THINK PIECES IN ANALYTICS

ANTHROPOLOGICAL ENTRAPMENTS

Ethnographic Analysis Before and After Relations and Comparisons

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Abstract: This article develops an argument for 'entrapment' as a heuristic of social process. Building on classic and contemporary ethnographies of traps and machine interfaces, the article offers the language of entrapment as an alternative to other idioms of complexity in social theory, such as 'relations', 'entanglements', and 'assemblages'. The heuristic appeal of entrapment lies in its ability to kindle modes of description where place and landscape, the obligations of bodies and energies, and the haunting presences of predation and the uncanny remain immanent to social process. Moreover, the work that entrapments do is recursively entangled with anthropology's own capacity for captivating, capturing, and making compatible further ethnographic descriptions.

Keywords: captivation, comparison, compatibility, entrapment, ethnography, natureculture, recursivity, traps

In *Tree Leaf Talk*, his evocative and exciting proposal for a Heideggerian anthropology, James Weiner (2001: 69–70) retells the Foi myth of the Sky Village.¹ The myth recounts the story of a young man who in the course of setting marsupial traps finds himself one day trapping a young girl instead. The girl takes the man to the sky village where she lives, eventually bearing a son for him. Time goes by, and one day his wife's father uses a hole in the ground to call the young man's attention to the mourning ceremonies that his former relatives are preparing for his elder brother who has just died. The man is allowed to travel with his wife and son to the surface world, yet is cautioned against mourning for his brother, for this would put his son's life at risk. However, the man is unable to contain his sorrow, which triggers a series of unfortunate events: his wife

disappears and returns to the sky village; after he tells the story of the sky village to his relatives, the man dies, with his ghost returning to the sky land and his dead body remaining on earth; and, last, his son finds himself wandering around the surface world, uncared for.

According to Weiner, the myth of the Sky Village makes explicit the limits of human relationship. Despite his wife's father's warnings, the young man finds himself unable not to mourn the loss of his brother. He falls prey to a fundamental human impulse that makes painfully evident the extent to which he has blurred and confused the sky land and the surface world. "The appearance of the Sky Village," explains Weiner (2001: 70), "fooled the young man into thinking he was in a human, social world; but the exchanges he subsequently enters into on the surface finally make known to him his incapacity for human relationship [his expression of grief at the sight of his dead brother]—they reveal that he is in fact a ghost." The young man made the mistake of trying to model a world of human relationships onto a world where relationality is, in fact, not to be found.

Weiner draws upon the myth of the Sky Village to make a larger argument about the limits of relationality as a heuristic in social anthropology.² The mar-supial trap in which the sky girl falls holds in suspension—and simultaneously casts into relief—the limits between the human and non-human worlds. It brackets and questions the capacity of relations to render all kinds of worlds meaningful. "We want to specify the conditions under which the world is perceived to be *relationally based* (by ourselves as well as our hosts) prior to our analysis of it," states Weiner (2001: 71; emphasis added). There are worlds, he intimates, where relations play a key part in holding a social ontology together, yet there are ontologies, too, wherein relations have no place. Put another way, as anthropologists, we need to specify the social ontologies—the "kinds of beings" (ibid.)—where 'relations' are elicited as (one of many possible) interpretational strategies for making sense of the world. We need to explore, then, the kind of world where relationality provides a suitable aesthetic and form for expressing sociality, but also the kind of worlds where it does not. For once we understand relations in such an aesthetic register, we can also consider their containment and delimitation. We can ask, what makes "social relations acquire their outline? What acts stipulate a boundary beyond which they cease? Against what is a social relationship poised such that this something shows the limit of relationship itself?" (ibid.: 77–78). Such a stance, Weiner suggests, reveals sociality's ultimate foundation upon an ontological immanence, the hidden affordances through which we carry ourselves in the world, of which 'relations' are but an aesthetic form or style for handling them. We need an anthropology, Weiner concludes, that is willing to shift attention away from the stylization of culture or morality and is attentive instead to the currents of immanence through which people 'world' themselves into the world.³

The marsupial trap in the myth of the Sky Village allows Weiner to capture the aesthetic and formal contours of ‘the relation’ as a trigger of social elicitation. That it takes a trap to ‘trap’ the form of the relation makes for a captivating (pun intended) duplex figure. In this article I want to put forward an argument that takes this double form of captivation and capture as its main object of inquiry. My straightforward proposition has, to my knowledge, gone largely unnoticed. Namely, I propose that traps are not just ‘things’ found in the ethnographic record, accessories of material culture that furnish ethnographic environments with symbolic, ritual, or ontological meaning; rather, they are in fact triggers and vehicles of anthropological description itself. Capture and captivation, I suggest, have played an unsuspected role in driving the capaciousness of anthropology as a language of social analysis.

