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### Documental Fixity

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In his work on documentality (Buckland, 2014), Michael Buckland suggests that instead of studying documents for what they represent (“documentation”) it might be more fruitful to examine them for what they do (“documentality”). Unfortunately, within Library and Information Science (LIS) there has not been enough examination along these lines. It isn’t the intent of this article, however, to suggest that user studies are the only or even the preferred way to proceed in such a direction. Rather, here, we wish to look at documents as a genre function regarding “fixity.” Fixity as a property of documents has been noted by others: in the case of paper documents (Gitelman, 2014), scientific processes of information formation and translation between scientific recording devices (Latour, 1987), and as part of the very definition of documents by international organizations (Briet, 1951). Here we are interested in documentary fixity as a function of, and vehicle for, power and control.

We will suggest such by an overview of the documentary functions of both textual and natural objects for Portuguese exploration and colonial rule in Brazil, in relation to racial classifications during and after the colonial period into today, and by looking at documents as stabilizing devices in interpersonal interactions. The overall theme we would like to stress is how documents have the genre function of fixing meaning and so, for better or worse, preserving judgments, actions, and interactions over time and distance, and also how they can produce stability in uncertain social environments. This “fixing” of meaning, judgment, and action also means that documents are means of control in social power relations and as means of control upon nature.

### **I. The Discovery of Brazil**

In 1500, Portuguese sailors claimed to “discover” what would become parts of Brazil. Three foundational letters describing their discoveries tell us about the brief anchoring of the Portuguese fleet in Brazilian lands and it is through them that we want to start our discussion.

The first letter contains, among all the formality necessary for the documentary communication of the occasion, one of the first “scientific and informative” pieces about the Brazilian sky by a European, the letter from “Mestre João,” who at the time identified himself as a physicist and surgeon. Among the notes of Mestre João, one of them is very important, the description of the Southern Cross, which was one of the first times that this cross-shaped constellation was identified as such by a European.

This constellation, as we know, is essential for expeditions to the southern hemisphere, since both the four stars that form the cross and the fifth “nosy” or

intrusive star help navigators identify their location in the southern hemisphere of the world, information that was extremely valuable for the Portuguese and others who were “reading” the stars in order to trace their routes. The recognition and documentation of this constellation and its use in further explorations gave the European colonists an important means for discovering and colonizing the lands of South America. The importance of reading the stars and the development of the technologies and techniques for such has been well studied, and researchers like Leitão (2009) emphasize the importance of this knowledge to the contemporary formation of our modern societies. In our context, the nautical records, the navigational records, and in them the recognition of the Southern Cross as a constellation of stars, provided the means by which subsequent identities were allowed to appear and reappear as natural and social facts for Europeans: the identity of stars for the conceptual passage to constellations, the identity of constellations for the physical passage of colonists across the oceans, and the identity and literal mappings of the “new world” and its geography, peoples, and natural entities as wealth resources for European powers (which allowed the later appearance of fully developed nation states in Western Europe and the claim of there being a cohesive modern European culture). Like Briet’s photograph of stars in her *Qu’est-ce la documentation?* (Briet, 1951), the representation of the Southern Cross built on previous identities and it created new identities, which acted as indexical passages through which Western European social and national forms of wealth and property were empowered and Western European nation-states emerged and became powerful. “The Americas” and the histories told of their “discovery” and then their own national cultures were, and even continue to be, documentary indexes for, what Nietzsche later in his critique of European culture and morality called, “the will to power.” And, as is so often the case with military led conquests, to be empowered means that others had to be disempowered and exploited—for as long as possible—and then self-exploiting and colonizing as well.

The letter of Pêro Vaz de Caminha to Manuel I of Portugal in 1500 and the Report of the Anonymous Captain (*Relação do Piloto Anônimo*) (the third letter) are documents that present less strategic relations with the stars and point more to the scenario that was discovered upon arrival in what would become Brazil. In both letters we can perceive all the strangeness when peoples meet who do not understand one another. We can also perceive the look of censure that the Portuguese read upon the natives’ naked bodies. Through these types of documents, in terms of writing systems and in terms of the content and the use of such fixed-word documents that transcend oral speech, the particulars and the idea of the “new world” were transformed into ideational representations for the

long-term management and exploitation of the particular entities found in the new lands. Though the Caminha letter is detailed, lacking exaggeration, gentle and even loving in its descriptions of the people the Portuguese met, it is also paternal. The indigenous peoples are described, as so often in European depictions, as “innocent.” Such a term described both the natives’ generousness toward the Europeans, and for other explorers (such as Christopher Columbus) also their ease in being exploited, kidnapped, enslaved, and killed for wealth extraction. Descriptive anthropology in these early “explorations” was not being done for the sake of knowledge per se, but it was for the purpose of discovering and extracting material wealth, taking slaves, obtaining information for furthering these activities, and killing and subjugating these “innocents,” and, of course, preparing for doing this again with greater ease and profit the next time.

