Introduction
Document/ation: Power, Interests, Accountabilities

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Abstract: In this introduction we argue that ethnographic attention to documents, as a mundane feature of everyday life, can reveal social manoeuvres that accelerate or detain particular configurations of power and accountability. We use the term "document/ation" to convey this space of possibility in moments of action. The articles collected in this special issue foreground the dynamic tensions between systematisation and ambiguity that arise in situations of verification, appraisal or validation.

Keywords: documents, organisations, materiality, audit culture, bureaucracy, surveillance, everyday life

Résumé : Dans cette introduction, nous avançons que l'attention ethnographique portée aux documents, un élément banal de notre quotidien, peut révéler des manœuvres sociales qui accélèrent ou préservent des configurations particulières de pouvoir et d'imputabilité. Nous employons l'expression « document/ation » pour rendre compte des possibles relevant des moments d'action. Les articles de ce numéro spécial mettent en évidence les tensions dynamiques entre la systématisation et l'ambigüité qui résultent des situations de vérification, d'appréciation et de validation.

Mots-clés : documents, organisations, matérialité, culture d'audit, bureaucratie, surveillance, vie quotidienne

In this special issue, we take up the idea that the document is as much an action as it is a thing. Within the form and formalisation of a document lie messier multitudes of possibility. A document is not simply a textualisation of information. Nor is it just exclusively a record, a file, a form, or a repository for facts. What makes something into a document is that it is something has been "preserved or recorded *toward the ends* of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon" (Briet, 2006, 10, emphasis added).[1] Social ends and material means are lashed up, sometimes fused, at least for a while.

Yet as mundane objects, documents themselves can appear trivially functional. They self-contextualise by advancing their purpose by their very existence and within their material format. And because documents serve bureaucracies and institutional record-keeping, their presence produces what Rozenblit and Keil (2002) call the "illusion of explanatory depth" with respect to their social purposes: that is, thinking that we grasp how familiar things work far better than we actually do. Document formulations and documentary routines are taken by most people at face value. Who and what they are for, and what they accomplish and how, can seem merely self-evident. This impression of flatness and predictability is one of the notable features of documents as social objects, whether or not the documents in question are taken seriously. In this special issue, we aim to pull out the nuance hidden in the ordinariness of documents to ask: What powers, interests and accountabilities are accelerated or detained in the ways people work with and work on documents? We explore non-instrumentalist answers that help us imagine multitudes of *possible* social lives of documents.

The articles collected here specifically foreground those moments when people, policies or projects are being appraised. In situations of verification and validation, documents centre human attention. Power imbalances flash into view: acts of judgment and assessment

imply relations, values, structures. In such moments of appraisal, how are documents used, performed, experienced, adjusted or disregarded? What kinds of reckonings are instigated? With what or with whom? By focusing on documents, the studies collected here show how people themselves reason about documents as they interact with them, and through documents, the systems to which they are assumed to connect.

Power, Interests, Accountabilities

Document/ation: the suffix "ation" indicates a process, action, state, condition or result. When we speak of document*ation*, then, we intend to open a space to pose questions about how and why; when and where; who and for what. By making a distinction between documentation and document/ation, we aim to complicate commonsense images of rote, faceless bureaucracies, of regimentation, sorting, surveillance, and of gatekeeping all serving a singular locus of power. We instead argue here for careful ethnographic attention to the dynamic tensions between systematisation and ambiguity that lie within so many documentary practices.

Documents are often the first passage point in processes whereby people gain legitimation or standing. They are used ubiquitously as a first step to access benefits or desires. Want to buy a ticket, solicit financial advice, get a Facebook account? There is a form to fill out. Want to cross an international border, get government assistance after a calamity, or be admitted to a hospital? Papers must be shown. Whether in innocuous quotidian activities or in life-and-death moments – or in the many routine yet consequential situations in between – documents figure prominently, yet usually silently, in negotiations about both access *to* something and assessment *of* someone.

