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Infinity within the Brackets

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infinity within the brackets

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documents

Conversation and practice within national, regional, and international institutions in many parts of the world proceed according to readily accepted and largely implicit understandings about proper bureaucratic behavior,¹ and an essential element of this practice involves the production, evaluation, dissemination, and collection of documents. Weber long ago drew attention to the role of documents in what he termed "rationality":

The management of the modern office is based upon written documents ["the files"], which are preserved in their original or draught form. There is, therefore, a staff of subaltern officials and scribes of sorts. 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." [1991:97]

Spurred by calls to "anthropologize the West" (Rabinow 1986:241), a wealth of sophisticated ethnography has emerged on the character of knowledge in late modern institutions (e.g., Brenneis 1994; Ferguson 1990; Haraway 1992; Herzfeld 1992; Malkki 1995; Rabinow 1989). Few anthropological studies, however, have considered legal documents (and other artifacts of bureaucratic knowledge) as aesthetic objects with uses distinct from their qualities as "texts" (Smith 1990). What little attention has been given to documents has, for the most part, focused narrowly on documents as instruments of political or ideological control.² This attention to the hidden politics of meaning (cf. Foucault 1979) has its uses.³ Yet where the "norms" are not hidden but are excessively explicit and located on the surface, insistently posed and restated at every turn, the documents themselves may have different uses altogether, and so might the work of anthropological analysis. Rather than uncover the norms latent in the forms (Rabinow 1989), anthropologists might instead seek to visualize the forms latent in the norms themselves.

In this article I aim to understand one such documentary form, the international legal instrument negotiated at global United Nations (UN) conferences. In September 1995, the UN convened a three-week "global conference" of governments to assess the condition of women and to formulate proposals for its improvement. The Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations in Consultation with the UN Economic and Social Council (CONGO) convened a parallel nongovernmental organizations (NGO) meeting. Known officially as the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW or "Beijing Conference") in reflection of its kinship with three previous UN women's conferences since 1975 (e.g., Fraser 1987; Nadel

The ethnographic subjects of this article are UN-sponsored international conferences and their legal documents. Drawing upon fieldwork among Fiji delegates at these conferences, in this article I demonstrate the centrality of matters of form, as distinct from questions of "meaning," in the negotiation of international agreements. A parallel usage of documents and of mats among Fijian negotiators provides a heuristic device for exploring questions of pattern and scale in the aesthetics of negotiation. [documents, institutions, knowledge, aesthetics, law, transnationalism]

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1975; Winslow 1995), the Beijing Conference also was part of a post-cold war explosion of UN global conferences aimed at building a new regime of international law and global civil society (e.g., Chayes and Chayes 1995). The organization of conference activities, the style of drafting, and the documents that emerged from the Beijing Conference thus conformed to a broader genre of UN activity employed in dozens of intergovernmental conferences on a wide variety of topics. The Beijing Conference and NGO Forum drew approximately 50,000 participants from 189 member states, as well as UN observers. It was the largest UN meeting ever convened.

The principal task of the Beijing Conference was to produce and ratify a document, the *Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration* (United Nations 1996).⁴ A text of 150 pages, the *Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration* lists 12 "Critical Areas of Concern" (CACs) and proposes an extensive set of "Strategic Objectives" (SOs) in response. The work of producing this document began over two years before the Beijing Conference with national, regional, and international negotiations over draft versions. The final and most important of the preparatory meetings was the so-called "PrepCom" held at UN headquarters from March 15–April 7, 1995.⁵

Many organizations in the Pacific, and especially in Fiji and Papua New Guinea, devoted the majority of their time during the period from 1993 to 1995 to preparations for the Beijing Conference. The nature of the activity demanded special emphasis on the coordination of such efforts, and much of this coordination work emanated from the offices of regional organizations based in Suva. Preparatory activities included convening conferences and drafting sessions; holding meetings of coordinators and coordinating committees; producing Pacific regional position papers and proposed amendments to the draft *Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration*; making mats, poetry, photographs, artwork, banners, or documentation to display at NGO Forum '95; applying for and coordinating the disbursement of travel funds; producing regional newsletters, films, posters, radio programs, and other communication tools; and attending the main regional and international preparatory meetings convened under the auspices of the UN.

I wish here to borrow a certain parallel I observed between the uses Fijian delegates made of documents and mats, respectively, in order to focus on some dictates of form in international agreements.⁶ I wish to consider the way the form of these documents made manifest a reality of levels and levels of realities through a simultaneous and mutual apprehension of the document as pattern and the document as an independent object or unit. I will return at the close of the article to the character of this parallel and the implications of my borrowing. I should note at the outset, however, that although the uses of mats and documents are those of the Fijian delegates, the *comparison* is mine. Indeed, the need to which a comparison of mats and documents responds would seem quite alien to the negotiators: the anthropological problem presented by international legal documents concerns how to make of negotiators' intensive efforts a subject of ethnographic inquiry—how to make their work come into anthropological view as, for example, the production or exchange of Pacific wealth objects have long held anthropological attention. The problem such documents present for negotiators concerns how to hold multiple levels of action in view at once. This problem of how to take both global and local concerns into account is by no means wholly unfamiliar to anthropology.

a layered form

The *Pacific Platform for Action* (South Pacific Commission 1994), a text of some 20 pages plus appendixes, enshrines an agreement of Pacific Island governments concerning national, regional, and international development policies toward women. Negotiated at a 1994 intergovernmental conference convened under the auspices of the South Pacific Commission (SPC) in preparation for the FWCW,⁷ the text of the agreement, now printed as a glossy color "document," sits on the shelves of the offices of governmental and nongovernmental organizations throughout the Pacific, amid scores of other similar documents. The image on the cover

of this document, a carefully composed collage of photographs and text (Figure 1), offers some initial clues as to what lies inside.

At the top of the page is a white band on which is printed the document's title, *Pacific Platform for Action*, while at the bottom a similar band reads *South Pacific Commission* and displays its emblem. The white background and plain typeface suggest the appearance of the pages of text between the covers, emphasizing visually what the words of the title and institutional affiliation also reveal: that this document is one of many and belongs to a set of similar documents such as the *Asia-Pacific Platform for Action* and the *Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration*, into which it will be incorporated during successive stages of negotiations. Yet what differentiates the appearance of this document from others of the same genre is that the bands at the extremities of the page rest on a close-up photograph of the weave of mat cloth, and the gaps

Figure 1. Cover design, *Pacific Platform for Action* (Noumea: South Pacific Commission, 1994). Original artwork by Jipé Lebars. Used by permission of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC).

in the weaving of the mats reveal behind them further layers of mats of other weaves. Against this layered background, the white bands appear as simply one more layer of a kind.

In the central part of the image, a close-up photograph of a piece of yet another mat has been torn by hand and mounted upon the layered mats, making plain that this is not just a fragment of mat, but also a fragment of paper containing the photographic image of the mat. On top of this latter layer is yet another torn piece of paper bearing the printed subtitle *Rethinking Sustainable Development for Women to the Year 2000*.⁸ Superimposed upon the background of mat fabric surrounding this text are the photographs of the delegates who attended the conference and negotiated the document, as well as photographs of children and of decorative flowers, again torn by hand and layered upon the background of photographed mat fabric.

