

June 2017

Editorial

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Recommended Citation

Gorichanaz, Tim (2017) "Editorial," *Proceedings from the Document Academy*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35492/docam/4/1/1>

Available at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/docam/vol4/iss1/1>

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*The Documents are weeping, fading,
fearing the worst.*¹

Academia happens, in large part, through publications. And along with so much else, academic publication is changing. Discussions of these changes tend to focus on the publishing model—issues such as open access and megajournals, for instance—but there’s also much to be said about content.

To this end, several scholars have discussed the shallowing of academic writing, the obsession with the instrumental value of research (as “deliverables” and “takeaways”) and measurement in terms of quantity rather than quality (for a recent account, see Berg & Seeber, 2016). Amidst this, we’re seeing the continued trend toward micro-specialization—in both the questions academia asks and the ways it tries to answer them—and concomitantly a growing disconnect between academic discourse and human life. The situation resembles a knotted net of motley threads held together by tension alone and suspended precariously over an infinite gulch, like the city Octavia imagined by Italo Calvino. If we wonder whether we should worry, Calvino (1974, p. 75) assures us: “Suspended over the abyss, the life of Octavia’s inhabitants is less uncertain than in other cities. They know the net will last only so long.”

*The Documents tell their stories
over and over, even when you’re asleep,*

Dangling thus, a few of us gathered after a panel at the ninth meeting of Conceptions of Library and Information Science,² asking, “If the field is brushing with new questions and ways of questioning, why aren’t we seeing new ways of publishing?”

Here at the *Proceedings*, we have the privilege of administering a publication that is rather unfettered. That being the case, we were able to publish in our previous issue ([volume 3, issue 2](#)) some “nontraditional” works from the 2016 Annual Meeting of the Document Academy. Imaginative layouts, audio and slide decks... But we could do more. Around this time I also became more

¹ All inset quotations are from Terence Winch’s (2014) poem “The Documents.”

² Incidentally the same conference where, 20 years earlier, the Document Academy *inceptit*.

interested in alternative ways of doing and disseminating research, and I started writing essays that might be classed as creative non-fiction. An idea, more conversations, and then a call for submissions.

*You could wrap yourself
in their giant pages.*

If it's our supposition that documents matter, then it seems to be worth exploring how documents manifest in human life—at the level of the lifeworld, our lived experience. This is not the norm in academia, which prefers its facts dead and dissected, and then strung back together in a word processor. To the extent that this stringing-together restores some semblance of life, it is in the way Thoreau observed: "Mere accumulators of facts... are like those plants growing in dark forests, which put forth only leaves instead of blossoms" (Thoreau, 1906, p. 18).

In this special issue, we sought to showcase without evisceration the complex roles that documents play in human life. To do so, we welcomed unconventional forms: essays, memoirs, short stories, poems, photos... We sought *poetic* engagement, in the broad sense of that term. We took inspiration from poetry such as Neruda's (1994) odes to common things and essays telling the stories of particular documents, such as "The Money" (Diaz, 2011). Observing that such work illuminates aspects of reality that get overlooked by traditional academic research, we wanted to bring a new richness into academia while bringing academic richness to new publics.

Such a call for submissions may be new in our field, but happily it builds on a longer tradition in other fields. This reaches back, perhaps, to Clifford and Marcus' (1986) groundbreaking *Writing Culture*, which problematized the act of writing in ethnography, helping us reconceptualize ethnography as fiction (*viz.* something made), learn more sophisticated ways to judge writing and better understand the relationship between the studier and the studied. In parallel fashion, we've seen the recognition that artistic practice can lead to knowledge—going back at least to Frayling (1993)—becoming manifest in arts-related research methods. And we're seeing renewed calls to bring research to broader publics: Watson (2016), for instance, argues for novel writing as a way of developing research in sociology, and she is presently putting together a new zine of sociological fiction.

*Take heart, they insist.
Resist your worst impulses. Fight on,
even against invincible power. Listen*

I'm of the opinion that we should stop telling stories what they mean, and instead let them speak for themselves. So let it suffice to say that in this issue you'll find meditations of various kinds on the doings of documents in people's lives—and even some documents themselves.

So read on, without further ado. I hope the power and importance of documents for the task of thinking, so needed today, will not go unfelt.

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