

# Introduction

## Experimental Collaborations

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Anthropologists conducting fieldwork in distinctive sites populated by ‘epistemic communities’, such as public institutions, activist collectives, artistic spaces and laboratories, have recently engaged in intense reflexive examination of their research practices and methodological engagements. This book presents a series of ethnographic accounts in which authors share their methodological anxieties and reveal the creative inventiveness emanating from fieldwork practices that challenge what they had assumed to be the norm and form of ethnography. Populated by activists, artists, designers, public servants and scientists, these ethnographic sites appear to compel us – or provide the opportunity – to reconsider not only the epistemic practices, types of relationships and forms of engagement in our fieldwork, but also our accounts of the field. Taking on this challenge, contributors explore a descriptive approach to their projects, narrating the intimate relationships established with their counterparts – now turned into epistemic partners – and the interventions devised as forms of epistemic collaboration in the field that open venues for experimental interventions in ethnography.

Our discussion resonates with recent reflections contending the need to readdress fieldwork and reformulate its practice (Faubion and Marcus 2009; Fabian 2014). We echo debates on the place of ethnography in the production of anthropological knowledge (Ingold 2008) and the transformation of the norm and form of fieldwork in a series of projects that have injected an experimental drive (Rabinow et al. 2008). The reflections of Douglas Holmes and George Marcus (2005,

2008) are particularly relevant: their ethnographic projects led them to argue that if anthropology was to enter into domains populated by subjects that shared anthropologists' ethnographic-like practices, or in their idiom, 'para-ethnographic' practices, it was essential to 're-function ethnography' (Holmes and Marcus 2005). In these ethnographic sites, collaboration would be the cornerstone from which to undertake fieldwork.

In the accounts compiled in this book, ethnography occurs through processes of material and social interventions that turn the field into a site for epistemic collaboration. Through creative interventions that unfold what we term 'fieldwork devices' – such as co-produced books, the circulation of repurposed data, co-organized events, authorization protocols, relational frictions, and social rhythms – anthropologists engage with their counterparts in the field in the construction of joint anthropological problematizations. In these situations, the traditional tropes of the fieldwork encounter (i.e. immersion and distance) give way to a narrative register of experimentation, where the aesthetics of collaboration in the production of knowledge substitutes or intermingles with the traditional trope of participant observation. Building on this, we propose the concept of 'experimental collaborations' to describe and conceptualize this distinctive ethnographic modality.

### Para-siting Ethnography

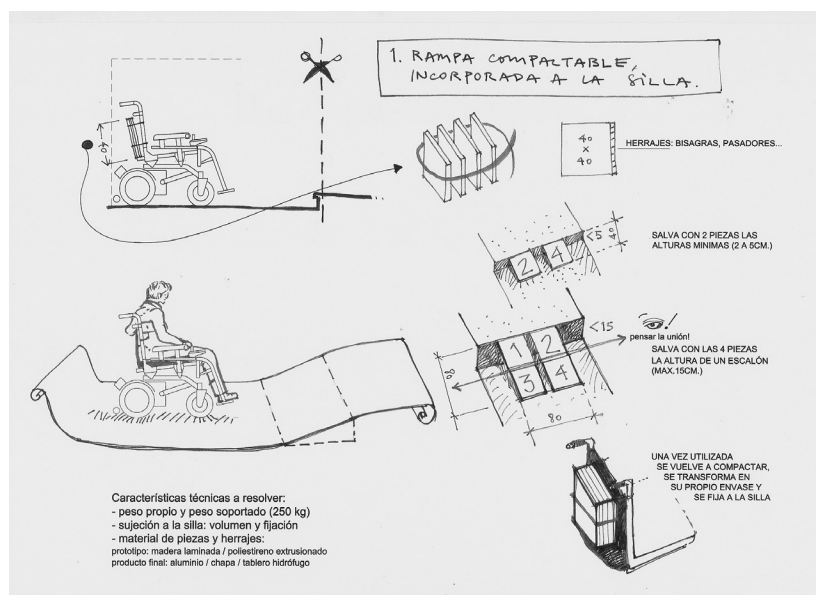
Our discussion stems from a methodological quandary experienced in our most recent ethnographies, which intensified when contrasted with the projects of our doctoral dissertations. Our presence in the field shifted from the previously experienced modality of 'participating in order to write' (Emerson et al. 1995: 26) to a more engaged and interventionist practice. We note similar experiences in the contributions to this book. The tension that arises in these situations, which sparked both our original discussion and a desire to bring the issue to the fore, is perhaps best exemplified in Isaac Marrero-Guillamón's account. Working with activists and artists protesting against the 2012 Olympics in London, Marrero-Guillamón vividly describes his methodological anxiety: 'I had wanted to *follow* some artists' work, but I was invited to become a *collaborator*; I had imagined a fieldwork based on some kind of *distance* with the objects and subjects of study, but I had instead *participated* in the production of the very things I was studying' (this volume, Chapter 8). His 'original sin'

(the term is his) reverberates with Andrea Gaspar's remark that her frictional presence amongst Milanese interaction designers was 'not as detached as it should be' (this volume, Chapter 4). These reflexive experiences are significant, for the transgressing of such conventions may lead ethnographers to view their own projects as failures.

Ethnography is generally considered a flexible method, and fieldwork usually requires substantial improvisation. Indeed, undertaking an ethnographic project is far removed from applying a recipe. Nevertheless, despite an openness in the forms of engagements allowed within the ethnographic method, our contributors mark the pervasive presence of a compelling canon restricting the way anthropologists should conduct themselves in the field (as illustrated in the quotes above). Yet these accounts do exhibit transgressions of this canon and outline a different modality for ethnographic fieldwork, one renouncing the supposed distance required in fieldwork and overturning certain conventions learned in introductory anthropological training.

