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Article abstract

This study provides a reading of Julio Cortázar's short story "Axolotl" through the dual lenses of ecocriticism and mid-century existentialism. Specifically, the critical perspective of this work is inspired by the writings of existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, and German biologist Jakob Johann von Uexküll. Such an interdisciplinary approach is intended to articulate a unique ecological perspective known as environmental existentialism. This critical approach not only acknowledges the longstanding influence that the existentialist movement has had on environmental scholarship, but also suggests that existentialist concepts are especially relevant to our contemporary ecological moment, and thus should continue to be employed in current ecological discourse. The primary locus of critical attention in this work centers on Sartre's theory of the Look, Uexküll's notion of the search tone, and Cortázar's emphasis on suffering. These concepts are examined in concert to suggest that the correlations between the dominant issues of existentialist thought and our contemporary moment ought to signal to readers the existential threat that the age of the Anthropocene poses, as well as the value of reading texts both old and new through the lens of existential ecocriticism.

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Another Way of Seeing: Ecological Existentialism in Cortázar's "Axolotl"

Krysten Voelkner

Ecological existentialism, as defined by Australian-based ethnographer and environmental humanities scholar, Deborah Bird Rose, is a response to "the two big shifts in Western thought that define our current moment: the shift into uncertainty and the shift into connectivity."¹ Coined nearly a decade ago, the term's emphasis on simultaneous feelings of uncertainty and connectivity has remained relevant as we continue to witness the effects of biodiversity loss, deforestation, and global warming, including the most recent events of the zoonotic virus, COVID-19. As Rose explains, existentialism is used in her theory as a means of proposing that "there is no predetermined essence of humanity, no ultimate goal toward which we are heading, and that we experience what appear to be astonishingly open ways of being and becoming human."² The term thus revises the anthropocentric threads of 20th century existentialism, suggesting that while the uncertainty and absurdity common to many existentialist theories still apply to life in the 21st century, the themes of isolation and subject-object dualism no longer apply to our increasingly ecocritical perspectives. Ultimately, as Rose suggests, there are facets of traditional existentialism (itself a contested term) which are helpful in articulating the conditions of the Anthropocene.

In particular, the increasing awareness of and anxieties associated with extinction have become a central feature of ecological existentialism. As Thom Van Dooren describes, while extinction is often considered a singular event occasioned by the death of the last specimen of a species, extinction phenomena are more accurately represented in broader scales of time and influence; extinction is "a slow unraveling of intimately entangled ways of life that begins long before the death of the last individual and continues to ripple forward long afterward, drawing in living beings in a range of different ways."³ Given this emphasis on the entanglements associated with extinction, which expands the effects of the event beyond the death of a given species and into the realm of multispecies ways of life, our situation in the sixth mass extinction event forces us to dramatically shift the ways in which we conceive of existence and death; no

¹ Deborah Bird Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 42.

² Deborah Bird Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, 43.

³ Thom Van Dooren, *Flight Ways* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 12.

longer something we are removed from by geological time, the mass extinctions unfolding in the present introduce anxieties about the fragility of both human and animal life. Extinction thus manifests as an existential problem and, as Ursula Heise has suggested, specific endangered or extinct species become culturally situated as well; they become “part of the stories that human communities tell about themselves: stories about their origins, their development, their identity, and their future horizons.”⁴ Narrative thus plays a central role in both how we conceive of extinction, and more broadly, how we understand ecological existentialism.