Produced by the "communications officer" at the SPC's Pacific Women's Resource Bureau in Nouméa, a Pacific Islander educated overseas and with considerable experience in intergovernmental institutions, this intricate and multileveled image points at the outset to the centrality of form in regional and international agreements such as the *Pacific Platform for Action*. Negotiators of these agreements whom I observed devoted considerable attention to the aesthetic quality of their work.⁹ As we will see, the drafting exercise and the analysis of documents by those who negotiated them emphasized the extent to which language, strung together in the proper sequence, adhered to a predetermined format and borrowed from other documents while producing its own variations on the standard form. The aim, in other words, was to produce a good specimen of a particular genre. The ethos of the conference demanded an exacting appreciation of the good text, and negotiators largely agreed on what constituted good text when they apprehended it.

The use of mat fabric in the image on the cover of the *Pacific Platform for Action* also illustrates a frequent convergence I observed among Fijian government officials and NGO leaders between the value they accorded the documents they drafted and negotiated and the value they accorded the mats that Fijians routinely collect, present as exchange objects, or use to cover the floors of their houses or the ground of a ceremonial space. Fijian delegates sometimes made personal gifts of special mats to those with whom they exchanged large numbers of documents, and they displayed both with pride in their offices. Both were pleasant to touch, and one was likely to run one's fingers across them in the course of conversation or to fix the plaiting of a mat that had come unraveled as one would fold back the dog-eared pages of the document. Shortly before I began fieldwork in Fiji, one of the most experienced veterans of international conferences resolutely abandoned negotiation to found a community center devoted largely to mat-making in what was widely interpreted by colleagues as an indictment of the world of conferences and documents. She refused to make any contribution to the Beijing process other than a donation of mats to an international NGO-sponsored project known as "Women Weaving the World Together," which called for organizations around the world to prepare pieces of "cloth" to be pieced together in Beijing and draped across the Great Wall. Each aspect of mat-making activity could be understood as an alternative to a negative aspect of the conferences, she told me: where people at conferences sat on chairs, at the community center people sat on the floor; while only certain people could access the conference floor, here anyone might participate; while the secular infrastructure of international institutions denied the centrality of the church in Fijian life, the center could work with and within the churches.

With rare exceptions, the indigenous Fijian and part-European women who negotiated the Beijing agreement and its subsidiaries did not plait mats. They were urban office workers and their primary skill lay in the production of documents. As kinswomen, however, they contributed mats for clan presentations at funerals or weddings, and as personal friends and coworkers they also made informal gifts of mats to each other. Each negotiator had her own means of procuring mats to meet these needs, ranging from tribute to barter to purchase at the local market. "I don't know how to make mats, but I know how to judge a good one from a bad one," one leader of

a Fijian NGO explained to me, adding, in an idiom reflecting both her institutional position and her rank, "and I know how to instruct others to make them properly." Indeed, the appreciation of mats was a favorite topic for many of these negotiators. Such conversation, and the instruction people took pleasure in giving me in the appreciation of mats, usually centered on the relative differences of form among kinds of mats and the quality these possessed, and on the kinds of mats that should be presented in any given context.

From my academic observer's point of view, the significance of both mats and documents to these negotiators brought to mind a number of similarities between documents and mats. Both were collective, anonymous, and highly labor-intensive exercises that required great attention to detail. Both kinds of production ultimately yielded objects collectively acknowledged as highly valuable and a source of pride to their makers. Like mats in Fijian ceremonial life, moreover, the document provided the concrete form in which collectivities (whether groups of clans, persons, or organizations) were "taken to" another environment. For example, one member of the "Pacific NGO Co-ordinating Group" explained to me how the *Pacific Platform for Action* concretized and carried its aspirations: "We put together the *Pacific Platform for Action*, which was then taken to Jakarta, and after our issues were inputted that way into the Jakarta document, that document went directly to New York incorporating our Pacific issues of concern."

Both documents and mats also were items of collection (Weiner 1985), elements of sets. Participants at the center that I first mentioned had hoped to exhibit their mats at Fiji's national museum as objects of display. Although its director had now ceased to attend international conferences, documents still remained highly visible at the center. In the shadow of the daily mat-making activity of the unemployed Suva women whom she had cajoled into joining her program, she carefully stored the documents she had accumulated over 20 years and each week took them out of their boxes to "organize them." This involved taking one Fijian table (a low table made for sitting at cross-legged on mats), stacking it on top of another in a makeshift filing cabinet, and categorizing the documents one by one. The task evidently was never completed; she used to ask her students for assistance, she said, but she ceased to do so because they did not appreciate the value of the documents and handled them without respect. She displayed the documents in much the same way as she displayed the center's mats, and took time to point out particular features of form or to tell the history of each. There was a pleasure about the collection that characterized both documents and mats.

Not all negotiators devoted as much time as she did to their document collections, yet all had extensive collections and prized them. During a conference, whether in Suva or at UN headquarters in New York, documents were rare and delegates sought them avidly. Everyone was continually searching for them; secretaries guarded their copies. NGOs demanded access to versions on computer disk so that they could reproduce them with ease, for if they did not have access to documents, they argued, they in effect were shut out of the proceedings. Each night during the Beijing Conference, representatives of the Fiji NGOs returned to their hotel rooms to lay out the documents collected during the day with care, sorting them by type, date, size, issue, or region of origin. They evaluated each other's collections and emulated these in their own efforts the following day. At the close of the PrepCom and the Beijing Conference, these delegates returned home with suitcases filled with the drafts they had collected and saved. Upon the delegates' return to Suva, these collections were carefully catalogued and placed in institutions' libraries or on office shelves. All institutions in Suva had extensive libraries of such documents; indeed, a collection of documents was a necessary trapping of any governmental or nongovernmental institution.

In drawing an explicit comparison between mats and documents, the negotiator-turned-community-center-director had exploited the parallel presence and significance of the two artifacts in an unusual way. Indeed, it is important to note that documents and mats were *not* analogous from Fijian negotiators' perspective, in the sense that analogy is traditionally defined

in anthropology as a device “that ‘translates’ one group of basic meanings into the other” (Wagner 1981:9). For negotiators, documents and mats were items of equal importance that often traveled similar paths and that could be appreciated in similar ways, but that belonged to different worlds and ordinarily did not call for an understanding of one set in terms of the other (cf. Miyazaki 1997). The analogy nevertheless has its analytical uses for outside observers of international conferences, and these uses inhere in the remarkable aesthetics of pattern and counting surrounding the making and exchange of Fijian mats.

Fijian mats are central objects of exchange, presented at funerals, weddings, and most ceremonial occasions, and also exchanged informally at a person’s arrival or departure. Mats are used on a daily basis to make any space into a place of significance, and they are admired for their form, for their feel, and for the skill involved in their plaiting. Where mats cover the ground or floor to create a ceremonial space, they are layered one on top of the next in the same order so that all but the top layer remain concealed from view except at the fringes or, in the case of large presentations or important ceremonies, from a side view in the thickness of the layering.

The set of patterns and styles of Fijian mats is a finite one. Mats are differentiated by the plaiting (e.g., single or double weave), the presence or absence of a fringe and the kind of fringe, the material used (*voivoi* [pandanus] or *kuta* [sedge]), and the geometric patterns woven into the plaiting by soaking strands of pandanus leaf in mud to give them a dark color (Ewins 1982; Fulmer 1996). These patterns are simple nonrepresentational designs produced in black and white in the weaving of the mat, and in multiple colors in the yarn fringe now used in the place of parrot feathers for decoration at the extremities. Most women who make mats know only a few patterns and concentrate not on innovation in pattern, but on perfecting the treatment and splitting of the pandanus leaf and the plaiting to achieve an even shape and a soft feel. At most, new designs constitute small variations on given patterns, variations that might go unnoticed to the unfamiliarized eye. Creating a mat is a work of repetition—of the careful repetition of simple shapes to form the patterns, and also of the even repetition of hand gestures in plaiting. The skill involved is one of coordination, evenness, and piece-by-piece addition rather than transformation, such as might be involved, for example, in pottery.

