

Other People's Books

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CENTRAL TO THE DISCIPLINE of literary studies is the question of how others read, an activity that “rarely leaves traces, is scattered into an infinity of singular acts, and purposely frees itself from all the constraints seeking to subdue it.”¹ Accounts of the contingency of reading and the unpredictable itineraries of books appear across the disciplinary spectrum—in narratology, book theory, book history, ethnography, publishing history, university studies, cultural studies, and literary computing; conducted in the style and spirit of Pierre Bourdieu, Janice Radway, Roger Chartier, Franco Moretti, and others; or by using a “mixed-methods approach.”² The concept of “contingency” performs a great deal of analytical and rhetorical work in the sociology of literature, encompassing history and historical counterfactualism, the distortions of fieldwork, situatedness and subject position, and differences in the behavioral patterns of readers and book acquirers. Contingency’s semantic flexibility allows it to “scale” from situational variation (the way reading materials are activated, taken up, used, distributed, and passed on, or not) to larger uncertainties within populations and over time.

In a special issue on the sociology of literature published in this imprint almost a decade ago, James English cautioned the discipline against unwarranted protectionism: “Literary studies, at least in the United States, has often let itself be guided by a view of sociology, as of the social sciences in general, as allied with the hegemony of numbers, and as a discipline decisively favored, over and against the humanities, by the despised new managers of higher education.”³ Whether the anxiety identified by English was justified, and whether these worries amongst literary scholars have come to pass, are questions that can be answered empirically. But even if macroquantitative methods and bibliometrics have not overtaken the sociology of literature, literary studies itself may have naturalized its definition of contingency. Ongoing contingency in reading practices and communities is increasingly addressed through social scientific concepts such as variation and spread, or through spatialized representations of chance in atlases, maps, and other standard tools of visualization. The unaccountable time of readership in a person’s

development tends to be treated interchangeably with the logistics of compilation and dissemination. Reading communities and textual reception are studied through “spatial distribution patterns” and models of dispersal, with these questions as the drivers of research: why did certain book cultures or texts flourish here instead of there, in these figures instead of those, through these forms rather than some other ones?⁴

In its etymologically purer sense of contiguous befalling, contingency, like “reading [which] does not keep what it acquires, or . . . does so poorly,” as Michel de Certeau described it, is almost representationally anemic.⁵ Both inside and outside of the discipline, there are few generic and conceptual forms available to us for imagining what Lauren Berlant, in seeking to revise the semantics of contingency, calls “the ongoingness of adjudication, adaptation, and improvisation.”⁶ When large-scale sociologies of reading tackle the ongoingness and the open-ended mediation of reading materials—a contingency in which reading may lead to others or act on lives in ways that render those lives’ influences empirically unverifiable—they tend to narrow the meaning of contingency down to either completely isolated circumstance or combinatorial chance. The fact that things could have been otherwise, that it could have been a different book reaching a particular reader, a different path to the present—this has become empirical literary sociology’s way of representing the unpredictable and indeterminable aspects of readership; this is its way of garnering nuance to itself. One of the ramifications of this semantic reductionism is that the cultural others of our literary sociologies continue to live in shrunken toy-worlds in which there are at once far fewer mediating materials and far more psychological transparency for the effects of those mediations, the subtleties of their book histories and reading practices handwaved away with incommensurate forms of “complexity.”

Contingency—who gets to fix its meaning and how this determines our representations of the reading and book-collecting practices of others—deserves an origin story and a proper mythology. There is a politics to representing contingency, and it can be seen with relative concision in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges. To many readers, Borges will seem like a tired choice for theorizing the interactions between cultural others and their books. The gambit of this essay is that his works, most prominently “The Garden of the Forking Paths,” have been erroneously associated with a naive—and, as I will argue, culturally specific—version of contingency that still dominates disciplinary methodologies. The readiness to describe this story as a hypertext and to figure contingency as “forking paths” issues from the same place as an imaginative resistance to a life in which many books may enter and leave with varying levels

of impact—a shortcoming currently in view in literary studies, but often not for non-Anglo-European readerships. In Borges's speculative fiction and philosophies, books have an enormous amount of deterministic power when it comes to other people's lives. These writings respond creatively to the questions of why Chinese people read and what they do with the books that they collect. What happens, however, when such fantasies migrate to sociological methods? How do the stories we tell about other people's books shade into cultural essentialism—not through representational choices but through an economy of scale?

If the sociology of literature privileges a cybernetic model of contingency—in which contingency is something that can be mathematically “modeled”—Borges tells us the reason lies in literature itself. The way we imagine or are invited to imagine books' lives among cultural others may encourage the dominant ascription of contingency to chance within a closed system, rather than to the effect of having new things come along, change what you do, and shape who you are.⁷ Entered into dialogue with theories of the book in and out of narratology, and set against the critical idioms and critical tools that are often deployed in literary sociology, Borges lays bare not only the orientalist logic of prevailing definitions of contingency but, far more importantly, the reasons why this shortcoming tends to evade notice, and why the material and metaphorical idiosyncrasies of the book sustain ongoing romances of the empirical *availability* of other people's reading practices.

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Widely regarded as an ur-text of computational formalism, Borges's story “The Garden of the Forking Paths” has long been misread at the level of plot. Although it is difficult to follow, in part because it happens in medias res, “The Garden of the Forking Paths” is neither a hypertext, nor an interactive fiction, nor anything that can be modeled as a map, network, or tree. In the story Dr. Yu Tsun, a Chinese spy living in England working for the German Reich, has been found out and must find a way to get one last piece of information to his boss in Berlin: that the British arsenal is hidden in the city of Albert.⁸ He does not have the time or means to relay this message physically or technologically (via telegram, for example) because the Englishman Captain Madden has already arrested and killed another spy and is hot on Yu's trail, beginning a countdown to making international communication happen outside the usual communicative channels. Yu's ingenious solution is nothing less than the hypostatization of Benedict Anderson's theory of print-

cultural nationalism. He tests out in real time Anderson's hypothesis that people from around the world can access the same informational plane because they can watch disparate events in "homogenous empty time" unfold on the same newspaper page. In fact, Yu is counting on this. He catches a train to Ashgrove, the hometown of an old friend, the sinologist Dr. Albert. And there, after stalling just long enough, timed to the moment that Madden shows up at the door and thereby becomes a witness, Yu shoots Dr. Albert and kills him. This act of betrayal is profoundly newsworthy, which Yu well understood it would be, and is published as news. The Berlin Chief-Boss reads about it in the paper the next day and makes the connection: Albert, of course, happens to be the name of the city the Germans need to bomb to hold off the British attack on the Serre-Montauban line.

