Haunting, Dutching, and Interference: Provocations for the Anthropology of Time

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I consider three ways of thinking about time, especially the future, that are new to anthropology. The concepts of interference and haunting illuminate how pasts and futures interact so that consideration of “historicity” needs to be complemented by “futuricity.” Discussion of promissory notes and Dutch betting (hedging bets) prompts reassessment of forward planning, including prophecy and prediction. Scenario planning is viewed as a way of “dutching the future.” Anthropologists need to acknowledge that their analytical vocabularies are metaphor laden to enable more finely nuanced reflection and analysis. Explicitly incomplete accounts can achieve this, accommodating the messiness of temporality. This provides a way of understanding and accounting for haunting, interference from both the past and the future, with Dutching as one way of responding.

1. Nancy Munn provides a still-helpful review essay (Munn 1992). Some key references for thinking about time are Edmund Leach’s essay “Time and False Noses,” included in Rethinking Anthropology (Leach 1961); Alfred Gell’s book The Anthropology of Time (Gell 1992); and Kevin Birth’s more recent Time Blind (Birth 2016). Gell discusses and qualifies two sources often cited to justify the claim that other cultures have different concepts of time: Bourdieu (1963) on Kabyle calendars (Gell 1992:294) and Geertz (1973) on Balinese time reckoning (Gell 1992:81–82). Birth, in his recent book as well as earlier monographs (Birth 1999, 2012), is particularly concerned with the risk of homochronism: the inappropriate and misleading assumption of shared conceptions of time. Although it is largely a topic for another occasion, there are relevant parallels with Smith and Vokes’s discussion of photography. One way to consider the differences among ideas, metaphors, models, and concepts (outside the philosophical tradition) is to think of each as a ghost haunting the others (an idea to which I shall return). Such is the case with photography:

More than a “metaphor” but less than a “belief,” the linking of the photograph and the ghost occurs time and again as a local theory or a response to the manner in which photography affects those living in a range of social and cultural contexts. (Smith and Vokes 2008:290)

There is another paper (if not a book) to be written about ghosts and photographs, about photographic hauntings, but I cannot pursue the topic here. However, as I argue below, haunting is a provocative model for thinking about the interactions between pasts, futures, and presents, as is interference. These provide ways of building on the work of Charles Stewart (2016) on the concept of “historicity” in anthropology. (I use Stewart’s [2012] ethnographic work as an example below.) Stewart (2016) explores conflicting understandings of the term by anthropologists and historians, “between historicity as verifiable factuality and historicity as a cultural perception of the past, thereby producing a minefield of potential misunderstanding between anthropologists on the one hand and historians and the general public on the other” (82). He continues, “’Historicity’ [may be] considered as the manifold interdependencies between a present (always sensing the future) and the pasts it elects to consider” (Stewart 2016:82). This suggests that we should rethink both historicity and what I call “futuricity” and start to consider the ghostly interactions between them and “presence” (their present counterpart). To paraphrase Stewart’s definition of historicity, we can understand futuricity as involving...
the manifold interdependencies between a present (always sensing the past) and the futures it elects to consider. Temporality might then be considered either as the manifold interdependencies between a present and the futures and pasts it elects to consider or as an interacting (haunting and interfering) amalgam of futurity, historicity, and presences.2

Two of the three models I consider below have now been mentioned. As we shall see, the third, dutching, is a way of bringing risk and a more calculated approach to considering a wide range of futures.

Models or Metaphors? Too Many or Too Few?3

What is termed a model in one academic tradition, such as anthropology and the social sciences, is a metaphor in another, such as cultural studies and the humanities. Social science likes to talk about conceptual or analytic models, the humanities about conceptual metaphors. So discussion of haunting in cultural studies mainly uses metaphor (e.g., Blanco and Peeren 2013), whereas in anthropology, we find both (e.g., Hodges 2008, discussing time). Other terms could be used; I could talk about frames or lenses. I prefer to switch to and fro between metaphors and models, using this to provoke the exercise of analytic reflexivity: hence the use of “provocation” in the title.

Academic debate is often obfuscated by a superfluity of models or metaphors (and by authors who confuse them).4 Discussions of time suffer the opposite problem but with the same result. The topic of “time” offers too few metaphors that various writers apply to mean different things.5 We spatialize, mapping one dimension (time) onto several (space). We talk about moving or traveling through time and then trip over the asymmetry: we cannot return to where we started; there are no circular paths; time travel is impossible.6 The interconnections are illustrated by Ingold and Vergunst’s (2008) reflection that “to follow a path is to remember how it goes, making one’s way in the present is itself a recollection of the past . . . onward movement is itself a return” (quoted in Macfarlane 2012:185). Moreover, the idea of “onward” or “direction” is itself spatialized: it assumes a present orientation to the future, to one’s intended destination, and, as Heidegger observed, the destination may be more “proximate” (salient) than our immediate location (Heidegger 1978 [1962]:142). In short, applying spatial metaphors to time has limitations and risks confusion.7

Apart from space, the other major metaphorical resource for considering both past and future is the complementary tense: we play games with parallels (symmetries, asymmetries) between tenses, between the future and the past. (I plead guilty here with the rest.) We talk about anticipating or predicting the past, about remembering or forgetting the future.8 This is enjoyable and provocative, but it does not necessarily benefit anthropological analysis.

In other work, Stefan Tanaka (2016) has recently argued for a “history without chronology,” one that is open to different interpenetrating ways of letting time work (multiple temporalities). He repeatedly invokes the multiple levels at which complex adaptive systems work and cites encouragingly the idea of a “mobility turn,” although he admits that it is another way of spatializing time (a practice he is cautious about).

Guyer (2007, taken up by de Abreu [2013], among many others) draws parallels between formal economics and Christian prophecy. In her account, both of these traditions “evacuate the near future” because their practitioners have their eyes only on the horizon, on the long term (evoking shades of J. M. Keynes’s [1923] “in the long term we are all dead” [80]) or the apocalypse.

There is a parallel between such emptying of the future and historical myopia: obsessions with innovation and change lead to repetitions of the same mistakes and to what we could term an “evacuation of the near past.” The past, including the recent past, is dismissed as being irrelevant because now everything is different. I regard this as a form of millenarianism. In the field of high technology, specifically internet talk, the stock phrase is “That is so 1.0 (or even 2.0) thinking. Now we are 3.1.1.” (This was a grumble by a middle-aged man about persisting with the use of a non-smartphone in 2014. The distinctions are between the original World Wide Web, Web 1.0;...

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2. In previous drafts of this paper, I suggested the further neologism “temporicity,” but I am persuaded, prompted by the Current Anthropology reviewers, that this is unnecessary. As I argue in another place (D. Zeitlyn, unpublished manuscript), we should neologize with caution.

3. This section is a revised version of part of Zeitlyn (2015).

4. I argue this at greater length in Zeitlyn (unpublished manuscript). In another area, archives provide an example of the dangers of metaphorical confusion and overextension; see Zeitlyn (2012a). The South African archivist Verne tqoeqiza (2015) connects “archive” (his term) and haunting.

5. One motivation for the discussions reported in Shryock and Smail (2011) is the perceived need for a new set of metaphors to help comprehend “deep history.”

6. Surely, the clearest evidence that time travel does not occur is that (even in Europe, where written records cover, albeit patchily, a couple of thousand years) there are no records of time travelers from the distant future. Of course, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and time travelers may have covered their tracks very cleverly indeed, but this is at the very least suggestive! For the more general point about not going backward, see Hughes (1995:2, citing Maurice Bloch). Relatedly, David Lewis (1987) argues that time travel is conceptually possible but does not occur in this possible world. See also David Reason (2015).

7. Sinha et al. (2014) provide an Amazonian counterexample: they document Amondawa time registers and ways of discussing time that we should note do not use spatial references. As Birth (2012) describes it, their “data on Amondawa ways of discussing time revealed ways of indicating the past, present, and future; the seasons; the parts of a day; and stages in the life cycle. The lexicon for discussing time does not make any spatial references” (21).

8. See, e.g., David Thomas’s Predicting the Past: An Introduction to Anthropological Archaeology (Thomas 1974). An example of this approach is the use of computer-based climate modeling to reconstruct the routes of the ancient Silk Road, identifying (predicting) archaeological sites (Frachetti et al. 2017). The phrase “remembering the future” is even more widely used: Google Scholar gives more than 2,500 hits for that phrase (on September 27, 2017).
the so-called Web 2.0, which arrived with the development of social media platforms; and the most recent state of the web at the time of writing, 2017.) However, the relevance of these issues extends to world events: consider the international response to conflicts in Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. Is there any evidence that we learn from the past? I fear that there is substantial evidence that we do not. (Marx [1852], in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, says that history repeats itself “the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce” [1], which we must recognize as often a bloody or deadly farce. The third repetition may be as parody, ironically, but is no less bloody for that.) In the terms suggested above, this may be a failure of futurity.