While there are a multitude of narratives which contribute to the discourses of extinction and ecological existentialism, the works of Argentine author, Julio Cortázar, have received little critical attention in the realm of ecocritical scholarship. Widely known for his contribution to the Latin American Boom of the 1960’s and 70’s, Cortázar’s works have also been associated with the mid-century existentialist movement, particularly in terms of the French existentialist thinker Jean-Paul Sartre; in 1951, Cortázar published a Spanish translation of *The Existential Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, and his work has been widely accepted as containing strong existentialist themes.⁵ Cortázar’s novels and short stories are renowned for their handling of the marvelous real and metaphysical questions of being. However, because much of his work focuses on human experiences, he is not a writer who has been typically read through the lens of ecocriticism. Nevertheless, a majority of Cortázar’s short stories do center around animals; and while most critics have acknowledged the “symbolic roles” of animals in his stories, they are “rarely endowed with a precise, fixed significance.”⁶ Therefore, a reading of Cortázar’s fiction through an ecocritical lens is greatly needed. Though animals play some role in a large number of Cortázar’s narratives, three short stories which might serve as an example of his portrayal of animal characters are “Summer,” “Letter to a Young Lady in Paris,” and “Axolotl.” In “Summer,” as a young couple babysits a friend’s daughter, a mysterious white horse appears in the middle of the night and terrorizes the couple, who become convinced that it wants to enter the house and crush them against the walls. “Letter to a Young Lady in Paris” portrays a narrator who struggles to hide the fact that he vomits up baby rabbits, and eventually, his anxiety over the rabbits’ increasing size, number, and destruction of his residence causes him to commit suicide. Finally, in “Axolotl,” a man visits the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris and becomes

⁴ Ursula Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 6.

⁵ Mark Harris, “Existence, Nothingness, and the Quest for Being: Sartrean Existentialism and Julio Cortázar’s Early Short Fiction,” *Latin American Literary Review* 37, no. 74 (2009): 5. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41478041>.

⁶ Pamela McNab Wilson, “The Narrative and Structural Significance of Animals in the Short Stories of Julio Cortázar.” (PhD Diss., University of Virginia, 1993), ii.

obsessed with the axolotls, a type of salamander which remains in an aquatic neotenic stage; eventually, his consciousness fuses with an axolotl in the exhibit, and he reveals that the entire story has been written in the voice of this man-axolotl hybrid. As these stories illustrate, the way that Cortázar writes about animals still places them in a broader context of human emotion, particularly in terms of anxiety about interiority/exteriority and order/disorder, which ultimately fall under the dualisms of the Western imagination that Deborah Bird Rose has connected to the nature/culture divide.⁷ However, specifically in the case of “Axolotl,” such a reading would overlook the complexity of the story’s underlying elements, such as its revision of the Sartrean Look, the axolotl narrator’s entangled consciousness with the human narrator, and the significance of the axolotl to the cosmology of the Mexica, or the indigenous Nahuatl-speaking people of the Valley of Mexico. Thus, this essay examines Cortázar’s story, “Axolotl,” through the lens of ecological existentialism not only to enrich Deborah Bird Rose’s theory but to also place its general themes of interconnectedness in conversation with the demands of biodiversity conservation and environmental justice at play in the axolotl’s last native habitat, the Xochimilco district of Mexico City.

Cortázar’s Existentialism

While Sartre’s theory of the Look is founded on subject-object dualism, which is anathema to most ecocritical scholarship, Cortázar’s familiarity of Sartre’s philosophy paired with the strong themes of the Look in his story reveal that Cortázar revised Sartre’s theory to trouble such dualisms. Introduced in one of Sartre’s most well-known works, *Being and Nothingness*, the Look is defined as the phenomenological experience of being seen, of being vulnerable, and ultimately, of having a body, which causes one to experience the alienation of one’s possibilities within a world which one no longer subjectively organizes. In his interactions with the axolotls, the narrator undergoes each stage of the Sartrean Look. Initially, the narrator stares at the Axolotl’s eyes and thus transforms the sensation of the look into a mere vision of eyes. As Sartre writes, “as soon as I look in the direction of the look it disappears, and I no longer see anything but eyes. At this instant the other becomes a being which I possess and which recognizes my freedom.”⁸ Yet, this “possession” of the other is one which cannot last, because as the axolotl becomes an object to the narrator, it is “outside the state of recognizing [the narrator’s] freedom,” which is of course the ultimate goal in the struggle between two subjects

⁷ Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, 47.

⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 380.

engaged in a visual exchange.⁹

After this first attempt to objectify the axolotl's gaze, the exchange is reversed, and the narrator recognizes that another being is looking at him—he experiences a shift in vision in which he no longer views the animals in the zoo as objects within his own world; and instead, recognizes that he is also being looked at. Congruent with Sartre's theory, the narrator describes how the axolotls' look makes him feel shameful, because they were "like witnesses of something and at times like horrible judges."¹⁰ As the narrator's sense of fear and shame grows, he also describes an inexplicable sensation that the axolotl's gaze has become ubiquitous. He remarks that "I only had to think of them, and it was as though I were being affected from a distance," a feeling which is only compounded by the fact that "the eyes of the axolotls have no lids."¹¹ This limitless gaze transforms the narrator's world by the very nature of being seen—as Sartre explains, "to apprehend myself as seen is, in fact, to apprehend myself as seen in the world and from the standpoint of the world;" and with this introduction of the world, alienation is also introduced—the alienation both of the self and of the "world which I organize."¹²

As the narrator's encounters with the axolotls continue, he reaches the pivotal moment in which his perspective shifts; and, as the opening of the story forecasts, he *becomes* an axolotl. This transformation is represented through the mechanics of the Look, in which he saw "from very close up the face of an axolotl immobile next to the glass," and then, with "no transition and no surprise, I saw my face against the glass, I saw it on the outside of the tank..."¹³ Cortázar's description of the human-axolotl interaction does not conclude with this neat duality of self-other. Instead, he fuses the man's consciousness with that of the axolotl—the former object of his gaze. While other scholars have elected to read this final event as an example of the magical or the fantastic,¹⁴ I suggest a more fruitful reading is found if we consider this shift as a more subversive revision of subject-object dualism, which considers the animal characters as being capable of thought not just *as* complex as that of humans but literally *that of* human thought itself, such that distinctions between human and animal thought become irrelevant, rather than endlessly tied up in the struggle for recognition that is characteristic of Sartre's theory. Such a reading aligns with Timothy Morton's take on ecological existentialism, known as

⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 380.

¹⁰ Julio Cortázar, "Axolotl," in *Blow-Up and Other Stories* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 7.

¹¹ Cortázar, "Axolotl," 7.

¹² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 263.

¹³ Cortázar, "Axolotl," 8.

¹⁴ Marta E. Sánchez, "A View from Inside the Fishbowl: Julio Cortázar's 'Axolotl,'" In *Bridges to Fantasy*, edited by George E. Slusser, Eric S. Rabkin, and Robert Scholes, 38-50. Southern Illinois UP, 1982.

coexistentialism. As Morton explains, “if all life forms are entangled, no hierarchy is possible without violence. Instead of imagining ourselves part of something bigger [...] it would be more helpful to start with the fact of our intimate coexistence with other life forms.”¹⁵

However, Cortázar’s story does not simply upend an anthropocentric reading through his revision of the Sartrean Look. It also evades readings, which would place all of the agency within the animal character; such an evasion is clarified if we also read the story through Jakob von Uexküll’s theory of the search tone. In *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, Uexküll seeks to reveal the underlying impulses and experiences which differentially shape the environments of both human and nonhuman beings. After describing the way that a being’s particular desire can alter what and how one perceives the world—what he calls the ‘search tone’— Uexküll asks a fairly Sartrean question: “How does the subject exempt itself as an object in the different environments in which it plays an important role?”¹⁶ To clarify his question, Uexküll presents the example of an oak tree, which is “populated by many animal subjects and is called upon to play a different role in each environment.”¹⁷ In the scope of each of these inhabitants’ environments, the oak “plays an ever-changing role as object;” and yet, these isolated parts of the oak “are only parts of a subject that is solidly put together in itself [...] one which is never known by all the subjects of these environments and never knowable for them.”¹⁸ In this description, we can find a conclusion similar to Sartre’s, in which a perfect unity between subjects is unattainable. Yet what Uexküll’s writing helps to reveal is that the way in which we perceive the Other (or any such presence in our environment) is dependent on how we approach the other with our search tone. Essentially, our desires manifest in an effect image (or a particular function), which dictates the “tone” adopted by our search for that effect.¹⁹

The shifting quality of the search tone proves useful in comparing Uexküll to Cortázar. Initially, the narrator’s search tone is merely one of observation; he approaches the zoo in order to “look obliquely at the banal fish.”²⁰ However, his search tone shifts to a deeper desire to know the axolotl (to *know* rather than simply to *look*), in which “every fiber of [his] body reached

¹⁵ Timothy Morton, “Deconstruction and/as Ecology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 301.