Bryce DeWitt and Neil Graham first claimed "The Garden of the Forking Paths" for quantum mechanics in 1973, deploying epigrammatically in their book on many-worlds theory a mysterianist statement from the story that is neither represented nor carried out in the plot: "This web of time—the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other through the centuries—embraces every possibility. We do not exist in most of them. In some you exist and not I, while in others I do, and you do not, and in yet others both of us exist. In this one, in which chance has favored me, you have come to my gate. In another, you, crossing the garden, have found me dead. In yet another, I say these very words, but am an error, a phantom."⁹ This statement, and the title, have authorized many analogies outside of the literary arts. In addition to countless lay associations with multiverse theory and ghostly decision paths—as any internet search will turn up but seen most recently in Andrew Gelman and Eric Loken's paper on experimental design and p-hacking in the statistical sciences¹⁰—the story has comeoed in new media studies and literary theory as an anticipation of the "hypertext novel . . . prior to the invention . . . of the electromechanical digital computer," a literary manifestation of Gottfried Leibniz's fractal model of the universe.¹¹ The story is referenced in Michel Serres's figuration of networks as things that "bifurcate endlessly" in time and has also been used to corroborate what Donald Kunze, specifically invoking the story, calls "positivism's idea of time as a series of dendritic choices . . . [that] puts every forsaken possibility into an existential deep-freezer."¹² Marie-Laure Ryan, one of the few to accurately gloss "Garden of the Forking Paths"—as "a suspense story with a traditional linear development"—remarks on the "superficial resemblance between the spatial organization of hypertext and the structure of Ts'ui Pên's novel," with the story being "no more feasible in hypertext than it is in print."¹³ Ryan's

alternative hypothesis, however, that “Borges invokes the spatial image of the forking paths to describe a fundamentally *temporal* phenomenon,” still demonstrates the ease with which the spatial metaphor of the hypertext converts into a counterfactual model of time in which time “splits” into parallel states with some actualizations mattering more than others.¹⁴ Her reasoning that if the story is not a spatial metaphor than it must be a temporal one—if not aerial maps then dendritic ones—treats diagrammatic complexity as the highest order of complexity, a distinction conferred upon literature that seems to approximate it.

In fact, “The Garden of the Forking Paths” is remarkably linear. Wartime spying provides the extraordinary circumstances under which textual information, reading, reaction, and action all occur without fail, in perfect timing. Aside from the bait-and-switch presented by its title, the story’s most striking reversal of expectation comes from the primitiveness of the “technology”—a headline—used to relay the final piece of intelligence, the plot practically reverse-engineered to secure this maneuver. It is hard to imagine literal detours in the story because any extra movement would prevent the trick (i.e. killing Albert/Albert) from working. So how does such linearity get read as the opposite dynamic? Within this apotheosis of print cultural efficiency, we have another, *noncompeting* romance of efficiency: the one of using the owned book to explain cultural identity. The title of the story refers to this second romance, an epiphany that takes the shape of the book of a cultural other. In the middle of the story, it is revealed that the German-Chinese spy Yu is a descendent of a man named Ts’ui Pên, who left to posterity an infinite labyrinth whose location was never determined. Subsequently we learn that the labyrinth *is the same thing as* the book his ancestor was writing, a novel in which all possible outcomes of an event occur in tandem. This very small part of the story is the one often lifted out to represent the whole and evidence Borges’s foresight into quantum theory, multiverses, disruptive architectural practices, subversive temporalities, and what have you.

Compelling as it is, this family history and revelation—the book is the labyrinth, the book is all books—are diegetically gratuitous. There are statements, not realizations, about things having gone otherwise; for instance, Dr. Albert muses that “in the present one . . . you have arrived at my house; in another . . . you found me dead; in still another . . . I am a mistake, a ghost.”¹⁵ At no point does the story become a choose-your-own-adventure. Unlike Robert Coover’s short story “Babysitter,” for example, which actually does “fork” to represent all the things that could have been done to and by a babysitter in the course of an evening, “The Garden of the Forking Paths” talks about alternate pathways only

to enhance dramatic irony. This is how we should appreciate Dr. Albert's romantic view of the Chinese book in which "time forks perpetually toward innumerable futures. In one of them I am your enemy."¹⁶ What seems like a gesture toward possible worlds simply states the reality: Yu *has* come to be Dr. Albert's enemy. "The Garden of the Forking Paths" is a story that moves inexorably toward its climax and denouement, a masterful exercise in emplotment so airtight that even its "hypertextual" asides redound back toward its unswerving arc.

The twin romances of the story are important because they appear together without upstaging each other, not because they are exaggerative in and of themselves. To simply expose the romance of the Chinese reader, one need only consult Chinese library practices, reading cultures, and historical textual practices (to say nothing of plain good sense). The ancestor character, Ts'ui Pên, is entirely fictive, but plausible real-life counterparts would include late Ming bibliophiles, catalogers, and readers like Fan Qin 范钦 (1506-1585), who built up the famous library, Tianyi ge (天一閣), Feng Fang 丰访 (1493-1566) and his Wanjuan lou (万卷楼), or Yuan Zhongche 袁忠彻 (1376-1458) and his Jingsi zhai (静思斋). An even closer example would be the garden-designer and book collector Qi Chenghan 祁承寧 (1563-1628), whose collection of over 100,000 fascicles outnumbered them all and who placed his library, Dansheng tang (澹生堂), in a garden called the "Garden of Secrets" or "Garden of Puzzles" (Miyuan 密园).¹⁷ Ming readers and book collectors obviously did not structure their lives around a single book that also doubled as a literal proxy of the cosmos. The complexes of gardens and pavilions in which Chinese libraries were housed were obviously not infinite labyrinths. The point is not to judge Borges's mythology for its fidelity to reality.

Orientalism offers a solid explanation for such hyperboles. Studying the politics of contingency in post-war US cultural practices, R. John Williams finds in the historical reception of "The Garden of the Forking Paths" a drive to "schematize, in narrative form, a *plurality* of possible futures."¹⁸ The origins of post-war world futures contingency planning have depended, in other words, on a mainstreaming of a faux-Asian concept of possible futures. Borges's story, its citational afterlives, and its casual interpretations neatly track this and other exercises in the attribution of pseudoprofundity to other peoples. However, the limited ability to imagine some ordinary facts of readership without relying on historical counterfactuals or metaphors of dice-throwing is not simply a disciplinary shortcoming or a symptom of corporatist neoliberalism. "The Garden of the Forking Paths" encourages two related habits: the first, of regarding hypertextuality and multiverses as literature's best shot

at profundity and complexity, and the other, of viewing the books that cultural others keep as having total explanatory power over their lives. No other story brings the two habits closer together. Both the trope of the labyrinth-as-novel and the one of novel-as-plural-universes tap into the same fantasy: other people just have more profound and expeditious relationships to their reading materials. This fantasy arises from the special features of the book form and their impact on the semantics of contingency in modern society.

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Borges's mythology of Chinese book culture is familiar to many through the famous orientalist topoi that opens Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*—the fictive *Heavenly Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*. Foucault's borrowing of Borges's Chinese encyclopedia and its mythical taxonomy (with animals divided into "(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs," etc.) explains, according to Frances Ferguson, how the human sciences used other people's books to comprehend how change ever happens in the world.¹⁹ Paradoxically, the Chinese encyclopedia, with its "table of terms" that "confronts us with startling inclusions and exclusions," gestures through hermeticism to the availability of beliefs that are as yet unthinkable and connects states whose ordering is complete, which are represented by the one book that explains everything on the one hand, and by susceptibility to change on the other.²⁰ Change no longer entails consecutive historical events but something like knowing that things didn't have to be this way and could have been arranged differently, captured by Borges's placement of an "et cetera" in the middle of the Chinese taxonomy. In this reading *The Order of Things* is a text that formalizes the conditions of historical change. Spaces of controlled contingency make historical change perceptible.

