Outputs: the promises and perils of ethnographic engagement after the loss of faith in transnational dialogue

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This essay investigates one important artefact of meeting knowledge production: outputs. It does so through the example of the activities of the members of Meridian 180, a community of Pacific Rim intellectuals collaborating on transnational legal and policy issues. For the members, the particular kind of knowledge production facilitated by Meridian 180 constitutes a response to the failures of international bureaucracy to generate and sustain a fabric of global relationality. The group’s various attempts to address the imperative for ‘output’ illuminate both aspects of the meeting as an organizational form, and the challenges and opportunities meetings present for ethnography. The wider underlying theme of the essay concerns the ethical purposes and promises of ethnographic styles of engagement after the loss of faith in transnational dialogue.

One way modern bureaucrats define a meeting is that it is a form of interaction that has outputs. As in the case of ritual speech, as described by Webb Keane, a meeting can only be ‘recognized’ as such when it is ‘objectified’ retrospectively in a particular form (Keane 1997) – the form of the output. Often the meeting is explicitly framed as a project to create the output. To choose an example from my prior ethnography, the UN Fourth World Conference on Women had one immediate aim: to produce a Global Platform for Women (Riles 2001). The fiction of the output in that case enabled a proliferation of meetings – a hierarchically and temporally organized series.

I focus on outputs in this essay as a way of returning with a different orientation to a familiar ethnographic place. Some time ago a number of anthropologists settled upon documents as an ethnographic artefact because of the point of commonality between practices experienced in the ethnographic trenches and the academic towers (Riles 2006). Documents embodied a critical turn on some forms of traditional ethnography that aimed to document others’ practices even as they ignored others’ documentary activities. Taking documents as artefacts rendered modern bureaucratic and academic knowledge strange through the analogy to others’ documentary practices (Brenneis 2006; Strathern 2006). The focus on documents, then, was a methodological intervention more than a documentary one. Its success lay in its achievement of an
external perspective on modern knowledge practices for which there seemed to be no ‘outside’. In other words, this framing of documents was a kind of distancing move.

Although they would have shared my interest in the details of documentary practices, for example, the UN workers I studied would not have reflected on documents as artefacts. Rather than talking of documents, they would have talked of outputs. The idea, then, was to re-create the aesthetic grounds for anthropological knowledge (‘distance’) after the loss of faith in an ‘outside’ to knowledge such that distance is possible. The objective was to re-create the possibility for our own expertise (the aesthetic of distance, of context, etc.) not by discovering actual outsides but by turning our knowledge inside out, as I contended that bureaucrats managed to do through their own documentary practices (Riles 2001).

The UN meetings and documents I studied twenty years ago were robust, ambitious, global phenomena, the products of a relatively confident universalist bureaucratic moment. The faith in dialogue, in networks, in documentation projects, in globalization as a political strategy, and in social progress through law and institutions was contagious. It was so contagious, in fact, that it had emboldened a kind of renaissance of second-wave feminism that left feminists who felt discomfort with the language of universal womanhood, progress towards gender equality, and global consensus about the nature of good and evil, in intellectual disarray. This new muscular feminism – one that anticipated its own triumphant future – had ironically provided me with the critical distance I needed for ethnography: if documents and meetings were not strange to me, this empowered ethics and epistemology certainly was.

Yet today that confidence has vanished. The United Nations no longer convenes global conferences; it authorizes military action through its Security Council, that is, when that body is not blocked by disagreements among its members. Gone is the faith in progress through deliberation in the global public square. Gone is the faith in technocratic expertise that made it possible to imagine that all kinds of knowledge and political points of view might be assembled into a singular document. Gone also is the notion that there is no outside to the global form. There is absolutely no need to debunk the global meeting: we (all of us – ethnographers and our interlocutors) know how the project fails.

This raises the question of what anticipatory futures we might envision for anthropological knowledge. In this context, it may be useful to return to the now dated and discredited knowledge practices of the global meeting, not as a subject of description or critique, but as a set of practices to act through – to think with outputs rather than study documents. I am attempting to do this through a project, known as Meridian 180, borne out of this crisis of expertise – ours and theirs.

Meridian 180 began as a set of confusing and frightening conversations with fieldwork interlocutors and academic colleagues in the midst of the physical, political, and existential chaos surrounding the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis in Japan in 2011. At the time I had just completed fieldwork among financial regulators and lawyers in the financial market, and for these people the fact that Fukushima could happen was profoundly destabilizing of their faith in the market, and in the potentiality of scientific expertise.