Tomás faced such a dilemma in late 2012, when he proposed undertaking participant observation in a nascent Barcelona-based project for the open design of technical aids entitled *En torno a la silla* (ETS), as part of his postdoctoral ethnographic project on self-care technology design. Despite the initial 'we are really looking forward to working with you' (Tomás's fieldnotes, 22/11/2012), they also stated: 'You can't be a mere observer here' (*ibid.*, 29/11/2012). This condition was aligned with the independent-living movement's motto and philosophy, which permeated the group: 'Nothing about us without us' – a slogan that would shape his subsequent ethnographic project. He was not the only researcher in the group, since other participants were also involved in their own design and political investigations, and reflecting on their experiences in depth.<sup>1</sup>

Alida Díaz, Antonio Centeno and Rai Vilatovà, the three initial members of ETS, had met in the 2011 occupation of the city's central square, *Plaça de Catalunya*, around the time the 'Indignados' movement (the outraged, the Spanish precursor of the Occupy movement) emerged: Alida was an architect with substantial experience in the city's activist collectives; Antonio was a mathematician, a powered wheelchair user and one of the most renowned independent-living activists in the country; and Rai, who was also an experienced activist, was an anthropology graduate who worked as a craftsman. Having been restricted by the lack of accessible spaces during their early friendship, they developed the idea for a project to prototype an open-source wheelchair kit, which could 'habilitate other



**Figure 0.1** First draft of an open-source portable wheelchair ramp. Picture by En torno a la silla (July 2012).

possibilities’ for wheelchair users and their potential allies. Without previous experience in the construction of technical aids, they started by reconceptualizing the very idea of a wheelchair: it was to be ‘a little agora that brings together not only its user but other people with whom the wheelchair user interacts, be it at home, in the streets, bars, classrooms, wherever the people are’.<sup>2</sup> The kit comprised three elements: a portable wheelchair ramp (see Figure 0.1), a foldable table, and an armrest-briefcase, developed with a small amount of funding from the cultural centre Medialab-Prado (Madrid).<sup>3</sup>

Tomás’s ethnographic site may be aptly characterized as a parasite, as can the venues populated by urban guerrillas where Adolfo, in collaboration with his colleague Alberto Corsín, conducted their urban fieldwork in Madrid (Corsín Jiménez and Estalella 2016). Both sites resemble the ones that contributors to this book have investigated: a wide gamut of spaces populated by professionals, natural scientists, artists, activists, designers and civil servants. These ethnographers were faced with subjects engaged in highly reflexive, creative and investigative practices, whether in their professional contexts or everyday activities. These are contexts populated by ‘epistemic communities’ in which “research”, broadly conceived, is integral to the

function of these communities', the lab serving as the paradigmatic example, but also realizing that 'an experimental ethos is now ... manifest in countless settings (Holmes and Marcus 2008: 82).

Indeed, laboratories are not the only spaces we would like to mention, given their modernist and lettered or expert connotations. We believe we should also expand our attention towards other spaces of 'the contemporary', such as the different activist spaces of the former 'colonized Others' of the discipline (black, indigenous, people of colour, women, people with disabilities, etc.). Due to their particular dialogic structure and argumentation-oriented modes of sociality, these epistemic communities explicitly counter and render impossible any form of 'allochronic' relegation (Fabian 2014) of our ethnographic counterparts – that is, their treatment as primitive, illiterate, or ancient, forcing anthropologists to consider them as 'coeval'.

Certain recent ethnographic accounts of these sites have avoided the conventional aesthetics of the field encounter, drawing instead on an idiom of intervention, underlining the ways in which anthropologists go beyond both the distant and engaged modalities of participant observation. An example of this is a series of ethnographic projects based on the construction of digital platforms for scholarly interdisciplinary work, which have become the very ethnographic sites of the anthropologists who established them (Kelty et al. 2009; Fortun et al. 2014; Riles 2015). The field of these ethnographies displaces naturalistic conventions and traditional tropes of immersion. It is not merely that these ethnographers assume their site is not a geographically bounded location (Gupta and Ferguson 1997) or that they bluntly acknowledge the laborious construction, both theoretical and practical, involved in the process of establishing relationships (Amit 2000). There is something beyond this: the field appears literally to be an object of careful design that gathers together those who would be part of the project. A different articulation of digital technologies in ethnographic practice is described in Karen Waltorp's chapter, where she introduces us to her and her fellow Danish Muslim second-generation immigrants' shared use of digital technologies. Mobile phones, email and message applications unfold a series of interfaces in the field that prompt Waltorp to conceptualize 'an ethnography where the field takes the form of an interface: a field of ambiguous condition because it links together those things that it at the same time separates' (this volume, Chapter 5).

Another para-sitical situation is instigated when anthropologists assume institutional positions among their prospective informants. This was the case in Paul Rabinow's ethnography of a large research

project on synthetic biology, where he assumed the leading role within an ELSI programme (Ethics, Law, and Social Impact), with responsibility for the social dimensions of the project. Rabinow has suggested he had to resort to re-equilibrating the traditional balance between participation and observation in the quest for a different relationship in the field: '[T]he need for a new form of collaboration was instigated by the desire to redesign a form of anthropology to be more adequate to the contemporary' (Rabinow 2011: 143).

Holmes and Marcus (2005, 2008) have similarly hinted at collaboration as the best epistemic strategy for developing fieldwork in these sites. Drawing on their experience, they have argued that anthropologists working in para-sitcal contexts cannot maintain the conventional dichotomy between informant and observer when the proximity of the epistemic practices of the former provides anthropologists with the opportunity to turn them into epistemic partners. Therefore, the challenge Holmes and Marcus present anthropologists with is 'to construct models of fieldwork as collaboration for themselves, models that let them operate with their own research agendas inside the pervasive collaboratories that define social spaces today' (Holmes and Marcus 2008: 130). However, collaboration in parasitical contexts may not always be the best option, or even possible. This is the argument Maria Schiller makes in recounting a project carried out in the municipal institutions of three different European cities, intended to study how diversity was produced and managed in practice. She describes the very different roles and positions she was able to establish, 'sometimes defining our relationship in more collaborative terms, and on other occasions confining my research to a more conventional participant observation' (this volume, Chapter 2). This fluctuating relationship underlines the need to consider the nuances of fieldwork, such as the relevance of the anthropologist's features and the convenience of further developing and differentiating forms of 'para-sites'. In these ethnographies, moving away from the vocabularies of observation and participation, collaboration takes central stage.