Ferguson's reading pertains to the sociology of literature in its suggestion that the moderns' apperception of historical change doesn't come naturally. It requires assistance, and assistance comes in the form of other people's books. Even though the book object—crucially, the book object of a cultural other made arbitrarily hermetic—eases the challenge of this imagining, it also predetermines (in a value-neutral sense) how it is done. We can see this at work in two pieces Borges wrote before and after his directorship at the National Library of Argentina, a time when sinology informed his existential meditations on library management and library mythography. Over a decade prior in 1951,

Borges had written that “according to Mallarmé, the world exists for a book; according to Bloy, we are the versicles or words or letters of a magic book, and that incessant book is the only thing in the world: or, rather, it is the world.”²¹ Earlier in his career he had already dreamt up the phantasmagoric library of Babel, one that is “total,” “register[ing] all the possible combinations” of twenty-five orthographic letters, a library of infinite extent whose volumes are chanced upon through an inexhaustible number of stairways and shelves.²² Across his metafictional writings that “[intertwine] fantastic genre characteristics or operations . . . with the world of books, encyclopedias and libraries,” the notion of contingency was undergoing a quiet cultural transformation.²³ Through the figure of the Chinese reader, Borges once again tackled literature’s social uses in developmental time, finding new ways to analogize such contingencies to the recombinatory potential of the book- or library-object.

The poem “The Guardian of the Books *El Guardián de los Libros*” was written in 1968, after Borges took over as director of the National Library of Argentina, during the library’s acquisition of its first Asian collection, and around the same time that his blindness set in.²⁴ The title character of the poem, Hsiang, has only one job: to keep the books of previous dynasties, books that preserve in text the perfectly harmonious political societies that produced them. The books are Hsiang’s cultural inheritance, and keeping them secures for him a self-contained political subjectivity against the backdrop of the Mongol invasion and the collapse of the Song Dynasty.

The Tartars came from the North
 On small long-maned colts;
 They annihilated the armies
 Sent by the Son of Heaven to punish their impiety;
 They built pyramids of fire and slashed throats
 They killed the evil man and the just,
 They killed the chained slave who watches the door,
 They used and forgot the women
 And kept moving south,
 Innocent like beasts of prey,
 Cruel like knives.²⁵

The Chinese bookkeeper’s relationship to historical change is static, and history passes before him like a series of queued images. He enters history only by remembering his ancestor’s stewardship of books that would otherwise have been lost in the upheaval:

In the uncertain dawn
 my father's father rescued the books.
 Here they are in this tower where I lie,
 Remembering the days that belonged to others,
 The alien and the ancient. (SP 283)

Hsiang's ahistoricity is implied in his purely material relationship to books:

In my eyes there are no days. The shelves
 Are too high and my years do not reach them.
 Leagues of desert and dream besiege the tower.
 Why deceive myself?
 The truth is I've never known how to read,
 But I comfort myself thinking
 That the imagined and the past are one and the same (SP 283)

There, in his role as the custodian of the books, a string of redundancies work to guarantee that the books he keeps remain as material objects. No new books enter his library, and the ones that he keeps are not read. Unable to reach the shelves—and therefore deprived of a material relationship to them—and, as if just to make sure, blind and illiterate as well, the bookkeeper cannot be hurt by the prospect of verifying the contents of the books he keeps.

My name is Hsiang. I am he who guards the books,
 Which are perhaps the last ones to remain,
 Because we know nothing of the Empire
 And the Son of Heaven.
 There they are on the high shelves,
 Near and far at the same time,
 Secret and visible like the stars.
 There they are, the gardens, the temples (SP 285)

Hsiang is shielded, we might say, from the basic historicity of reading things.²⁶ "The Guardian of the Books" not only outsources ideal bookish relationships to cultural others, but also outsources to books in general a space protected from the kind of change that simply comes from being moved in unpredictable ways by the unpredictable appearance of reading materials.

Even though Borges later admitted that "the sham Chinese poem [was] altogether autobiographical," the overdetermination of Chinese others and their attachments to their often finite set of books was not merely projective or ironic.²⁷ The poem was also an intellectual response

to Leibniz's philosophies of contingency that were introduced to Borges through Bertrand Russell.²⁸ Leibniz had conceptualized contingency mathematically as something that could be expressed in fractions, the contingent being a remainder of the rational (which could be expressed in integers), and viewed possible worlds as the infinity of combinations out of which God must select the "actual world."²⁹ "The Guardian of the Books" finds a version of this metaphysics in the Chinese *Book of Changes* (also known as the *I Ching*, represented by "the sixty-four Hexagrams" in line 3 of "The Guardian"), a divinational text that, like the labyrinth-book in "Forking Paths," theoretically contains all the permutations of past, present, and future phenomena in the universe, and that calculates them through combinatorics. The *Book of Changes/I Ching* reference helps extend a shibboleth in Christian-Judeo-Islamic traditions—a single book that dictates the lives of members of a particular culture and sustains them forever. In the poem, the world of the Chinese bookkeeper does not feel impoverished, despite all its deprivations, because the features of this one book supply the element of chance and plenitude. If Hsiang cannot experience historical ongoingness because he is blind, illiterate, and short, he is compensated by the contingency that is *in* books. Possible worlds serve as consolation here: "The secret eternal laws, The concord of the orb . . . are in the books / Which I guard in the tower" (*SP* 283).

Borges's essay "The Wall and the Books" (*La muralla y los libros*) also seeks to explain Chinese subjectivity on the theory that books house the combinations of all possibilities from earlier works. Inspired by the sinologist Herbert Giles's *A History of Chinese Literature*, and specifically its translation of passages from the *Zhuangzi*, Borges's essay reflects on a historical event called "the burning of the books and the burying alive of Ru scholars" (焚书坑儒) at the beginning of the Qin dynasty (213-210 BCE). "The Wall and the Books" mythologizes this event. Books and their stewardship promise fail-proof access to the political motivation of others who are again seen as moving within a closed system—within the wall that "enclose[d]. . . an empire" (though we should know it did not).³⁰ Even conceding that "historically, there is nothing mysterious about these two measures," the book burning and the wall erecting, the essay searches for an epistemological connection between these separate events (*SNF* 344). Prompted by Giles's interpretation that those who concealed the books from the previous regime were forced to work on the construction of the great wall and were then buried underneath it, Borges tries in various ways to understand the contrapasso—why this particular punishment?—in order to connect the text and the subject *in suffering*.³¹

"The Wall and the Books" begins with the burden of explanation—why do the building of the wall and the burning of the books originate in the same person?—and moves in its investigation through various types of explanation, from the psychoanalytic to the philosophical. The psychoanalytic explanation—that the Qin emperor Shih Huang Ti burned the books to exorcise the memory of his mother's libertinism—proves as unsatisfactory an explanation as the psychological one—that, out of fear of mortality, Shih Huang Ti ensconced himself in a palace containing 365 rooms, a "closed orb" that, like the wall, keeps out time and change. Conceding that "both conjectures are dramatic" but that they "lack . . . historical foundation," the essay finally settles on another isomorphism, musing that perhaps the emperor "condemned those who adored the past to a work as vast as the past, as stupid and as useless" (*SNF* 345). According to this final conjecture, the emperor "walled his empire because he knew it was fragile, and destroyed the books because he knew that they were sacred books, books that teach what the whole universe teaches or the conscience of every man" (*SNF* 345-46). The emperor's desire for a historical reset (burning the books of the past) can only be satisfied through spatial delimitation (walling in China itself), even though book burning and wall building never had any necessary connection. The essay's hypotheses are not so much renounced as remade into a frieze in its concluding inference that "all forms have their virtue in themselves and not in any conjectural 'content'" (*SNF* 346). In other words, the formalization of the mystery relaxes the drive to explanation. After setting out to explain book burning and wall building through each other, "The Wall and the Books" finally transfixes itself in the "imminence of a revelation, as yet unproduced," which constitutes "the aesthetic act" (*SNF* 346).