It slowly became apparent that ethnographic skills – of hearing linkages between one set of conversations in one disciplinary or linguistic locale and another, of finding ways to transpose conversations linguistically, aesthetically, and epistemologically – could in a small way be a source of repair and insight, at least for us as interlocutors.
These conversations, exploring the points at which our knowledges and commitments failed us, came to encompass a range of explicit subjects and now continue on-line and in periodic gatherings between approximately eight hundred academics, financial and legal professionals, government officials, artists, and others from thirty-nine countries. Among the distinguishing features of these discussions are that they are private (they cannot be quoted or disseminated), and that they occur in four languages at once (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and English), such that the problems of translation and of the limitations of language are a continual challenge and presence in our minds (Riles 2013).

In some matters of form, Meridian 180 might seem to be yet another attempt to revive international dialogue through institutions. The multilingual conversation, and of course the recourse to international meetings, evoke that bygone universalist fantasy of agreement mediated through bureaucratic expertise. Yet there are also important differences. The modernist international institutional project sought to reach consensus enshrined in rules to be followed ‘at the national level’. The agent of dialogue in that project was the nation-state. Meridian 180’s agents, by contrast, are experts with varying degrees of confidence remaining in their own expertise, who, despite their own professional relationships to nation-states, and other established institutions, wish to act outside that context – a reflection of a collective loss of faith in nation-states and institutions as agents of change. Thus they bring to the meeting their professional backgrounds and expertise but explicitly shed their professional responsibility in order to speak only for themselves (something members repeatedly describe as refreshing and hopeful).

Gone, likewise, is the fantasy of agreement at the heart of the modernist international institutional project. Meridian 180’s on-line forums and live conferences make no effort to generate consensus, and focus instead on carefully teasing out differences. The project is one of changing people’s capacities to hear, empathize, and imagine, of rekindling individual and collective hope, rather than of creating rules or proposals to be implemented. Yet it retains the ‘constraint of form’ (Strathern 1988) that defines a bygone technocratic universalism because, as I have suggested elsewhere, that thin form can accommodate remarkable diversity in an under-the-radar, mundane way, while standing for nothing in and of itself. It may be a technology in which we have lost faith, but it is one that we already know how to use.

This project is a mutually authored rather than singular exercise and hence stretches the ethnographic commitment to collaboratively produced knowledge to its breaking-point. The intellectual, political, and ethical problems are overwhelming, and real people and institutions push back constantly in ways that create very real risks for all involved. Moreover, our particular relationship to theory is distinctively ethnographic: there are a number of theoretical problems embedded in the artefact, yet these are backgrounded as we act As If (Leach 1982; Strathern 1988; Vaihinger 2000 [1924]; Wagner 1986) we are just doing what we do. Yet I claim this project as ethnographic most of all for the following reason: Meridian 180 is both relationally produced knowledge and knowledge productive of relationality, and this knowledge is the artefact of a genuine struggle.

Yet if it is ethnographic, it is animated more by political commitments borrowed from feminism than by social-scientific imperatives. It is the project articulated by Robyn Wiegman (2000) as ‘feminism in the meantime’ – living alongside others in a moment of loss of anticipatory futures. Although we have now initiated a series of book projects, Meridian 180 is not activity that aims in the first instance to result in...
a text. Rather, our hope is that, like Donna Haraway’s cat’s cradle (Haraway 1994), participants will take the work we do together and make of it what they will, in their own contexts and in response to their own problems. For all these reasons, knowledge is not cumulative, but unfolding, and always returning to prior points of origination.

As Keane suggests, recognition, as a source of authority, depends upon being ‘true to form’: activity must be recognizable as one of ‘certain types’ (1997: 14). Because we are deploying ethnographic techniques and aspirations in ways that fail to register immediately as outputs of the ‘scholarly type’, our activity has fallen into being described and recognized as an ‘organization’ with ‘meetings’. Rather than rebel against this (in the mould of the rebellious ‘experiment’), we have taken it as an opportunity to work within a given form. In my case, this involves returning to a form I have long studied in conventional ethnographic terms: the ongoing global meeting powered by the tools of the information age.

In March 2015, I, together with a Korean colleague, convened a public meeting in Seoul. Professor Cho Haejong, a cultural anthropologist and prominent public intellectual, described the meeting in her weekly column in one of Seoul’s daily newspapers:

The topic of the seminar held on March 31 was ‘Democracy in Aging Societies’, with the Korean economist Sung-In Jun leading the discussion. The participating researchers read Professor Jeon’s write-up of the topic and uploaded texts of up to 1500 words on the Web, at which point these comments would be translated immediately into Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and English to be sent to over 700 members and archived on the Web platform. On March 31 the 25 members around the world who had commented gathered to present their thoughts for five minutes each, by sub-topic groupings such as values and ethics, redistribution policies, and the politics of fairness. Afterward the participants discussed the issues freely. Professor Jun in his topic write-up pointed out that at no prior period in history has the proportion of senior citizens increased by such high rates and so rapidly, and that attention must be given to the rise of the senior citizen generation in the realm of politics to a highly influential interest group. He pointed out that if senior citizens, who are distant from the realm of production, should become the political majority, the vote would not guarantee the principles of democracy. Furthermore, democracy itself may have to be questioned in light of the older generations’ leaving enormous budget deficits and a polluted environment to later generations, and taking risks such as pushing forward with nuclear experiments whose safety is uncertain (Cho 2015).

