



Curiosity, power and narrative practice:

An interview with Perry Zurn

Perry Zurn interviewed by Zan Maeder



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Abstract

What are some of the dominant and alternative stories of curiosity? How do we wield it and to what effect? What does it mean to attend to the politics of curiosity in our lives and work and to acknowledge it as a collective practice and social force that can colonise, normalise and divide us and disrupt, liberate and connect us? Zan Maeder interviews Perry Zurn, Provost Associate Professor of Philosophy at American University and author of *Curiosity and power: The politics of inquiry* (2021) about work tracing histories of curiosity in philosophy and political theory and co-creating (with many other transgressors, past and present) possibilities for ethical and liberatory curiosity praxis.

Key words: *curiosity; queer; colonisation; narrative practice*

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Zan: Welcome, Perry. For narrative practitioners, curiosity is really a first language. Of all the audiences of your work, I imagine that narrative practitioners would be some of the least surprised by the notion that curiosity would be political. And there are so many things about your work that might extend and deepen our attention to the politics of inquiry that I'm excited to hear more about. Would you share a bit about the history of your interest in the politics of curiosity?

Perry: We live in a globalised world in which curiosity is largely perceived as an automatic good, a simple good. It's just good to be curious. It's good to ask questions in all kinds of directions. And in a sense, I resonate with that. But in another sense, as someone who has worked in educational settings and learning spaces all my life, I've witnessed a lot of constraints placed on curiosity. Despite everyone saying that curiosity is always good, there's a lot of governing of curiosity, directing it in particular ways and forbidding it in other ways.

I went to a conservative college, for example, where discussion of gender and sexuality was not permitted. Now I teach at a liberal college where we have a department devoted to topics like this. How do institutions of learning – institutions of curiosity – develop in such different ways?

Our political setting and our political structures really inform who's asking questions about what and how they're asking those questions and how those questions get taken up and legitimated or not. Instead of just a blanketed celebration of curiosity, I think we need a critical approach that asks, well, where are these questions coming from? What are they really doing in the world? And who are they supporting and who are they not supporting? For me, the notion that curiosity *is* political prompts me to attend to *how* it's political (Zurn, 2021b).

Zan: As you've traced the political histories of curiosity discourses and the ways that curiosity and politics are co-constructive, what are some of the things that you've discovered that curiosity can do?

Perry: I define curiosity as a capacity to build connections through a set of investigative affects and practices. Curiosity is typically thought of as something we have: an individual desire for knowledge, a kind of lightbulb that switches on when we are motivated to explore something. But I like to think about curiosity as something we do.

On the one hand, curiosity can be revolutionary. It can prompt us to imagine a different way of being in the world for ourselves and for one another. New paths forward. And that can be beautiful and empowering if (and that's an important if) the vision of a new world is itself beautiful and empowering. This is the kind of curiosity that can inform social justice movements, for example.

On the other hand, curiosity can support the status quo. How do we keep things the way they are? How can we keep going in the direction we're already going? Sometimes, maintaining the status quo can be troubling, especially if the status quo is inequitable in certain ways. Other times, maintaining the status quo can be good. If we're on the path toward liberation and we're already expanding rights or conditions of flourishing for more people, how can we keep doing that? And how can we keep doing that better? Liberation doesn't always require new questions and new directions; sometimes it takes pure staying power. So curiosity can break us into new patterns, or it can sustain current patterns. Either way we have to ask, "Why are we committed to sustaining or breaking those patterns? What are the values and the relationships at the root of that choice between revolution and the status quo?"

Zan: In your book, *Curiosity and power*, you really seek to disrupt the notion that curiosity is an individual trait or practice and explore examples of curiosity as a collective practice or a social force, again, both in ways that enforce and subvert dominant power. Why is it important that we consider it in this collective way? And I'm wondering if you have ideas about what this might have therapists considering if they're orienting to justice in therapy and community work?

Perry: For thousands of years, at least in Western intellectual history, curiosity has been thought of as an individual desire that each of us has, some kind of kernel of intellectual interest that fires off whenever we are personally motivated to explore something new. Honestly, that perception has contributed in many ways to a colonial curiosity – where an explorer gets to discover whatever it is that they want to discover, whether that's land or whether that's ideas, regardless of the effects. As a colonial practice, it's fine to express your individual curiosity, in whatever way you want. Because it's individual, it's personal, so how could it be political or subject to ethical evaluation, right?