"The Guardian of the Books" and "The Wall and the Books," then, dramatize the relationship between books and the political self as an epiphany that becomes a universal formal aesthetic.³² We can appreciate that Borges, as a material philosopher of the book and its readers, absorbed Asian histories and cultures to transform, if not upstage, the Western codex. This has been established by critics studying Borges's China imaginary at the intersection of his cosmologies of writing and reading.³³ Perspectives gained on Borges's relationship to his sources—for example, in the idea that nonlinearity and nonconventional states of time and space come from his readings of Eastern texts—often repeat his trope of infinite possibility within the analog or virtual library.³⁴ In one description of Borges's "The Library of Babel," "architecture and writing are so entangled with each other that the architectural expression becomes an integral part of the narrative content. The Library is

the universe; its architecture forms the universal substance."³⁵ Analogical chapter titles in a book inspired by Borges—"Library as Chance," "Library as Order," "Library as Mind," "Library as Island," "Library as Imagination," "Library as Identity," "Library as Home"—all attest to the library's ontological flexibility. "A library is not only a place of both order and chaos; it is also the realm of chance," writes Alberto Manguel. "Books, even after they have been given a shelf and a number, retain a mobility of their own."³⁶ In another metaphor, "The books of the Stasi, like a Borges library, overstep all bounds and become their own world."³⁷ The Borgesian library is something that "left to [its] own devices . . . assemble[s] in unexpected formations."³⁸ Borges's librarians, "hav[ing] at their disposal all possible knowledge . . . realise that they can never know anything to be true. Every statement can be countered with an infinite number of counter statements and variant statements."³⁹ These analogies show that, as a recourse in explanation, bibliographic order offers complexity but ever only of a very specific kind.

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In much of sociology of literature, books or lists of books act as tabulating tools and tracking devices, and bibliographic data sorted geographically is used to reveal something about larger reading communities. Algorithmic determinations of readerly inclinations have redoubled the belief that social relations and literary histories can be articulated in lists of books. This belief in turn has to posit a bibliographic subject who is perfectly responsive to "the impact of the printed book," and who reinforces this impact by entering into a relational structure with others via the circulation of books.⁴⁰ Such procedures, whether positivist or descriptive, believe fundamentally that a person plus a text that is available to them at any given moment constitute a data point, and that texts saturate their readers with a regularity and thoroughness that would warrant the conversion of that encounter/possession/etc. into a datum.⁴¹ In standard protocols of the macrosociologies of literature, mere acquaintance and ongoingness—living by *Jane Eyre* this month, and by *Dream of Red Mansions* the next, if not this morning and this afternoon—still have no real argumentative correlative. The only exceptions are more general polemics against paranoid readings of the social uses of books, important flashpoints being Michael Warner's essay "Uncritical Reading" and Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature*.⁴² Both establish critical reading as a recent, disciplinary phenomenon and advise against the tendency to attribute "critical" reading to the subaltern, especially

if only as a performance of the critic's largesse. But surely the critical/uncritical dichotomy should apply even more universally: Westerners, cultural others, whoever, sometimes read critically, sometimes uncritically, depending on person and time of day, social circumstance, the stage of life they're in, and the length of the window used for seeing the effects. Surface or "mere" reading's problem isn't that it's untrue or unethical, necessarily; it's just true or untrue for readers in ways that are not so easy to tell based on self-described readerly praxis, appearances, or other empirical signs.

To ease off of representational politics in which cultural others are always reading suspiciously or subversively, our discipline has proposed meaningful but frustrating compromises: a division of disciplinary methods such that we have surface reading and broad ethnographies of book praxis for cultural others, and an application of methods imported from the social sciences to account for the contingencies of *their* readings and uses of books. Even before the turn to network modeling or the uptick in the lingo of nodes and branches, we see a very basic conception of "otherwiseness" standing in for conceptual nuance in the research design of large-scale investigations of literary history.

The evolutionary model in distant reading, for example, works around its inability to account for developmental change in a lifetime of readerly experiences by scaling up through a logic no different from the garden of forking paths.⁴³ The business of tracking literary lives and histories with lists of books makes recourse to evolutionary chance to process contiguous change: you could have read another book, but you read this one; you could have missed this book if luck hadn't intervened. Empirical studies asking, for example, how canons emerged from a greater corpus have treated the metaphor of the forking paths as the highest form of historical complexity. To reconcile the sheer quantity of books in the world with the political impulse toward inclusivity—*we must but can't read everything*—Moretti, for example, played up the utopianism of thinking that things could have turned out differently, turning the statistical "tree" into a ready-made metaphor for this kind of contingency.⁴⁴ Moretti's trees "'open up' literary history, showing how the course selected by European audiences . . . is only *one* of the many coexisting branches that could *also* have been chosen (and weren't). What the tree says is that literary history *could be different from what it is*."⁴⁵ To use his own example of the kind of egalitarianism afforded by this perspective, millions of people might be reading Jane Austen now, but since "nothing lasts forever" they might be reading Amelia Opie later.⁴⁶ If the meaning of contingency bends when it passes through the form of the book, we see here that the meaning of change in the world has been starved down to simple expressions of *this happened, as opposed to that*.

“The Garden of the Forking Paths” shows us that absolute faith in print culture’s global dissemination and deterministic romances about other readers are related things. This relation has been underexamined even as the sociology of literature has expanded its ambitions to net all book-reader transactions. Theorists and historians of modern readers may not be attuned to the fact that claims for contingent literary histories in the West tend to come with essentializing, counterbalancing claims about China’s reading practices. For Moretti’s model to work, for instance, historical Chinese readers have to function as foils, relating to their books with such intensity and repetition that a few classics effectively halt the production of new ones. The Chinese “taking the novel seriously as an aesthetic object” explains (for Moretti) the absence of a “rise of the Chinese novel in the eighteenth century.”⁴⁷ Further, in a backhanded compliment, the Chinese’s all-consuming reading of a handful of books is favorably contrasted to the “one-volume-per-day consumption” plaguing Europe, where supposedly millions of books disappear into the ether of “the great unread.”⁴⁸ Book historians working on China have repeatedly pointed to the sheer magnitude and decentralized nature of Chinese print and reading cultures to counteract perceptions in the West of a small print sphere consisting only of canonical classics.⁴⁹ Moretti’s comparison is by all accounts insupportable given the volume of canonical and lesser-known novel genres (*xiaoshuo*, *yanyi*) from the period he surveys.

Through Borges we have another way to understand this. Projective orientalism abides not only in acts of representation *within* print modernity—how people are depicted, their worlds imagined—but also in the narratives we tell *about* print modernity.⁵⁰ And just as orientalism accompanies the fantasy of zero waste and complete efficiency in matters of reading and print in “The Garden of the Forking Paths,” here, in Moretti’s account, a story about the attenuation of reading in Europe’s burgeoning literary marketplace—too many books, too little attention—produces a suspect comparative morphology in which cultural others demonstrate far more transparency and constancy with their books.

A nonessentialist, nonpositivist literary sociology that incorporates theoretical insights about mediation, narrative, and materiality is in full disciplinary view. As I’ve been suggesting throughout, the solution is not merely a reversal (more theory for other people’s book cultures) but a deconstruction of the relationship of the book to contingency itself. The determination of methodological approach by the nature of books themselves has been a longstanding problem in theoretical book history. When D. F. McKenzie applied analytical bibliography to sociology, he did so with the aim of releasing bibliography from its more prosaic uses and

re-envisioning “the book as an expressive form,” indexing social motives, transmissions, reception, and other types of human content in history.⁵¹ Ensuing constructivist approaches have argued that books do, in fact, *do* things, and often do unpredictable things. While these approaches made available a notion of mediation in which the materiality of books shapes the meanings humans attach to them, they overlooked another kind of mediation, one in which people use books, and props, and whatever is at hand, to make worlds that they only temporarily live in.