¹⁶ Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: With a Theory of Meaning*, trans. Joseph O’Neil (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 126.

¹⁷ Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, 126.

¹⁸ Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, 132.

¹⁹ Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, 117.

²⁰ Cortázar, “Axolotl,” 4.

toward that stifled pain, that stiff torment at the bottom of the tank.”²¹ It is only through this shift in the narrator’s search tone from looking to knowing that he is able to engage with the axolotl in ways that move beyond Sartre’s conflict-oriented theory of the Look. As mentioned, the point at which Cortázar’s writing departs from Sartre’s theory is when the narrator becomes the axolotl. Cortázar uses this transformation to revise one of Sartre’s conclusions of the Look, which states that I can only identify with the other on the condition that I “persist in denying that I am the Other.”²² The narrator’s transformation forces him to realize that he is also the Other; he never speaks to any other person in the story, and as such, can be considered, at the very least, a kind of social exile in Paris. These shifting scales of alterity are also represented after the man becomes an axolotl and professes that it is the axolotls who want to know humans—to reach the human “in a certain way” in the hopes of “keeping awake [their] desire to know [the axolotls] better.”²³ Thus, the existential question of other people is expanded in “Axolotl” to also encompass other forms of life; and while the narrator initially encounters the same alienation that Sartre theorizes in the Look, it is through Uexküll’s proto-biosemiotic theories that we can understand Cortázar’s intervention as troubling the dualisms that pervade Sartre’s thought. Furthermore, such a revision of the dualisms prevalent in mid-century existentialism allows Cortázar’s intervention to relate more closely to Deborah Bird Rose’s theory of ecological existentialism. As Rose explains, “while humanistic existentialism found humanity isolated in the face of the cosmos,” contemporary ecological existentialism has revealed that “we are in a world of intersubjectivity—a world in which sentient subjects face each other.”²⁴ In Cortázar’s portrayal of the narrator and axolotl “facing each other,” the intersubjectivity between them places his story more in line with Rose’s ecological existentialism than the mid-century dualists.

In terms of what comes of this intersubjectivity presented in “Axolotl,” we must consider the primary emotion involved in the axolotl’s existence, which is suffering. On the day of the transformation, the narrator questions the possibility that he might be simply projecting his own suffering onto the axolotls, but this psychological solution is immediately dismissed; he notes that “hopelessly, I wanted to prove to myself that my own sensibility was projecting a nonexistent consciousness upon the axolotls. They and I both knew.”²⁵ In the narrator’s emphasis on the axolotls’ suffering, it is important to note two things. First, the animals in the

²¹ Cortázar, “Axolotl,” 8.

²² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 366.

²³ Cortázar, “Axolotl,” 9.

²⁴ Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, 49.

²⁵ Cortázar, “Axolotl,” 8.

story are capable of suffering. This particular statement seems obvious enough but in fact contains an important point in the context of animal studies. As discussed by Jacques Derrida in his essay, “The Animal that Therefore I Am,” the primary question of animals that we should ask is not “whether the animal can think, reason, or talk,” but “whether animals *can suffer*.”²⁶ Cortázar’s insistence on the axolotls’ suffering also reveals what Derrida articulates as the “most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life [...] the anguish of this vulnerability and the vulnerability of this anguish.”²⁷ Cortázar’s insistence on the suffering that both the Axolotls and the narrator share is important in the context of contemporary environmental thought—it troubles optimistic readings, which might rush to rejoice in the narrator and the Axolotl’s intersections of being and shared agency and instead ties their being to shared degrees of vulnerability, which stages a more realistic ontological theory.