The gatekeeping metaphor, built off long-forgotten practices of guarding city walls, is now absorbed into everyday language and therefore into fundamental assumptions about how the world works. It has become a metaphor we live by (Lakoff 1980), shaping the common-sense expectations social actors sometimes have about the systems in which they participate and that they reproduce. A gatekeeper exercises power by controlling access to something, by monitoring which individuals or information can pass from outside to inside. For the petitioner, having the right document, or having the right information on one's document, affords access to institutionally managed rights and resources. The petitioner expects to be allowed (or to be barred) entry to an organised set of possibilities that have already been, at least partially imagined, as a goal. From a firmly ethnomethodological perspective, we could say that social practices that uphold gatekeeping structures coalesce around the document as an object, which is treated by social actors as a token of admittance to a valued realm of belonging. People operating according to a gatekeeping frame treat documents as valued badges of legitimacy and as vehicles that carry one's interests forward into power-saturated distributional systems in which they desire to be included. When social actors – on either side of the gate – behave in this way in relation to documents, they also "accomplish what count as power relations for them in particular social settings" (Schneider 2007, 185).

The gatekeeping metaphor can also shape the assumptions held by people on both sides of the gate about what is going on. The research studies in this special issue show people making alternative uses of documents at gates, based on their assessments that not all gates are equally created or defended. In addition to revealing documents as sites of productive quotidian banality, our research shows that gates can lack order and fairness and that some are mismanaged. We say more about what these studies reveal, specifically, below. For now, we twin the gate metaphor with that of a chute to conjure a related image, and with it, a shifted take on the interplay of power, interests and accountability in documentary practices. A chute is a narrowed passage point that constrains and slows movement from one area to the next. For example, farmers move livestock from pasture to corral by herding the milling animals through a gate of this type. On either side of the gate, there is unstructured movement within a wide area. It is only at the point of the chute that directional control is exerted. A narrowed passage point of this kind organises movement mainly insofar as it is evident that it must be passed through to reach the other side. Such passage points might be guarded by a "keeper," or alternatively, they might have the controlling function built in as self-managing infrastructure, but what distinguishes these situations from the more familiar image of gatekeeping is that once through the single constrained and constraining moment, more divergent, even unpredictable possibilities open up again. Where the traditional gatekeeping metaphor assumes a flat, stable social geography that is divvied up into well-demarcated realms, the chute metaphor can evoke multiple paths to various possible worlds, more like those in drawings by Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher. As in his drawings, multiple spatialised dimensions coexist; a passage apparently leading in one direction can unexpectedly turn along a different angle and into a different realm of possibility.

The papers included in this special issue show that social actors themselves understand the social world to be organised more like a shifting set of intersecting assemblages than like a map of heavily guarded hereditary princely states. People who see themselves heading toward a narrowing slow down to finesse their tight manoeuvre through the chute, expecting that once through that particular institutionalised passage they can move on as they will, at least until they come to the next gate along their intended path. Implied, then, on the other side of the passage is a degree of indeterminacy, of potentiality. Temporal flow and anticipating other people's expectations are sometimes built into the common-sense knowledge of how things work and how to get things done. Close attention to the use, handling and dispersal of documents can thus reveal specific ways that people live, on a daily basis, amidst and between fields.

Papers in this issue also shed light on the characteristics of documentary chutes, especially those brought into being by audit and accountability procedures. Building on Power (1997), Shore and Wright (2015, 422) characterise audit cultures as contexts where auditing principles and procedures "have become central organizing principles in all aspects of society." The contexts are "constellation[s] of processes" that can be seen to have "brought about a wholesale transformation in the ways in which individuals, organizations, and even countries are now managed and governed" (422). In the name of the virtues of transparency and accountability, audit and performance indicators elicit layers of documentation that lay out the terms, track measures, and demonstrate progress.

Influence and power are exerted here on the people who are navigating fields by forcing particular kinds of attuned awareness and a self-consciousness of constraining forces. Gatekeepers are not always discernible; neither is there always a singular and distinct passageway from a here to a there. Instead, the interested and particular reasons for producing documentation engage people in force fields of accountability. Instead of gates – real or metaphorical – there is an encircling that inconspicuously and usually impersonally keeps individuals inside and outside fields of interest or gain. Often these "invisible fences," though sensed, cannot be leapt over or pushed through. Auditees are "turned into ethical self-auditors – typically they do their own audit on themselves before the experts come in," as Strathern (2006, 191) notes.

