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Books and Imaginary Being(s): The Monstrosity of Library Classifications

Melissa Adler

Western University, Canada, madler7@uwo.ca

Greg Nightingale

Western University, Canada, gnightin@uwo.ca

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Books and Imaginary Being(s): The Monstrosity of Library Classifications

Cover Page Footnote

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Remember first to possess his books; for without them he's but a sot,
as I am.

—Caliban

My late loss may perhaps have reached you by this time, I mean the loss of my mother's house by fire, and in it, of every paper I had in the world, and almost every book. On a reasonable estimate I calculate the cost of the books burned to have been £200. sterling. Would to god it had been the money; then had it never cost me a sigh! ... These are gone, and '*like the baseless fabric of a vision, Leave not a trace behind.*'

—Thomas Jefferson to John Page, 21

February, 1770

At the age of twenty-seven, just six years before he penned the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson reported to his friend and confidant John Page that his mother's house—his childhood home at Shadwell—had gone up in flames, and with it, all of his books and family papers. For a man who arguably valued books and history more than any person of his era, the loss was devastating. In his letter to Page, Jefferson quoted the *Tempest*, and compared his experience of loss with Prospero's passions.¹ To him, the memory contained within the books and papers had vanished like a mostly forgotten dream. And like Prospero, his books had been his "dukedom enough," more important than the temples and pageantry of aristocratic life.

Jefferson immediately began assembling a new library and corresponding with friends and colleagues about the best books. He sent Robert Skipwith a list of books that he believed were essential to a man's library. The list is revealing, particularly because it was written before Jefferson was heavily involved in politics, and just six months after the Shadwell fire:

¹ The lines from the *Tempest* (Shakespeare, 1997) appear toward the end of the play, when Prospero appears to have gone mad. After this scene he resolves to punish Caliban for plotting to kill him. He addresses Ferdinand:

You do look, my son, in a mov'd sort,
As if you were dismay'd; be cheerful, sir.
Our revels now are ended. These our actors
(As I foretold you) were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air,
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded
Leave not a rack behind.

Considering history as a moral exercise, her lessons would be too unfrequent if confined to real life. Of those recorded by historians few incidents have been attended with such circumstances as to excite in any high degree this sympathetic emotion of virtue. We are therefore wisely framed to be as warmly interested for a fictitious as for a real personage. The spacious field of imagination is thus laid open to our use, and lessons may be formed to illustrate and carry home to the mind every moral rule of life. Thus a lively and lasting sense of filial duty is more effectually impressed on the mind of a son or daughter by reading *King Lear*, than by all the dry volumes of ethics and divinity that ever were written (Jefferson, 1950, 76).

Again, Shakespeare. Our focus here, however, is on monsters and the imagination. Jefferson's reference to *The Tempest* above is even more telling than it might first appear, particularly when we understand how Prospero's own literacy practices were so crucial to the entire plot of the play, and how they stood in direct contrast to Caliban's education. We might think of Jefferson as a Prospero figure, and consider the ways that his own theories about literacy and books are tied to his rationalization of slavery and genocide. Jefferson's Caliban was anyone he regarded as a savage, incapable of self-government, and destined for a life of servitude, but also someone that Jefferson depended upon. As Sylvia Wynter (2003) writes, "In the plot of *The Tempest*, the central opposition is represented as being between Prospero and Caliban; that is, between Higher Reason as expressed in the former, and irrational, sensual nature as embodied in the latter" (p. 289).² Jefferson imitates Prospero, especially in his implementation of a "master code of rational nature/irrational nature, together with the new 'idea of order'" (Wynter, 2003, p. 289).³ Whether it was intended or not, these structures enacted and maintained divisions between the rational and the irrational, they upheld and were upheld by the belief that the politically rational man commanded "mastery over their own sensory, irrational nature—and, as well, of all those Human Other categories who," like Shakespeare's Caliban, remained enslaved to his (Wynter, 2003, p. 290). Given what we know about Jefferson's passion for books and his influence far beyond his own personal library, his identification with Prospero provides us with insights into how monstrous knowledge and knowledge about monsters have been codified in library practice for centuries.

