

American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World. By SUSAN SCOTT PARRISH. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture. 341 pages. \$49.95 (cloth), \$22.50 (paper).

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In 1743 Pennsylvania botanist John Bartram received a silver cup from Sir Hans Sloane, recently retired president of the Royal Society in London, with some large writing on it. The engraved letters modestly spelled out Sloane's name. This pleased Bartram because "when my friends drink out of it they may see who was my benefactor" (172 n. 41). Susan Scott Parrish's marvelous, meticulous, and original *American Curiosity* emphasizes that colonial America was as much a center of early modern scientific production as the cities of metropolitan Europe. But Sloane's gift and Bartram's delight—the embodiment of an entire culture of transatlantic scientific exchange—seem to suggest how even metropolitan acknowledgments of colonial labor and their reception in the periphery reinforced awareness of Eurocentric Atlantic hierarchies.

In Parrish's vivid and precise telling, America was no longer a theater of jaw-dropping wonders by the later seventeenth century but a collection of curiosities. Having shed much of its former association with a sinful lust for knowledge, curiosity became synonymous with the minute observation of particular facts, the objectification of a pastoral and feminized nature, and the perception of the universe's divine rational structure (though curiosities often retained a more prodigious sense of the utterly weird). Because the Americas were the colonial theater with which early modern Britain enjoyed the most sustained interaction, grappling with American curiosities played a decisive role in fostering a new empiricism in British science. The desire among London's virtuosos for trustworthy accounts of faraway American nature empowered Americans as in situ observers. "Empiricism, in this regard, gave authority where political empire took it away" (22). The *curieux* of the Royal Society needed good relations with their colonial informants. Realizing this, American savants sought to advance "claims for their own legitimacy as knowledge makers" (76) and reject opprobrious discourses of New World degeneracy. Naturalists such as William Byrd II and Alexander Garden typically traveled to Europe by proxy, through their letters and specimens, rather than in person and often bristled at the paltry recognition granted their labors. On their own shores and on their own terms, however, they comprised an ad hoc community of creole cognoscenti in a curious sphere—ostensibly set apart from war, trade, politics, and heterosexual desire—defined by sentimental pastoral devotion and modest empirical curiosity.

In addition to challenging the Eurocentric structure of standard accounts of colonial science, Parrish broadens readers' views of early modern knowledge making to include women, servants, Amerindians, and African slaves. Steven Shapin's foundational *A Social History of Truth* has long focused attention on the construction of the Christian gentleman as a uniquely credible spokesman for nature.¹ But Parrish demonstrates how many different kinds of informants and assistants the virtuoso needed to be able to speak at all. Curiosity, licit for men, was repeatedly declared illicit for women, a dangerous if not fatal passion. Yet in reality colonial women including Jane Colden, Eliza Lucas Pinckney, and others could be active botanizers and collectors for metropolitan patrons. Amerindians and slaves—often presumed absent from the sources that document colonial American knowledge—were, in fact, pivotal mediators between colonizers and the natural world. Amerindians were "naturals," their senses almost preternaturally attuned to their environment. Indian "sagacity"

¹ Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1994).

(239) was akin to animal instinct in European eyes, associated with a tendency to swampy skulking treachery rather than philosophical wisdom. Native knowledge, however, was a tool for the conquest of the American environment to be ignored at the invaders' peril. Settlers grabbed what knowledge they could from natives: geographic, botanical, medical. But they rejected the heathen beliefs that went with them and ultimately poured scorn on what they later hypocritically blasted as the feeble superstitions of decimated Amerindian populations.