The anthropology of traps has recently emerged as a topic of scholarly interest, drawing attention to the material, environmental, cognitive, and relational processes that systems of entrapment have been known to embody and redeploy (Corsín Jiménez and Nahum-Claudel 2019; Seaver 2019; Wadley 2019). In this article I wish to make a contribution to this literature by calling attention to the role that ‘entrapments’ have played as placeholders for thinking about the status of description in anthropology. In particular, I wish to make a claim for entrapment as a heuristic of social process. I offer the language of entrapment as an alternative to other idioms of complex description in social theory, such as ‘relations’, ‘entanglements’, ‘assemblages’, or ‘networks’ (see, e.g., Giraud 2019; Latour 2005; Strathern 2020). These vocabularies have enabled scholars to urgently point out the fragile relational densities holding worlds and lives in place. Yet the trap of the Sky Village taught Weiner that one must be wary, too, of the romance of relationality. Marilyn Strathern (2020: 188) has recently observed that it is not “from the vernacular gloss of solidary connection or association” that anthropologists “may derive positive value” from the language of relations, but from their “active, transpositional capacity” to bring “new concepts into view.” In this sense, the language of entrapment offers a model of social process that complements, but also differs from, other relational imaginaries; it delineates one possible heuristic for getting a hold on the “contours of non-relational shapes” (ibid.: 113). Entrapments work as figures of allurement, seduction, and enchainment, but they are also presages for and vectors of abduction, predation, and agonism. Entrapments index how relations originate but also how they terminate. Finally, entrapments embody systems of practice, orientation, and thinking that the ethnographic record has long held to be of paramount importance to indigenous ways of being and knowing. As such, the heuristic appeal of entrapment lies not in its capacity to translate, transpose, or represent other systems of understanding and sociality, but in its capacity to emplace, gain traction, and environmentalize specific modes of commitment, attentiveness, and separation.

The rest of the article is organized in three parts. In the first part I provide a selective overview of the ethnographic corpus on traps and entrapments. My intention here is not to produce a comprehensive review of the literature, which is well beyond the scope and ambition of this article. Rather, I aim to survey some of the richly complex themes that ethnographers have unveiled in their descriptions of traps and entrapments. As we saw in the myth of the Sky Village, traps have enabled anthropologists to ‘capture’ multiple problems of description, from questions of ancestry and cosmogony to matters including ritual warfare, kinship and territorial claims, environmental knowledge, and multispecies diplomacy. I focus in particular on the way that entrapments are deployed to (1) transcode symbolic and ontological practices, (2) channel and reorient the circulation of vital and predatory energies, and (3) emplace and terraform the world. By no means does this approach exhaust the ethnographic record, but it offers, I believe, a sufficient approximation to its richness.

In the second part I offer another selective overview, this time on how traps have ‘captivated’ scholars into reimagining the possibilities of analysis. Sometimes anthropologists have taken inspiration from the work that traps do as systems of camouflage, mimesis, and analogy to develop their own theories of symbolism, metaphor, or semiosis. At other times, attention to the work of entrapments has prompted academics to reorient their gaze toward problems regarding the agency of objects, the distributed landscapes of cognition, or the situated tensions of interagency. I speak of ‘captivation’ in this context because scholars draw on the allurements of entrapment to stage a persuasiveness for analysis as a form that is at once volatile yet also promising. Drawing inspiration from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, we might say that entrapment works as a heuristic of ‘equivocation’ (2004), oscillating between a “metaphysics of predation” (2014: 49) and a “metaphysics of production” (2002: 15).

The third and final part brings the article to a close with a provocation of sorts. I suggest that the mobilization and redeployment of entrapments across theoretical domains speaks about their unusual ability to do double duty as ethnographic *and* analytical effects. This is another way of saying that the work that entrapments do is ‘recursive’, making the effects of analysis visible from the point of view of the very context or form that enables it (Holbraad 2012). More specifically, I suggest that the recursivity of entrapments is explained by the surreptitious partnership of capture and captivation as a mode of description in anthropology, whereby the discoveries of ethnographic captivation are recaptured as anthropological analyses. Following Marilyn Strathern, I suggest that the travels of the capture/captivation duplex in the literature have enabled anthropological descriptions to work in a register of “*compatibility* that does not require *comparability*” (Strathern 2004: 35; emphases added). In other words, anthropological entrapments make the “working compatibility” (ibid.) of ethnographic worlds possible.

Entrapment I: Capture

Let us go back to Weiner's account of Foi mythology for a moment. The marsupial trap in the myth of the Sky Village is in fact but one of many figures of capture to be found in Weiner's (1988) *The Heart of the Pearl Shell*. The book contains numerous descriptions of relations that are brought to a halt and contained or that are accelerated and expanded through traps. Traps recurrently figure as devices of capture and suspension of prey, of course, but of other forms of relations as well. For example, Weiner reports on the construction of traps that aim to capture the analogical relations between men and animals. He describes a spell used in the construction of "deadfall traps used in hunting rodents and small marsupials" where "instead of building the trap with the usual wooden parts, the bones of the hawk are used: the backbone representing the log, the ribs representing the pointed struts into which it falls, and so on. The analogic relationship between man and hawk, each of which preys on common animals, is here being utilized, and the speaker attempts to appropriate the superior hunting abilities of the hawk" (ibid.: 130).

Take another example. In the myth of the Hornbill Husband, an old woman tricks a young girl into climbing a tree to pick some leaves for her. When the girl has reached the top, the woman casts a spell that makes the "trunk of the *hagenamo* tree elongated greatly and the branches spread out in all directions" (Weiner 1988: 160), making it impossible for the girl to get down. The old woman, it turns out, is a *ka buru*, a "black woman" or "ogress" (ibid.: 164). The old woman announces that she plans to marry the young girl's husband and leaves her to die in the tree. The girl wakes up the next morning to find that someone has built a fireplace and a small house for her. As times goes by, she finds herself taken care of by this unseen provider, and later discovers that she is pregnant. One night, in order to find out who her secret caretaker is, the girl pretends to fall asleep and rises unexpectedly to catch a man holding the child. The man explains to the girl how to escape from her tree entrapment and offers guidance about reuniting with her husband. He also introduces himself as really a hornbill and lets it be known that "while you live with your husband on the earth, I will be around. If he mistreats you, call out to me, I will be flying in the sky above" (ibid.: 160). The girl finds her husband and moves back to the house to live with him and the *ka buru*, but this arrangement fails to work for her, for the *ka buru* keeps pushing the boundaries of her status as a co-wife. Finally, on one occasion, the husband hits the young girl on the head with a stick, prompting the girl to call out for the hornbill, which comes to rescue her and her child and takes them back to their treetop home.

