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## Emergence: Documents in Crisis

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## Emergence: Documents in Crisis

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank the organizers of the 2021 annual meeting of the Document Academy for formulating such a productive conference theme, which I have stolen for the title of my essay.

## Emergence

This paper emerges from a misreading. The theme of the Document Academy's 2021 annual conference, which I take as my title, is Emergence: Documents in Crisis. I initially read the theme to be Emergency: Documents in Crisis. My misreading suggested the theme concerned documents in crisis and the idea of an emergency. The actual theme suggests something more interesting, that documents in crisis have some relationship with emergence. As I explain below, *emergence* and *emergency* are closely related words and ideas. What follows considers the relationship between emergence, emergency, and documents in crisis. The uses and etymologies of *emergence*, *emergency*, and *crisis* create a useful framework for theorizing documents. Indeed, the overlapping semantic associations of the words allow us to consider the idea that documents emerge in crisis. The semantic overlap also allows us to theorize how documents descend into crisis. My central contention is that theorizing documents as phenomena that emerge in crisis is useful. Also useful is the idea that without crisis, or the expectation of crisis, documents descend into crisis. Theorizing documents in crisis complements documentalist theories of documentary representation suggested by thinkers like Paul Otlet and Suzanne Briet, as well as newer conceptualizations of documentality as conceived by Michael Buckland and Maurizio Ferraris and documentarity as described by Ronald Day. What follows is an essay in the root sense of the word *essay*, a test, a trial, in this case, of the idea that considering how documents may emerge in crisis can usefully complement widely used theories of documents.

The linguistic context for my theorizing is provided initially by the Greek and Latin roots of the word *crisis*. *Crisis* concerns “decision,” “discrimination,” and “judgement” (Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “crisis”).<sup>1</sup> In the useful context provided by the conference theme, these etymologies facilitate the idea that documents evince facts during acts of judgement, decision, and discrimination or when there is a need to discriminate, make decisions, and/or pass judgements. The conference theme can also be read to mean documents emerge in “states of affairs in which a decisive change for the better or worse is imminent,” the more common contemporary meaning of *crisis*.

Definitions of *emergence* and *emergency* sustain a theoretical framework in which documents emerge in emergencies. *Emergence* and *emergency* share an etymological root. Both words meant “coming forth, issuing from concealment, obscurity, or confinement” until *emergency* emerged in the seventeenth century to suggest *emergency*'s modern synonymic relationship with *crisis*: the idea of “junctions” “arising,” especially states of things “urgently demanding immediate action.” Within a framework afforded by *emergence*, *emergency*, and *crisis*, we can

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<sup>1</sup> All definitions to follow are from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition, <https://www.oed.com>, accessed in early April 2021.

theorize that documents emerge in states of affairs that demand immediate action. Emergencies for documents, we might also conjecture, are states of affairs when they are not brought forth to facilitate acts of discrimination and judgement and thus disappear into concealment and obscurity, a state of affairs that is also likely to be a crisis for those that might benefit from using them.

Considering how documents may emerge at “junctions” that “arise” “demanding immediate action,” i.e. in crisis, enables us to extend Suzanne Briet’s iconic discussion of an antelope as a document by investigating the crises (in both senses of the term as I have been using it) that precipitated the need to discriminate gazelle from antelope and antelope from impala and wildebeest. As previous scholarship has suggested, Briet describes documentation “as a ‘cultural technique’ that addresses the needs of contemporary culture at large and, most importantly, the needs of individual cultures of scientific disciplines and scholarly production” (Day 2006, p. vii). Reviewing the imagined context Briet creates to fashion her arguments about the documentary status of an antelope reveals the various crises that formulate the antelope as a document, i.e. the various “decisions,” “discriminations,” and “judgements” that produce the antelope as a document. Admiring the “documentary fertility of a simple originary fact,” Briet (1951, 2006) imagines the following:

an antelope of a new kind has been encountered in Africa by an explorer who has succeeded in capturing an individual that is then brought back to Europe for our Botanical Garden [Jardin des Plantes]. A press release makes the event known by newspaper, by radio, and by newsreels. The discovery becomes the topic of an announcement at the Academy of Sciences. A professor of the Museum discusses it in his courses. The living animal is placed in a cage and cataloged (zoological garden). Once it is dead, it will be stuffed and preserved (in the Museum). It is loaned to an Exposition. It is played on a soundtrack at the cinema. Its voice is recorded on a disk. The first monograph serves to establish part of a treatise with plates, then a special encyclopedia (zoological), then a general encyclopedia. The works are cataloged in a library, after having been announced at publication (publisher catalogues and Bibliography of France...). The documents are recopied (drawings, watercolors, paintings, statues, photos, films, microfilms), then selected, analyzed, described, translated (documentary productions). The documents that relate to this event are the object of a scientific classifying

