

Good morning. I want to start today with the problem of Derrida. In archival studies, his piece, "Archive Fever," originally a lecture, causes some consternation. It contains influential concepts about archives: a focus on the future, the manipulations of memory, and control of history to cement authority. And yet, what Derrida describes the archive doing seems not only unclear but also very distant from the work that archivists do.¹

===== Outline

Many scholars have struggled to articulate Derrida's point and what it might teach us about how to build archives today.² For my part, I am just starting on a dissertation that will look at special collections at universities in the United States, which often contain both archives and libraries. So, with little theory on the purposes of libraries available to start with and the cloudiness of archival ideas, generally, I wanted to look to another writer for some guidance on how to think about what collections do and what they are for. Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentinian writer born in 1899, makes constant references to books in his poetry, essays, and short stories. He often mentions the libraries, as well. Today, I will show, briefly, how his ideas about libraries help us to understand their meaning, particularly as it concerns the various collections his own work that have ended up in research libraries.

===== 2:00 - Librarian

Borges often described his early education as simply getting free rein in his father's library.³ A voracious reader, he began to write poetry in his early twenties and then edited literary magazines, too. In 1938, however, he became a clerk at a municipal library. During his years there, much of the time was spent in the basement, reading and writing for himself after finishing a bit of cataloging. When Peron chased him out of that job over some criticism of the government, Borges committed himself to being a writer and lecturer. In 1955, a new government appointed the now famous, almost completely blind, writer to

1 Kate Orazem, "Fever Dreams," <https://www.laacollective.org/work/fever-dreams>. She outlines how Derrida's behavior highlights a very different take on archives. And how focusing on theory about these issues is a bit beside the point.
2 e. g. Verne Harris, "Insisting Derrida: Cixous, Deconstruction, and the Work of the Archive," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 1–19. He declares from all this that the work of the archive is justice.
3 Jorge Luis Borges, "A Writer's Destiny," *The Iowa Review* 8, no. 3 (1977): 1–12, 1.

be the head of the Argentine national library. Borges described the post in a lecture he gave in 1977 as the honor that made him happiest in his life. As he said at that time, "I had always imagined Paradise as a kind of library."⁴ He would continue to write, travel, teach at universities, and head the library until resigning when Peron returned from exile in 1973.

===== ↓ Stories

Many libraries around the world have his words equating themselves with paradise etched in stone. And yet, while the libraries in Borges' writing do many things, they are rarely perfect. In an essay on the total library, he describes the dizzying shelves full of chaos in an inhuman information machine that would eliminate intelligence.⁵ Books hold all history and therefore our entire past, he writes in another essay, so the simplest way to control cultural memory is simply to destroy the libraries.⁶ Leaders find little value in them, other than the ease with which libraries allow the shames, and glories, of the past to be erased.⁷ Marauders, too, find libraries convenient for ransacking and destroying their victims' culture.⁸ For readers, though, Borges considers their personal memories of the books they have enjoyed as a sort of private library of remembrance that they can share with others. So, we can imagine libraries being mental storehouses.⁹ His short stories mention versions of the universal library, among his descriptions of fictional medieval tomes and Classical scrolls, collections with all the possible variations of text held in labyrinthine stacks.¹⁰ Even his National Library takes on aspects of the unending, fantastical maze in Borges' stories, full of every kind of information. As he writes in "The Book of Sand," for example, "Before my retirement, I had worked in the National Library, which

4 Jorge Luis Borges, "Blindness," in *Selected Non-Fictions* (New York: Viking, 1999). 475.

5 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Total Library," in *Selected Non-Fictions* (New York: Viking, 1999). 216.

6 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Wall and the Books," in *Selected Non-Fictions* (New York: Viking, 1999). 345-46.

7 Jorge Luis Borges, "On the Cult of Books," in *Selected Non-Fictions* (New York: Viking, 1999). 348; Jorge Luis Borges, "The Wall and the Books," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James East Irby, New Directions Paperbook (New York, New York: New Directions, 2007), 188.

8 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Theologians," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking, 1998). 201; Jorge Luis Borges, "Three Versions of Judas," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking, 1998). 163.