These and other letters and documents “discovered” Brazil, in the sense that they reported, described, counted, and recorded the results of the expeditions for others in the home countries of the first explorers and conquistadors. “Discovery,” here, is not just a momentary act of finding something, but is a set of documental activities that is meant to record what is found for further use. The specimens procured, as well as the written documents, were taken and made in order to be considered as records. These early explorers and conquistadors were, literally, “information seekers” and “information prospectors” in the meanest and most eager senses. As with Briet’s antelope (Briet, 1951), documents took organic, inorganic, and written forms.

There is a permanence that is meant by discovering something in the sense of setting it into being as a recorded document. A set of meanings is attributed to an entity, which, if not set in stone, at least are set in paper. It wasn’t that the night sky was just filled with stars that looked like a cross or other objects, and it wasn’t just that the native peoples were understood as curious oddities by the European colonists (as, for example, in Herodotus’s description of the people beyond the Nile in his much earlier *Histories*). Rather, the Portuguese, as the Spanish, and other European national explorers took their specimens and documented their figures in modes which could serve their aspirations and wants. They were fixed stars, if not totally fixed in the sky, then in the books that charted them and their movements. They were types of peoples and plants and animals, rather than particular ones with histories, cultures, societies, and desires of their own. And these *fixities* of particulars into universal reliabilities, the creation of “universal” and interchangeable resources to serve European knowledge, desires, tastes, markets, and institutions, were so that the “discoverers” could themselves now more easily *move and profit* from these now captured and fixed identities. The peoples and lands were documented so as to be fixed and reliable information for

economies and desires that existed and were imposed from Europe. In addition, not only as pragmatic, indexical documents for mobility, but as representational ones, long after these “discoveries,” throughout the Americas, Europeans and their descendants were describing these “Indians” within biblical and other philosophical anthropologies, racial mythologies, geographical and national imaginaries, and all sorts of convenient, self-serving, and spurious “explanations” that documented these peoples in terms very different than their own terms. The colonizers forcefully took samples of people, flora, and fauna back to Europe, as dead and living documents, placing them on exhibit and preserving them in popular and learned institutions, as tokens of types from distant places. And progressively, the conquered lands themselves became hosts for these “samples” of their own native cultures and peoples.

The documentary “libraries” built from these constructed identities existed not just on paper and in literal libraries, zoos, and botanical gardens, but were recorded in the mental storehouses of prejudgments and prejudices of the European conquerors and settlers and in the histories, languages, and scripts that the conquered people then had to know and pass onto their own children. Given this knowledge (both practical and theoretical, both indexical and representational), the particulars encountered were represented not just as knowledge, but as a particularly strong type of knowledge, that is, as documented truths, within management systems and socio-cultural machines of production and reproduction. By desire or will, existence or obliteration, by the hands of the invaders or their own hands, the entities were made to conform. For native peoples, they were given back their own self-images, their own identities, in the eyes of those who conquered them. As with the Roman Empire earlier, the colonizing knowledge was intended to be violently imposed, for it was meant to exist for a long time and to function across a great ocean, across different modes and cultures of being, and as a permanent source of wealth production for the conquerors. It takes not only material capital, but more importantly, symbolic and social capital, to hold an empire together over long distances and times. The conquered, even more than the conquerors, *had to believe and act on the “knowledge” imposed. Nature had to become knowledge and knowledge had to be naturalized.* The records had to achieve the status of not just being in an archive, but being a mental archive for technical and judgments, and of course, for faith.

## II. Racial Inscription

One of the most lasting inscriptional beliefs of the Portuguese and Spanish colonization in the South, and of the French and British colonization in the North,

of the Americas was, of course, that of race as indexed by skin color. And the reason for this had to do with the fundamental role that native peoples, and then predominantly Black African, slaves had for economic production and wealth in these areas.

Brazil was the last country in the Americas to formally abolish slavery in 1888. The slaves from Africa found themselves in foreign lands in the Americas, and from different tribes, and so they didn't have the ability to rebel and flee to forests of their native lands, as was the case with the Indigenous populations. For the nearly four hundred years of slavery in the Americas, Brazil was, by far, the largest importer of African slaves.

Unlike what would become the United States, Brazil was colonized largely by men, rather than families, leading to higher levels of interracial sexual relationships and, so, the mixing of races or "miscegenation." Later, Brazilian immigration policies during the 1930s favored European immigrants over Asian or African immigrants, toward a policy of "whitening" the mixed-race population (Telles, 2007).

Racism has a long history throughout the world, taking forms of family, ethnic, and national attributions and difference, and slavery too has a long history, ranging from various types of bondage of conquered peoples, strangers, and even family, to the bondage of captives in war (and at least in some North and South American indigenous tribes, according to early missionaries, the cannibalistic consumption of their slaves, as well). The cognition and indexing of skin color within racial identification and its further use in slavery and the commercial trading of slaves as commodities became the dominant form of European and colonial slavery in the Americas. The identification of slaves as "Black" or like terms more easily allowed for the management, confinement, and selling of slaves. Today, as we know, this index for race continues to afford the unequal distribution of goods and wealth, as well as various sadistic and nationalist impulses upon "people of color," and especially those who are or who have descended from darker skinned central Africans who were enslaved as part of the transatlantic slave trade.

