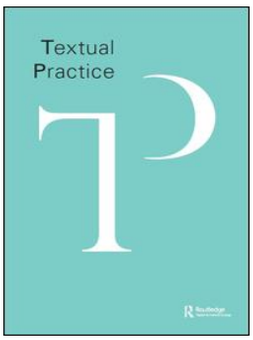

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Capture: American pursuits and the making of the new animal condition

by Antoine Traisnel, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 296 pp., 28 b&w photos, 4 color plates, 5 ½ × 8 ½, $27.00 (pbk.), ISBN 978-1-5179-0964-2; $108.00 (hbk.), ISBN 978-1-5179-0963-5

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BOOK REVIEW

Capture: American pursuits and the making of the new animal condition, by Antoine Traisnel, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 296 pp., 28 b&w photos, 4 color plates, 5 ½ × 8 ½, $27.00 (pbk.), ISBN 978-1-5179-0964-2; $108.00 (hbk.), ISBN 978-1-5179-0963-5

Antoine Traisnel's *Capture: American Pursuits and the Making of a New Animal Condition* offers a fascinating genealogy of the representations of nonhuman animals that emerged in the United States during the nineteenth century. As species extinction became a thinkable and experiential reality, writers and visual artists in the United States increasingly represented nonhuman animals as intrinsically elusive forms of life. Traisnel mobilises the concept of capture to describe this 'modern imperative to apprehend animals at the historical moment when they are receding from everyday view' (p. 2). Capture presents itself as a harmless way to see and know these disappearing animals with the assistance of new technologies and techniques of representation. Yet capture also naturalises and diffuses biocapitalist and settler colonial violence by laying claim to nonhuman animals prior to any actual encounter with them. Traisnel argues that we continue to view nonhuman animals through the perspective of capture that materialised during this period.

To explain the historicity of capture, Traisnel resituates Foucault's account in *The Order of Things* of the shift from the Classical to Modern episteme. Traisnel focuses instead on 'the Animal' as a biopolitical concept that is continuous with US conquest during a transition from what he calls 'the hunt regime' to 'the capture regime' (pp. 20–1). As the object of capture, 'the Animal' refers to 'something intangible, something presumably inherent to all animals: vitality, motion, states of change' (pp. 2, 22). In the hunt regime, the hunter acknowledges particular animals in contingent and explicitly violent encounters with them. The capture regime, on the other hand, presents itself as a humane alternative to the hunt. By claiming to access knowledge of the Animal in general prior to any encounter, however, the capture regime renders particular animals interchangeable and expendable as a means of accumulating land and capital. The aim of capture is to see and know the Animal in its elusive vitality.

This pursuit spurs new technologies of representation that themselves become inextricable from the apprehension of animals under the capture regime. Inventions like Benjamin Kilburn's wonderfully strange 'gun camera' ('an accordion-style instantaneous camera mounted on the end of a shotgun shaft') and new genres like detective fiction allow the hunt's sovereign claims over 'territory' to become sublimated in capture's spatial and temporal securing of a 'milieu' (p. 1). Under the capture regime, the biopolitical concept of the

Animal itself becomes a key technology for making the reproduction of settler colonial and biocapitalist violence appear inevitable. By obscuring the agents perpetuating this violence, capture asserts itself as the manifest destiny of the Animal.

Traisnel organises his study around the works of canonical US white male writers (Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne), bookended by two visual artists (Audubon and Muybridge). Each of book's five chapters focuses on a different work of literature or visual art in its historical and intellectual milieu. Traisnel's literary and visual analyses of these texts are immersed in continental philosophy and contribute to ongoing discussions of the work of scholars like Cary Wolfe and Akira Mizuta Lippit within animal studies. Traisnel also draws on insights from Black and Native studies in his commitment to understand the 'new animal condition' of capture as continuous with settler colonialism, slavery, and biocapitalism. Nineteenth-century writers like Harriet Jacobs and William Apess, as well as contemporary theorists like Sylvia Wynter, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and Gerald Vizenor, significantly inform Traisnel's argument and elucidate several previously overlooked dimensions of the canonical works he studies.