Participants hailed from different communities of language and expertise, and much of the ethnographic work of staging the event involved creating the conditions under which others could be heard. The meeting was ethnographic also because of the leap of faith required in ceding ‘the problem’ to others: the question of how an ageing society might impact on democracy emerged from the membership in Seoul, in the aftermath of a political election in which elderly people, exercising their superior electoral power, had elected a conservative government over the wishes of youth. For our interlocutors in Seoul, here was an intellectual problem that was a true political problem, as well as an ethical conundrum for a Confucian society. It was something they were desperate to talk about. Yet it made little sense to North Atlantic members. For other Asian members, in contrast, the excitement of the meeting was about mutual recognition. For participants from countries that are used to relating to one another in an adversarial mode, in which cultural, political, or historical differences are emphasized, the discovery of a common point of genuine confusion was, for them, surprising and hopeful. Ultimately, it was an experience of respite, a kind of pause to be savoured. As Professor Cho (2015) wrote, ‘I missed many of my colleagues at the forum; it is an unfortunate reality that many Korean
professors are so worn down in universities reduced to vocational training schools that they do not have the time to stop by a forum for such timely and relevant intellectual innovation. What I want to focus on here is not the experience of the meeting per se but the problem that emerged around the imperative of meeting outputs. My hope is that this focus will illuminate both the character of the meeting and some challenges they pose to the ethnographer.

The imperative of outputs
Our members experienced the post-Fukushima moment as a profound crisis of their own expertise; indeed, what they shared was their loss of a confident vision about how they might usefully intervene in the world. Our challenge, as I saw it, was to exist as a kind of collectivity in which claims about effects, outcomes, and potentialities could disappear so that the unanticipated could reappear at some later stage in more powerful form (Strathern 1988). Now one can easily imagine the standard academic ways in which we were told one cannot do this. The usual reaction went as follows: this is not research since it does not result in a text or even in knowledge claims. If it is not research, it must be some form of activism. But activism without a purpose is nonsense.

This line of dismissal is to be expected. But what tripped up the project far more profoundly was a corresponding bureaucratic need: since this is not scholarship, it must be an organization, with meetings. But meetings without outputs do not produce ‘no meeting’ – they produce an illegitimate (i.e. pointless) meeting.

I mentioned earlier that documents emerged for me and other ethnographers as a solution, as a way of reimagining ethnographic futures. They opened up possibilities for us as ethnographers and social theorists. Yet this time the same artefacts, refigured as outputs, emerged as a problem, a stumbling block on the way to an open-ended feminist meantime of risk-taking alongside others confronting the limits of their knowledge. In documents, the ethnographer can see a future; outputs in contrast seem to shut that future down. When seen as documents, the artefact can be analysed with our tools: materiality, aesthetics, agency, historicity, and so on. When seen as outputs, the artefact seems anathema to those same tools.

My first impulse was to shield our conversations from such bureaucratic demands. I was inspired in this by the parallel efforts of economic historian David Moss to reorientate his own and his colleagues’ professional trajectory methodologically, towards a vision of collective rather than individualized intellectual contribution, and to re-create the scholarly infrastructure for progressive social policy that in his view had been purposely dismantled in support of a neoliberal political agenda over the last thirty-odd years. Moss’s group had in fact generated some important policy ideas leading to regulatory changes after the financial crisis of 2008. Yet he often went out of his way to downplay these in conversations with foundations and other institutions to which he was accountable. For him one aspect of the danger of the output was its temporality. He often referenced the anthropologist Franz Boas’s work on race, which, he argued, had had little impact at the time of its writing but served as the intellectual infrastructure for a political movement for racial equality a generation later. This somewhat romantic idea of the long-term scholarly legacy as opposed to the short-term bureaucratic impact was by no means novel or outside the discourse of organizational action. On the contrary, it was exactly what funding agencies, with their demands for demonstrable outputs, sought to displace.
I thought I had a solution to this challenge in the anthropological repertoire’s celebration of As If practices (Leach 1982; Strathern 1988; Vaihinger 2000 [1924]; Wagner 1986). As I had learned in prior work, the As If is a powerful legal and bureaucratic tool for bringing open-ended futures into being (Riles 2011). It remained only to operationalize that insight: contrary to the organizational ideal in which meetings have a clear purpose, vindicated in the outputs, we would focus on the means, not the ends, allowing the ends to remain unformed, undefined (Riles 2013).