Bowker and Star (1999) have shown how ridiculous empirical proofs for racial identity can be, such as the apartheid South African practice of testing to see if a comb can stand on end as a test for hair stiffness, taken as an essential quality for "Blackness." But the point of such "empirical" tests was never that of actually proving racial skin color or hair stiffness (one can't), but rather, the point was the putting into deployment of social and cultural prejudices through such means. Such "proofs," like the proofs of evidence in documents, are meant to hold the expressive powers of entities steady or fixed, to hold people, beings, and things in

productive places and in productive lines of assemblage, and in this case for purposes of unequal wealth distribution, social confinement, and wealth extraction for others who are not so classified, not so universalized, and who can move more freely in economic and political economies. Black slaves were the most “fixed” of human capital, and because of them, even poor, exploited, whites could see themselves as being “free,” could be proud in being more variable and movable, even while employed.

### III. Documents as Boundary Passageways

Present situations—events and encounters—bring with them not only present but historical affects, sometimes to such a degree that they charge the present with nearly unmanageable effects. In these moments, documentary forms may be useful in bringing order and introducing a stabilizing plane for action into the encounter by offering normative passageways for action, not at least by establishing grounds for trust and value. (Documents are often used for these reasons; recall Buckland’s (2014) discussion of passports as allowing foreigners to cross borders and act like citizens do in foreign lands.) Documents, like diplomas or passports, act as boundary passageways, bridges, that stabilize the identities of the possessors within fixed planes for future action. They “translate” subjectivity (or objectivity, as in the case of documents produced by technologies and techniques in natural science) onto domains and planes for action. As assurance against uncertainty, they can lead to belief, knowledge, and trust (though such may or may not necessarily involve truth or even justice).

For example, let us take an ordinary encounter on the street between two people, one of whom offers the other a Brazilian work card (the “*carteira de trabalho*,” which assures skill possession and past work reliability) as a token of not only economic, but moral certainty. Though only being a work card, it suggests that the bearer has the moral qualities of being knowledgeable, trustworthy, and fair. Both the bearer and those to whom the card is presented, are, as it were, “called” or interpolated (Althusser, 2001) to a domain of employment customs and the moral values these connote, even if the bearer of the card isn’t offering employment at that moment. It allows one or both of the people in this encounter to proceed in a normative manner, assured by the government document. The purpose of these and many other such documents is to assure smooth or smoother passage through complex or uncertain situations for the agents bearing them, in some publicly recognized manner.

Many performative (and in their own way, also representational) documents work in this way. Passports allow one to traverse a foreign country,

marriage certificates allow one to traverse the thorny lands of monogamy and encourage one to walk silently past the lake of marital tumult and committed indifference (cf. Madeleine de Scudéry's famous 17<sup>th</sup> century *Carte de tendre* in her novel *Clélie or a Roman History*), and college degrees are at least thought to cut a path through unemployment and poverty and to certify knowledge or skills. A guarantee for your furnace means that it will be repaired or replaced if it breaks down in a given period. As Luciana Duranti has shown, diplomatics was grounded in documents ("Diplomatics is the study of the *Wesen* and *Werden* of documentation..."; G. Cencetti; cited in Duranti, 1989) and it assured national and international trust among participating agents and nations (Duranti, 1989).

All texts are entranceways and exits for desire—one's own or others—but documents come with the backing of more certainty than other types of texts regarding their promise for actions and intentions, or their assurance that what they represent is authentic or is a true depiction. The degrees of strength for these assurances certainly depend on many factors, but all are tied to institutional and cultural powers. While contexts give meaning to texts, documents attempt to control contexts.

## Conclusion

We may see documents as a specialized genre form, more restrictive than ordinary texts in their range of interpretation and acting to stabilize meaning and affect. Particularly as used in uncertain or unstable social or cultural situations, documents are used in order to reduce doubt and so to increase certainty. Such reduction, however, comes at the cost of "fixing" time, interpretation, and the powers of particular beings and other entities. It may also involve typification and reification. This may be desirable for interests of control and for directing, generating, and sometimes capitalizing and reproducing powers, particularly in economies of production that depend upon deterministic and mechanistic reproduction. But it also can mean restriction and even enslavement in various ways and degrees. Much depends who holds the documents, their desires and powers, and what can be done with them, whether they are used for purposes of self-movement or for purposes of other's regulation, and if the documental function becomes purely reified through identification and representation. Examining how documents control human beings and other entities, or how they let them express or increase their own powers, is a fascinating area of documental studies. We end with suggesting that the investigation of documental "fixity" is still a rich area to explore.



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