Not only do humans seem unable to learn from their pasts, but also it has been suggested that we do not think in long enough timescales. Some attempts have been made to remedy this. The Humanity 3000 project considered a 1,000-year horizon, asking what the world would be like in the year 3000 (Inayatullah 2012). The same timescale has been used for an automated piece of music by the composer Jem Finer that will take 1,000 years to play.7 Even more ambitious is the work of the Long Now Foundation, one of whose initial goals was to make a clock capable of running for 10,000 years.8 They also have a deceptively simple, smaller proposal. They suggest a typographic reform to provoke thought about a longer time horizon: adding an initial zero when writing dates, so the year of writing this essay should be written as “02017.” But even the Long Now Foundation does not consider the timescales of “deep history,” which bridge historical, evolutionary, and geological eras. This is tackled in a fascinating collection of essays discussing time spans of more than 3 million years (Shryock and Smail 2011).9 In their introduction, Shryock and Small suggest three new metaphors for bridging the gap between conventional history and deep history: “kinshipping,” “coevolutionary spirals,” and “fractal perspectives.” Kinshipping is the recognition of commonality (and, simultaneously, difference) across a divide. For example, when interacting with other primates, such as chimpanzees or gorillas, many people report feeling recognition, sympathy, a sense of shared understanding, despite all the differences. We are some sort of distant cousins and seem to recognize a common bond: in other words, a kinship.10 Archaeologists refer to similar intuitive affinities when describing the reactions prompted by, for example, an artifact that fits comfortably in the hand or an object that has been repaired, showing that it was worth mending.

Shryock and Small’s second metaphor is that of the coevolutionary spiral. They say that this “envisions two genealogies intertwined and feeding off each other, and that it” displaces metaphors of genesis, revolution, and the biblical Fall” (Shryock and Smail 2011:19). By emphasizing coevolution, they shift the focus to wider ecological perspectives, away from the more usual obsession with humans. It is clearly misleading to view the world as if everything else is at the service of humans: indeed, humans serve the evolutionary ends of many other species. Codpendence and coevolution are the key ideas.

The third concept introduced by Shryock and Smail is that of fractal perspectives,11 which they explain as follows:

The fractal, and the imagery of ever-smaller scales it evokes, suggests that leaps are always built on other leaps. Like kinshipping and spiraling, fractal patterns draw us ceaselessly into the past. They explain why changes in the things we can measure, such as gross population, population density, and energy consumption, do not have to be large to be profound. (Shryock and Smail 2011:19–20)

Ideas such as these may well help to establish bridges, not only into the past but also into the distant future. In addition to the “deep pasts” considered by Shryock and Smail, I suggest that we should also be considering “longer futures,” with a 3-million-year span projecting into the future as well as the past.

Having considered these alternatives, I return to my own preferred set of three (interference, haunting, and dutching), which I think can help particularly when thinking about processes in the somewhat shorter timescales usually considered by social anthropologists. In the terms used by Shryock and Small, interfering and haunting may contribute to what they call spiraling, but I cannot see a parallel with their terms and dutching, on the one hand, and neither can I see a way of mapping their term kinshipping onto any of the metaphors I will now discuss.

Interference

Waves passing through two adjacent slits produce diffraction patterns in which the waves overlap, reinforcing or canceling each other out to produce characteristic patterns because each slit behaves like a point source emitting “its own wave” (fig. 1). Classical physics theory calls this phenomenon interference. Where two or more waves meet, they are said to be “superposed.” What happens at that point depends on how crests and troughs meet, how they mutually reinforce each other or cancel each other out. This creates a new pattern: a diffraction or interference pattern. These patterns are stable and characteristic

9. The piece is being “live-casted” online at http://longplayer.org/. 
10. See http://longnow.org/clock/ (accessed September 12, 02018 [sic]) for progress reports. I look forward to reports from readers about whether it really does run for the planned life span.
11. So perhaps the year of their publication should be written as “0002011,” which shifts the 0 point back and raises the question of negative long now dates (on a parallel to dates BC). Robert Heilbroner (1995) also thinks about longer timescales, extending his distant past to 100,000 years ago. He also discusses possible futures but, by these standards, with a far more restricted (albeit unstated) time frame.
12. Donna Haraway makes a similar point talking about oddkin and other forms of kinship (Haraway 2016:2–3, 99–103).
13. This parallels Tanaka’s idea of multiple levels cited above. Fractal accounts of the history of peoples on the Cameroonian-Nigerian borderlands have been given by Zeitlyn and Connell (2003) and by Gausset (2010).
of the frequencies of the waves that are meeting and the separation of the slits. When two wave crests or two troughs coincide, they produce a larger wave in what is called positive interference, but when trough and crest meet, they cancel each other out, leaving an area of flat calm in so-called negative interference. The analysis of interference patterns has been very significant in the history of science in the twentieth century. From a particular interference pattern it is possible to infer backward to some of the properties of the slits that produced it (such as their separation). This is the basic physics behind the X-ray diffraction patterns that Ruth Franklin used to analyze the structure of DNA, which Crick and Watson reconstructed as the famous double helix.

There is a further aspect of two-slit interference patterns that is worth considering. One of the now-standard ways of demonstrating wave-particle duality is by passing particles such as electrons through two slits: they scatter in ways described by classic wave theory, as just described. Such interference is easy to conceptualize for waves but impossible to explain for billiard ball–like particles. Moreover, a variant of the experiments that fire electrons at pairs of slits uses an electron beam of such low intensity that only one particle is in the system at any time. Despite the low intensity, they eventually produce the same effects as high-intensity beams. The characteristic interference pattern is produced over time, so, at some level where metaphor meets the concrete, the individual electrons “know” where their past and future counterparts impact and shape their trajectory accordingly. It is difficult to find a neutral language here, and space prohibits detailed discussion of the philosophical implications of quantum mechanics (see Dippel and Warnke [2017] for some relevant discussion). However, this simple experiment with its paradoxical result shows how both pasts and futures are involved in present events. Pasts and futures can be seen to interfere with the present. Further, they also interfere with each other. Metaphorically, they could also be described as haunting each other. Interference is systematic and predictable, haunting much less so. The two metaphors capture different aspects of how pasts and futures are entangled in the present. Having introduced interference, I now turn to haunting.

Multidirectional Haunting

Robert Frost’s (1920) poem “The Road Not Taken” is about a past decision that will haunt the future. The narrator predicts that reflection on “the road not taken” will cause regret “ages and ages hence.” The poem predicts that the decision will make “all the difference,” although as David Orr (2015) points out, the poem undermines this reading and ironizes any difference made or claimed. Indeed, as he points out, three roads actually meet at the divergence.14 Frost’s fork in the road has three branches: it is a Y junction. The traveler, therefore, has not a binary but at least a three-way choice, including returning the way they came, and a fourth choice of not following the road at all. (The poem could be rewritten as either “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and I, I turned back whence I had

14. In Cameroonian pidgin, the junction in the yellow wood would be called “three corner.” If it were not a Y junction, the two diverging roads would either resemble Richard Long’s artwork A Line Made by Walking, a road going from nowhere to nowhere, or be a single road with a steeply angled bend, which is scarcely the stuff of poetry.
come” or “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and I, I
plunged off the road into the xanthous trees.”)

The point of the poem is how a choice made at one moment
will haunt later moments. Classically, a ghost is taken to come
from the past and manifest itself in the present (see Buse and
Stott 1999:11). At the beginning of Hamlet, the prince con-
fronts the ghost of his recently murdered father, whose man-
ifestation on the ramparts of Elsinore Castle sets off a chain
of events that later unfolds through the play’s timescape. Avery
Gordon explored these issues in her book Ghostly Matters:
Haunting and the Sociological Imagination (Gordon 2008
[1997]). As she put it, “Haunting raises specters, and it alters
the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past,
the present, and the future” (Gordon 2008 [1997]:xvi). She sees
haunting as involving futures as well as pasts, a point to which
I return below. Of course, more modern hauntings have also
been cited; The Communist Manifesto starts in the present
tense: “A spectre is haunting Europe” (Marx and Engels 2012
[1848]:73; emphasis added). At that moment of history, in the
“year of revolutions,” communism was current and pressing;
the issue was movement across space rather than across time,
but as they evoked it, the fear of communism was haunting con-
temporary politics, just as both militant religion and terrorism
now haunt politics in many countries around the world.