As I say in the introduction of this essay, recent work in critical book history and reception theory has wrangled with books whose imprint on a life, whether fleeting or engrossing, does not translate into external signs, advancing a sociology of literature that carries with theory and interpretation. Historians of the book have, for example, been reframing human interactions with books as ad hoc settlements—halting, stopping, and generally inconclusive affairs—even as the circulation of books is often overstated.⁵² A related and crucial insight from material/historicist studies of books is that the “book-ness” of the book aids the generalization of more easily conceptualized contingencies. Scholars have argued that the print-cultural explosion of the eighteenth century fine-tuned subjectivity to resemble books, specifically books’ self-exaggerated accounts of transactions with humans, hence the overemphasis on circulation.⁵³ Accordingly, the picture of contingency on offer in books, materially conditioned and otherwise, has become the only kind of contingency there is. If we look to books or narratives featuring books to see how contingency is actually experienced (or imagine contingency as anything other than experiential options) we might never see things aright.

Narratology informed by systems theory has taught us, in a different way, that works of literature behave as contingency machines, and that contingency only comes into view *ex post facto*, at the end of a wholly contained form, whether that’s a formally perfect story or a book bounded by two covers.⁵⁴ To extend this logic to the textual example on hand, we have to know that the Chinese book in Borges’s plot is actually a labyrinth (a closed object) in order to imagine it as a hypertextual object in the first place. By making available to the interpretive arts systems theory’s tenet that openness is always a product of, rather than a condition for, operational closure, this line of thinking not only gives narrative interpretation a proper place in book history; it also downplays the novelty of hypertextuality. Relatedly, the turn to phenomenology in the study of print cultural reading communities represents, for its part, a quiet disputation of social scientific methods for literary sociology.⁵⁵ Some have underscored the unevenness of handling that allows people to exaggerate bookish interactions and shield themselves from their social

worlds at the same time, advancing a sociology of literature based on the *intermittent* presence of texts in the lives of readers. Others point out the logical flaws in proceeding as if the social lives of readers—“social” in the sense of a strategic control over the level of transparency in any interaction—did not throw off the tracking itself. All of them reemphasize the opacity of a reader’s interactions with books that she might read with absorption or not: once but thoroughly; or over long periods of time, but distractedly; or repeatedly, to different effects. These various subdisciplinary developments round out empirical assessments of reading and book use with negative capability and theoretical savvy. They demonstrate a basic epistemic humility toward the scope, and therefore indeterminacy, of all that we do with books. The hope is that they will soon be in view for everyone.

* * *

If books are slippery empirical objects, the point here is also that they make this fact less obtrusive than one might think. This lesson comes through in Borges and in comparative histories of reading practices. There is not space to unfold it fully here, but a Chinese book history similarly attuned to the conceptual distortions of the book object can offer alternatives to the reigning positivism of the sociology of literature. For much of its history, China’s equivalent for libraries were called *cang shu lou* (藏书楼), buildings for hiding or storing away books. The transition to the lending library happened in stages as a result of nationalism and globalization, and was definitively institutionalized when Communist party founding member Li Dazhao renamed Peking University’s *cang shu lou* as *tushuguan bu* (图书馆部) (library department) in 1918. Modeling the new Chinese library after Anglo-American ones, Li promoted open access, changed the library’s top priority from preservation to lending (“借书之事，乃成为图书馆中最重要的问题”), and required that the borrower take on a transactional visibility.⁵⁶ Prior to and even after this paradigm shift, private, noncommercial publications often served only a small network of readers, some as small as a single person. Many books were intentionally kept out of circulation.⁵⁷ According to one literatus, “books, publicly and privately owned, [are] carefully stored in boxes for a string of months and a series of years, and men do not see them. Forever separated from the wind and the sun, they permanently take leave of the table. This is called ‘secreting them away.’”⁵⁸ This happened not because readers were completely consumed by the few books they had, or even that collectors had to deal with censorship and confiscation. Most of the time the reasons behind noncirculation were much more

mundane. Chinese book collectors hid and hoarded their books mostly for fear of bad loans and other forms of negligence in handling, resulting in the view that “to loan a book [was an] unfilial” act. Consequently the inaccessibility of major book collections continued to grow, even as the ways they were read cannot be ascertained.⁵⁹ Without suggesting that all books were kept under lock and key in China before 1918, I give this snapshot of the Chinese social history of the book to highlight a relatively weak desire to “document” circulation with books. Books not destined for reading or circulation and reading not destined to be seen inevitably challenge book histories that measure transmission through the publication and distribution of books alone.⁶⁰

Social practices theories of reading are also found in the following parable from the *Book of Zhuangzi*, *The Way of Heaven* (庄子·天道) by Kong zi (Confucius), a lesson in the structural belatedness of books and its special ability to absorb delegation over time.⁶¹ In this curious pedagogical anecdote, Kong zi, wishing to “hide” (store) his books in the library of Zhou, is turned away by Lao Dan, the former librarian of the Zheng repository. To the reader Lao Dan’s rebuff may seem inexplicable—wouldn’t a librarian want to keep some more books?—but the rest of the chapter explains his decision by way of a famous exchange with the Duke Huan of Qi (齊桓) and a wheelwright named Pian (轮扁).

Duke Huan sits in the hall reading. A wheelwright named Pian, hewing a wheel in the courtyard below the hall, sets aside his chisel and goes up to ask the Duke, “Will you forgive me for asking what you are reading?” The duke replies, “These are the words of sages.” The wheelwright asks, “Are these sages still living?” The duke replies, “They have passed.” “Then,” says the other, “what you, my prince, are reading are only the dregs and sediments of the ancients.” The duke responds, “The things I’m reading—how could you, a wheelwright, feel that you would have anything to say about it? If you can explain yourself, do so; if you cannot, you shall be put to death.” The wheelwright says, “Your subject will look at the thing from the point of view of his own art. In making a wheel, if I proceed gently, that is pleasant enough, but the workmanship is not strong; if I proceed violently, that is toilsome and the joinings will jam. If the movements of my hand are just right, the idea in my mind is realized. But I cannot tell (how to do this) by word of mouth; there is skill in it. I cannot teach the skill to my son, nor can my son learn it from me. Thus it is that I am in my seventieth year, and am still making wheels in my old age. But these ancients, and what it was not possible for them to convey, are dead and gone: so then what you, my Ruler, are reading is but their dregs and sediments!”⁶²

Ideas, the wheelwright argues, lose their immediacy in forms (such as books) that outlive them; in contrast, the act of fashioning a wheel

cannot be outsourced because its significance cannot be extricated from its immediate operations, its mechanical maneuvers. Wheelmaking dies with the wheelwright. A simple philosophy of living and doing rather than reading and contemplating, the wheelwright's rebuttal seems to pan the need for books, which he describes as "dregs and sediments of the ancients," several removes from the original meaning and the ideational source.⁶³

The passage is typical of the *Zhuangzi* in that it defetishizes bookishness and learning by rote, going so far as to downplay its own importance as a vessel of knowledge. Instead of making much of books, it is making little of them. And, as is often the case in the *Zhuangzi*, the overt didacticism overwhelms the parable. But such a diminution of books also works as an ontology of the book. Books act as prostheses for your relationships to the ideal political orders contained in them, maintaining those relationships without you having to maintain them at all times. The wheelwright regards this as no different than parasitism, but then again he himself has no distance from making wheels—the thing and the act that defines him. Unable to pass the skill on, whether pedagogically or even hereditarily to his offspring, Pian cannot outsource his identity in any way. For Huan, who can escape immediacy, the situation is quite different. For better or for worse, books allow you to contract out some of your political self-upkeep to forms (codices or scrolls or even just the abstract notion of books), which can then sit there, transportable, abstract-able, pick-up-able, put-down-able, so that you do not have to represent it yourself at all times.