There are of course notable differences between the traps described above. The marsupial trap in the Sky Village and the hunting trap used for procuring analogical enhancements both refer to specific material objects: they are

‘traps-as-things’. On the other hand, the “arboreal entrapment” (Weiner 1988: 162) in which the Hornbill Husband refers to an act of magical trickery is, we might say, a ‘trap-as-process’. However, in all cases trapping is mobilized to emplace, liberate, or confuse specific social capacities. These are all traps or trapping impulses—let us think of them as *entrapments* more generally—deployed to frame worlds, energizing or deflating them in particular directions. They both enable and disable people in their ‘worldlings’ from and against the ‘unworld’. If we are to follow Weiner in some of his obviational interpretations, these worldling projects express central themes in Foi sociality, such as a man’s divided loyalties between his agnates and his affines (the Sky Village), the moral comparison between monogamy and polygyny (the Hornbill Husband), or the progressive transformation of humans into birds (deadfall trap). More importantly, the tropic substitutions that each myth/trap enables are, for Weiner, expressive of a larger transformational logic that pervades and organizes Foi sociality: “the creation of affinity out of intersexuality and vice versa ... [and the] transformation of one to the other (and both out of life and death)” (ibid.: 172).

Such transcodifications between life and death, kinship and interspeciation, the (sub)terrestrial and the celestial are echoed throughout the ethnographic corpus. There is a passage in *The Savage Mind* where Lévi-Strauss ([1962] 1996: 50) provides one of his typically mesmerizing glosses to a mythical story he has just been describing: “Man is the trap,” he says, emphasizing the provocative nature of his statement. Despite appearances to the contrary, Lévi-Strauss is making here an ethnographic observation, not a philosophical or existential claim. He is describing the technique of eagle hunting of the Hidatsa, which “presents a kind of paradox” (ibid.). This is so because “the Hidatsa hunt eagles by hiding in pits. The eagle is attracted by a bait placed on top and the hunter catches it with his bare hands as it perches to take the bait. And so the technique presents a kind of paradox. Man is the trap but to play this part he has to go down into the pit, that is, to adopt the position of a trapped animal. He is both hunter and hunted at the same time” (ibid.). As it turns out, this assumption of the form of a trap by the hunter becomes, for Lévi-Strauss, central to understanding the ritual importance of eagle hunting among the Hidatsa. As he puts it, such importance is “at least partly due to the use of pits” (ibid.). The trap functions as an interface between “a celestial prey and a subterranean hunter,” effecting a “mediation” that narrows the “wide gulf between hunter and game” (ibid.: 51). Crucially, man’s self-capture—his own trapping of himself before he traps the eagle—is of the utmost importance in the case of the eagle’s hunt, because it is this self-identification of man and trap that enables the hunter to catch the eagle without shedding blood. Such is the identification that “the same native term is used for the embrace of lovers and the grasping of the bait by the bird” (ibid.: 52). The “purity” of the

man-eagle embrace contrasts with the “pollution” of the small piece of game, whose “bloodstained carcass ... which is close to the living hunter for hours or even days is the means of effecting the capture” (ibid.). The trap stands therefore at the very point of intersection of a set of symmetrical axes, whose movements configure “a general system of reference allowing the detection of homologies” (ibid.) between celestial and subterranean orders, hunter and game, purity and pollution, life/love and death.

The Ankave eel traps described by Pierre Lemonnier (2012) offer yet another condensation of key themes in the mythical transcodification of gender relations, genealogy, and territorial power. The traps, Lemonnier tells us, are built to great strength and resistance in order to create an “enormous passive energy, capable of successfully resisting the vitality attributed to the mythic eel” that is identified with the ancestor and master of fish (ibid.: 58). The magical activation of traps is carried out by women, although a trapper may silently formulate his own magical recitation that “minimises his wife’s action” (ibid.: 59). Men’s suspicion of women rehearses the origin myth of eels, where an ancestral woman made a deadfall trap that severed “the very long penis” of a neighboring villager that molested her. The severed penis “made its way to the river” and engendered the “masters of fish” (ibid.: 56). This is why the eel is mythically “associated with an extremely vigorous male member,” and why the trap “functions as the equivalent, or marker, of a piece of territory held through the male line” (ibid.: 58). Although Lemonnier is cautious not to invest the power of traps with animistic or ontological capacities, his ethnographic material speaks about the important mythic role of traps in *emplacing* kinship genealogies and territorial claims, a point to which I shall return below.

