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## LOVING THE NATIVE

Invasive species and the cultural politics of flourishing

Jessica R. Cattellino

George Washington's revolutionary spirit led him to remove non-American plants from his front garden at Mt. Vernon and secure ornamental specimens from across the new United States to adorn his estate. As historian Andrea Wolf explains in *Founding Gardeners* (22–33), his was the first ornamental garden in the United States to be planted with and for native species, in an act of independence. Certainly, his act was patriotic, but it was more: it was also a settler-colonial act, one that anchored him more directly to this land. Invasive species management and the embrace of native species are affective projects that operate distinctly in settler-colonial societies like the United States, past and present. No place better illustrates this than the Florida Everglades.

After a century of reclamation projects reduced the Everglades by half in size, Congress in 2000 authorized the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Program (CERP), which, at an estimated \$13.5 billion, is the world's largest ecological restoration project. I am writing an ethnography that examines how the diverse residents of a 20 by 40 mile region in the northwest Everglades value water and land, and how these practices enact political belonging.<sup>1</sup> Building out from the Everglades, I develop an argument at the intersection of scholarship on settler colonialism (e.g., Wolfe; Simpson) and on the cultural politics of nature (e.g., Moore et al.); namely, that nature and political belonging are co-produced in settler societies in specific, patterned ways that have broad and problematic consequences for both sociocultural and ecological flourishing.

One domain in which we can see how the cultural politics of nature operate distinctly in settler societies is the management of invasive species and the promotion of native species. Scholars including Banu Subramanian, Anella Moore, and Jean and John Comaroff have identified in the discourse and practice of invasive species management a pervasive socio-political nativism against immigrants and aliens.<sup>2</sup> Subramanian briefly notes that the "native" in such discourse is the white settler, which she considers an "irony" (34, 36). In a settler society, however, the "irony" by which white settlers are figured as "native" is constitutive, and invasive species management is contradictory in ways that such analyses cannot fully address.<sup>3</sup> For example, nonindigenous occupants of this land must reckon with (or overcome by disregarding) their own arrival and the structural conditions of colonial invasion that so fundamentally shape American ecology and polity alike. Indigeneity becomes, as indigenous critical theorist Jodi Byrd writes, a "transit" through which other

relational forms pass and become enacted. In a recent paper, Masniak et al. have defended native plant advocacy as "botanical decolonization" by emphasizing that botanical changes have been a method and legacy of settler colonialism. While settlers' domesticated species did play a role in colonization, it is imperative not to draw an analogy between indigenous peoples and native species or between settlers and invasive species. Instead, the challenge is to understand the nonanalogical processes—too often obscured by the technique of the analogy, in fact—through which indigeneity and nature are co-produced in settler societies. The following are glimpses at three such processes: the problem of categorization; disturbance and equilibrium; and loving native species.

### Category problems

In his keynote address to the 2012 Everglades Coalition conference, which is the major annual forum on the state of the Everglades, US Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL) emphasized the destruction wrought by invasive species upon his beloved state (Fieldnotes, January 8, 2012). Nelson won applause in our standing-room-only audience by touting his efforts, realized just days thereafter, to pass a federal ban on Burmese python importation. Nelson's speech tapped into a dominant discourse and practice on the part of environmentalists, land and water managers, and policymakers that promotes native species and seeks control of invasive ones.

During the early 2010s, the specter of Burmese pythons (*Python molurus bivittatus*) overtaking the Florida Everglades caught Americans' attention and took the Internet by storm.<sup>4</sup> Pythons are generalist apex predators, with a startling result: a decline of approximately 90 percent in nonhuman mammal populations upon establishment in the Everglades (Dorcas et al.; Harvey). Blame for the snakes' spread is often heaped on irresponsible pet owners for setting them loose in the Everglades, though research suggests that Hurricane Andrew was responsible for a significant portion of the population when in 1992 it blew the live contents of pet import warehouses from the suburbs into the swamps. More broadly, as anthropologist Laura Ogden has written, the pythons reanimate a long-standing American fascination with snakes in the Everglades and underscore the ability of snakes to "mesmerize, to halt people in their tracks" (83).