My goal here is not to offer a contrastive "Eastern" uses/theories of books as a nonessentializing sociology of literature, but to suggest that this little parable about books in the *Zhuangzi* carries over with real resonances the meditations on immediacy and contingency provoked by Borges's works. The figuration of books in the *Zhuangzi* as a medium characterized by weakness, distance, and remove from time's ongoingness gives us a new way to frame cross-cultural imaginings expressed in the language and images of books. In poststructural terms, it puts some real limits on the expressive immediacy of books, as well as their indexicality, by singling them out as a special technology—one that works together with society/"the world" (世) to hide the contingency of ongoing change.

To make a provisional comparison: in Niklas Luhmann's writings on the function of books in modernity, books intervene in their readers' lives in empirically slippery ways, being as likely to sweep them into a network as to give them the means to compartmentalize and evade the demands of visibility and participation.⁶⁴ As such they create "a model of society within society," a service that is necessary because modern

society's smooth functioning depends on systems that *reduce* the perception of complexity by nominating more manageable, more imaginable contingencies as suitable substitutes for actual social complexity.⁶⁵ In a complexly differentiated world, technologies signaling the possibility of otherwiseness offer *relief*.⁶⁶

We can appreciate this sociological insight through Borges's "Forking Paths," the *Zhuangzi*, or examples closer to our time. In the social media game of tagging others to name the books that have made them who they are (or, more dramatically, the ones that have "saved their lives") that went viral a few years ago, it was understood that a list of books that changed one's life would look very different a decade or even a week out from its making.⁶⁷ The list's romance of contingency—my life turned out this way because I chanced upon *these* books and not some other books—is appealing precisely because it is not definitive but looks definitive. The inability to police the boundaries of personhood against the train of books that pass before us is something of which we are conscious and nonchalant. Different books give you different experiential possibilities that you can assume and leave behind; few to no existential crises will ensue.

Working in the imaginarium of East-West encounters, the poem "The Guardian of the Books" and the essay "The Wall and the Books" likewise deliver these theoretical lessons about other people's books: they offer the vision of possible worlds in order to *relieve* us of the ongoingness of this one. Writings like "The Guardian of the Books" and "The Wall and the Books" constitute a small body of work that has been thoroughly exhausted by interpretative arguments about the coproduction of Western literary modernity through Eastern influences. For example, the idea that, through Borges but also through Foucault and others, experimental ideas about language and text in the West emerged from an orientalist projection of Chinese ordering and classification. Or, that these writings do the work of "the imaginary," the term for the literary places where oblique, nuanced, and latent colonial and postcolonial cultural misappropriations occur. This essay has skirted these more familiar forms of orientalism to relocate these highly allegorical episodes in Borges's writing to a bibliographic modernity in which thinking about the books of others constitutes a powerful form of contingency management, referring not to the wrangling of chance but to the swapping out of less exciting but more realistic book-human relationships for more cathartic and satisfying ones. In this small slice of Borges's works, the metaphORIZATION of the library and the exaggeration of book-based ontologies are some of the means by which transcultural writings tamper with the semantics of contingency. In making these claims, this essay holds out

the belief that poststructuralism and its specific pathways of thought offer sharper insights into global reading practices than its replacement by global literary networks, even as the latter's "uncritical" approaches have helped us refrain from tracking other people's readings and uses of books, and have helped us track recessive forms of reading without kneejerk recourse to narratives of power and resistance.

I have suggested that the contribution of these texts to the art of fiction is neither metatextuality nor hybridity, but intimation: at the places where East meets West, our desires for immediacy and profundity seem amplified, and other people's books do more to satisfy this desire than expose it. Misreadings of "The Garden of the Forking Paths" are understandable, in other words, because the story assumes a contrapuntal structure. There are two romantic, and substantively noncompetitive, bibliographic orders here, signaled by the funny chiasmus in the two main characters—a British sinologist (Dr. Albert) and Chinese English professor (Dr. Yu). In the first order, a book that is handed down generationally in China explains all the secrets of the Chinese character's identity (if not the secrets of the universe). Through the One Book, the economy of reference is so constricted that all aspects of mutability reinforce one another: the fragments of heritage left by the Chinese ancestor and the labyrinth on which he was putatively laboring, the Chinese garden of literal zigzagging paths and the road Yu takes to Albert's house that "descended and forked among the now confused meadows," and the "divergent, parallel and finally coalescent armies" that Yu remembers in his blood and the invisible persons that he senses "busy and multiform in other dimensions of time." In the second order, perusing newsprint is a matter of life and death. If information is published, the right person will read it and act.

"The Garden of the Forking Paths" sets extraordinarily efficient relationships to reading in compressed adjacency, and you don't have to choose between them. To get the plot straight, as it were, is to be cradled by another fantasy about print, one that puts matter, motive, and action in perfect alignment. Readings that suggest that the story's narrative architecture derives from the Chinese book of divination (the *I Ching*) for example, have simply confused the mention of hypertext in the story with the story itself; to read it accurately as a hyperbolic enactment of reading's efficiencies does not, for that matter, involve a fundamentally different view of the relationship between readers and books. In both accounts, subjects are perfectly sensitive to the things they read, and the books (or, more frequently, the single text) that they carry on them make transparent their psychic, cultural, and historical selves. Accurate and inaccurate synopses of the story share similar expectations about

texts, readers, and the universe of their interactions. The exaggerative self-sufficiency of the Chinese plot represents narrative's own reaction formation to broader print cultural phenomena. Oddly enough, it is the perfect fictionality of this two-part myth that can underwrite a nonessentializing sociology of literature, one comfortable with less satisfying, less culturally predictive forms of contingency, one that expresses with more subtlety the role of books in the lives of others.

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NOTES

1 The quotation is taken from Roger Chartier's reflections on the challenge of drawing sociological conclusions about reading. Chartier enlists Michel de Certeau's phenomenology of everyday life to modulate the sociology of literature from bibliographic inventory-taking to the reconstruction of the sociality of reading. A historian who attends to reading's circumstantial "actualization" in embodied practice is someone who reconstructs the variables of interpretive communities and distinguishes what is actually read from what is available for reading. Chartier, "Laborers and Voyagers: From the Text to the Reader," trans. J. A. González, *Diacritics* 22, no. 2 (1992): 50.

2 James F. English, "Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature After 'The Sociology of Literature,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010). Merve Emre updates English's provocations, arguing that "innumerable and ephemeral contingencies of time and space, [can] scale up into a general theory of contemporary literary production or reception" by combining "local, partial accounts" of reading cultures with bird's eye views. Emre, *Modernism/Modernity print plus* 3 (2019): n.p., <http://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0089>.

3 English, "Everywhere and Nowhere," xiii.

4 See, for example, Wang Zhaopeng and Qiao Junjun's "Geographic Distribution and Change in Tang Poetry: Data Analysis from the 'Chronological Map of Tang-Song Literature,'" trans. Tom J. Mazanec, *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 5, no. 2 (2018).

5 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Randall (Berkeley Univ. of California Press, 1984), 1:174.