Yet this approach quickly ran into problems. Upon reading a draft of another academic article in which I had articulated the project as anti-instrumentalist, a consultant hired through my university to help us explore sources of outside funding admonished me to remove that language from my article, as it would be read as problematic by foundation staff. He framed the problem of the project as a ‘tension between process and products’, and although he expressed sympathy for the value of the kinds of intellectual and personal relations flourishing within the project, he emphasized that in the eyes of potential donors ‘process alone’ was illegitimate. Sympathetic but sceptical university administrators likewise demanded ‘metrics’ to demonstrate the ‘impact’ of the project, while less sympathetic administrators politely dismissed the entire project as a disorganized fantasy, a waste of money and time.

Those most committed to Meridian 180 also expressed concerns. For some, the problem was that they needed something to show for the project to justify their own institutions’ demands for accountability for their professional time. They recognized that outputs were not ends in themselves but means of legitimizing the project, but they insisted, nevertheless, that these were necessary. A small number of members raised some concern that a lack of outputs reflected a genuine weakness of the initiative. Still others argued that certain forms of public communication that I had rejected out of hand, such as social media, in fact were more complex and generative than I appreciated, and could be ways of extending or enriching our actual project.

I consider the failure of my own attempts to sidestep the output to be a first ethnographic finding of this project. Without outputs, a meeting is just ‘talk for its own sake’. It is not fundable, and, worse yet, it is ‘untransparent’, ‘elitist’, insiders excluding outsiders. The challenge of producing outputs, then, is the indigenous counterpart to the sociological question concerning how meetings constitute and act on external contexts (see the Introduction to this volume). Sociologists define organizations (as against publics, for example) in terms of the existence of an ‘outside or environment made up of either individuals or other organizations which are cast in the role of the client, consumer, customer, patron, citizen, competitor, stakeholder, user’ (Fish, Murillo, Nguyen, Panofsky & Kelty 2011: 160). In this view, there is an imagined world outside the organization that serves as its context (Riles 2001). What this standard sociological definition of the organization is doing is formalizing an indigenous obsession with the difference between the organization’s ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. If sociologists define the boundary of the organization as constitutive, those on both the inside and the outside notice the very same conventional definition of boundary as something potentially problematic, a site of illegitimacy.

What our experiment in engaging in activity without outputs demonstrated is that when framed as a meeting, a set of relations become secrets generative of anxious para-sociological descriptions of what is inside and outside. For example, at the conclusion of the Seoul meeting, when I asked the group to whom we thought our outputs should be addressed, participants enthusiastically suggested ‘policy-makers’ and ‘youth’ – the
two categories most underrepresented, in participants’ view, at the meeting itself. What
our own struggles against and with outputs demonstrate, then, is a set of anxieties
about communication within meetings that define what we might call the ideology
of the meeting. Meetings are, foremost, sites of talk, and talk should be spontaneous,
disruptible, open-ended. Yet at the same time, talk itself is never enough. It is always
incomplete by virtue of the fact that it happens only on the inside. Outputs – what crosses
the boundary between inside and outside – are necessary to rectify this problematic
condition.

The temporality of the output
A focus on outputs reveals that the simple opposition of inside and outside, and with
it, the ethically charged boundary between inside and outside, is a fundamental folk
category of the meeting. To this, the output adds an equally simple folk temporality
of the meeting as comprised of two key moments: the first moment, what happens during
the meeting’s present; and the second moment, the output that is after the fact.

Hence, outputs pose an inherent temporal challenge: by definition, they come after
the event. As such, they are anticipated prior to and during the event – it is the possibility
of the output that gives the meeting its ‘orientation toward the future’ (Keane 1997: 12)
as participants can imagine the future value of their present work in the form of outputs
to come. Yet by virtue of this temporality, outputs are also ‘after the fact’ (Miyazaki
2006), somewhat superfluous, a headache for those in charge and a responsibility that
other participants are often quite happy to shirk.

It was this temporality that ultimately defeated my efforts to treat the
instrumentalism of meetings in an As If modality. In the organizational planning
for the Seoul meeting, one of the Korean organizers – a professor newly recruited to
the project – urged us to use the final session of the meeting to draft a ‘communiqué’
to be released to the press and to policy-makers. In his view, the conference would have
greater ‘meaning’ if something ‘concrete’ ‘came out of it’. Eager to follow the lead of our
Korean collaborators, I agreed but suggested that we be explicit about the ‘As If’ quality
of this exercise: most likely there would be no outside press or policy-makers eager to
receive this document (Riles 2001), and yet the exercise of thinking as if there were such
an outside to our activities might nevertheless be generative.

