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Introduction

Biographic Mediation

On the Uses of Personal Disclosure in Bureaucracy and Politics

Ebony Coletu

I used to collect lottery tickets thrown into the gutter next to a convenience store in East Oakland. Because I lived across the street, I picked up abandoned tickets daily. I would carefully place them in photo albums, fascinated by a dozen different ticket designs competing for the attention of customers staring through plexiglass. Bright green dollar signs. Pots of gold. A Monopoly baron with a cane dancing down a yellow brick road. All scratched according to style, some were completely exposed by a coin or key. Others barely revealed mismatched numbers. The California lottery was a novelty when I was young, introduced in the mid-80s as a ballot measure to raise money for schools without raising taxes.¹ The rolls of shiny, perforated scratcher cards were intended to transfer the increasing cost of public education to those most in need of a windfall.

From its inception, the California lottery board conducted extensive demographic research on game participants by querying winners about their backgrounds and buying habits. The bottom fifth of wage earners spent the most on the lottery, and in the early years games were so heavily weighted toward the state that the rules had to be adjusted to produce more winners.² When I began to collect discarded tickets years later, I placed some cards face up and others flipped to show the text on the back, featuring rules and a miniature form requesting identifying information. The cashier would tuck these ticket-forms into the register drawer to collect reimbursement from the state and a retailer bonus, while regaling new customers with evidence that the location produced winners. For prizes over \$600, a more extensive claim form was required, followed by a six-week waiting period that involved checking the payment against taxes, child support, welfare, and traffic fines before issuing a check.³ Upgrading tickets into data collection devices enabled

the lottery to perform a variety of state revenue functions discretely printed in the “rules of the game.”

The lottery ticket offers a window into the method guiding this special issue, which reorients our approach to biography through technical demands for disclosure that affect earnings and overexposure to policing. We may be tempted to disqualify functional forms of inscription as life writing. But the invitation to think of these acts of writing in terms of *biographic mediation* makes the case for exploring less visible linkages between paperwork and politics to better understand how biographic data operates within a political economy, even as it may be masked by moral language, political generalities, or hope of winning the lottery. Despite the importance of paperwork to distributive mechanisms, it tends to deflect serious political analysis because the form is considered a derivative of policy, a side effect of law rather than the driving force of law.⁴ In recent years this tendency has started to shift, yielding more analysis of the “graphic artifact” that conditionally sutures lives to institutions (Hull, *Government of Paper*), compelling pivotal life decisions—whether navigating the court-ordered loss of children to foster care or a graduate school admissions application. The production and circulation of textual things, particularly to yield knowledge, move money, or reconstruct social relationships, compel a closer reading of biographic forms.⁵ With this intimate view, we can understand the back of a lottery ticket as a biographic medium capable of adjusting status, altering life chances, and channeling value. Not synonymous with identity or limited to a single author, data intake points toward the contingencies of identification as a porous and mediated process, checked against a history of documented institutional affiliations (employment, debt, education, and imprisonment), which are all subject to interpretation.

In her manifesto for auto/biographical studies, Liz Stanley argues that we ought to study the interface between self-making and demands for personal information because it creates tension within strict definitions of autobiography. We are not always disclosing what we think—but rather what is solicited as evidence. Stanley goes on to suggest a hybrid epistemological approach that might take its cue from documents like death certificates, life insurance policies, and employment applications to better understand how self-presentation is pressured and shaped by allowable routes for bureaucratic action. Inspired by Dorothy Smith’s feminist approach to sociology and its intersection with lifewriting studies, Stanley’s proposed investigation of biographic forms opens onto the study of institutional practices. Studying functional, quotidian documents foregrounds the conditions imposed on self-expression while broadening the political scope of analysis beyond expression.

This special issue extends the sociopolitical concerns of auto/biographical studies, emphasizing the political edge of analysis that congeals when we study the way forms circulate and gather data, directing the distribution of payments and punishment. Because paperwork is often implicated in public debates and policy-making, the essays in this issue explore how paperwork steers political

problem-solving. For example, how does the specter of “papers” shift political demands away from migrant rights, toward selective inclusion of *undocumented* immigrants? In taking up the way “documents of life” redefine the scope and accessibility of rights, the issue pays tribute to theorists of functional life writing outside of the academy. High-stakes situations that link paperwork to politics make it easier to see how blocked access to aid, protection, or rights can make a theorist out of anyone determined to end structural exclusion.

Fannie Lou Hamer was such a theorist. As a political organizer from the Mississippi Delta, she is perhaps best known for her televised address to the Democratic National Convention in 1964 arguing for the inclusion of Black delegates who were shut out of state-level party meetings.⁶ In a bid for recognition of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, she laid before the credentials committee the numerous obstacles designed to block recognition of Black voters and representatives. Though the right to vote was available in principle, various bureaucratic hurdles that invited police and civilian enforcement disqualified Black voters and intimidated onlookers.

