

Drunk birds

At some point in the early 2010s, variations of a pop-science news story about bird sexuality began to circulate online. **STUDY SAYS POLLUTION MAKES BIRDS GAY** and **GAY BY MERCURY**, read the headlines. The story was about the fact that pollutants leaking into the environment are changing the hormone systems of animals and leading to new traits and behaviors. In the case that has gotten the most attention, high levels of mercury in wetland habitats are altering the ‘pairing behavior and reproductive success’ of a species of white ibis. Scientists observe that, rather than heterosexual coupling and reproduction, some white ibises now prefer same-sex relationships. One image accompanying a news item shows a pair of male ibises strolling together along a shoreline, looking very gay indeed.



Alice Crain, pair of white ibises, 2015

The tone of these stories is one of alarm. And it is surely alarming that human-made pollutants are altering the endocrine systems of other species. White ibises who do not breed with each other are more likely to go extinct, further reducing the planet's rapidly diminishing biodiversity. The gay birds represent yet another example – part of a long list – of human behavior altering the planetary ecosystem in unexpected and damaging ways.

Yet the news stories' common focus on the birds' sexually 'atypical' behavior indicates another type of alarmism, too. Queerness, here, is presented as the result of a toxic environment, an unnatural aberration from the birds' 'natural' straight and reproductively focused orientations. Aligned with the toxic and the unnatural, the birds are anthropomorphized and their sexualities moralized according to human biases. In an essay about the ibises, health scientist Anne Pollock points out that 'posing intersex characteristics as the *sine qua non* of harm to our environment is a move steeped in heteronormativity.' According to Pollock, commentators may couch their concern in terms of extinction, but nonreproductive erotic relationships are the underlying fear.

Pollock argues further that, if we are to anthropomorphize animals to the extent that we can even call them gay, we must also consider the anthropomorphic possibility that their new sexual identities (assuming, probably wrongly, that their gayness is entirely novel, rather than previously unobserved) are not unpleasant for them. Perhaps the gay birds are enjoying their new carefree, childless lifestyle. Perhaps some of these birds, like some humans, find some aspects of reproduction a burden. 'For biologists, reproductive success is often understood to be the final cause of animal existence,' writes Pollock. 'Yet from whose perspective is reproductive success the ultimate definition of "success"? God's, Darwin's, ecologists', or the animals?' We can't know what fulfilment is to the animals, but we have to assume it isn't the same as ours. More to the point, human desires differ among the species – can't theirs?

While sympathizing with preservationist concerns and lamenting the possibility of ibis extinction, Pollock inquires why some behaviors, and some environments, are deemed natural or unnatural; why human-led climate change gets so much attention only in some circumstances; why bird sexuality is any of our business. It's true that the birds have not had a choice in the matter when it comes to their environmental pollution or hormonal regulation – but then again, who does? Humans too absorb a number of extremely toxic pollutants without prior consent.

In this toxic world, GMO crops are vilified as suspiciously artificial, unhealthy and unnatural; simultaneously they are championed for quick reproduction with the capacity to feed large populations. Seedless grapes – fleshy globes bred devoid of seed-embryos – are weird but convenient and delicious; yeast is good for the gut unless it overbreeds, in which case you need pills and ointment. Opium is illegal but opiates are sanctioned and gluttonously overprescribed

for profit. With our incredibly porous bodies and our mutated ecologies, we can hardly pretend there is a state of unmodified, unpolluted, sober nature in which animals like us could – or should – exist and bear fruit.