On August 24, 1814 another library went up in flames. This time it was the Library of Congress, the formation of which Jefferson had intimately been involved with. Congress passed a bill approving the library in 1800, while he was Vice

² Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003), 289.

³ *Ibid.*

President of the United States, and the books arrived while he was President. The library burned in the War of 1812, and at the time Jefferson was residing at Monticello with his collection of over six thousand books. Facing inescapable debt, he proposed that Congress purchase his collection to replace the destroyed volumes, which they did, after much debate. Jefferson viewed the act of submitting his collection to the U.S. Congress as a means to inscribe his legacy and political agenda into the intellectual and cultural realm of the nation, and the method for organizing this collection was integral to its cohesion and value. As Kevin J. Hayes (2008) suggests, “In this respect, his careful library organization was more important than the individual books it contained.... Jefferson saw the sale of his highly organized library of Congress as an opportunity to determine how the new national library codified information” (p. 551). The establishment of the U.S.’s first federal cultural institution was instrumental in laying the groundwork for its global knowledge organization systems.

Jefferson modeled his system on Francis Bacon’s division of knowledge into three faculties. Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning* outlines a research agenda of topics which he grouped in the categories of Memory, Reason, and Imagination, grounded in the idea that the faculties of the mind are what operate on these areas of study.⁴ These faculties are translated into categories for knowledge in Jefferson’s catalogue: Memory is what is known—facts, *History*. Reason is *Philosophy* or science, i.e., the advancement of knowledge. And imagination is *Fine Arts* and literature. Hayes (2008) observes that, “Any library patron browsing the stacks in American history who notices that the volumes are generally arranged from North to South can see the books through Jefferson’s eyes” (p. 563). This north-south arrangement appears not only in the American history section (Jefferson’s Chapter 4), but also in Geography of America (Chapter 29), which is where Jefferson classed nearly every text on Indigenous peoples, even if they resided in North America. Here is where we find the books that contain Caliban figures, indigeneity, and monsters of the Americas, as described by European explorers. Scholars have concluded that 18th century archaeological and ethnographic studies of Indigenous peoples in the Americas were knowledge-gathering projects that aimed to transform a past into opportunity for expansion and land acquisition. They were also meant to serve as evidence that Indigenous peoples were primitive savages, “thus paving the way for the justification of future policies of removal” (Rivett 673). This was an ongoing project on land speculation, and classification was one of the mechanisms used to reconcile the competing claims to the land. As Nord and Campbell (2017) have observed, documentation and classification have been

⁴ Diderot & D’Alembert had followed this arrangement in their *Encyclopedie*, and it appears that this was the model that Jefferson used most directly for his book classification. It should be noted that the *Encyclopedie* has a significant section on deviations of nature, which includes monsters.

instrumental to settler colonialism and cultural genocide. Jefferson's book catalogue not only mirrored existing discourses, it was one of many documentary practices that classed Indigenous peoples as ethnographic subjects—as Others of land that is not (yet) American, and outside of American history. The Library of Congress began to replace the Jeffersonian system with its current classification divided into academic disciplines around 1900. Today, Anthropology, maps, and Geography all reside together in the G section, retaining an association between scientific studies of peoples, geography, and foreign lands in ways that resemble Jefferson's plan. At the same time, the books on "Indians of North America" and voyages and travel to the Americas are placed in E, the section designated for American history. At first glance, this seems to indicate an assertion that Indigenous people do have histories and are no longer viewed as ethnographic subjects—that they belong in the history of the Americas. Although the books have been removed from geography and anthropology, however, they are displaced in another significant way. As Webster and Doyle have explained in detail, books on Indigenous peoples are classed in pre-colonial times, before and outside of the United States or North American present. In a 1971 response to recommendations for revising the classification on this basis, Eugene Frosio, Principal Subject Cataloger at the Library of Congress wrote:

It is quite clear from the tables themselves that the intention of the creators of the classification was to treat the modern Indians as remnants of a vast group of peoples who once populated the entire New World long before the arrival of Europeans. This conceptualization of the Indians is still valid today, it seems to us (129).