Expectations figure prominently in the operations of audit culture. In a hall-of-mirrors effect, audit measures and indicators in documents force effects, sometimes morphing, sometimes reconfiguring accountability-making into new forms of call-and-response, action-in-context. But who games whom? The human social capacity to have an "interest in anticipating how people are going to behave" is suborned here (Strathern 2006, 197). Audit governors can feel compelled to invent new measures to get ahead of the tendency to strategise documents, much as indicators are exploited (Merry 2011; Shore and Wright 2015; Strathern 2006). This can foster, as articles show, a pernicious self-regulation that catches people up (Favret-Saada 1980) in a guessing game of which interested aims will be coded into the next round of protocols. Here, too, we put forward the claim that a focused ethnographic attention to people's everyday actions with documents opens up new understandings of how activities are "accomplished" (in the sense used by classic ethnomethodology) within documentary cultures.

What Documents Do

It is reasonable to think of documents first and foremost as devices used by bureaucracies. Everyone deals with documents in this guise. In this view, documents uphold bureaucratic control as the means by which information is held, meted out or shared. It can seem logical that if institutions do in fact exert social control, then documents are an instrument of this control. Power lies in the information contained in the document. Indeed, governmental practices have been predicated on this assumption for decades (Breckenridge 2014; Hetherington 2011, 150).

However, in asking what makes bureaucratic organisation a distinctive social form, Max Weber famously noticed that "the management of the modern office is based upon written documents ('the files') … The body of officials actively engaged in a 'public' office, along with the respective apparatus of material implements and the files, make up a 'bureau' " (Weber 1946, 197). In other words, the very paths of circulating paperwork trace out organisational structures. More than that, Weber saw the making, keeping, retrieving, moving and examination of documents as a "material means of management" (221) that works simultaneously to *consolidate* bureaucratic power overall and to *coordinate* functional roles in support of a depersonalised authority. Inscribing people's "facts," writing things down, creating records of information that are attached to actions to be taken rather than to an individual: these acts are the gears driving the rational engine of organisational life.

Weber's initial analysis of the bureaucratic form has since been refined and reconsidered.[2] Hull (2012b, 257) warns against "assuming too close a fit between documentary practices and organizational order" such that

bureaucracies loom as unrelentingly unified, laser-focused instruments of social control. An instrumental view of documents-in-the-service-of-bureaucratic-power is straightforward and sometimes appealing in its illusion of explanatory depth. Dorothy Smith's (1990) concept of "textually-mediated social organization" takes up how the textual character of documents itself coordinates work processes. Smith held that work texts – such as medical charts, enrolment reports, strategic plans – uphold dominant structures by organising work relations and subordinating them to institutional regimes (Smith 2005). Specifically, documents as work objects can be observed to offer up "affordances" in their material format that support particular ways of working and relating (Hartswood et al. 2011). They have social lives (Brenneis 2006; Brown and Duguid 1996, 2000; Cabot 2012; Harper 1998) in the sense that they are enmeshed in particular communities and relationships,[3] or what Anselm Strauss and his followers approach methodologically as social worlds (Clarke and Star 2008; Strauss 1978).

Documents have also been theorised via a Foucauldian concept of discourse, which draws attention to systematic ways of naming, classifying and discussing the world. Through Foucault, anthropologists became attentive to how power might operate via the constitution of knowledge, creating the appearance of common sense and thereby subjugating possible alternative discourses. Foucault asserted that power works through discourse by reaching into and forming people's self-understandings – a subject-making effect whose implications overturn traditional models of force and compliance. Hacking (1986) proposed that documents that force classifications of people effectively "make up" ways of experiencing being a person.

In another vein, work on the practices of scientific research draws attention more deeply to myriad activities of recording, ordering, manipulating, visualising and sharing data. Actor network theory (Latour 1987), for example, directs our attention to processes by which documents mobilise people, perspectives, practices and places over time and space. It is *through* the mobility of things such as maps and graphs that such networks accrue power and fix shared meaning; they're not simply a reflection of social interests, "as if the 'reflected' society existed somewhere else and was made of some other stuff" (Latour 2000, 113–114).

Each of these concepts provides a lens that brings into focus clues for where to look to see what documents do. Despite these well-known analytical frameworks, documents themselves remain strange, somewhat elusive, objects for anthropological attention.[4] We posit that it is intriguing to consider that documents-in-the-world are socially productive, that their very existence, form and use are generative of ways of being and relating. What do documents, as objects and artifacts embedded in practices, accomplish *socially*? The focus of this special issue is to show how documents can be theorised as specifically semiotic technologies[5] with "capacities" for "the coordination and control of organizations and the terrains on which they operate" (Hull 2012b, 256).