The art of entrapment does not stop at the masterful and skillful blurring of environmental interfaces, say, between predator and prey, territorial genealogy and mythical vitality. Sometimes the trap extends well beyond the domain of the material artifact and demands that the trapper apprehend the circulatory landscape and economy of spirits. Among the Siberian Yukaghir, for example, it is not unusual to try to redirect the migration routes of sables and have them come one’s way by leaving vodka offerings to the forest spirits at specific locations. It is said that “forest spirits love to get drunk and play cards. They constantly play each other, with the sable and other fur animals as their stakes. So the animals must pass from one owner to the next at the end of each game” (Willerslev 2012: 78). Hunters will entice the spirits their way by pouring a glass of vodka down the throat of one of their most precious game, so that the animal thinks of itself as a “guest” of the hunters and “will tell its kinsfolk that they can come to us without fear” (ibid.: 77).

The skills of entrapment mobilize abilities that are terraforming, that can tap into and shift the circulating landscapes of animals and spirits, or at any rate that can seduce the energy of spirits into terraforming the world to the

hunter's requisites. For example, the Daribi people of Mount Karimui, Papua New Guinea, describe the terraforming capacities of spiritual agencies as a "place-soul" whose will and dispositions must be negotiated with through a form of ritualized hospitality that Roy Wagner (2012: S163) calls "land shamanism." When a *hoa-bidi*, or "soul-person," is denied a proper ritual, Wagner explains, it "expersonates" herself by becoming the territory (ibid.). Thereafter, the place-soul takes command of the land and the circulation of energies therein, for instance, by willing and directing animals for hunters to embrace aplenty or, on the contrary, by exacting the depletion of the land and the end of abundance. The capriciousness of the place-soul can be redressed only through the *habu* funerary ritual, a ceremony that requites the burial feast denied to the soul-person. The ritual stages a relation where the Daribi and the land shaman play host and guest to one another, and where the underlying tension at play signals that it is "the people of the community itself who are feasted as *guests of the land*" (ibid.: S164; emphasis in the original).

Entrapment thus mobilizes what we may think of as *endo- and exo-energies*, which hustle bodies and environments into pressure fields and tendencies that are much greater than those of the hunter and his technology or craft. While endo-energies arrest the world into moments of vigilance, suspension, and concentration, exo-energies thrust our bodies into movements of anticipation, acceleration, and display; these energies respectively insulate or catalyze modes of connectivity. We saw one example in the Ankave ethnography, where traps are designed to hoard excesses of vital energy. To take another example, among the Amazonian Enawenê-nawê the building of monumental fish dams is carried out in two stages over the course of about two months (Nahum-Claudel 2018, 2019). The process mirrors the charter myth for dam fishing; it makes a distinction between the cosmogonical creation of the first dam, which separated land from water and is deemed "masterful" (Nahum-Claudel 2019: 481), and the tending of riverine traps within the dam, which instead "blurs the land/water boundary, occupying a risky but powerful medial position" (ibid.: 480) between "species, levels, life and death" (ibid.: 482). Thus, whereas building the weir displays powerful and masterful world-making energies, tending the traps conjures instead an embodied ethics of vulnerability, liminality, and subjection. Thus, entrapments are terraforming, but they are also body- and soul-forming. Trickery and deceit may well be what is partly at stake, but these are modes of existence that pertain to no singular being and are redeployed more amply as ecological and intersubjective effects.

The extent to which traps work as *ecological placeholders* is indeed amply documented in the literature. In this respect, the ethnographic corpus has taught us to reorient our gaze away from the specific material architecture of traps-as-objects and toward the ritual landscapes set in motion through dynamics of entrapment. The texts on bison jump complexes in the Northern Plains

offer well-known examples. Gerald Oetelaar (2014: 15) discusses the kill sites used by the Blackfoot people that were under the tutelage of “spirits and ancestral beings” who had “left behind instructions” for their “design, construction, and proper use.” As Oetelaar explains: “To the Blackfoot people the repeated use of a *pis’kun* [buffalo jump] represents a spiritual and historical attachment to place. People returned to the same places at regular intervals to (1) renew their ties with the local spirits and with their ancestors; (2) remember and transmit the names of the places and the associated narratives, songs, and rituals; and (3) regenerate the land and its resources” (ibid.: 25).

For Zedeño et al. (2014), the organizational complexity demanded of the construction of such monumental traps is exemplary of true feats of ‘landscape engineering’, which involve the reorientation and recirculation of all kinds of telluric, political, and ritual energies. In his ethno-archaeological survey of hunting sites in the Archibarca region in northern Argentina, Alejandro Haber (2009: 425) similarly resorts to the notion of the ‘landscape-as-trap’ to conceptualize the complex architecture of ritual, spiritual, and material energies that have terraformed and animated the desert for the past two thousand years. To cite one final example, in their impressive study of hunting magic and ‘seascapes’ in the Torres Straits, Ian McNiven and Ricky Feldman (2003: 171) have spoken of “geographical metaphors of ontology” to illustrate how hunting rituals densify spiritual and bodily encounters at specific sites and territorial demarcations. Entrapments, in sum, ‘capture’ places as sites of social ontology, vitality, and territorial becoming.

What is it, then, that traps capture? In a narrow sense they of course trap prey. However, the selective ethnographic review conducted above has already shown us that dynamics of entrapment operate across numerous fields and terrains of social organization and action. Entrapments help channel and conduce the circulation and alignment of sometimes agonistic, sometimes beneficiary social energies. They are interfaces for complex and often dangerous transubstantiations, in and across bodies and landscapes. Moreover, traps are also sometimes landscapes in their own right. Their designs delineate and silhouette the terraforming or ontological movements of telluric beings and histories. Entrapments are placeholders of worlds as much as they are worldling operations of place.