But, as we know, the personal is political, and the individual is always submerged in some kind of social fabric. There's no real way of extracting the individual from the social. That's just a ruse. So all of our individual curiosities, all of the questions that each of us brings to ourselves and to the world and to each other, are informed by social networks and social histories, political networks and political histories, people present in our lives today, or people who existed well before we ever appeared on this Earth. Our curiosities are informed by all of that. Curiosity is already collective in that sense. It's already communal. It's already social. It's already political.

The question then is: What are we missing when we treat curiosity individually? When we don't approach it in its communal setting, its collective context, and the relationships that make it possible? For therapists, for example, it's important to reject a simplistic "everyone's on their own individual journey" narrative, and think instead of how our journeys, and the construction of our sense of self and of meaning in the world, are already rooted in and constantly in dialogue with the people around us, as well as people before us. How can we consciously sit our curiosity in that space and ask questions that break or that build in different ways from there? That seems like a rich place to start.

Zan: In *Curiosity and power*, it's really fascinating to read the history of discourses of curiosity more broadly in Western thought traditions. Zooming in now, narrative practice or narrative

therapy is practiced on the margins of, adjacent to, alongside and in critique of the field of mainstream psychology and psychiatry. I was wondering in your research, what you've discovered about the ways that curiosity has been and is wielded politically in this field and in the particular power relations of therapy?

Perry: Well, psychology is largely responsible for the mainstream understanding of curiosity today. Defining curiosity as a motivation to explore or a drive to fill an information gap, psychology has been pivotal in observing curiosity's role in individual information-seeking behaviour. Those psychological theories of curiosity of course build on Western philosophy and extend into neuroscience, and from there inform the spheres of education, business, technology, et cetera (see Zurn & Shankar, 2020).

I've already gestured toward my concerns with a characterisation of curiosity as merely individual information-seeking rather than social knowledge-building. So perhaps I'll highlight another concern here. In psychology, curiosity is described as a condition of or as correlated with wellbeing. The healthy person is curious, and the unhealthy person is incurious. Or the happy person is curious, and the unhappy person is incurious. By this reasoning, stress, anxiety, depression, trauma and the like necessarily compromise a person's capacity for curiosity.

But I think this misses something fundamental about curiosity. It is already there when, for example, we're full of anxiety or deeply depressed. It is already there in experiences of trauma. I would rather ask, then, how does curiosity function within states of depression and anxiety? What is curiosity already doing in spaces of trauma? How are we holding on to it – and how is it holding on to us – in those spaces? I want to resist the psychological and psychiatric penchant toward saving curiosity for folks who are "better" or getting better. And I want to instead think of curiosity as a tool always already in us and between us, one that just gets inflected in different ways based on where we are, what we're experiencing, and what we're going through.

Zan: This has me thinking about your writing about the crippling of curiosity. Is that present in what you're speaking about?

Perry: Absolutely. The field of disability studies and crip theory thinks critically about norms of mental health and rationality (McRuer, 2006). Norms that we've created for how bodies and minds work (or are supposed to work) are often inaccurate and unhelpful. There is far more diversity of function (and value to that diversity) than norms typically allow. When these norms govern individual and social behaviour, communities of people who don't have "normal" bodies or "normal" minds, or don't use their bodies or their minds in "normal" ways, experience discrimination and violence.

Crippling curiosity for me means resisting ableist norms of curiosity and embracing its divergences instead. It means trying to think about curiosity not as a simple sign of being well-adjusted, able-bodied, sharp-minded and highly intelligent. There is a perception that the paradigmatically curious person is the scientist. A scientist with a standard, normative kind of intelligence. I want to really resist that and think about curiosity in ways that are wildly diverse and won't always get recognised as intelligent or rational or correct, or well-behaved or whatever. That's crippling curiosity.

Zan: One of the things that I imagine is very relevant to narrative practitioners is the way that curiosity can be dehumanising or rehumanising and its capacity to thicken personhood. And that makes so much sense to me as a queer person who's seen the dehumanising effects of curiosity on so many folks. But also, in a narrative practice context, the experience that people have when someone is actually really interested in the many facets of who they are and their experience and what they think about and value, the sense that you have of dignity that can become available through that kind of curiosity.

