Conclusion

Taking inventory

Tomás Sánchez Criado and Adolfo Estalella

This book is an invitation to take inventory of the endless creativity that is essential to the ethnographic encounter. Anthropology has barely acknowledged the relational invention that pervades fieldwork. What is more, as we discussed at length in our Introduction, regular 'methodological' descriptions of anthropology's empirical practices have rarely exhibited its distinctive improvisation. Conventional 'tales of the field' have tended to follow a rather canonical pattern (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Marcus 2012) and narrations of ethnographic fieldwork regularly foreground the norm and form of a vocabulary of 'method'. This can be seen in how ethnographers tend to talk about their field encounters, whether in reflexive after-the-fact depictions, such as in the 'methods chapter' of many PhD dissertations, or turning practice into normative prescriptions, such as in the distillation of ethnographers' experiences in manuals or handbooks of ethnographic methods. We believe that learning to appreciate – and being able to account for – the creativity of ethnography's empirical practices requires going beyond the conventional narrative genres that highlight the commonalities of these activities, to be standardized and replicated anywhere and anytime. The creativity and inventiveness of the ethnographic encounter requires consideration of the irreducible singularities of field situations and their relevance for ethnographic inquiry. This also entails going beyond the canonical archives of handbooks and manuals. In order to respond to the challenges of the empirical encounter and the inventiveness it always demands, we posit the importance of taking inventory.

Taking inventory means attending to improvisational gestures and creative responses in the field. But how to describe them? By foregrounding what we call 'field devices', this inventory composes a different tale of the field, an account of the singular dispositions – social and material arrangements, but also personal sensibilities and predispositions – brought creatively together to undertake anthropological inquiry. Following from this, we argue that taking inventory of ethnography requires a systematic approach and an appropriate genre, one capable of narrating the overflows and relevant singularities of the empirical encounter. Drawing on the systematizing archival practices of countercultural and digital activists, we

suggest a 'how to' aesthetic for these descriptions. Rather than curtailing creativity, we believe a systematic approach is essential to make the details of these fragile and often fleeting practices legible. Thus, in what follows, we provide readers with a key to how, in a joint effort with our colleagues and fellow contributors, we approached the task of taking inventory of modes of ethnographic inquiry.

Composing other tales of the field

We start with perhaps the most obvious question readers may have: why do we call this an inventory of ethnographic invention? Certainly, the use of this concept is not trivial or capricious. In a certain sense, it builds on a long-standing vision of anthropology as an archival endeavour. George Marcus (1998), for instance, argued that anthropology could be conceptualized as an archive of cultures, a practice of accounting for the multiplicity and diverse forms of the relationality of human existence. While 'inventory' resounds with the idea of an archival impulse, our formulation of the object and expression of this activity is different: rather than describing and archiving the forms of human relationality, we focus on and inventory anthropologists' modes of relationality in the field.

In conceptualizing this book as an inventory rather than a handbook or manual of ethnography, we wish to stress the distinctive nature and practice of the peculiar archival task at hand: our aim is to pay descriptive attention to the improvisational, non-standard, and even minor activities of fieldwork that are essential to any anthropological investigation. Thus, taking inventory means documenting and acknowledging the everyday acts of inventiveness that all relational forms of ethnographic fieldwork entail. In calling this 'an inventory' our approach is in line with other initiatives that foreground, exhibit, and make conceptually available the 'inventory', not as an archive of convention but as a record of invention.

In this sense, our proposal resonates with Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford's (2012) *Inventive Methods*, the chapters of which narrate the use of singular and varied research devices and approaches to knowledge production within the social sciences. The gathering of these stories is intended to contribute to 'a perpetual inventory … testimony to the irreducibly unstable relations between elements and parts, inclusion and belonging, sensing, knowing and doing' (2012, 2). Similarly, by taking inventory of ethnography, we endeavour not to capture and 'methodologize' the empirical practices of anthropologists in the field but, in Lury and Wakeford's wake, sustain an ongoing description of the relational complexity present in ethnographic projects.