Entrapment II: Captivation

There is arguably no better-known theory of entrapment than Alfred Gell’s (1996, 1999) inspiring analogizing of artworks and traps as ‘technologies of enchantment’. Famously, Gell (1996: 29) draws parallels between the way traps embody networks of “complex intentionalities,” pulling together and

redistributing the agencies of hunters and prey through environmental designs and material media, and the captivation that artworks effectuate in their vicinity. As Gell (1998: 69) later puts it, “captivation” works as a “primordial kind of artistic agency” when a work of art moves us intersubjectively to wonder about the “indecipherable agency” that created it (ibid.: 72). If we are mesmerized and entrapped in the presence of an artifact, then, according to Gell, we are in the presence of art proper.

While Gell’s approach has often been criticized for focusing too narrowly on intersubjectivity as a measure of material agency, his views on suspension and captivation open a fertile pathway for exploring how scholars have themselves been drawn into and moved by dynamics of entrapment. Take, for example, the very notion of material agency. Descriptions of the sentience of traps, or their disguise as muddled vectors of sentience, have long populated the pages of ethnography. Frederica de Laguna (1972: 822) believes that the Tlingit giving personal names to fish traps (along with houses, canoes, or feast dishes) is indicative of “the vague feeling that such inanimate things had a personality or life, similar to that of their owners.” In his account of Tikopia fishing, Raymond Firth (1981: 220) notes how in “the ritual formulae recited by fishermen, fish are urged to satisfy their appetites for food, in particular the fine puddings which Tikopia like so much. Or fish are credited with an interest in personal decoration, as a shark will be invited to treat noose and hook as hair fillet and breast ornament.” Firth is drawn to the ritual culture of fishing in Tikopia as an “outstanding medium for the expression of social relations in figurative form” (ibid.), one, moreover, that gives “expression to [Tikopia] uncertainty, anxiety, impatience, desire for success and respect for and fear of external controlling forces” (ibid.: 226).

In his ethno-archaeological survey of Northwest Coast fishing cultures in the US, Robert Losey (2010) recounts numerous instances when fish trapping equipment (hooks, nets, weir structures) was described as a sentient being. He recalls how Salish speakers of the Gulf Islands of northern Washington state considered nets to be “female human beings” and cites Jennes’s observation that “they consider their net to represent a human being with head, body, arms and legs, and they believed that unless it was set in a definite way the leading sockeye would turn back disapprovingly and warn those behind” (ibid.: 20). And returning to Franz Boas’s work, Losey reminds us how, among the Kwakwaka’wakw, “bag-style nets used to harvest eulachon (*Thaleichthys pacificus*) were spoken to as follows: ‘Go on and gather in yourself the fish, that you may be full when you come back, friend! Now go into the water where you may stay, friend!’” (ibid.: 20–21).

Losey’s theorization of systems of entrapment in terms of animism is a healthy reminder that entrapment is not only good to think with, but that it is also embedded in the very material process through which thinking and

interagency take residence in the world. The material and conceptual aesthetics of entrapment are an important mechanism (by no means the only one) in the elicitation of worlds. We may put it somewhat differently by saying that traps ‘trap’ worlds. In *Habu*, his monograph on Daribi religion, Roy Wagner (1972) comes close to saying this about the mechanics of tropic expansion. Here Wagner provides a vivid account of how traps are craftily designed and deployed to inhabit the very tension of self-concealment, at once camouflaged from but also attractive to prey, opening up a space of metaphorization that allows them both to link to, and at the same time detach from, the prey they are aimed for (ibid.: 63–66):

The way in which a metaphoric “link” or analogy “controls” the action of a metaphor is best demonstrated ... in a spell that accompanies the setting of a cassowary-snare ... As the snare is set, a *pobi* [spell] is recited, stating that “All the men have gone away carrying cargo for the Europeans, therefore Pesquet’s parrots, black cockatoos, you come to this road, there is a man here, he will not hurt you, he will tie a pearl shell around your neck.” Daribi say that they address the black cockatoo and Pesquet’s parrot so as to conceal their true interest in the cassowary, and the latter will overhear, or the black cockatoo will let it know. Actually both Pesquet’s parrot and the black cockatoo resemble the cassowary in coloring, and a legend relates how the black cockatoo became the “cross-cousin” of the cassowary by knocking tree fruit down to it while feeding, and thus “sharing food” with it. This resemblance or relationship serves as a metaphoric link directing the spell at the cassowary, who will “know” or “overhear” as a result ... The effect of the spell, which is to draw the cassowary to the snare, is achieved through the very kind of deception by which the snare itself operates; through the use of bait the snare is presented as something desirable, and its actual intent is hidden, and the spell, similarly, conceals the nature of the snare by misrepresenting its action metaphorically. The metaphoric link aligns the technological efficacy of the snare itself with a somewhat anthropomorphic area of motivation, augmenting its dissembling effect. Other Daribi snare-*pobi* metaphorize the action of the bait itself.

As understood above, the snare is the infrastructure of metaphor, in both a literal and figurative sense. It is what metaphor works *on* and where it works *from*. We might say, to offer a playful gloss on Wagner’s (1986) famous theory of symbolic meaning, that if metaphors are ‘symbols that stand for themselves’, then traps *under-stand* for metaphors themselves: they are the infrastructures that enable metaphors to play both hide and seek, deception and seduction, concealment and elicitation. They are technologies of double metaphorization: now resembling, linking to, or looking like this or that animal or bush, now detaching themselves from, signaling or clearing a space of taboo around, or holding in abeyance relationships with specific humans or spirits. In this view,

the process of entrapment does not prejudice its aftereffects. There is nothing inherently bad about trapping or being trapped. Whatever worldling the entrapment effectuates, it is not predetermined by the infrastructure of the trap. The trap silhouettes an ecology in tension and may even capture an ecology in action, but it by no means models an ecology in function.