Perry: In a colonial context, and in a colonial style – and I mean "colonial" not just in the sense of modern European colonisation, but stretching

back to the Roman Empire and before – curiosity involves going into someone else's land, studying the people and the language, taking artefacts (and sometimes people), organising knowledge/people according to foreign norms and expectations, et cetera. Colonial curiosity separates the knower from the thing that is coming to be known. It says, I (the knower) am curious about this thing (the object). That distancing of the knower from the object of knowledge is, I think, ultimately dehumanising.

In contemporary social sciences, such as anthropology, sociology and psychology, for example, researchers talk about patients, or clients or participants in a study, as opposed to people who share worlds with them. One of the critiques of a colonial construction of curiosity in this context has been community-led research and community-engaged research where the person who wants to come to know becomes part of – and participant in – the group itself. The researcher becomes a participant in the community rather than the person in the community becoming a research participant.

The subject/object divide also comes up regularly in testimonials of marginalised people, marginalised along a variety of different axes. We can talk about gender or race and ethnicity, or we can talk about disability or queerness or Indigeneity or class. Folks in these positions are often targeted by an objectifying curiosity. That dehumanisation reduces the person to simply an object that must produce knowledge (especially about their difference) for the knower. And that's really troubling and problematic. Now, as far as rehumanising, I do think that curiosity has this capacity to reopen the relation that has been cut, that severance of the knower from the object of knowledge, and refashion it entirely. Curiosity really has this beautiful capacity to connect everyone (and everything) involved in the knowing relation (Zurn & Bassett, 2022). It can help rebuild that relationship or that edge between things, and help humans (and nonhumans) start learning, thinking and developing meaning together in a web or a network.

But I want to pause here. It's important to think about this process not just as humanising, but also as moving beyond the human. When curiosity's capacity to connect destroys the division between (human) knower and (dehumanised) object of knowledge, something fundamental changes. We are resituated within curious webs not only of other people but also of non-people, including the animals, the plants, the earth, and the stones around us. This is one of the gifts of Indigenous philosophy, at least in the North American context (see for example Simpson, 2017). This injunction to think of curiosity beyond the human.

Zan: In your work, you speak a lot about what this means for Black and brown folks, trans folks, disabled folks, but also about folks who've died, ancestors, the power of asking questions of folks whose voices have been silenced or marginalised or distorted. Could you speak a bit more about that?

Perry: People often approach curiosity with a novelty bias.¹ An individual bias and a novelty bias, which means that people think curiosity has to take us somewhere new. And that we, especially young adults in the present, need to lead the way to new ideas. I think this bias is extremely limiting because it misidentifies the source of curiosity's power to change our worlds. That power does not simply lie in breaking open the new; it also lies in holding close the old. What are the questions our ancestors have had that we can humbly take up and say, "These are worth asking, these are worth holding on to, these are worth holding up to the light"? How can we reconnect with what has preceded us? This is in opposition to, again, a colonial curiosity that sets out to discover (or better yet *establish*) a new world, and in doing so erase the old.

I think about this a lot in queer contexts. What have my queer and trans ancestors asked about the world? Sure, they may have said it in language that I no longer fully recognise, because I wasn't there for that language to make sense, right? But what were they really asking? A lot of young people these days think people in the 80s and 90s were just wrong about everything because they were using the

wrong words. That approach impoverishes us. How can we learn from the elders in our lives and in our communities and think *with* them rather than immediately assume they are not woke enough, not hip with whatever we're talking about. And similarly, for those who have passed on, how can we listen? We are going to have to listen across a number of bridges: age, certainly, and time and language and experience. We have to listen across those things.

Zan: My sense is that many, maybe most of us, might be recruited into oppressive and colonising curiosity practices without realising it, and especially when we occupy locations of privilege. Like myself, as a white practitioner with over three decades of training in entitlement to knowledge, seeing myself as a knower, an expert, especially in the context of "therapy", and how subtly I can be captured by that in spite of much unlearning. What might we notice that can help us untangle, or expose, dominating or oppressive curiosity in action? And what kinds of questions could we ask ourselves in order to interrogate the kinds of curiosities we're collaborating with?