In the introduction to the second edition of her book,
Gordon writes:

If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there
is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling
with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or
the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is
taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing
person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that
dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The
ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost,
or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly
well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its
own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and
haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has hap-
pened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively,
sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into
the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience,
not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.
(Gordon 2008 [1997]:8)

Ferreday and Kuntsman have edited a special issue of the
journal Borderlands (Ferreday and Kuntsman 2011) using
Gordon’s work to examine ways of connecting to the future.
They “propose a different form of futurity: adopting haunting
as demand for justice, as something to be done, and looking
not just into past and present, but into the future/futures. Such
thinking about futurity is not so much about remembering and
forgetting, as it is about responsibility” (Ferreday and Kunts-
man 2011:8). This chimes with Tine Gammeltoft’s account
of the uncertainties concerning pregnancy in contemporary Viet-
nam. Long after the war has ceased (a war that Vietnamese
people do not wish to remember), the legacy of the spraying of
the defoliant Agent Orange continues. There are very high rates
of fetal abnormality, so an announcement of pregnancy is wel-
come news but one tinged with dread. Gammeltoft (2013:S165)
uses Heidegger’s idea of moments across time being “equipri-
omordial” (gleichursprünglich), which I think is close to Gor-
don’s “seething presences.”

When considering the metaphorical basis for thinking about
time and about how to approach temporality, I started with the
phenomenon of interference in physics. In the human sciences,
Gordon’s “transformative recognition” of “seething presences”
of hauntings neatly parallels the effects of interference, as
contributors to Ferreday and Kuntsman (2011) draw out. As I
see it, they differ in that interference is more structured than
haunting.15

Derrida’s Specters of Marx is as much about Hamlet and
the idea of time being “out of joint” (Shakespeare 1963, act 1,
scene 8, line 188) as it is about Marx. In this book, Derrida
coined the influential neologism “hauntology.” As Derrida put
it, in words not all readers find helpful:

Repetition and first time: this is perhaps the question of the
event as question of the ghost. What is a ghost? What is the
effectivity or the presence of a specter, that is, of what seems to
remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum?
Is there there, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, an
opposition that holds up? Repetition and first time, but also
repetition and last time, since the singularity of any first time
makes of it also a last time. Each time it is the event itself, a
first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end
of history. Let us call it a hauntology. This logic of haunting
would not be merely larger and more powerful than an on-
tology or a thinking of Being (of the “to be,” assuming that it is
a matter of Being in the “to be or not to be,” but nothing is
less certain). It would harbor within itself, but like circum-
scribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology
themselves. It would comprehend them, but incomprehensi-
ably. How to comprehend in fact the discourse of the end or
the discourse about the end? Can the extremity of the ex-
reme ever be comprehended? And the opposition between
“to be” and “not to be”? Hamlet already began with the ex-
pected return of the dead King. After the end of history, the
spirit comes by coming back (revenant), it figures both a dead
man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return
repeats itself, again and again. (Derrida 1994:10; emphases in
original)

Mark Fisher (2016) argues that hauntology expresses “the
agency of the virtual” (18; see also Fisher 2014). He then quotes
Hägglund (2008): “What is important about the figure of the

15. Contributors to Blanco and Peeren (2013b) generally take a more
chaotic stance to the way pasts and presents interact.

16. Mark Fisher (2016:17) points out that the original French puns
between hauntologie and ontologie. This suggests a potent alternative
approach to the ontological turn in anthropology.
spectre, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is *no longer* or *not yet* (82; emphasis in original).17 For Fisher (2016), “no longer” and “not yet” are both effective “in the virtual” (18); they are both capable of hauntings and, I would add, of interference. Specters in the present may come from either temporal direction or from both directions at once, and they may conflict or interfere with one another. This brings us back to Gordon’s question of future hauntings, by which I mean hauntings from the future. From this perspective, anticipations, fears, and morbid dreads are specters from the future that haunt our present, as do fragments of history. Hauntings are multidirectional.

The idea that haunting can occur from the future as well as from the past prompts new ways of thinking about future-oriented activity. Insurance is often described as a form of betting or, more properly, of hedging a bet, but now we can also view it as a payment to ward off a future calamity, a type of exorcism. On this view the insurance industry depends on the haunting possibility of future misfortune or disaster. It is only a little fanciful to view the premium as a pecuniary exorcism to propitiate that risk, to quell the ghost. I say more about betting below as part of the discussion of dutching.

Big business now makes much of scenario planning for future preparedness.18 In futurology the idea of scenario planning has been widely adopted as a good business practice. In workshops senior managers consider different possibilities for the future and how they (their business) could respond. The company Royal Dutch Shell benefited by being an early adopter of such approaches (Cornelius, Van de Putte, and Romani 2005).

This sits in interesting tension with Derrida’s more lyrical, playful discussion of Marxist economics:

> [The commodity-form] affects and bereaves [the use-value] in advance, like the ghost it will become, but this is precisely where haunting begins. And its time, and the untimeliness of its present, of its being “out of joint.” To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration. (Derrida 1994:201–202)

I discuss below the range of possibilities explored by scenario planning in Dutch betting.

Turning the discussion from past to future hauntings has interesting repercussions. It brings into play topics such as the precautionary principle (as we have just seen, this includes the idea of insurance as a precaution against possible future calamity), the classical oracles (such as that of Delphi), the myth of Oedipus, astrology, and divination (see Zeitlyn 2012d, 2020).

Haunting can be incapacitating: the fear of ghosts can prevent us from acting, or the ghosts may change the way we act. In other words, haunting by ghosts may affect the course of action. In some arenas, applying the precautionary principle of minimizing risk can itself become damaging when it leads to (in)action that creates harm. For example, lack of action to counter climate change (no matter how that change is caused) exacerbates or fails to mitigate climate change. Inaction can make things worse. And if all actions are potentially damaging and therefore contraindicated by the precautionary principle, then stalemate results unless the deadlock can be resolved.

However, not all interpretations of the precautionary principle are incapacitating; an explicit application of the principle arose from the 1992 Rio Conference: “In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation” (United Nations 1992, principle 15). This is to say that we should assume the worst and act to mitigate it. Along similar lines, Gollier, Jullien, and Treich (2000) conclude that “more scientific uncertainty as to the distribution of a future risk—that is, a larger variability of beliefs—should induce society to take stronger prevention measures today” (245).19 In other words, we risk being damned if we act and damned if we do not. The precautionary principle is also vulnerable to criticism on the basis of its own precepts: if inaction is the riskier choice, then the precautionary principle itself suggests action! As I explain below, some forms of divination are seen as invoking a supernatural sanction to break this sort of deadlock.

**Divinatory Warrants**

In sociolinguistic work that goes back to Erving Goffman (1983), the different roles and “footings” of participants in a conversation may be either bundled together or separated out. A spokesperson or press officer does not speak on their own behalf: the force or weight of their utterances comes from the person or institution they represent. A legal statement that

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17. Derrida in conversation with Bernard Stiegler provides a more succinct summary of his argument: “Respect for the alterity of the other dictates respect for the ghost and, therefore, for the non-living, for what is possible is not alive” (Derrida and Stiegler 2013:42). The conversation also introduces another neologism: “spectrography,” writing about ghosts or writing by ghosts, although also covering writing about other nonreal possibilities.

18. See Wilkinson and Kupers (2013) and Bradfield et al. (2005) for background on scenario planning in business.

19. Yet strong versions of the precautionary principle such as “when an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically” (Science and Environmental Health Network 1998) have also been seen as incapacitating, inducing harmful inaction whereby the stasis caused by fear of negative consequences may be more damaging than action, although they were intended to avoid stasis.
Refilling Evacuated Near Futures: Anticipation and Beyond

As noted above, the precautionary principle can be incapacitating when future interference inhibits present action. Another example of incapacitation is exhibited by bad car drivers. Overanticipation of risks may present too many possibilities, rendering the driver unable to choose the best course of action. Or it may distract the driver from making an obvious decision. In either case, that driver’s actions will become more difficult for other road users to predict.

Imagine the interior monologue of a bad driver on a motorway:

Oh my god, that driver behind is going to rear-end me: I must speed up. And that other one wants to undertake, so I cannot pull over. Look ahead: brake lights. BRAKE lights! This one in front wants to pull in. I must slow down. But, oh my God, the driver behind is going to rear-end me: I must speed up. Et cetera.

Good driving requires reciprocal anticipation of actions based on a shared reading of the traffic conditions and involving mutual agreement about which unlikelihoods can be disregarded. This is what drivers learn as they move from thinking about every action (e.g., as a new or inexperienced driver) to driving by habit; experienced drivers may not even remember what happened during a journey. This example could be described as illustrating the interference of alternatives or the way the alternatives haunt the driver.

The British comedian Spike Milligan chose an ironically decrepitating epitaph on his gravestone: “I told you I was ill.” The bad driver’s epitaph might read, “I told you I was going to crash.” This is a form of Merton’s (1948) self-fulfilling prophecy, for all that the driver was struggling to avoid it. It is exemplified in more dramatic form by the mythical response to the prophecy about Oedipus, which brings about the events prophesied. Laius, on being told that his son will kill him and marry Jocasta, has his son abandoned on a hillside, which triggers the train of events that eventually leads to Laius’s death and Oedipus’s subsequent marriage to a grieving widow.