As exchange items, Fijian mats are presented in sets of different kinds of mats, layered one on another and called *vivivi* (literally, “to wrap or bundle”). In the exchanges I observed, and according to Fijian and Part-European informants, it was appropriate to present a specific number of *vivivi* at particular occasions—one at the weddings of more distant relatives and two in the case of closer ones, for example. Both sides in the exchange counted *vivivi* as they were given. The receiving side usually recorded the number of *vivivi* received in a ledger, while the giver, in assembling the *vivivi* beforehand, necessarily had counted the kinds of mats it contained.

Yet a *vivivi* was not actually a specific number of mats. Rather, it was a number of *kinds* of mats. Thus “two” *vivivi* on one occasion might actually contain “fewer” mats than one on another occasion. One was never sure at the point of exchange how many mats a *vivivi* contained, as the number of mats in the *vivivi* was concealed in the layering of one mat on the next. Although those receiving or redistributing the mats were actually counting, the act of counting was therefore apprehended as an ultimate failure. In it Fijians came to terms with the potential infinity literally bundled into a *vivivi*—a device, in short, that defied the specificity of number. In such circumstances mats were not individually counted as concrete “objects” but as an abstract totality.

The Fijians I observed apprehended the totality of the mats that constituted the *vivivi* in a second sense. Although each mat was concealed by the one that covered it, the mats were layered each on top of the next so that the multicolored fringe of each was left in view (Figure 2). These successive layers of fringe formed a *pattern*, and, where a large presentation of mats was involved, the patterned layers of fringe extended over a space as large as a mat. At the moment at which counting stopped, in other words, pattern emerged. The turn to pattern was

Figure 2. Layering mats in a typical ceremonial space. The occasion of this photograph was the groundbreaking ceremony for a building jointly owned by several clans in Suvavou village, Suva, December 6, 1995.

a distinct turn to the visual, as one kind of mental apprehension (counting) gave way to another (seeing). Another way of describing this turn to pattern is that the boundaries of the artifact were no longer foregrounded. Instead, when the mats were laid on the floor of a ceremonial space,

Figure 3. Women layering mats for the installation of the Roko Tui Bau, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, November 10, 1995. Note that as the mats are layered, the continuation of the pattern beyond the artifact onto the weave of the walls also becomes visible.

the viewer suddenly apprehended a pattern that extended from one mat to the next, from the mats to the plaiting of the walls (Figure 3), or the arrangement of flowers, or the placing of bodies in a ceremonial context, infinitely inward and outward.

Another crucial aspect of the apprehension of the *vivivi* was what was—and remained—hidden from view. Before any ceremony I observed, senior ranking women assembled the mats to be laid out and, watched by junior women, layered these according to the *vivivi* logic, whereby mats of each kind must be covered by another kind. After hours of discussion, of trying a mat this way and then the other, they completed the task only to tear up their work and begin again. This laborious task yielded little fruit for public display, as all but the top layer and the layers of fringe of this carefully composed artifact remained hidden from view. The pattern was apprehended precisely through the *failure* of apprehension: it came into view in the experience of what was unknowable in concrete terms but that was nonetheless present.

Finally, the pattern of the *vivivi* always anticipated its own disintegration into concreteness. Later, when the presentation or ceremony had ended, the mats would be redistributed among the side which had received them, one by one. *Vivivi* would be taken apart, and clanswomen would unceremoniously toss the mats into piles according to type without regard for their origin or participation in a *vivivi* set, and would then carefully record the actual number of mats in a ledger. The mats would be redistributed and each member of the clan would roll up his or her share and take it home. What each took away was a concrete thing, a singular mat. As clan members sat upon the patterned *vivivi* during the course of the ceremony, therefore, they knew that the moment would come when the infinity of the pattern would be taken apart into a finite number of concrete things. Crucially, here, decomposition was not transformation: when one took the *vivivi* apart one had both nothing (an absence of form) and a collection of concrete things, but not one form emerging out of another.

negotiation: working with pattern

Like mats, we might say, intergovernmental agreements such as the *Pacific Platform for Action* partake in a simple nonrepresentational patterning that is replicated again and again within the document, from one document to the next, and in the mechanics of the conference at which documents are negotiated.¹⁰ The UN document's standardized structure of chapters, headings, subheadings, and paragraphs dictates a given progression from the "Preamble" to the "Mission Statement" to the "Global Framework" section and on to the "Institutional Arrangements." On this skeleton hangs a series of self-contained paragraphs. One unit is connected to the next according to a simple and straightforward stylistic logic that encompasses at most two or three paragraphs at a time. It is appropriate, the Austrian diplomat chairing one drafting session of the PrepCom pointed out, as delegates argued over the relationship among paragraphs, that a first paragraph list the facts, a second list the consequences of those facts, and a third make a proposal for how those consequences might be addressed. This simple structure was as much of an "analytical framework" as I ever heard elaborated in a drafting session. One could negotiate the paragraphs of the *Platform for Action* and the *Beijing Declaration* in virtually any order, and indeed in the course of negotiations, delegates skipped freely from paragraph 31 to paragraph 225 without any of the loss of continuity or cohesion that academics might expect.¹¹

Like the given and self-evident geometric patterns of Fijian mats, moreover, the analytical sequence was all on the surface, dictated, and known at the start. The character of the pattern—a simple logic that linked words, paragraphs, documents, or conferences—entailed the collection of a potentially infinite number of concrete and distinct entities (words, paragraphs, conferences) into a straightforward digital sequence of numbers and letters.¹² The document was divided into alphabetically and decimally numbered sections: Strategic Objective F.4, "Strengthen women's economic capacity and commercial networks," followed Strategic Objective F.3, "Provide

business services and access to markets, information and technology to low-income women," and paragraph 221 followed paragraph 220. This internal digital pattern also was replicated outside the document in the sequencing that related each document to the next. The document had a numerical placement in a series of other documents where, for instance, document number A/Conf.177/L.2 followed document number A/Conf.177/L.1. Although the system of decimals, letters, and slashes was somewhat detailed and complex, the logic of the system was as simple and transparent as the layering and repetitions in the patterns of the Fijian mat.

Just as the layered mats brought into view a continuity in pattern from one mat to the next, the organizational pattern of the document also was repeated in the way documents at each level of negotiation mirrored the others in form and function. Conferences at national, *subregional*, regional, and global levels all generated their own "platforms for action," which were then "taken to" higher levels of conferences and incorporated into the new documents negotiated there so that succeeding conferences fit together as academics might imagine increasing levels of generality to do. Thus the Fiji national document was "taken by" the Fiji delegate to the Nouméa conference of Pacific Island governments in 1994 and formed the basis for Fiji's "inputs" into the *Pacific Platform for Action* drafted there. This latter document then was "tabled" at the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Meeting in Jakarta,¹³ and so on. At each level, successive drafts were incorporated into preceding ones, first by a "technical team" that produced a draft text, and then through a lengthy process of intergovernmental negotiation. The rigid stylistic conventions I have already mentioned ensured that documents replicated one another in structure, organizational logic, language, format, typeface, layout, and even substantive content. As in the mats, although there could be changes in form from one document to the next, emphasis lay not on the innovative details but on the success of the replication of a given pattern from one artifact to the next.