We have seen how Alfred Gell's attention to milieus of intersubjective affects that radiate outward from material artifacts can be expanded to thinking more broadly about the modes of "interagency," as Vinciane Despret (2013: 44) calls them, where "spheres of vulnerability and spheres of activity overlap," where guests and hosts—hooks and fish, snares and cassowary—become "companion-agents." Such a transition from the intersubjective to the interagential is beautifully illustrated in Eduardo Kohn's (2013) recent study of ecological relations among the Runa of Ecuador's Upper Amazon. Central to Kohn's project is the articulation of a model for an 'anthropology beyond the human' where human and non-human organisms are mutually enmeshed in cross-signaling processes of sentience and environmentalization. Building on Peirce's semiotics, Kohn develops a view of ecology as a complex sign-processing biotic system. In this system, 'life' or 'thinking' is carried through processes of anticipation and amplification that are intuited, emerge from, and self-organize themselves through a cross-fertilizing semiosis of icons, signs, and symbols. Importantly, for Kohn, getting a hold on this ecology requires us to explore "representational forms that go beyond language" (ibid.: 8). The supervenience of representation upon and beyond linguistic and paralinguistic signifiers is important here. In place of these systems of signification, Kohn opts instead to speak of the Runa's cosmological forest environment as an "ecology of selves" (ibid.: 16), where a 'self' is not to be understood as a bounded vehicle or unit of self-awareness but as a process of bio-semiotic emergence. As Kohn (2007: 6) puts it: "It is appropriate to consider nonhuman organisms as selves and biotic life as a sign process, albeit one that is often highly embodied and nonsymbolic ... The semiosis of the nonhuman biotic world is iconic and indexical. That of the human world ... is iconic, indexical, and symbolic."

Although Kohn (2013: 98) provides abundant examples of how this ecology of selves is rendered animate for the Runa, how it carries and sustains their life, there is one particular myth that "captures, savors, and makes available something about life 'itself.' It captures something about the logic of the thoughts of the forest. And it captures the feeling of being alive to this living logic in moments of its emergence. It captures, in short, what it feels like to think." The idiom of 'capture' that Kohn employs in this evocative gloss is most apposite, for the myth in question is the myth of a trap (ibid.: 97):

It begins with a hero on top of his roof patching it. When a man-eating jaguar approaches, the hero calls out to him, "Son-in-law, help me find holes

in the thatch by poking a stick through them.” From the vantage point of someone inside a house it is quite easy to spot leaks in the thatch because of the sunlight that shines through them. However, because roofs are so high, it is impossible, from this position, to patch these. A person on the roof, on the other hand, can easily patch the holes but cannot see them. For this reason, when a man is patching his roof he will ask someone inside to poke a stick through the holes. This has the effect of aligning inside and outside perspectives in a special way; what can only be seen from the inside suddenly becomes visible to the person on the outside who, seeing these two perspectives as part of something greater, can now do something. Because the hero addresses and “sees” the jaguar as son-in-law, the jaguar thus hailed feels obligated to fulfill the functions incumbent on this role. Once the jaguar is inside, the hero slams the door shut and the structure suddenly turns into a stone cage that traps him.

For Kohn, the jaguar-trapping myth not only provides insight into the shamanistic perspectival aesthetic that has come to dominate descriptions of Amazonian multi-naturalism (see Viveiros de Castro 1998), but perhaps more interestingly it helps the listener “experience the feeling of a new living thought as it emerges; it captures what it feels like to think” (Kohn 2013: 99). The feeling of thinking takes hold of the listener as he or she suddenly realizes that there is a place where inside and outside perspectives come together as a part of an overarching experience. The experience therefore arrests us in a manner analogous to how the trap “suddenly springs up” (*ibid.*). Ultimately, then, what the trap ‘traps’ here is not just the flow of analogical or perspectival relations between human and non-human agencies, but ‘thought’ and ‘life’ themselves as ecological effects. It is ecology that gets trapped out—simultaneously captured and liberated—as a vital and thinking infrastructure. The jaguar trap is therefore not just a method of capture, neither is it just a metaphor or a myth. It is all these things, but it is also an indigenous heuristic for holding in tension and in view the complex entrapments of selves-thinking-worlds.

Entrapment III: Compatibility

In working through the apprehension of thought as feeling, Kohn (2013: 98) draws on Gregory Bateson’s notion of “double description,” which offers a method for analyzing what may be happening at the interface where the many levels and processes of a non-linear system come together. For example, double description refers to the accommodating redescrptions that two people make of each other’s understanding of a situation they share in common. The situation is not ‘out there’ to be apperceived; rather, it is re-perceived through their mutual telling and sharing of information. Thus, there is no vantage point from

which to describe the situation except through these redescrptions—descriptions that move forward as they double back on themselves. For Kohn, sylvian thinking provides one such case of double description. The complex semiosis that takes place between humans, animals, and other forms of living organisms in the thick of forest encounters—in and through the luxuriance of every double description—is the very shape that the feeling of thought takes. Sylvian thinking is the expressive effect of such mutual describabilities.