The timescale of the Oedipus myth is longer than usually covered by anticipation. Hauntings and temporal interference can occur at a short scale and across longer periods. Charles Stewart’s (2012) case study about the importance of dreams in the historical imagination of people in the village of Kóronos on the Greek island of Naxos covers a span of almost 200 years. A dream led to the unearthing of an icon (and bones said to be Egyptian). To obsess about whose bones they “really” are is to miss the point (as Matt Hodges [2015] explains in his extended review of Stewart’s book). Dream books and discussion of dreams provide the raw material for the local understanding of Kóronos pasts and, as Stewart (2012:217) says at the very end of his monograph, their futures, too. The ghostliness of dreams is perhaps not captured by written records of dreams or discussion of them, but through these activities, pasts as experienced in dreams touch and thereby haunt the present. If they lead us to dig for buried icons revealed in the dreams, they interfere with it as well.

Another example from another Greek island (Crete) is the role of photography in what Kalantzis (2014) calls “experiential historicism,” where local readings and repurposing of tourist postcards tread a delicate balance between different forms of nationalism and localism. When members of cultural associations adopt traditional dress and pose in group photos in ways that echo early photographs (Kalantzis 2014:70–71), they embody their sense of history, but the same people criticize others who dress in similar ways for tourist photographs. We might think of these contrastive uses of traditional dress in terms of interference between different uses of history and the discussion of photographs as a form of haunting, perhaps exemplifying the ways that photography affects the living as described by Smith and Vokes in the quote given above in this article. In both of these cases, I think that the models help us get an analytic purchase on the ethnographic material.

If haunting and interference connect pasts and futures as they touch in an unfolding present, the final ideas I will consider relate mainly to prediction and the ways in which futures are apprehended and planned for. As we have seen above, driving involves assumptions and presumptions about other road users. For drivers to drive well requires mutual readings of traffic conditions and shared acceptance of the rules of the road. In other words, good driving is a social achievement, not an
entirely personal set of actions. A similar situation holds for forecasts, and it is to these that we now turn.

Promises and Promissory Notes

In an early article about understanding what others are saying (written long before the literature on speech acts), John Austin (1946) talks about being in a position to make promises. This deserves to be better known. Considering whether or not the bird he can see is a goldfinch, he writes:

It seems a serious mistake to suppose that language (or most language, language about real things) is "predictive" in such a way that the future can always prove it wrong. What the future can always do, is to make us revise our ideas. (Austin 1946:160; emphases in original) 

Expanding on this issue, he writes:

If you say you know something, the most immediate challenge takes the form of asking "Are you in a position to know?": that is, you must undertake to show, not merely that you are sure of it, but that it is within your cognisance. There is a similar form of challenge in the case of promising: fully intending is not enough—you must also undertake to show that "you are in a position to promise," that is, that it is within your power. Over these points in the two cases parallel series of doubts are apt to infect philosophers, on the ground that I cannot foresee the future. Some begin to hold that I should never, or practically never, say I know anything—perhaps only what I am sensing at this moment: others, that I should never, or practically never, say I promise—perhaps only what is actually within my power at this moment. In both cases there is an obsession: if I know [then] I can't be wrong, so I can't have the right to say I know, and if I promise [then] I can't fail, so I can't have the right to say I promise. And in both cases this obsession fastens on my inability to make predictions at the root of the matter, meaning by predictions claims to know the future. But this is doubly mistaken in both cases. As has been seen, we may be perfectly justified in saying we know or we promise, in spite of the fact that things "may" turn out badly, and it's a more or less serious matter for us if they do. And further, it is overlooked that the conditions which must be satisfied if I am to show that a thing is within my cognisance or within my power are conditions, not about the future, but about the present and the past: it is not demanded that I do more than believe about the future. (Austin 1946:172–173; emphases in original)

Austin links knowing and promising through the "problem" of the inscrutability of the future. Taking a leaf out of his book, as well as talking about empty or idle promises, should we also be talking about idle predictions or idle forecasts? Arendt (see below) and Austin both view a forecast as an action taken with an eye on the future that changes the present. But what of the lonely prophet with no audience? It seems that if nothing changes or if no action was taken (successful or not), then no prophecy has been achieved. Just as we accept that there is no private language (Wittgenstein) because we now say that an utterance must have an addressee who is not the speaker, so a promise cannot be made by one person alone: a promisee must also be present. In other words, promising is a social act. And as for promises, so too for prophecy and prediction.

More complicated than purely linguistic examples are financial instruments such as promissory notes, which are underpinned by social institutions (banking and legal systems) but may not have named promisees. Promissory notes predate but are exemplified by banknotes. English banknotes bear the statement "I promise to pay the bearer, on demand" made by the chief cashier of the Bank of England; the promise is a general one made to any holder of the note. Promissory notes have value (or "force," per Austin [1962] on speech acts) because they are sanctioned by society: that value cannot be created or sustained by an individual alone. Fake notes cannot be cashed out; they lack the social force of real notes.

Predating Austin's work on speech acts, Hannah Arendt (1998 [1958]) also made connections between promising and futures. Renzo Taddei uses this to discuss what he calls "the social performativity of [climate] forecasts."

According to Hannah Arendt, promising creates shared visions of the future, thus reducing the cognitive range of possibilities and facilitating coordinated social action (1998: 237). A promise is a force that maintains social cohesion in a community, and signifies the capacity to make use of the future as if it were the present (Bruno and Martins 2008: 5).

In the words of Arendt, "when people come together to bind themselves to a future, the covenants they create amongst themselves can throw 'islands of predictability' into the 'ocean of uncertainty,' creating a new kind of assurance and enabling them to exercise power collectively" (Arendt 1998: xix). This effect of the imagination of the future over life is particularly salient and relevant in critical situations, where coordinated action is imperative. (Taddei 2013:250; emphasis in original)

If we view predictions and forecasts as forms of promissory notes, then we are forced to consider their social role. To predict an earthquake in California within the next 500 years is almost as useless as predicting one within the next five seconds. Neither can be cashed out in the sense that neither helps guide action. As stated above, one of divination's roles is to break impasses by enabling clients to decide what action to take. Idle forecasts cannot perform this role since they justify everything
and nothing. Scenario planning, divinatory outcomes, and forecasts are all forms of promissory notes that work only when their enabling “felicity conditions” are fulfilled. A generalized forecast, along the lines of “stuff will happen,” fails to satisfy the felicity conditions for a forecast: it is too vague to be helpful. A further twist to forecasting is suggested by another favorite example of speech act theorists: betting. Viewing forecasts as promissory notes stresses their social embedding, the roles they have, and the uses that are made of them; from this perspective, they have some interesting parallels with bets. In the next section, I explore this parallel in more detail, especially through the idea of Dutch betting.

Forecasts and Dutch Bets

The link between forecasts or predictions and bets is evidenced not only by speech act theory but also whenever a forecaster’s prediction prompts the question how much would you bet on it? The Long Now Foundation has an ongoing project called Long Bets (see http://longbets.org/) to take up forecasters on their predictions, challenging a forecaster to “put their money where their mouth is.”

Dutch betting, colloquially called dutching, turns the process of betting on its head and has interesting resonances for forecasting, especially for scenario planning in business. It is a systematized form of hedging (or side betting), as in the expression “hedging one’s bets,” which is usually taken to mean betting on all the horses in a race. Dutching provides a way of calculating how much to bet on each horse so as to optimize returns. For example, an investor says, “I will put most of my stake on the most likely eventuality, but since there is a small chance that the outcome will be different, I will also place small bets on the other outcomes” (the latter are the side or hedge bets). The same process is applied in dutching. A “Dutch book” of bets is created in which the gambler’s stake is split among all the possible outcomes in inverse proportion to the likelihood of each outcome. A Dutch book for a three-horse race would result in three bets being placed: the smallest on the least likely winner, the largest on the most likely, and a median bet on the third horse with median odds. Whichever horse wins, the financial outcome for the punter will be the same (a larger percentage return on a smaller bet, a smaller return on a larger bet, etc.).

The same strategy is used by businesses and governments undertaking scenario planning: this involves considering the implications of each of a range of possible outcomes. What could we do if X, Y, or Z happens? Of course, to really count as dutching the future, there must be actual investment in the possibilities. Investments in renewable energy made by oil companies such as Shell and Total can be seen in this light (although the amounts invested are smaller than real dutching would produce). The principle behind dutching suggests that, when planning for the future, we should try every option (in inverse proportion to possibly shifting judgments of likelihood) and see what works (we could call this “dutching the future”).

