

The “Discourse of Invasive Species”: Another Consideration for the Rebel Teacher

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In “Freedom & Flourishing in a Posthumanist Age: More-Than-Human Being in Revolt,” Blenkinsop *et al.* consider the importance of discourses and pedagogical stances that allow teachers to de-center the human and the individual in favor of a posthumanist and eco-centric vision of a flourishing and dignified life—for all life. Blenkinsop *et al.* favor a posthumanist reading of Camus in order to envision a politics that “might inform environmental educators who are faced with negating the ecocidal aspects of human-centrism within the dominant culture.”¹ Their argument is that: “it might be through bearing witness and negating ecocidal suicide as a result of our individualistic anthropocentrism, while at the same time allowing all to exercise their freedom through exalting mutual dignified flourishing, that we can as living beings find the meaning of freedom.”²

In their text, it is the discourse of humanism and the centering of the individual—as opposed to a vision of humanity and the more-than-human as an interdependent collective or a unified ecological whole—that is named as *the problem*. The argument suggests that if we, as teachers, or community members, or humans, can begin to understand the ways that we live in symbiosis with other organisms—that all life has meaning and necessity—then we can move to a freedom that encourages mutual dignified flourishing and combat impending ecological suicide. While I agree with the authors—that anthropocentrism and individualism are discourses that need to be pushed against—I am unconvinced that these are the main discourses that need to be combatted in order to avoid imminent ecocide. To be clear, I sympathize with and echo their proposed solution of counter-narratives and counter-discourses that expand our vision, but I take issue with their suggestion that the discourse of

anthropocentrism is the primary discourse that needs to be challenged. In this response, I offer a friendly addendum to their work: that while the discourses of anthropocentrism and individualism need to be dismantled, it is equally important—or maybe even more important, given the current political climate—to wrestle with the discourse of invasive species.

INVASIVE SPECIES

Before discussing the ways that the discourse of invasive species is used *as a discourse*, it is first necessary to define “invasive species.” In order to be considered an invasive species, a plant or animal must be something that expands and takes over the space in such a way that the native plants or animals are killed or forced to leave. As the University of Florida’s IFAS website on invasive species declares: “Non-native invasive plants are weeds in natural areas because they displace native plants and associated wildlife, including endangered species, and can alter natural processes.”³ An invasive species is one that flourishes *at the expense of* other animals or plants in the area. “Invasive Species” are a real threat, a metaphor for threat, and now a concept that has moved beyond a metaphor toward a language—a way of talking about—a discourse around threat.

Invasive species discourse includes language that affirms the idea that various species must live in interdependent relationships with others—both human and more-than-human—but that we are also subject to threats from “invaders” that could destroy our life. It is a discourse that grounds the idea of competition to the death: it is not the one vs. the collective; it is *us* and our life vs *them* and their life. That life has value is not disputed, but this discourse creates terms of intelligibility that frame life as always already in competition with other “invading” life. Anthropocentric discourse is grounded in the idea that humans are rulers over nature, not in competition with it. Invasive species discourse is grounded in the idea that life is always both interdependent and competitive, and that there are some forms of life that will kill off other forms of life. While I do not agree with this discourse, I see it as a powerful language

that contours speech around our relationships with the environment.

INVASIVE SPECIES DISCOURSE IN THE HANDS OF ECO-ADVOCATES

Many eco-advocates have used both the metaphor of invasive species and the discourse of invasive species in order to advocate for both an understanding of our symbiotic relationship with and connectedness to each other, the land, and the more-than-human, and an eradication of anything that threatens that eco-interconnectivity and health. Donna Haraway—a post-humanist scholar, biologist, and advocate for our relationship with the more-than-human—has argued for the need to make sure that we—humans—are not acting like an invasive species. Haraway gives the example of the acacia tree, that can sometimes live in symbiotic harmony with all plants and animals in its environment, but can also act as an invasive species that threatens waterways, plant life, and animal life.⁴ She cautions that we, as humans, should not be the invasive species acacia tree. Haraway also draws on the writings of Ursula Le Guin, a prominent science fiction writer who advocates for ecological diversity, ecological protection, and environmental activism in her novels. One of Le Guin’s most profound novels *The Word for World is Forest*, tells the story of a planet—Athshe—full of beings that live in harmony with nature. When humans come from Earth to invade the planet and exploit the natural resources of Athshe, the Athsheans are enslaved because they do not want to engage in violence against the people from Earth. The Athsheans finally revolt and kill all of the invaders. The Athsheans are able to once again live in harmony with their planet, but it has come at the cost of becoming violent. When eco-justice warriors use violence in support of the planet, they often deploy the invasive species discourse that suggests that, while we must learn to live in harmony with nature, it is permissible to use violence when natural life is threatened.⁵

INVASIVE SPECIES DISCOURSE IN OTHER HANDS

The invasive species discourse has also been deployed and co-opted

in ways that push against ecological sustainability and environmental health. When rural townspeople in Oregon argued for the need to “boost logging and tap natural resources,”⁶ their argument was not based on the idea that the natural world is unimportant. Their argument was based around the idea that logging and natural resource mining had to continue in order for the rural towns to continue life. It was nature vs the life of the town; competition to the death. When townspeople in Garfield, Utah complained about the creation of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, it is not because they do not value animals, plant life, and nature, but because they see the protection of these lands by the federal government as a threat to their life. The town officials argued that:

Restrictive federal land policies had “virtually eliminated historic social and economic stability,” ... Families were fleeing in search of livable wages. Enrollment at Escalante High School had dropped by two-thirds in two decades. Worse yet, federal agencies had turned a blind eye to the county’s struggle to promote health, safety and economic prosperity ... A top culprit, local officials insisted, was Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.⁷

These officials see the protection of wild spaces as a threat to their life. As they see it, they are being displaced by the invasive federal government that wants to protect land at the expense of the life of the town.

In Texas, there is a saying: “We take care of our own.” This saying is both historically and currently deployed in ways that include both humans and the more-than-human. We take care of our land. We take care of our animals. We take care of our crops. We take care of our town. We take care of our people. It is a saying that calls into being some of the very same notions of life, freedom, and flourishing advocated by Blenkinsop *et al.* and by Camus. There is a recognition that people, land, plants, and animals are co-creative of each other and symbiotically related. There is a recognition that life is important and that care is needed. But there is also a sense of us vs them: we take care of *ours*, but not *yours*, not the *invasive*.

THE REBEL TEACHER

As Blenkinsop *et al.* suggest, we need teachers who can decenter anthropocentric and individualistic discourses of life and freedom. We need teachers who can show the ways that we are connected to, and must honor, the natural world and the more-than-human. However, we also need teachers who can articulate and demonstrate a vision where humans, land, plants, animals, and all of the natural world live in cooperation with each other. We need teachers who can offer a counter-narrative to the invasive species discourse of competition to the death.

1 Blenkinsop et al., “Freedom & Flourishing in a Posthumanist Age: More-Than-Human Being in Revolt,” this volume.

2 Ibid.

3 University of Florida’s IFAS Extension, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ag108>.

4 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

5 Lawrence E. Likar, *Eco-warriors, nihilistic terrorists, and the environment* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011).

6 *Oregon Live*: http://www.oregonlive.com/politics/index.ssf/2013/12/oregons_fast-aging_rural_popul.html

7 “Grand Staircase Escalante Winners and Losers,” *Green Wire*, <http://www.eenews.net/stories/1060040270>.