As in the mats, then, the skill of the exercise lay in the detail, in the degree of familiarity with the aesthetic conventions, and in the patience this extremely labor-intensive task demanded, not in the invention of new designs or in the transformation of one form into another. It entailed the wearisome and often highly frustrating detailed work of cutting and pasting, of organizing and collating. One slowly worked the text together, phrase by phrase, heading by heading. The objective was not so much to achieve transparent meaning but to satisfy the aesthetics of logic and language. Commentary, interpretation, or even reflection on the direction of the exercise was beside the point. At the PrepCom, when one state's delegate proposed, "Let's make the language more forceful; let's shorten it," the chair responded, in an impatient tone, "Does the distinguished delegate from Turkey have language he would like to suggest?" A seemingly infinite number of hours of labor by anonymous negotiators, lobbyists, and secretarial staff went into the preparation of the necessary drafts and position papers and the negotiation of each paragraph, and this was made palpable in the conference halls by the sense of collective exhaustion—but also of pride when the document was displayed at the end.

As negotiators pieced the language together word by word into a document, they also worked with patterns at the levels of word and sentence. These, like the patterns of the mat or the document as a whole, were not strictly representational and were characterized by a high degree of repetition. Certain words fit with others. Language had a shape, a rhythm, a feel, not simply a meaning. Although elsewhere the words—*gender*, *structural adjustment*, *violence*—might point only to political conflict, for the moment of the negotiation they pointed more vividly to their own syllables and spelling, to the number of instances in which each word had appeared so far in the document, or to the delegations that wished to see the words included or deleted. For example, if one takes the general subject of this conference as "women," certainly, the word appeared frequently enough in the thousands of documents that circulated throughout the meeting. Yet in practice it was hardly clear what this word "meant" at all, and how it might be delineated by the scope of other UN conferences on subjects such as development, human

rights, population, children, or environment. Instead, attention turned to what should be listed as *elements* in the definition of violence against women or in the list of what birth control technologies should be included in the category of available alternatives, or to whether to single out “internally displaced women” as a specially disadvantaged class among “displaced women.” By the close of the conference this subject had not evolved, expanded, come into focus, or been transformed; like the mats hidden from view it simply was there, underlying the work of the conference.

The work of producing properly patterned language was in the main a sorting exercise in which language was cut, arranged, or inserted to produce appropriate strings of words. The final result was a “clean” text—that is, a completed text without brackets. Negotiators struggled together to generate the right pattern, and, when at last they happened upon the proper phrasing, the collective recognition of the strength or appropriateness of the verbal formulation was appreciated by all. One important element in this effect was the repetition of the language—the extent to which the words resonated through the document as a whole. Delegates actually quantified this repetition by counting the number of times a word appeared in the document. (The word *indigenous* appeared over 200 times, Fiji delegates noted with satisfaction, although they expressed disappointment that the word *nuclear* was absent from the document, for example.) Yet repetition, too, was a matter of aesthetic judgment: the text should be “strong” and “consistent” but not “redundant,” delegates say. It should borrow language from other documents, but it could not replicate those documents wholesale. It should be “brief” but also “comprehensive.” One had to acquire an ear and an eye for the patterns here.

This orientation toward language can be difficult to grasp. I had to be reminded of it at a national negotiation among government and nongovernmental bodies in Fiji, where delegates reviewed a draft version of the *Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration* and made suggestions for the Fiji government position. The phrase “universal human rights” was a commonly used one, so that it seemed appropriate that in the patterning of the words *universal* should precede *human rights* and vice versa. The phrase, however, had been the subject of intense dispute at a prior stage of negotiations, at which some delegations such as that of the Vatican had sought to limit the scope of human rights by adding the word *universal* to the term, thereby effectively reducing the set of recognized “human rights” to those acknowledged as truly “universal”—that is, those to which no state could possibly object. The insertion of a seemingly expansive word had the effect of emptying the phrase of representational content by rendering it utterly vacuous. Although one or two Fiji delegates, looking at the effect of the insertion of *universal* in terms of the tactical meaning of each phrase, argued that Fiji should oppose proposed amendments, most of the delegates did not take an interest in this aspect of the text even when, at the urging of the proponents of tactical meaning, I naively sought to explain the argument for removing the word *universal* again and again. For most delegates to the national consultations, *universal* and *human rights* belonged together, sounded right together, and formed a proper pattern.

Pacific academics I knew who came into contact with the UN document-drafting process generally found it confusing, nonsensical, and even counterproductive. They complained, for example, that the document artificially separated important Pacific issues and denied connections between them (for example, by separating “economic development” and “environment” into two separate chapters of the document rather than treating these as a single set of related issues). They bristled at the carelessness with which the “argument” of the document had been assembled. The document should *reflect* the *reality* of women’s experience, they also emphasized; and it should have a clear analytical perspective rather than be simply a collection of words on a page. Their efforts to “critique” the document, as they said, by revealing what lay beneath the surface of the text struck negotiators as equally counterproductive.

Indeed, one of the most puzzling aspects of intergovernmental documents, from an academic point of view, is the negotiators' lack of interest in their meaning.¹⁴ The more words negotiators added, the "less" meaning the document seemed to have, as when the addition of the term *universal* to the word *rights* rendered the phrase vacuous. To academics, the string of words in the document consisted of a jumble of words and paragraphs that seemingly pointed nowhere.

It is difficult to imagine meaning as anything other than paramount, for anthropologists have long understood that what makes others as human as ourselves is their capacity to hold signification dear. Indeed, the elucidation of other's implicit meanings has long been one of the anthropologists' principal tasks. Knowledge, in this understanding, is the artifact of transformation of one set of meanings into the next.¹⁵ This understanding may capture the character of academic analysis but, in its transformative element, it is utterly unlike the documents described here, for which all patterns are given at the start.

brackets: infinity within

If the generation of meaning through the transformative power of analysis is not the objective of negotiation, how does this institutional knowledge achieve its effects, and what effects does it achieve? As we will see, the document's principal aesthetic device involves an alternation between concreteness (the document as object) and abstraction (the document as pattern). We can understand the elicitation of this double view, that is, the alternation between object and pattern, as negotiators' principal endeavor; it is the *work* of producing the document. There are two central devices through which this effect is achieved. The first is the bracket.

For the most part, the layered collage on the cover of the *Pacific Platform for Action* (Figure 1) consists of representational images; the photographs of negotiators or the text in the title point to particular people or things. Yet in the case of the mats photographed in the image the magnitude of detail is such that it is impossible to identify with any degree of certitude the kind of mats shown in the photograph or their place of origin. As one progresses toward the upper layers of the composition to the mat fabric directly beneath the title words, the camera zooms in so closely that the shape of the mat is lost altogether, leaving only an abstract pattern of shapes and colors. In the eye of the close-up lens, representation fades into pattern as the camera moves from one scale to the next.

Just as the background of the image on the *Pacific Platform for Action* cover of layers of mat and paper made visible through their gaps evokes the sense of levels behind levels, behind every Institutional Arrangements section, behind every use of the phrase "universal rights," or indeed behind every document and conference, delegates knew, lay countless others of the same genre, artifacts of activity at other levels. Although negotiators always "knew" this, from time to time the apprehension that each document, survey, or position paper was layered upon countless others overtook them. They commented on the number of people, the amount of time, the amount of paper at stake in preparations to this point. For a moment, at least, the apprehension of the seemingly infinite amount of texts or labor that text or labor concealed imbued the events with a weightiness that was almost overwhelming.

