



'Devising' fieldwork

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Collaboration is an epistemic figure resulting from the careful craft of articulating inventive shared modes of doing together with our companions in the field. The field turns into a site for the construction of joint problematizations.

An anthropologist embarks on the co-production of an edited volume during his fieldwork with one of his counterparts in the field. The book becomes something else when it starts to publicly circulate in a series of events, and provides contributors with the opportunity to raise and discuss different issues.



Unexpectedly, the book turns into a platform for the enactment of public encounters: ‘a hosting device which allowed contributors and others to raise issues of concern, present ideas, and make new connections’ and the ethnography is transformed into ‘a collaborative device for the production of public forums’. Another anthropologist working side by side with a touring band describes her engagement with musicians as a practice of ‘rhyming together’. Instead of the traditional vocabulary of place-making she uses the rhythmic analogies of touring and musical performance to account for her experimental ethnography. If the first reading is proposed by [Isaac Marrero](#), the second account is provided by [Anna Lisa Ramella](#), two of contributors to the forthcoming edited book on ‘Experimental collaborations’, exploring experimental forms of ethnography that result from close relationships of collaboration with our counterparts^[1].

Developed in certain para-sitical locations—such as design companies, scientific laboratories, activist/artistic/cultural contexts, and public institutions populated by diverse advocates, technicians and experts—the kind of experimental ethnography we are proposing is a form of engagement that entails field interventions through material and spatial arrangements that enable the articulation of inventive ways of working together. At times these interventions take the form of events (as in Isaac Marrero’s case), on other occasions the anthropologist is responsible for setting up digital infrastructures (as was the case of Tomás Sánchez Criado—[see first post](#)—), or making the articulation of rhythms an instrument for ethnographic work (following Anna Lisa Ramella’s account). These are all instances that may be described as exercises of ‘devising the field’ in collaboration with our counterparts.

Collaboration has a long tradition in anthropology, and ethnographers have historically drawn on different forms of partnership in their professional activity.

From the early anthropological accounts based on key informants through the work of armchair anthropologists grounded in third-party narratives to the more



modern fieldwork practices, anthropologists have always depended on others for the production of knowledge. Native American anthropology is an example of the critical role that key informants have played in the discipline. Luke Eric Lassiter (2008) has described how from Lewis Henry Morgan to Franz Boas, the work of these key informants was not reduced to providing anthropologists with information. On the contrary, these counterparts in the field were often engaged in practices of translation and even the co-authoring of texts, as has been explicitly recognized in a number of classic studies. Nevertheless, explicit acknowledgment of these forms of collaboration has tended to be the exception, rather than the norm, and field relationships have been dominated by an asymmetric balance between the informant Other and the informed anthropologist. Describing this kind of relationship as collaboration requires clarification of the extractive act and the asymmetric roles embodied in these situations. In a heuristic attempt, we suggest referring to this as ‘collaboration mode 1’.

In the 1980s, during attempts to renew and reinvigorate the discipline, collaboration was hailed as either a means of creating more engaged public forms of anthropology (Lassiter, 2005) or as a methodological strategy that would enable anthropologists to articulate their ethical responsibility and political commitments towards more ‘dialogic’ forms of research. We would like to highlight two different routes in these pleas for collaboration. One locates collaboration in the time and space of fieldwork, invoking it as a strategy for establishing more symmetrical and horizontal relationships. For Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) this form of collaboration was an attempt to engage with and empower marginalized communities. In contrast, Eric Lassiter (2005, 2008) locates the paradigmatic locus of collaboration in the space of representation, advocating coproduction of written ethnographic outputs. The argument for this is that collaboration lays the foundations for the incorporation of voices and interpretations of our counterparts in the field, enriching the final account with more nuanced, dialogic and polyphonic writing. We call this mode of infusing fieldwork with a political or ethical commitment ‘collaboration mode 2’.



We may thus distinguish these two established modes of collaboration in anthropology: whereas Mode 1 pays attention to the constitutive flows of fieldwork information, Mode 2 highlights the capitalization of information by anthropologists and proposes a symmetrical and ethical-laden form of relationship. We do not intend to criticize these ethnographic endeavours, merely emphasize the differing idioms that inform these conceptualizations of collaboration. Each denotes specific loci for collaboration (translating and providing data or taking part in and representing marginalized or political communities) and motives (production of information or ethical commitment).

