

ANTOINE TRAISNEL

*Capture: American Pursuits and the Making of a New Animal Condition.*  
Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2020. 253 pages

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being “unholy [and] inhospitable [...] to foreigners” (190) while the American dream is severely debunked (196). The novel thus highlights a story of “failed immigration and of stigmatized outsiders” (199). Her conclusion is that Halaby schematically limns a “cursed” nightmarish America and an uncriticized ideal Arab world, and as such, misses an opportunity to perceive the underlying power structures that precede and result in discrimination.

Chapter 5 deals with Yunis’ *The Night Counter*, a novel where an “Americanized” version of Scheherazade (211) is a character who functions as a “unifying principle in a disconnected family” (207) as she enables the gathering of one family scattered across the US around the lonely mother figure of Fatima. Although Sawires-Masseli underlines, in a passing remark and a lengthy footnote, that the novel is classified as magic realist, this aspect is not really exploited. It could have provided an opportunity to assess the sort of critical interstitial narrative space that the genre creates, a “third” space which may be potentially fruitful in order to rethink hyphenated identities, bring to light cross-cultural narrative techniques, and enact several decisive reversals (280). The author then ends her chapter by persuasively underscoring the pertinence of Elias’ theory of the established and outsiders when it is applied to Yunis’ characters (239-275). Yet, again the question of storytelling at that stage of the chapter seems to have been simply diluted, if not forsaken.

In her conclusion, Sawires-Masseli honestly assesses the applicability of her theoretical frame of reference, that is figurational sociology, to her corpus, and brings to the fore the writers’ aim “to inform about Arab art and thus counter stereotypes in most cases” (283). Confirming that “the *field* of Arab American studies in academic context emerges clearly” (290, my emphasis), Sawires-Masseli has published an interesting and valuable book about Arab American literature. Notwithstanding this achievement, it seems that her monograph harbors two distinct books: a dominant one that tackles in depth the notion of outsidership, and a secondary one about classical storytelling; the reason for this discrepancy is because the latter lacks the theoretical background

which informs the former. If the sense of outsidership in the novel is perceptively displayed by Sawires-Masseli when applicable, it is not always organically conjugated to the broader theme of Arab storytelling, to its motifs and tradition.

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The ambition of Antoine Traisnel’s captivating book is to spell out the emergence, in nineteenth-century America, of a new epistemic regime of animality, which still informs our present for better or, mainly, for worse. This new animal condition is made visible through the analysis of several works by Audubon, Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, and Muybridge, which stand in a complex relation of illustration, symptom, questioning, and resistance to this paradigm of capture. The intellectual framework relies extensively on Michel Foucault’s taxonomies in *The Order of Things* and his notion of biopower, as well as on Walter Benjamin’s meditations on the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility. The focus on America entails shifts in periodization and a stronger preoccupation with race, i.e. with the populations that are “animalized” by dominant culture, in keeping with recent elaborations on Foucauldian theory. The rich polysemy of the word “capture” encapsulates at least two aspects of the new animal condition under modernity: an unprecedented level of control and species management, symbolically ranging from the extermination of the buffalo in the wild to the corralling and mass killing of cattle in the industrial slaughterhouses of Chicago – not to mention the increase of

pets; and a form of representation of “the animal” that is increasingly indebted to means of mechanical reproduction like photography and the budding cinema. The two are of course interdependent, as suggested by the opening example of the aptly-named Benjamin W. Kilburn’s gun camera (1).

The episteme of capture evolves out of and gradually replaces that of the hunt: the latter presupposes encounters with individual animals on their territories and the possibilities of escape or death, while the former deals with the category of “the animal” in a milieu, that can be utterly known yet whose inherent life-mystery remains elusive, only to be conjured by the technological apparatus. Disappearance is both a physical and ontological constitutive trait of the animal in capture – under erasure. “The animal, conceived as a technology of biopower, is an invention of recent date – and one interminably nearing its end, for it is construed as both imminently endangered and eminently reproducible... It is by disappearing, in other words, that animals appear for modern representation, as if nonpresence was a constitutive property of animality” (22). Furthermore, this fashioning of the animal echoes and haunts that of the concept of Man, according to Foucault.

The first chapter, “Still Lives,” takes a bird’s eye view of John James Audubon’s ornithological project, centering more specifically on his famous painting *Golden Eagle* (1833). Due to the ongoing colonization of the continent and the still-present dangers of the wilderness, the transition between hunt and capture illustrated by these works took place belatedly, when compared to Foucault’s description of the shift to the new paradigm of animality. The chapter comments on the nationalist dimension of Audubon’s project, in terms both of documenting the specific fauna of the New World and of claiming institutional independence from European naturalist milieux. It tracks the evolution of the scientific ethos from that of embodied hunter to objective, anonymous gaze by deftly pinpointing the painter’s willful erasure, in a later engraving, of a small figure: presumably a humorous self-portrait in precarious balance on a log over a precipice, carrying the eagle he has just shot.