## Epistemic Collaborations

Collaboration has a long tradition in anthropology, and ethnographers have historically drawn on different forms of partnership in their professional activity (Riles 2015). 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 (Stull and Schensul 1987; Ruby 1992; Choy et al. 2009). 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 (Hymes 1974) and political commitments (Juris 2007) towards more ‘dialogic’ forms of research (Fabian 2014). 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 (Rappaport 2008). 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 output. 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 (Field 2008). We call this mode of infusing fieldwork with a political or ethical commitment ‘Collaboration Mode 2’.

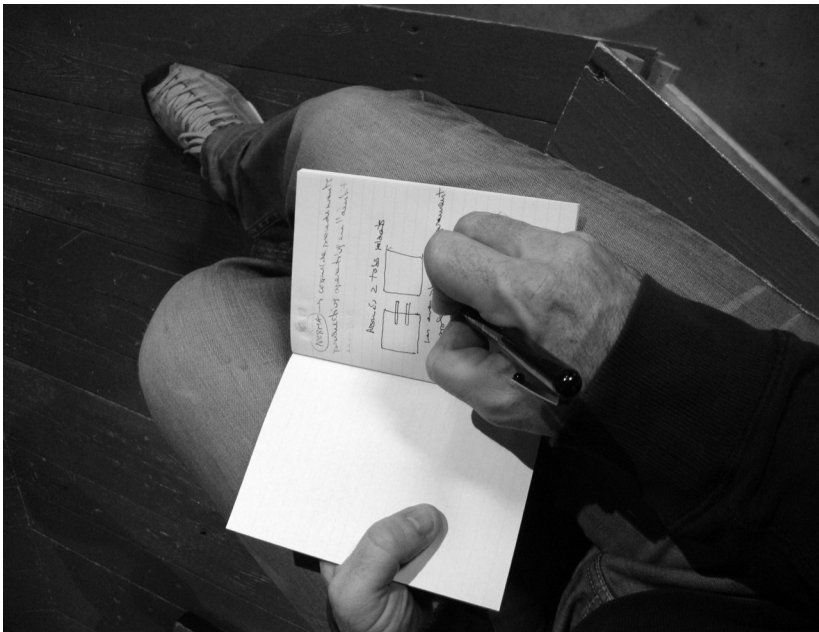
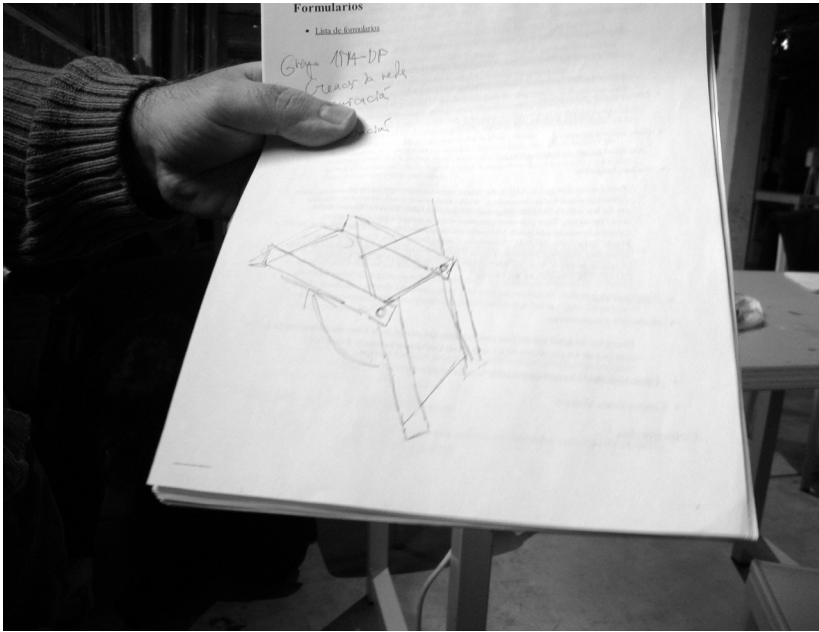
We may thus distinguish these two established modes of collaboration in anthropology: whereas Mode 1 pays attention to the constitutive flows of fieldwork information, Mode 2 highlights the capitalization of information by anthropologists and proposes a

symmetrical and ethics-laden form of relationship. We do not intend to criticize these ethnographic endeavours, but 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 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 (Bishop 2012), sciences (Olson, Zimmerman and Bos 2008) and technological design (Benkler 2009). 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.

The contributors to this book describe their field engagement in collaborative terms, although here collaboration is usually neither a constitutive condition of fieldwork nor a deliberate strategy informed by political and ethical commitments. Instead, collaboration is 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. Tomás’s fieldwork is exemplary in this sense. Due to the ethnographic documentary practices he displayed in the first encounters, he was rapidly brought in to the shared exploratory material fabrication activities of ETS, and placed in charge of the project’s documentation. At times this involved taking pictures of measuring, sketching and manufacturing, and producing notes of meetings and events; on other occasions, gathering and scanning the many different ideas or sketches being produced, whether in notepads or on table napkins (see Figure 0.2). The aim was not only





**Figures 0.2 and 0.3** Pictures of the sketches being produced in discussions about folding methods for the portable wheelchair ramp. Pictures taken by Tomás Sánchez Criado (January 2013).

to compile records but also to generate an account through textual and audiovisual materials such as tutorials. To this end, Tomás set up a digital infrastructure for the archiving, publication and circulation of these materials. Sharing all this was essential to ETS: not only would the process and all results be made public, it was hoped this would inspire others to start their own explorations.

Tomás's experience resonates with that of Alexandra Kasatkina, Zinaida Vasilyeva and Roman Khandozhko, who describe for us a large project based on interviews conducted with Soviet nuclear scientists and engineers. These authors relate the cumbersome process of obtaining authorization from their interviewees to publish the transcripts. What was assumed to be a straightforward process embroiled them in an unexpected arena of toing and froing over these texts, which were substantially modified, transforming the transcripts into something else. While the authorization process presented an opportunity to work with interviewees and produce new empirical data, elicit interpretations, and establish new relationships, the authors hesitate to qualify these instances as collaboration, describing them rather as 'forms of partnerships shaped around knowledge production' (this volume, Chapter 6).