During the conference, I noted the ideas that emerged, and in the final session, I
presented the participants with my notes (Fig. 1) and asked them to comment on which
ideas seemed most salient or appropriate for a communiqué. Participants tried to muster
the energy to engage in good faith in this exercise. We highlighted suggestions in red,
added new topics in green, and posited linkages between ideas. Yet the excitement that
had pervaded our earlier discussions was missing. We had already experienced together
the moment of the meeting; there was no need to revisit it retrospectively.

What this exercise demonstrated was that the As If was the wrong tool for the
meeting form. It is not that it is too epistemologically adventurous – participants
had no problem appreciating the idea of a virtual exercise in output production since
organizations do this all the time (Riles 2001). The problem, conversely, was that As
If thinking is not temporally adventurous enough: it cannot convert a retrospective
moment into a prospective one.

In order to see how this is the case, compare my failed effort to produce a
conference output with my co-organizer’s equally virtual but far more successful
initiative. Prior to the conference, she simply gathered together all the on-line forum
Figure 1. Notes from concluding session of the Seoul conference.
comments by conference participants that had preceded the meeting, themselves written in anticipation of the meeting itself, and reprinted those in beautifully bound form. The bound volume was distributed to participants as they arrived at the conference site for the meeting. When participants saw their own words collected together, they experienced their conversation as already highly substantial and successful. This output also circulated after the conference among representatives of our patron institutions as evidence of the scholarly seriousness of the deliberations. What my co-organizer had done was to prospectively create the retrospective moment of the meeting output. It was a clever solution to a fundamental temporal problem.

**Self-objectification as an anticipatory problem**

Just as our team returned from the Seoul meeting, we were asked by the foundations relations staff at our university if we would be willing to undergo an exercise in ‘telling our story’. The impetus for the request was that the Rockefeller Foundation had asked the university to identify groups that would use a ‘tool’ it had funded called ‘Hatch for Good’. The tool, a website with simple but engaging graphics envisioned as something to be used in team meetings about outputs, aimed to help organizations to produce outputs, reframed as ‘stories’ – as the website put it, to ‘tell stories with a purpose’. An organizational project of its own, Hatch for Good needed outputs to demonstrate its legitimacy, and its sponsor, the Rockefeller Foundation, was marshalling its own relations to bring those outputs into being. The Meridian 180 project manager and I, together with a doctoral student in anthropology who had not attended the Seoul meeting, a freelance writer, and some members of the university’s communications team, dutifully sat down in a conference room with the Hatch tool looming on the overhead screen and began to work our way through its scripted questions.

The Hatch tool walked the user through a series of simple fill-in-the-blank questions about one’s organization that aimed to objectify the organization to oneself, such as who are its members and what is the problem it seeks to address. Self-objectification, here, as Keane (1997) has suggested, is an exercise in anticipating, or imagining, the response of others. The very need for it is an artefact of a conception of the organization’s outside. The entire feel of the exercise was structured, manageable, doable. But the encouraging tone (‘Nice Job! You’ve established your narrative framework and set the stage for creating successful stories. Next up: Capacity’) belied the tremendous challenge of reflecting on one’s activity from an objectified point of view. If the ideology of the meeting suggests a seamless relationship of cause and effect between meetings and outputs, the very perceived need for this tool on the part of important organizational actors such as the Rockefeller Foundation suggested how the production of outputs is in fact an overwhelming exercise.

Hatch admonished us to take an instrumental view of our outputs: ‘What do you hope storytelling will help your organization achieve?’ The exercise asked us to identify the persons we served, the problems they faced, the goal we wanted them to attain, and the solution we had identified. The example it offered up was that of an NGO that sought to provide clean water to rural villages. In that example, Hatch told us, the people to be served were the villagers, the problem was the lack of water, the goal was clean water for all, and the solution was the NGO’s project to build a pipeline to the village. It all seemed simple and straightforward. But in our organization, the people to be served, the problem, the solution, and the intended outcome were all internal, all ‘seen at once’ (Miyazaki 2004). The freelance writer expressed admiration for the village water project
and bemoaned the fact that our organization could not do something similar. Projected in this way on the conference room overhead, in comparison to the NGO providing clean water to villages, our initiative seemed illegitimate, unimportant. The tool then asked us to envision the organization’s ‘supporters’: ‘Why should your supporters take action now?’ This was of course a fantasy exercise – there was no suggestion that we actually consult ‘supporters’ in producing the outputs. The supporters were treated rather as future consumers of the outputs of the exercise.