Themes

Each of the papers in this issue focuses on a moment of appraisal that works like a hinge: a situation created by an existing, uncompromising regime, standard or requirement for a certain kind of documentation. The ethnographers here explore how people sense and respond to ambiguities, creatively adjusting their behaviours and thereby finding ways to be and do, not in spite of document demands but often because of them or through them.[6] The authors delve into the minutiae of mundane experience, pausing to ponder the "/", that hinge that propels the swivel of the document/ation from material form to social action. In doing so, they enable the following themes to emerge:

(1) *Creative workarounds as everyday orientation*: Given that documents have been gates along the path to resources for a long time, inevitably documents invite workarounds that strategise the perceived system: in any given act of documentation, who works whom to game what? Several of the articles in this issue show people treating documents ironically, as temporary formalities in systems that can be outsmarted. Processes surrounding documentation offer sites for strategic opportunity, benign neglect and selective ignorance. At the level of individual agency, we observe individuals figuring out what processes are and figuring out how to subvert them to get what they need. People creatively adjust their behaviours in relation to the fixedness of systems and categories contained within documentary forms themselves (Inglis, Thedvall, Thomson, this issue). Sometimes they act *in spite* of what a document demands (Butt, Kalman, this issue). Studying techniques, aesthetics and ideologies of avoidance helps us do the ethnographic heavy lifting that can end up disrupting normative assumptions of documentation as innocuous bureaucratic acquiescence.

(2) *Temporal unfolding*: Documentary practices, by their very nature, encode a relationship to time. When we look at temporality in relation to document/ation, we are not just talking about the basic social logics

that arise from existence in unfolding time, as in practice theory (Bourdieu 1977). Many documents fix in writing or a database an occurrence, so that as fleeting events become the past, a record can be carried forward into the future. Other documents orient toward a possible future need, such as a demand to show proof of payment, or eligibility, or entitlement, or to verify that procedures were followed. A document can imply a future in which it will at the very least come in handy, if not certainly be demanded. *Re*-placing documentation activities in human spheres requires, then, that we attend to the temporal nuances of documentary practices such as anticipating, stalling or forgetting for clues to how documents coordinate and fail to coordinate people.

Documents situate understandings of possible pasts, presents and futures. In other words, they *position* temporalities: for petitioner and claimants, record holders, gatekeepers, and keepers of files; for a person subject to scrutiny; and for an auditor who vets others. We may speak of systems, but in fact, the system is not the same system for everyone. Document/ations – as temporal activities inscripted by documentary practices – imply at the very least roles and statuses in institutions and social worlds. In documents, there are slot categories that transcend the individual but that aim to contain the individual in a particular way at a particular moment, for a while, or for all time. As well, documentation rules can be used intentionally to bog down a process, to buy time or to discourage courses of action (Butt, Grinberg, this issue). "Sitting on the paperwork" is a well-known habit of experienced bureaucrats who cannot afford the public spectacle of saying no outright, but who also cannot or will not give go-ahead authorisation.

People's social knowledge of relations of power is immediately evident in their temporalised understanding of their relationship to documentation. How do people behave when they reasonably expect to be subjected to a demand for documentation? In some situations, the further down the hierarchy, the more rigidly people adhere to the template (Inglis, Thedvall, this issue), while in others they imagine they can take shortcuts, cut corners, get through without documents (Butt, Ecks, Kalman, this issue). Importantly, these temporal, anticipatory orientations have a collective character. People exchange and distribute knowledge about bureaucratic procedures.

(3) *Proxy effects*: Document/ations – producing documents, obtaining documents, storing documents, showing documents, verifying documents, moving documents along – often tend to become ends in themselves (Grinberg, Inglis, Thedvall, Thomson, this issue). When digital- and paperwork stand in for face-to-face communication and understanding or education or health care, fundamental human activities change. Proxy operations of document/ation can be thought of as a misplaced concreteness by which documentary activities are (mis)taken for other activities. People, processes and agendas become suspended between a fetishised documentary regime and all the other possible ways of recording what is going on. This situation is most conspicuous in health, educational and humanitarian realms. When activities such as data collection, record-keeping or plan creation become reified in this way, the distance between what is documented (inscribed) and that which is documented (messy social life) collapses in a proxy effect.
(4) *Ambiguity and productivity of murk*: Ambiguities in documentary processes afford opportunities for both agency and ignorance within bureaucratic processes themselves. Primary tensions between systematisation and ambiguity lie within many of the documentary practices described in this issue. There are ambiguities in the categories contained in any given document as well as ambiguities surrounding the uses and trajectories of the physical documents themselves.