We have used the concept of collaboration to refer to these situations in the field: a para-sitical collaboration taking place in contexts where anthropologists meet para-ethnographic others. However, rather than notions of solidarity and equity, for us collaboration takes the form of tentative situations in which anthropologists appear to be prompted to repurpose their traditional techniques (taking notes and interviewing) 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 epistemic partners. 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. An interesting example of this is Anna Lisa Ramella's chapter on her fieldwork with a band. Instead of a vocabulary of place-making and even relationships, she uses the rhythmic analogies of touring and musical performance to describe her experimental engagement with participant observation in terms of 'rhyming together'. Whilst touring she was required 'to navigate within and become a rower in a boat where people, objects and practices were constantly being negotiated' (this volume, Chapter 3).

The para-sitital collaborations described by the contributors to this book delineate different empirical contours of such a Mode 3. In many cases this is a type of field situation that neither takes the shape of horizontal relations nor implies the erasure of (disciplinary) differences. On the contrary, the para-sitital collaboration of Mode 3 is often brought into existence against a background of disciplinary frictions, differing knowledges, epistemic diversity and social misunderstandings. Take, for instance, Tomasz Rakowski's account of his project in a rural area of Poland. Working with artists and a segment of the rural population extremely skilled in their DIY practices, Rakowski states: 'The collaboration is made possible, as there is an acknowledgment of a certain clash of different forms of knowledge and different energies' (this volume, Chapter 7). This clash takes place between the vernacular knowledges of the amateur craftspeople, the artists seeking to give them visibility, and the anthropologist. In all these cases, collaboration is an epistemic figure resulting from the careful craft of articulating inventive, shared modes of doing together with our counterparts in the field. The contributions in this book strive to find the appropriate vocabularies to narrate this. It is precisely in this para-sitital collaboration where the experimental impulse takes central stage within ethnography.

## **Experimentation and Observation**

Working side by side with scientists, activists, public servants and artists has led anthropologists to intertwine with different forms of expertise, problematizing their conventional practices of knowledge production in fieldwork. The observational stance is then replaced with an experimental approach deeply rooted in these para-sitital collaborations. One of the broadest explorations of experimentation in ethnography in recent years was undertaken by Paul Rabinow and his collaborators (Rabinow 2011; Rabinow and Bennett 2012; Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2013; Korsby and Stavrianakis 2016), as

part of his wider reflection on what he refers to as the anthropology of the contemporary. His most recent project on synthetic biology has been described as an experiment unfolding a twofold collaboration: between anthropology and biology; and between Rabinow and his co-researchers (PhD students and postdoctoral researchers). This project is driven by the desire to redesign, ‘to experiment with the invention and refinement of practices of venue construction and modes of presentation, as well as concept formation and clustering’ (Rabinow 2011: 114).

The increasing incorporation of digital platforms in anthropology – at times as spaces for collaboration, at others as repositories for exploring the formats of empirical data – has often been accompanied by appeals for experimentation. Kim and Michael Fortun’s Asthma Files project is paradigmatic in this sense: a set of digital platforms, private and public databases with interviews and various ethnographic findings, intended to record the different and fragmentary sources of knowledge and expertise available on this multiple disease. In the researchers’ own description, theirs are ‘digital tools aimed to animate the comparative perspective of anthropology’ (Fortun et al. 2014: 633). Digital platforms in the form of archives and coordinating tools have also been the locus for experiments with ethnographic writing genres (Fabian 2008). Digital platforms certainly serve a different purpose from that of publicizing projects or the presentation of results; they are essential pieces of equipment in the production of records, concepts and interpretations during fieldwork. Nevertheless, the key point is their status as infrastructures for inquiry, an integral part of ethnographic forms of engagement. This is fundamental for arguments advocating experimentation in ethnography: it allows anthropologists to put in practice forms of inquiry that make the forging of new anthropological problematizations possible.

Although appeals for experimentation are sometimes vague and attribute diverse meanings to the process, the use of this figure is not a mere metaphorical flourish. Descriptive accounts of experimentation bring to life new ethnographic imaginations that either transform field informants into epistemic partners (Holmes and Marcus 2005), remediate the form of ethnography in the company of others (Rabinow 2011), or even trade the traditional comparative project of anthropology for one of collaboration (Riles 2015). The experimental becomes a distinctive articulation of the empirical work of anthropologists shaping their relationships in the field collaboratively. We take this invocation of the figure of experimentation in fieldwork seriously because we believe it constitutes attempts to describe

distinctive forms of knowledge production, and with this book we seek to further delineate the contours of this form of practice. As Emma Garnett suggests in her contribution when describing her work in an interdisciplinary team of epidemiologists and chemists: 'The concept of experiment is useful for an anthropological approach to interdisciplinary knowledge making because it offers a material means of ethnographic engagement' (this volume, Chapter 1).

Despite the innovative formulation of experimentation in various contemporary projects, the trope of participant observation as the epistemic figure through which fieldwork is described often remains. Experimentation, hence, is conceived here as a kind of deviation from participant observation, where the experiment sets the stage for the expansion of limits and possibilities (Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2013). While these considerations provide fruitful insights to experimental practices during fieldwork, we contend that the ethnographic experiment should not be seen merely as a deviation but as a distinctive ethnographic modality for the production of anthropological knowledge. Put differently, the specific object of the ethnographic experimentation is not participant observation but the social worlds in which anthropologists are involved. The chapters in this collection delve into descriptions of their experimental interventions, and provide hints of the specific venues, infrastructures and forms of relationality that are mobilized in experiments in the field. In so doing, they outline an ethnographic figure that surfaces in their fieldwork and stands apart from participant observation. We do not intend to set this ethnographic modality against participant observation. On the contrary, the ethnographic accounts gathered here bear witness to the multiple and entangled relations between both ethnographic modalities: at times they alternate, at others experimentation replaces participant observation, and very often they coexist in intricate alliances. An analogous relationship has been demonstrated in the history of science concerning the historical distinctiveness and relationships between observation and experimentation as epistemic practices. This literature is, indeed, a source of inspiration for our discussion.