(fauna) and of an ideologic [*ideologique*] classifying (classification). Their ultimate conservation and utilization are determined by some general techniques and by methods that apply to all documents-methods that are studied in national associations and at international Congresses. (pp. 10-11)

The crises that generate the documentary status of “the antelope” in Briet’s description are manifold but largely asserted by the “cultural techniques” of Europeans and European “scientific” needs. The “explorer” (presumably European) captures what for him (presumably) is a “new” kind of “antelope.” The explorer has made this discrimination based on what is “new” in relation to his formulation of “antelope.” He has made a judgement. In addition, he has decided to bring this new antelope back to Europe. These actions, as Briet suggests, create a cascade of secondary documentation, which we can understand as a cascade of additional judgements and decisions, including those she describes as “scientific” and “ideological.” National and international congresses arbitrate the “techniques and methods” of documentation that apply to all documents.

Considering Briet’s classic assertions about the nature of documents within a context provided by the word *crisis* complements Briet’s theorization by suggesting that the antelope’s status as a document is facilitated by a series of discriminations, judgements, and decisions. It emphasizes how documentary status in Briet’s theorization is culturally specific, nation-centered, and arbitrated by the conception of “scientific” needs, perhaps in a way that even Briet, despite her inclusive thinking, did not fully recognize. The useful context provided by the conference theme and the etymology of *crisis* helps to complement Briet’s theory of a document by revealing “simple originary facts” to be complex and difficult to divest from the crises of the documentarian as those are perceived, judged, and responded to through actions.

Recognizing that documents may emerge in crisis allows us to extend Briet’s theory to consider the crises for the diversity of “simple originary facts” evinced by non-European documents that do not serve scientific ideologies and are not arbitrated by national/international documentary techniques and methods. A framework in which documents are understood to emerge through crisis complements Briet’s theory by clarifying that documentary acts have often been performed to serve hegemonic cultural and ideological ends. As historians and cultural critics have argued, Edward Said (1978) perhaps most famously, the documentary methods of hegemonic cultures have often perpetuated collective states of affairs in which decisive change is made imminent for alternate “originary facts,” the documents that evince them, and the non-state communities that arbitrate alternate documentary methods. While alternate forms of documentation are not

necessarily mutually exclusive, if documents are formulated in crises by acts of judgement and discernment, documentary methods will be formulated by those who usurp the authority to do the documentary work and, ordinarily, with the aim of serving ends that facilitate a change for the better from their perspective.

Complementing Briet's theory of documents with the idea that they emerge in crisis (i.e. through acts of judgement, decision, and discrimination) also helps make sense of the uproar in the US and international media caused by the idea of "alternative facts." Kellyanne Conway, an advisor to former president Donald Trump used the term in a January 2017 interview to suggest that there can be "alternate facts" of a situation. This idea is, in fact, not problematic. After all, we have facts that are out of date and misleading. At issue for many is the common assumption that facts constitute the truth of a situation, event, or actor. This was challenged by Conway, Trump, and his administration. But what is arguably more problematic is the disregard for previously established and communally agreed upon documentary procedures for generating evidence of facts. Considering documents through a critical lens provided by the word *crisis* we expand Briet's discussion of documents to acknowledge that facts, even scientific and "simple ordinary" facts, are formulated by decisive, discriminating documentary actions, as thinkers such as Ludwick Fleck (1979) and Bruno Latour (1986) have argued. Recognizing that facts are formulated by actions, as the Latin roots of the word *fact* and its early uses suggest, we extend Briet's thinking to reemphasize and redirect the theoretical stress she places on the importance of attending to and assessing documentary procedures. Conway suggests evidence of "simple ordinary facts" that never were. She does so, like Briet's fabled European explorer, by usurping the authority to create a document. As a primary document, her recorded statement provides the opportunity for a cascade of secondary documentation. Where Briet's European explorer serves the needs of European science with his documentary acts, Conway serves her own political ends. While we can distinguish between the ends pursued by Conway and Briet's explorer, the force of their documentary acts is similar, especially when their initial judgements and discriminations are reiterated to provide additional evidence of fabricated or assumed "ordinary facts." Considering how documents emerge in crisis helps to clarify the kinds of cultural, political, and even epistemological emergencies that documentary acts and processes can precipitate. Considering documents in crisis reemphasizes the need, as Briet suggests, for scrutiny of documentation's "cultural techniques."