Moreover, documents create particular kinds of knowledge and validations that are sometimes difficult to see – stirring up murk – while at the same time fostering an aura of facticity that hovers in a contradictory relationship to known experience. Describing more than mere contradiction, the idea of epistemic murk was coined by Taussig (1984, 492, 494) to capture how "an unstable play of truth and illusion becomes a social force." Writing about what he called the culture of terror fed by colonial atrocities in the Peruvian Amazon of the early twentieth century, Taussig noted that the stories of extreme incidents repeated in the colonial records provoke questions about the accuracy of those accounts even while inscribing them as events. This unresolved hovering between certainty and doubt, between truth and illusion, is the state Taussig identified as epistemic murk, and which Taussig argues is itself a political practice that cripples resistance by dislodging straightforward perceptions of truth and rumour. Not simple uncertainty or ambiguity, epistemic murk is an oscillation

that defies resolution. It is easy to imagine documents taking up and holding time and space for "processing" that does not happen, as placeholders for futures not ever fully realized. Documents, then, as sites of mundane practices can stir up epistemic murk as an end in itself, even as political efficacies are operationalised through opacity (Bubandt 2009; Ecks, Grinberg, Inglis, Thedvall, this issue).

In the documentary mundane, we find snuffed-out dreams (Thomson), retooled preschools (Thedvall), card-carrying cynics (Ecks), indifferent birth registrants (Butt), overly concerned NGOs (Inglis), futile faxing (Grinberg) and historical exemptions (Kalman). We find bodies enabled, exempted, barred and banned. We find that the impacts of documents spread, but often unevenly, disparately, and as some of the articles show, even in the absence of the documents themselves.

The Cases

Biometric identity cards, like other state-issued identification papers, legitimate citizen entitlements to benefits. They do so with the added promise that biometric technology will eliminate fraud and deception by pinpointing the very act of identification more firmly on the body of the person. Biometric IDs tie the document to the holder by technological means that are presented as more truthful and enduring. Stefan Ecks's paper in this issue looks at enrolments for biometric smartcards in South India, uncovering the precarity found within such a system. Ecks describes how biometric identity cards were intended by government and private insurers to enable enrollees to "become fully benefit-maximising health care consumer[s]"; enrollees meanwhile worry that health benefits would not be properly implemented, as has been the case in the past. Biometric IDs are just shiny plastic cards, after all. The householders he interviewed were acutely aware that newly introduced biometric health insurance cards were only as good as the current politicians' abilities to implement the program post haste. There was little faith that one government's grand health care innovation would be taken up by the next politician (a scenario now playing out in larger health registers in the United States as well). The documentary spectre of the temporal is maintenance – over time and with continuity from one government to the next. Ecks's work brings Indian smartcard IDs centre stage to show how the rhetoric of documentary demarginalisation has not met with the realities of continuing economic inequality.

Indonesian birth registration documents are the focus of Leslie Butt's (this issue) analysis of state authority over citizenship. Butt reminds readers that the ubiquity of identity documents in everyday life is by no means a universal phenomenon by describing the situation for communities in Lombok, Indonesia. Here a chasm separates the Indonesian state's insistence on the foundational necessity of birth registration from local perceptions that such documentation is unnecessary or readily faked into being when required. As Butt shows, where documents are absent, it is the absence that can be most revealing. Exploring the activities that connect migratory labour work to birth documentation, Butt problematises the assumption that documents are experienced simply as necessary by-products of state authority. Rather, she upends that view by exposing perceptions of the irrelevance of birth documents. She brings "attention to the strangeness of demanding instant linking of a newborn to a nation" by witnesses sanctioned by the state to *see* newborns emerge from their mothers' bodies. Birth certificates operate as markers of the state, she says, and what is fundamentally interesting are the high rates and the logics of non-compliance. She cites an elected village official who chose to use false names on his migration documents to avoid being managed through state records. Butt juxtaposes this and additional agentive workarounds with the ambitions of the Indonesian state to modernise through "bureaucratic regularities." The low rate of birth registration in Lombok is more about the absence of documents than actually declining rates of birth. Butt points to the weaknesses of systems – global public health being one – that place too much faith in enumerative metrics that miss too much. Ethnographic examination of forms and ideologies of evasion can help to unsettle normative views of documentation as banal bureaucratic compliance.