Work within the history of science has demonstrated that, until very recently, observation and experimentation have been interrelated scientific practices: only since the second half of the nineteenth century have they been interpreted as two detached and differentiated epistemic categories (Daston and Lunbeck 2011). This was part of a process of attributions that characterized the experiment as an active process demanding ideas and ingenuity, while reducing

observation to a passive instance restricted to the mere recollection of data (Daston 2011). Each practice was then located in a specific space: the laboratory for experimentation, the field for observation. Historians of science have demonstrated the sheer diversity of ‘styles of experimentation’ (Klein 2003) that have characterized this form of knowledge production and, importantly for our argument, have disputed the confining of experimentation to the laboratory, by revealing the existence of many forms that took place in the field (Schaffer 1994). Robert Kohler (2002), for instance, has described biologists practising experiments in the wild during the last decades of the nineteenth century. The laboratory may be the paradigmatic spatial organization of experimentation, but it is not the only one.

A historical detour into the origins of anthropology demonstrates that this intricate entanglement between experimentation and observation can be witnessed at the very moment the discipline’s modern methodological canon was articulated. The historical record provides authoritative evidence of how early anthropological expeditions modelled the discipline’s fieldwork methods after the field practices of biology, zoology and oceanography (Stocking 1983; Kuklick 1997). Less established is the claim that these experiences received the influx of forms of self-experimentation by medical and psychological practitioners (Schaffer 1994). In their historical account of the 1908 expedition by A.M. Hocart and W.H.R. Rivers to the Solomon Islands, Edvard Hviding and Cato Berg describe details of how forms of prolonged fieldwork, which laid the foundations of the contemporary canon of participant observation, were the result of an exercise of ethnographic experimentation with the Solomon villagers: ‘[T]he fieldwork was to be a mutual experiment in which initiative was simultaneously ethnographic and indigenous’ (Hviding and Berg 2014: 4).

Our intention in highlighting this is neither to bestow contemporary projects with a halo of radical methodological novelty nor to posit an absolute rupture with the conventions of ethnography. On the contrary, we suggest that the experimental nature of these ethnographies connects with and continues a prolonged history of creative exploration within the discipline. In particular, we would like to expound on the idea that this experimentation draws from the creative exploration of writing genres inaugurated in anthropology during the 1980s in what became known as ‘the reflexive turn’ (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986), a time when many explorations in textual and audiovisual genres brought to the fore a ‘crisis of representation’ (Russell 1999). As George E. Marcus

and Michael J. Fischer phrased it at the time: ‘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’ (1986: ix). Yet, while this epistemic reorientation in the discipline focused on the space of representation (particularly the written form) as the locus for creative reinvention of the ethnographic norm and form, we are now witnessing a shift that identifies the empirical site of fieldwork as the locus for devising modalities of ethnographic experimentation (Marcus 2014).

### ‘Devising’ Fieldwork

We now return to Tomás’s ethnographic experience, to sketch out the distinctive modality of the experimental drive within his fieldwork. One of the most important projects of the early *En torno a la silla* (ETS) involved the design and fabrication of a portable wheelchair ramp. Produced after trial mock-ups in an intensive collective work environment (see Figure 0.3), the final incarnation consisted of



**Figure 0.4** Collaborative testing of one of the first metal ramp prototypes in Medialab Prado. Picture taken by Tomás Sánchez Criado, published by *En torno a la silla* (January 2013).

two foldable aluminium sheets, each capable of taking 250 kg and enabling a powered wheelchair to deal with 20 cm high steps.<sup>4</sup> ETS described their do-it-yourself (DIY) exploratory fabrications with the pejorative term *cacharrear*, to tinker, characterized by playful learning processes – a mundane exploratory practice of sketching and fabricating in which inspiration was often sought from online tutorials and conversations. An integral part of the tinkering process was the production of appropriate documentation to make their prototypes public, inspiring others to start their own processes. This led to significant exploration of formats, genres and styles of recording, as well as aesthetic languages of publication.

In his role as documenter, Tomás had to establish a shared digital environment for his own *cacharreo* (tinkering). Since he was required to take pictures and make quick notes using one device, the customary notepad was superseded by a smartphone application; on other occasions he jotted down exhaustive minutes of meetings in draft emails, which he would later send to ETS members. He collected material from various sources, archiving these in the cloud, and learnt to use a blog platform to manage the different aspects of documentation. Working within the project, Tomás equipped his field with a digital infrastructure for documentation, and as a consequence, remediated his ethnographic practice of note taking. Tomás's intense engagement led him to take a crucial role in constructing the basic infrastructure of the collective he was investigating. This turned his ethnographic project into one concerned with designing and maintaining a space of which he was a part. Yet this was not the only way he intervened: on other occasions he promoted the organization of public events (talks, presentations, etc.) in order to produce situations of knowledge elicitation and further documentation, therefore acting as a kind of curator for the group.

A similar form of engagement is described by Isaac Marrero-Guillamón. As part of his ethnographic project among artists he had intended to produce an edited volume, but when undertaking fieldwork he met an artist and curator with matching ambitions. The two combined their efforts on a book that though initially a collaborative project later became something else. Marrero-Guillamón notes the collaborative dimension of this book produced in close partnership with the curator and a designer, yet he focuses attention on the later process of public circulation, when a series of events provided contributors with the opportunity to raise and discuss issues. Unexpectedly, in this situation the book became 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'. These events became highly significant for Marrero-Guillamón's fieldwork, the hospitable conditions transforming his ethnography into 'a collaborative device for the production of public forums or platforms' (this volume, Chapter 8).