While considering how documents may emerge in and produce "junctions" that "demand immediate action," i.e. that emerge in and can precipitate emergencies, we can also consider objects more commonly associated with Anglo-European conceptions of documents than antelope and television interviews. For example, we can consider the kinds of crises that gave rise to the "documentary fertility" of Shakespeare. We can understand his plays as representations of ideas,

as well as typographic objects that inform, as traditional formations of documentation by Paul Otlet, for example, would have us understand them. As Buckland (1997) has suggested, for Otlet, documents are “graphic and written records [that] are representations of ideas or of objects” but also “objects themselves” if one is “informed by observation of them” (p. 805). By “objects themselves,” Otlet means “natural objects, artifacts, objects bearing traces of human activity (such as archaeological finds), explanatory models, educational games, and works of art” (p. 805). We can complement Otlet’s conceptualization by considering the crisis (or crises) that lead to the documentary acts that generate the fecundity we call Shakespeare’s plays. What emergency necessitated so many judgements about what Shakespeare may have meant? What crisis demands a decision about whether to pay 9.98 million US dollars (“Shakespeare first folio,” 2020) for a particular copy of Shakespeare’s plays? By considering documents in crisis, we can assess how documentary status changes as new judgements are demanded by new circumstances.

The October 2020 sale of a copy of Shakespeare’s First Folio, for example, intimates how a particular document associated with Shakespeare emerged differently to decision makers at Mills College in Oakland California during a financial emergency that portended the college’s closure. Mills’ decision to sell the document suggests that it had emerged as a means of addressing the college’s financial shortcomings, an emergent state that was judged to be more valuable than its status as a document with “research value to students” (Lefebvre 2019). I add to the documentary fecundity associated with Shakespeare to advance my claim that the word *crisis* helps to theorize documents by complementing established theoretical frameworks, but also to emphasize again how documentary practice is difficult to divorce from the documentarian. I read about the decision of the Mills’ board to sell their copy of Shakespeare while catching up on hometown news (I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area), topics that interest me as a bibliophile, and causes I feel passionate about (the need for liberal arts education).

### **Documents in Crisis**

Considering documents as phenomena that emerge in crises complements documentarity as a philosophy of evidence (Day 2019) by providing an avenue for considering how documents emerge in emergencies that require discrimination, judgement, and decision. As Day (2019) describes, documentarity ultimately concerns “technologies of judgement” (“Introduction,” para 1). Considering documents as phenomena that emerge in crisis also helps to describe the diverse, labile powers of documents as they emerge to perform and permit certain kinds of actions in the crises of “a changing world” (Buckland 2014) and then fade from view. The ongoing global health crisis that began in 2020 is bringing forth various

kinds of “vaccine passports,” for example. These systems for providing representational evidence of vaccination against the virus that causes Covid-19 have emerged as what Ferraris (2014) would call “social objects” in the context of global crisis in a manner not entirely dissimilar from the emergence of modern passports in the context of the first World War and the 1918–1919 Spanish Flu pandemic (Kavalski & Smith 2020; League of Nations 1920). Ferraris would call the crisis, the environment in which these “social objects” are generated, documentality (Ferraris 2014, pp. 113; Ferraris 2013). They will exert power and facilitate acts of discrimination. In their diversity, these powers will resemble those exerted by the travel documents Michael Buckland describes in “Documentality Beyond Documents” (2014).