Invasive species can wreak havoc. Often lacking predators, they enter an ecological zone and frequently out-compete native species for food and habitat. Invasive species shape the earth: in the yards and playgrounds of the city of Clewiston (population seven thousand) and the Seminole Big Cypress Reservation (population six hundred), where my ethnographic research is focused, red fire ants build mounds. According to a state park biologist, fire ants may contribute to the grasshopper sparrow's endangerment on the prairies north of Lake Okeechobee (fieldnotes, December 31, 2011). Invasive species alter the air: long-time residents attribute a perceived increase in human allergies to invasive plants and to exotic orange blossoms in citrus groves, in the center of Florida's citrus industry. They fill the water: canals brim with invasive tilapia, lionfish, and oscar, and with surface-dwelling water hyacinth and water lettuce that block light to species below. They change the horizon: Australian pines first planted as wind breaks now overtake woodlands. They create disappearances: as Seminole Tribal Council Representative Mondo Tiger recounted, quail vanished from the Big Cypress Reservation after residents began to keep cats as pets. Invasive species account for approximately 30 percent of all

uncultivated plants in Florida (South Florida Water Management District and US Army Corps of Engineers). Nationally, invasive species management costs more than \$120 billion annually (Dorcas et al.).

Invasive species pose category problems. The line between "exotic" species (those out of their places of origin) and invasive ones (ditto, but with the added definition of causing harm) is thin, thoroughly blurred, and socially defined. What counts as harm often differs for a water or wildlife manager, a farmer or an angler. The task, then, is not just to break down or destabilize categories but rather to analyze what sustains them, and with what political and economic effects.

Take oranges, for example, in their multiplicity. Cultivated orange trees originated in Asia and are often said to have arrived with Christopher Columbus. They are widely valued as Florida heritage (see, for example, "Citrus Industry History"). Seminole Ahfachkee school pupils on Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum tours learn that citrus trees mark the campsites of their nineteenth-century war heroes (e.g., Abiaka, also known as Sam Jones) who fought against the United States and resisted removal to Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). Meanwhile, the Asian psyllid (*Diaphorina citri*) that carries the citrus greening disease currently threatening Florida's multi-billion-dollar citrus industry is treated as an invasive (Harmon). The spacetime of invasion tracks national borders and colonial timelines, not only with oranges but also with other species. In fact, Florida state law and everyday practice associate nativeness with being here before colonists and existing inside United States territorial borders. Native nature is pre-historical and nationalized statutorily in ways that render the settler state its rightful inheritor and steward.

Assessments of a species' harm and benefit can change over time. The first time I drove to Clewiston and up the levee to Lake Okeechobee, I saw a band of tall, dead trees along the rim canal. These were melaleuca trees (*Melaleuca quinquenervia*) that had become victims of a state eradication program. Americans initially imported melaleucas from Australia as an ornamental. Then, on the theory that the thirsty specimens could be used to drain "useless swamps," twentieth-century land managers dropped seeds from airplanes, and the US Army Corps of Engineers in 1940–1941 planted them along Lake Okeechobee's levees for stabilization (Carter-Finn et al.; South Florida Water Management District). In just a few decades, melaleucas took over approximately 20 percent of South Florida's "natural" lands. As Everglades reclamation gave way to restoration, melaleucas were listed federally as "noxious weeds" and by Florida as "weeds" (making it illegal under federal and state laws to possess or sell them). Under CERF and other policies, coordinated state and federal agencies have devoted substantial resources (over \$35 million to date) to regional melaleuca eradication, with notable successes. Some Clewiston residents, unaware of this, bemoan the loss of the tall trees atop the levee, under which they had enjoyed shady picnics and lake breezes on steamy summer afternoons.

Invasives can restore. Out on the same lake, an endangered indicator species, the snail kite, has rebounded recently, thanks to an invasive snail they eat that is making its way into the Everglades. Snail kites had declined because reclamation destroyed the pond apple forest along the southern lakeshore that previously provided habitat for their prey, the apple snail. Pond apple restoration is limited by agricultural development. Within such constraints, invasives can restore. Meanwhile, this same pond apple species was brought to Australia as graft material but escaped an orchard there and now is taking over wetlands and subject to federal eradication projects. In Australia, the pond apple endangers a valued native species: the melaleuca tree.

