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DEBATE

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DEBATE

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Futures Anthropology for AgeTech Research

As anthropologists working in the future field have argued, futures are not simply out there to be analysed, nor are they separated from the everyday practices, technologies, imaginations, uncertainties, anticipations, and hopes of our presents and pasts (Pink et al. 2022a). Futures anthropologists (Waltorp et al. 2022) have instead drawn attention to futures as a productive space for anthropologists and have argued that anthropological research should not limit itself to analysing the impacts of future imaginaries on our present choices, research solely nation-state levels, or investigate futures as mere cultural expressions. In other words, they have stated that analysing futures is not about speculating about what is to come, but about moving ourselves *into* futures and paying attention to how we move and improvise along the way (Ingold 2021). In this paper I argue that this immersive move can be applied to aging technologies — AgeTech henceforth — and therefore follow Marilyn Strathern’s (1995) suggestion to consider the interplay between futures, creativity, and present choices, while also exploring the benefits of studying AgeTech futures themselves.

In line with Strathern’s approach, I draw both on science and technology studies (STS) and Futures Anthropology literature, and fieldwork with older people and AgeTech industry experts and reports. Here, I demonstrate a Futures Anthropology approach to AgeTech as a way to envision aging-technology futures as a conceptual tool to understand forthcoming possibilities for older people.

It is indicative of the fact that STS scholars have only recently started exploring aging-technologies, that the AgeTech agenda struggles with the classic ontological divide between technology and humans hampering its practical and theoretical progress (Peine et al. 2015). In response to this divide, material gerontologists and STS scholars suggest the co-constitution of aging and technology (Peine & Neven 2021). Much as socio-gerontechnology has not widely focused on futures (for exceptions, see Cozza et al. 2021 and Lemos Dekker 2021), their diagnosis of today’s engagement with technologies’ speculative potential resonates with Strathern’s (1995, 434) argument that “the future seems increasingly trapped by present choice. It is as though creativity were trapped by artifice.”

The strand of literature that does work at the intersection of STS and futures (e.g., Borup et al. 2006; Jasanoff and Kim 2015) tends to overlook the role of the experiential, contingent, and serendipitous everyday in the generation of imaginations (Pink 2022a). This leads Minna Ruckenstein and Sarah Pink (2024) to call for a new futures approach in STS, one that accounts for hopeful and optimistic futures through, for example, considering anticipatory future breakages and modes of repair. The STS literature

is helpful as it understands futures as connected to the mind, artifices, and presents in resonance with Strathern's argument. Yet moving beyond classic ethnographic approaches which explore the future distantly and apart from the present, Pink (2022a) proposes an anthropology *in* the future rather than *about* the future. Pink and colleagues (2022b) additionally suggest that futures should not only be analysed to understand the present, nor should futures be solely understood as a temporal and linear phenomena. In summary, Futures Anthropology (Pink and Salazar 2017), design ethnography (Pink et al. 2022), and design+ethnography+futures (Akama et al. 2020) aim to take the everyday seriously and immerse *in* possible futures rather than research *about* futures distantly. This move implies researchers to draw on innovative methods beyond interviewing and participant observation, which allows them to analyse futures beyond the study of time, and investigate the unknowable and the possible (instead of predicting a fixed future). As such, I take and apply the new move of Futures Anthropology into AgeTech and consequently draw on three examples from fieldwork.

Doing Futures Anthropology with AgeTech

My fieldwork first included a desktop review of 49 AgeTech industry reports predicting aging-technology futures published online between 2012-2023. This eventually led me to design a series of comic-scenarios portraying AgeTech futures. The comic method has been previously used by Strengers et al. (2022) and Dahlgren et al. (2022), who explore how participants reflected on their own energy futures. I used these comic-scenarios in interviews (online and in-person) with 29 AgeTech experts spanning CEOs and aged-care workers in different countries. Based on both the industry reports and interviews, I then developed a series of future AgeTech scenarios through the GenAI platform Microsoft Bing that I am currently employing in video-ethnographic visits in older people's homes in Australia. These visits are inspired by design-anthropological filmmaking (Pink et al. 2022; Pink, 2022b) in which I pay particular attention to movement, imagined home adaptations, anticipated concerns, and future sensory experiences drawing on creative materials. The following ethnographic examples involve two older participants – who consented to an academic use of their visual material – and an aged care GenAI-scenario.

John (shown in Figure 1) is an Australian research participant in his 70s. He grounded futures discussing his preferred possibilities for Melbourne concerning an old sky-photograph of the city. As we had a video-tour, his home had plenty of historical pictures of his metropolitan area. He expressed keen interest in history and photography, yet my anthropological focus concerned futures. At first, I thought these two were incompatible as I initially wanted to understand futures as an out-there and lone entity separate from our presents and pasts. However, the historical sky-photograph eventually helped him understand concerns about futures. It firstly elicited him to reflect on the motivations to have such urban design and how Melbourne's housing is readapting from houses to apartments to an ongoing expansion of people:

Miguel: If these people were in 2023 and they saw Melbourne with all these technologies and skyscrapers, how would they feel?

John: I think it'd be a bit frightening for them – it is too much to accept. Some of the technology I remember when a TV first came out, you couldn't believe what that was happening. Some people would look behind the screen to see if there's someone there. I think it'd be unbelievable.

Miguel: And how do you think Melbourne will be in 100 years?

John: I'd love to see it. And I can't imagine it but because I am a bit pessimistic about politics. Politicians don't do a really good job but hopefully I'm wrong and things will get better. I would like to change Melbourne and take a lot of the cars out of the city and make it a more walkable

place. I'd like to see Flinders Lane, Collin Street, having no cars. People can walk all over it and have outdoor living. As I've seen in Europe, a lot of towns without cars in the middle. It's just lovely.