Hedging one’s bets (dutching the future) is not always possible: although we can simultaneously invest, for example, in different alternative energy sources, conceptually, we cannot treat a sick child with both homeopathic and allopathic medicines at the same time. In the latter case, we must choose to jump one way or the other: this is where the external validation of divination can be useful (see Zeitlyn 1993, 1995, 2012b). We could see as a type of hedging the practice of medical pluralism, where patients go (more or less simultaneously) to rival medical practitioners (e.g., allopathic doctors and alternative therapists), which exasperates more purist practitioners of all sorts. The actions of patients of consulting widely and doing different forms of treatments could be described as a form of dutching without the calculations. However, medical pluralism may also result in unintended forms of negative interference. Dutching and scenario planning are most effective when it is possible to explore different alternatives simultaneously: in other words, when there is no path dependency or interference between alternatives. When a single course must be chosen, then unilateral decision-making is needed, and, as noted above, the validation of divination can enable us to stop dithering and act.

22. A Current Anthropology reviewer points to another example: the fast food company McDonald’s also owns Panera Bread, serving a very different sort of food than is associated with the main brand.

23. From the point of view of homeopathy, any allopathic medicines risk swamping the effects of the homeopathic medicines. Many other sectors have mutually exclusive or path-dependent decision-making. A case in point is Lopez and Haines’s (2017:713) discussion of drought managers, where the regulatory framework is such that the fear of service failure inhibits the use of long-term forecasts, especially when they are probabilistic.

24. I am grateful to a Current Anthropology reviewer for pointing out this analogy. As was mentioned above, in the classic explanation of interference, negative interference occurs when peaks and troughs coincide, canceling each other out. Dutching attempts to make modest gains no matter the outcome, smoothing away both extreme losses and high gains.
Conclusions

I started with the observation that anthropologists need to put their analytical house in order. By suggesting a range of non-standard ways of thinking about futuricity, I am seeking to make explicit the “metaphors we think by” (to rephrase Lakoff and Johnson’s [1980] title). In my opinion, being conscious of and explicit about the theory ladenness (or metaphor ladenness) of description is an important part of analytical practice because it makes it easier for others (perhaps using different metaphors) to reanalyze the same material. The models suggested above may be useful tools for anthropologists and other analysts seeking to make sense of complicated and confusing events and the myriad ways in which people talk about them. They have emerged out of my extended encounters with different forms of Mambila divination. If, as William Faulkner (2013 [1951]) said, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (85), then so, too, “The future is already alive, it’s not even future.” We must take into account the haunting or interferences of the present with the past and future: an interfering mess out of which decisions must be made and actions taken. Past and future haunt all of our presents, and actions emerge out of those hauntings.25 Dutching and hedging are principal ways of responding to this. The hard but not impossible task for the analyst is to make sense of this while remaining faithful to the various means by which different cultural traditions discuss it. An important step is to recognize the extent to which our analytical vocabularies are metaphor laden. Such recognition does not prevent the enterprise of anthropological reflection and analysis but qualifies it. In a different approach to anthropological theorizing, Zeitlyn and Just (2014) have argued the case for knowingly incomplete and partial accounts, also a form of qualification. Combining that position with the argument of this article, I end by suggesting that we need accounts that are knowingly incomplete, recognizing their limits and also knowing about the metaphorical bases of the models they use. Knowingly incomplete accounts are a starting point for working with the messiness of temporality. Different temporalities (each including their own presences, historicities, and futuricities) can provide incomplete but fruitful ways of understanding and working with the ghostly interferences caused by the haunting of the present by both pasts and futures. Sometimes this even amounts to dutching the future.

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In addition to the careful readings from the Current Anthropology reviewers, who have helped me sharpen the argument and give clearer signposts, I have greatly benefited from discussions in Oxford with Sophie Haines and Steve Rayner and from ongoing discussions with diviners in Somié about how divination works. Roger Just helpfully commented on an early draft of the manuscript and made me fill in some of the gaps. Jane Guyer gave further helpful feedback on a later draft of the manuscript. A version was presented at a workshop on the Horizons of Decision Making (part of Collaborative Research Centre 806, Our Way to Europe Project E3, “Anthropological Models: A Reconstruction of the First African Frontier” at the University of Cologne) in December 2017, and the discussion has prompted me to think more about dutching. Many thanks to Thomas Widlok and Michael Bollig for the invitation and to all the participants. Rebecca Cassidy first suggested the idea of dutching to me at a workshop on gambling in Cologne on November 7–8, 2016. In the back of my mind is an unfinished set of discussions with the late David Reason, now a friendly but critical ghost. Anna Rayne has challenged me to tighten the argument and bridge some incomprehensible jumps in the argument. She deserves more than meals in the Magdalen Arms.

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Comments

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This engaging article explores three ways of thinking about time in social context. Two of them—haunting and interference—are similar and focus on how the past and future inhabit the present so that multiple times and timescales are all simultaneously in play. This insight, echoing across so much of social theory at least since William James, is both profound and consequential. Insofar as futures and pasts are copresent, we can think of social technologies like the calendar creating not synchronic illusions but diachronic ones: the forward march of time as a social product. While different authors have focused more on historicity (such as in the tradition of Habwachs) or on futuricity (such as in the tradition of Schutz), Zeitlyn quite correctly argues that the two are best thought about together. The paper offers a rich set of reflections about how the past and future may occupy the present. A complementary analysis could consider how the past and future are at least equally dominated by the present. Recent research in social psychology and behavioral economics has examined how people across cultures remember their own past ideas and predict their own

25. Through their haunting or interferences, unrealized possibilities may have real effects: the self-denying complement to Merton’s (1948) self-fulfilling predictions.
future ones, showing that the present crowds out futures and pasts that differ from it. For example, Edward Miguel and colleagues have interviewed a cohort of young women and men in Kenya repeatedly over more than 10 years, asking not only about their current beliefs but also about what they believed in the past and expect to believe in the future. Comparing past responses with later memories of past responses, it was clear that the respondents overwhelmingly “corrected” their past beliefs to conform to their present ones and also significantly underestimated how much they would change their minds in the future (see Mueller et al. 2019). While the past and future may haunt the present, the present can also overwhelm them. This empirical observation does not contradict Zeitlyn’s elegant reflections. Rather, it shows that the infusion of times into each other is bidirectional although not fully symmetric, adding another nuance to an already interesting story.

The third metaphor of time that Zeitlyn considers is “dutching the future,” which he describes as a strategy for managing the uncertainty of the future related to both scenario planning and divination. Dutching in this sense refers to a particular strategy of betting in which, instead of betting on a single outcome, the bettor places multiple bets, each on a specific outcome and in amounts inversely proportional to their estimated likelihood of success. (I have a minor quibble with Zeitlyn’s description of dutching: if you were indeed to bet on all of the horses in a race at fair rates, your long-run predicted gains would be zero. You would be certain to win every time, but the cost of placing the bets would exactly equal your winnings. Successful dutching therefore comes from guessing well which are the horses on whom any bet at all should be placed.) Although dutching is still betting and thus still full of uncertainty, it is a means of reducing the bettor’s risk, or “hedging the bet.”

Although the term is new, the logic behind dutching can be traced back at least to Blaise Pascal’s development of the concept of expected value at the end of the seventeenth century. In his eponymous wager, Pascal offers two arguments for belief in God. The argument from superdomination says that in every possible case, believing produces outcomes that are at least as good as does doubting, and in at least some possible cases, its outcomes are better. The second argument is from expected value, which comes from multiplying the chances and their payouts to produce a single value that the game should produce in the long run. Expected value is the key to dutching and indeed to most contemporary strategies for managing uncertainty and the future.

Dutching in particular and betting in general rest on a radically different set of metaphors for past, present, and future than do haunting and interference. Instead of thinking about the mutual interpenetration of multiple times, to think about betting we have to think of the future as irreconcilably different from the present or past because it is unachieved and therefore unknowable. Dutching makes sense only if the uncertainty of the future is unbreachable. Zeitlyn nicely draws attention to the difference between uncertainty and risk here, between cases where all possible outcomes are known and their likelihoods calculable (like throwing dice) and cases where even the range of possible outcomes is ill defined and their relative likelihoods unknown (like waking up in the morning and facing another day). The classic cases of dutching, such as betting on horse races, lie in between, with known ranges of possible outcomes but often only poorly estimated relative probabilities of those outcomes. Zeitlyn’s use of dutching as a metaphor for making multiple simultaneous plans for different possible alternative futures—dutching the future—invites us to explore this space between the technically uncertain and the radically unknowable. This is perhaps the most useful point of the paper: as we have ever more data and can calculate ever more rates, more aspects of the social world come to seem like horse races. How can we use what we know about the past to inform our predictions for the future? Dutching is one metaphor that may be useful.