Hamer’s testimony was culled from political praxis beginning with her own experience attempting to register in Indianola, Mississippi in 1962. Merely showing up at the courthouse to fill out a voter registration form activated a terror network run by the White Citizens’ Council, a group formed to stall school integration and degrade Black voting rights. Their members worked at the court, on the police force, and at the telephone company connecting calls. Each played a role to preserve a white voting majority within the media infrastructure that managed elections. As soon as she finished answering the court registrar’s questions in writing—she was one of two people in a group of eighteen allowed to fill out the form—the registrar used her address and employment information to contact the plantation owner who hired her as a timekeeper and sharecropper on his farm. After taking the call, the employer sent a runner to the Hamer house to announce that Fannie Lou was fired if she didn’t withdraw her registration. Following that announcement, a mob organized to run her out of town. The home where Hamer’s family took refuge was shot eighteen times, causing them to relocate again (Brooks and Houck).

In subsequent community meetings Hamer shared her account of the violent consequences that followed Black voter registration, all while arguing *for* mass registration—a difficult pitch to make. But Hamer’s observations about the ways media infrastructures had been used to sustain racially exclusive voting were aimed at identifying system vulnerabilities. She observed that white terror networks paired paperwork with policing to create the impression that Black voters had no right to approach the court. She questioned whether they had the power to derail every Black voter with the same intensity in the event of mass registration, and insisted that a large number of Black voter registration attempts could scramble the network’s focus and disrupt the coherence of their power. Hamer situated voter registration forms among a range of ordinary documents used to intimidate,

teaching their significance in citizenship schools developed through the Highlander Folk School and Southern Christian Leadership Conference training programs.⁷ These informal instructional settings used everyday forms to teach Black southerners how to read while learning how American institutions differentiated access to capital, education, and rights by race. From bank deposit slips to sharecropping agreements, the curriculum sharpened attention to functional modes of life writing that influenced where one worked, how much one could save, and how protest was organized (“Program trains”).

The concept of biographic mediation takes inspiration from Hamer. It refers to the solicitation of personal data used to determine who gets what and why, drawing attention to taken-for-granted media used to enact or critique differentiated access to resources. Focus on mediation encourages us to identify the ways political rights are contested and claimed in application forms. The central questions animating biographic mediation are scattered across different lineages of inquiry, but the gestalt of understanding strikes anyone who has had to apply for a job in which “many qualified applicants were rejected.” How is the mass rejection of qualified appeals legitimated? Biographic mediation attunes us to the naturalization of rejection using the details of life, stimulating awareness of “the tension between legitimate choices and discrimination” (Coletu, “Biographic Mediation” 384). For the purpose of this introduction, I will highlight a few theoretical currents that take up the technical uses of biographic data as a medium for judgment, then suggest that more refined modes of analysis have been central to activist practice—motivating distinct and even competing strategies for political change.

Biography: Circulation, Judgment, and Value

How we come to understand biography as a medium for judgment varies depending on the place where we first notice it, but Hannah Arendt distilled it into a single source. In *The Human Condition*, she points to the moment of birth as the birth of biography. At birth, others gain authority in describing the existence of a child unable to narrate their own arrival in the world. And throughout life this authority to pass judgment on the actions of others as witnesses continues. But the practice develops a mutual character. No one can claim to be the author of their own story, as the constant production of life stories circulates in response to social judgment. Arendt goes on to say that the “medium” of storytelling fabricates action as much as tangible objects because stories shape intersubjective responses, which is to say, they shape action in response. The biographic form (e.g., a birth certificate) might be understood as a “tangible object” that concretizes this process, soliciting personal disclosure in order to insert the telling into a “verification regime” forged through so many contacts with other institutions, databases, and professional queries, until “the agent [or applicant] is not the author” of the story judged (Arendt 184).⁸

What is the value of displacing authority to authenticate claims about life? In 1986 Arjun Appadurai answered this question by addressing the situational

conditions of evaluation. He introduced a collection of breakthrough essays on the politics of value with particular attention to the way objects attract or lose value through circulation. In *The Social Life of Things*, he described recorded mutations in an object's value as its *biography*. In Appadurai's view, biography referred to a methodological approach that tracked the phases of valuation affecting the life of an object (16–20). A clever metaphor for writing about circulation, biography might have been critiqued as a borrowed term, not referring to life writing at all. Then Igor Kopytoff, in the same volume, insisted that the *medium* of value transactions was also part of the definition. Kopytoff pointed out that tracking the periodic valuation of things to explain changes in location and treatment was a central feature of slave markets in the Americas (68, 70–73). Was “thing” a document or a person treated as a thing via documented sale? Slaveholders and brokers turned into functional biographers when inscribing moments of valuation marked by sale days, injury, lease agreements, work output, death, or birth.⁹ And those mounting the auction block or forewarned of sale also made choices to shift their value, altering self-presentation to shape buyer perceptions of worker productivity or diffidence, gambling on recorded impressions to stay close to family or friends (Johnson). Those performances influenced the prices documented in bookkeeping columns. Workers with skills in demand at other plantations used their reputations to strike lease agreements that on the surface appeared to mark trust in faithful return at the end of a workday. But this judgment of character camouflaged the plantation owners' investment in “permission” when he or she benefited from a locally coveted skill set, recuperating wages from leasing allowed for the purpose of self-emancipation.¹⁰

Functional life writing—whether reflecting on the past or speculating on the future—mediated each of these value transactions. Appearance, reproductive status, point of origin, and skills were converted into a calculus affecting sale prices, insurance policies, lease rates, and estate values. Foregrounding the quotidian practices of life writing in plantation accounting books made clear that life as a unit of account was not a neoliberal invention, unless neoliberalism is traced to the human capital of slavery.¹¹

In each of these examples, biographic mediation enables a conversation across institutional settings in order to ask how functional life writing is produced and for what purposes. In a special forum on the future of life writing studies, I suggested biographic mediation could describe any institutional demand for personal disclosure to make decisions about who gets what and why (Coletu “Biographic Mediation”). The emphasis on demand encourages us to link biographic media with institutional operations like data entry, research, and accounting.¹² Where forms are required, biographic mediation is at work. Best understood by examples that sharpen the stakes, I invited scholars and activists to think about various demands for personal information that have multiple uses, tracking the ways institutional practices affect political claims. The journal convened a workshop for contributors selected for this special issue and over two days we discussed circuits of production

and evaluation, in each case naming how biographic mediation animates distributive systems, asymmetric policing, and punishment.