To better understand what this entails, our approach to the practice of taking inventory reverberates with Jara Rocha and Femke Snelting's powerful conceptualization of 'inventorying':

> Rather than rarefying the items, as would happen through the practice of collecting, or pinning them down, as in the practice of cartography, or rigidly stabilizing them, as might be a risk through the practice of archiving, inventorying is about continuous updates, and keeping items available … The temporalities of inventorying are discontinuous and its ways of being, pragmatic: it is about finding ways to collectively specify and take stock, to prepare for eventual replacement, repair or replenishment.
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> (Rocha & Snelting 2017, 44–45)

Similarly, we envision the practice of ethnographic inventorying to be based on collectively taking stock of the multiple creative arrangements required in field encounters. Inventorying is thus an activity that looks to the past – as we have – but is oriented towards the future, enabling others to draw inspiration from previous inventions when engaging in their own work. We thus take stock of invention for further use.

Taking inventory of ethnography poses two interrelated challenges that contributors to this book have faced head on: first, it demands highlighting those situations that, due to unconventionality or irreproducibility, could go unnoticed; and second, it requires finding an appropriate vocabulary, as well as the adequate means for capturing the creative nature of ethnography. We use the concept of 'field devices' as a particular heuristic intended to capture and account for the ethnographic invention that takes place in any practice of relating in the field. Having field devices as the main object of our inventorying directs our descriptive gaze towards the dispositions and arrangements that make fieldwork possible, and the relational adaptations or tweaks that pave the way to singular modes of anthropological inquiry.

By enabling an alternative composition of our tales of the field we wish to reflect on the continuous adjustments that must be undergone in order to inquire. This has led us to privilege elaborate accounts of that which was encountered in the process of undertaking ethnographic inquiry, the circumstances and the inventiveness or creativity demonstrated throughout the venture. Rather than displaying a fetishism of material gadgets with which to conduct research, or the methodical reproduction of procedures, this inventory contributes to an appreciation of the multiple expressions of ethnographic invention. As a result, this volume inventories 18 pieces describing distinctive modes of ethnographic investigation. In this task, fellow contributors document improvised gestures, discoveries, and creative forks, revealing the peculiar social and material dispositions developed to undertake fieldwork in a wide variety of topics, places, and ways.

In our vision, inventorying is a hands-on practice that requires curating, documenting, and making available the arrangements and dispositions through which ethnographers inventively relate in the field. And yet, this inventory is just 'an' inventory, a version of the many possible ways in which

this could be done. We believe the task of taking inventory could take place in a variety of archival forms. This book is one example within a larger effort that also includes the open-source digital platform *xcol. An Ethnographic Inventory* (www.xcol.org), through which we aim to enable a wider inventorying of anthropological modes of inquiry. As colleagues in STS and media studies habitually remind us, reflecting on the materiality of the particular ways in which we record and make knowledge available for future use is crucial. We believe that taking inventory may also require experimentation with the media we use for this task (Waterton 2010) since the aesthetics of knowledge inscription – such as files and documents (Gitelman 2014) – and the materializations of archival forms – with their different technical and infrastructural specifications that shape enduring knowledge (Bowker 2005) – matter. As a collaborative open-source infrastructure, *xcol* enables such experimentation and provides pedagogical resources for ethnographic learning.

Launched in November 2020, *xcol* inventories four kinds of activities: (1) the relational inventions produced in the field by anthropologists and their companions (what we have called in this book 'field devices'); (2) pedagogic formats and venues for ethnographical apprenticeship (what we call 'open formats'); (3) interventions towards the inside of the discipline drawing inspiration from our fields of study (what we call 'intraventions'); and, (4) material experiments enabling different forms of anthropological problem-making (what we call 'prototypes'). Although separate objects, this book and the digital archive are conceived as intermingling projects with the potential for creative synergies and recursive relations to facilitate varied takes on what we mean by taking inventory. Whereas the website inventories a wider variety of forms of anthropological invention in perhaps more provisional, revisable, and updatable ways, the book focuses on 18 accounts of field devicing. We envision this collection as an introduction to ethnographic inventories as archival forms, and as an alternative descriptive genre to the standard ethnographic manual.

