Bosnia” in the paper.

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