Bringing such levels of action into view was a paramount concern. On returning from the Beijing Conference, for example, the leader of the Fiji delegation argued vehemently in a major speech to community groups that the ultimate purpose of the great expenditure of time and public funds had been "to make an impact as a region, not as a country." Documents made a region or level "visible" at the next level of negotiation, and Pacific delegates spoke with pride of the new-found "visibility" of the Pacific "at the regional level." The national preparatory conferences held in Fiji explicitly sought to replicate all of the UN processes "at the national level" by organizing plenaries, working groups, and main committees, by tabling working papers, and by producing agendas in standardized form. The aesthetic may have puzzled

national delegates who had never witnessed a UN meeting, for the organizers took no interest in adapting “global” procedures to “local” circumstances or understandings, nor did they attempt to give local meaning to global activities. The objective was rather to bring to the collective attention a formally ideal national “level” of preparatory activity. In this sense, we also might understand why a regional map of the Pacific, with imaginary geographical boundaries marked with a bold black line, appears on the back cover of the *Pacific Platform for Action* (South Pacific Commission 1994). It is the mirror image of the layered mats and documents on the front cover—what is visible when the document is complete.

Like mats layered one upon the next in ceremonial contexts, therefore, documents were entities that at key periods of time faded into patterns replicable at seemingly infinite levels. The documents were valuable collection items when delegates took them home in their suitcases to place on library shelves, and they were concrete objects that delegates carried from one level of negotiation to the next in the same way that they physically displaced themselves from Nouméa to Beijing. Yet the documents emerged as such objects only after the fact, when the negotiation was complete. During the negotiations, the documents did not exist as physical entities, nor did they capture the imagination, for at that point the negotiator’s attention was turned only to language and pattern. The following day, after the secretariat had inputted changes into the word processor and produced hundreds of copies, the draft appeared in boxes in the office for collection. Indeed, at the PrepCom, the draft *Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration*, as something called a “document,” did not appear at all until the final moments of the close of the conference, when the secretariat presented the results of the conference to a first “outside” audience—a gathering of the press.

During the negotiations, then, a document was better imagined as an orientation of thought and action, a state of being, than as a reified object. In essence, one lived through the patterns of the document. Sessions defied any distinction between writing and conversation (Brenneis 1994). The chair proceeded through the paragraphs one by one, calling out their numbers, and delegates held up their nameplates to indicate that they wished to make “interventions.” When called on, they read out proposed language, then scribbled it out and handed it to the secretary sitting at the podium. “So, European Union, you have no objection to ‘[the role of women and girls]’ but you would like to keep ‘[the gender dimension],’ is that right?” the chair called out. Life proceeded at dictation speed, and it was not unusual to spend several hours on a single paragraph as delegates agreed to add a clause, to delete another, or to eliminate three alternative formulations for a certain phrase but to keep two others in brackets for further negotiation. The document at that stage was not an entity of its own but a collective patterning of intention.

This work was performed by assembling all proposed “language” into “brackets” (see Figure 4). Bracketed text gathered together every possible alternative formulation into a messy and very lengthy document. Negotiators then worked for hours in word-by-word negotiations to whittle away at the brackets until they achieved the “cleanest” (nonbracketed) version possible. “Consensus” among states was manifest in a specific form—that is, in the form of the “clean” and “tight” text, the text without brackets, the text that had not been watered down but rather made strong, precise statements. If the parties reached consensus, the brackets were removed, to the satisfaction and pleasure of all. If any one state refused to agree, however, the brackets remained and people said that the text was “unreadable.” The chair used every power of persuasion at her disposal to cajole, bully, or beg delegates to eliminate the brackets or at least to pare down the number of words within the brackets by consolidating one line of text with another. Delegates spoke of “lifting” the brackets, of “freeing” the bracketed text, and of “liberating the paragraph,” in language that evoked the normative nature of their common task. If the parties formally confronted each other as adversaries, they also were collaborators in what they experienced as the truly challenging task of producing a complete physical document in proper and pleasing form in time for its adoption at the closing ceremony.

223. [The World Conference on Human Rights and the International Conference on Population and Development [which did not create any human rights] reaffirm [all aspects of the [universal] human rights of women, including] women's reproductive rights [as defined in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, taking into consideration the reservations to the Programme of Action] and the right to development.] Bearing in mind the definitions given in chapter II, chapter VII, paragraph 7.2, and chapter VIII of the Programme of Action 11/ [reproductive rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. It also includes their right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence, as expressed in human rights documents. [Therefore, the unique reproductive and productive roles of women [and men] must be recognized and valued.] [Changes in both men's and women's consciousness, attitudes and behaviour are necessary conditions for achieving harmonious partnerships between women and men. It is essential to improve communication between women and men on issues of shared responsibility, including sexuality and reproductive health, so that women and men are equal partners in public and private life. Special efforts are needed to emphasize men's shared responsibility and promote their active involvement in responsible parenthood and sexual and reproductive behaviour.]

Figure 4. Paragraph 223 of the Draft Platform for Action, May 15, 1995, version (Future A/Conf. 177/L.1). This paragraph is taken from the last draft version of the document, and therefore the brackets in this paragraph already have been consolidated considerably.

These brackets were visual phenomena. Fijian negotiators noted in conversation that they preferred some versions of the draft *Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration* because brackets were marked in bold font, thus making each instantly noticeable on the page. At Fiji's national consultation, delegates carefully and laboriously marked the brackets with bright highlighter pen on their copies so that these stood out in fluorescent yellow against the remainder of the black type. Moving through the text involves focusing on one bracket after another rather than proceeding evenly from one line to the next, as in ordinary reading. For these Fijian delegates, the bracket was more than a representational marker of the lack of consensus among states. It was also a self-representational graphic entity, and the project of removing brackets engendered a commitment that was independent of their commitment to the conference's substantive political goals. For negotiators brackets were not asides, pauses, or explanatory devices but focal points to which attention was immediately drawn (Riles in press). The argument happened within the brackets.

More difficult to appreciate is the fact that the bracket was also a point of potentially infinite internal expansion. The rule of such negotiations is that although one cannot alter nor add to text outside the brackets, within the brackets a state can add as much as it wishes. Theoretically, at least, a delegation could therefore propose within the scope of any one bracket an entirely new text that would overtake and engulf the whole. Yet this potential infinity of text within the brackets is contained within the concrete graphic parameters of the bracket on the page.

The bracket is an expansive moment in at least one other sense. When negotiators focused their attention on the bracket, when they peered into its infinite potential, what was visible were the layers and levels of language, of other documents, and of alternative possibilities out of which the text had been created, as proposed amendments were taken largely from documents produced at other levels. As noted earlier, these successive layers of previous debates, previous interventions, or previous drafts and amendments all partook of a similar patterning of words, phrases, paragraphs, and sections. Text within brackets had the potential for endless internal fragmentation. For example, at Fiji's national consultation debate over the resolution of a single bracket among the delegates with whom I worked decomposed into a conversation about the languages in which chemicals are labeled in Fiji, the programming on national television, the recent death of one of their members, or the impending privatization of the hospital; for to focus

on the bracket is to tumble into a rabbit's hole of seemingly endless concrete instances. This device is precisely the reverse of the conventions of academic reading and writing. For negotiators, the world does not encompass the bracketed text or the document as context does for academic text, but rather is contained *within* it.¹⁶ And unlike the additive quality of the academic's context, this layered reality is as much a gap or vacuum as a thinglike entity.