There are also *intoxicating* effects to what we consider toxic. ‘Yeah, maybe these birds are “fucked up” by their polluted environment,’ Pollock writes, but ‘it can be fun to be fucked up’. What is recreation and what is poison is entirely a question of cultural attitude. A state of intoxication might be dangerous, but it might also be pleasurable, and there is nothing particularly aberrant about it: when it comes to sobriety as a default ‘natural’ state, the last centuries have been a historical exception in the West. Throughout the Middle Ages, for example, people drank beer or wine because water wasn’t potable. Even if drunkenness doesn’t fit into our current understanding of purity, many other chemically altered states do. Pharmacological substances are sanctioned when they contribute to what is considered mainstream productivity, wellness or normalcy. Conversely, pharma-power has been reclaimed in opposition to conservative purity politics and endlessly shifting ‘natural’ baselines – consider the gleeful endocrinological intoxication and chemical dependence implied by Paul Preciado’s well-known title *Testo Junkie*. (Or the *Xenofeminist Manifesto*’s closing line: ‘If nature is unjust, change nature!’ – as in, nature doesn’t exist, so let’s fuck with it according to our own desires.)

Despite their endocrinological metamorphoses, and despite their declining reproductive rates, the gay ibises seem to be living long and healthy lives – and enjoying intimate relationships with each other. Pollock likens their state to what some theorists might call ‘queer sociality’, where any moral, and in this case anthropomorphic, distinctions between toxic and safe, pure and artificial, chemically neutral and chemically enhanced, may be reclaimed and/or rendered irrelevant through the sheer intoxicating nature of togetherness. The birds are still having an erotic and social life, if not a reproductive one, and that is still a life. Especially in an age of mass extinction, should not every form of life be celebrated, congratulated?

In a landmark book of queer theory *No Future*, Lee Edelman claims that politics as we know it operates on the ‘presupposition that the body politic must survive’ and that queerness provides an alternative political framework. As a term and a lived experience, queerness ‘names the side of those not “fighting for the children”, the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism’ – and this is where ‘queerness attains its ethical value’. Like Edelman and many others, Pollock provokes us to rethink ‘the capacity for intergenerational life’ as the telos of all life, but takes this further to suggest this question applies *even* when it comes to other species. This is of course a provocation for humans to think anew about our own teleological drive toward intergenerational life in relation to *all other life*, especially when human activity is exactly what has fucked up the birds so much.



Mushrooms grown under lockdown, 2020. Courtesy of the author.

Paradise rot

Jenny Hval's short novel *Paradise Rot* presents love as an ambivalent experience, both toxic and intoxicating. A young Norwegian exchange student, Johanna, moves to a beach town in Australia. Struggling to find housing, Johanna eventually moves in with Carral, a waify Australian woman living in a strange house in a former brewery. The brewery is disused but doesn't seem to have stopped fermenting. Everything in the building is rotting. Mushrooms sprout from the bathtub grout; disintegrating apples overflow from the trash can. Insects circle. The decomposition is lively and sensorially overwhelming. The cheap walls, built to divide the formerly cavernous space, are paper thin, and Johanna can hear everything in the house – from water dripping to Carral peeing or even breathing. And Carral herself, increasingly fragile, sickly, somnambulist and clingy, seems to be decomposing into the stew.

Soon after Johanna moves into the brewery, Carral starts sneaking into her bed at night. It's not clear whether Carral wants sex; she mainly seems to want someone to cling to, to rub up against, to cry with, and to assure herself that she exists by dint of contact. It's not clear either whether Carral is entirely awake for these dreamlike encounters, which become increasingly erotic. The lovers soak into each other and the furniture, the floorboards. Carral wets the bed, pee soaking Johanna's clothes. Johanna gets her period and the blood soaks the sheets.

In a state of what resembles chemical dependency, Johanna finds it harder and harder to leave the house or to be away from Carral, who is constantly persuading her to stay home, who needs Johanna to feed her, take care of her, hold her, touch her. Carral spends most of her time listlessly flipping through an erotic novel or passed out on the dank sofa. Johanna watches her, obsesses over her, loves her, despises her. Their desire does not flow but oozes between them, threatening to submerge Johanna. She struggles against the urge to become part of the damp house with its fungal occupants and its compost heap.

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