Pythons in Paris: Fear and Desire in the French Empire
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Through an exploration of nineteenth-century perceptions of snakes in France, I seek to answer two questions revolving around the expansion and consolidation of empire and the figure of the snake. What role did snakes play in popular culture during the rising years of empire (ca. 1870-1900)? Specifically, how were snakes portrayed in popular publications, and how may this have reflected attitudes towards imperial expansion and tropical colonies as both endeavor and place? I posit that the figure of the snake was in many ways integral to the perception of empire in metropolitan France, serving to comment on both positive and negative aspects of conquest. I propose that snakes were mobilized as emblems encompassing the contradictory—but utterly entwined—emotions and impulses of empire, encompassing both fear and desire (or aspiration).

While French animal studies is a growing field of research, and studies on exotic animals are numerous, reptiles remain largely absent from the conversation. Louise E. Robbins and Peter Sahlins have addressed the cultural and political roles and meanings of animals in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which exotic animals in royal, private, and theatrical collections dominated. Sahlins describes how chameleons arrived in France as rare and curious prestige gifts that became unique pets and, more importantly, scientific specimens for observation, dissection, and publication. The engagement of men and women, professionals and amateurs in producing knowledge based on their observations of living and dead chameleons in Louis XIV’s salon society indexes an expanding scientific world, which at the same time remained linked to creaturely mythologies.1 Robbins traces the eighteenth century importation of

1 Peter Sahlins, “A Tale of Three Chameleons: The Animal between Science and Literature in the Age of Louis XIV,” in French Thinking About Animals, edited by Louisa
animals from Africa, North America, and the Caribbean to Paris, where winsome birds and mammals signaled the far reaches of French overseas activity and power.\(^2\) Cardinals, canaries, parrots, and monkeys were popularized as exotic pets, whereas large animals such as zebras, ostriches, and elephants were desired for the royal menagerie at Versailles. Meanwhile, the French population had steady access to viewing and interacting with exotic animals such as tigers, rhinoceroses, and even the occasional snake charmer at seasonal fairs.\(^3\) As the century advanced, these animals were increasingly touted as being of scientific value for academics and the populace alike; although Robbins argues that while animals became valued as sites for scientific knowledge production, “they continued to sport elements of their older dress from fables and emblem books, speaking to humans about human, not animal affairs.”\(^4\) The serpent’s evil role in Judeo-Christian traditions surely continued to lurk beneath everyday attitudes towards snakes in popular culture. So burdened, snakes remained distinctly ‘other’ in comparison to animals commonly adopted as pets or viewed more sympathetically by humans as fellow mammals.

However, as discussed by both Kathleen Kete and Ceri Crossley, animals in nineteenth-century France found themselves increasingly under empirical scrutiny, whether in vivisection laboratories or under observation in zoological exhibitions.\(^5\) At home, petkeeping became a thoroughly bourgeois practice, and the sentimentality of pet owners further endowed mammalian domestic animals with human characteristics.\(^6\) Neither Kete nor Crossley discusses interactions with, or attitudes towards, reptiles, despite the fact that in print snakes were featured amongst exotic species in the popular imagination and appear to have been a significant element in publications on the Jardin des Plantes zoo in Paris. It seems they were deemed neither appropriate as pets nor highlighted in discourse on the treatment of animals during the period.

Across the channel, James Hall’s inquiry into the emotional economy of the London Zoo reptile house describes the popularity of that exhibit in light of

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\(^3\) Ibid., 79.
\(^4\) Robbins, 232.
\(^6\) Kete, 76-96.
the cultural connotations of snakes. Hall documents visitors of all ages, classes, genders, and professions enjoying the reptile house and its occupants, arguing that the great fascination it held was related to the dual familiarity and ambiguity of snakes in Victorian culture—spanning references in religious, scientific, moral, and imperial discourse. As such they were figuratively readable, but mysterious as individual creatures, objects of fear and curiosity.

As opposed to zoological publications, I examine snakes through a range of popular culture lenses, including newspapers, magazines, and adventure literature. Through these objects, the iconic reptile emerges as integral to the imaginary of tropics and empire. Sources sampled include *Le Petit Parisien, Le Petit Dauphinois* (and their weekly illustrated literary supplements), *Le Petit Français Illustré, Le Journal de la Jeunesse*, and *L'Eclipse*, as well as fictional works for youths by Paul du Chaillu. The connotations accrued by snakes allowed for their textual deployment both in favor of, and in protest to, imperial pursuits—as moral lessons or scientific arguments, as natural beings in their own right, or as representations of Africa and Asia in general. Understanding these contradictory mobilizations requires an understanding of the fear/desire complex theorized in the colonial context. At times snakes were representative of tropical nature, whereas elsewhere they represented tropical culture—both of which were targets of the imperial mission to civilize. I argue that snakes became actors and metaphors integral to debating what exactly the colonial project’s reach should (and could) be.