Zeitlyn makes a strong claim that anthropology needs to spend more time thinking about the future in its entanglement with the present and the past and that the metaphors of haunting, interference, and dutching provide productive ways to do this. Importantly, he insists that these metaphors should not be taken for granted—that their metaphorical operation has to be acknowledged and specified, in how it differs from the operation of concepts or models as well. His suggestion that “one way to consider the differences among ideas, metaphors, models, and concepts . . . is to think of each as a ghost haunting the others” is provocative, first of all in its use of a metaphor to figure the relationship and, second, in the specific metaphor chosen—that of a haunting ghost. What exactly does it imply to see these methodological terms as haunting each other? To me, this metaphor aptly suggests how between these terms there is both an eerie convergence, as they resemble each other perhaps too closely, especially in the unreflective manner in which they tend to be used within particular disciplines, and an irreducible difference, as their distinct operations and connotations (not least in terms of their perceived degree of scientifity) work to disrupt and challenge each other, notably, across disciplines.

As a humanities scholar with a background in literary studies used to working with conceptual metaphors—with the “conceptual” added to distinguish metaphors designed to do theoretical (or, if you will, modeling) work from their everyday and poetic counterparts—and having a particular interest in the spectral metaphors of the ghost and haunting (Blanco and Peeren 2013b; Peeren 2014), I concur with Zeitlyn that it is essential to think carefully about which metaphors we use, how exactly we use them, and how we see the relationship between

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Zeitlyn considers the spectral metaphors of the ghost and haunting (Blanco and Peeren 2013b; Peeren 2014). I concur with Zeitlyn that it is essential to think carefully about which metaphors we use, how exactly we use them, and how we see the relationship between
the metaphor and what it figures—as one of substitution, comparison, or interaction. Metaphors are never neutral and are frequently ambiguous—thus, the ghost can figure dispossessio
n (invisibility, irrelevance, impotence) as well as sovereign empowerment (as the ghost of Hamlet’s father does for Jacques Derrida in Specters of Marx). The fact that, as Zeitlyn points out, discussions of time tend to be conducted through a small number of predominantly spatial metaphors reveals something important about how time is thought. In turn, mobilizing new metaphors to rethink historicity, futurity, and their relation to a present that, following Derrida, should not be seen to imply (self-)presence opens up other ways of thinking about time and ways of thinking other forms of temporality, such as the distant future, which may be one without humans and, as such, could require a radical rethinking of anthropology itself.

The proposed metaphors of interference, haunting, dutching, and also divination offer ways of figuring longer futures that seem to differ mainly in the answer they provide to the question of whether the future can be predicted; interference, dutching, and divination rely on at least the possibility of this, whereas haunting (especially in the Derridean mode) puts it into doubt, perhaps more radically than Zeitlyn acknowledges. It would be interesting to compare his article’s rather pragmatic assessment of these different attitudes toward the future in terms of the extent to which and the degree of confidence with which they allow decisions to be made and actions to be taken with Arjun Appadurai’s opposition of a positively valued ethics of possibility to a negatively assessed ethics of probability in The Future as Cultural Fact (Appadurai 2013) or with Derrida’s own decidedly ethical model in which the ghost (as always haunting from both the past and the future, as revenant and arrivant) offers no certainty or comfort but needs to be lived with and responded to in its very unpredictability (Derrida 1994). Derrida notably associates the specter with an inheritance that always involves a secret and with a messianic future to come that has to be awaited without a horizon of expectation and without knowing exactly what it is that will arrive (certainly not the Messiah). His insistence that “being-with specters would also be . . . a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (Derrida 1994:xix; emphasis in original) links ethics to politics and could open up a possibility to think the metaphor of haunting with Shyrock and Small’s kinshiping as, in Zeitlyn’s words, “the recognition of commonality (and, simultaneously, difference) across a divide.”

Haunting is used by Derrida in a complex yet also highly selective manner, emphasizing its destabilizing, unhinging workings, its radical repudiation of defined, singular origins or ends. Consequently, it seems to me that there is more than merely a “tension,” as Zeitlyn puts it, between, on the one hand, Derrida’s exhortation to, in Donna Haraway’s terms, “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) that is a haunting from the future and, on the other, seeking to exorcise the ghost of the future by anticipating its movements through insurance or dutching or by having an “external authority” predict them in an act of divination. As I have argued elsewhere (Peeren 2018), hauntings from the future, following Gayatri Spivak’s discussion of the Native American ghost dance (Spivak 1995), appear not in the mode of the future present (the future as it will be) but rather in that of the future anterior (the future as it might or could be). Taking the metaphor of haunting (with its implication of an unrelenting temporal disturbance or disjointing—as popular ghost movies teach us, the ghost or another ghost will always return, even after an ostensibly successful exorcism) seriously means going beyond even “dutching without the calculations” or simultaneous exploration of different future scenarios Zeitlyn so intriguingly proposes in that it requires a “surrender to undecidability” (Spivak 1995:71) that comes with great risks and without guarantees but that does not absolve one from taking responsibility for the future or preclude the taking of actions in relation to this future and its inherent openness.

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Time Interferences or Time Elasticity

Speaking of temporal interferences, I recently read a previous article by David Zeitlyn on the topic of time. In that article, published in Current Anthropology in 2012, Zeitlyn argues that divination methods such as Mambila spider divination, which he studied in Cameroon for many years, follow two different logics: one diagnostic and past oriented and the other prognostic and future facing (Zeitlyn 2012b). He also notes that although these two temporal logics are qualitatively different, in practice it is not always possible or even desirable to extricate them. The tension between theoretical differentiation and practical conflation remains unresolved.

That, however, is not the case in “Haunting, Dutching, and Interference,” where Zeitlyn introduces an intriguing pair of concepts: interference and haunting. Thanks to these related concepts, the temporalities of historicity, presence, and futurity are not disconnected. Historicity and futurity both interfere in the present as well as with each other, creating, in Zeitlyn’s words, a temporal mess. Inasmuch as these temporalities encompass a plurality of pasts, presents, and futures, the idea of temporal messiness is befitting. Zeitlyn’s approach offers an insightful, original, and thought-provoking contribution to the anthropology of time and the future. I highly recommend this article to anthropologists and others interested in the study of time.

Zeitlyn also stands against any form of historical myopia. He writes, “Obsessions with innovation and change lead to repetitions of the same mistakes and to what we could term an ‘evacuation of the near past.’ The past, including the recent...
past, is dismissed as being irrelevant because now everything is different. I regard this as a form of millenarianism.” In this light, it is commendable that Zeitlyn’s work reveals the contemporaneity of Mambila divination, which others might disregard as old and obsolete, as well as the intellectual value of researching divination. Zeitlyn’s sophisticated model of presences, historicities, and futuricities emerged from his extended study of Mambila divination, and the strength of his approach derives in part from his juxtaposition and comparison of different “insurance” methods used as a protection against future calamities, from Dutch betting to divination techniques such as Mambila spider divination, the oracle of Delphi, and astrology. Here, Zeitlyn exhibits the intellectual creativity that his work is known for.

This said, I would like to respond to Zeitlyn’s provocations, as he puts it in his subtitle, with two provocative points. I begin by asking whether Zeitlyn’s concepts of interference and haunting are suitable for the central role assigned to them. Do these concepts capture the great temporal messiness of past and future temporalities in the present? Zeitlyn borrowed the idea of interference from classical physics theory and quantum mechanics, and it may well be that the concept is interference is the perfect designation for the phenomenon that occurs when waves pass through two adjacent slits. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary online, the verb “interfere” means “to act reciprocally so as to augment, diminish, or otherwise affect one another—used of waves.” This is presumably the idea that Zeitlyn has in mind when he relates waves to temporalities. Curiously, however, when we move from waves to humans, the relations between the mutually affected terms turn sour. For the common person who knows nothing or very little about wave interference, to interfere is “to interpose in a way that hinders or impedes: come into collision or be in opposition.” “Interfering with” is altogether disruptive, and “interfering in” is not seen in a brighter light, the assumption being that someone is meddling in someone else’s affairs. While scholars are well known for coining neologisms and attempting to alter the meaning of common words, I wonder whether the concept of interference and the less-structured haunting are our best options in the important work of explaining the interactions between temporalities. Interference helps capture those strange moments when we feel that a particular past or future is intruding into our lives, causing an interruption. Maybe we learned that a distraught ancestor is behind our suffering or that a gene inherited from a parent will likely cause a fatal condition. Interference is significantly less helpful in the case of temporalities without a spectral aura, such as guessing my dinner on the way back home or remembering where I placed my car keys in the morning. For this reason, a more neutral concept such as “layering” is better suited to the important task at hand. Zeitlyn himself speaks of an “amalgam” of futuricity, historicity, and presences and of “the seething present containing a superposition of pasts and futures.”