Perry: That's such a good question. I think about this in relationship to what I understand as feminist curiosity, which is a kind of curiosity that's attuned to inequities of all sorts (Zurn, 2021a). We could talk about this as a queer curiosity, too, or a crip curiosity or a decolonial curiosity. These traditions point us to how knowers get constructed through social norms and hierarchies. Marginalised groups then become constructed as objects of knowledge. But what would it mean to take those groups as knowers themselves? For me, as someone who's white in a white settler-colonial country, there's a way in which I can walk into a space and claim to be a knowledge producer fairly easily. That is true. And, in certain contexts, there won't be pushback precisely because of my whiteness.

But at the same time, as a visibly queer, trans and gender disruptive person, the privilege of my whiteness is compromised, complexified. At different moments and in different contexts, I will walk into a space or begin speaking and be met with: "You're

not a serious scholar.” “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” “You’re off your rocker.” There is this perception of queer and trans folks as too rebellious, emotional, unstable and unable to hold the private and the public apart. A perception that, insofar as we break social mores in how we behave, we also break social mores in how we think, so we must be less rigorous thinkers and less reliable scholars (or employees, or organisers, et cetera). So I’ll get both. I’ll get, “Yeah, sure. Come in, you belong.” And “We are going to hold you at arm’s length. You’re not a well-disciplined knower. You are more careless, more haphazard.”

Many of us are situated on these hinges of privilege. And it matters that we attend to where we are immediately given space and legitimacy and respect. We need to notice those places. But we also need to notice where we’re not, and where we don’t even give ourselves credit as knowers. Living in a world that dismisses queerness and transness in the way that it does, and discriminates against queer desire and trans disruption in the way that it does, I have to devote time and energy to saying, “No, I *can* be a knower. And what I see and what I observe and what I’m building with other people matters. And it is reflective of something true in the world.” This reclamation takes constant work for people on the marginalised side of their hinges, because the world is constantly trying to erase our right to know.

Zan: So on the other side of the coin, I would love you to speak about the politics of incuriosity or unexpressed curiosity. There’s lots of examples in *Curiosity and Power* about how incuriosity can be a tactic of oppression and also of political resistance. And in narrative practice we often really centre curiosity, but we’re also very attentive to the effects of our questions. I wonder what might radical or resistance-oriented incuriosity look like?

Perry: Certain experiences in our lives prompt narratives of who we are. Sometimes those narrative structures are incredibly useful, and other times they are deeply unhelpful. When you realise a specific narrative is not serving you, you have to say, “I’m no longer going

to ask questions like that, in that direction.” Questions like: Did I do that right? Am I good at this? Am I not good enough for this? All of us get negative messaging, even more so those with marginalised positionalities. It’s a constant second-guessing of self. And there comes a point at which we have to realise this way of incessantly querying ourselves is not helpful. That is the moment of radical or resistant incuriosity, to say, “I’m no longer going to ask those questions or go down that road. I am here now. I am building this sense of who I am with myself and other folks around me. And that’s the place I need to put my energy.”

A lot of times these narratives are inherited from (and tuned to) social norms. Sometimes it’s the part of prudence (and a technique of survival) to be curious about how social norms work and how you might be able to pattern your life after them. We have to be honest about that. But other times, it is important to say, “No, I do not need to spend all this energy trying to pattern my life after cisheterosexual, or white settler, or ableist and sanist norms. But rather, I need to lean into the ways my community or my culture makes its own meaning, builds its own values and practices, and find comfort and satisfaction in that. I need to be more curious about my own people rather than clamouring to succeed within oppressive social norms.” There can be a radical incuriosity here. A refusal to study dominant patterns of thought, value and behaviour and to instead lift up other ways of being.

Zan: It really makes me think about, for example, cisgender heterosexual practitioners who are working with trans and queer folks – and this is often true for people working across varied difference in power relations – those questions that people in a therapy context can feel entitled to ask. Like the phenomenon of trans broken arm syndrome where every question has to be related to gender and transness, often excluding all of the other dimensions of people’s experiences and preferences. What might it look like for people to not ask those questions, or to ask themselves whether they need to ask those questions or whether they need to “know” those things? Often, I have no

idea the way that people I work with identify or about their experience of their body, but I don't actually need to know that to be able to collaborate with them. I only need to know how they want me to relate to them. And that's a really different inquiry.