Finally, in keeping with the aesthetic of counting and of digital sequence linking paragraphs or documents, a great deal of effort was devoted to quantifying the number of brackets and the amount of bracketed text within the draft document. At the Beijing Conference and the PrepCom, the secretariat kept a running record of the percentage of the total text that remained in brackets as an indicator of the progress of negotiations, and delegates checked this statistic frequently as a marker of their collective progress—60 percent of the text was in brackets at one point, then 40 percent, then 20 percent, they learned. At the close of the PrepCom, NGO newsletters again and again mentioned the fact that “60 percent of text is in brackets” as a marker of the failure of the meeting. Yet such quantification, people knew, could not take into account the infinite expansion possible within any single bracket, for, as we have seen, one bracket might expand to equal the totality of the nonbracketed text in length. This counting mechanism, then, ultimately rehearses the point at which counting *fails*. Negotiators apprehend the infinity within the brackets, we might say, by encountering the limit of number.

I noted earlier that negotiators only realized the endless levels of their activity at particular moments, and now I might add that these were the moments at which they were drawn into the bracket. It was both a thrilling and a deeply troubling effect. On the one hand, there was a weightiness and a sense of awe about the endless levels of activity and of artifact. Yet this black hole of meaning within the bracket also had to be backgrounded, made stable, held at bay. To fail to resolve the brackets into language would mean aesthetic failure, for a document with brackets is not a finished document but “unreadable” confusion, they repeatedly told themselves.

quotation: the text solidifies

Negotiators seeking to mask infinity within the brackets found what from an academic point of view seems like an improbable ally in language, and, in particular, in the second principal device of their aesthetic activity, the quotation. In negotiations, the chair directed negotiators' attention to a particular bracket, and, as they turned their attention away from the text as a whole to the specific bracket, gaps among proposed versions of the language collected within the bracket came into view. For example, in paragraph 223 (reprinted above), the chair might direct negotiators' attention to the distance between the two final bracketed phrases (“[Therefore, the unique reproductive . . .]” and “[Changes in both men's and women's consciousness . . .]”). Inside the bracket itself, therefore, the same pattern of gaps that characterized the bracket's relationship to the main text reemerged. “Could any delegation suggest language that might bridge this gap?” the chair asked. And negotiators began to “bring in language” to attempt to close it. At this stage, as one of the Pacific's most skilled negotiators explained to NGOs, everything but language and politics was left behind—women, the Pacific, the issues. What NGOs should do, she instructed them, was to propose language that would “bridge the gaps” among the texts suggested by the major delegations, for this was the only way to participate effectively.

Proposing language to bridge the gaps was not a process of thinking of an evocative phrase or of putting meaning into words. Indeed, as paragraph 233 illustrates, negotiated language often fails to conform to what academics would consider standards of proper grammar, let alone elegant form. Rather, delegates know that there are certain words that they would like to see included in the brackets, and others that they cannot allow. Bridging the gap is a matter of

"bringing in" words that will satisfy all, as one might bring in pieces of equipment, and of finding a way to string these words together so that the language will conform to stylistic conventions.

In several senses, this language, as the "things" delegates bring in, was the antonym of, as well as the antidote to, the infinity within the bracket. First, language was the opposite of the logic of counting that characterized the brackets. In counting paragraphs or sections or brackets, one moved through the text vertically, from top to bottom, following an outline structure, and one did not need to take notice of any particular sentences or words. Language, in contrast, was a horizontal weave. It existed entirely independently of the logic of the numbers, although it was built across the vertical skeleton that the numerical outline set for it—for, as I have mentioned, the paragraphs and even the sentences were virtually self-contained. One could move across the two-dimensional surface of the text either way, according to number or words.

More important, as we saw in the previous section, counting revealed levels (global, national, and so on), for in counting one apprehended the point at which counting failed, the point of infinite expansion within the bracket. Language, in contrast, masked these levels. Negotiators were only momentarily overwhelmed by the spectacular sense of levels in their work because most of the time their focus on language represented a turn away from the world at any level. Their work was neither national, nor regional, nor global, but "technical," as they said; it foregrounded its own activity. For example, during the conference the Fiji delegates never mentioned life in Fiji or in the Pacific, or even "Fiji" or "the Pacific" as ideas. Rather, their interest was absorbed by which copies to use, what similarities and differences linked or separated texts, with what language it was easiest to work, which word was stronger or weaker, or which word was used at the previous conference in a similar paragraph. Like the form of the document, the activity of drafting was self-contained.

The ideal form of language, according to negotiators, was the quotation, and they revered the encyclopedic knowledge of phrases from other documents that was necessary to produce the appropriate quotation at the opportune moment in the negotiations. The text of every document made frequent mention of language negotiated at other conferences or set out in other instruments, and a deadlock in the negotiation was often resolved by a proposal to quote directly from language already agreed on at a previous conference. These quotations reaffirmed the strength of the language negotiated earlier and also provided firm grounding for the claims of the new text. In the document, however, these quotations were unacknowledged borrowings, and were incorporated seamlessly into the text. The notion that documents were linked to one another like paragraphs engendered a rule of procedure: the chair would not allow delegates to bracket language taken verbatim from previous UN conferences.

The visual apprehension of the quotation was precisely the opposite of the bracket. While the bracket was a focal point, the quotation faded into the text without so much as the quotation marks that academics use to indicate textual borrowing. Anyone other than a connoisseur of such documents would fail to note the quotation at all. Even more powerfully than ordinary language, therefore, the quotation concealed the layers, for in borrowing from one conference or document to the next without so much as a citation, the quotation collapsed all levels of conferences or documents into a single text. Negotiators apprehended this as a great feat, a sign of progress, the creation of a solid linguistic regime.

Likewise, we saw earlier that the bracket was an abstract form (infinity, the pattern of levels) contained within a concrete form (the visual markings of the bracket on the page). As the substance that hides the bracket, language in contrast was at once both abstract and concrete. This special language was abstract in the way that it was apprehended primarily as patterned sequences of words, quotations, or paragraphs. As with the infinite levels within the bracket, the pattern lay in the repetition of forms, and, as we have seen, delegates carefully counted the number of times words such as *nuclear* or *gender* appeared in the document in the same way

that they counted the brackets. The objective was form and quantity, not the way words stood for analytical positions or contained images.

Language in this context was also abstract in that it never pointed to a particular instance of anything. In order to participate in the drafting process, one had to amass an astounding number of small pieces of information. This included statistics about nutrition, rising sea levels, or rates of increase in gynecologically related deaths; knowledge about what was happening in each committee meeting or about how far each drafting group had proceeded; about procedures and compromises reached at other UN meetings and about the workings of the UN bureaucracy; or about the positions of the parties on each of dozens of issues. Just as people collected documents, they spent much time collecting information. Unlike the information about the time and place of meetings, however, the information included in the document as *language* was never specific. Pacific delegates needed specific information about rising sea levels to argue for the inclusion of a proposed paragraph that mentioned rising sea levels, for example, yet in their proposed amendment rising sea levels were everywhere and nowhere. During the conference, the difference between the specificity of the facts outside the document and the generality of the facts within the document defined a distance between the inside of the text and the inside of the coffee bar where delegates gathered to talk about their amendments.