In my second and last provocation, I present an alternative to interference: the concept of elasticity. Similar to Zeitlyn, I developed my ideas on temporality in the process of researching an African divination technique, basket divination. In northwest Zambia and the neighboring regions of Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, basket divination generates a stretch of time that extends from the near past to the near future (Silva 2018). To conceptualize this temporality, I drew on Alfred Gell’s (1992) idea of “present in progress” (288) and on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “long present” (Bourdieu 1979 [1963]; see also Gloor 2007:410). In this temporality, the present extends backward and forward, bringing into its fold the near past and the near future.

Other examples of temporal elasticity may help. Think of religious groups such as evangelicals, whose sense of presence stretches backward to biblical times. Some young, wealthy individuals prefer extending themselves in the opposite direction by freezing and storing their own stem cells to combat age-related diseases in the future. Another interesting case of commitment to the future is contemporary anthropology. By blindly promoting the idea of the contemporary, we shrink the temporal messiness of the world to a disabled present that can only lean forward. In other words, we risk becoming historical myopes.

In conclusion, rather than seeing the past and future as interfering in or with the present, it is more helpful to speak of a present that stretches in both directions. The past and future are of the present, their point of reference, and we therefore inhabit innumerable long presents of different scales, from a split second to millions of years. While the concepts of interference and haunting have a place in the study of time, the idea of elasticity, which I borrowed from physics, offers a simpler explanation for a wider range of presences that extend into multiple pasts and futures.

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Zeitlyn presents the reader with a set of ideas that are speculative and thought-provoking. His operators for addressing how groups deal with “futuricity” are interesting. That said, many aspects of his argument remain mysterious to me. I believe that part of the issue lies in the absence of an ethnographic approach. While it is not a problem in itself, I feel that ethnographic accounts sometimes function—for better or worse—as a good handshake when scholars from different walks of life meet in arenas considered to be anthropological (a form of Wagnerian encounter; Wagner 1981). In addition to the absence of ethnographic peacemaking strategies or perhaps because of that, I ended the reading feeling that important gaps were left scattered throughout the text for the reader to fill in; perhaps this is not surprising, given Zeitlyn’s explicit advocacy...
for incompleteness. What follows is my attempt to fill in some of those gaps.

My comments will focus on three aspects of the argument in the article. The three are interconnected, but I will treat them separately for clarity. The first refers to how time is ontologically featured in the text. The second refers to the theory of language that seems to ground the argument. The third addresses the nature of the anthropological endeavor that is precipitated by such an ontological regime and theory of language and the conflicts that this may engender. For lack of space, the style will inevitably be telegraphic.

The concept of time that seems to be dominant throughout the text is the one exemplified in Zeitlyn’s (unexpected and counterintuitive) interpretation of physics’ double-slit experiment. This was used to demonstrate what is called wave-particle duality; “billiard ball–like particles” would not be able to produce the observed patterns of interference, the author remarks. And yet what Zeitlyn takes from it is a situation where past and future seem to interfere with the present while remaining distinct from each other, exactly as if they were billiard balls. A more direct (although far from simple) alternative would be taking time as a wave of probabilities, as some famous interpretations of the experiment suggest. Furthermore, if contemporary physics is to be used as a source of metaphors for temporality, it is remarkable that the author decided to evoke quantum mechanics rather than general relativity, where time is the central actor. Einsteinian physics presents time and space as inseparable; matter (which is also energy) deflects space-time, and the deflection of space-time moves matter-energy. All of this is in contrast with the author’s insistence that mixing up temporal and spatial metaphors is a bad thing.

The point is not, obviously, about physics. Such restrictive definition of what the future is, which leads the author to state that the anthropological literature on the future is “surprisingly sparse,” results in important literature being overlooked: the almost century-old linguistic relativity question and the whole debate on the Anthropocene, just to mention two.

The ontology upon which the theory of language that grounds the argument is built seems to fit well with the mechanistic concept of time. Linguistic constructions are presented in disembodied ways: the disconnection between the subject and time is replicated in the relation between social life and language. Models lose their dramatic performative power (most of it coming from relations that are rather metonymic; see Daniel 1996) and are equated to metaphors; metaphors are, in their turn, judged in their (connotational) “efficacy” according to their referential (denotational) capacities.

Finally, a few words on the nature of the anthropological endeavor that the aforementioned elements produce. Nothing of what comes next should be read as indexing specific intentions of the author; I myself have been struggling with these issues (Taddei 2014). The text presents no justification for why past, present, future, history, anthropology, and ghost, just to name a few of the key concepts used, are naturalized and reified as they are. I understand that the reason for that is the existence of a large community of anthropologists who share such ontological stands. The point is whether they should be naturalized to the point of becoming unmarked so that anthropologists from other strains, for lack of a better term, are left with the task of spelling out their differences. Going straight to the point, anthropological cosmopolitanism is often oppressive and needs to be replaced by cosmopolitical arrangements in which anthropology ceases to function as a discipline and starts operating as a platform for encounters in the pluriverse (De la Cadeña and Blaser 2018; Escobar 2018)—a move that requires forms of unpredicting the world (Viveiros de Castro 2019). If this sounds abstract, two brief examples should suffice. The number of indigenous intellectuals who now hold PhDs in anthropology is growing in Brazil, the United States, Hawaii, Canada, New Zealand, Mexico, India, and other places. Many of them joined the movement to decolonize the discipline (McGranahan and Rizvi 2016; Tengan and Perley 2015). In what concerns this text, a point of contention is the concept of ghost. In spite of how ghosts are usually perceived in Western cultural industries, these intellectuals view the issue from a reality infused with spirits where ghosts do not exist—the difference being the extent to which spirits relate to the living according to widely accepted and manageable protocols, generating feelings other than fear or the experience of the uncanny. The question is not to negate that ghosts can be useful metaphors to someone but to call attention to the fact that the assumption that there is a universal readership for anthropology is to reproduce the imposition of ontodoxies and ontonormativities and move the wheels of colonialism. The second example refers to how the flow of reality, of which time is a Western abstraction, is featured as generated by the engagement of shamans and spirits in most indigenous ontologies across the Americas, as exemplified by the narrative of Davi Kopenawa (Kopenawa and Albert 2013). In this mode of existence, spirits and time are radically entangled and embodied. The point here is that ghosts, spirits, and time inhabit diverse worlds; these are not monads, and therein lies the reason why they must be spelled out.

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Having read this paper, I am somewhat at a loss. Maybe this is related to the impression that motivated Zeitlyn to write it in the first place, when he felt anthropological literature on the future to be inadequate. However, there is also a different sense of loss because I know that there is now a host of rich literature on temporality that contains concepts that are much more productive than what we previously had. Zeitlyn does not pick up much of that literature, and I wonder why.
I agree with Zeitlyn that there is a considerable imbalance in that anthropology has produced and continues to produce a lot of work related to historicity in comparison with its contribution to futuricity. My own explanation for that is twofold: First, this is a product of anthropology’s attempt to deconstruct the colonial past and its own involvement in it but also the experiences of cultural loss and cultural memory that we encounter in the field and the debates about “tradition” and “custom” that the discipline has constantly been drawn into. Second, looking to the past when dealing with the present is a distinct cultural practice in which several tendencies mutually reinforce one another: European cultural bias and the bias of humanistic scholarship but also the ideology of many descent-based societies that anthropologists have dealt with. As someone who has worked with hunter-gatherers who conduct their lives unburdened by much of this cultural baggage, which consists of strategies to create hierarchy and domination through an orientation toward the past (Widlok 1998), I have often felt this to be a painful bias in the discipline. Like Zeitlyn, I have been involved in research initiatives on archives, but I continue to invoke Wittgenstein to make the point that a genetic explanation (explaining something on the basis of its origin) is not a privileged mode of explaining the world (Widlok 2017:xix).

However, times are changing. There is now a lot of promising work on our conceptual tool kit in the anthropology of time, and I wonder why Zeitlyn seems to think that these tools are useless. To illustrate the point, I shall refer to the work of Adam, Abbott, and Appadurai—and these are just some selected entries starting with A in our project database of more than 700 entries.

Barbara Adam’s work on time (Adam 1994, 2013) and the concepts she highlights (time frames, temporality, tempo, timing, rhythm) have been around for a while, and inspired by her work, we may wonder, for instance, whether Zeitlyn’s first paragraph does not get us off to a false start when he asks “how different groups think differently about time.” Following Adam, there are three problems in this short phrase: (1) It may no longer be useful to ask whether “different groups” have different time concepts, as was discussed in the 1960s and 1970s with regard to “African time.” As Adam (1994:507–508) underlines, in every group or setting (including the “West”), there is considerable internal diversity with regard to time frames so that anthropological research should not be about “our” time versus “their” time but about how people (anywhere) chose from their repertoire of dealing with time in changing situations (see also Widlok 2014). (2) It may be inadequate to focus on people “thinking” about time as if memorizing, remembering, planning, and, why not, haunting and dutching were exclusively mental processes and not processes that can and should be studied as part of distributed cognition, social interaction, and political power play. (3) On the basis of Adam’s work, anthropologists have found their topic not to be philosophically abstract “time” but rather the practices that are related to it and the communities of practices that are created in the process. Zeitlyn’s piece, too, provides promising examples of such communities of practices, above all those involved in oracles and those involved in strategic scenario construction.