For some, the agent of arrival matters to the category of species. While volunteering at a tour of the J-7 ranch during a nearly all-white birding festival, I gazed up at my favorite swallowtail kites circling above their nest and then gingerly asked the enthusiastic tour leader if, in her view, it is acceptable for birders to have favorite birds. She grinned and admitted that most birders do, so I asked her to name hers. After noting her love of many species, she named the (threatened) Florida scrub jay and then emphasized that she liked them all—so long as they were native. What made a species native, I asked? That it came from here. I asked about the cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*), a common wading bird that is believed to have arrived in North America only in the mid-1900s, having established itself decades earlier to the south after crossing the Atlantic, perhaps on a hurricane. She considered the cattle egret native because it was not brought by humans (Fieldnotes, March 31, 2012). Humans, or in any case some humans, stand outside nature, as disturbance. Such an ideology of unpeopled wilderness developed in the United States as part of the settler-colonial project, with disastrous consequences for indigenous land claims and ecologies. Categories do things and sustain structures.

### Disturbance and equilibrium

Invasive species, human activity, hurricanes, drought, and fires generally are included among the “disturbances” to the Everglades ecosystem. Invasive species management rests in part on theories of the ecosystem that privilege ecological equilibrium and view change as disturbance. The term *ecosystem*, coined in 1935, came to dominate ecological theory over subsequent decades (Colley). In the ecosystems view, ecological communities are complex systems whose structure and function can be examined with synchronic analysis. The historical period that produced ecosystems theory also produced structural functionalism in anthropology, an approach that sought explanation for social organization in the function of maintaining social structure.<sup>3</sup> Like ecosystems theory, this approach was rightly criticized for an inability to explain historical change and a tendency to interpret change as disruption or dysfunction, at least for colonized, indigenous, and racialized peoples. Thus, the problems of “disturbances” to culture and to ecosystems share roots in mid-twentieth-century thought. In a settler society, as many scholars have shown (e.g., Barker; Clifford), this means that change among indigenous peoples signals cultural loss, inauthenticity, and loss of sovereignty. Historical curiosities: they are logics that link indigeneity with nature. Together, prevalent ecological and cultural views foreclose historical change in the Everglades and other ecosystems *as such* and, similarly, for Seminoles and other indigenous peoples *as such*. It should come as no surprise that Michael Grunwald’s generally helpful history of the Everglades introduces indigenous people first in a section on “native species” (20).

Equilibrium is fantasy, and for that reason maintaining a “native” state requires active and ongoing invasive species management. Without creatively destructive management, invasive species would take over Florida’s wetlands. To the untrained eye, invasive species’ eradication and maintenance look like environmental destruction: large yellow bulldozers tear down Brazilian pepper trees, US Army Corps of Engineers boats spray herbicides over water lettuce mats in Lake Okechobee, and controlled burns clear pastures of invasive grasses. Invasive species management can produce additional damage. The Seminole Tribe of Florida’s Environmental Resource Management Department (ERMD) is responsible for invasive

species eradication at Big Cypress, but the chemical treatments they use also affect valued plants. Plants sprayed with herbicides cannot be used to prepare medicine. Staff members, most of whom are not Seminole, wish to avoid spraying medicine plants and have requested that tribal citizens identify their location to prevent harm. However, norms that protect culturally sensitive knowledge limit disclosure. Invasive species management itself disturbs.

Invasive and exotic species force us to ask what we mean by diversity. All too often in environmental discourse, biodiversity and cultural diversity are laminated onto one another, generally in efforts to preserve indigenous peoples, cultures, and languages in order to maintain human diversity as a good that gains its force through direct or indirect reference to biodiversity. The perils of such discourse are (at least) threefold. First, it contributes to the long-standing and consequential problem of collapsing indigenous peoples into nature. Second, it trades on the specter of extinction that no doubt raises awareness but also participates in the project of indigenous vanishing that is endemic to settler colonialism. And third, it often (though not intrinsically) associates indigeneity with stasis in ways that devalue indigenous cultural change as cultural loss.

### Loving native species

In South Florida and across the United States, invasive species eradication is coupled with the promotion of native species, and this is an affective project. At one local Hendry-Glades Audubon Society meeting, the audience soaked up county extension agent Gene McAvoy’s presentation on the advantages of planting native species that require less fertilizer and water. But they appeared taken aback when he pointed out that the most extensive cultivated plant in the United States is lawn grass, which accounts for higher concentrations of pollution per square foot than the agricultural crops more often fingered as polluters in Everglades debates (Fieldnotes, March 12, 2012). The big water quality issue in the Everglades is phosphorus, and “Big Sugar” has been the primary target of environmentalist activism around water quality. Native species promotion grows and native nurseries are on the rise; there are annual conferences promoting native plants in South Florida. Like the birding tour guide who loved native species, one becomes emotionally attuned to the native-invasive distinction.

