

Transecological Curiosity

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Perry Zurn as Environmental Philosopher

In *Curiosity and Power* Perry Zurn draws out the historical, political, and collective dimensions of curiosity, adding texture to a widespread mode of engagement that has required more attention and care. Though he begins by discussing curiosity in its fetishizing and colonial mode, he soon moves towards a reparative practice of curiosity that seeks to undo spectacularization and objectification (Zurn 2021: 2, 5-6). Zurn thus calls our attention to the bivalence of curiosity, aligned with both "the side of conquest, sovereignty, patriarchy, and marginalization" and "dissent, counterinformation, resistance movements, and social justice" (3).

Despite this acknowledgment of its bivalence, Zurn's book aims to create more space for curiosity as a collective political practice aimed at amelioration and a more open engagement with the world. In his chapter on trans curiosity, Zurn gives substantial attention to curiosity as it is used against trans people to reduce and ostracize (182-185). He also looks at trans people engaging in a different kind of curiosity that "opens up the possibility of nuance, change, and transformation coincident with their who-ness" (190). By drawing attention to this, Zurn intervenes in the existing literature by calling for an increased focus on trans curiosity as a source for embodied subjugated knowledge. Such a focus "challenges trans theory's almost exclusive concern with the curiotization - and the Frankensteinian spectacle - of trans people" (196). While the bivalence of curiosity remains in operation, Zurn reveals his goal to weaken the sway of objectifying curiosity by looking at how curiosity is practiced differently.

Zurn's project of focusing on the collective potential of curiosity for social transformation coincides with his move towards a collective vision of curiosity as it links humans, animals, other organisms, and the environment as a connected whole. In an earlier chapter titled "A Political History of Curiosity," Zurn links the disparagement of curiosity in the history of philosophy to the disparagement of women, colonized people, disabled people, and poor people as linked with animality and nature. Zurn points out that one of the most maligned figures in the history of curiosity is the serpent in the story of Adam and Eve, a contagious and dangerous force linked to the curiosity of women while also evoking anxieties about disability (34-35, 155). With the redemption of curiosity across modern philosophy, Zurn finds that animals were now largely denied the capacity for curiosity while curiosity itself came to be seen as "crucial to expanding sovereignty, dominating the natural world, and ordering human life" (38-39). This included not only Hobbes but also Rousseau, who conceptualized colonized people as incapable of curiosity in contrast with Europeans (41). Zurn thus traces the history of curiosity as a history of the use of curiosity against collectivity, nature, the environment, and people associated with these.

Refusing such a limited understanding of curiosity, the concluding chapter draws from decolonial and indigenous philosophies to argue for a more expansive use of curiosity as ecological curiosity. Echoing the forbidden serpent, one of the aspects of curiosity that Zurn draws out is its opacity, capable of complicating and opening up new passages "between organisms, entities, languages, and worlds" (Zurn 2021: 201). This curiosity not only brings opacity to inquiry but also ambiguity, emphasizing "the bothness and betweenness of knowers and knowns" (210-211). Finally, the intimacy of curiosity refuses to isolate but instead emphasizes interconnection and enmeshment within environments, likened to curiosity's

breathable air, swimmable water, and pollinatable plants (217). Zurn fittingly concludes the book with a passage on curiosity and ecological connection, writing,

...I hope for a curiosity alive to the things I do not know and perhaps cannot know. A curiosity attuned to the oscillations within and between things. And a curiosity conscious of its own stickiness, its embedded presence. (220)

The arc of Zurn's work on curiosity thus marks him as an environmental philosopher and eco philosopher, attentive to a broader practice of curiosity that is collective, enmeshed, and complicated by a teeming world. In the rest of this essay, I connect Perry Zurn's work on curiosity with trans history, activism, and art to bridge his attentiveness to both trans curiosity and eco curiosity, emphasizing the prevalence of a rich transecological curiosity.

Trans Eco-Curiosity

Drawn out together, I find Zurn's call for a richer topography of trans curiosity and the arc of his book towards an environmental philosophy of curiosity to be intriguingly interdigitated. Looking at trans history, activism, and writing suggests both a longstanding and contemporary engagement with curiosity as it is practiced with Zurn's vision of an alive, oscillating, and embedded curiosity.

In his essay for the anthology *Trap Door*, Abram J. Lewis looks at archives of trans activism in the 1970s as a resource for thinking contemporary trans politics differently, describing them as "at once expansive, unruly, and at times (perhaps at its best) downright strange" (Lewis 2017: 57). While acknowledging the distinctness of 1970s trans activism, Lewis emphasizes the connection between this past and the present as trans people responded to unprecedented and unpredictable attention to trans lives much like during the "tipping point" of the 2010s (60). In addition to the abolitionist and intersectional coalitional visions of

organizations such as STAR and TAO (Transsexual Action Organization), Lewis notes an affinity between 1970s trans organizations, terrestrial life, extraterrestrial visitors, and the expansion of consciousness through psychedelics (64-65). One image he shares produced by the Erickson Educational Foundation (EEF) features a painting of a large grasshopper being ridden by frogs and small mammals with the text, “DON’T SACRIFICE COMPASSION FOR SCIENCE, WE ARE ONE” (79). Another image titled “UFOs, TSs, and Extra-Ts-” and illustrated by Suzun David describes the advantages of an alliance between marginalized people and extraterrestrial visitors (66). By looking through archives, Lewis thus draws out the historical richness of trans curiosities as they forge radical connections with the earth, the sky, and the malleable world of perception while eluding demands for mainstream trans intelligibility.

