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Article

# The Aleph and the space of Shakespeare

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**Abstract** In this article, I use the work of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges as a heuristic for engaging with Shakespeare and challenging established notions of universality. In Borges's short story 'The Aleph,' the narrator sees a small sphere that encapsulates all of the spaces and time of the entire world at once. Whereas conceptions of Shakespearean universality are premised on the possibilities of Shakespeare's language, Borges affirms the limits of language and its impossibility of describing the human experience. Despite language's constraints, Shakespeare is an interlocutor for Borges to engage with the world. I demonstrate a Borgesian praxis for attending to Shakespeare creatively and critically, one that embraces cultural and linguistic identities and experiences that Shakespeare's canon decenters or excludes.

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I think I have seen an Aleph. Or at least heard one humming. Not an Aleph that encompasses the universe, but my own personal Aleph. Perhaps I even have been living inside of one for the last decade or so, though I know sadly this is not possible.

The Aleph is the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet, as it is in Arabic, Phoenician, Sumerian, and Aramaic. It also signifies the number One. The Aleph of ancient Hebrew signaled strength and power, and its symbol was modeled after an ox head and later in the shape of what appears to us as a sideways letter 'A,' becoming the inspiration for the first letter of the Greek alphabet, Alpha. In mathematics, and in Kabbalah, it is the infinite sign, denoting the cardinality of

 

infinite sets in the former and the origins of the universe in sacred textual writings in the latter. My introduction to an aleph came not from my Jewishness (I never studied Hebrew) or from my career in forecasting and finance (I only worked within finite math), but from Jorge Luis Borges, the twentieth-century Argentine writer of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. Borges' oeuvre offers mediations on time, paradox, language, symbols, labyrinths, the problematic notion of a unified Argentine cultural nationalism,[1] and yes, Shakespeare.

In his short story 'The Aleph,' Borges writes of a space in which the narrator (also named Borges) can see the world from all perspectives and simultaneously see himself within it. It is 'the place where, without admixture or confusion, all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist' (Borges, [1949] 1998, 281).[2] The Aleph of his story is compact and spherical, found deep in the cellar of his friend, Daneri. The narrator realizes that he cannot describe the Aleph because there is no one language or syntax to symbolize and express the whole world at once.

Borges and his narrator both try to express the infinite that is seen in the Aleph, but all that the Aleph holds and reflects in its minute space cannot be represented through conventional structures. The narrator describes that 'What my eyes saw was *simultaneous;* what I shall write is successive, because language is *successive*. Something of it, though, I will capture' (Borges, [1949] 1998, 283). Borges' semi-autobiographical narrator maintains the desire to represent what he sees, despite lacking the linguistic capacity to do so. Then Borges composes a sentence that is over 425 words long, and 'it goes off madly in all directions, at the same time working from a still center' (Balderston, 2012, 54). It begins,

> I saw the populous sea; saw dawn and dusk; saw the multitudes of the Americas; I saw a silvery spiderweb at the center of a black pyramid; saw a broken labyrinth (it was London); saw, endless eyes, all very close, studying themselves in me as though in a mirror; saw all the mirrors on the planet (and none of them reflecting me). (Borges, [1949] 1998, 283)

Following 37 repetitions of 'I saw,' or 'Vi' in the original Spanish, the narrator utilizes various rhetorical devices, clauses, and descriptive language. For example, the narrator 'saw the survivors of a battle selling postcards, saw a Tarot card in the shop window in Mirzapur, saw the oblique shadows of ferns on the floor of a greenhouse' (Borges, [1949] 1998, 283). In the original Spanish version, 'Vi' translates to 'I saw' at the beginning of each clause; in the Hurley translation, this is once translated to 'I saw' and repeated afterwards as simply 'saw,' removing the narrator linguistically as explicit subject until he finally sees himself within, 'saw my face and my viscera, saw your face, and I felt dizzy' (Borges, [1949] 1998, 284). The narrator sees these vast spaces within the small sphere, all in one moment. Despite the narrator's linguistic mastery, creativity, and his understanding of the sphere as an aleph to signal it as both infinite and divine, he recognizes that language as a system of symbols cannot honestly or

1 Silvia Rosman argues that Borges illustrates the 'problematic and imaginary relation' of a national community based on linguistic unity (2002, 19). See also Landgraf (2012).

2 All translations into English of Borges' original Spanish are from Hurley (1998).

accurately express the world. It is this story that I continuously return to when reading and writing about Shakespeare.

Borges wrote essays, stories, and poems engaging with Shakespeare, all laudatory. In 'Shakespeare's Memory' (1980), the narrator has the opportunity to have Shakespeare's memory, which he discovers is 'a good deal more auditory than visual' (Borges, [1980] 1998, 512). Borges has the narrator describe what it was like to have all of the Bard's memories within him, distinct from the narrator's memory but also embodied in his person. In both 'Shakespeare's Memory' and the poem 'The Thing I Am' (1977), Borges compares himself to the deceitful Paroles from *All's Well That Ends Well* repeatedly.[3] In 'The Aleph,' Borges quotes *Hamlet*, 'O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space' (Shakespeare, 2007, II.ii.247–8) in one of the epigraphs. Much has been written on Borges' infatuation with Shakespeare, and it is Borges through his corpus who taught me to read, imagine, and engage with Shakespeare.