As we worked our way through the script, the questions shifted from self-objectification with outsiders in mind to reconfiguring the internal organization to address its outputs: ‘Stories that achieve real and meaningful change don’t just materialize – they’re strategically conceived, creatively executed and attached to measurable outcomes.’ The message was that outputs should be conceived not as afterthoughts but as evidence and effects of robust internal institutional capacities: ‘a sustainable storytelling organization’. The script asked leading questions about the responsibilities of staff, or chains of communication, that made specific institutional weaknesses evident to us (the absence of a ‘story bank’ or a communications manager responsible for producing stories, for example) (Fig. 2).

It is easy to disparage this exercise from an academic point of view in which meaningful scholarly thought is imagined to generate its own sui generis effects, without much work after the fact on the part of authors, publishers, or other agents. Yet in light of the previous discussion of output temporality, the Hatch tool had achieved something significant: what it had done was to turn the retrospective problem of producing outputs for a prior meeting into the script for a meeting of its own, with a prospective orientation towards future consumers of the outputs. Moreover, the Hatch tool pinpointed and responded to an actual and present organizational problem: some kind of output needed to be produced, and hence some kinds of institutional

Figure 2. Graphic from Hatch for Good (available at https://www.hatchforgood.org/explore/154/building-a-sustainable-storytelling-organization).
relations needed to be activated. Moreover, it responded by turning the problematically retrospective problem of creating an output for a past meeting into a prospective agenda for organizational activity predicated on fostering a sociological vision of the inner workings of their organization. This tool highlighted to participants the internal relational work necessary to produce effects that anthropologists have long emphasized in their work about other kinds of stories of origins or prominent events. As a tool for producing outputs, however, it failed in this case: we could not agree on what outputs to create and in the end abandoned the exercise and moved on.

**Extraction**

One of our most active members, a high-ranking US government official whom I will refer to as John, had been badgering me for outputs since Meridian 180’s inception. What we needed, he repeatedly said, was a set of good ‘one-pagers’ that could be circulated to policy-makers and to the media. To him, outputs were a matter of a particular kind of expertise. The ‘art of the one-pager’, as he called it, was learned within the policy community through careful apprenticeship. In stressing these points, he positioned himself as a bureaucrat-outsider – as someone who had expertise that the inside of this ‘scholarly’ organization lacked.

At the close of the conference, I asked John to help us produce an output. Within merely a couple of days of his return to Washington, he sent me a one-page document (Fig. 3). To my horror, the content of the document, cut and pasted from the on-line forum prior to the conference, ignored the conference discussions entirely. Moreover, the document contained no single statement about the value or importance of the event. Why was it significant? Why did it matter? What most offended my academic sensibilities was that there was no trace of sustained thought on the author’s part. John responded to concerns about his document in a group email to the leadership with a point of bureaucratic constraint: ‘It was unclear that it was my role to put words in anyone’s mouth. Should authors now wish to insert their own words, I would have no objection. Thank you very much’.

To an academic, John’s text reads like a random collection of quotations that do not add up to any whole; it presents precisely the image of the messy pointless event that we as organizers had hoped to guard against with proper outputs. Yet although on first glance the document appears void of any creative labour, on closer examination it is meticulously formatted and organized with specific points of entry for the reader. ‘When, where & how’ correspond to a straightforward description of the event itself in a handful of words – the kind our team was unable to produce despite long hours in a conference room with the Hatch tool. Likewise ‘Who should engage’ has a simple answer: ‘human capital officers, welfare policy-makers & researchers’. Organized as ‘problem statements,’ ‘issues of concern,’ ‘points & propositions,’ and ‘counterpoints,’ the document demonstrates, rather than asserts, a message summarized in four of the only words of his own that John inserted into the document: ‘state of the art’. As he said to me privately, the conference represented in his view the global ‘state of the art’. As he said to me privately, the conference represented in his view the global ‘state of the art’. As an academic discussions on its topic. As such, there was genuine disagreement among the participants – there was even a debate on certain points. ‘We have identified different problems; we have identified conflicting solutions’, he said. ‘This is useful information’.

John’s vision of the consumers of this document, in other words, was quite unlike the Hatch tool’s imagined consumer of ‘stories’, someone to be moved to action by a completed, polished artefact. He strongly resisted a retrospective narrative of success.
Rather, he assumed that users of his one-pager would be savvy enough to expect debate at the meeting and would want to know where the disagreements lay. Indeed, he anticipated that they would want to do the work of weaving the narrative, or determining the bottom line for themselves.