These collaborative modes are thus not historical stages but distinctive ways of understanding the locus, meaning and practice of collaboration in ethnography.

In recent years the idiom of collaboration has pervaded anthropology and many other social domains, capturing the imagination of a wide range of professional domains. We often witness calls for collaboration in the arts, sciences and technological design. In all these contexts, collaboration has been invested with a series of virtues that Monica Konrad (2012: 9) has synthesized as follows: 'the expectation of mutual advantages', 'an increased awareness of the other parties' work', and in the case of her institutional studies, 'more effective work styles and an enhanced organizational capacity' resulting from different actors with diverse knowledge backgrounds and from multiple disciplines working together. Collaboration is praised as an ideal mode of either social organization or knowledge production: 'a new overarching motif for research and practice' (Riles, 2015: 147). A different take might be Marisol de la Cadena's (2015: 12-34) conceptualization and praise of 'co-labouring,' a series of practices aimed at elucidating and controlling 'equivocations' in conceptual translations and dialogues with our epistemic partners.



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Drawing on our own ethnographic projects of recent years and the contributions to the 'Experimental collaboration' volume, we would like to intimate a different mode of collaboration, one that is neither a constitutive condition of fieldwork nor a deliberate strategy informed by political and ethical commitments. Instead, collaboration is in these cases an epistemic figure that describes how anthropologists creatively venture into the production of venues of knowledge creation in partnership with their counterparts in the field. Collaboration refers in this case to a para-sitical situation taking place in contexts where anthropologists meet para-ethnographic others (see first post).

Rather than notions of solidarity and equity, collaboration takes for us the form of tentative situations in which anthropologists appear to be prompted to repurpose their traditional techniques or are drawn into intense interventions in the field, at times working smoothly with counterparts, at other times clashing with them.

In these situations, the ethnographic method is re-equipped with new infrastructures, spaces of knowledge production, relationship forms and modes



of representation.

Taken this way, collaboration would not be the traditional constitutive condition of any fieldwork characterized by an asymmetric relationship (Mode 1) nor a deliberate strategy infused by political and ethical commitments (Mode 2). Rather, it would be a form of engaging in joint epistemic explorations with those formerly described as informants, now reconfigured as our epistemic partners, or drawing on Paul Rabinow (2011): companions in the field. We have come to think of this process as one that unsettles the observational convention of ethnography and reveals other epistemic practices in fieldwork. We call this ‘collaboration mode 3’. Without a definitive idea of what such a mode might entail, we have realized that Mode 3 tends to involve experimentation with the vocabularies in use.

The para-sitical collaborations we are delineating is a kind of field situation that neither takes the shape of horizontal relations nor implies the erasure of (disciplinary) differences. On the contrary, the para-sitical collaboration of Mode 3 is often brought into existence against a background of disciplinary frictions, differing knowledges, epistemic diversity and social misunderstandings. Collaboration is an epistemic figure resulting from the careful craft of articulating inventive, shared modes of doing together with our counterparts in the field. It is precisely in this para-sitical collaboration where the experimental impulse takes central stage within ethnography.

Fieldwork in these situations is articulated with specific material and social forms. In an attempt to convey these instantiations of fieldwork, we draw on John Law and Evelyn Ruppert’s (2013) conceptualization of such methods as ‘devices’. In their own words, these are patterned arrangements that ‘assemble and arrange the world in specific social and material patterns’ (Law and Ruppert, 2013: 230). In contrast to formulations that reduce methods to instruments or simple recipes, this conceptualization emphasizes the precarious, processual and creative nature of methods, its situated condition—the boundary of what counts as a method



always depends on one's questions and agendas—and its performative character: 'methods are shaped by the social, and in turn they act as social operators to do the social' (2013: 233).

Describing the role of anthropologists that organize events in the field, utilize friction as a relational mode, and manage rhythms requires a vocabulary to illuminate the presence of fieldwork interventions that 'device' ethnographic venues for epistemic collaboration. These fieldwork devices, in our vocabulary, construct an ethnographic site that is not just a location for the production of empirical data, or a space for learning, but a field where the construction of problematizations is central both to the anthropologist and his or her field counterparts: now transformed into epistemic partners they become companions sharing the endeavor of problematizing the world.

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^[1] [‘Experimental Collaborations: Ethnography through fieldwork devices’](#) (to be published by Berghahn’s EASA book series).

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