On the shelves this means that books about Indigenous peoples are spatially separated from books about people in the U.S. and Canada. And intellectually they are a certain kind of historical subject—seemingly not a subject whose history is continually in-the-making. This structure supports the ongoing perception of Indigenous peoples as being from another time, of not belonging to a place. We suggest that is a legacy of that act of pulling books from Geography, where Indigenous peoples were regarded as scientific objects. Placing them in a pre-colonial history is another form of removal and displacement, and this order is affirmed and solidified each time they a volume is added to this section. This is one of the ways that separateness becomes systemic without our noticing.

Jorge Luis Borges was another extraordinary man who happened to be the director of Argentina's national library. Indeed, the national libraries cross in particular ways, and if we begin by finding Borges' works in the Library of Congress catalogue, we begin to see Jefferson's mind at work with results that mirror Borges's nightmarish narrations of infinite and labyrinth libraries. Borges's

Book of Imaginary Beings is a strange encyclopedic volume about mythical creatures and monsters. Although nearly every work of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction written by Borges is classed in literature—the P section of the Library of Congress, the *Book of Imaginary Beings* is in Folklore, with Geography—specifically, GR 825, defined as “Folklore—By Subject—Nature—Animals, plants, minerals—Mythical animals. Monsters.” It seems that Jefferson’s Calibans are still lurking in the Geography section.

The point we want to make is that the classification creates monsters, but not just by naming and classing creatures that deviate from nature. We suggest that the classificatory acts that distinguish natural from unnatural bodies, or that dehumanize any human, or that cast Others to the bottom of the row, the underground, the margins, the Geography section, are monstrous acts. As a universal classification is something that is meant to classify all knowledge, and as libraries like the Library of Congress draw precisely these types of lines, we view universal classifications as monstrous products of the imagination. Embedded in the order are the classifier’s repressed ideas, motives, fears, and desires. One of the aims of classification is to give order based on reason, both Jefferson and Borges, in very different ways, show us how a classification is based on imagination as much as it is based on reason, and that the systems that order knowledge are expressions of repressed desires and anxious attachments and fictions as much as or more than they are based in reason and natural order. Putting Jefferson and Borges into dialogue with one another is a terrific experiment in thought. It turns out that they have a great deal in common, even if they are wildly different librarians.

In Borges’s short story “The Book of Sand,” an unnamed narrator—perhaps a fictional version of Borges himself—trades “Wyclif’s black-letter Bible” to an unnamed traveling bookseller for a mysterious, “literally infinite” book of unknown origin, in an unknown script. Every time the book is opened, it displays two new pages, with random contents, random page numbers, and the occasional unique illustration (Borges, 2007, p. 92). No page, once seen, is ever seen again. It is impossible to open the book to the first or last page. “[The] book was called the Book of Sand because neither sand nor this book has a beginning or an end” (Borges, 2007, p. 91). The narrator, compelled to own the Book, becomes obsessed with it before ultimately deciding to rid himself of it by hiding it on the shelves of Argentina’s National Library, which Borges had directed for eighteen years.