3 See Tiffany (2005).

Shakespearean plays engage with Italy, Spain, and Jewishness, but they have no conception of the Latinx. To see myself in the text, I am not Othered. I simply am not there. I advise students not to look for a relational or 'relatable' hook into the text as that mode of thinking makes a value judgment about literature and art if one does not find herself in it – or even if one does: Shakespeare's three Jews, handful of Spaniards, and numerous characters from city-states that today form part of Italy are not touchstones for identification, either. I never had the liberty to make rash decisions like Hamlet, Macbeth, or Othello, and it never occurred to me to remove myself from the world like Juliet, Lady Macbeth, or Ophelia. I was stuck in it, subject to an unjust society, and I had to persevere, more akin to Isabella, Perdita, and Imogen. But we didn't read those plays in school. What, then, is the relationship of Shakespeare's work to someone like me?

Longstanding conversations about a Shakespearean 'universality' have reopened in recent years as critical race and ethnicity theory and whiteness studies become more integrated with early modern literature and theatre studies. Kiernan Ryan's homage to Shakespearean universality claims that Shakespeare's plays 'are dramatized *from the perspective of* "common humanity" – from the anticipated future perspective of a genuinely universal human community no longer crippled by division and domination,' but nowhere in this utopic vision does the author adequately consider the perspective of marginalized peoples (Ryan, 2015, 11). The 'common humanity' he describes does not account for the misogyny, anti-Semitism, racism, and bigotry that constitute an indelible mark on some of Shakespeare's most revered plays.

Ryan's approach to reaffirming Shakespeare's universality rests on two primary claims. The first is that Shakespeare offers a vision of timelessness, of the future perfect tense, and Shakespeare is timeless because he envisions a time

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that has not yet occurred. By contrast, in 'The Aleph,' Borges uses repetition of the past tense, 'I saw,' to describe what is in the Aleph, which is everything in the world. The singular instance of the future present tense in the story is a line spoken by Daneri, a pretentious intellectual-type who frequents the literary 'salon-bar' (Borges, [1949] 1998, 278). Daneri claims, 'it must be [habrás de reconocer] that you recognize that this place is on par with the most elevated heights of Flores' (Borges, [1949] 1998, 278), despite Flores being only about one hundred feet above sea level and less exclusive than in the past (Hurley, 1998, 542). Borges employs Ryan's esteemed future perfect to express a character's absurdity. Further, Borges creates dialogue for a fictious Shakespeare in some of his stories, and in 'The Aleph' Borges points to the falsification of language, that it is bound by syntax and therefore cannot capture the world. This fundamentally different approach to language does not diminish Borges' reverence for Shakespeare; on the contrary, unlike Ryan, Borges can negotiate the limits of language while continuing to celebrate the dexterity of Shakespeare.

From the Borgesian perspective, language cannot explain the universe, no matter the verb tense. In 'Shakespeare's Memory,' the narrator acquires Shakespeare's memory into his own person, yet eventually gives the memory to another man. With both his own and Shakespeare's memory within, he realized 'that I was gradually forgetting the language of my parents. Since personal identity is based on memory, I feared for my sanity' (Borges, [1980] 1998, 514). Internalizing Shakespeare into his corporeal being proved fantastical and then burdensome, and the 'more auditory' memory that he had inherited could only fully be erased by 'strict, vast music – Bach' (Borges, [1980] 1998, 515). For Ryan, Shakespearean language provides evidence of universality, but for another of Borges' semi-autobiographical narrators, it drowns out the linguistic heritage of his ancestry. Those of us who are bilingual and/or bicultural must negotiate our memories and identity with those that are presented to us as 'universal.'

The second of Ryan's claims is that Shakespeare's plays transcend time and place 'because he writes about his age from an imaginative perspective that's ahead of his time, not confined to it' (Ryan, 2015, 10). This notion that a white, male, heteronormative artist could be ahead of his time, an exaltation in any circumstance, is addressed recently by feminist comedian Hannah Gadsby in her recent award-winning comedy special, *Nanette*, where she offers a queer perspective on storytelling. Regarding Vincent Van Gogh, she says, 'No one is born ahead of their time! Maybe preemie babies, but they catch up! Van Gogh was a post-impressionist painter, painting at the peak of post-impressionism. [. . .] Artists don't invent the zeitgeist; they respond to it' (Gadsby, 2017). Shakespeare famously being considered a poet 'for all time' is taken one step further toward deification with this notion of being ahead of his time.