In this framing, the fear/desire complex of colonialism entails the dueling emotions that drove imperial expansion and writing about colonial people, animals, objects, and spaces. The unknown was desireable, but also potentially terrifying and in need of radical improvement. Undesirable elements needed to be eliminated in order to reap the desired benefits of the colony (productive crops, mass markets, revenues). The tension between fear and desire can also be described as a temptation—dangerous, possibly fatal, but also seductive, possibly irresistible. Colonial landscapes themselves were seductive through promises of rich resources and views of paradise, but they were also in need of rationalization and being made productive. Snakes embodied the fear/desire complex, in which wild and dangerous colonial natures had to be domesticated, tamed, or—more violently—explicitly conquered and subjugated. This applied to people, animals,

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7 Hall, 338-339.
and landscapes alike.\textsuperscript{10} That is, the colonial endeavor was potentially highly lucrative as well as morally mandated by the civilizing mission, but necessarily involved significant risks. The widespread fear of, and fascination with, snakes tied into these metropolitan anxieties over untamed landscapes, and traditional European fears of venomous snakes and carnivorous beasts (wolves in Europe, big cats in the tropics, snakes in both).\textsuperscript{11} Such predators were a direct threat to ‘civilized’ domestic life. They had to be eliminated in order to civilize indigenous ecologies, to make new territories ‘safe’ in the same way that Europe had struggled to make itself safe from such threats in the past.

**Perceptions of Snakes: The Hunted & the Tamed**

Snakes had four main connotations in nineteenth-century France: they were dangerous, they were exotic (and seductive), they were associated with women (although more phallic than feminine themselves), and they were of scientific interest as part of the on-going cataloguing of the natural world. Further, two main character-types interacted with snakes in popular narratives: the adventurous male explorer or snake hunter, and the alluring female snake charmer. Acknowledging these as heuristics rather than exclusive categories, overall, the reader can begin to draw creeping inferences from a series of sensational and seemingly politically benign narratives that feature snakes, which—despite the fear they inspired—held a prime position in the visual canon of nineteenth-century empire.

Encounters with snakes featured prominently in books by Paul Du Chaillu, a Franco-American naturalist who made early forays into Gabon and is often credited with ‘discovering’ gorillas.\textsuperscript{12} Du Chaillu wrote many books from his travels, including five for young readers: *Stories of Gorilla Country* (1867) *Wildlife Under the Equator* (1869), *Lost in the Jungle* (1870), *My Apingi Kingdom* (1871), and *The Country of the Dwarves* (1872).\textsuperscript{13} All but the last

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feature multiple, action-packed episodes with snakes, both venomous and non-venomous—pythons, cobras, water snakes, vipers, etc.—bringing a thrilling and romantic adventure narrative to the youthful reader. Several of his works appeared in English and French. Africa was depicted as a wild landscape, full of savage animals, and populated by both helpful and antagonistic indigenous people. At the same time, it was a place of wonders, such as the rumored and mythologized gorilla. Thus, in Du Chaillu, Africa was full of adventure, wonder, potential, and danger. In some ways paralleling Sune Borkfelt’s analysis of Rudyard Kipling’s animal stories, I posit that an inculcation of thought about colonial (or potentially colonial) tropes is embedded in these and other adventure stories.14

Du Chaillu described near-death incidents with snakes, including a vignette in which one of his dogs was attacked by a huge python,15 and one in which his boat was swamped by a bevy of river snakes.16 Throughout his stories, Du Chaillu and his guides trekked through the untamed African wilderness, and killed any snake that crossed their path. Some ate the snakes, although for others they were taboo;17 however, never was the slaying of a snake portrayed as unnecessary or against belief. This is in direct contrast to an incident described in The Fortunes of Wangrin, a colonial novel of French West Africa by Amadou Hampaté Bâ. There, the protagonist has lost his personal amulet, and—stricken by bad fortune, speeding through the countryside in his car one night—he runs over a large snake that had served as the sacred water guardian of a nearby village.18 Worse still, pythons were a sacred animal for Wangrin, and taboo for his clan. As a result, he was obligated to go through various absolutions and to make amends in order to appease both the python water spirit, and the villagers, including animal sacrifices to the pond and a ceremonial burial of the dead snake. Contrary to Du Chaillu’s description of consequence-free snake hunting, Hampaté Bâ’s narrative points to the traditional role of pythons in West African religiosity in which they are characterized as water spirits or guardians (correlating to the rock python’s habitat preferences). In addition to associations with water places, pythons also represent deities of fertility, wisdom, culture, and

15 Du Chaillu, My Apingi Kingdom, 91.
16 Du Chaillu, Wildlife Under the Equator, 94-96.
17 Ibid., 95, 98.
war in West Africa,\textsuperscript{19} something that also appears in Classical Mediterranean and Christian contexts.\textsuperscript{20} However, as presented by nineteenth-century European writers, positive African attributes of snakes were obscured, and their importance to spiritual life was obfuscated. The colonial gaze approached sacred animals from a purely Eurocentric point of view, in which snakes were casted as vermin in the secular world, and as evil in the moral or religious world. Du Chaillu’s seemingly apolitical adventure stories feed directly into this metropolitan attitude towards snakes, Africa, and tropical colonies in general.