To ensure the analytic connection between technical demands for personal information and life writing, the essays presented here draw attention to the biographic interface as a means to build institutional authority for judgment using limited descriptions of life. Similar to Liz Stanley's apt slash suturing autobiographical to biographical analysis, we address the dialectic between self-presentation and formal evaluation. But we also sharpen focus on biographic mediation as a technology that provokes responses to judgment, following Arendt. To clarify how disclosure pivots into biography, we discussed Alfred Schutz, who devoted several decades to a phenomenological description of social life. He cast functional life writing as a typified demand for disclosure, calling it biography precisely to de-emphasize expressive personality and to re-emphasize occasions that stage external judgment (Schutz and Luckmann 233). For Schutz, the demand for "biographical articulation" could be reasonably expected whenever someone asked for support. Asking someone to state their plans relative to their history authorized the listener to assess whether such plans could be carried out with the support requested. As a result, the speaker considered the assumptions, needs, and desires of potential sponsors when crafting a biographical account. Schutz insisted that these transactions are functional because they are commonly expected and delivered.

Jürgen Habermas extended this a step further, suggesting that normative queries, such as those we find in bureaucratic forms, are "action orienting mechanisms" to coordinate individual lives with institutional procedures, steadily "colonizing" the lifeworld with generic vocabularies for action that can guide or distort plans for life (183). In this way, biography does not necessarily refer to an expressive story of life experiences. Rather, it can refer to a "stock story" laced with personal details to stimulate recognition and satisfy expectations (Schutz and Luckmann 67). Functional biographies solicited by institutions form a social interface that documents perceptions others have about you paired with your own efforts to steer the direction of life (e.g., recommendation letters paired with cover letters). The articles included here pursue the bureaucratic and political uses of disclosure by charting the conversion of personal accounts into occasions for biographic judgment.

Following biographic transactions through moments of evaluation made it possible for participants, with our varied projects, to reconstruct what biographic forms were doing inside institutions, whether a welfare bureaucracy or an adoption agency. At times surprising, biographic forms perform work that is not always publicized, leading us to explore the relationship between paperwork and publicity, or, the perceived purpose of disclosure versus actual use. And those uses can often seem so particular and embedded that the conceptual thread connecting them to other institutional practices seems opaque. When I circulated the call for papers the response was firm ("I write about this!") and uncertain ("Is this what you mean?") precisely because we are familiar with the varied processes that biographic

mediation names, but we have not discussed them across such a wide range of institutions while still holding onto the specificity of context. For example, how do we build conceptual relevance between state surveillance practices in Romania, adoption paperwork in Korea, and mandated sexual assault reporting for minors in California? Shared questions began to congeal across these projects, as scholars and activists attempted to name the *work* of biographic production and its *impact* on political claims.

Like many *Biography* special issues, the call for papers was oriented toward something that looked like a genre question on the surface—is this biography?—only to suspend genre for questions about practices.¹³ During our workshop, four recurring questions developed around practices of disclosure and evaluation that are worth revisiting here: 1) How does documentation of personal details convert disclosure into a biographic form? 2) What circuits of biographic evaluation influence options in life? 3) How is biographic data remediated as publicity to accomplish a range of economic and political goals—whether by governments or advocacy organizations? 4) What are the limits of biographic mediation as a political strategy? Though we can easily imagine the constraints imposed by reductive forms that alter preferred modes of self-presentation, biographic mediation illuminates systems that justify asymmetric rewards and punishment in service of institutional survival. A familiar example can clarify how this works.

Biographic Mediation in Policing and Advocacy

On August 9, 2014, Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson shot unarmed eighteen-year-old Mike Brown twelve times, claiming self-defense. Left in the street for four hours, Brown's body was cordoned off from onlookers filming and calling for help. The protests that ensued after his death are well-known.¹⁴ They amplified a growing movement to end police brutality and expose racialized policing in the US as a common practice that disproportionately exposes Black Ferguson residents to extreme punishment for minor infractions.¹⁵ Several scholars have theorized mobilization in the wake of "spectacular black death" as *necropolitical media* where documented murders provoke wide public debate about the persistence and impact of racially-targeted policing. But the media focus on specific victims of violence, their lives, and sudden deaths can easily obscure the wider apparatus for police aggression.¹⁶ Community residents understood the problem and contextualized racially-targeted aggression as part of an incentivized pattern of behavior *across* municipal institutions.¹⁷ Hands Up United, a coalition of groups working to end state-sponsored violence, demanded a civil rights investigation to document the circuit of violence, fines, and incarceration that kept Black people in Ferguson alert to the life-changing power of police stops and ticketing.¹⁸