The 'how to' as a systematic genre

An inventory of ethnography enables us to recognize the value of the minor improvisational and creative activities engendered by each field inquiry. The heuristic of 'field device' clarifies the archival object of this task, but how to approach their narration? What kind of genre might we need to inventory ethnography? In our view, this task requires a descriptive form that enables us to appreciate the perhaps non-replicable and certainly non-standardizable aspects that are nonetheless vital to the ethnographic investigations in which they emerge. Hence, to assemble this inventory, we drew inspiration from a particular lineage of 'how to' narrative approaches, one which foregrounds the singularity of creative practices and inventive approaches that transform

our everyday surroundings. We have come to appreciate these varied genres of documenting invention during our ethnographic investigations, observing their deployment over the last decade in our own ethnographic engagements with urban guerrillas, experimental cultural spaces, and activist yet speculative design collectives (Corsín Jiménez and Estalella 2013; Criado 2019). Summarizing them as a 'how to' genre of narrating invention, we refer to a substantial succession of minor descriptive genres and popular approaches to recording fragile, unaccounted, popular, and collaborative knowledge, that systematizes their recollection and enables their circulation. Allow us to provide an example.

In her study of North American counterculture during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly attempts to take back control of the knowledge and technical aspects that articulate our social and material worlds, architectural historian Cathy Smith studied the aesthetics and relevance of do-it-yourself manuals: 'an important educational platform through which counterculturalists could disseminate not only practical know-how of construction and technology, but also the philosophical and cultural ethos of the movement – a direct challenge to mainstream American values and lifestyles' (2014, 1). The manuals created by these craftspeople contained textual and graphic step-by-step accounts of attempts to construct or reconstruct a wide variety of gadgets. Compiled in systematic formats but with various aesthetics, these manuals describe the processes of making, as well as the reasons for doing so, with pictures and diagrams for illustration and inspiration.

The long history of rich and varied attempts to document everyday invention presents a reading of creativity as a non-specialist activity.[1] Narrative genres such as the 'how to' manual and the recipe, are systematic attempts to preserve knowledge, efforts that at times take activist contours (Eichhorn 2013). Despite often employing standardized forms, countercultural DIY manuals, our main inspiration from this long tradition, do not seek to provide roadmaps on how something 'should' be done. Rather, their goal, as Cathy Smith argued, is 'to inspire their readers to build projects themselves' (2014, 2). Unlike the notion of method, these 'how to' genres do not assume a unity of knowledge; unlike research techniques, they do not articulate a hierarchy of ways of inquiring and making. These narratives aim to trace, register, and share in a wide variety of vernacular forms, fleeting forms of popular, experiential, and at times raw and inarticulate knowledge, often with collective authorship. As a result, they frequently resemble a 'richly documented palimpsest' (Coleman 2013, 177).[2]

We aim to follow in the footsteps of these practitioners by providing a systematic approach to the recollection and description of open-ended and everyday ethnographic invention. At the core of the 'how to' genre of this inventory there is a desire to systematically display the experiences the contributors underwent when attempting to relate in the field, providing ethnographically rich depictions of the particular dispositions that enabled

their distinct modes of inquiry. The core elements of each piece are accompanied by a series of further attempts to systematize these practices in procedural terms. Hence, all pieces contain:

- a 'summary' in the form of an encyclopedia or a glossary entry, helping readers situate the explorations as part of broader anthropological inquiries;
- a 'file card', like those in gardening and hiking guides, describing the main contextual aspects of the project, such as geographical location, duration, relevant ethnographic counterparts, necessary resources, a list of substantive outputs, and perceived degree of difficulty;
- the 'sources' contributors drew from to *device* their particular ways of relating in the field;
- a closing 'how to' section, with recommendations for practitioners attempting similar endeavours;

In a nutshell, the systematic aesthetic of the 'how to' pieces assembled here is intended to reveal the singularity of the ethnographic inquiry described in each contribution. It is precisely this formal similarity that enables the reader to appreciate the distinctive modes of inquiry of each ethnographic investigation. This prescribed repetition draws attention to the significant singular dispositions of each field encounter: the sensibility needed to appreciate the soundscape of the field, the arrangement of spaces to be together, or the situations devised for sharing material with ethnographic counterparts, to name but a few. We also contend that this facilitates an appreciation of how, for instance, apparently similar devices perform in radically different modes of inquiry. As any hacker or fablab maker, gardening or cooking aficionado, bricolage or mycology practitioner well knows, it is not following someone else's ideas that produces the most interesting results but drawing inspiration from these sources to address one's own predicament, and the subsequent situated trials and discoveries that draw and deviate from the 'how to' sources.

