

“More-than-Human” and “Less-than-Human”: Race, botany, and the challenge of multispecies ethnography

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In a growing body of humanities and social science research, plants and animals have moved from the background to the center, as scholars examine how diverse organisms are “entangled in political, economic, and cultural systems” (Kirksey, Schuetze, & Helmreich, 2014, p. 1; Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010; Tsing, 2015). De-centering the human also brings attention to ways of knowing, such as Indigenous animism, that disrupt narratives of human exceptionalism common to Western philosophy.

While multispecies ethnography and theories about the Anthropocene have gained traction in recent years, discussions about the human–nonhuman interface date to the origins of anthropology. For instance, in her influential work, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway challenged strict partitions between nature/culture, male/female, and self/other foundational to Western philosophical thought. She wrote that while these dualisms are part of the logics and practices that inform the domination of women, people of color, nature, and workers, they can be challenged through strategies that deploy “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries” (Haraway, 1991, p. 151).

Building on this research, multispecies ethnography attempts to blur the boundaries of human and nonhuman to disrupt hierarchies of power. In this sense, multispecies approaches celebrate the political and theoretical possibilities of

Ives, Sarah (2019). “More-than-human” and “Less-than-human”: Race, botany, and the challenge of multispecies ethnography. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 5(2), page 1-5.

<http://www.catalystjournal.org> | ISSN: 2380-3312

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foregrounding more-than-human worlds and human–nonhuman relations. As we move beyond a humancentric lens, however, it is critical that multispecies approaches engage further with scholarship on race and colonialism to remember a history in which blurring lines between the human and nonhuman was not celebratory, but rather distinctly violent, a history in which “the management of populations and race undergird[ed] the human–nonhuman interface” (Ives, 2014, p. 703).

Colonial agents constructed connections between race and nature by portraying those they colonized (such as Indigenous peoples) as less-than-human and closer to nature and, in turn, depicting whites as producers of culture and superior to nature. These constructions reinforced white supremacy by establishing dualisms of “white” and “nonwhite” to justify political, social, and economic hierarchies.

In considering new directions in research on peoples and plants, my research asks how scholars can engage with the *more-than-human*, while recognizing the history of violent connections drawn between race and nature whereby certain groups were (and still are) considered *less-than-human*. I explore this question through two interrelated themes: (1) colonial histories that rendered people as a part of the natural landscape to justify land dispossession and even genocide; and (2) the deliberate alteration of the landscape through the introduction of invasive plants. Together, these lines of inquiry can inform critical approaches to systems of power and knowledge embedded in human–plant relations.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965), Frantz Fanon brings attention to colonial language that associates certain peoples with nature by showing how colonists spoke of the native in zoological terms. He argues that this language saddled the native with the violence of “exclusionary humanism.” Books such as the *Natural History of the Negro Race*, for example, placed plant taxonomy alongside racial classification (Virey, 1837).¹ I explore these colonial associations in my own research by addressing how naturalized ideas of race and plants intersected with both political and scholarly representations of—and discussions related to—Khoisan (or “Bushmen”), which is an umbrella term used to describe ethnic groups in South Africa who share physical and linguistic characteristics distinct from the Bantu-speaking majority. The very label “Bushmen” exemplifies colonial practices of equating Indigenous peoples, in this case Khoi and San, as “nature” and thus rendering them less-than-human. In this context, the blurring of distinctions between human and nonhuman was (and remains) violent in part because it constructs and reinforces racial hierarchies that place whites at the top. For

example, while making his classificatory schemes in the eighteenth century, Carl Linnaeus said he had difficulty convincing himself that Europeans and “Bushmen” shared the same origins.² And unlike the “pleasurable” confusion discussed by Haraway as a means to challenge relations of power, colonial governments “confused” and conflated the boundaries between the “native” and “nature” to deny Khoi and San humanity and justify land seizures, slavery, and genocide.

Colonists not only conquered people and territory; they also sought to alter fundamentally geography and ecology, thereby upending understandings of place. For example, in the nineteenth century the British brought Australian eucalyptus to southern Africa. The invasive trees thrived in the new environment, and eucalyptus soon “stood out as one of the most distinctive features of the...landscape” (Bennett, 2011, p. 130). Given their seeming ability to eliminate malarial mosquitoes, the trees even helped *facilitate* colonial settlement in what was considered a “challenging” ecosystem. By transforming the ecosystem, eucalyptus disrupted relationships between local people, plants, insects, and soils. Framing foreign plants as inherently “bad” and native plants as inherently “good” erases the multiplicity of roles invasive species play in social, political, and economic relations and can easily reinforce violent, eugenicist notions of nationalism (see, for example, Stern, 2005; Subramaniam, 2014). Nevertheless, the resulting landscape change (whether or not it was a conscious rationale for introducing invasive species) helped lay a foundation for colonial dispossession of those historically viewed as part of the natural world, including Khoi and San.

In a planet increasingly affected by human-caused climate change, research that foregrounds the legacies of Indigenous peoples, colonial histories, transformed ecosystems, and multispecies entanglements is more urgent than ever. Attention to human–plant relations can add depth to this research by undermining essentialist dualisms. The focus can also offer hope in what feels like apocalyptic times by emphasizing our shared futures with a “multitude of creative agents,” from trees to insects (Kirksey, 2015, p. 217; Kohn, 2013; Marder, 2013). Yet I argue that we must remain aware of the differential ways in which certain people are *included* in the human world, while others are *relegated* to the nonhuman world.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Laura Foster for her feedback throughout the writing and revising process and for her efforts in bringing together diverse perspectives on plants, colonialism, and race. I am also indebted to the editors and anonymous reviewers for their insights.

Notes

¹ I have written about this topic extensively elsewhere (Ives 2014, 2017).

² Violent connections between race and nature have hardly been relegated to Africa, as demonstrated by research connecting plants and eugenics in the United States (Stern, 2015).

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