Everyone needs a passport to cross an international border: border document/ation is a *thing.* When you are a member of an Indigenous community whose territory existed before any present-day nation-state borders, as in the Akwesasne case described in this issue by Ian Kalman, the normalised expectation that a passport must be shown at a border is a moment that crystallises an ongoing challenge to the status quo of citizenship grounded in lately established nation-states. A presence signalled by the absence of border documents, an Indigenous population chooses to exercise exemptory rights to documentary control. Kalman describes how recent changes in border crossing requirements produced particular forms of marginalisation and disadvantage that manifest at the level of experience as a felt narrowing of the room for manoeuvre. Kalman's analysis underscores how exchanges of knowledge about bureaucratic procedures circulate within groups (a theme also seen in the articles by Inglis and by Thomson). In the

Akwesasne case, where community newsletters circulate updates on documents for border crossing, this knowledge is explicit and propositional. The lore can also be more diffuse, moving, as Kalman also shows, from casual chats about "what happened to me at the border today" to spontaneous, circumstantial decisions about which document, if any, to show. Knowledge can be gestural, embodied and enacted. It can be the way a driver has of sitting still and silent in front of the border control agent, not offering the document in the expectation that it will be requested. It can be the knowing that the agent has to ask for documentation. And it can be in the challenge to the border itself that comes from signalling Indigenous exemption through the deliberate, indeed pantomimed, pointed non-provision of the document (passport) that an international border usually automatically compels. Such knowledge can include the subtle art of timing – that is, knowing what document to produce when – and understanding how to appear authentic and not as someone who is strategising the system through advance knowledge of the demands it will make as a bureaucratic process unfolds. Thus the absence of documents too becomes a *thing*, something to be managed, a challenge begging a riposte in the way characterised by Comaroff and Comaroff (1991). Historically, as Kalman chronicles, exemptions have legal precedent, but this is changing. And thus new social relations are being formed. As Kalman follows the breaking-news aspect of this as-we-speak time Canadians are in, Indigenous rights throughout Canada are being increasingly and newly negotiated as First Nations rise to documentary and territorial infringements.

Documents serve as both claim and proof in systems that decide whether people displaced by war will be deemed true refugees. Marnie Thomson's paper (this issue) explores how Congolese refugees manoeuvre under conditions of menace and violence, when the very act of documentation of these conditions has such high stakes. Thomson's paper drives home the idea that pasts and futures can be configured by implicit temporalities embedded within documentary practices. Past events make it impossible for Congolese refugees in camps to return home, yet resettlement in a new home depends on strategically anticipating which selective version of the past is most likely to secure future possibilities. Refugees must commit to narratives of continuing victimisation and persecution in the refugee camp. The relevance of the cataclysmic, often traumatic, events that brought them to the refugee camp in the first place fade in comparison. In this situation several trajectories of calculation of risk collide. A documentary regime that demands proof of experiences whose magnitude is ultimately unprovable forces an orientation toward the past that involves mining it for suitably documentable events. Further, documents require an orientation toward the present that includes an awareness of the need to get the documentation on the spot, all with an eye to a future imagined review. This case shows what can happen when life hopes, writ large, are funnelled through especially narrow documentary passageways.

The "action plan" document operates as a crucial tool in organisations governed by lean management, a model developed by the Toyota automobile company to eliminate waste by continually streamlining worker activities. Renita Thedvall's paper in this issue depicts the odd activities that ensue when this model is transplanted to a preschool in Sweden. By focusing on the "action plan" document, Thedvall reveals that the rigid ideology embedded within the document's design prods teachers to formulate the things they do to nurture and educate preschoolers as objectives that can be broken down into linear steps that in turn can be observed and measured. The graphic arrangement of the form – the labelled, empty boxes demanding to be filled in – coax from teachers formulations of what they do that are strangely distant from what they actually do. The words put on the page as "objectives" are far away from teachers' enacted, internalised commitment to child development and nurturance. Thedvall shows that the exercise of creating "action plans" deflects other ways of considering what makes a preschool work well by forcing teachers to artificially segment the everyday, spontaneous enactment of judgment and skill. In semiotic terms, the signifiers inscribed on the form call up signifieds that seem concrete and real by virtue of being named, but that hover, disconnectedly and at a remove, from what they purport to be doing, that is, educating young children.