Attention to ticketing opened a window onto a system. In the months that followed, community town halls and testimony in Ferguson broadened the lens from Brown's body in the street to a panoramic view of linked municipal practices

designed to extract money from those unable to hire legal representation, coercing payment of fines under threat of wage garnishment and jail—authorized by the accumulation of tickets. Following the ticket proved to be a method for analyzing the relationships between institutions considered separate or loosely interdependent. The Department of Justice initiated an investigation that developed into a cross-organizational ethnography including police ride-alongs, court observations, over 35,000 police records, thousands of emails, data on stops, searches, and arrests, and interviews with municipal employees and community organizations as well as residents charged with offenses (US Department of Justice iii). The result of analyzing the changing value of tickets revealed a modern debtor's prison that used racial profiling to suppress objections to disproportionate punishment (Benms and Strode). The criminalization of Black residents leveraged the perceived necessity of intensified policing into a mechanism for debt manufacturing.

Prompted to increase the number of tickets issued per year in tandem with an increase in court fees, police officers issued 90 percent of all citations to Black residents in 2013, and used warrants for arrest for unpaid traffic tickets to escalate encounters into mandated court appearances (US Department of Justice 4). The warrant became a standing account, accumulating fees for overdue tickets, missed court dates, time spent in jail, as well as parole monitoring and debt-collection services. The municipal profits calculated from targeted ticketing over time created revolving debt for some residents who struggled to keep up with payments.¹⁹ The model is known as “offender-funded policing” or “policing for profit” because it converts infractions into income for the government, offsetting city debt onto those least able to challenge charges (“Policing and Profit”). At the same time, this method concealed the growing dependence on jails as a tool to both force and substitute for debt repayment.²⁰

City debt in the United States reflects expenditures that are not covered by taxation. In 1979, New York City went bankrupt when it could not pay debts from its tax base. Soon after, economists began to develop fee-based systems for a variety of bureaucratic transactions to increase revenue. By the 1990s this included punishment. At the same time, the court struggled to keep up with increasing caseloads, compromising due process by considering 1200–1500 cases in a single three-hour session (US Department of Justice 9). Those cases, quickly converted into verdicts, generated more income while also instituting a cycle of debt for those least able to pay. In Ferguson, the approach was compounded by bloated fines. A five-dollar ticket for an uncut lawn in surrounding municipalities was seventy-seven dollars in Ferguson. Charts comparing costs regionally demonstrated a greater number of officers policing Ferguson, generating a higher number of tickets for more expensive fines (10). The report issued by the Department of Justice in mid-2015 led to the abolition of fines for a majority of Ferguson residents who lived in the shadow of debt and incarceration, some refusing to leave their homes and unable to work because they restructured life to avoid arrest (“Policing and Profit” 1725).²¹

Policing for “profit” relies on a circuit of biographic mediation to generate

value from racial profiling, ticketing, and compound interest from delayed payments—all tethered to biographic units of account to achieve the impression that an individual is responsible for payment and police are responsible for debt collection.²² Activists critically redeployed biographic mediation by directing public interest in Brown's death toward the practice of profiling, asking how police are incentivized to attack rather than defend Black residents of Ferguson. In *Carceral Capitalism*, Jackie Wang points out that Brown's death and the subsequent protests helped to expose a predatory model of governance that was discussed in municipal memos and routinely experienced by residents but not widely interrogated until the Department of Justice report was released (160). A predatory state is distinct from a welfare state because the latter taxes higher incomes to pay for public services while a predatory state coordinates institutional practices to claim value from the lives of the poor (echoing the lottery without the occasional reward). Wang argues that Ferguson further transitioned into a parasitic model, using force to compel payments and manage populations, which in turn satisfied creditors seeking repayment of city debt (71).

The Ferguson police department, in concert with courts and private parole firms, replenished city coffers by mining-and-fining vulnerable biographic records on the edge of arrest. Biographic mediation then cannot be reduced to telling the "right story" about life in exchange for support (Schutz). Rather it sheds light on infrastructures designed to maintain institutional authority and revenue. When critics craft biographic profiles to expose the impact of administrative practices, they are using biographic mediation as a mirror to comment on a system. This tactic requires considerable labor and research. Ironically, funding needs for social justice organizations have also been used to pressure advocacy narratives according to the expectations of philanthropic sponsors. During the workshop we adopted a reflexive approach to discuss how complicity with issue-reframing can develop from grant writing if we ignore the conditions in which nonprofit organizations survive (INCITE!).

For example, in this issue, Amita Swadhin reflects on the development of *Mirror Memoirs*, an archive that foregrounds the stories of LGBTQI+ people of color who have survived childhood sexual assault. The invisibility of their experiences in policy discourse points toward demand for "positive survivor" accounts supporting carceral solutions for individualized violence. Swadhin wanted to create room for "negative survivor" accounts that explained institutional complicity in maintaining rape culture, but the most readily funded projects tend to fit survivor narratives within existing policy discourse. In the interview, Swadhin challenges the assumption that the state has a zero tolerance approach to child sexual assault. Reporting policies and their consequences reveal another trajectory. When the survivor's story is documented and publicized as a moral demand for sex-offender containment and surveillance, popular support swells but overstates the effectiveness of the solution. Carceral punishment imagines offenders as strangers to be locked out of communities, but most offenders are relatives or friends of the family.