Categorization of the snake as dangerous and killable is seen throughout popular publications (including \textit{Le Petit Parisien Supplément Littéraire Illustré}, \textit{Le Petit Français Illustré}, and \textit{L’Eclipse}). Listings of exotics (to be seen at the zoo, for sale, or in the guise of toys) most often included lions, tigers, leopards, elephants, crocodiles, and snakes. Snakes feature widely in the imaginary of tropical wildlife, and are rarely absent from the imagined fauna of empire. As seen in Du Chaillu, the adventuring snake hunter—\textit{chasseur de serpents}—appears frequently in illustrated journals.\textsuperscript{21} The propagation of such a form of possessive and violent exploration helps to solidify in the mind of the child a specific colonial imaginary and even personal aspiration for their own future participation.\textsuperscript{22} The snake became a part of the wild tropics that was dangerous and in need of conquering, even eradication. The pursuit of its demise was heroic, romantic, and masculine. Snake hunters such as Du Chaillu killed snakes because they were dangerous and undesirable. Their natural menace is easily equated with Edenic associations of evil and betrayal. However, the nineteenth century saw a popularization of natural history and efforts to bring items of scientific interest to the public. The importation exotic animals became a scientific


endeavor in the service of public education (another major development in nineteenth-century France). The democratized approach to zoological collections expanded upon a longstanding elite occupation with natural history seen in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through the proliferation of cabinets of curiosity featuring faunal specimens across Europe. In the wake of the 1789 revolution, the royal menagerie at Versailles was dismantled and its inmates were ‘liberated’ to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris—known in zoological histories as the first instance of the public zoo. This initiated a public zoo phenomenon throughout Europe, which may be connected to the popularization of natural history and to gaining the fruits of colonial exploration. The new snake hunter was an adventurer, scientist, and patriot.

Such an individual (and his foil, a layman leery of snakes slithering amok), features in Hector Malot’s 1889 “Une Peur,” in which the narrator admits to a crippling fear of snakes. While on holiday in Antwerp, he meets a sunburned traveler at his hotel. They get to talking, and the traveler reveals himself to be a dealer in exotic animals, recently returned from the tropics with a range of live specimens for the zoological society. These include a basket of poisonous snakes kept in his hotel room. He claims they are quite docile, that they might even sleep—harmless—in your bed without your ever noticing. When the narrator expresses his dismay that it is legal to import such dangerous creatures, the traveler argues that their study is crucial to modern science. The narrator is not convinced and retires nervously to his room, just next door to the snake hunter’s basket of vipers. Predictably, the narrator goes to sleep, but is soon startled by the sound of something creeping about his room, which he imagines to be a venomous snake. Having left his candle out of reach, he is afraid to move from his bed for fear of being bit. Suddenly he fancies something moving in the bed. He stays up all night in a panic, curled up in a corner, waiting feverishly for daybreak. At dawn, the narrator finds that the sound he heard was simply a mouse drowning in his washbasin. Nevertheless, he decides to switch hotels.

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25 Malot, 1889.

26 Drayton, xv.
Despite the snake hunter's argument in favor of herpetological research, and his testimonies of how harmless snakes are if handled properly (citing explanations given of and by snake charmers), the narrator remains petrified and sticks to his judgment: snakes are monsters that should be confined to the colonies or eliminated altogether. The narrator suggests that scientists should travel to the tropics if they want to research dangerous snakes rather than bring them into the metropole where they are a risk to public safety.

Thus, Malot presents two opposing views on colonial practices and science. On the one hand, exotic snakes should be kept out of the metropole and in the colonies for the safety of European populations. Even better, snakes should be eradicated in the colonies because they are not useful and endanger the lives and productivity of colonizers and colonized alike. On the other hand, the scientific study of all that natural history encompasses was deemed incredibly valuable to the advancement of modernity and, as such, the project of colonization. Such work required firsthand observation of live snakes. Given that the narrator remains unconvinced, “Une Peur” depicts the snake as an element of ‘un’-civilization with no proper place in Europe, which had been tamed to the likings of its inhabitants over the course of millennia. Malot’s story, in contrasting the snake as a dangerous versus a useful animal-object, contributes to a discourse emphasizing the domination of the colonies, even to the point of the eradication of undesirable elements.