As I began to suggest above with my brief discussion of Briet, non-European documents, and Conway’s “alternate documentary procedures,” in addition to considering documents as phenomena that emerge in crisis, we can consider what might constitute documents in crisis, i.e. documents in states of affairs in which a decisive change is at hand. If we do, we arrive at a useful paradox that can also inform theories of documentarity, documentality, and documents as evidentiary representations. While documents can, in the terms I have been suggesting, be seen to emerge in crisis, a lack of crisis, i.e. times and situations that do not call for urgent decision, are likely to constitute an emergency for documents, a crisis in the sense that some important change is at hand. Theorizing how documents descend into crisis we can consider the idea that documents in crisis are those that are not urgently needed for making decisions, whose representations and service as evidence of facts are not utilized. The book not used to gain a sense of history, the accounting ledger no longer needed as evidence of a company’s financial health, the dog stone after the story of white settlers colonizing New Zealand is told less often (see McKenzie 1999) are all, arguably in crisis. They do not do what they once did. They function differently or simply cease to be social objects. Unused to discriminate and make decisions, there is less evidence of their usefulness when judgements need to be made. They are not conserved or copied. Their crisis is that eventually there will be little evidence of them as facts. Our crisis is that there will be less evidence of judgements, decisions, and discriminatory perspectives that do not serve contemporary authorities like science or attempts to usurp institutional authority through “alternate documentary procedures” like Conway’s.

Documentarity as a philosophy of evidence can be complemented by recognizing it to be also a philosophy of crisis in the twin sense of the term as I have been using it. Documentarity as Day uses the term focuses primarily on how being and beings are evinced through documentary (inscriptional) technologies of judgement, i.e. in crisis as I have been using the term. But considering documents in crisis allows us to extend documentarity to include considerations of what is lost



when acts of discrimination and judgement are not made to formulate or represent evidence. From this angle, documentarity abuts the moral choices of philological work as Jerome McGann (2012) has described it. The philologist, according to McGann, works with the knowledge that “value is not only beyond present conception, it is understood that it may never again acquire perceived value. ‘Never again’ is crucial. For the philologist, materials are preserved because their simple existence testifies that they once had value, though what that was we may not — may never — know” (para 15). Crisis here concerns ethical judgments and decisions about value when value may never be known. The preserved object emerges in and by means of crisis as a function of the philologist’s ethical discrimination when a document is in crisis, i.e. when it lacks a clear value or use, and otherwise might be lost.

Documentality as a concept that encompasses what documents do (Buckland 2014) and the environments that “generate” “social objects” (Ferraris 2014, 2013) can be extended to include the idea that crises can evince both environments and social objects, as well as the affordances of documents, i.e. the things that they can do. The strict boundary that Ferraris would draw between natural and social objects can be refigured conceptually as a shared space that, like a fence shared by neighbors, connects what he calls the social with “the natural.” Ferraris (2014) writes, “an artifact can offer its affordance even in the absence of minds (a table can shelter an animal), while documents cannot” (p. 114). This will be news to the many mites, small spiders, and other fauna that make a home, and sometimes a meal, of my books. The human mind and naturalized distinctions between “natural” and “social” that Ferraris assumes when categorizing documents and artifacts would seem to preclude documentality extending to other species. This is a problematic ethical and intellectual stance. It precludes the possibility of non-human documentality, contradicting a growing body of research that spans back at least as far as Jakob von Uexküll (1864 – 1944). Ethically, as when philologists choose to conserve and investigate documents while uncertain that their value will ever be known, the social objects of non-human creatures and how they function are arguably worthy of investigation and conservation for what they may offer non-humans and humans alike. Considering how documents may emerge and descend in crisis allows us to extend theories of documentality to include the intersections that constitute “natural” and “social” objects for human and non-human communities.

## **Conclusion**

To contemplate documents in crisis is not to deny the diversity of ways that documents exist ontologically and function epistemologically. Nor does it deny the force and power they exert performatively or as “social objects” constituted by

environments. But the theme of the 2021 annual meeting of the Document Academy provides a useful framework for expanding widely used theories of documentation. It grants the opportunity to theorize *how* documents emerge and descend as ontological and epistemological entities, representations as well as actors in performative practices that affirm, reaffirm, or rearticulate themselves and the status of entities and beings in systems and societies, both human and non-human. Considering documents in crisis complements representational theories of documents and documentarity as a philosophy of evidence by providing an avenue for considering how documents are brought forth in crisis as evidence of facts during acts of discrimination, judgement, and decision and the ways they descend into obscurity otherwise. Considering documents as phenomena that emerge in crisis and disappear without it foregrounds the import of attending to documentary ethics and helps to describe the diverse, labile powers of documents as they emerge as social objects to perform and permit certain kinds of actions in the crises of “a changing world” (Buckland 2014, p. 185) as experienced by living entities and then fade from view to perform and permit others, or simply vanish.

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