Health data production in the Global South has become an industry in its own right. Kathleen Inglis (this issue) shows that documentation practices anchoring "monitoring and evaluation" (M&E) of an HIV prevention program in Ghana do not simply reflect but also inadvertently reproduce hierarchical aid relations. Phalanxes of fieldworkers collect and record raw data. These activities are premised on a quest for truth, on ideals of pinning down the variables behind poor health and discovering what works. Training for these workers emphasises not only the scientific need for rigorously standardised data collection methods, but also the moral value of absolute accuracy and meticulous, truthful record-keeping. "The sheet" Inglis refers to – the daily

activity log that summarily codes Ghanaian HIV/AIDS workers' outreach activities – is the mundane mechanism that forces the documentary regime required by the US Agency for International Development to continue program funding. Workers feel pressure to meet prescribed targets, forewarned as they regularly are that underachieving could mean their dismissal. As Inglis points out, the sheets operate as material mnemonics of the workers' subordinate employment position. Ghanaian workers know that they are employed as only "target achievers and data producers, not creators or collaborators." The larger humanitarian health aid industry in Ghana regularly engages Ghanaians in jobs limited and dead-ended like these. Documents work to help maintain the fundamental neo-colonial relations that withhold sovereign health care decision-making authority from Ghana's professional class. At issue here is not data validity but the actors, activities and intentions tied up in the space between a fetishised documentary system and other potential ways of doing global health.

Faxes are the main form for NGOs to report Israel's human rights violations in occupied Palestinian territories. Omri Grinberg's paper (this issue) shows that the Israeli state's decision to use the outdated, unreliable technology of fax machines as the main mode of communication with NGOs reporting human rights violations is just as, if not more, important in the construction of colonial power relations as the documents themselves. In the face of fax machine system breakdowns and the laborious processes of sending and receiving faxes and of acquiring telephone confirmation of faxes received by apathetic state office employees, NGO workers struggle to put in motion victims' paths toward justice. This is the point, asserts Grinberg: the cumbersome bureaucratic documentation process serves to uphold Israel's regime by "ensuring that these mechanisms fail to provide Palestinians with protection or justice, thus deterring them from appealing to the state and communicating to NGOs that their struggle for change is futile." NGO efforts for justice mean active participation in faxing procedures, inadvertently implicating themselves in a system that keeps them down. Their "mimicry" of the state's facsimile practices undermines, to their frustration, their role to engage in a humane form of political action by keeping the focus on their role as fax-handling bureaucrats mirroring the state. Grinberg highlights NGOs as intermediaries in a system of inequality, which challenges overly simple top-down understandings of post-colonial power (a theme also raised by Inglis). Documents are not simply technologies of power through their content and material form, but also through the way they are immobilising. Grinberg's paper reminds us that technological infrastructures that can (im)mobilise are as important as documents themselves in studies of document/ation.

Conclusion

Our special issue takes up the question of what documents accomplish socially. The answer from the research collected here: multitudes. Documents shape, but do not wholly discipline, human behaviour. People are savvy to documentary effects, creative in their workarounds, wary of procedural stalls, stoppages and murk. Documents-in-the-world provide moments when power inequities flash into view, when gatekeepers can assert their awesome powers in acts of appraisal. These are moments of reckoning. When people show a passport at a border, or present court-worthy documents to a refugee tribunal, or use a biometric identity card for health care, they are vulnerable for a minute or an hour or a year. Documents matter at these moments. What the research in our special issue shows, though, is the possibilities at these moments of reckoning, and that there are different kinds of reckonings for different "kinds" of people and that reckonings are uneven and dissimilar in the world. When documents are appraised, we cannot definitively know the outcome ahead of time. Cranky border guards make or break a person's day; disinterested bureaucrats lose papers never seen again; and biometric cards do not work. Or our documents – and thus, we – sail through that documentary chute into new fields of possibility. The thing is, with documents and document*ation*, we cannot know these outcomes in advance. This is why we argue here for careful ethnographic attention to the dynamic social contingencies of documentary practices to see how documents generate ways of being and relating.