Swadhin argues that prison abolition and child sexual assault need not function as a limit case, which is to say, the point at which abolishing prisons no longer makes sense. Rather, child sexual assault indicates where prisons fail to address the source of an epidemic.

In this way, biographic mediation is methodologically concerned with mapping circuits that collect and evaluate personal details in order to ask what kind of work biographic profiling performs within bureaucracies and in politics.²³ Our discussion probed the interactive dynamics between publicity and paperwork to discover what is publicly emphasized and how it shapes or conceals administrative practices. Finally, policing is not an incidental case study here. Biographic mediation alters the practice of policing. From arrest warrants to algorithms for bail payments, the technical process of calculating payment and punishment from recorded encounters with institutions depends on biographic mediation.²⁴ Most of the contributors to this volume shaped their final essays in dialogue with these themes, which directly emerged from our workshop. In two cases, authors were not able to attend the workshop, but their writing seamlessly amplified the issues raised here: Sara Ahmed's "A Complaint Biography" and Leigh Gilmore's "Frames of Witness." Since Sara Ahmed's essay was precirculated, it offered a helpful prelude to discussions of method. How can biographic mediation track the work of evaluation when so much of the case material under discussion is hidden from view?

Ahmed's "A Complaint Biography" is republished here from her blog *Feminist Killjoys*. In it, she shares arguments from a forthcoming book *On Complaint*. The essay develops a phenomenology of the complaint to demonstrate how grievance protocols are often presented as a remedy but practically translate into a cost, a means of deferral rather than redress. Ahmed's own public departure from Goldsmiths, University of London in 2016 helped publicize the pattern of deferral by making visible her refusal to cooperate with institutionalized procedures designed to dismiss sexual harassment complaints ("Resignation as a Feminist Issue").²⁵ Repurposing her position within reporting requirements, she named system functions that contradicted university publicity by design. In an earlier work, *On Being Included*, she theorized the *non-performative* discourse of diversity as a publicized claim to progress that documents inaction (i.e., the work that needs to be done). The non-performative does not mark failure for institutions. To the contrary, it functions as a shield, deflecting reputational damage from charges of racism when committees, protocols, and publicity have been organized within a diversity management regime.²⁶ Similarly here, Ahmed takes up the question of complaint protocols as a mechanism for "stopping and stalling" allegations in ways that protect institutional reputations while predicting reputational damage for people who lodge reports. She suggests "a complaint biography" might include not only the life cycle of the complaint itself, similar to Appadurai's social life of things, but also the way a complaint can alter life in a system designed to normalize sexual harassment.

If complaint protocols narrow the space for institutional accountability, bureaucratic procedures can rationalize stigma. In "Biographic Mediation and the

Formerly Incarcerated,” Michelle Jones explains how administrative practices animate stigma as a feature of decision-making for college admissions, housing, and employment of the formerly incarcerated.²⁷ Contrary to the fine print at the bottom of applications promising equal opportunity, conviction details are routinely converted into disqualifying data as a matter of “safety.” The idea of “safety” is cued to perceived ability to cause harm, born out by an earlier conviction. For Jones, stigma exemplifies biographic mediation because it mobilizes discrediting information from the past to render everyday decisions about who gets what and why. Her work joins a wave of recent scholarship reinterpreting Erving Goffman’s *Stigma* by addressing power dynamics in the solicited disclosure of criminal charges, conviction, and time served in prison (Tyler and Slater). Importantly, Jones calls attention to thousands of “carceral judges” who hold administrative positions and readjudicate the past in everyday encounters, casually extending punishment past the point of release from prison. In addition to mapping the extended consequences of prior convictions, Jones challenges allies to identify stigmatizing complicity in advocacy strategies that rely on hyperdisclosure (tell-all profiles) or nondisclosure (don’t ask, don’t tell) as a condition of rights for the formerly incarcerated.

Biographic mediation is not only a tool to control access or carve a narrow path to rights. As several essays argue, the stories of the most marginalized are also used to repair institutional reputations damaged by racism. In Rhondra Thomas’s essay “Call My Name,” she recovers historical information about enslaved and convicted laborers who built Clemson University, a land-grant university in South Carolina that was founded on a former plantation in 1889 by the plantation owner’s family. What superficially appears to be a gesture toward educational benevolence, forsaking the plantation economy, actually develops into a school for white men built by Black men. As part of a growing movement among scholars in the US and Europe investigating slavery and the university, Thomas traces the role of unpaid laborers in the university’s growth. She asks: what kind of biography can be written for minimally described workers in plantation accounting books and correspondence between Clemson administrators? Their value to the university was calculated as essential because the scale of the project was unthinkable to administrators without forced labor. But how to read biography in budget line items and bills for tools used by taken-for-granted labor? The method employed has consequences for analysis, but how can it be used? Because institutional interest in positive publicity shapes what details appear in memorials today, the mobilization of research for public memorials can be easily coopted in ordinary decisions about copy length and formatting. Based on years of reconstructive research, Thomas reimagines how memorials can expose rather than obscure involuntary labor by incorporating minimal details like age to denote cradle-to-grave work camps. She goes on to pose ethical questions about researcher responsibility to communities versus institutions, suggesting ways recovery work can move beyond reputational repair for the university to engage with descendants, reparations claims, and other forms of reckoning.