Moreover, John anticipated that the document would be used in a particular way – as ‘useful information’. The quotes from particular speakers directed attention not to the event as a whole, but to individual scholars’ points of view, presumably to be followed up through direct interviews or consultations with those individuals. This document
seemed to anticipate the entire event’s decomposition (Strathern 1988: 179-80) into just so many individual academic points of view. And yet on closer analysis, traces of the organization, as the entity that had assembled and offered up all these points of view, were everywhere in the margins – in the names of the sponsoring institutions, the footer with Meridian 180’s tag-line ‘transforming the trans-Pacific dialog’, and the website address of the project. Finally, John’s selection of quotations framed the project as a prestigious and international scholarly collectivity – presumably as something quite other, in both its scholarliness and its international orientation, than the domestic policy-makers such as himself whom he took as his target audience.

A few weeks later, a new member of the group, a journalist, suggested she would like to write a story about the condition of youth in East Asia. I decided to test John’s one-pager, to see what reactions it would engender, by sending it to her. She responded immediately that this was ‘wonderful’ and ‘exactly what is needed’. Of course, others may have less enthusiastic reactions. But it occurs to me that had John produced a tight laudatory narrative of our meeting, this journalist most likely would have been suspicious, eager to get the real information. This document presented itself merely as ‘valuable information’ – raw, ready to be used and analysed. John’s one-pager memorialized the conference by anticipating its own erasure as it ‘impacted’ on other conversations and projects in other ways.

In a different ethnographic context, Marilyn Strathern (1988) has described the act of objectifying relations as ‘extraction’ – a coercive act authored by an exchange partner whereby a part (such as a daughter) in the act of coerced separation is transformed into a metaphor of the whole (such as an affine). To put her point into the terms of this material, a meeting cannot produce outputs for itself – someone or something ‘outside’ must do that extractive work. In this particular case, what made John and this journalist configurable as ‘outsiders’ was that they could be imagined as having a different kind of expertise than the conference organizers or participants – the expertise of policy and journalism. This was the lesson of John’s intervention, experienced by me and my co-organizer as a semi-jarring appropriation. John’s output, moreover, anticipated its own further extraction and appropriation by successive chains of users.

Yet who is the agent of this extraction? John’s outsider status to Meridian 180, as a bureaucrat, is certainly one plausible understanding of his relationship to the project – and indeed his credentials and expertise from the world of policy are highly valued by many participants in the project for that reason. On the other hand, this portrayal fails to account for John’s many linkages to the academy (he completed all but the dissertation in a prestigious doctoral programme in anthropology; he teaches at a law school on the sidelines of his full-time job; he is the son of two prominent academics). It also fails to account for the way that, notwithstanding John’s characterization, Meridian 180 is unrecognizable to many academics as an ‘academic’ project. The presentation of John as an outsider also omits the fact that he is one of the most active members of Meridian 180, part of the governing body that makes day-to-day decisions for the project, someone who has attended virtually all of our events around the world. Much the same could be said of the journalist who received John’s document. From one point of view, she is a professional journalist at a respected international press outlet reporting on our event – the archetype of the organizational ‘outside’. Yet from another point of view, she received John’s one-pager because she was already a member of the project – and as such was positioned to take it up because she had both an interest and confidence in what its participants had to say.

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Rather than imagine an organization internally and collectively producing outputs for consumption by anonymous outsiders, then, we might imagine a series of singular insiders configured at particular moments as outsiders, so that they may receive the event framed as ‘output’ and make of it something further of their own. Indeed, one might say that in anticipating that the readers of the one-pager would do the work of synthesis, the real purpose of this document was to bring these imagined ‘outsiders’ to the inside – to enrol them in the work of producing outputs, which, as the Hatch tool astutely suggests, is the quintessential internal work of the organization. John’s contribution was not to objectify the meeting but to create chains of agents imaginable as alternatively inside or outside, each confirming their relations with one another through acts of successive extraction.

Conclusion
At first glance, meetings appear to be another element in the same category as documents, a continuation of an earlier ethnographic response to the collapse of distance between the ethnographer and the ethnographic object. Yet meetings are trickier than documents, ethnographically speaking, because we (both the anthropologists and the ethnographic subjects who spend our lives attending meetings) already have a para-ethnographic take on them. As Douglas Holmes and George Marcus (2006) have observed, we must have such a para-ethnographic sensibility simply to survive and dispense our duties as institutional actors. Moreover, we all have our critiques of meetings – this too is part of the indigenous point of view.