The first two chapters track the waning prevalence of the hunt regime as it becomes sublimated in capture. For Traisnel, John James Audubon and his *Birds of North America* (originally published in 1827) exemplify the hunt. As is well known, Audubon himself was a visual artist and scientist who hunted birds to better see and know them in order to represent them. Traisnel argues that Audubon's images betray the hunter's fantasy of colonial conquest, which is represented in the way birds 'appear fundamentally knowable' only after he kills them (p. 36). This epistemological confidence is disrupted, however, when Audubon laments that he cannot represent the liveliness of the birds he kills for his still lifes. This desire to preserve the vitality of birds without ceasing to kill them (the drive of capture) becomes the impetus for the new technologies of representation Traisnel follows throughout his book.

The hunter's explicitly violent, epistemophilic modes of tracking animals morph more prevalently into techniques of taxonomic capture in Traisnel's reading of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie* (1827), the final installment of the *Leatherstocking Tales*. In the romance, Natty Bumppo, the white frontier hunter par excellence and metonymy for the hunt regime, becomes a trapper late in life. As he fades from prominence, the myopic taxonomist Obed Bat assumes a crucial role under the capture regime. Taxonomy becomes a ubiquitous 'method (nomos) for ordering (taxis) the sensible' that not only arrays animals according to preexisting classifications but also maps indigenous territory as land available to US settlers following the 1785 Land Ordinance and Louisiana Purchase (p. 61). In the 'biopolitics of vision' at stake in Traisnel's book, taxonomy brings animals into view, yet, in the name of objectivity, disavows the mediation of the human hand that divides and indexes the space and time of the Animal. Through Audubon, hunting 'lodg[es] itself within the period's epistemological unconsciousness' (p. 37). The hunter, however, does not vanish so much as he becomes diffused through epistemological and visual imperatives that need the

paradigmatic figure to 'disappear for the colonial project to appear complete' (p. 59).

In the absence of the hunter, taxonomy sanctions a camouflaged power that 'oversees and supervises' particular differences in the name of a totalising view of animality (p. 64). Traisnel turns his attention in the second part of his book to the Animal in relation to biopolitical concepts of race and species. This connection between race and animality informs emergent representations of criminality that expand the biometric protocols of policing. In Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841), the short story credited with inaugurating the genre of detective fiction, Detective Dupin takes on the role of the hunter displaced in the city. Unlike the police, Dupin does not presume the intentionality of the criminal. Instead, he decrypts the milieu of the murder scene. Thanks to his reading of Georges Cuvier, Dupin identifies the culprit as an ourang-outang who managed to evade police surveillance and disappear into the 'gridded space of the city' (p. 106). Poe's story, according to Traisnel, presents the Animal 'as literally ungraspable, as essentially fugitive' (p. 97). This assumption, which relies on a taxonomic ordering of animals based on body parts, fastens itself to emerging racist biometrics of criminality that enable the expansion of punitive governance by 'denying the rationality (even the full humanness) of the [criminalised] actor' (p. 102).

Traisnel next reads Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (published in 1860, a few months after Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*) as a response to Poe's tale, particularly in its critique of Cuvierian taxonomies. Hawthorne presents the 'ambiguous specimen' Donatello (who may or may not be a faun) as a figure who cannot be located within the temporal imagination of Cuvier's metonymic taxonomy. Cuvier's comparative anatomy viewed particular animals unknowable while claiming to apprehend animality as such. This taxonomy of capture retroactively situates ambiguous specimens within a preexisting system in order to validate its totalising perspective. Hawthorne, in response to Poe, opens the possibility for 'the cryptic animal' (that which cannot be made fully legible and interchangeable) to evade the order of time presumed under capture (p. 125). In Hawthorne's work, Traisnel finds an alternative epistemology based on withholding legibility and assuming heterogeneous temporalities. This epistemology accepts the asynchronous yet interconnected entanglements of 'incommensurate life-forms' (pp. 17–18). Traisnel's reading of animal temporality introduces a transient 'rhythm of life' that counters both Darwinian (linear, secular, progressive) and Cuvierian (timeless Ideal) enclosures of time (p. 152).