Unlike the patterns of levels within the brackets, therefore, the language that bridged the gaps within the brackets held firm and did not reveal other layers. It was opaque in its masking of the potentially infinite layers of language, even as it was presented as absolutely transparent in the sense of holding a singular and self-evident meaning.¹⁷ The quotation epitomized this concreteness of language in the way it could be taken from one conference to another, like the physical displacement of the document or the negotiator. As one Fiji delegate explained, "our platform solidified" through the process of transposing language from one document into another through quotation. The concreteness of the language, when woven into a proper pattern, constituted the concreteness of the document that emerged at the end.¹⁸

Finally, like participants in a Fijian ceremony seated on the pattern of layered mats, delegates knew that, once assembled into a concrete document, language would be taken apart again. The document did not exist to be "read" in the academic sense of the term. Rather, after the close of the conference, governments and NGOs would use the document by dividing sentences into categories and reshuffling the text into material for quotation in further documents of their own. The carefully crafted patterns of the artifact, delegates knew, would be decomposed into their myriad composite parts.

a figure seen twice

I have described a double view. First, just as the pattern of the *vivivi* emerged from the layering of one mat onto the next, we saw that the apprehension of the *Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration* entailed a loss of representation—as happened at the point at which counting of brackets, like the counting of mats, failed—and that this loss also enabled the realization of "the pattern which connects" (Bateson 1980:8) one level (of documents, of conferences, of text) to the next. In this apprehension of pattern, the difference of scale that separated the negotiator from the document or the global from the local was no longer foregrounded.

There were also points at which the document, as an object, was distinct from the patterns of conference procedure and the patterns in delegates' minds. Such moments were also those at which only one level of language was accessible, while others were (temporarily) closed. The concrete document was an encapsulation of the infinity of pattern within something that stood on its own, just as the *vivivi* could be rolled up and taken away. The possibility of the further extension of the pattern always remained: a copy of the document could always be reproduced an infinite number of times. Yet for infinity to emerge anew would require some

intentional reactivation. One needed a typist, a printer, or a photocopier to make it happen, for example (see Latour and Woolgar 1986).

From this vantage point, however, a problem emerges concerning the cultural specificity of what I have described. Whose patterns are these? Is this a Fijian phenomenon, something "global," or something "in between"?¹⁹ Indeed, perhaps one of the initially most surprising ethnographic observations to be made about the negotiations described in this article was negotiators' collective failure to problematize what anthropologists describe under the rubric of global-local relations during the course of their work.²⁰

This returns us to the cover design of the *Pacific Platform for Action*. As in the cover design, mats often served as symbols of the Pacific and especially of Pacific women in documents, newsletters, or promotional videotapes produced by Pacific governments and NGOs. Such depictions of generically "Pacific mats," and indeed of "the Pacific," might raise precisely the concerns about cultural specificity noted above. Yet the way in which the representation emerged here is particularly interesting. It is the great detail of the close-up lens, the scale of the image, that renders the mats in the photographs unidentifiable, and thus engenders the loss of precisely the cultural detail that interests anthropologists. In this foreclosure of representation, the loss that brings pattern into view, the image also brings into being a visual representation of another kind—one of regionalism and of scale change itself.

We might take this image as a particularly graphic example of a phenomenon described throughout this article: the generation of the perspectival experience of local, regional, or global levels. I have endeavored to show that far from being contexts outside the document, the local and global are brought into view through the aesthetic devices described in the previous pages. This material then would draw attention to the importance of aesthetics in the imagination and experience of global and local. It might also imply that the relationship of global to local cannot provide the analytical framework for such documents—that one cannot understand the experience of these documents in terms of contextual shifts—because such a perspective is overdetermined by the material itself. That is to say, the very contexts or perspectives of global and local are artifacts of the practices we wish to understand.

In *Resisting Representation* (1994), Elaine Scarry examines how the language of the English novel is able to accommodate subjects that seem either too abstract or too concrete for representation—subjects such as truth on the one hand, or pain on the other. Her answer turns not to the well-chosen image or the evocative phrase, but to similarities within the novel between "grammatical structures and narrative structures"—that is, "between large and small patches of language" (Scarry 1994:3). Such repetitions in the pattern of language, in turn, engender the "'extendibility' of language, the coherent way it can be steadily elaborated and unfolded. Once opened and elaborated, it can be contracted again" (Scarry 1994:3). In the same way, what the patterns in the language of the *Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration* ultimately represented, what we might understand as its meaning, was precisely the "levels" (global, national, regional, and so on) that the designers of UN procedures so desperately sought to bring together. The 20th-century problem of international institutions has been one of how to grasp these levels at one and the same time, how to bring them into a single encompassing view. The aesthetics described in this article—that of a figure seen twice—provide a means of representing precisely what resists representation. One outcome of these aesthetics is that the fixed and self-contained form of analysis of international negotiation deprives the academic observer and reader of the familiar ethnographic journey through transformations of meaning from concrete apprehensions of facts to abstract analyses. Yet, as I have endeavored to make clear, documents such as the *Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration* cannot be analyzed—at least in academic terms. That is, any attempt to transform the material from concrete to abstract would fail to achieve the effect we expect of our analyses in the first place, but would simply sit like one more layer, one further replication, one

convention upon a series of other conventions. Indeed, the achievement of the document is that the levels of analysis—from global to local or national to regional—are already revealed from the start.

notes

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1. This article draws upon 18 months of fieldwork in Suva, Fiji, and at UN meetings. Suva is the administrative hub for a wide range of regional and international organizations working in the South Pacific. The major UN development institutions—the UN Development Fund (UNDP), the UN Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the UN Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), and others—have offices in Suva from which they direct projects throughout the Pacific, as do large governmental and international aid agencies such as AusAID (the Australian national aid agency) or the World Council of Churches, and international pressure groups such as Greenpeace. During the period of 1994–96 when I conducted fieldwork, typical projects included providing training courses in areas such as “rural development skills” or “data management,” sponsoring regional and international meetings on banking policies or water sanitation methods, producing legal documents and pamphlets for popular audiences, lobbying Pacific Island governments for the ratifications of international agreements, gathering demographic data, and mounting public awareness campaigns.

Suva also serves as the administrative base for numerous regional intergovernmental bodies. The SPC, an organization of Pacific Island states and former colonial powers in the region, operates many of its programs from Suva. Similarly, Suva hosts the headquarters of the secretariat of the South Pacific Forum, an economic and political alliance of Pacific Island states devoted to political and legal harmonization of law and policy in areas such as trade, maritime, environmental, defense, and foreign policy. The work of these organizations included negotiating regional and international agreements, devising and implementing developmental programs, conducting studies, maintaining databases, providing “technical assistance” to Pacific Island governments and representing Pacific concerns in other international forums. At the top management level, these organizations were staffed by university-educated Pacific Islanders with diplomatic experience drawn from the region at large, or, in some cases, by expatriates. Most of the remaining staffers in the Fiji offices were Fiji citizens of diverse cultural and educational backgrounds.

2. For example, Malkki (1995), following Foucault (1979), considers the extent to which UN identity cards define refugee identities:

documentation can come to be a very efficient technique of power by means of which people can be fixed and objectified and, in the process, rendered more visible as objects of knowledge and targets of “care and control.” [1995:170]

Foster (1995) has called attention to the role of the “rhetorical form” in collective imaginations of nationhood. His interest is in “forms” such as flags and advertisements as “markers of . . . shared subjective identity” (1997:154) and in advertisement rhetoric as a medium for the transfer of (hidden) meaning (1997:155 et passim), that is, in the interpretation of the symbolic politics of forms. The knowledge practices at stake in global UN meetings, however, foreclose the possibility of such interpretive moves.