Hence, formalizing these para-ethnographic accounts into an ‘actual’ ethnography of meetings cannot serve the purpose that ethnographies of documents served for anthropologists, as to do so would be parasitic on a divide between the ethnographer and the site of ethnography that has long ago collapsed. This suggests that ethnographers of meetings would wish to be wary of adopting the folk vocabulary of inside and outside, or of temporally sequenced action and effects, as analytical categories or aesthetic devices of our own, as organizational sociologists have done.

Indeed, the ethnographic experiment described above was possible only because these simple tropes, like the larger problematic of outputs, are key analytical and professional frames for anthropology as well. Outputs are not just an obsession of bureaucrats. Academics, too, are constantly called upon to produce outputs for their scholarly activity, and we have a certain knee-jerk antipathy towards them. We associate them with the privileging of ‘form over substance’, as in the case in which our own scholarship is evaluated within the structures of meetings in the only way a meeting can: that is, as if it were an output of some work of our own. We tend to respond in a modality of critique (Strathern 2000). We see this most clearly in the parallels between the way the folk ideology of meetings and the academic critique of meetings treat outputs. In the folk ideology, the meeting should naturally result in outputs. In the academic common sense, meetings result in nothing because they are meaningless, while meaningful academic work for its part naturally gains attention, changes minds, and so on. In both cases there is little attention to the relational work entailed in turning events into artefacts. In this sense the humble Hatch tool was ironically more anthropological in the conventional sense of its attention to the social grounding of knowledge.

Likewise, the simple two-step of text and context, inside and outside, grafted onto a straightforward temporality of two moments – the moment of doing and the moment of retrospective reflection – is a temporal framework and organizational aesthetic that
still pervades anthropological research. Indeed, the reason Meridian 180 does not qualify as scholarship in the conventional anthropological sensibility is that it confounds the distinction between the moment of the field, in which one set of relations is activated, and the moment of the academy, when another set of relations is activated, and between the internal text of scholarship and the context of the world it describes and acts upon.

The experiment here has been one of abandoning these aesthetics as scholarly devices by submitting to them elsewhere, in another register. The difference between apprehending documents ethnographically, as I once did, and responding to the imperative of outputs is this: at the end of the day, I need to work out what kind of outputs Meridian 180 will produce, and to ensure that they do in fact get produced and put into circulation. What to do about outputs is a real and practical conundrum for me.

For me now, these challenges become preconditions for reactivating anthropological knowledge in other forms. I have described one particular experiment in this venture: from the effort to think and act without outputs, to As If instrumentalism, to prospective preparation of retrospective outputs. The value of this exercise was not generated through my analysis but through what was done to me, and to my knowledge. What I have gained is a renewed appreciation of the relational (‘extractive’) quality of knowledge production. I would claim the language of extraction, over the more enticing prospective orientation of Haraway’s cat’s cradle, as a vocabulary for talking about feminist futures. That is, cat’s cradles are still things to be made, collectively. They are forms of shared expertise. What is important about John’s expertise, in contrast, is precisely that I do not share it. Were I to learn his expertise, through ethnographic apprenticeship, the output would become a document once again for me. It would lose its power as a solution.

This is admittedly an orthogonal response to the failures of our international institutions to live up to an earlier generation’s hope for dialogue across difference, which I chronicled in earlier ethnographic work. It also requires that anthropologists place enough faith in our long-standing humanist commitment to relationality to do without a now outmoded concept of authorial agency in our definition of scholarly work. I, for one, plan to cede the problem of outputs to others.

NOTES
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1 More information about Moss’s initiative, the Tobin Project, is available at http://www.tobinproject.org.
2 The anthropology of secrecy has demonstrated, however, that the ‘secret’ is not a self-evident condition of not being generally known (Crook 2007).
4 https://www.hatchforgood.org/theme/strategy.

REFERENCES


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Résultats : promesses et périls de l’engagement ethnographique après la perte de la foi dans le dialogue transnational

Résumé

Cet essai étudie un artefact important de la production de connaissances par les réunions : les résultats. Pour cela, il s’intéresse à l’exemple des activités des Meridian 180, une communauté d’intellectuels des pays bordant l’océan Pacifique, qui travaillent ensemble sur les questions de législation et de politiques transnationales. Pour les membres de Meridian 180, le type particulier de production de connaissances rendu possible par le groupe constitue une réponse à l’incapacité de la bureaucratie internationale de produire et de maintenir un tissu de relations mondiales. Les différentes tentatives du groupe de satisfaire l’exigence de « résultats » éclaire à la fois les aspects de la réunion comme forme d’organisation et les défis et opportunités que les réunions présentent à l’ethnographie. Plus largement, le thème sous-jacent de cet essai concerne les buts et promesses éthiques des styles d’engagement ethnographiques, à présent que la foi dans le dialogue transnational s’est éteinte.