Perry: I think it's incumbent on all of us, but certainly as people working in therapy or in education, to be aware of the stereotypical ways in which problematic questions get asked of particular communities and resist those. That's not too hard to learn if you become a student of a variety of different marginalised communities. How have they experienced questions as a group? What are the constant questions that get asked in their direction and how have they critiqued them? For trans folks, there's a set of questions that typically get asked over and over again. The same goes for people with disabilities, people with specific racial or ethnic backgrounds, but also folks who are mixed in a particular way. There's a need to locate them, "Where are you really from?" Or, "Which parent do you most identify with? Or which culture?" These questions attempt to pin people somewhere, to a narrative, or to a stereotype. It's crucial to understand the ways curiosity gets constantly thrown at particular groups and then refuse to participate. Say, that's not going to be a part of my practice here.

Zan: It seems like some kind of flattening curiosity that we can be vigilant to in our work. In the final chapter of *Curiosity and Power*, you consider who might need to be the possible companions of curiosity in order for it to be practiced ethically. You name opacity, ambiguity and intimacy. Would you speak a bit about the lineages that these came from and why you think they are so important in an ethical curiosity practice?

Perry: I was grappling with how to practice curiosity in an ethical way, grounded in all the values I've been trying to develop throughout the book and in my other work. These values of relation, of equitability, of reciprocity, of generosity and humility. If curiosity can be used by all kinds of people to do all kinds of things, then how can I carve out a generous curiosity, an equitable curiosity?

What I realised was this: It's not as simple as distinguishing good curiosity from bad curiosity and saying, "Do it this way. Don't do it that way." Rather, curiosity itself isn't enough of a guide to its own best practice. It needs companions. What I love about this move now, in retrospect, is that the whole book is trying to think about curiosity in a social context. Then, in the final chapter, it treats curiosity as a person and says, "Well, curiosity needs friends, too. It needs to be in relationship, too". These are just some of the companions for a more ethical curiosity: ambiguity, opacity and intimacy. When our curiosity practice is capable of honouring ambiguity, opacity and intimacy, it is on its way to being ethical.

When curiosity is used in violent ways, it often divides one thing from another (for example, the knower from the object of knowledge) or makes binary distinctions (whether gendered or otherwise). So I thought, ambiguity lets the complexity of things sit there and we can become curious in that space of ambiguity where we can't quite settle what something means or where we want to go, and that's okay. We don't have to use curiosity to govern and settle and distinguish immediately. We can let it sit with ambiguity. I draw a lot from Gloria Anzaldúa here, a 1980s and 90s queer Chicana feminist who's written much about the power of ambiguity, especially when thinking about borderlands (the Mexico/US border specifically), but also border experiences and border people (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Opacity is the second companion. Curiosity often gets used to make the world transparent, as if the world should give me its knowledge, and other people should give me their knowledge. But what if particular objects in the world, particular communities in the world, particular organisms in the world, are opaque? Or refuse to give their knowledge to me? How could my curiosity sit with that and listen to that opacity, listen to that refusal to be known and be okay with that as opposed to a more violent, extractive approach? For opacity, I draw on Édouard Glissant, who worked in the Caribbean to think about colonisation and the colonial practice of curiosity as demanding transparency (Glissant, 1990).

The final companion, at least for the moment, is intimacy. I want to resist a kind of curiosity that is individualistic, domineering, self-guided, self-possessed and self-confident in a way that refuses to acknowledge the intimacy between me as a knower and all the things that inform me and guide me in my knowledge journey. Recognising the intimacy between the psyche, the social world and the natural world re-situates curiosity. It doesn't let me use my curiosity *on* someone or something. But it makes me practice a curiosity *with* those worlds. Not a curiosity *about* or *on*, but a curiosity *with*. I draw a lot from North American Indigenous theory here (Kimmerer, 2015; Simpson, 2017).

At any rate, those are some helpful companions for a more ethical curiosity. I imagine you could develop others in a therapeutic context to help guide curiosity toward its best self.

Zan: Ambiguity, opacity and intimacy seem like they might provide some interesting invitations for narrative practitioners in thinking about the ways that we come together with people in our work. There are so many discourses around professionalism and ideas that are meant to elevate therapists out of relationship with the folks that we are collaborating with. I wonder about how we could continue to disrupt those hierarchies that are really inherently violent. Especially thinking about intimacy in connection with Country and ecosystems and ancestors – many exciting possibilities. Thank you so much for this conversation and your work.

Note

¹ For more on Zurn's critique of the novelty bias, see Zurn & Bassett, 2023.

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