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Natural History According to Animals: Whitney Barlow Robles Tells an Alternative Story of Enlightenment Science

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English Abstract:
Whitney Barlow Robles' *Curious Species* advances a compelling counter-narrative to existing understandings of the emergence of natural history by foregrounding the agency of animals. Combining original research with first-person nature writing, the author contends that raccoons, rattlesnakes, and flounders all had a hand – or a tail, or a fin – in shaping and frustrating the attempts of naturalists to grasp the natural world. But to what extent were these and other *Curious Species* exceptions to the imperial rule which dominated nature in the 18th century?

Naturgeschichte nach den Tieren. Whitney Barlow Robles erzählt eine alternative Wissenschaftsgeschichte der Aufklärung

Abstract:
Whitney Barlow Robles' *Curious Species* entwirft eine faszinierende Gegenperspektive zur Gründung der Naturkunde, indem sie die Handlungsfähigkeit von Tieren ins Zentrum rückt. Durch eine Kombination von Originalrecherchen und Naturberichten aus erster Hand zeigt die Autorin, wie Waschbären, Klapperschlangen und Flundern die Erforschung der Natur mitprägten. Doch inwiefern waren diese und andere *Curious Species* Ausnahmen von der imperialen Regel, die die Natur im 18. Jahrhundert beherrschte?

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Natural History According to Animals: Whitney Barlow Robles Tells an Alternative Story of Enlightenment Science

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Categorization-defying corals, enchanting rattle snakes, unflattenable lumpfish and rebellious raccoons: The cast of animals enlisted by Whitney Barlow Robles to narrate an alternative account of natural history is an unruly ensemble. Her debut monograph, Curious Species, spotlights the ways in which these creatures both defined and derailed practices of natural history in the 18th century, the period in which the collection and categorization of the planet's animal inhabitants became a hallmark of the so-called 'Age of Enlightenment.' Except – as Barlow Robles deftly argues – prevailing ideas of Enlightenment science as a methodical and straightforward fact-finding procedure are far off the mark. On the contrary, animals influenced and often frustrated each step in the process of knowledge production, from the collection and transportation of specimens through to the depiction and description of species. In Barlow Robles' words, "animals shaped the very project that studied them, setting the terms for what people could learn" (p. 7). By attending to animals as protagonists, stories surface in which boats and taxonomists crash over corals, rattle snakes warn off collectors, and fish obstinately refuse to submit to two-dimensional techniques of preservation and illustration.

These well-chosen examples not only succeed in rendering the (often vaguely invoked) notion of 'animal agency' self-evident and immediate. They also make for an engrossing read. Thanks to its accessible and imaginative prose, Curious Species is a curiosity in itself, a hybrid book mixing conventional academic writing with elements of science journalism, nature writing and autobiography, all while spanning the fields of environmental, global, and science history. Each of the four chapters tracing the efforts and failures of 18th century naturalists to study a particular species alternates with a chapter in which the author sets out on a personal quest

to meet their modern descendants, a premise which impels Barlow Robles on escapades near and far from home: from scuba diving in the Great Barrier Reef to preserving the skin of a sea bass on her kitchen counter. The book's introduction justifies these re-enactments of 18th century encounters both as an explicit rejection of the artifice of scholarly objectivity and as a gesture to help communicate the 'situated and embodied' practice of natural history, then and now. But in her reflections upon her own interactions with animals, Barlow Robles is also after something more contingent: a thread linking 18th century science to the multiple environmental crises of the present. Catching and eating fish, hand-feeding endangered raccoons, tracking down a rare timber rattle snake – in a context of mass extinction and biodiversity collapse, all these personal actions entail moral choices with which the author reckons openly. "We ourselves are never not writing or working or thinking as animals," (p. 9) writes Barlow Robles, staking a claim as both observer and actor in the ongoing drama of natural history.

Of all her animal subjects, the author's most intense and surprising sense of personal identification resides with the rattle snake. In the book's second part, she traces the ways in which the rattle snake's subterranean habits, its venom and its rattle confounded settlers and naturalists alike in North America. While European colonizers eagerly pursued mass extermination campaigns to cleanse the landscape of serpentine danger, naturalists equally fell prey to outsized fears and myths, inducing specimen collectors to abandon their fieldwork or to speculate as to the enchanting effect of snake eyes and the (fictitious) hallucinogenic properties of venom. Seeking out the only surviving population of timber rattle snakes in New Hampshire, Barlow Robles wryly observes that ignorance – a defining feature of 18th century snake knowledge – is today a necessary precondition for snake protection , with the location of rattle snake dens kept tightly guarded to prevent intentional disturbance and harm by humans. The author's meeting with a live rattle snake also engenders a further realization about the gendered nature of historic violence against the species. Upon emerging from their winter dens, pregnant (or 'gravid') rattle snakes spend much longer basking in the sun than their male kin, a behavior which singled them out as prime targets of extermination campaigns. Entering the final stages of her own pregnancy, Barlow Robles reflects on the conflicting notions of danger and vulnerability which shackle child-bearing snakes and

humans, drawing connections with the fetishization of pregnant bodies within 18th century science. Researching against the grain of the male gaze on nature, the author herself becomes snake: “I was curled up, becoming, snake-like in my incubation, expecting, expectant, waiting for things not yet seen” (p. 122).