These two accounts illustrate a form of field intervention materializing and/or spatializing the ethnographic method: in the first it takes the form of a digital infrastructure that sustains a complex process of DIY design, in the second a book that in its public circulation generates new spaces for ethnographic encounters. Both articulate fieldwork with specific material and social forms. In an attempt to convey these instantiations of fieldwork, we draw on John Law and Evelyn Ruppert's 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' (ibid.: 233).

We think that the contributions gathered in this volume provide sharp insights into the potential of the device idiom for the description of our ethnographic modalities of engagement. Describing the role of anthropologists organizing events, introducing interfaces in the field, utilizing friction as a relational mode, and managing rhythms, these accounts present a vocabulary to illuminate the presence of fieldwork interventions that 'device' ethnographic venues for epistemic collaboration. These accounts narrate the minutiae of assembling the material and social conditions needed for the joint construction of knowledge: 'devising the field' for the elaboration of anthropological problematizations. In Tomás's case, these problematizations emerged and interweaved with the ones produced by ETS in its tinkering practices. One instance of such problematizations can be seen in the blog post 'The ramp is not the solution',<sup>5</sup> summarizing collective reflections on what the portable ramp was for:

With it we do not claim to be solving the problem of universal accessibility. Neither do we search for a definitive solution. We seek instead to activate some possible relations with the environment. The ramp displaces the problem to the person responsible for a given urban setting. The problem is transferred to this place, this shop, that space ... and

from here we might create a possible link, with all the difficulties to solve thereon. The ramp doesn't solve anything. On the contrary, it displays the problem, making it evident, tangible and attainable. (Blog post excerpt, translated and published in full in Sánchez Criado, Rodríguez-Giralt and Mencaroni 2016: 34)

The ramp had been put to use in the previous months in collective actions jokingly called '*a-saltos*' by ETS members, a play on the double meaning of *asaltos* (assaults), and *ir a saltos* (jumpy walking) (see Figure 0.4). But deploying the ramp would have been a mere series of events ending with the retracting and folding of the ramp were it not for the durability afforded by documentation and the dialogic digital infrastructures set up by ETS (a blog and social media) to accompany their actions. Documentation of the design process was crucial for ETS, since their central exploratory concerns had always been to understand not only whether the results of their tinkering were working in design terms but also potential uses and problems prior to and after production. Although the documentation produced and compiled by Tomás was relatively basic (pictures, minutes or notes), it was never used without careful selection and appropriate elaboration. Indeed, everything had to be collectively discussed and agreed upon (remember, 'nothing about us without us'). ETS members gathered around Tomás's computer to debate and select the impressions, memories of the moments recorded and pictures to be made public in their reports.<sup>6</sup> The documentation facilitated many fine-tuning discussions within ETS and, once public, prompted debates with other accessibility advocates.

The reflexivity afforded by revising and publishing the open documentation gradually turned ETS into a space of discussions and joint research, enabling the construction of shared problems in and around their tinkering processes. Using Rabinow's anthropological reinterpretation of Foucauldian problematizations, the tinkering practice of ETS emerged as 'the situation of the process of a specific type of problem making, as simultaneously the object, the site, and ultimately the substance of thinking' (Rabinow 2003: 19). Each participant (be they designer, wheelchair user, craftsperson or documenter) was tinkering with something, since he or she 'invents technologies, and then shares these technologies with the people with whom he also shares problems or situations'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, for ETS the explorations of collaborative design undertaken in their tinkering practices became central, so much so that their reflexive version of design practice could be narrated as an interrogative form of 'joint problem-making' around the conditions of open-source technical aid



**Figure 0.5** En torno a la silla's members testing the portable wheelchair ramp by 'assaulting' public spaces. Picture by En torno a la silla (July 2013).

production rather than as a form of problem-solving through design (Sánchez Criado and Rodríguez-Giralt 2016).

Tomás's tinkering with documentation proved crucial in generating many of these reflexive situations. However, the production of this documentation was not straightforward. It involved various forms of *mise en documentation*, from the publication of mere technical specifications to tutorials and how-to manuals, as well as more poetic experience-based texts and political essays. It included an exploratory process with tentative and uncertain roles and aims. Tinkering with format, genres and styles, Tomás's documenting practice not only inscribed the social world for his personal use as an ethnographer,<sup>8</sup> it also contributed to the emergence of a shared research space. In such a space, Tomás's problematizations merged into a wider and shared process of problem-making in and around the open design of technical aids. Indeed, Tomás's tinkering with documentation – and the reflexive and performative practices it afforded – produced a context that redistributed ethnographic practice, expanding the how and who of knowledge production in the field, with all members of ETS contributing to the documentation, elaboration

and conceptualization efforts surrounding their practices. Therefore, while ETS was a space of ‘joint problem-making’ around design, Tomás’s tinkering practice proved vital to ETS becoming a space of ‘ethnographic joint problem-making’ – or, to phrase this differently, a space of ethnographic experimentation.<sup>9</sup>

## Experimental Collaboration

Drawing on our own empirical experience, we have outlined an ethnographic modality that is conducted in close relationship with our counterparts. 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 – it 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, while on other occasions the anthropologist is responsible for setting up digital infrastructures, or making the articulation of rhythms an instrument of ethnographic work. The contributors to this book address all these instances – in our jargon, ‘fieldwork devices’ – to underline what we have conceptualized as ‘devising the field’: the production of unforeseen and unexpected matters of shared concern in close complicity with the anthropologist’s counterparts in the field. The experimental condition we appreciate in the ethnographies described here has particular effects on the nature of the field site. This is not just a location for the production of empirical data, or a space for learning, but a site where the construction of problematizations is central both to the anthropologist and their field counterparts, now transformed into epistemic partners – companions sharing the endeavour of problematizing the world. We use ‘experimental collaboration’ to denote this distinctive mode of devising fieldwork through ‘joint problem-making’.