Similarly, Andrew Abbott (2001, 2016) has plowed his way through the extensive literature on the philosophy of time in order to make it fruitful for social science research. The very perceptive things he has written about the future (Abbott 2016, chap. 6) or about the different strategies for making the present stretch (Abbott 2001, chap. 7) may not be directed primarily at anthropologists, and the same may be true for John Urry’s reflections on making futures and dystopias (Urry 2016) or even Marc Augé’s point about insurance and credit (Augé 2014:96). However, surely there is a lot to be borrowed here for an anthropology of futuricity. It would be interesting, for instance, to hear how the suggested conceptual vocabulary of haunting, dutching, and interference relates to Appadurai’s recent work (Appadurai 2013) on the future and to his terminology of probabilities and possibilities. It would also be important to spell out what the consequences of Zeitlyn’s “provocations” are in comparison with the recent manifesto of future-oriented anthropological researchers (Salazar et al. 2017), which aims to refudge all of anthropology through action research. Is there a similar or different program for research implied here? The interference metaphors from physics and the haunting metaphors from lyrics and ghost studies (and the ghost of Heidegger) risk obscuring the intricate time issues even further and carrying us away from social practice and the biographical depth of focus that are the very hallmarks of anthropological work. I would like to see the points about dutching, gambling, and money explored further in this light because they do relate to the real-life time of real people with a limited lifetime. As they are phrased in the paper, the dutching examples seem to work only when people have a probabilistic view of the world in the first place. In practice, however, decision-making is not the truly simultaneous weighing of options that game theory suggests. As Abbott (2001:219) observes (following Bergson), the second option—or provocation—always looks different once we have looked at the first one because, when turning from the first to the second possibility, the choice is no longer exactly the same—time does matter.

Reply

I am very grateful to the commentators for the attentive reading they have given to the paper. Jennifer Johnson-Hanks makes the important point that different presents make for different pasts and futures, so asking the same questions of the same individuals can garner very different responses on different occasions. Thomas Widlok makes a closely related point in his closing remark about the order in which choices are considered, so a choice may look more appealing the second or third time it is considered. The temporal inflections of decision-making are something that clearly needs much more
work, and I note that the scholarship on divination such as Silva (2011) can help to illustrate this.

I have found dutching hard to explain, and clearly I have failed to explain it adequately to Johnson-Hanks. She is right that on the standard basis of setting odds, if you bet the same amount on each horse in a race, then your return will be zero. Dutching takes the idea of betting on each horse in a race but modifies the amounts staked in a systematic fashion so that one bets in inverse ratio to the odds. When dutching, you bet large on the favorite (at low odds, so you stand to win relatively little). At the other extreme, you bet small on the outsider (at high odds, standing to win relatively large but overall winning only a little because the stake was small). Whichever horse wins, the return is the same, and one can (but not always) make a small gain. The mathematics of this has been explored by, for example, Barnard (2010). In its classic form, dutching can be done only if odds can be calculated, so it is possible only in situations of Knightian risk, not certainty. However, the general approach can be applied even in uncertain situations where odds may not be known. Even there, then, the bare idea of dutching encourages one to explore all the possible avenues and not to put all the eggs in one basket. One could imagine a type of Delphi panel ranking a set of alternatives from most to least likely (without needing to assign specific odds), and this could be used as the basis of allocating development funds according to the principles of dutching so that even the option assessed to be the least likely would receive a little funding. Johnson-Hanks’s closing comments are in this spirit.

I appreciate Esther Peeren’s comments as she is one of those who has been developing ideas of haunting and spectrality across a wide range of domains. Both she and Widlok mention Appadurai’s distinction between possibility and probability, which I see as linked to Bourdieu’s distinction between foresight and forecasting in Kabyle; one is sanctioned, the other far less so—grudgingly accepted at best. As Peeren reminds us, a key aspect of Derrida’s hauntologie is the insistence that we must accommodate and find ways of living with our ghosts. This resonates with Tanya Luhrmann’s cross-cultural exploration of variation in the way that the voices of psychosis are understood and heard (Luhrmann et al. 2015), concluding that such voices may not be eliminated but can be managed in a variety of ways, including by naming them. The conversation becomes more complex, which I think is positive.

As a fellow scholar of African divination systems, I have followed Sónia Silva’s work on Zambian basket divination. Indeed, I have a recent work of hers (Silva 2018) on my desk in an important special issue of *Anthropologie et Sociétés* on divination. She describes diviners zigzagging between pasts and futures as they fill in the evacuated immediate future, deciding how to treat an illness and managing tensions between different conflicted groups of kin. Her ethnography makes clear how the clients use and ponder the advice the diviners give them, not always doing the suggested rituals or not doing them in full. Questioning my use of interference, she asks what happens “when . . . mutually affected terms turn sour.” I think that this might be seen as a case of negative interference (in the classic case where waves cancel each other out, troughs coinciding with crests) rather than the positive interference resulting when they amplify each other (trough meeting and deepening trough, crest meeting and raising another crest). However, more important is her suggestion that the idea of layering might cover some of the same ground in a more neutral fashion, but it leaves unclear how the different layers might interact or interfere with one another. Layering evokes the idea of a temporal palimpsest, which might be worth pursuing. I am intrigued by her use of elasticity and the idea of an “elastic present” stretched to fill an evacuated future and recent more or less evacuated pasts. This perhaps links to Bergson’s idea of duration, a point that Widlok also makes. I look forward to reading more about layered elasticity as applied in the analysis of Zambian divination.

Renzo Taddei is surprised that I have looked to classical physics (plus allusions to quantum mechanics) rather than general relativity. This was deliberate since, for all that “Ein- steinian physics presents time and space as inseparable,” its space-time is not really one of four independent dimensions but is a three-plus-one manifold (composed of three spatial dimensions and one time dimension within limits set by special relativity: the temporal dimension cannot be transformed entirely into a spatial one and vice versa). More importantly, he is critical of the anthropological cosmopolitanism to which my article clearly belongs. Rather, he sees anthropology as a platform for encounters in the pluriverse. Laudable as this is, I worry that we need, if not a single metalanguage, then a set of languages within which the conversations can continue. The challenge is to enable comparison to occur in a meaningful way (q.v. Candea 2019), and my hope is that widening the range of models or metaphors available to talk about futures might help the conversations across and between the “diverse worlds” he evokes.

Thomas Widlok has amassed a large bibliography of work on time, some of which is expressly about the future. He is absolutely right to challenge my statement about how people think about time. It is not so much how conceptualizations are stated explicitly as what implications they may have as people plan and act in mundane settings and in ritual about futures. In my book about Mambila divination (Zeitlyn 2020), I discuss ways that Mambila diviners sometimes talk as if they are determinists, especially when talking to anthropologists. Yet the patterns of questions asked and, just as importantly, not asked imply a fluidity and an openness that the formal discussion belies.

I realize that I should have said more about the idea of making futures, which is common in futurology and in the books that he cites. Entrepreneurs may be advised to select a
future by making it happen. This may be useful advice in Silicon Valley, but it does not translate so well to mundane decision-making as people live their lives, creating their life-worlds as they go, sometimes actively avoiding nonpreferred futures. These, I think, may helpfully be seen as interfering in or haunting our presents and other futures. I hope that the ideas from this paper may be of assistance to programs of work such as that heralded by the European Association of Social Anthropologists Future Anthropologies Network in Salazar et al. (2017).

Not cited because it appeared too late in the writing process is Bryant and Knight’s monograph *The Anthropology of the Future* (Bryant and Knight 2019).27 They use Schatzki’s notions of “teleaffective structures” (a way of thinking about teleology and its affects) and timescapes to discuss the “thickening and thinning of temporal horizons” (Bryant and Knight 2019:14).28 They contrast expectation and anticipation by their differing relations to the unexpected. For them, expectation leaves room for surprise, the unexpected; it is based on promises (that may be broken; Bryant and Knight 2019:63) and is prospective (allowing for different outcomes), whereas anticipation projects the past forward (Bryant and Knight 2019:77).

Not cited is de Abreu’s (2013) *Technological indeterminacy: medium, threat, violence* (Collins 2008:125). I hope that the ways of thinking about futures that we have been discussing here might help the conceptual design of, if not so much an anthropological “anti-time machine,” then at least some other ways of what we may call “thinking-futures” and “thinking-for-futures.”

—David Zeitlyn

References Cited


27. An even later publication is Valentine and Hassoun (2019), which appeared as these responses were being finished, sadly too late to do anything but note its appearance.

28. The book leaves unclear the relation between timescapes and chronotopes.


