Vol. 2.1 (2014)
ISSN 2182-8830
‘Livro e Materialidade’
Abel Barros Baptista (org.)
Distributed and Conditional Documents: Conceptualizing Bibliographical Alterities

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Abstract
To conceptualize a future history of the book we have to recognize that our understanding of the bibliographical object of the past is challenged by the ontologically unbound, distributed, digital, and networked conditions of the present. As we draw on rich intellectual traditions, we must keep in view the need to let go of the object-centered approach that is at the heart of book history. My argument begins, therefore, with a few assertions. First, that we have much to learn from the scholarship on Old and New World contact that touches on bibliography, document studies, and book history for formulating a non-object centered conception of what a book is. Second, that the insights from these studies can be usefully combined with a theory of the “conditional” document to develop the model of the kinds of distributed artifacts we encounter on a daily basis in the networked conditions of current practices. Finally, I would suggest that this model provides a different conception of artifacts (books, documents, works of textual or graphic art), one in which reception is production and therefore all materiality is subject to performative engagement within varied, and specific, conditions of encounter. Keywords: Conditional Document; Bibliographic Alterity; Book History.

Rezumo
Para conceptualizarmos uma futura história do livro temos de reconhecer que a nossa compreensão do objeto bibliográfico do passado está posta em causa pelas condições ontologicamente ilimitadas, distribuídas, digitais e reticulares do presente. À medida que fazemos uso de tradições intelectuais ricas, devemos perceber a necessidade de abandonar a abordagem centrada no objeto que está no cerne da história do livro. O meu argumento começa, portanto, com algumas afirmações. Primeiro, que temos muito a aprender com a investigação acerca dos contactos entre o Velho e Novo Mundo naquilo que diz respeito à bibliografia, aos estudos documentais e à história do livro para a formulação de uma conceção de livro não objetocêntrica. Em segundo lugar, que as intuições desses estudos podem ser produtivamente combinadas com uma teoria do documento “condicional” para desenvolver um modelo dos tipos de artefactos distribuídos com que nos deparamos diariamente nas condições reticulares das práticas atuais. Por fim, gostaria de sugerir que este modelo oferece uma conceção diferente dos artefactos (livros, documentos, obras de arte gráfica ou textual), isto é, uma conceção em que a receção é produção e, portanto, em que toda a materialidade está sujeita a uma intervenção performativa dentro de condições variadas e específicas de encontro. Palavras-chave: Documento Condicional; Alteridade Bibliográfica; História do Livro.
To conceptualize a future history of the book we have to recognize that our understanding of the bibliographical object of the past is challenged by the ontologically unbound, distributed, digital, and networked conditions of the present. As we draw on rich intellectual traditions, we must keep in view the need to let go of the object-centered approach that is at the heart of book history. For this reason, this seems an apt moment to emphasize scholarship of books in the period of colonial expansion and cross-cultural encounter (particularly, though not exclusively, that of the 17th and 18th centuries). In part because of the character of the works they study, scholars working in this area put ideas of performative materialities into the context of networked environments as a basic framework for their analysis. We know that classic studies in bibliography have emphasized the understanding that textual artifacts are frequently constituted through complex processes and received through the parallax of varying cultural, social, or historical perspectives. Taken to their logical extension, such approaches suggest that cultural artifacts are constituted within cycles of circulation where lines between production and reception blur. But in book history, an object-centered approach persists, even, as we shall see, in revisionist models of the field. We have to shift outside its modern or western frames to grasp an alternative conception—in which a book is conceived as a distributed object, not a thing, but a set of intersecting events, material conditions, and activities. Books, documents, textual artifacts can no longer be thought of as autonomous objects that circulate in a context, but must be reconceptualized as event spaces within an ecology of changing conditions.

My argument begins, therefore, with a few assertions. First, that we have much to learn from the scholarship on Old and New World contact that touches on bibliography, document studies, and book history for formulating a non-object centered conception of what a book is. Why begin with scholarship focused on artifacts composed three or four hundred years ago? Because contact experiences unsettled every certainty that had been in place in the Renaissance, shaking the foundations of historical, religious, geographical, and philosophical knowledge across nearly every domain. The importance of these exchanges has registered in theoretical and critical writings with increasing frequency in recent decades. Second, that the insights from these studies can be usefully combined with a theory of the “conditional” document to develop the model of the kinds of distributed artifacts we encounter on a daily basis in the networked conditions of current practices. Finally, I would suggest that this model provides a different conception of artifacts (books, documents, works of textual or graphic art), one in which reception is production and therefore all materiality is subject to

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1 See McKenzie, 1986; McGann, 1983.
2 The phrase conditional document is mine.