Precarity in the Axolotl’s Environment

Vulnerability and suffering function as particularly important bridges of emotion between the man and the axolotl when we consider that the axolotl’s suffering stems from its captivity inside a cramped tank. While the axolotl was not officially placed on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List until 1986, 30 years after Cortázar first published his short story, it has a long history in laboratory research. Known as one of the oldest laboratory animals, a group of roughly 34 axolotls was removed from their natural habitat in Mexico by the French in 1863 and placed in a lab in Paris, and “most laboratory specimens trace their heritage” back to this small group.²⁸ The axolotl is a unique animal in that it remains indefinitely in the juvenile stage of development, meaning that unlike other salamanders, it never metamorphoses into its terrestrial stage and instead retains its characteristic branching gills.²⁹ Due to this trait and its regenerative capabilities, the axolotl has been used in laboratory experiments ranging “from tissue repair to development and cancer.”³⁰ While most scientific sources on the axolotl praise the species for its research value, the centuries of suffering that these lab animals have endured is relatively overlooked—they are often simply deemed a ‘paradoxical’ animal, in that their population in captivity is quite robust, while their native

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 2, (2002): 396.

²⁷ Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” 396.

²⁸ Erik Vance, “The Axolotl Paradox,” *Nature* 551, no. 7680 (Nov 16, 2017): 288.

²⁹ Vance, “The Axolotl Paradox,” 287.

³⁰ Vance, “The Axolotl Paradox,” 287.

population in Mexico is considered critically endangered.³¹

To bring Cortázar's emphasis on suffering into a 21st century context, the endangered status of the axolotl becomes particularly relevant. In 2006, the IUCN classified the axolotl as a critically endangered species, a label which persists into the present. The species' fragility is owed to a combination of ecological threats, including urban, industrial, and agricultural pollution; a shrinking habitat due to deforestation; the introduction of invasive species; and increasing drought events due to climate change. Each of these factors dramatically impacts the axolotl's last natural habitat, the remaining canals of Lake Xochimilco, which are located in southern Mexico City. While the axolotl's status as critically endangered places them outside of the "extinction" end of the IUCN's spectrum, Thom Van Dooren's concept of the "dull edge of extinction" would likely place the axolotl soundly within the realm of extinction. As Van Dooren notes, extinction should be considered an "ongoing process of change and loss that occurs across multiple registers and in multiple forms both long before and well after this 'final' death" of the species.³² The primary register associated with the axolotl's extinction is its habitat. The canals of lake Xochimilco in southern Mexico City have a long history of anthropogenic intervention beginning with their settlement by indigenous tribes between the years 1000 to 1250, but the most detrimental interventions began in the mid-fourteenth century with the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors, who destroyed much of the Mexica infrastructure during their conquest.³³ Currently, the canals suffer from "remarkably poor" water quality,³⁴ which, along with the introduction of non-native fish species, has greatly contributed to the decline of the axolotl population. One attempt at conservation in this regard has been to designate the canals as a protected ecosystem—the northern region of Xochimilco has been deemed an "Ecological Park" since 1989, the canals have been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1987, and they have been protected under the International Convention on Wetlands since 2004.³⁵ While these attempts at conservation are direly needed, they reveal a unique conflict in the realm of ecological activism in which endangered animals often receive "more protection and care than some human communities."³⁶ Such a conflict is not only echoed in Cortázar's

³¹ Vance, "The Axolotl Paradox," 287.

³² Van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 58.

³³ Manuel Perlo Cohen and Loreta Castro-Reguera Mancera, "Thirsty City on a Lake: Introducing Sustainability into Mexico City's Hydrological Infrastructure Could Evade a Water Crisis," *American Scientist* 107, no. 5 (2019).

³⁴ Luis Zambrano, Victoria Contreras, Marisa Mazari-Hiriart & Alba E. Zarco-Arista, "Spatial Heterogeneity of Water Quality in a Highly Degraded Tropical Freshwater Ecosystem," *Environmental Management* 43, (2008): 260.