In an interview from the *Trap Door* anthology artist Juliana Huxtable adds further nuance to this collective practice of trans curiosity through enhanced perception by discussing spaces of intoxication and her work deejaying. Describing the “states of intoxication” she discovered while getting into deejaying, Huxtable explains,

I think intoxication is a space where desire is able to operate in a way that’s much more liminal. I started deejaying at my own parties, so I was both creating the sound and throwing the party. It was a really intentional way to engender a dynamic. And it felt *possible*. So many things felt possible. (Huxtable 2017: 52)

Huxtable explains how the “experiment” of deejaying guided her from her unfulfilling job as a legal assistant to her life-long dream of becoming an artist who could “create a world” (51).

Through her musical curiosity and participation in nightlife through deejaying, Huxtable found a way into a creative and collective space of altered perceptions and transgressive world-making. Huxtable’s engagement with nightlife scenes of collective intoxication is also temporary and

tempered, as she asserts, “At a certain point, I want the option of operating during the day” (52). Referring to the limits and traps of nightlife scenes, Huxtable emphasizes that making connections with older trans women and Black trans women who have navigated nightlife scenes was key for avoiding these pitfalls... (53), care and collectivity becoming a means to both enter intoxication and set limits when needed.

Connections between trans curiosity, environments, and altered collective perception persist in trans literature. In 2019 writer Callum Angus founded the journal *Smoke and Mold* that publishes writing by trans and two-spirit people on nature, the environment, and climate crisis. When describing the most recent issue published April 2021, guest editor Charles Theonia unpacks its theme of fungi as a means of thinking through enmeshment between selves and their environments, writing,

In these pieces, rock-eating lichens generate poems from debris. The singular plurality of a slime mold undoes our edges. An interstellar mycelial network offers a model for accepting that the capacity for being apart is a necessary condition for coming together. Spore dispersals trace lines of inheritance and germination: one teaches us to forage, one creates the environment for our impossibility, one shows us how to metabolize our surroundings to remake ourselves. (Theonia 2021)

Joss Barton’s poem “THREE SHROOMS ON PAINTED WOOD” in this issue exemplifies an engagement with the environment and collective intoxication, including references to “THE PSYCHOTROPIC REALM A COSMIC / WILDERNESS,” “CHEWING THE BLUE VEIN STEMS AND BLACK BELLIES OF PSILOCYBIN / CAPS,” and “AUTOEROTIC EGO- ASPHYXIATION / AS THE WALLS BEGIN TO BREATHE AND THE SOUL MELTS INTO SPORES OF / TRANSSEXUAL GERMINATION” (Barton 2021). Barton’s erotic and

intoxicating ecopoetics exemplifies the characteristics of fungi described by Theonia, fruiting from debris in a dizzying plurality that includes self-fashioning from within and without.

Barton's poem is also political, interweaving the erotic, psychedelic, and dizzying transsexual fungisphere with visions of racism, homophobia, and transphobia permeating the meaning of home. The psychedelic descriptions of a transsexual environment are prefaced by warnings from Grandma of a poisonous otherworld that will "MAKE YOU GO PLUM OUT YOUR / MIND." This warning galvanizes curiosity by marking a space for enticing departure, leading "CLOSER TO THAT PERFECT STATE OF TRANSGENDER / NATURE" even while the multivariance of "HOME" continues to echo as a series of "SPORES." As Katie Hogan argues, environmental thinking in trans literature can include both an ambivalence and affection for home (Hogan 2020: 134).

In an essay for the recent *trans | fem | endurance* section of the *Brooklyn Rail*, Barton reflects on trans knowledge and loss, citing the negative spiral through which the endurance of growing up also involves "hiding away so much of the inherent joy of being a transgender little child." In addition to the "displacement of life" caused by poverty, racism, abuse, and survivor's guilt, Barton writes, "...I mourn because my childhood was trans as fuck and I wasn't allowed to name it for what it was." While reflecting on the complexities of endurance, loss, and movement into the forbidden fungal woods, the poem also references moments of freedom, including "CUTTING THRU THE FUNGAL BODIES OF FACISM AND SELF-DESTRUCTION" (Barton 2021a). At its conclusion her poem packs these complexities into a condensed image with the line, "HER / HEART AS SIMPLE AND FULL AS THREE SHROOMS ON PAINTED WOOD."

Isobel Bess's poem from an earlier issue of *Smoke and Mold* titled "Idyll 7 / A History Of The St. Johns River" similarly links environmental thought with reflections on history and home. Describing her experience on the waters of the St. Johns River, Bess connects this with liturgy, the theft of land and memory from indigenous people, climate change, and her experience of getting ejected from the academy, emphasizing "there are no pristine landscapes." She ends with a reflection on home understood through the mode of the river, writing,

When I first touch the waters of the St. Johns River I have not been home in years. I would not recognize the people who live there and I do not think they would recognize me. It is the nature of rivers to separate one bank from the other.

Environmental experience is thus marked as historical, complex, and opaque, the river standing as more than a river with each of Bess's refrains of "When I first touch the waters of the St. Johns River..." (Bess 2019).

These texts do not explicitly reference curiosity, but they connect with Zurn's emphasis on trans curiosity naming experience, experimenting, introspecting, and investigating beyond a narrowly prescribed vision of life that brackets out trans experience (Zurn 2021: 188, 190). They also begin responding to Zurn's question about the coalitional potential for trans curiosity as it extends beyond an exclusively human and unmalleable world (192). Though more can be asked about transecological curiosity, *Curiosity and Power* begins this conversation by centering transecological experience as it ranges from river reflections to collecting mushrooms (viii).

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