6 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2011), 54. For Berlant, the political work of recognizing lived lives and building even more livable ones would involve widening the semantics of contingency: gathering more and better examples of dealing with contiguous befalling and ad-libbed self-modeling and remaking.

7 In her introduction to a special issue on literature and contingency, Christina Lupton emphasizes the centrality of the term "contingency" in modern sociological thought and then, unexpectedly, the importance of literary analysis to its social meaning: "Literature [is] a form that makes contingency visible; a place where language plays with its own situation in time, with selection and possibility, in ways that maybe no other medium can." She argues, in effect, that the *sociological* analysis of contingency—what it makes available to collective apperception, what social benefits can come of narrowing or simplifying its meaning, what necessary ambiguities are embedded therein—must first pass through the formal properties of literature, its materiality, and its cultural semiotics. I am proceeding from the same inversion. Lupton, "Literature and Contingency," *Textual Practice* 32, no. 3 (2018): 375–79.

8 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of the Forking Paths," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions Books, 1964).

- 9 Bryce S. DeWitt and Neil Graham, eds., *The Many-Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics: a Fundamental Exposition by Hugh Everett, III, with papers by J. A. Wheeler, B. S. DeWitt, L. N. Cooper and D. van Vechten, and N. Graham* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), epigraph.
- 10 Andrew Gelman and Eric Loken, "The garden of forking paths: Why multiple comparisons can be a problem, when there is no 'fishing expedition' or 'p-hacking' and the research hypothesis was posited ahead of time" Working paper retrieved from http://www.stat.columbia.edu/~gelman/research/unpublished/p_hacking.pdf
- 11 Nick Montfort, introduction to *The New Media Reader*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 1:29. In *Cinema 2: the Time-Image* Gilles Deleuze locates the impact of "The Garden of the Forking Paths" on Joseph Mankiewicz's films in the latter's nonlinear temporality (trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1989], 49). See also Lev Manovich, "New Media from Borges to HTML," in *The New Media Reader*, ed. Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort, 13-25.
- 12 Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1995), 109. Donald Kunze, "Gardens of Forking Paths: Notes on Architecture's Ingenious Destruction and Recreation of Time," *Form, the Journal of Architecture, Design, and Material Culture* 9 (2009): 21-33; David Baulch advances a reading of the story as a challenge to Newtonian, linear temporality in traditional narratives ("Time, Narrative, and the Multiverse: Post-Newtonian Narrative in Borges's 'The Garden of the Forking Paths' and Blake's *Vala or the Four Zoas*," *The Comparatist* 27 [May 2003]: 56-78).
- 13 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2006), 141-42.
- 14 Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, 141.
- 15 Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, 28.
- 16 Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, 28.
- 17 In this paragraph, all the names of people are formatted as follows: phoneticization, Chinese characters (biographical dates). All the names of libraries are formatted as follows: phoneticization (Chinese characters).
- 18 R. John Williams, "World Futures," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 3 (2016): 473.
- 19 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xv.
- 20 Frances Ferguson, "Coherence and Changes in the Unknown World," *New Literary History* 35, no. 2 (2004): 311.
- 21 Borges, "On the Cult of Books," in *Other Inquisitions: 1937-1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1964), 120.
- 22 Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, 54.
- 23 Liliana Weinberg, "Jorge Luis Borges: La Escritura de una lectura, la lectura de una escritura" [Jorge Luis Borges: The Writing of Reading, the Reading of Writing], *Variaciones Borges* 23 (2007): 9. The original quotation in Spanish is "operaciones propias del género fantástico se entrelazan con el mundo de los libros, las enciclopedias y las bibliotecas." The translation from the Spanish is my own.
- 24 With thanks to the National Library of Argentina for an abbreviated catalogue from the *Colección Jorge Luis Borges de la Sala del Tesoro de la Biblioteca Nacional* (Jorge Luis Borges Collection from the Treasure Room of the National Library). The books listed, many translations by contemporaneous sinologists, belonged to the personal collection of Borges. This catalogue was edited and published by the library itself under the title of *Borges, libros y lecturas*, ed. Laura Rosato and Germán Álvarez (Buenos Aires: Biblioteca Nacional, 2010).
- 25 Borges, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman, trans. Charles Tomlinson et al. (New York: Penguin, 1999), 282-83 (hereafter cited as *SP*).

- 26 The original Spanish couplets reinforce this sense of total containment: "Soy el que custodia los libros, / que acaso son los últimos, / porque nada sabemos del Imperio / Y del Hijo del Cielo" (SP 284).
- 27 In an earlier version of "The Guardian of the Books," a poem called "June 1968," Borges himself is the blind bookkeeper (SP 280-81); Borges, *Borges on Writing*, ed. N. T. Di Giovanni, D. Halpern, and Frank MacShane (New York: Allen Lane, 1973), 83.
- 28 Borges was exposed to Gottfried Leibniz through Bertrand Russell's *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*, 2nd ed. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1937).
- 29 See Leibniz, "On Contingency," in *Samtliche Schriften und Briefe* (Darmstadt: O. Reichl, 1923); and *Discourse on Metaphysics*, trans. George R. Montgomery (London: Open Court, 1918).
- 30 Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen and Suzanne Jill Levine (New York: Penguin, 1999), 345 (hereafter cited as *SNF*).
- 31 The burning of the books and the penalty of wall-building labor for those who refused to turn in their books are found in Herbert Giles's *History of Chinese Literature* (New York: D. Appleton, 1901), 78. Although the phrase 焚書坑儒 draws from a later period, the primary source for the repressive policies of the early Qin (221 BCE) is in Sima Qian's *Shi Ji* (around 85 BCE), a source that already suggests what Borges calls "the psychoanalytic explanation" and that was widely known and partially translated into European languages by Borges's time. Specifically, Sima Qian quotes a memorial by Li Si that specifically describes this penalty: 臣請諸有文學詩書百家語者，蠲除去之。令到滿三十日弗去，隸為城旦。(*Shi Ji*, ch. 87).
- 32 The essay's concluding notion that forms repeat with regularity across cultures and times and are self-evidently profound, containing multitudes, can also be seen in notes Borges kept on the on the Chinese books he read in translation as he tried to account for similarities between texts. See Borges, *Libros y lecturas: catálogo de la colección Jorge Luis Borges en la Biblioteca Nacional*, ed. Laura Rosato and Germán Álvarez (Buenos Aires: Biblioteca Nacional, 2010), 218, 220.
- 33 See Rosario Hubert, "Sinology on the Edge: Borges's Reviews of Chinese Literature (1937-1942)," *Variaciones Borges* 39 (2015): 81-101; Haiqing Sun, "China of Labyrinth: A Referential Reading of 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,'" *Variaciones Borges* 25 (2008): 101-14; Sergio Waisman, "The Search of/for Averroes Difference and Translation between East and West," *Variaciones Borges* 32 (2011): 109-20. See also Carlos Abreu Mendoza, "Borges y 'el milagro secreto' de la creación literaria," *Revista de crítica literaria latinoamericana* 35, no. 69 (2009): 279-93; Daniel Balderston, "Palabras rechazadas: Borges y la tachadura," *Revista Iberoamericana* 80, no. 256 (2014): 81-93; Roger Chartier, "¿La muerte del libro? Orden del discurso y orden de los libros," *Co-herencia* 7, no. 4 (2007): 119-29; Kane X. Faucher, "A Few Ruminations on Borges' Notions of Library and Metaphor," *Variaciones Borges* 12 (2001): 125-37; Lisa Block de Behar, "El lugar de la biblioteca," in *Jorge Luis Borges: Lectures d'une œuvre*, ed. Julio Romero (Paris: Éditions du Temps, 2004): 32-55; and Weinberg, "Jorge Luis Borges: La Escritura de una lectura, la lectura de una escritura," *Variaciones Borges* 23 (2007) and "Las mil y una noches del libro (The Thousand and One Nights of the Book)," *El legado de Borges*, ed. Rafael Olea Franco (Mexico: El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Lingüísticos y Literarios, 2015).
- 34 One representative example: José R. Echeverría and Nilita Vientós Gastón read "the enclosed space of all literary gardens [as] clearly 'standing in for' the sum total of finite creation" and remark on the "characteristic strangeness" of "the Chinese garden is its cramming of a density of meanings into a very small space, its tight packing, and its restless changing aspect." ("Espacio Textual y el arte de la jardinería China: 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,'" in *El arte de la jardinería china en Borges y otros estudios*, ed. Arturo Echavarría [Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2006], 196. Translation from the Spanish my own).