³⁵ Zambrano et al., "Spatial Heterogeneity of Water Quality," 250.

³⁶ Sarah D. Wald, David J. Vazquez, Priscilla Solis Ybarra, and Sarah Jaquette Ray, *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019): 155.

intertwined human-axolotl narrator but is also revealed in the material conditions that the people of Xochimilco face today.

Environmental Justice in Xochimilco

As Ursula Heise notes, “the ‘flattening of ontologies’ that comes with questioning the human subject and human-animal boundaries often makes it difficult to address head-on the uneven power distributions that environmental justice is centrally concerned with.”³⁷ Certainly, placing humans and animals on a level plane of existence is more complicated than undoing the nature/culture divide, since the marginalization of many groups of people has hinged on this very same idea of designating some humans as nonhuman. However, as Cortázar’s figuration of intersubjectivity between the narrator and the axolotl makes clear, humans and their animal counterparts within a shared environment often find commonality through their overlapping experiences of suffering. In the Xochimilco district, the major issues faced by the people and the axolotls who live there are particularly intertwined; as the axolotl grapples with an ever-shrinking aquatic habitat, the people of Mexico City also face a water crisis. Both wealthy and impoverished residents face an “overall undersupply of water,”³⁸ in which “nearly 20% of [the city’s] residents still can’t count on getting water from their taps each day” and the city imports “as much as 40 percent of its water from remote sources.”³⁹ Access to clean drinking water is also stratified along class divisions, as the wealthier residents are able to get their water trucked into their neighborhoods, whereas the poorer residents often cannot. These water crises also disproportionately affect poor women, who are forced to spend a great deal of time and money tracking down, and sometimes bribing, the unreliable water delivery services.⁴⁰ Finally, it is also important to note that the longer drought events caused by climate change are only projected to make this problem more severe.

Given these real-life connections between the axolotls and their human counterparts in the Xochimilco district, Cortázar’s portrayal of shared degrees of suffering in his story takes on another layer of complexity. Rather than presenting the axolotls’ suffering in the tank as one which the narrator merely sympathizes with, the narrator’s transformation into an axolotl

³⁷ Heise, *Imagining Extinction*, 198.

³⁸ Adrian Guillermo Aguilar and Flor M. López, “Water Insecurity Among the Urban Poor in the Peri-Urban Zone,” *Journal of Latin American Geography* 8, no. 2 (2009): 109.

³⁹ Michael Kimmelman, “Mexico City, Parched and Sinking, Faces a Water Crisis,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/02/17/world/americas/mexico-city-sinking.html>.

⁴⁰ Aguilar and López, “Water Insecurity Among the Urban Poor in the Peri-Urban Zone,” 99.

allows him to literally feel that suffering firsthand. Conversely, because the axolotls are consistently described as possessing a form of humanity, their suffering is never actually differentiated from human suffering even prior to the narrator's transformation. Thus, as both the water crisis in Xochimilco and the underlying themes of Cortázar's "Axolotl" make clear, the intersecting demands of biodiversity conservation with social justice force us to ask not "whether we should aim to conserve the welfare of individual animals or that of species, but how we can articulate human rights and human aspirations to a good life together with the claims of nonhuman species on our moral consideration."⁴¹