Borges doesn't try to move Shakespeare's art into other temporalities; rather, he writes fictitious stories of his life, death, and memories, thereby engaging

with Shakespeare in his own time. Borges complicates the time that Shakespeare can be in by creating semi-autobiographical versions of himself to interact with in the story, thus taking on the perceived temporal omnipresence of Shakespeare. Borges puts himself in multiple locations to be with Shakespeare instead; if Shakespeare moves across time, then the author and interlocuter must go with him, too. In this way, Shakespeare is more of a traveling companion on a journey through time, constrained by the limits of language.

In 'The Aleph' the narrator dismisses any conversation about the Aleph to enact revenge on Daneri and 'urged him to take advantage of the demolition of his house' where the Aleph was in the cellar (Borges, [1949] 1998, 284). After seeing the universe, both time and space, in one, minute sphere, he promotes its destruction for his personal gain, believing that there are other alephs in the world. According to Evelyn Fishburn, 'A logical development from the postulation of a plurality of *alephs* is the notion of a plurality of universes' (Fishburn, 2012, 29). One challenge to a conception of universality is the theoretical premise of the possibility of totality. If one were to make a case for Shakespearean universality, through the Borgesian lens, it would be redefined as Shakespearean universalities. A way of substantiating Shakespeare for worldwide consumption has been to claim a timelessness and singular universality, but this vocabulary mutes or ignores histories of colonialism and of cultural and linguistic translation. It also suggests that the structure of Shakespeare's storytelling should be appropriate for all stories and dominant everywhere, despite circular, patterned, and fragmented narratives shaping many of the stories of the last century. Further, it is founded on a conception of a worldwide desired whiteness, one not predicated necessarily on skin color but on hegemony.

Whiteness studies attends to power relationships beyond colorism, nationality, and language. Richard Dyer, in his influential book *White*, describes the unspoken presence of whiteness and describes the color white 'as everything and nothing' (Dyer, 1997, 39). It is noteworthy that this expression is often credited to Dyer and adopted by subsequent critical race theory and whiteness scholars. Sociologists Becky Thompson and Sangreeta Tyagi use the phrase 'everything and nothing' about race quite broadly. They write, 'Race is about *everything* – historical, political, personal – and race is about *nothing* – a construct, an invention that has changed dramatically over time and historical circumstance' (Thompson and Tyagi, 1996, ix). It is omnipresent but engineered, and its representation reflects and shapes each culture and time period.

Borges's 'Everything and Nothing' (1960) utilizes this phrase and involves a fictitious summary of Shakespeare's life and his conversation with God after his death. After his death, Shakespeare then appears before God, and God says, 'among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one' (Borges, [1960] 1998, 320). In this short story, Shakespeare and God are 'everything and nothing.' Borges himself was part English through his paternal

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line and was raised bilingually, first reading Shakespeare in English. Shakespeare, a Judeo-Christian God, and whiteness are intricately and inextricably bound through the language used to describe them, but despite this connection, it is not a 'universal' phenomenon.

Both this complexity of identity and the language to express it can be found within the Aleph. Borges explained, 'What eternity is to time, the Aleph is to space' (Borges, 1970, 189). Perhaps the language about Shakespeare needs to shift from the temporal and singular 'for all time' to the spatial and plural 'of infinite universalities.' According to Silvia Rosman, 'The Aleph thus marks the limit of Borgesian writing because it is simultaneously what cannot be translated (it thus functions like a proper, unique name) but also what requires translation, since it belongs to a common system, language' (Rosman, 2002). Describing the fictitious Aleph proves impossible for narrator and author, and describing all that constitutes Shakespeare proves likewise problematic, leading some scholars to look to Shakespeare's writing to be that very language. No language can describe all of our experiences, the universe in whole. But it is the desire, and failure, to describe the totality of the human experience that connects us.

As I continue to move through my time in the world, I will have engaged with the Shakespearean canon much like the semi-autobiographical Borges narrator of 'The Aleph': simultaneously within the story yet outside the world to be described. I confess that I do not see the Shakespearean canon as an aleph of the entire human experience or Shakespeare the man as virtuoso composer of the totality of human narratives. Shakespeare, for me, is my lifetime interlocutor who I see from the outside, digest within, and hear in the language of my everyday life. We are in conversation creatively and critically, and his stories provide the landscape to build, deviate, splinter, explore, translate, and tell our stories.

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Carla Della Gatta is Assistant Professor of English at Florida State University. She has been awarded fellowships from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the New York Public Library, and the American Society for Theatre Research. She received the J. Leeds Barroll Dissertation Prize in 2016 from the Shakespeare Association of America. Her first monograph explores the intersection of Shakespeare and Latinidad through dramaturgical and textual analysis of adaptations. She has published essays in journals such as *Shakespeare Survey*, *Shakespeare Studies*, *Shakespearean International Yearbook,* and *Bulletin of the Comediantes* (E-mail: cdellagatta@fsu.edu).

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