As it turns out, Bateson's double descriptions are but one of the many methods he developed throughout his life as he progressively gave shape to what he called "an 'ecological epistemology' or 'recursive epistemology'" (Harries-Jones 1995: 4). Other methods include the 'interface' or the notion of 'scan'. These were all attempts at modeling what an integrated social and biotic system would look like were it able to self-model itself (i.e., to double describe itself) as an informational "cybernetic system" (ibid.: 116).

While 'recursive' was not a concept in currency in the late nineteenth century, when anthropologists first turned their attention to the material culture of traps, the peculiar functionality of traps as technologies that looped their design around environmental interfaces was not lost on scholars. Writing at the turn of the century, Otis Mason (1900: 657) defined traps as an "invention for the purpose of inducing animals to commit incarceration, self arrest, or suicide," pointing thus to their invisible and deceitful grafting onto the animal's habitat. Julius Lips (1949: 76) spoke of traps as "the first robot," whereby "human intelligence" looked to "imitate by mechanical means what [had been] seen in nature." For Hugo Theodor Horwitz (1924), a historian of technology and a contemporary of Lips, the trap's intermediate position between human intelligence and nature was unique in that it afforded communication between two worlds of energy—the environmental energy carried forth by prey and the cultural energy embodied in the artifact's mechanism. For Horwitz, such communication established traps as "the first information-proceeding [*sic*] devices, precursors to the open machines of the age of cybernetics" (Brandstetter 2012: 351). This image was reused by Alfred Gell (1996: 27) in his classic text when he described the design of a trap as an "automaton's central processor (the trigger mechanism, a switch, the basis of all information-processing devices)." Therefore, while traps were still imagined as tertiary devices between the energy and informational worlds of nature and culture, one can begin to see in these arguments about the cybernetics of traps and their role as automata an incipient imagining of entrapments as inchoative designs of naturecultures.

Automata also play a central role in Michael Taussig's (1993) fascinating inquiry into the 'mimetic faculty' that drove social and philosophical description in the twentieth century. Taussig's project is focused on showing how the projection of mimesis as a quality of savagery was central to the colonial project. What early natural historians and anthropologists such as Charles Darwin

and James Frazer seemed to be most drawn to about the culture of ‘primitives’, notes Taussig, was their admirable ability to imitate and copy specific attributes of ‘nature’. The mimesis of nature seemed, in this light, a natural feature of primitiveness itself.

Once the mimesis of nature and the nature of mimesis are posited as two sides of the same coin, other projects in mimetic culture become easier to account for, according to Taussig (1993). Copying, recording, reproducing, representing, modeling—these have all, in different instances and contexts, given power and credence to the notion that the mimetic faculty is the “nature that culture uses to create second nature” (ibid.: xiii). Whatever power that fetishes, photographs, phonographs, models, or icons may yield, they do so through the magic of mimesis, where the difference between sensuousness and nature, “the real and the really made-up” (ibid.: xvii), becomes otiose and unproductive. It is not the differences between nature and culture—the original and the copy—that should be of our concern, but instead the similarities brought out by mimetic enchantments.

Although traps do not figure prominently in Taussig’s *Mimesis and Alterity*, the language of capture and captivation remains central to his project. As Taussig (1993: 2; emphasis added) explains early on, “the power of the mimetic faculty” is often best explained by imagining the “spell of the natural” as that moment “where the reproduction of life merges with the *recapture of the soul*.” Indeed, throughout the book, the making of copies, photographs, films, or decoys is described in the language of capture. Taussig is himself aware of this idiomatic indulgence: “I use the word ‘capture’ advisedly, it being a taken-for-granted way of vividly expressing not only the apparent physicality involved in imageric production, but also the capturing of something important, something otherwise elusive ... What is faithfully captured is a *power*” (ibid.: 62; emphasis in the original). The power of capture and the capture of power become thus mutually ‘entrapped’ in the work and magic of mimesis. This is a dazzling and dizzying movement of recursions that has no end. For example, speaking of Cuna healing practices, where small wooden figurines are used to ‘capture’ evil spirits, Taussig explains how the healer’s capacity “to diagnose and cure, to restore souls [the indigenous term here meaning also ‘double’] depends on out-doubling doubling. Through his wooden figurines activated by his chants bringing forth doubles by means of mimetic magic, he brings forth images that battle with images, hence spirit with spirit, copy with copy, out doubling the doubleness of the world. Until the next time” (ibid.: 128). From here it is of course only a small step to imagine the work of ethnography as itself yet another enterprise in doubling and out doubling, in capture and captivation. If for healers and shamans the “task to which the mimetic faculty is ... set to capture ... spirit power, ... for the ethnographer graphing the ethnos, the stakes are no less important” (ibid.: 17).

It is not just anthropologists who have refigured the arts of ethnography as an arts of capture and captivation, of mimesis and “mimetic excess” (Taussig 1993: 34, esp. 254–255). Our interlocutors have also done so, as Katherine Swancutt (2016) has eloquently described in her recursive ethnography of Nuosu ritual warfare and animism. For the Nuosu, the human soul is a tiny ‘soul-spider’ that inhabits the outside surface of the human body. Wandering ghosts, who for various reasons have not gained entrance to ancestral afterlife, are known to haunt the homes of villagers, where they inflict illnesses and capture people’s souls. The ritual retrieval of these soul-spiders entails luring them back “with promises of warmth and food” in an “asymmetric power relation that is more transparent to the captor than the would-be captive” (ibid.: 77). Such encounters stage “a reflexive battle of wits, using hidden knowledge or jokes to lure others into close enough range to accomplish the art of capture” (ibid.: 88). Thus understood, Swancutt tells us, the art of capture is a “recurrent theme in Nuosu efforts to manage relations between people and their souls, the living and the dead, anthropologists and informants, or even native scholars and foreign anthropologists” (ibid.: 77). We may call this the auto-capture of anthropological knowledge.