At this point, it should be clear that biographic mediation is not neutral, but a malleable technology deployed by government officials, university administrators, police, scholars, and activists, oriented toward different horizons of justice or damage control. In her essay “Guidelines for Squatting,” Mercy Romero investigates a creative redeployment of biographic mediation by housing activists who turned a critique of municipal practices into resources for community development. When the Concerned Citizens of North Camden were rejected for a community housing grant, they inhabited abandoned buildings and developed an elaborate counter-bureaucracy that forced city officials to recognize their right to housing and commit to making it livable. Romero explores the pamphlets that powered the protest alongside forms crafted to strengthen support between African American and Puerto Rican residents determined to fight disposability. Though this innovative response may have been prompted by a rejected grant application, the critique commented more broadly on the city’s investment in demolition as a path to corporate development and city revenue. The Concerned Citizens of North Camden managed to expose the speculative value of “blight” as a label forged through deliberate arson and decisions to demolish affordable housing.

Aly Wane’s interview, “Lives on the Line,” also considers how paperwork can be a gateway to analyzing the political and economic forces of displacement. For Wane, an undocumented human rights activist who is regularly asked to share his story in organizing spaces, churches, and universities, biographic mediation is the primary mode of political advocacy. In telling his own story, he can share how external perceptions mediate access to employment, mobility, housing, and education, and the ways blackness both obscures his immigrant status and exacerbates vulnerability to aggressive policing. For this issue, Wane reflects on status crimes—civil violations at the level of paperwork that have become criminalized²⁸—and racial profiling as mutually reinforcing justifications for mass deportation and mass incarceration. He also explains how preferred biographies have become a useful alibi for the state, articulating benevolence to deflect attention from intensified policing. Like Jones, he cautions against recruiting ideal subjects for narrow political victories when it participates in a broader apparatus of selection, incarceration, and deportation.²⁹

During our workshop, themes that initially appeared specific to political or historical context often broke through contained academic arguments to shed light on other contributions. That was the case between Aly Wane’s interview and Cristina Plamadeala’s essay on the recruitment of collaborators by the security state in Romania, which also addressed the intimate ways status and surveillance can reconstruct identity and relationships. In “The Securitate File as a Record of *Psuchegraphy*,” Plamadeala expands policing from those designated employees of the state to those recruited by the state to monitor neighbors and friends. She focuses on the vast apparatus used by Romanian security officials to probe for evidence of long-held desires, shame, intimate relationships, and habits of movement among targets, then using life analysis to cultivate fear and cooperation. In a

moving account mediated by manuals and forms, Plamadeala argues that the infrastructure for converting aversion into state loyalty frequently provoked collaborators to imagine alternative trajectories of life and new selves born out of isolation and abandonment. Intervening in relationships with what she calls *dossierveillance*, she suggests more broadly that the physical production of surveillance files sowed distrust, as one could not know whether a file had already been created and whether partners or friends were contributing to it. Noting how we tend to erroneously project the efficiency of the state onto its bureaucratic tasks, Plamadeala also describes noncooperation and resistance, as surveillance dossiers depended on disclosures that were not always forthcoming or accurate.

Surveillance and media surfaced in several essays as a call to action, encouraging us to think about how publicity expands policing beyond waged labor. In “Has someone taken your passport?,” Annie Fukushima charts the deceptively simple way that lay surveillance is activated in US campaigns against human trafficking. The signs of human trafficking are not easy to spot. To construct a proxy test for trafficking, US campaigns focus on who controls the passport. Billboards and pamphlets advertise the passport as a gateway to neighborly interrogation, authorizing surveillance, reporting, and police intervention for immigrants not in control of their travel documents. Fukushima’s analysis bridges insights from Wane’s interview and Plamadeala’s essay on collaborator recruitment in that she explains how American anti-trafficking campaigns strengthen civic policing of undocumented immigrants while reinforcing a narrow path to citizenship through disclosure that allows the US to play the role of rescuer. Not limited to state-advertised hotlines or NGO campaigns, Fukushima also offers a way to read survivor memoirs that reinforce campaign policy goals. Like Swadhin, she investigates how the survivor story is often used to strengthen carceral regimes and the racialized policing of immigrants.

Biographic mediation exposes the way positively stated programmatic goals can lead to policing effects. In her essay on neurodivergence in the workplace, Aimée Morrison explores how provisions for faculty accommodations of disability use elaborate forms of verification and stock stories to limit the availability of support. In “(Un)Reasonable, (Un)Necessary, and (In)Appropriate,” she reviews the vetting process for work accommodations at her university, which are provisions made for preferred communication and learning technology, longer timelines for work, and support for completion, according to the disability diagnosis. She juxtaposes competing demands to advertise the institution as a welcoming and neurodivergent space, while also enforcing ableist policies oriented toward specific models of faculty productivity. Morrison takes this conflict as an opportunity to thread a capacious review of literature through verification protocols for an accommodation she has not requested, but that she is entitled to based on her diagnosis of ADHD and autism. Noting her concerns about making a workplace request for support, she contrasts a public disability identity from a bureaucratic disability identity oriented toward medicalized accommodation. In doing so, she traces the distinction

between accommodation and access, or tolerated inclusion versus institutional transformation. Morrison's contrastive work brings us back to Ahmed's query about the function of bureaucratic protocols that claim to redress inequalities and harms that occur on campus. She argues that the biographic mediation of support, if studied closely as a process of identity construction for institutional management, tells a different story than the services advertised.

