Extinction and Transformation: Surrealism, Literature, and Ecology

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Surrealism’s disdain for Western civilization has increasingly come to encompass its mistreatment of animals and the environment. The surrealist critique of the exploitation and domination of other species and the planet frequently recognizes the way in which these are bound up with repression along the lines of both gender and knowledge. In this presentation, I examine two novels by women surrealists from different generations, which thematize the nexus of environmental destruction, animal exploitation, and one-sided scientistic rationalism. The British-born, naturalized Mexican artist and writer Leonora Carrington’s *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974) and the American artist and writer Rikki Ducornet’s *Phosphor in Dreamland* (1995) are wildly adventurous interrogations of ecological catastrophes and conjurations of new modes of being that may be able to counteract them.

Carrington’s novel narrates the coming of a new ice age which instils an ambivalent utopia, as 92-year-old protagonist Marian Leatherby takes the opportunity to recover the Holy Grail and restore it to its rightful place as a paean to Goddess worship; meanwhile, Marian and her elderly companions form a new interspecies community comprising crones, cats, goats, and werewolves. As the world is covered in snow and ice, patriarchal institutions crumble and a new ecological order arises. Ducornet’s novel takes place on the fictive Caribbean island Dreamland, where the club-footed orphan and prodigious inventor Phosphor takes part in an expedition that sets out to chart the animals and vegetation on the island; the expedition uncovers the island’s malicious history, including the eradication of its native population and the extinction of a species of human-sized birds called lôplôps, under the sign of mercantilism and the Catholic church. Combining recurring refrains about human hubris with near-zoological descriptions of the island’s rich mollusc life, Ducornet ultimately locates the germs of an ecological sensibility in a form of love that is an alternative to instrumental
knowledge, transcends species, and is directed toward the entire natural world. Both novels are polyphonic and meandering, mirroring the narrative depictions of complex interactions between humans, animals, and the environment. In this presentation, I read *The Hearing Trumpet* and *Phosphor in Dreamland* in relation to a broader surrealist critique of environmental destruction and exploitation, and as tributes to the magical potential of transformation.

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