Let me start wrapping up my argument at this point. I noted earlier that automata play an important part in Michael Taussig’s arguments about the magic of mimesis. For Taussig (1993: 210), automata make evident the “link between mimesis, primitivism, and technological development” that is characteristic of our age because they “register the rediscovery of the naturalness of the mimetic faculty” in the language of mechanical reproduction. In my idiom, automata are ‘traps’ for naturecultures: in their mechanical bodies the display of technological wonder reinstates the power of mimesis (whereby automata copy human nature) as mystery and otherness.

Taussig was prefiguring arguments that have recently found a new lease on life in ethnographies of machine learning and machine intelligence. For example, building on Otis Mason’s and Alfred Gell’s work on the persuasiveness and enchantment of traps, Nick Seaver (2019) has redescribed the music industry’s recommender systems as ‘captivating algorithms’. Seaver is mirroring here the music industry’s own favored explanatory metaphors, “which figured users as prey and recommender systems as devices for catching them” (ibid.: 3). He describes how a theory of “captology” has been developed more amply to foster the design of computer systems as behaviorally persuasive technologies—such that people are modeled as having “habitual minds with tendencies and compulsions that make them susceptible to persuasion and targets for capture” (ibid.: 5). In particular, Seaver is interested in redeploying classic arguments on the anthropology of trapping to problematize the design ethics of data infrastructures. As he puts it, the language of traps helps sidestep techno-behavioralist approaches to ethics, “reorient[ing] our attention toward the vast

middle ground between coercion, figured as material or technological, and persuasion, figured as mental or cultural. Ethical disputes that hinge on whether a technique is properly persuasive or coercive miss the fact, evident in trap design, that most persuasive technologies work in the blurry middle” (ibid.: 7).

The term ‘blurry middle’ offers an apposite metaphor for the recursive strangeness between capture and captivation that drives anthropology’s own capaciousness as a language of description. From the ecologies of selves of Amerindian ontologies to the persuasive technologies of algorithmic recommendation systems, it is ‘recursion’ that loops into, but also redescribes and moves forward, the strangeness of encounters that entrapments set in motion—between prey and predator, endo- and exo-energies, metaphor and life, intelligence and environment, machine and semiosis, anthropologists and their informants.

Conclusion

The recursive strangeness of entrapments, as I have argued in this article, performs three types of work in anthropology. First, entrapments are descriptors of ethnographic contexts and encounters. In particular, entrapments both inchoate and get redeployed as places, energies, and interagencies. They help capture complex double movements of mastery and subjection, emplacement and abduction, affinity and cannibalism. They work as tractions and orientations through which people ground, mobilize, and re-environmentalize the world around them.

Second, entrapments operate as systems of captivation for anthropological analysis. Entrapments summon ecologies, infrastructures, and ontologies that have proven surprisingly adequate at refurnishing the theoretical sensibilities of anthropology. In the language of entrapment, anthropologists have found a useful resource for rethinking structuralism and metaphorization, cybernetics and semiosis, animism and symbolism, mimesis and alterity, infrastructural designs and ethics, to name but a few of the topics we have covered here.

Finally, as our narrative has gradually moved between moments of ethnographic capture and displays of anthropological captivation, we have seen how entrapments also work to *make compatible* different regimes and sensibilities of description—from ethnographies of hunting and trapping to descriptions of shamanic healing or algorithmic recommendation systems. In this guise, ‘making compatible’ rehearses a different operation of capture than the work of ‘comparison’ (Strathern 2004: 35; see also Candea 2018). Working recursively as an ethnographic register and an analytical effect, entrapment quietly gains traction, not as a device for description and comparison, but as an orientation toward compatibility and redescription (Lebner 2017). Captures, captivations,

and compatibilities are all operations of anthropological entrapment. How successfully I have ensnared you in my argument will be, in this case perhaps more so than in any other, a measure of its robustness.

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Notes

1. The Sky Village myth is first described by James Weiner (1988: 243–248) in *The Heart of the Pearl Shell*. In a retrospective published in the journal *Oceania* on his life, Biersack et al. (2021: 2) recount that Weiner took the name Jaimie Pearl Bloom and began to live “openly as a transgender woman in the last years of her life. Jaimie was proudly transgender and worked ... to support LGBTIQ rights and transgender issues” while accepting “being referred to as ‘James’ or ‘Jimmy’ in commentary on her anthropological work.”
2. One could argue, contra Weiner, that there is no limit to relationality here, only a substitution of human for non-human relationships. The man was fooled into thinking that only humans have relations, but of course the Sky people do as well—it is just that they preclude human relations (Strathern, pers. comm.).
3. ‘Worldling’ is not a term that Weiner uses. He does note, however, that if we are to think of social relations as aesthetic elicitations of a concealed ontological grounding (“unknown, unseen, uncanny”), we may describe it, “for lack of a better term, [as an] *unworld*” (Weiner 2001: 106; emphasis in the original).

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