



Colleex: A Collaboratory for Ethnographic Experimentation

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Fieldwork, the cornerstone to the ethnographer's magic, seems to be under siege in recent times. The invocation that it 'is not what it used to be' runs parallel to intense debates on the place of ethnography in the production of anthropological knowledge (see for instance the recent take and forth on [Ingold](#)'s critique on ethnography [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). Challenges to fieldwork (and ethnography) come from all the corners of the discipline: anthropologist injecting a sensory approach to ethnography, drawing inspiration of design practices to devise new



venues for the production of anthropological knowledge or endeavouring into partnerships with other disciplines and substituting the traditional trope of comparison for that of collaboration.

Amid this broad debate on the norm and form of fieldwork, we intend to open a debate on the place of experimentation in anthropology.

The invocation of experimentation in anthropology is not completely new, as we would like to recall, 'the reflexive turn' of the 1980s inaugurated a period of creative exploration of writing genres that [George E. Marcus](#) and [Michael M. J. Fischer](#) described in experimental terms: 'What is happening seems to us to be a pregnant moment in which every individual project of ethnographic research and writing is potentially an experiment'. While this turn focussed on the space of representation (particularly the written form), we suggest now the opportunity to emplace the experimental drive of ethnography into fieldwork. A call that echoes and draws inspiration of a number of projects carried out in recent times by a series of anthropologist (we find especially inspiring the work of [Paul Rabinow](#), [George E. Marcus](#) and [Douglas Holmes](#), [Kim Fortun](#), [Michael Fortun](#), [Alberto Corsín Jiménez](#) and [Annelise Riles](#), among many others).

A very important caveat, we do not intend to place experimentation and (participant) observation in opposition, only highlight their specificities. Indeed we think that both epistemic practices usually establish complex relationships in our fieldwork, at times they are entangled, juxtaposed or alternated.

Despite these relationships, we contend that experimentation involves a different epistemic practice to participant observation and it constitutes an alternative trope to describe our forms of engagement in the field.

Colleex thus intents to open a space for debate and intervention around experimental forms of ethnographic fieldwork. It seeks to work as a collaborative whose main agenda is to foster theoretical debates and practical explorations on



this topic. Below you can read the statement for the network proposal; if you are interested just send as an email (tomas.criado@tum.de and jestalellaf@uoc.edu) or sign the proposal [here](#). The network builds on and intends to continue the work we have been doing in the previous two years in a series of meetings and writings, you can have a glimpsed of it [here](#).

Colleex: A Collaboratory for Ethnographic Experimentation

Colleex is a network that aims to open a space for debate and intervention around experimental forms of ethnographic fieldwork. Amid profound debates in recent years on the nature and conventions of ethnography, Colleex seeks to explore novel forms of knowledge production for anthropology. The network is organized as a collaboratory whose main agenda is to foster theoretical debates and practical explorations on what we call ethnographic experimentation.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork has traditionally been understood as the cornerstone epistemic situation for the production of anthropological knowledge in ethnography. Both an empirical practice and disciplinary narrative, we know that nowadays fieldwork is not what it used to be —or maybe it has never been what the canon narrates. The solitary confined research practice of ethnography has given way to collaborative projects, far-away locations have been replaced by close-to-home field sites, and traditional visual predominance has been expanded into a multi-sensory concern.

Anthropological imagination has traditionally understood the epistemic practice of fieldwork in observational terms. The core trope of participant observation has worked both as description and prescription for the kind of social relationships and epistemic practices through which anthropologists produce knowledge in the



field.

The entrance of anthropology in novel empirical sites and the construction of new objects of study in the last decades seem to require from us to urgently revise and devise other forms of practising fieldwork.

Experimentation

Invoking the figure of the experiment acts as a provocation to investigate alternative epistemic practices in ethnography. Colleex intends to explore the infrastructures, spaces, forms of relationships, methods and techniques required to inject an experimental sensibility in fieldwork. Nevertheless, there is no intention to oppose experimentation to observation. On the contrary, Colleex seeks to discern the multiple forms of relationship between these two epistemic forms —and their correlate modes of relationality— that in different circumstances and situations may be complementary, adjacent or substitutive.

Not alien to the anthropological endeavour, experimentation was invoked decades ago as an opportunity to renovate the discipline through novel forms of ethnographic writing and representation. Colleex network would like to further develop that experimental impulse present in many anthropological sensibilities, shifting its locus from the process of writing to the practice of fieldwork. The intention is to work on a question: What would ethnographic fieldwork look like if it was shaped around the epistemic practice of experimentation?

Hence, fieldwork experimentation is not being invoked just for its own sake but because there is a prospect that it could help foster new forms of anthropological theorization.

Collaboration

The network seeks to connect with anthropologists and other practitioners of ethnography interested in discussing their fieldwork practice. It could be of



interest for specialists in the fields of visual anthropology, sensory anthropology, digital ethnography, design anthropology, creative intersections of art and anthropology, or anthropology and STS. The network also seeks to include specialists from other domains like art, cultural producers, designers and practitioners of any discipline interested in the creative experimentation with ethnographic practice. The inventive unfolding of ethnography taking place in those areas could greatly contribute to strengthen the reach of anthropological fieldwork practices.

Colleex is established as a collaboratory, a project that aims at promoting forms of collaboration among all those interested in the topic under discussion.

In contrast with permanent networks, from its very inception Colleex would like to work with a temporary horizon of 5 years, after which we expect to deliver a contribution of the work done by the network in appropriate formats, be it in conventional academic and/or more experimental formats faithful to the collaboratory sensibility we are invoking. Four convenors will develop their task for periods of two years. The network will only continue after the first period of five years if a designed program for its continuity is agreed by its members.

It is not necessary to be member of the [EASA association](#) or even an anthropologist to be part of the network/collaboratory. If you are interested please write us to jestalellaf@uoc.edu ([Adolfo Estalella](#)), tomas.criado@tum.de ([Tomás Sánchez Criado](#)) and eeva.berglund@helsinki.fi ([Eeva Berglund](#)).