3. Rabinow has recently commented on the “relentless, omnivorous, and insatiable demands” on “knowledge-producers” to generate “meaning” (1996:xiv).

4. For its part, the NGO Forum was designed as a formal counterweight to the governmental meeting; it was precisely what that meeting was not. From structural adjustment to yoga, the program of activities advertised a choice of 350 workshop topics each day. As one NGO newsletter emphasized,

The Forum is not designed to take formal positions; it has no fixed “agenda,” and does not adopt resolutions as a body. . . . It is a means of creating and exchanging ideas, and not an end in itself . . . its success lies in the follow-up activities at the national level. [Asian and Pacific Development Center 1994:5]

5. Officially, the PrepCom was also the annual meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), an organization of member states elected on a rotating basis from the membership of the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the major UN organ of which the CSW is a part. All UN member states and official observers were invited to send delegations to the PrepCom and the FWCW.

6. In addition to the actual intergovernmental agreements, many other kinds of “documents” are also produced in the course of this process, including shadow documents drafted by NGOs, newspaper articles, newsletters, films, and demonstrations. In this article I limit discussion to the official negotiated document.

Throughout this article, therefore, "the document" is the *Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration* unless otherwise specified.

7. The Pacific Ministerial Conference on Women and Sustainable Development was convened by SPC in Nouméa from May 2–6, 1994, as preparatory negotiations for the Beijing Conference at the subregional level.

8. This subtitle of "sustainable development" was adopted largely at the urging of the UNDP, which played a major role in the funding and organization of this meeting. At the conference, well-known politicians were enlisted to give lectures on different aspects of the concept "sustainable development" to delegates. The presence of this term at the center of the image might be taken as graphic evidence of the powerful role international agencies play in the production of even the "local," "natural," and "grassroots" documents at issue in this article.

9. In referring to *aesthetics*, I borrow from Marilyn Strathern's use of the term as "the persuasiveness of form, the elicitation of a sense of appropriateness" (1991:10), and from Gregory Bateson's understanding of aesthetics as "recognition and empathy" toward "the pattern which connects" (1980:8). This usage differs from uses of the term within the parameters of a Kantian debate over the nature of beauty (e.g., Coote and Shelton 1992).

10. Indeed, when delegates at the Nouméa Conference alluded to above sought to eliminate several sections of the draft *Pacific Platform for Action* prepared by SPC staff and to adopt an alternative format, they were informed by UN authorities that they could not do so as they were "required" to conform to "UN style" for the sake of the uniformity of documents.

11. Such uses of text may be more pervasive than is often acknowledged. Danet (1997) has described a similar processing of information with respect to electronic hypertext:

The advent of hypertext is changing the rhythms with which we read, and undermining the authority of the author and the fixity of the text. Texts written in modular chunks and having an associative, rather than a linear structure may be read in different sequences by different readers, and even by the same reader on different occasions. Links between portions of texts and between different texts may be instantly activated. [1997:6]

Similarly, studies in cognitive psychology have demonstrated that the use of documents such as timetables should be understood as "analogical reasoning" rather than as reading, since they require entirely different skills, focused on the comparison of elements in the document and the location of specific facts rather than the acquisition of knowledge (Guthrie 1988:181, 197).

12. I borrow the term *digital* from Gregory Bateson's commentary on the difference between "digital" and "iconic" pattern (1987). Bateson's argument concerns the way in which a pattern that is digital at one "level" can be iconic at another.

13. This regional ministerial meeting was convened by the UN Economic and Social Council for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) from June 7–14, 1994.

14. In speaking of an academic point of view, I do not mean to imply that actual "academics" never encounter the kind of knowledge practices described in this piece. Indeed, the presence of some academic feminists at the Beijing Conference, and the anxious discussions within academic feminist networks such as DAWN (Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era) over whether to participate in document drafting or to take an entirely critical stance toward the conferences, are evidence of these interconnections.

15. In Wagner's study of the fundamental "constitutive and organizing power" of meaning in human cultural life (1986:ix), for example, we learn that it is in the elicitation of meaning that knowledge expands (1986:31), crosses from one scale to another, and grows from one "order" to the next (1986:126).

16. Messick (1993) similarly describes the past treatment of legal documents by judges in Yemen for whom "an oral core is complemented by a written surround" (1993:209). The resemblance to UN documents is not complete, however, because Messick tells us that like the ethnographer, the Yemeni scribe aims to describe the social world in the text of his document (1993:224).

17. Michael Herzfeld has made a similar point concerning the tensions between officials' insistence on the transparency of bureaucratic language and their own uses of the inherent opacity of language (1992:115). The interesting aspect, Herzfeld points out, is the way in which bureaucrats continue to insist on the clarity of literal words even as they are "well aware of the inconsistencies that abound in the legal system they are supposed to uphold" (1992:118). As he illustrates, such claims on behalf of language can in turn be substantiated in practice only by the "tautologous" practices of producing yet more documents at further stages or levels of activity (1992:121). It is through the bureaucrat's movement between an apprehension of the transparency and opacity of language, in other words, that documents are made to beget further documents and further "levels."

18. This is not to say, however, that delegates were naively unaware that language was not in fact "firm," as academics engaged in "critique" of the *Platform for Action* at the Conferences and in outside writings sometimes assumed. Indeed, the entire game of the negotiation consisted in lulling oneself and others into an apprehension of the concreteness of language even as one knew that meanings must fail to hold. For example, after initially opposing a paragraph affirming women's equal right to own land, the Fiji delegation later dropped its objection on the grounds that the text could be read as asking for nothing beyond the communal "land rights" Fijian women nominally "had" in their native clans. If the strategy lay in the interpretive possibilities of words such as *land rights*, the strategy was at least a double one. For at least some members of the delegation, it also was a way of supporting a call for land reform in Fiji that as individuals

they believed to be imperative, but that, as government officials, they could not ratify. If words could be decomposed, so could institutional identities and allegiances.

19. Margaret Jolly (1996) has described a similar conference of Vanuatu NGO representatives sponsored by overseas aid agencies on the topic of violence against women. Jolly's argument that the allure of human rights language (1996:182) among the educated urban ni-Vanuatu women who attend such conferences is neither "familiar" nor "unfamiliar" (1996:185)—an artifact neither of local culture nor of international institutions—is well illustrated in the ease with which a conference brochure she describes gathered together Christian allusions, quotations from a speech by a well-known American feminist activist given at a UN conference, a title from a book authored by the owner of the Body Shop, calls for "educating" and "empowering" women in language evocative of UN documents, and an account of the local history of the Vanuatu Women's Center (1996:179–180).

20. In a recent article, Elizabeth Mertz has described the highly regimented process through which American law students learn a new orientation toward texts as "precedent" and in the process are socialized into their identity as lawyers (Mertz 1996). I follow Mertz in proposing that attention be paid to the effects of the form of legal language as constitutive of a politics beyond the subject matter of the text itself. A comparatively surprising facet of the Beijing Conference, however, was the speed and ease with which persons of vastly different backgrounds absorbed the aesthetics of documents—the absence of an analog to the political struggle between teacher and student that Mertz details (1996:240–245).

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