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Notes

1 See also Buckland (1997) for a review of the evolving notion of "document."

2 For instance, Bittner's (1965) important move away from a formalist, normative concept of organisation toward inquiry into "the meaning of the rules as common-sense constructs from the perspective of those person who promulgate and live with them" (251).

3 Scholars of documentary practices have focused on the community-forming character of documents, noting the way that documents enable a shared sense of identity and togetherness among a dispersed and previously disconnected group of people (see Anderson 1983; Brown and Duguid 1996; Price 1963; Strauss 1978).

4 Because it is usually in the pursuit of other questions that documents and documentary practices emerge as something worthy of analysis, disparate literatures tend to take notice of them for different reasons. For instance, organisational sociology, founded as it is in the fundamental Weberian insights, has always taken paperwork, files and record-keeping as means of maintaining structures that allow hierarchical organisations to persist over time. Similarly, where mechanisms of social control are examined – for instance, in studies of disciplinary institutions such as prisons, the military, schools and hospitals – documents are conspicuous as means of attempting to regulate compliance or of effecting surveillance. Within contemporary anthropology, however, it is the fresh interest in the everyday workings of the state, in expert knowledges and in global processes mediated through transnational organisations and/or science that puts ethnographers face to face with documentary practices. For instance, critical studies of development and humanitarianism initially attended to the proliferation of "program descriptions, evaluation reports, research reports, meeting documents, scholarly papers, and so on" (Escobar 1995, 112; see also Ferguson 1994), interpreting the vast corpus of development documents as sites that exposed underlying discursive frames. But when ethnographers take up the work involved in producing the documents so central to the work of international development, global health projects and humanitarian interventions, they observe slippages and gaps, effacements and closures, silencing and negotiation (for example, Adams 2016; Biruk 2012, 2018; Erikson 2012, 2015; Harper 2005; Kingori and Gerrets 2016; Pigg 1997, 2001; Riles 2000).

5 In a departure from previous scholarship that treated documents and files as "texts" whose discursive and representational qualities alone merited scrutiny, more recent work has moved more deeply into symbolic and semiotic significations of material documentary formats: of patterns (Riles 1998), colours (Cabot 2012; Thedvall 2015), language (Papen 2008; Riles 1998), annotations (Hetherington 2011), signs and symbols like stamps, letterheads and signatures (Hull 2012a; Lowenkron and Ferreira 2014), lost pages or files (Hull 2012a), fresh added pages (Hetherington 2011), and size (Hetherington 2011; Thomson 2012), amongst other qualities. Recent scholars have shown that archival materials, too, can be interpreted through their material presences. Anthropologist Ann Stoler describes a shift from "archive-as-source to archive as subject" (Stoler 2002, 87) whereby analysis attends not only to a document's content but also to "its particular and sometimes peculiar form." When anthropologists turn their attention directly to documents-in-social-life, the symbolic and material qualities of the documents themselves, as objects, quickly become evident. When we shift our analytical terms from "text" to "document," we begin to consider that "documents are something different from or more than they say" (Hull 2012b, 254). Documents themselves – their symbolic and material qualities – carry meaning.

To capture this meaning, Hull (2012a) advances the term "graphic ideology." Hull draws on Keane's (2003, 419) concept of "semiotic ideology" – derived from "linguistic ideology" (Silverstein 1979) – described as "assumptions about what signs [words, gestures, sounds, et cetera] are and how they function in the world" (Keane in Hull 2012a, 14). Likewise, "graphic ideologies are sets of conceptions about graphic artifacts held by their users" (14). For example, we have expectations about what an official document should look like, which conveys the authority of the item/sender, and abiding by formal conventions may help one's cause. Recent scholarship makes a point not to make a form/content distinction (Hull 2012b), but emphasises the need to look at the relationships between discourses and their material forms, as these relationships shape the documents' meaning and use in specific contexts (Hetherington 2011; Hull 2012a; Riles 1998, 2006).

6 On this theme we join with other recent scholarship that explores documentation as a site for manoeuvring by those it is meant to control (Cabot 2012; Coutin 2003; Hetherington 2011; Hull 2012a).

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