I grew to appreciate native species by contrast with invasive species and even found myself adjusting emotional attachments to flora and fauna upon learning their status. As the summer of 2012 approached, for example, I delighted as each night fell in watching shiny green tree frogs with suctioned feet make nocturnal appearances on the exterior of our rental house’s glass patio door. The then-toddler squealed with pleasure when the frogs’ curious-looking heads and long legs appeared at the edge of the glass. One morning, we found a frog tucked snugly into the depression behind the handle of our car door. Subtropical living! When I conveyed our enthusiasm to my neighbor and landlord, she looked pleased but then, with an almost embarrassed expression, explained that these were probably Cuban tree frogs, an invasive species that contributed to the population decline of Florida’s native place? Felt less of a thrill when they poked their shiny eyes around the corner at dusk? I just couldn’t. But the categories of native and invasive come with their own emotional force: a scientist at an environmental organization recalled being taken aback when a neighbor who was new to birdwatching asked him to identify an invasive species in order that the neighbor could learn which birds to hate.

Some scholars, as mentioned, understand the embrace of native species in the United States to be a decolonizing project. This is because botanical colonialism—notably, the cultivation of non-native species—was a method of settler colonialism (Mastrak et al.). Such analyses are helpful but overlook the contradictory structure of nativism in a settler society on the part of all but indigenous peoples. Settlers' embrace of native species anchors us in this land, as ours. Recall George Washington's garden. Wolf's otherwise delightful discussion of the founding fathers' gardening politics misses a critical piece of the puzzle: the founders' horticultural severing of America from Europe staked a distinctly settler-colonial claim by gathering native species and caring for them as their own, as their national patrimony. Such acts of power not only displace indigenous peoples' histories and futures but also depoliticize those very acts of dispossession. In recent years, the US Army Corps of Engineers and other agencies have created public education materials that depict invasive species in the Everglades on Old West-style wanted posters. The frontier lives and shifts.

Emma Marris is an environmental journalist who, in *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World*, presents a provocative case for jettisoning the long-held environmentalist goal of preserving pristine nature in favor of promoting post-wild nature under human management. In the course of doing so, she asks readers to learn to love exotic species. Marris, moreover, observes that the tendency to view natural landscapes as devoid of humans is especially prominent in places like the United States and Australia. She does not ask why or how pristine nature might be linked to the sociopolitical formation of these nations.

This is where an analysis of settler colonialism comes in. After all, settler colonists had and have every reason to see the land as uninhabited and unchanged, as *terra nullius*. Enlightenment thinkers developed theories of property through the foil of the New World indigene who purportedly failed to cultivate land and thereby held no property right (Tully). It is worth noting that Washington had another garden of mostly exotics, planted for the purpose of improving agricultural practices in the new United States (Wulf 32–33). Still, even as settler societies embrace native species as a kind of patrimony, there is room for a more unsettling politics and practice. Native species do not only anchor settlers in the land or foster Creole exceptionalism. They also have the capacity to facilitate future flourishing, insofar as the institutions that govern them are guided by anti-colonial and anti-nativist practice. More on that below.

Back at the Everglades Coalition conference, Senator Nelson spoke broadly about environmental restoration. In a voice thick with longing, Nelson asked us to imagine Florida as it was almost five hundred years ago, when the “explorer” Ponce de León landed his ship. Picturing that moment, Nelson delivered his rallying cry: “and that’s what we’re all here today for.” We, the listeners, joined him on that ship, admiring that which we and our Spanish hogs were about to invade. As Senator Nelson’s speech simultaneously battled invasive species, identified with (invasive) Spanish colonizers, and rallied his audience to restore the Everglades to a moment of naturalness just prior to European conquest, his metaphors of native and nonnative remained in play in, for him, loving contradiction.

### On flourishing

In invasive species management, and more generally on the terrain of nature, settlers often narrate and enact a kind of nation-building and nation-sustaining nativeness. One conclusion

is that the cultural politics of nature reinforce settler colonialism as a logic, and no doubt that is often the case.