If Barlow Robles’ approach succeeds in rendering her subject moving and relevant, certain trade-offs are apparent. Artfully stitched together using evidence derived from prepared specimens, archival material, and visual sources, the species portraits in Curious Species have a tendency to collapse a complex period of accelerating change into a single moment in history, and Barlow Robles is content to cite voices and anecdotes from beyond the bounds of the 18th century when it strengthens her argument. This is forgivable insofar as her ambition is far larger than a simple chronology of colonial science. But it matters in the sense that it leads to a simplification of the aims and epistemologies of natural history as an evolving set of knowledge production practices. To tie her chapters together, Barlow Robles returns repeatedly to discussions surrounding the ‘great chain of being,’ a theological metaphor which ranked animal life according to its similarity to humans. Yet in portraying natural history primarily as an intellectual project – a lively debate driven by ‘curiosity’ over how various species fit into this scheme – the author perhaps downplays other potent forces which motivated investigation of the natural world, not least the politics of colonial power and exploitation, the commercial value of specimens and the prestige and cultural capital attached to participation in natural history.

This is by no means to suggest that Curious Species is not attuned to the violent and exploitative context in which natural history thrived. In the fifth chapter on fish, for example, Barlow Robles dedicates significant attention to the unsung role of enslaved people in gathering specimens under extreme conditions for collectors such as William Peck. In the analysis that follows, she astutely observes how a number of species – rays, flounders and lumpfish included – were unamenable to the two-dimensional representational strategies and preservation techniques deployed by European naturalists. Here, as in the rest of the book, the author avoids the erroneous temptation to claim that by frustrating the project of natural history, animals actively resisted imperial power. Instead, she widens her net to consider the

messy entanglement of fish science with commodity and food markets – both significant channels for specimen collecting, behavioral and morphological observations and the broader production of knowledge about fish.

One might still ask whether Barlow Robles' emphasis on natural historical knowledge as messy, involved, and networked goes too far in disregarding its long-term, totalizing victories. Put otherwise: For all the fish that couldn't be squashed onto a page, how many were successfully flat-packed, shipped across the Atlantic, and incorporated into white systems of knowledge? Published in the same year, an interesting counterpoint to *Curious Species* is offered by Nicholas Mirzoeff's *White Sight* (Boston 2023), which refers to practices of collecting and display as "the institutionalization of nature," carried out in the service of untrammeled colonial domination (p. 106). Barlow Robles' account, in which animals co-produced knowledge and occasionally evaded institutionalization, is penned both with more attention to detail and more hope. But there's a deeper reckoning with the tangible outcomes of natural history needed to convince readers that the author's hand-picked 'curious species' were not the exceptions which proved the rule.

The outcomes of natural history: a highly contested matter. Though most 18th-century naturalists doubted the possibility of extinction, the accelerating processes of racial capitalism set in motion under their watch are unarguably linked to the sixth mass extinction event we are currently experiencing, with the Living Planet Index documenting a 73% collapse in vertebrate wildlife populations since 1970. Post-Enlightenment naturalists of the 19th century often reframed their collecting activities as a valorous act of salvage in the face of unstoppable modernization. But as John Mackenzie and others have shown, the musealization of nature also existed within an opposite dynamic, whereby collecting assumed the role of a colonial insurance policy: By freezing a version of the past, naturalists manufactured a clean conscience for European exploitation. It can simultaneously be true that the vast numbers of animals which naturalists skinned, dried or bottled as specimens now play a vital role in DNA-based research into how quickly global biodiversity is changing. Navigating between bleached coral reefs and cluttered museum depots, Barlow Robles prevaricates in the face of this contradiction. The plaintive rhetorical questions addressing the environmental crisis which

end each chapter are nonetheless worked into something more substantial in the book's last pages: "for all the power of animals, one need only look at the accelerating destruction of coral reefs worldwide, or the plight of timber rattlesnakes, or the collapse of fisheries, or the handful of Cozumel raccoons left scurrying around the island to conceive of animals and their communities as finite historical entities that change over time [...] Their stories show the resilience of such creatures in the face of radical change and suggest how the fates of animals are bound with our own" (p. 244). Beyond its engrossing tales of misconceptions, mishaps, and animal mischief, the most striking contribution of Curious Species is its attention to uncertainty as a historical continuum. Far from resolving the question of human-animal relations, Barlow Robles shows that natural history in the 18th century was in fact a catalyst of precarity in an ongoing story of entanglement with our more-than-human world.