While Cortázar's portrayal of intersubjectivity between the axolotl and narrator underscores the shared precarity of the people and animals in the Xochimilco district of Mexico City, the history of anthropogenic influence on the Xochimilco waterways is also referenced in "Axolotl" in terms of the source of the axolotls' suffering. As the narrator's obsession with the axolotls intensifies due to a shared sense of unarticulated suffering, he senses that their pain comes from the experience of "lying in wait for something, a remote dominion destroyed, an age of liberty when the world had been that of the axolotls."⁴² In an environmental context, such an age of liberty, perhaps, relates to a time prior to the fall of the Aztec empire, when civilization in the Valley of Mexico had a less dramatic impact on the environment of which it was a part. The metaphorical implications of the "world of the axolotls" also suggest a longing for a pre-colonial era; as the dominion of axolotls remains aquatic rather than terrestrial, their paradisiacal world would look more like the robust "five lake system" in the Valley of Mexico prior to its destruction by the Spanish colonizers, who filled Mexico City's channels and "transformed [it] from a city built within a lake to a city built on top of a lake."⁴³ Thus, the placement of the axolotl within Mexica cosmology is central to our understanding of the story's ending, in which the narrator and the axolotl finally intersect, and it is revealed that their fused voices have been narrating the entire story, because "every axolotl thinks like a man inside his rosy stone semblance."⁴⁴ While Daniel Reedy argues that "the significance of mythic structure in 'Axolotl' is found in the culmination of the protagonist's search which imitates the pattern of search for spiritual rebirth,"⁴⁵ the source of the myth—specifically, Mexica cosmology—is in fact central not just to such an anthropocentric reading but also to its ecocritical implications.

⁴¹ Heise, *Imagining Extinction*, 166.

⁴² Cortázar, "Axolotl," 8.

⁴³ Manuel Perlo Cohen and Loreta Castro-Reguera Mancera, "Thirsty City on a Lake: Introducing Sustainability into Mexico City's Hydrological Infrastructure Could Evade a Water Crisis," *American Scientist* 107, no. 5 (2019).

⁴⁴ Cortázar, "Axolotl," 9.

⁴⁵ Daniel Reedy, "Through the Looking-Glass: Aspects of Cortázar's Epiphanies of Reality," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 54, no. 2 (1977): 130.

Axolotl in Mexica Cosmology

The Axolotl derives its name from the Mexica god, Xolotl, who is associated with a multitude of symbols, such as “twins, doubled things, and conjoined things [...] deforming diseases, and all things monstrous.”⁴⁶ One version of the Mexica origin story dictates that Xolotl traveled to the underworld to collect “the bones and ashes of the previous humans,” which eventually bore two children.⁴⁷ As such, Xolotl is also related to cycles of life and death, as he names “a specific cluster of sacred processes and energies involved in transforming death into life by way of gestation, renewal, and rebirth.”⁴⁸ These cycles are central to much of Mexica cosmology, which emphasizes that “how cycles end prefigures whether or not, and if so how, they will begin anew.”⁴⁹ The doubled nature of Xolotl relates most directly to the axolotl itself, which exists perpetually in a liminal state between youth and adulthood. This emphasis on doubling is also represented in the main action of Cortázar’s “Axolotl,” in that the narrator’s consciousness becomes fused with the axolotl’s. Yet prior to this transformation, which would require the narrator’s help in the axolotl’s becoming-human, the narrator already notices that the axolotls have a complex consciousness, which mirrors the Mexica mythological structure of cycle and renewal (rather than intervention and birth). As the narrator watches the axolotls, he notes that it is “easy, almost obvious, to fall into [Aztec] mythology,” because he can recognize in the axolotls “a metamorphosis which did not succeed in revoking a mysterious humanity.”⁵⁰ The pre-existing humanity within the axolotls, paired with the narrator’s eventual transformation into an axolotl thus presents a perspective on animals and humans, which does not align with the typical nature/culture divide.

The cyclical nature of the story also echoes the significant role of renewal in Mexica mythology; the story opens with the narrator’s confession that “now I am an axolotl,”⁵¹ and closes with the narrator hoping that “perhaps [the man] is going to write a story about us, that, believing he’s making up a story, he’s going to write all this about axolotls.”⁵² While the narrator is

⁴⁶ James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014), 204.

⁴⁷ Alfredo Austin López, *Tamoanchan, Tlalocan: Places of Mist* (Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1997), 37.

⁴⁸ Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 204.

⁴⁹ Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 208.

⁵⁰ Cortázar, “Axolotl,” 6.

⁵¹ Cortázar, “Axolotl,” 3.