9 Jorge Luis Borges, "Prologue to a Personal Collection," in *Selected Non-Fictions* (New York: Viking, 1999). 513.

10 Jorge Luis Borges, "A Note on (toward) Bernard Shaw," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James East Irby, New Directions Paperbook (New York, New York: New Directions, 2007), 213.

contained nine hundred thousand books; I knew that to the right of the lobby a curving staircase descended into the shadows of the basement, where the maps and periodicals are kept."¹¹ All of these libraries offer us many possible interpretations. Borges is often at his most political, certainly his most philosophical, in his metaphysical portrayals of uncertain reality.¹² So, in his descriptions of confusing, fragile, and excessive libraries,¹³ I am looking for evidence of what he thinks they are for, to get at some deeper ideas about how actual libraries relate to political power.

===== 6:00 - Library?

Keeping in mind Borges' warning that, "There is no intellectual exercise that is not ultimately pointless,"¹⁴ I want to start with his one story that is focused entirely on a library.¹⁵ Originally appearing in 1941, in *The Garden of Forking Paths*, "The Library of Babel" describes an unknown, perhaps infinite, number of hexagonal cells, each containing five shelves on four walls and a librarian. The thirty-two books on every shelf have four hundred ten pages of completely random letters and punctuation in every possible combination. All the books ever written, in all languages, are contained in the dark warren of low-ceilinged rooms, but many of the pages are incomprehensible ciphers. The books are unique, but the library has so many variations that differences of one letter or one comma can also be found there, meaning that we do not have to worry about the preservation of each single text. The librarians sleep standing up, and there are no pleasures for them. "Man, the imperfect librarian, may be the work of chance or of malevolent demiurges; the universe with its elegant appointments--its bookshelves, its enigmatic books, ... --can only be the handiwork of a god."¹⁶ The men, and there are

11 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Book of Sand," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking, 1998). 483. See also Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking, 1998). 70. "Bioy and I paid a visit to the National Library, where we pored in vain through atlases, catalogs, the yearly indices published by geographical societies, the memoirs of travelers and historians--no one had ever seen Uqbar."

12 Hernán Díaz, *Borges, Between History and Eternity* (London ; Continuum, 2012). 70.

13 Justin Pack, "Too Many Books on the Dance Floor (2015): Borges, Arendt, and Ortega y Gasset on the Onslaught of Information," *The International Journal of the Book* 14, no. 1 (2015): 23.

14 Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," in *Selected Non-Fictions* (New York: Viking, 1999). 94.

15 Cynthia Gabbay, "Worlds of Libraries: Metafictional Works by Arlt, Borges, Bermiani, and De Santis," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 43, no. 2 (2016): 246.

16 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Viking, 1998), 113.

only men, often fall victim to despair and commit suicide by throwing themselves down the ventilation shafts that connect the levels.¹⁷ Others roam the shelves looking for catalogs or truth or omniscience, or else destroying the books they do not understand. This timeless, immense universe does not contain an infinite number of books, but that knowledge only tricks people into thinking that they can understand it. Or describe it. But the library is really just too big and confusing for the human mind. The only possible understanding comes in recognizing the patterns of repetition that can be found exploring the shelves of the endless chambers over the course of centuries.

===== ↓ Knowledge

With such an infernal vision, it is clear that Borges does not think that the characteristics of the all-encompassing library are virtues.¹⁸ But what is going on here? In the preface to his *Order of Things*, Michel Foucault starts with a passage from Borges describing the division of types of animals in a Chinese encyclopedia.¹⁹ These are so different from what Foucault expected that it causes him to rethink how information is organized. He then goes on to write the book about the ways that epistemic models shape the possibilities of what we can know. What I want to suggest today is that Borges intends to challenge our ways of knowing. Libraries, like encyclopedias, do not just express the typical organization of information but reflect the ways that we understand the world in seeing relationships between things. Only certain types of knowledge can be imagined, but Borges suggests that other cultures see things differently. Readers would do well to be aware of the limits on their knowledge.