In a distinct but related vein, the relationship between publicized services and bureaucratic realities also shapes Kimberly McKee's essay on transnational adoption. She argues that widely consumed publicity and films surrounding adoptee reunions often contribute to the obfuscation of illegal adoption practices. In "The Consumption of Adoption and Adoptees in American Middlebrow Culture," McKee observes that even when forgery and predatory traffic in Korean children for US and European markets appear in adoptee narratives, the narrative arc minimizes the impact of agency deception. Rather than account for the deliberate suppression or alteration of biographic data that keeps adoptees from knowing basic details about families of origin, feel-good narratives justify unethical practices. Heroic reconstructions of the adoption process in mainstream movies emphasize rescue and improved life chances at the expense of institutional accountability. If we understand biographic mediation as a process that operates at the level of paperwork and publicity, this issue asks, how can we read across genres to understand the interactions between them? McKee reads memoirs, a film, YouTube videos, agency records, and adoptee convenings to trace the muted presence of the "adoptee kill-joy," who names commonplace violations in adoption practices at the risk of reaching a limited or hostile audience. McKee and other contributors usefully probe the connection between the limited circulation of life details (blocked in closed adoptions) and the mainstream publics seeking affirmative closure in stock stories of reunion.

Our final contributor was included after the workshop in Honolulu. Prompted by Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation hearings for a position on the Supreme Court of the United States, I asked Leigh Gilmore to share her analysis of the televised proceedings in light of the expectations for a different outcome strengthened by the #MeToo movement. In "Frames of Witness," Gilmore extends the framework she developed in *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* to analyze the fraught demands for personal disclosure in the #MeToo movement, a global reckoning with sexual violence that reverberates in local contexts. She analyzes the frames of witness that shaped the Kavanaugh hearings and the role of Christine Blasey Ford's testimony in it. Connecting the ethical mandate of #MeToo with the rising hope for Kavanaugh's accountability, she identifies the emergence of competing frames for "hearing" testimony. Gilmore argues that the spectacle of the hearing was designed to dismiss claims that gained credibility through #MeToo's demands for reckoning by restaging Anita Hill's testimony decades prior as the standard for expected rejection. Not only figural, but also structural complicity with organized attacks on Hill forged a familiar echo by reintroducing a Black

woman's public takedown as the standard for rejection of sexual assault testimony.

The development of this special issue brought multiple issues and projects into the room, inviting us to trace the connections between our interests, sharing vocabulary and hard-won insights. I cannot imagine a better process of collaboration. Because the entire workshop was conducted under a hurricane watch, carefully monitored by the editors and staff of the journal, we experienced a double dose of care from the discussion and attentiveness to physical safety. We also happily expanded our number when Genesis Be, who was visiting and displaced from a hotel on the coastline, joined our workshop. Her arrival was timely, as we discussed ways to reckon with racism symbolically enshrined in memorials to white supremacy. An artist and activist, Be's work on a referendum to redesign the Mississippi state flag provoked unprecedented conversations in the state, not only about who controls versions of the past but grappling with how institutional support for white supremacist claims enables racial terror today ("Confederate Pride"). We considered her feedback about the interaction between political symbols and the processes used to change or retain them, a fortunate bonus that enriched our workshop discussions.

All this to say, the annual convening that the journal facilitates for special issues made a critical difference to the essays gathered here. Inviting scholars and activists to think together about biographic mediation over several days shifted the register of impact from internal disciplinary debates to lived consequences and concept-building for solidarities to emerge across distinct institutional settings and practices.

Notes

1. Proposition 37 allocated fifty percent of proceeds to winners, with the remaining amount split between education and administration of lottery programs. A handful of high-yield winnings paired with a large number of low-yield winnings (i.e., \$1) recycled the majority of "winners" into new ticket purchases. The program did not prevent subsequent tax increases, but it did develop a new source of revenue for the state.
2. Popular games did not necessarily yield regular winners. For Mega Millions, a number-draw game, the perception of a large payout can increase the number of participants without actually producing a winner. In 2010 the lottery system was recalibrated to increase the value and number of winning tickets only if payouts to education were also increased, which required greater sales of lottery tickets.
3. "The Player Information you provide may be disclosed to various state and federal government agencies, including but not limited to: the State Controller's Office, Franchise Tax Board, Health and Welfare Agency, and the Internal Revenue Service" (*California Lottery Winner Claim Form*).
4. Cornelia Vismann makes this point about the media of law, that paperwork enacts what the law claims, often revealing the limited realization of principles at the moment

of adjudication. Therefore, the material documents that animate legal claims realize the limits and functions of law, while abstract descriptions aspirationally describe values.