Where natives were sagacious, slaves were "cunning" (262), a word that signaled colonizers' dread that Africans might turn their knowledge into an instrument of resistance, a danger epitomized by the shamanic religion and armed resistance of Maroons who thrived in opaque geographies such as the mountains of Jamaica, and by the seemingly ubiquitous threat of poison. Yet again the objects of colonizers' fearful scorn were enlisted as vital allies in the quest for American nature. The London collector James Petiver actively encouraged training slaves to help with botanical work, and many clearly did so: Cotton Mather insisted that his first awareness of inoculation came through his slave Onesimus, and whites often trusted blacks' healing arts and feared their magic. But if knowledge was power, the fundamental project of slavery was ignorance and the attempt to deny Africans education, information, and communication. The theme of slavery feeds one of two inspired endings to the book, a discussion of a slave trapped in a cage who has his body pecked apart by birds, depicted in a section of J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur's 1782 *Letters from an American Farmer* titled "On Charles Town and Slavery." "The birds, the birds; aaah me!" (293) cries the hapless victim, an ending that could have been written by Edgar Allan Poe. In the new United States, visions of divine pastoral order disintegrated into accounts of a tormented American nature, profoundly disturbed by the unnaturalness of slavery. The book's other ending also connects with the literature of the American Renaissance and the attack on what its exponents mistook as the cold rationalism of Enlightenment science. In "Cetology," chapter 32 of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Ishmael dismisses scientific attempts, particularly Linnaeus's, to reduce the "multitudinously baptized" (312) whale to the definitive signifier of "mammal." Ishmael modestly insists that his telling of the whale is "but the draught of a draught" (312), not a fancy system. Thus Melville continues a tradition of "rebellious American empiricism" and "colonial resistance to metropolitan hauteur" (312).

American Curiosity is an outstanding work of historical recovery, beautifully executed, closely argued, and laden with telling quotations. It takes an amorphous and hitherto obscure archive of correspondence and, fusing approaches from the sociology of scientific knowledge, Atlantic history, and American studies, wrings from it important arguments about the relationship between American ways of knowing and self-fashioning in response to the American environment and an imperial Atlantic world. It vividly demonstrates the social character and cultural significance of transatlantic scientific exchange, as American naturalists sought to become authoritative participants in enlightened natural history's grand project to collect and describe the world. With impressive originality it combines the cultural history of natural history with assessments of the role played by Amerindians and slaves in making American knowledge. The breadth with which Parrish conceives the problem of American curiosity is at the cutting edge of the field and richly suggestive, if not fundamental, for future studies. It can no longer be ignored that the networks that spanned the Atlantic and spawned American knowledge were highly complex intercultural fabrics, comprised of men and women, Europeans and Creoles, Amerindians and African slaves.

What, ultimately, does *American Curiosity* tell readers about the relation between natural history and empire? Were Americans modestly curious about their environment or sinfully (imperial) curious? Parrish excels in detailing the internal imperialism of settler relations with natives and slaves, yet the theme of commercial empire, while certainly present, is somewhat underexploited. The book focuses on the literary and cultural history of American self-making

through natural history, rather than the social history of the commercial interests in which such projects were deeply embedded. More discussion of the relationship between natural history and transatlantic trade would have been welcome.

The Melvillean ending of the book is provocatively suggestive for understanding the colonial origins of American skepticism toward scientific expertise. But it is also potentially teleological, the danger being that scholars read eighteenth-century Bartrams in terms of nineteenth-century Melvilles, the former united with the latter in a continuous tradition of rebellious American empiricism. It is not in doubt that colonial naturalists often resented metropolitan hauteur. What needs attention is the precise character of their sometime rebellious resistance to empire's epistemological authority and their assertion of their own authority to speak about American nature. Prior to the Revolution, Americans wanted more recognition from their patrons, not an end to their transatlantic relationships. They wanted to share Britain's cosmopolitan and devout empire of natural history and the environmental and social mastery it promised, not declare independence from it. Only the rupture of revolution—a profound cultural rupture—would change this desire. As natural historians, moreover, most of their work, along with the authority they sought, was descriptive in nature, not interpretative: tacit acknowledgment that the centers of interpretation remained in Europe rather than America.

To expose the extent of mutual dependence between metropolitan and peripheral savants is one of the decisive contributions of this impressive book. But its argument seems to embody a teasing tension. Parrish suggests that colonial naturalists' assertions of epistemological authority stood to turn America into the center and Europe into the periphery, though also acknowledging that, typically, knowledge could only be ratified in places such as the Royal Society. So where was the center? One solution to this puzzle may be that experiences of mutual dependency and hierarchy were not in fact incompatible but went together under the old regime. When in 1744 the London merchant Peter Collinson wrote to Cadwallader Colden in New York, "I expect Something New from your New World, our Old World as it were Exhaust[ed]" (113), this was, I think, less a political acknowledgment of rising American power than a conventional metropolitan demand to supply the curious peripheral goods to which Europeans felt entitled. The Old World might conduct itself with model rhetorical modesty, yet it was still imperially expectant.