Yet, perhaps we should not focus exclusively on logics and contradictions internal to settler colonialism. Doing so while ignoring the specificity and power of indigeneity risks reproducing the very eliminatory logic—this time by writing indigenous peoples out of the story—that settler-colonial studies aim to upend. Indigenous sovereignty matters to nature. For example, indigenous water rights are a constitutive part of the Everglades, from the Seminole water compact’s impact on water allocations and restoration to the activities of the Tribal Historic Preservation Office, which intervenes whenever restoration or development unearths significant objects. What is more, indigeneity is built into US law and public culture even when indigenous peoples are neither the subjects nor the objects of engagement, from water rights doctrine to ecosystems restoration modeling, and from settler narratives of nature’s past and future to what wilderness looks and feels like in the most personal and embodied ways.

In invasive species management, some claims open up processes of categorization, disturbance, and loving. For example, Seminole natural resource management staff increasingly respond to community input that promotes native species along with selected nonnative ones (e.g., guava) that offer culinary, aesthetic, sentimental, economic, and other forms of value—that contribute to flourishing. Farmers in the drained Everglades manage invasive species through the cultivation of exotic ones, like oranges and sugarcane, and they argue for a form of flourishing that does not sweep people off the landscape in a wilderness model of restoration.

I am thinking toward an account of ecological and sociocultural flourishing, on the conviction that it is only by unsettling nature that the Everglades can be “saved” in some yet-to-be-determined way. The challenge is to simultaneously open up categories like native and invasive, delinking them from colonial timelines and dispossessions, and to train attention on governance and the justice imperatives of institutions (e.g., science, law) that sustain the present order of things in the Everglades and other settler-colonial contexts. How a decolonized invasive species management agenda would enact the politics of indigeneity is unforeseeable. Minimally, it would insist on the agency, governance, and scientific participation of indigenous peoples, whose long-term experience with invasive and native species and whose sovereign authority over environmental governance on their territories should inform and delimit non-Indian management practices. Such an approach would bring indigenous dispossession and sovereignty into the environmental accounting of human harm and human value, whether in assessing the value of a species’ ecosystems services or preparing cost-benefit analyses for a project’s environmental impact statement. And that’s a start.

### Notes

- 1 Fieldwork in 2012 was funded by fellowships from the National Science Foundation (#1127272) and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. Additional research was funded by the Howard Foundation.
- 2 Subramanian writes: “The point of my analysis is not to suggest that we are not losing native species, nor that we should allow plants and animals to flow freely across habitats in the name of incipient or globalization. Instead it is to suggest that we are living in a cultural moment where the anxieties of globalization are feeding nationalisms through xenophobia. The battle against exotic and alien plants is a symptom of a campaign that misplaces and displaces anxieties about economic, social, political, and cultural changes onto outsiders and foreigners” (34).

- 3 By settler society, I refer especially (if not only) to the liberal democratic settler states of the former British Empire with indigenous minorities: Australia, Canada, Aotearoa/New Zealand, the United States. The historian Patrick Wolfe differentiates settler colonialism's target of land dispossession from the exploitation of labor in dependent colonies. Thinking in terms of settler society interrogates indigenous and non-indigenous lives, while sustaining attention to power, by attending to the ways in which all of our conditions are structured by the legal, historical, cultural, and economic formations that are characteristic of settler societies.
- 4 I first learned of the reptiles in the early 2000s upon hearing that a concerned non-Seminole employee had circulated an illustrated informational email to all the Seminole Tribe of Florida staff, sparking eye-rolling and more serious disapproval in light of prohibitions that regulate Seminole interactions with snakes. A few years later, tribal citizens and employees recounted when another non-Seminole employee captured a python on the Brighton Reservation, and preserved it for research purposes in an administration building refrigerator. The relevant department director soon fielded a call at his distant coastal home that required him to ensure that the snake and the refrigerator itself were removed from the premises by the time the building opened the next morning.
- 5 Animal ecologist Charles S. Elton is an interesting example here. In his important 1927 book *Animal Ecology*, he theorized ecological niches and compared the loss of a species (a badger) to the loss of a role (vicar) in society (64). Tellingly, Elton moved on to study invasive species. Often, structural functionalism is considered organismic. It is also ecological (cf. Jax, 78–81).

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