5. See Hull, "Documents and Bureaucracy"; Latour; Gitelman; Kafka; Vismann.
6. See cover image.
7. The Highlander Research and Education Center has been a rich resource for grasping the action theories of activists involved in popular education. In 2019, the office was destroyed by a fire, which damaged historical documents and curricular materials, making it even more critical to acknowledge the methods of analysis practiced on the frontlines of social movements (Rosenberg).
8. On verification regimes mediated through paperwork that alters the logic of identification, see Robertson.
9. See Berry; Ralph; Rosenthal.
10. Stephanie Jones-Rogers has pivotally shifted awareness about the number of white women who owned slaves in the United States (40 percent in the 1850 and 1860 censuses). In *They Were Her Property*, she punctures the myth of marginal ownership by probing census data in tandem with the oral histories of former slaves who testified that white women were often given slaves, sold, or purchased them during key life events (birth, baptism, marriage, a spouse's death), altering the fates of those caught up in a gendered economic exchange.
11. In *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown makes a case for understanding neoliberalism as the steady conversion of life into a unit of account, tethered to financialization in the 1970s. However, a prehistory of this typical timeline for neoliberalism would account for the priming factors that experimented with human capital and accounting in slavery. See Rosenthal.
12. In *The Sense of Dissonance*, David Stark considers "search" the activity that converts data into other uses. In order to conduct a search, a media infrastructure for data intake, storage, and retrieval has to be in place, prompting organizations to shift from a flat logic of rationality oriented toward classification to a more contingent logic of search oriented toward possible uses in the future. But this too relies on a progressive narrative of technology that glosses over data experimentation in plantation accounting.
13. See Smith and Watson 3–10. Related to Schutz's account of stock stories, Smith and Watson also describe personal storytelling as a practice that "adopt[s] ready-made narrative templates to structure experiential history" (9). For the shift from genre to practice, see also Masschelein and Roach 170.
14. See Ransby.
15. In an updated account of policing inspired by *Policing the Crisis*, Camp and Heather-ton trace the legacy of broken windows policing in the 1990s (asymmetric punishment for minor infractions in racially concentrated neighborhoods) in police brutality, surveillance, mass incarceration, and gentrification today. See also Hall, et al.
16. For example, Kwate and Threadcraft argue that street-level policing is necropolitical even when it does not lead to death, because it renders Black neighborhoods into "death spaces," where the increased possibility of death stresses the body, turning the

- ongoing threat of arrest and abuse into a public health crisis (538).
17. In her now classic volume, Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag* explained how particular laws that incarcerated increasing numbers in California prompted activists to research court strategies, but instead their findings pivoted into system analysis accounting for the growth of prisons in the 1980s and 90s as a response to budget shortfalls and unemployment in the state. This analysis also revealed the basis for new or renewed solidarity work, as various issues converged in the site of the prison. Ferguson activists similarly developed a system and solidarity analysis, even as media narratives concentrated on the unrelenting spectacle of Black death.
 18. Taylor discusses the importance of Hands Up United linking mechanisms to demands, but also the danger of reforms that use the same mechanisms to narrow the scope of demands (409–10). For the initial demands made for investigation in August 2014, see <http://www.handsupunited.org/#demands-section>.
 19. See *Fant v. City of Ferguson*. In 2015, ArchCity Defenders brought a class action lawsuit against the city of Ferguson on behalf of eleven plaintiffs who were repeatedly jailed for failure to pay fines from traffic and other minor offenses.
 20. Policing for profit should be distinguished from the arguments about privatized prisons. These latter arguments galvanize support to close for-profit prisons, which are only a fraction of the total number of prisons, leaving the basic structure of punishment intact. And prisons are still a fraction of the total number of jails, which incarcerate far more people in the US. See C. Gilmore.
 21. See also Cobb; Lurie and Quandt. Mapping the circuit of debt production in Ferguson from a single fine, the authors follow the consequences of an unpaid \$50 fine that triggers a \$125 fee for failure to appear in court, followed by a \$50 fee to issue a new arrest warrant, and .56 cents per mile for the officer delivering the warrant. Once arrested, charges of \$30–\$60 accrue per night in jail until the next court session, which only convenes three days a month.
 22. Even the focus on profit misleads, as municipalities struggle to make headway with underfunded budgets and attempt to capitalize on racialized policing practices. This issue draws attention to inefficiencies and institutional debt in order to challenge the perception that profit and efficiency make these methods difficult to overturn.
 23. In an earlier issue of *Biography*, this question was raised about the interaction between Elizabeth Warren's public claims to Native American ancestry and her campaign to reform predatory lending. Lynn Mie Itagaki argues that Warren's reputation, sullied by deceptive claims of family origin, compromised demands for industry accountability in financial services. Since then, scholarship applications featuring her unverified claim to Cherokee ancestry further press the point of biographic mediation: how does verification operate in the distribution of resources earmarked for minority inclusion?
 24. See Levin; Alexander; Wang 49.
 25. She poses resignation as a question and a statement. In the act of resigning, feminists consider where their work happens—particularly if that work is publicly claimed yet bureaucratically blocked by the workplace.
 26. *On Being Included* describes how this process works from multiple angles, but insofar as paperwork is concerned, Ahmed marks the production of documents as a

manifestation of “institutional commitment” that is separate from a substantive commitment to institutional change. Hence, diversity statements and committees prevail as the currency of non-performative progress in universities, delaying fulfillment of demands that established diversity work in the first place (113–40).

27. The formerly incarcerated refers to anyone who has been released from a detention center, jail, or prison. The term addresses the experience of incarceration and its afterlife because records of arrest and/or conviction are often used to inhibit employment and educational opportunities, access to housing, and social relationships after release. In the United States over one thousand laws circumscribe the life movements, rights, and obligations of people who have had contact with the justice system. See Jones in this issue.
28. See Cacho.
29. See De Genova and Peutz.

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