Cultivating ethnographic invention

Taking inventory of ethnography is our response to anthropology's lengthy disregard of these crucial acts of ethnographic invention. In taking stock of the dispositions and devices needed for any ethnographic inquiry to come to fruition, we foreground the minor and creative undertakings of fieldwork encounters. This task requires an exploration of genres and modes of curation for narrating these alternative modes of inquiry. Here we have explored both dimensions in our effort to bring together a variety of 'how to' pieces. Thus, capturing the singularities of the field encounter and bringing these together is an invitation to acknowledge the distinctiveness of the relational engagements in each ethnographic investigation. Rather than

treating the accounts here contained as canonical models to be reproduced, as methods as it were, this depiction enables field devices to be envisioned as 'prototypes'. In Alberto Corsín Jiménez's terms, they are to be conceived as 'a cultural form … always on the move and proliferating into affinal objects, yet never quite accomplishing its own closure' (2014, 385). Far from a finished object, a prototype is an open-ended and modifiable object. In a similar fashion, this inventory is a record of ethnographic incidents intended to enable further modifications and variations.

In this sense, the archival-like activity of taking inventory is entirely different to that of, for instance, museum conservation, the epitome of modern archival practices. While this is an activity focused on what Fernando Domínguez Rubio (2020) terms 'caring for the same',[3] inventorying means caring for the singular. In this sense, inventorying is more akin to the work that Brian Massumi and his collaborators at the Senselab refer to as 'anarchiving', in which the documentary traces are not treated as 'inert, but … carriers of potential', 'reactivatable', as a '*feed-forward mechanism* for lines of creative process, under continuing variation' (Massumi 2016, 6). We envision the practice of inventorying not as an act of preserving the past but stepping into the future. Thus conceived, inventorying is a systematic activity, the aim of which is to collect and curate traces for the purpose of fostering creativity and invention. The principal aim is to raise awareness without inhibiting exploration, and hence animating the invention that every ethnographic inquiry demands. Beyond this purpose, we hope this inventory will spur others to engage in the same cultivation. Our inventory is an invitation for others to take inventory: that is, to recognize and honour their situated inventions, to recursively assemble various inventories, to experiment with their own genres and curatorial approaches, and to make these available in wide-ranging ways.

Notes

1 In a marvellous account of the importance that vernacular spaces and non-professional actors had for the development of early modern scientific practice in England, historian of science Elaine Leong (2019) has addressed the relevance of recipes. A rather patchy historiographic archive of everyday knowledges and explorations, some more attentive than others to the context of their production, recipes enable her to present the household as a significant proto-scientific space. In her work, Leong addresses the relevance of recipes that were systematically compiled in their everyday materiality, creating household archives that enabled the production of knowledge on health issues, plant care, and animal husbandry. These recipes not only document how things were done, but the networks of kin and contacts these activities required.

2 This is perhaps most evident in digital and open-source approaches to contemporary DIY making, in which practitioners work tirelessly to present the traceability of sources, as well as the different versions being produced. In her

work on hackers and free software developers, anthropologist Biella Coleman recounts how heavily invested these practitioners are in creating narrative forms and platforms where 'accountability and credit are built into many of the technical tools that facilitate collaboration' (2013, 177). Indeed, their resulting online documents, repositories, and websites tend to proffer 'version control': that is, a traceability of the different versions produced, not only for acknowledgement, but to facilitate the remix and repurposing of this archived knowledge.

3 In his ethnographic project on the conservation practices of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Domínguez Rubio describes the activities of the curators and workers of the museum to maintain the works of art as a 'mimeographic work of creating sameness by constantly regenerating and extending the life of something as a particular kind of object' (2020, 40).

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