⁵² Cortázar, “Axolotl,” 9.

nevertheless trapped within the tank, “condemned infinitely to the silence of the abyss, to a hopeless meditation,”⁵³ the story’s ending does not end with a sense of hopelessness. Just as Mexica cosmology emphasizes the importance of the manner in which cycles end, and how those endings prefigure renewals, Cortázar’s “Axolotl” ends by turning to narrative for a possible shift in the axolotls’ cycle of suffering. However, to read this ending as a mythological solution to the axolotl’s plight in both the story and in reality would be a misunderstanding of the ways in which Cortázar’s “Axolotl” reflects on ecological existentialism as a central theme. Key to the Mexica understanding of cycles of renewal is the idea that “proper completions promote proper gestations that, in turn, promote proper renewals.”⁵⁴ As such, renewals of a particular cycle are not mythologically guaranteed. The necessary precarity of this approach to time and renewal thus places this philosophy in an existential realm; as Deborah Bird Rose explains, ecological existentialism proposes an existentialism informed by a lack of certainty, where “the long history of thought that drew its logical, metaphorical, and mystical power from the idea of the whole is overturned, and we are thrown back on what existential philosophy has called the Absurd.”⁵⁵ Yet the term is also informed by an ecology which proposes “a kinship of becoming” that includes “the rich plentitude, with all its joys and hazards, of our entanglement in the place, time, and multispecies complexities of life on Earth.”⁵⁶ As such, paired with the clear entanglement of the protagonist-axolotl dyad, the story’s indefinite ending echoes the lack of certainty characteristic of Rose’s notion of existentialism as “modified” by the ecological.⁵⁷

Conclusion

In an essay proposing that Cortázar’s “Axolotl” presents a literary case study of Deborah Bird Rose’s ecological existentialism, my discussion of Mexica mythology may seem curious or even contradictory given that Rose’s theory aligns with the existential notion of “the loss of certainty and destiny that inheres in mechanistic worldviews.”⁵⁸ However, my inclusion of Mexica cosmology in this essay is meant to not only address a major theme of Cortázar’s story but to also interpret the content of such a mythological theme in the context of ecocritical

⁵³ Cortázar, “Axolotl,” 7.

⁵⁴ Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 208.

⁵⁵ Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, 47.

⁵⁶ Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, 44.

⁵⁷ Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, 43.

⁵⁸ Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, 43.

readings. The connection between the Xolotl myth and the axolotl's role in Cortázar's story should not force readers to relegate the story to the realm of pre-existential, deterministic worldviews but should instead highlight how, from a contemporary perspective, the axolotl's shared situation of precarity with the people of the Xochimilco district lends a new layer of complexity to Cortázar's 20th century narrative and, more broadly, opens a uniquely contemporary discussion on his oeuvre. In other words, such a reading highlights how the interconnectedness in Deborah Bird Rose's theory of ecological existentialism is reflected in Cortázar's portrayal of the narrator as both, and at once, man and axolotl. Such a portrayal allows for Cortázar to narratively revise the human/animal dualism pervasive in mid-century existentialism in the same way that Rose theoretically modifies the term "existentialism" with the term "ecological."⁵⁹ While Deborah Bird Rose employs a range of thinkers in her explanation of ecological existentialism, from Lev Shestov to Plato to Val Plumwood and Lynn Margulis, this essay provides a literary touchpoint for ecological existentialism. Cortázar's "Axolotl" allows readers to consider ecological existentialism's pertinent questions of "how to appreciate the differences between humankind and others, while at the same time also understanding that we are all interdependent," as well as "how to do all this in the time of extinctions, knowing, as we must, that we are living amidst the ruination of others."⁶⁰ For readers of "Axolotl," narrative becomes a possible answer, as it provides a means of not just appreciating the differences and levels of interdependence across species boundaries but also of acknowledging and, perhaps, raising awareness of the ways that extinctions are, as Thom Van Dooren suggests, involved processes of "entangled relations" between multiple forms of life.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, 43.

⁶⁰ Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, 51.

⁶¹ Van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 58.

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