A focus on Audubon’s technique for the capture of his trademark life-like effect ironically emphasizes the necessity to kill a captive animal and set it up on a wire grid for the accurate rendition of proportions – a sublimation and obliteration of the intimate bond between knowledge and death. Allusions to Empire are also complex and ambivalent: on the one hand, the majestic, emblematic eagle takes up the whole frame, and the leftward direction of its flight may echo the westward course of territorial conquest; but should its reimagining of David’s 1800 *Napoleon franchissant le Grand-Saint-Bernard* be seen as “a parodic rewriting of the Louisiana Purchase, [hailing] the naturalist in buckskins as victorious over the emperor” (38), or as an inspiration within the framework of the *translatio imperii*? The color scheme in the painting is seen as more than a mere dramatic contrast between the dark bird of prey and the white hare against a background of snow-capped mountains and cloudy skies; it is interpreted as a possible racial allegory, harking back to Audubon’s putative mulatto identity: “The painting replays the same racial paranoia: a dark, wild beast swoops on a defenseless white hare, and the hunter heroically intervenes to right this wrong” (48). We know from psychoanalysis that fantasies brook contradictions, yet the notion that the eagle might represent both the (white) imperial theme and the dark savage (more black than Indian) may need some clarification, especially since the hare in question might well be a *lepus americanus*, which changes color according to the seasons. This interpretive problem points at the difficulty of a thorough analysis of the personal or political unconscious of a work of art.

The second chapter offers an analysis of James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Prairie* (1827) from the angle of the disappearance of the hunter. Natty Bumppo, whom old age has transformed from a huntsman into a trapper, is confronted with a myopic taxonomist called Obed Bat, who becomes the butt of ridicule for his encounter with a mysterious unknown animal that he proudly baptizes, only to discover that it was his own donkey, or ass, that he was contemplating. In spite of the parody, this Bat logic will ultimately prevail, since taxomony is on a par

with a relation to the land based on the production of deterritorialized, homogeneous space fit for colonization and economic exploitation. Traisnel's interpretation makes the most of the polysemy of words like the "taming" of the land (60), "purchase" (60, from *purchasser*), or "speculation" (63) as bridges between attitudes towards animals and the territory, and between the predatory gaze and economic gain. While Cooper laments the passing of the embodied hunter's episteme, he seems to accept the inevitability of a Manifest Destiny that will ensure the vanishing of the prairie's animals – for example the buffalo and the passenger pigeon – and of the (nomadic, hunting) Natives who depend on them. The new dispensation, even as it claims to provide positive knowledge, entails a specific form of blindness and loss. In a form of hermeneutic circle between power and representation, "[t]his same pacific violence operates in the conception of its object – the human and nonhuman populations it seeks to monitor and control" (86).

The next development, "The Fugitive Animal" takes its cue from Walter Benjamin's perceptive genealogical connection between the hunter and the detective of crime fiction. It addresses the foundational mystery of the genre, the fact that the murderer in Poe's ground-breaking tale "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) is not a human being but an ape. The answer seems to be a racial allegory: "Recovering the detective's predatory functions is thus an invitation to consider what debt the modern societies of control owe to the history of transatlantic slavery and the extent to which modern surveillance technologies were specifically designed to target racialized populations" (97). The fugitive orang-outang illegally imported from overseas into an unfamiliar milieu, where his lack of control and rationality wreaks havoc, thus represents the racial other, subjected to the State's power to define and criminalize.

This animalization of the criminal in turn demands a recognition that all humans are animals (some more equal than others) subjected to technologies of capture, like the cage at the *Jardin des Plantes* where the ape ends up. But the tale is also an "allegory of reading" (121), and the second part of the

chapter hunts high and low for the strategies of encryption and decryption that could account for the animal's specific modes of signifying: "clews" as opposed to language. In the detective's *praxis*, to the faculty of reason must be added ruse, or *Metis*, which is also displayed by animals. The boundary between human and animal, whose temporary blurring is humorously illustrated by the specular anagram between the author's initials, E. A. P. and the murdering APE (119), is ultimately reestablished. "The tale of detection invites a prophylactic interpretation of Dupin as a champion of human exceptionalism, but it also reflects on the types of knowledge that are overtly and covertly at work in the capture of the fugitive animal" (120). In the light of the multilayered sophistication of the tale, the reader may wonder whether the strictly ideological readings are not too partial and reductive.

Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860) is the focus of the fourth chapter. The mystery of the protagonist, Donatello, who is rumored to be a faun like those of ancient statuary, is never solved, since he always refuses to expose his tell-tale ears. More than a meditation on racial purity or mixing, the "fabulous taxonomy" which gives this section its title is taken as a resisting allegory of modern taxonomy itself, and the episteme of capture coeval with the rise of Cuvier's comparative anatomy. Contrary to Linnean tabulations, Cuvier's nomenclature introduces time as a variable, and "paves the way for phylogenetic and biopolitical conceptions of race and species," prefiguring Darwinian evolution (128). Appearances become markers of functions and stages of development, ensuring a knowledge of species at the expense of that of individual animals. Traisnel interestingly parallels two forms of taxonomy, literary genres and biological classifications, showing how Hawthorne's recourse to an already outmoded genre, the romance, featuring the classical chimera of a hybrid between animal and man, amounted to a resistance to the main paradigm of "fiction in the age of Cuvier" (132), namely the Balzacian realist novel. By focusing on the interstices and throwbacks of epistemic systems, it may even point, in terms inspired by Claudio Agamben, to a future reconciliation between humans and

animals: "It opens a space for his romance on the figure of Man, for the dream of Man's transformation into something different altogether, and for an ethics of relating differently to what can only be partially seen and known" (152).

The last chapter, which deals with Eadweard Muybridge's chronophotographic experiments, glosses the different acceptations of its title, "The Stock Image." A stock image is one that is commercially available, while stock is storage within a mercantile economy, in which animals become livestock and commodity. At first sight, Muybridge's studies of animal motion – in their scientific objectivity, their fragmentation of motion, their grid-like measuring background, or their ability to reveal what the eye cannot (the moment when none of the four hooves of a galloping horse touch the ground) – can be seen as the perfect extension of a (bio)capitalistic logic of animal reproducibility, commodification, and dismemberment. Indeed, Leland Stanford, the millionaire who prompted the first photographic series, was a horse breeder and had made his fortune in railroads. Furthermore, the strange alliance of mechanization and vitalism that presides over the cinematic image actually inverts the relation between reality and reproduction: "it is reproducibility that defines what counts (albeit retroactively) as original" (173). This new form of aura creates a nostalgia for the animal as "essentially fugitive and vulnerable, and in a sense, already lost" (174).

Industrial and conservationist outlooks, in spite of their oppositions, share common premises: whether for exploitative or protective aims, "[both] perspectives view animals statistically, in aggregate, at the level of population or breed – from the vantage point of their reproducibility" (180). But Muybridge's early dispositifs may gesture toward another, more constructive view of life under capture. In his trip line device, the horse's body triggered the battery of cameras as it ran in front of them: the entanglement between the apparatus and the animal left some agency and "subjectivity" to the latter. Cut to Jakob van Uexküll's notion of the *Umwelt*, itself influenced by photography and chronophotography: animals experience and shape their environment according to their singular perceptive capacities.

"The subject is refashioned as interface, as medium – as itself an elective technology of capture, cutting up or editing the world according to various interests and sensorial aptitudes" (183). This alternative vision can open up a new "ethics of life in capture" (193): rather than the entrapment of the animal in a melancholy narrative, it would recognize the "unbridgeable distance between living beings" and call for "an epistemology and ethics of cohabitation, a way of inhabiting absolutely enclosed yet irreducibly entangled worlds" (195). A concrete application of this ethics, barely delineated by Traisnel, can be found in Baptiste Morizot's *Manières d'être vivant* (Actes Sud, 2020).

*Capture* is a fascinating scholarly work for its erudition and its contribution to the field of Animal Studies. It succeeds in articulating historical, philosophical and aesthetic considerations, and in inserting close readings of complex works within an impressive overarching project. The very scope and depth of its findings validates its methodology, but the reader may have appreciated a brief discussion of the study's limitations. Some crucial works of fiction are missing: whereas *Moby Dick* is briefly mentioned and discussed as the archetypal novel of the hunt, Jack London's *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* are not even indexed. Even though they nominally belong to the early twentieth century, it would have been rewarding to gauge how these attempts at adopting an animal's point of view within a Darwinian framework fared against the episteme of capture. In a self-reflexive twist, the key notions that inform this enterprise can be applied to it: the Foucauldian methodology at the core of the study may at times appear like a gigantic apparatus of capture: it is highly systematic in its criticism of former epistemic systems, and seems to turn a blind eye on its own unavoidable biases and on the constructedness of its own field and objects. Yet the book also features some illuminating moments of textual hunt, when close reading evokes moments of encounter with the works under study, in their individual rather than symptomatic capacity.

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