Yet, despite—or perhaps because of—the risk perceived as inherent in handling exotic snakes, the French public seems to have developed a taste for the theatrical flaunting of such fears by snake charmers. For in addition to being classed as dangerous and/or important to scientific advancement, snakes were also exotic and in that exoticism they possessed a certain seductive quality. They were feared, desired, and highly visible; for example, publications promoting the Jardin des Plantes in Paris included dramatic depictions of its reptilian occupants.27

Alluring to viewers, snakes are often brightly colored, their movements are unexpected, they give themselves handily to being artistically draped across the human body, they feature prominently in mythologies worldwide, and many people have a strong aversion to them.28 Thus, their handling, cajoling, taunting, seemingly unnatural subduing, and even mutual seduction by snake charmers

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certainly makes for a compelling performance that blurs the line between science and entertainment. Snake charming as an exotic mode of entertainment dominated late nineteenth-century articles involving snakes. In 1894 Jean Camille Fulbert-Dumonteil wrote of a Hindu snake charmer named Maïra.29 The narrator attended her show and then obtained an introduction, during which Maïra explained that when she was a child, her father was a snake hunter. One night his quarry escaped the tub in which they were held captive and swarmed over him. Maïra was able to tempt the snakes away with a bowl of milk and soothing tones. Afterwards, she was no longer afraid. In the end, however, an small Egyptian viper fatally bites Maïra during a performance and she dies onstage.

Female snake charmers garnered particular attention as tantalizing Eves who succumbed to the temptation to defy and possess nature. They were described as seductive, charmers not only of reptiles, but of men. On occasion, the beautiful snake charmer overestimated herself and paid the price with her life. Maïra is depicted as having won the trust and affection of snakes through gentle coercion, although in the end she is betrayed. Despite the mystery and entertainment value of snake charming, it is made clear that a fear of snakes is prudent, and that the wildness of the viper can never be tamed. Instead, one could argue, it is best to eliminate the threat. The same might go for maneuvers and methods of conquest and stabilization in the colonies.30 Perhaps we can read this as an implicit warning, a tempering of colonial aspirations to control or the willingness to be seduced.

In another story linking feminine allure with snakes and their control, a snake charmer was reported as having used her co-stars as accomplices in a series of thefts.31 Illustrated on the covers of both Le Petit Parisien Supplement Littéraire Illustré and Le Petit Dauphinois Illustré, Zalemma Neardy, a Swedish snake charmer, was arrested for a series of robberies committed in London and Antwerp before her arrival in Paris. After her performance, M. Hamard, the investigating Sûreté officer, tracked Zalemma to her hotel, where she fled to her bed, seeking refuge by surrounding herself with snakes. In the Petit Dauphinois, she warned the police not to approach, because her snakes were prepared to defend her. All the same, Hamard prevailed and Zalemma was successfully arrested. At the end of the Petit Parisien version, the author wonders if Hamard

was the first man Zalemma had ever been unable to charm. The snake-charmer’s coercive control over snakes and men alike is a danger and concern to law enforcement. There is something decidedly biblical in her alliance with snakes in order to resist capture. Here, the snake charmer fails to seduce her enemies, a victory for law and order. The venomous snakes are a distinct threat to the officers, but they are overcome in the end, indicating that French power can prevail over the wild or immoral elements of the tropics.

**Conclusion**

In this sampling, snakes always appeared as the enemy in the end—as an agent and representative of the uncivilized and undesirable elements of the tropics (and colonial places in general). In their interactions with snake hunters, due to their predatory nature and exotic cachet, they were portrayed as dangerous beasts and/or scientific opportunities. In narratives involving snake charmers, snakes were widely associated with the dangers of feminine seduction or temptation because they are duplicitous and ultimately untamable, despite their allure. The publications explored reveal currents of popular opinion and cultural attitudes towards empire in which snakes can be read as representing the undesirable aspects of tropical colonies, including dangerous animals, economically unproductive landscapes, and even indigenous resistors to colonization. In more positive representations, snakes were lauded as integral to colonial science. Thus, the figure of the snake quite neatly encapsulated the conflicting fears and desires wrapped up in the idea of empire.

While there is a tempting desire to behold the snake, to believe that it can be tamed, stories arrive at the conclusion that the snake—perhaps like the colony—cannot be peacefully tamed or held, but must be forcefully conquered. Objectionable features of the tropics must be eliminated in order to make way for the rationality of French civilization. The safety and domesticity of France became the goal for colonial landscapes and ecologies, which had to be regulated. Conversely, ever-increasing knowledge about the natural world became the goal for metropolitan scientists. The colonial fear/desire complex was succinctly embodied in the figure of the tropical snake—whether desired for the aims of colonial science and the curiosity of the theater audience, or despised as a dangerous beast. Snakes latched themselves firmly in the metropolitan imagination, and represented the conflicting emotions of the colonial project.