Reading Borges, like reading the “Book of Sand,” like reading Jefferson’s 18,000 letters and multitudes of personal and public documents and catalogues, is exhausting, confusing, bewildering. Passages are re-quoted, paraphrased, quoted in their paraphrasing. Ideas are refined, altered, revisited, posed in their original forms. And then there are the proliferations: new editions, alternate translations, collections. Add to that the secondary literature: scholarly works with their own

paraphrases or translations, dizzying amounts of references, re-references, self-references. And then there's something like *Other Inquisitions 1937–1952*, where Borges reuses the same passages in adjacent essays, sometimes in the *same* essay (e.g., “New Refutation of Time”). The world of Borges, the ideal reader, reflects all ideas, all books, all people. Borges incorporated all authors who came before him; all authors after him must incorporate him and therefore all others. To trace just one “person” through his works—Hamlet, Hawthorne, Heraclitus, Hitler, Hume—is to trace the past, present, future of all people, of all our thoughts, or all the books that we will ever imagine, let alone write. Balderston (2018), citing “Kafka and his Precursors”, calls this Borges’s “dialogue of the dead” (p. 31).⁵

Borges’s writings seem to bear out the idea that cataloguing something imaginary brings it into contact with our perceived world, whatever it may be, though that world is also already based on its own fictions. Something imagined and catalogued therefore becomes both more and less “real” at the same time, as does “reality” in turn. *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, which we might regard as a catalogue of fantastical creatures throughout the history of literature, is an example of this process at work. Borges and Guerrero recognize this in their foreword to the 1967 edition: “The title of this book would justify the inclusion of Prince Hamlet, the point, the line, the plane, the hypercube, all generic nouns, and, perhaps, each one of us and the divinity as well” (xv). Is the *Book* a work of fiction, non-fiction, or both? Is a catalogue of fictions actually a work of non-fiction? What about when some of the sources aren’t given, can’t be determined, or were perhaps invented, as in this case? And is it any wonder that it seems misplaced, hidden among the vast universe of books, by the classificatory system created by the Library of Congress?

At least twice in his writings, Borges ridicules one of the most famous attempts at such a system—that of l’Institut international de bibliographie, or the Brussels Institute, founded by Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine in 1895 (see Day, 2019; Rayward 1994). In “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins”, after describing “the arbitrariness” of Wilkins’s system, in which “the letters of the words to indicate divisions and subdivisions”, and the incongruously random divisions of subjects in “a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*” attributed to an “unknown (or apocryphal) Chinese encyclopedist”, Borges (1964) writes:

⁵ Balderston continues: “And of course this also forces us to reread his own work, in which two early prose texts are strongly influenced by Kafka. I am referring to the ‘Parábolas’ (even the title invokes Kafka), ‘La lucha’ and ‘Liberación,’ published originally in the magazine *Gran Guignol* in Seville in February 1920 and collected in *Textos recobrados 1919–1929*”. Similarly, Balderston forces us to reread Borges and his influences. When studying Borges, there is no end to the rereading, a fate to which we have now condemned you. In “Liberación”, “a chained prisoner is linked to a hundred other chained prisoners and muses on the ‘order of things’ that ties him to others who are the same, yet he feels different” (Balderston 2018, 32). Where is the end to the chain of the order of things?

The Bibliographical Institute of Brussels also resorts to chaos: it has parceled the universe into 1,000 subdivisions. Number 262 corresponds to the Pope; Number 282, to the Roman Catholic Church; Number 263, to the Lord's Day; Number 268, to Sunday schools; Number 298, to Mormonism; and Number 294, to Brahmanism, Buddhism, Shintoism, and Taoism. It also tolerates heterogeneous subdivisions, for example, Number 179: "Cruelty to animals. Protection of animals. More Implications of duelling and suicide. Various vices and defects. Various virtues and qualities" (pp. 103–104).

Juxtaposed against the lists from Wilkins and the *Emporium*, the Brussels scheme seems equally absurd, equally arbitrary, equally difficult to understand, and equally unsuited for everyday life. Borges summarizes: "obviously there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural" (p. 104). In the same year that the "Wilkins" essay was first published in Spanish (1952), Borges (1999) takes special care, in the postscript to the "Afterword" to *The Aleph*, to point out that he has forgotten almost all of the Brussels system: "the manual of the Bibliographic Institute of Brussels, I might add, a code I have entirely forgotten save for the detail that God can be found under the number 231" (p. 288). How quickly did Borges forget? Is his forgetting, like the list from the *Emporium*, possibly fictional? Does it matter?