- 35 Sophia Psarra, "(Th)reading the Library—Architectural, Topological and Narrative Journeys in Borges' Library of Babel," in *Space Syntax 5th International Symposium Proceedings*, vol. 2 (2005): 2:293.
- 36 Alberto Manguel, *The Library at Night* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2008), 163.
- 37 Damion Searls, "The Wall and the Books," *Variaciones Borges* 4 (1997): 176.
- 38 Manguel, *Library at Night*, 163.
- 39 McKenzie Wark, "Late Returns in the Library of Babel," *Media International Australia* 81 (1996): 64.
- 40 Andrew Piper, *Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009), 14.
- 41 Christina Lupton, "Immersing the Network in Time: From the Where to the When of Print Reading," *ELH* 83, no. 2 (2016): 299-317.
- 42 Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading," in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004); Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).
- 43 I am referring here to the cultural and social-scientific memes engendered by creative misreadings of "The Garden of the Forking Paths," not brokering a comparison to the story itself.
- 44 I use "metaphor" because the mathematical tree is not simply a visualization of alternative scenarios but a solution method used when options depend on future realizations, and for which every "branch" one can calculate mathematical probability.
- 45 Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (New York: Verso, 2013), 88.
- 46 Moretti, *Distant Reading*, 68.
- 47 Moretti, *Distant Reading*, 176.
- 48 Moretti, *Distant Reading*, 176. Moretti attributes the large cast of characters in the early Qing novel *The Story of Stone* (红楼梦) to the Chinese tendency to cast groups rather than individuals as literary protagonists. (The term "the great unread" is coined in Margaret Cohen's *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999], 23).
- 49 See, for example, Cynthia Brokaw, *Commerce in Culture: The Sibao Book Trade in the Qing and Republican Periods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007).
- 50 See Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012).
- 51 D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 9-11; 16-17; 29.
- 52 Leah Price argues that books in literature are cannier and yet also less read and lived with than they are in real life. Similarly, books intervene in their readers' lives according to their inclination. See "From The History of a Book to a 'History of the Book,'" *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 120-38, and *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012). John Lurz picks up this thread and conceptualizes book-reader mediation through the principle of an "impersonal ephemerality," imagining a sociality between book and reader "subject to the flow of time" and the passing of interest. Lurz, *The Death of the Book: Modernist Novels and the Time of Reading* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2016), 1, 168.
- 53 Between a world where anything may happen and where one is exposed to all of the risks of the market, and one in which characters do not circulate at all, modeling characters as "reading matter" achieves a middle ground by "clos[ing] out the noise" of society's agoraphobia-inducing contingencies while still putting people in play. Deidre Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 242.
- 54 David E. Wellbery, "Contingency," in *Neverending Stories: Toward a Critical Narratology*, ed. Ann Fehn, Ingeborg Hoesterey, and Maria Tatar (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press,

1992). Adapting Wellbery's central insight, Lupton and Meiner argue that the concept of contingency "refers us philosophically to narrative's permanent situatedness in time. It's because things have happened one way (past tense) that we see they might have happened in another." (Wellbery, "Literature and Contingency," in *Textual Practice*, 378).

55 For an exemplary monograph-length study, see Lupton's *Reading and the Making of Time in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2018). See also Kinohi Nishikawa, "Merely Reading," *PMLA* 130, no. 3 (2015): 697-703 on functions and forms of reading amongst African Americans and the measurements of literacy with which these bear no cause-and-effect relation; Yi-Ping Ong, "Anna Karenina Reads on the Train: Readerly Subjectivity and the Poetics of the Novel," *PMLA* 133, no. 5 (2018): 1083-98 for the uneven phenomenon of novel reading and the consequences for the imagination of one's own responsibilities; Michaela Bronstein, "Taking the Future into Account: Today's Novels for Tomorrow's Readers," *PMLA* 134, no. 1 (2019): 121-36 for the impact that a book's demands (of resources, attention) from the future has on its demands for action from the present; and the cluster of essays on improvised, performative, "mesopublic" phenomenologies of reading in part four of *Early African American Print Culture*, ed. Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

56 Li Dazhao, *Li Dazhao Quanji* (李大釗全集), ed. Zhu Wentong 朱文通 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1999), 3:658.

57 Joseph P. McDermott traces Ming dynasty "lineage publications" that were privately published, privately distributed, and not-for-profit, and that never made it into compendiums, bibliographies, or book collectors' catalogues, in *The Book Worlds of East Asia and Europe, 1450-1850: Connections and Comparisons*, ed. McDermott and Peter Burke (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Univ. Press, 2015), 49-50.

58 As translated by and cited in McDermott, *A Societal History of the Chinese Book: Books and Literati Culture in Late Imperial China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Univ. Press, 2006), 141.

59 This is a quotation from the book collector Qian Qianyi (1582-1664), who lived during the Ming-Qing dynasty transition, that was reprinted in McDermott's *A Social History of the Chinese Book*, 140.

60 James Raven links the emphasis on "distribution" and "transport" in "models offered of communications circuitry" in Europe to a deluge of China-related codices hitting European markets—nearly 3,000 titles on China printed in Europe between 1450 and 1850 and hundreds of tracts issued by Protestant missionaries in China—and an increasing desire to track the Chinese uptake of European ideas. See Raven, "Distribution: The Transmission of Books in Europe and Its Colonies: Contours, Cautions, and Global Comparisons," in *The Book Worlds of East Asia and Europe*.

61 With the caveat that Kongzi and Confucius are not exactly commensurate.

62 Zhuangzi, 莊子全書 [The Complete Works of Zhuangzi], ed. Sima Zhi 司马志 (Taiwan: huazhi wenhua Shiye, 2013), 124 (translation is my own).

63 Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, 124.

64 Niklas Luhmann explains that while books can flip open and shut in an unpredictable manner, they are not like deck chairs. They model contingency in a way that's different from material accidents. See Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz, Jr. and Dirk Baecker (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ Press, 1995), 314.

65 The phrase, "a model of society within society," comes from Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000), 308-09.

66 For Luhmann, the stability of society depends on art's generalization of contingency. Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, 309.

67 See James Altucher, "The 40 Books That Saved My Life," *The Observer*, October 20, 2016, <http://observer.com/2016/10/the-40-books-that-saved-my-life/>; Jonathan Russell

Clark, "The List of Books That Saved My Life," *Read It Forward*, September 2016, <http://www.readitforward.com/essay/article/list-books-saved-life/>; and Koty Neelis, "12 People Discuss the Books That Saved Their Lives," *Thought Catalog*, May 30, 2015, <http://thought-catalog.com/koty-neelis/2015/05/12-people-discuss-the-books-that-saved-their-lives/>.