===== 10:00 - Cataloging Collections

On the other hand, these libraries are not just prone to being destroyed, but they are just as likely to "confuse everything like a delirious god,"²⁰ as they are to provide any information.²¹ While a library can give joy and comfort to a child, especially in retrospect, it can also be a gloomy basement full of

17 Borges, "Library of Babel," 118.

18 Borges, "Total Library," 214.

19 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences.*, World of Man (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971). xv.

20 Borges, "Total Library," 216.

21 Jacob Howland, "Borges's Mirror," *The New Criterion* 38, no. 2 (2019): 15.

disappointment and failure, or a maze of incomprehensible facts and riddles. Knowledge, in such depictions, has limits. In fact, the search for knowledge can be its own problem in that the idea that there are definable limits to the world gives us confidence that we can know it, but the effort to do that truly is beyond us. This might mean that faith gives us more certainty than the pursuit of facts. But I think that Borges is more focused on the point that the modern mind is misled and let down by institutions such as libraries, education, and science. Certainly the librarians in his stories would find their work unsatisfying, in that Borges shows them unable to protect the books, catalog the collections, or even master the information they read. As in the "Library of Babel" they would most likely fall prey to hopelessness, destructive rage, or religious hope.

===== ↓ Borges Collections

None of this should keep us from building or using actual libraries, however. The University of Virginia acquired a large collection of Borges material in 1977, mostly early editions of his publications, started with a purchase from a fellow poet from the early days in Buenos Aires. Borges left his papers to his National Library of Argentina but also helped the University of Texas put together its collection when he taught there toward the end of his life. One of the early translators of Borges in the United States also put together a collection of his own, which he donated to his workplace, Michigan State University. And finally, the University of Pittsburgh has established a Borges center, with its own small collection of manuscripts. All of these are in support of academic research, something Borges often disparaged, even when himself was teaching at prominent universities. Yet his actions show support for such efforts, concluding his writing career with the collection and preservation of his work through "the labors of a fellow librarian," as he told the cataloger at Virginia. These collections have been created to mark that the writer has ended his career, so that his works no longer serve his profit or our enjoyment, but help to move us onto a new stage, to define the writer, Borges, making him a new field of knowledge. This is something different from the fictional Borges we meet in many of his works.

===== 14:00 - Libraries and Culture

Borges believed that classifications were arbitrary,²² and his stories show repeatedly that he thought the cultural record to be uncertain, something to be played with in his own stories of mystical texts and fictional authors. This makes libraries contested ground, subject to manipulation. I have already mentioned how some rulers destroy the historical record to control perceptions. They also build collections, just like academics and Borges himself have made collections to preserve. The world of the library, however, has its limitations. Reality is something administered, not designed.²³ So, the archive does not dictate the facts of history, so much as define how we understand the past. Borges urges us to question the reality we are given, to see power in its working. Still, it is important to note that his libraries rarely have any readers. The users are librarians, or Borges the librarian, working as cogs in in the whole affair, rather than as subjects or leaders, or even readers.

===== ↓ Legacies

So, is there any theory in all of this? Or anything that can help me understand special collections? I think that Borges sees people enmeshed in their culture creating libraries that further ensnare them. Systems dictate what systems can grow out of them. Even what systems can be imagined. This means, though, that order exists even if we cannot understand it.²⁴ When we create libraries, their meaning and purpose escape our expectations. Derrida's archons may work to control information and understanding, but they themselves are trapped in the stacks, sick with archive fever.²⁵ Borges plays with reality to understand better how collections work and to master that meaning as well as possible. The trick is to see what we do to libraries and what they do to us.

===== 15:00 - Conclusion

22 John Pedro Schwartz, "Reading and Writing 'a Destiempo': The Figure of the Museum in Borges," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* (Liverpool : Liverpool University Press : 1996) 92, no. 3 (2015): 310.

23 Diaz, *Borges*, 45.

24 Diaz, *Borges*, 114.

25 Geoffrey Bennington, "Derrida's Archive," *Theory, Culture & Society* 31, no. 7–8 (December 1, 2014): 112.