The ethnographic accounts gathered here provide significant insights into the diversity and variability of ethnographic experimentation. Despite the limited geographical and empirical scope of these projects (broadly speaking, expert sites in Europe and the United States), we believe they help to advance the traditional anthropological endeavour of narrating the diversity of cultures by resourcing the ethnographic imagination with different modes of engaging social worlds. Indeed, we wish to consider that these modes of ethnographic fieldwork could take place beyond these geographical and empirical

locales. These contributions portray the kind of epistemic relationships that shape their experimental take on ethnography, detailing the venues devised – or perhaps ‘devised’ – to produce knowledge with their companions. This set of accounts, thus, presents us with descriptive vocabularies and conceptual idioms that renew our tales of the field, opening up venues for reimagining (and practising) other forms of being in the field with others.

We cannot avoid mentioning that almost all the contributors’ projects (as well as those of the editors) took place in their early careers, whether as doctoral dissertations or postdoctoral research. Although unintentional, we think this reveals a significant factor: a preoccupation among scholars in the early stages of their careers with the methodological contours of their ethnographies when they appear to deviate from a certain taken-for-granted canon. Ethnographic endeavours always place anthropologists in uncertain situations, yet the anxieties and preoccupations described by these contributors have a different source, originating in the contrast between their ethnographic engagement and what they learned in training. Their vulnerability comes from the acute experience that their fieldwork appears to transgress what is understood to be the canonical norm and form of the ethnographic method. These contributions, thus, demonstrate the need for an initial training that explores the nuances and diversity of fieldwork modalities, and acknowledges not only the tensions in these early stages but also the opportunities that arise. This would compel us to suggest the need for a renewed pedagogic programme in and around the multiple possible modalities of ethnography.

We are even tempted to say that our evocation of experimentation does not signal a new form of engagement in the field but a common practice, an ethnographic modality that despite its presence has rarely been noted or recounted in our tales of the field. This is why it is so important to explore the descriptive vocabularies that can account for these ethnographic modalities. Ethnographic exploration of the specific sites we have portrayed is certainly not new: the anthropology of organizations, for instance, has a long tradition of studying these kinds of corporative and institutional environments populated by technicians and experts. Therefore, the reflections on epistemic practices and forms of engagement provoked when studying these sites are not simply a result of their nature. We believe they bear witness to an emerging sensibility that takes shape in these encounters and seeks to devise other forms of field engagement.

In close partnership with their counterparts, our contributors narrate the convoluted, heterogeneous and unpredictable forms

of collaboration that are unfolded during fieldwork. In contrast to more naturalistic or purely observational forms of engagement, these authors avoid the tropes of distance or participation, and highlight the tensions and frictions of collaboration, its particular rhythms and the material infrastructures or spaces required for its production and sustenance. Thus they explore the descriptive vocabularies and conceptual idioms that could renew descriptions of forms of engagement, open a new register, different even from what are sometimes conceived as experiments within participant observation. Here, experimentation is an ethnographic modality independent from observational stances. However, as stated earlier, we do not intend to place experimental collaboration and participant observation in opposition, but only highlight their specificities. Indeed, our contributors skilfully illustrate the diverse forms of entanglement, juxtaposition and intermittent connections between observational practices and experimental stances that occur in fieldwork. Our introductory account has followed the same path: we have attempted a description that, by applying an ethnographic sensibility to the anthropological method, has sought to faithfully describe our epistemic practices, with the hope that these could open up new forms of engagements with the worlds we study.

## Overview of Chapters

In *Experimenting with Data: 'Collaboration' as Method and Practice in an Interdisciplinary Public Health Project*, Emma Garnett explores multiple data practices concerning air pollution. Having subtly characterized how the various scientists in the project deal with data, producing versions and coordinations of air ontologies, she reflects on the recursive implications for her participant observation work. In this tale, 'data' appears as a fieldwork device for the anthropologist, implicated in the production of data in such a context, in an experimental practice of tracing the material and conceptual processes in the ongoing generation of new articulations of air pollution.

Maria Schiller, in *The 'Research Traineeship': The Ups and Downs of Para-siting Ethnography*, describes her ethnographic experimentation with fieldwork roles in her participant observation study of multiculturalism as practised and conceived in diversity offices across Europe. Drawing on the literature of organizational ethnography, she presents the experimental 'devising' of the ambiguous role of 'research trainee' as enabling her not only to access everyday

para-ethnographic practices, but also to provide a complex account of the para-site in her comparison of three offices. In *Finding One's Rhythm: A 'Tour de Force' of Fieldwork on the Road with a Band*, Anna Lisa Ramella plunges us into the rhythmic ebbs and flows of being on tour. In her participant observation of musicians' touring practices, an experimental impulse can be found in her attempt to find her own rhythm. In her narration, Ramella utilizes the vocabulary of rhythm for a narration of fieldwork practices that differs greatly from those that usually employ categories of place; rhythm is also a refreshing way of describing collaboration as ongoing attunements in the field.

This expansion of vocabularies to narrate experimental forms of epistemic collaboration also features in Andrea Gaspar's *Idiotic Encounters: Experimenting with Collaborations between Ethnography and Design*. Gaspar recounts the many frictional events in her participant observation study of a Milanese interaction design studio. Describing the relationships between anthropology and design (usually, to use our terms, between a Mode 1 extractivist use of ethnographic data by designers, and a Mode 2 critical engagement with design practice), she seeks an interventionist take on the interdisciplinary field of design anthropology. Friction becomes not only a category accounting for tense epistemic relations between designers in their search for 'the new', but also a device of fieldwork engagement that could pave the way for more speculative ethnographic practices in design settings, transforming not only design but also anthropology.

The exploration of forms of 'in-between-ness' in the field takes centre stage in Karen Walorp's chapter, *Fieldwork as Interface: Digital Technologies, Moral Worlds and Zones of Encounter*. Focusing on the use of digital technologies (smartphone apps and a digital camera) in her relations with the Danish Muslim women with whom she carried out participant observation, she produces a vernacular account of her fieldwork as an 'interface': an experimental space that devices connections between moral worlds, an encountering zone, not only to prolong relations but also to clarify interpretations of events in their connected yet separated cultural worlds. It is perhaps in the final three projects described here – all ventures into forms of fieldwork conducted solely in and through particular devices, events and platforms – that we see most clearly the difference between the mode of experimental collaborations and experimental forms of participant observation.