The book's final chapter turns to Muybridge's famous proto-cinematic photographic series of a running horse. Traisnel persuasively illustrates how capture decouples time and perception. Muybridge's experiments enable a power of seeing that renders visible previously invisible movements. For instance, his technologically mediated vision provides an affirmative answer to the long-standing curiosity as to whether horses are ever completely air-borne when they gallop. Traisnel claims that the horse helps represent its own temporality (a distinct 'horsetime') when it crosses a series of trip wires that trigger successive

cameras to photograph the horse's movements (Traisnel dubs these the first horse 'selfies'). This example points to a more general insight that gradually unfolds throughout the book: particular animals shape the technologies of representation that capture and reproduce a likeness supposedly representative of all animals. In the case of Muybridge's experiments, however, the minute segmentation of particular animals within the enclosed time of the photographic series reveals that the reproduction of the Animal is continuous with the logics and violence of biocapitalism. As Traisnel demonstrates, Muybridge's images are haunted by an economy that assumes animals are interchangeable, expendable, always already vanishing. The Animal that appears at the dawn of cinema shrouds and sanctions the contemporaneous mass slaughter and systematic reproduction of real animals.

In the book's conclusion, Traisnel finds an ethical interstice in the midst of this violence by attending to the traces animals leave within their representations. An ethics of distance opposes the imperatives of capture by seeking to not render animals transparent and interchangeable. Withholding sight and knowledge, Traisnel suggests, helps attune us to entanglements between what Uexküll calls animal *Umwelten*, or subjective perceptual worlds, and our own (p. 186). Following Kafka's Red Peter, Traisnel asks if there is 'a way out' of the capture regime that could still acknowledge how human and nonhumans contrapuntally cohabit 'absolutely enclosed yet irreducibly entangled worlds' (pp. 189, 195). The word 'enclosed', used to describe the irreducible singularity of subjective perceptual worlds, deliberately echoes the enclosure of territory under settler colonialism. Enclosed within an *Umwelt*, the subject itself, whether human or nonhuman animal, is reconfigured as 'an elective technology of capture' (p. 183).

While he rightfully insists on the limited access any human or nonhuman animal has to one another's bounded perspective, Traisnel's decision to characterise this horizon in terms of an enclosed *Umwelt* of subjective capture seems to undersell, if not withhold, the ethical potential of his thesis. Could a distanced attunement to the entanglements of singular *Umwelten* occasion a 'dis-enclosure' (to borrow Jean-Luc Nancy's term) of capture without flattening 'abyssal differences' between humans and nonhuman animals?[1] Traisnel's ethics of distance itself seems to gesture towards a counter-conduct that could imagine, without claiming to understand, incommensurable *Umwelten* outside the terms of recognition afforded through settler colonialism and biocapitalism. Similar to Traisnel, philosopher of science Vinciane Despret has argued that situations of multispecies 'intercapture' create new, porous, and imbricated *Umwelten*. However, Despret emphasises that we should not only be attuned to what enables cohabitation, but also take an active interest in what cohabitation 'invents and metamorphoses into'.[2] What would change if we understood *Umwelten* not as irrevocable sites of enclosure but rather as unpredictable occasions for eclosion or dis-enclosure?

One the most promising aspects of Traisnel's book is how its concepts lend themselves to continued study. His analysis of animal temporality and ethics open lines of inquiry that have remained under-theorised in animal studies.

Similarly, his captivating study attests to the surprising ways nineteenth-century American literature and visual arts continue to anticipate and animate contemporary theory. Future scholars may also find value in displacing his majoritarian genealogy to examine the hunt and capture regimes from minoritarian positions. Readers will delight in Traisnel's knack for selecting vivid examples that punctuate his explanations. This stylistic feature allows his book to work simultaneously as an advanced introduction to and generative intervention in animal studies, environmental humanities, and theories of nineteenth-century American literature and visual art. *Capture* affirms the continuing importance of seeking different arrangements for thinking and living with nonhuman animals on their own terms.

Notes

1. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: the Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo et al. (Fordham University Press, 2009); see also Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am,* trans. David Wills (Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 34.
2. Vinciane Despret, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, trans. Brett Buchanan (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 165.

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