Then, we spoke about hypothetical scenarios such as what would previous Melbournians might think had they lived our presents, how would they imagine the future of Melbourne, and if we have met their expectations. John also imagined a plurality of city futures. As a bike lover he wished Melbourne to look like European bike-friendly and walkable cities banning cars in the city center. John did not imagine the future as a tangibly separate entity from the past, as his reflections on the historical photograph show, nor did he imagine futures only to affect the immediate present (e.g. implementing changes on our current policies). This example provides evidence to follow Strathern's argument on futures connected with artifices (i.e., historical photographs), mind, and pasts.



Figure 1: John imagining futures of Melbourne, filmed by Miguel Gomez

In the second example I show how I applied Futures Anthropology advocacy (Pink 2024a) for moving ourselves into sensing and experiencing future possibilities. I drew on generative AI (GenAI) to create futuristic scenarios (e.g. see Figure 2), which I then discussed with older participants in familiar places such as their living rooms. Based on this ethnographic tool, I argue that a study of AgeTech futures should not exclusively pertain to the immediate present, but that we can also analyse futures through far-fetched scenarios inasmuch participants and ethnographers find meaning in them. I used a GenAI-scenario of a future aged care living room and this tool enabled me to avoid hyper-realistic scenarios attached immediately to the present. The scenario (Figure 2) encouraged my participant and me to move ourselves into a 'futuristic aged care living room' and discuss possibilities. These possibilities were far from our current everyday (i.e. my participants do not live with blue holograms or with such a deep datafication), but they provided a platform to express concerns about care, surveillance, and control central to imagining future possibilities. In particular, my participants expressed that they would want to avoid certain possibilities in that future aged care, such as coldness, bland design and colours, and loneliness. These concerns were not voiced in a classical interview mode, through the use of hyper-realistic artifices, or participant observation. Instead I used far-future, utopian/dystopian, and uncertain GenAI-scenarios as prompts that participants improvised upon. Linked to this improvisation of futures, this possible scenario additionally demonstrates that a study of futures should not only be analysed linearly as a temporal consecution of past, present, and future events, given that these categories eventually merge when imagining futures with participants.

Yet researching in AgeTech futures should not be about speculating from scratch — my GenAI-scenario was somewhat attached to our presents and pasts given that its prompt relies on prior existing information (a review of AgeTech industry reports and GenAI using online information). In this way this example also follows Strathern’s argument in addition to STS that advocates for a study of futures linked to the immediate present through anticipation, artifices, and nation-state players.



Figure 2: Scenario created by Bing depicting a future living room in an aged care facility

The last fieldwork example (Figure 3) follows Strathern’s call for particular interconnections of futures and presents by demonstrating how Lucy challenges GenAI visions presented to her, using her present choices, and hence reflects the relevance of researching *in* futures in familiar places (e.g. participants’ homes). Lucy, a 70-year old woman living in Melbourne, and I talked in her living room, where she stressed the importance of her capacity to choose a yellow-green carpet that was specially made for her and her partner. Lucy conveyed that the carpet easily collects dust, thus requiring a professional cleaner every six months, and might not be to everyone’s taste in colour. Yet she adores her carpet for how its colour awakens senses and lifts her mood, mirroring the sunshine streaming through her garden windows as she expressed during an interview:

Miguel: Do you mind telling me why did you choose this colour?

Lucy: So I chose this colour because we formerly had a teal coloured carpet. And I thought I wanted to lift the mood of the house. I like the teal colour. But so we were talking about red or yellow. And I thought I know most people wouldn't choose a yellow colour because it gets dirty. But for me, it's the sunshine seen and it's just happy.



Figure 3: Lucy —participant— and her dog contesting GenAI representations, filmed by Miguel Gomez

Lucy claimed that the carpet differs from standard, homogenous, and bland house styles imagined by GenAI (as seen in Figure 2), so she uses her carpet to show her unique home style. Also, AgeTech industry experts anticipate concerns about the hazards that carpets pose for older people tripping and falling, and hindering walkers. However, Lucy, aware of safety through her occupational therapy background, foresees her future house with her current carpet and dog largely partaking in the future identity of her home. See our conversation below:

Lucy: Can I ask you a question? Do you think that AI would have designed our house like this interior? I kind of feel like, they will never know what you would like, unless you tell them. Now if you go to an architect, they'll ask you, what do you want? How many bedrooms do you want? How do you want your kitchen? (*Pointing to parts of her living room*) I mean, like, the green, light green curtains, and the yellow. The garden out through the windows?

John and Lucy anticipated future concerns which help me support Strathern's argument about socio-material futures intertwined with pasts, presents, and artifices. However, aging futures are not merely cultural expressions tied to the present and past, temporal representations, nor tangible or specific events. Rather, futures can be effectively researched through methodological innovation (e.g. using GenAI far-fetched scenarios) to help uncover participants' concerns about the contingency of aging-technology future possibilities. These socio-material futures should not be researched distantly, rather I draw on futures anthropology (Pink and Salazar, 2017) and design ethnography (Pink et al., 2022) to argue that researching future AgeTech should look *into* aging futures sensing and experiencing through collaborations and being there with AgeTech industries, older people, carers, and more in their familiar places. Following this, I suggest aging futures should be understood as nonlinear, unpredictable, and contingent upon a plurality of uncertain possibilities, in movement, and experiential in that older people — not only nation-state or industry players — performatively enact them.

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