A collaborative piece by Alexandra Kasatkina, Zinaida Vasilyeva and Roman Khandozhko, *Thrown into Collaboration:*

*An Ethnography of Transcript Authorization*, describes in detail the effects produced in an interview-based research project – seeking to document the lives and careers of scientists involved in the Soviet nuclear project at Obninsk – by a platform for transcript authorization. Emerging in a context of state secrets and rising concerns over personal privacy, access was restricted to the time spent interviewing. However, their ethnography of authorization shows how epistemic forms of collaboration emerged through the authorization process, which in turn authorized the authors to undertake a particular form of ethnography.

In *A Cultural Cyclotron: Ethnography, Art Experiments, and a Challenge of Moving towards the Collaborative in Rural Poland*, Tomasz Rakowski narrates the ‘experimental encounters’ of various artists, ethnographers and Polish villagers in nuanced detail. His chapter has a twofold aim: on one hand, by showing the forms of research made available by collaborative exhibitions of the creative gadgets and devices produced by the villagers, Rakowski demonstrates how art-related practices could transform what we mean by ethnography and the ethnographic site; on the other, this is carried out within a wider discussion of the challenges posed by the many asymmetries and symbolic inequalities traversing these endeavours.

Lastly, in *Making Fieldwork Public: Repurposing Ethnography as a Hosting Platform in Hackney Wick, London*, Isaac Marrero-Guillamón undertakes an analytical reconstruction of the ‘unexpected trajectories’ that led him to repurpose his project. What was to have been a participant observation study of the artists and activists opposing the transformation of East London’s Hackney Wick following the 2012 Olympics, took on the shape of various ‘hosting platforms’: collaboration in an art installation, and production of a book and zine that, recursively, produced gatherings for the public generation of knowledges and practices he had initially intended to study.

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an EASA network to whose initial debates we would like this book to contribute.

The English has been fine-tuned by Joanna Baines.

**Tomás Sánchez Criado** (TU Munich) is a social anthropologist with specialization in Science and Technology Studies (STS). Senior researcher at the Munich Center for Technology in Society (MCTS), he currently undertakes ethnographic and archival research on DIY and institutional urban accessibility struggles and the design/maintenance of sidewalk democracy, as well as inclusive urbanism practices in Europe, with a focus on Spain. He is interested in their twofold dimension as forms of ‘technoscientific activism’ – with their experience-based challenge and democratizations of expertise through the production of documentation interfaces – and as ‘ecologies of support’, generating encounters to elicit bodily diversity and the appropriate socio-material affordances to host it.

**Adolfo Estalella** (CSIC) is an anthropologist affiliated to the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC). His recent work is focused on the study of digital cultures and grass-roots urbanism. He has published, in collaboration with Alberto Corsín Jiménez, *Political Exhaustion and the Experiment of Street* (JRAI 2017) and *Ethnography: A Prototype* (Ethnos 2016). Two accounts of a long investigation on the 15M movement (the Spanish Occupy movement) and a series of urban grass-roots movements developed after the financial crisis. His two fields of research are Anthropology of Knowledge and Science and Technology Studies (STS).

## Notes

- 1 This stems from the debate around ‘emancipatory research’ and research as a joint endeavour, which is a much-debated topic in disability studies and in the independent-living movement as a whole. In one of the most classic works articulating that debate, Michael Oliver stated that ‘the major issue on the research agenda ... should be: do researchers wish to join with disabled people and use their expertise and skills in their struggles against oppression, or do they wish to continue to use these skills and expertise in ways that the disabled people find oppressive?’ (Oliver 1992: 102). Of

course, this debate resonates widely with indigenous peoples' attempts at 'decolonising' research practices and methodologies (Smith 1999).

- 2 Excerpt translated from <https://entornoalasilla.wordpress.com/el-proyecto-original/> (accessed 9 May 2016).
- 3 Medialab-Prado Madrid is a cultural hub of Madrid City Hall's Area of Arts and Culture that has specialized in the production of open-source projects. ETS took part in Medialab-Prado Madrid's 'Funcionamientos' (Functionings) workshops between Winter 2012 and Spring 2013, which sought to host group and individual projects coproducing or experimenting with the 'open design' of objects, and infused with the philosophy of 'functional diversity'.
- 4 See Sánchez Criado, Rodríguez-Giralt and Mencaroni (2016) for a more detailed description of the ramp's open design and construction process, as well as its open documentation.
- 5 'The ramp is not the solution' post was published after slightly rewriting collectively a draft proposed by Alida, the architect of the group, who took the lead after having re-read Rabinow's 'Space, Knowledge, Power' interview with Foucault (1984), and their conversations concerning law, the freeing capabilities of architectural projects, and the practice of freedom being the only warrant of freedom (clearly resonating with the politicizing practice of displaying inaccessibility issues with the portable ramp as something different from the legal activism of regular accessibility politics). The original post in Spanish can be accessed here: <https://entornoalasilla.wordpress.com/2013/11/10/la-rampa-no-es-la-solucion-noviembre-2013/> (last accessed 6 May 2016).
- 6 This practice resonates with participatory strategies in visual and digital anthropology (Gubrium and Harper 2013).
- 7 Excerpt translated from a choral presentation by ETS members in Barcelona's BAU Design School (May 2014): <https://entornoalasilla.wordpress.com/2014/07/01/cuidar-a-traves-del-diseno-presentacion-en-objetologias-junio-2014/> (last accessed 6 May 2016).
- 8 Geertz appositely described ethnography as an act of 'inscribing social discourse', writing it down with the intention of transforming it 'from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted' (Geertz 1973: 19).
- 9 Indeed, STS researchers have characterized experimentation as an episodic practice of 'tinkering' (Knorr-Cetina 1981: 34), an apt metaphor for narrating Tomás's forms of devising fieldwork, since it not only emphasizes experimentation as an 'opportunistic' and open-ended reasoning practice, but also the importance of tweaking experimental devices and the spaces of representation in situations that, if successful, may enable experimenters to pose new questions they did not have in advance (Rheinberger 1997).

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