The library offers itself as a hiding place for more tangible objects, as demonstrated in "The Book of Sand". The narrator (perhaps Borges himself) becomes obsessed with the book, with the concept of possession, and with seeing all of the permutations to be found on each possible page. This leads to mania, paranoia, insomnia. "I showed no one my treasure. To the joy of possession was added the fear that it would be stolen from me, and to that, the suspicion that it might not be truly infinite. [...] A prisoner of the Book, I hardly left my house. [...] At night, during the rare intervals spared me by insomnia, I dreamed of the book" (Borges, 2007, p. 93). He hides inside the Book, which is equally monstrous to him whether it is infinite or finite. The Book of Sand, though it is seemingly impossible, exists in the world, like all other books. "I felt it was a nightmare thing, an obscene thing, and that it defiled and corrupted reality" (Borges, 2007, p. 93). This seems to suggest that infinite information corrupts reality, that reality is outside the realm of mere information. To preserve his sanity and the world, Borges must rid himself of the Book:

I considered fire, but I feared that the burning of an infinite book might be similarly infinite, and suffocate the planet in smoke.

I remembered reading once that the best place to hide a leaf is in the forest. Before my retirement I had worked in the National Library, which

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. I took advantage of the librarians' distraction to hide the Book of Sand on one of the library's damp shelves; I tried not to notice how high up, or how far from the door.

I now feel a little better, but I refused even to walk down the street the library's on [la calle México] (Borges 2007 93).

Here we have a librarian who must destroy a monstrous book, but knows that burning it might be more dangerous than allowing it to exist. And so he hides it in the vast library, which effectively destroys its contents by rendering it virtually invisible by virtue of its unfindability. Jefferson understood this, as well. In fact, when he appointed the first librarian at the University of Virginia, he wrote, "a book misplaced is in fact lost, as nothing but accident of a revision of the whole library book by book can ever find it again...A library in confusion loses much of its utility" (Jefferson to Kean). Borges hides the nightmare thing underground, in the underworld, in the library he used to direct. The library's collective shelves offer an alternative to "the concept of [personal] possession"; the fictional Borges breaks free of the possession of owning the Book as well as the book's magical possession over him. Again, we see something of a Prospero figure, whose books were full of magic. Now Borges's book possesses and is possessed by the library. The fact that it is not yet catalogued, not yet entered into a system of classification, makes it harder to discover. But because the "Book of Sand" is in a library on a publicly accessible shelf, it will be found eventually, by either a librarian or a browser, who will, like Borges the narrator, attempt to integrate it into reality once again.

Burning is a recurring theme in Borges's fictions, appearing in such stories as "The Wall and the Books", "On the Cult of Books", and "The Congress," to name a few. The examples from Borges's fiction, paired with the real-life Jefferson examples, show that the burning of libraries destroys—is necessary to destroy—the monstrosities therein (including the memories piled up as books). But that destruction can also lead to other monstrosities, as with Jefferson, in the form of new collections, new classification systems, new means of order or control. If we had found ways to prevent our shameful memories from burning (to paraphrase Shaw's Caesar as quoted by Borges), then perhaps we wouldn't have been subjected to other forms of shame (by way of Jefferson, Otlet, etc.).

Monsters lurk in all areas of a library's organizing scheme. For everything named and ordered, there is a beneath, an Other. And the classification itself is hidden beneath the stacks, providing an imaginary order, appearing as rational, but in fact, it creates monsters. And those monsters, whether they are the books themselves, or the what they contain—stories about Calibans and other imaginary creatures—are hidden, buried, lurking, waiting to be found.

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