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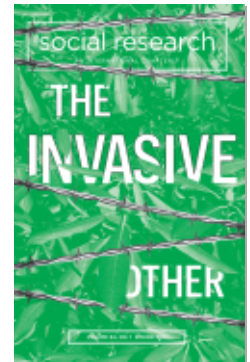
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## Introduction: Invasive Ecologies

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# Introduction: Invasive Ecologies

DURING A RECENT COLLECTIVE RESEARCH EFFORT AT THE US-MEXICO BORDER in Texas, some members of the group went to see a section of the border fence at a place called the Hidalgo Pumphouse. The Pumphouse itself is now a museum about early agriculture in Texas. The site is also visited because it is a World Birding Center, home to hundreds of species of migrating birds. Thousands of people come to watch the bird migrations that pass through each year. While we were there to interview a local activist about the border fence, we also were part of a disturbing moment in which two individuals, who had managed to climb over the border fence from the Mexican side to the American side and were hiding in the tall grass, were pointed out to US Border Patrol by some of the birdwatchers. Within minutes, the full force of the Border Patrol descended, and the two individuals were pulled up, handcuffed, put in a van with tinted windows, and taken away.

Not far from the Pumphouse, a century-old, tick-eradication quarantine line runs for hundreds of miles, roughly parallel to the border. Staffed by dozens of US government-funded horse-mounted cowboys, the purpose of the quarantine line is to keep tick-borne cattle fever out of the United States, largely by keeping stray cattle from Mexico from wandering north. The region also has a thriving population of wild Nilgai antelope. Along with the native white-tailed deer, Nilgai are sometimes a vector for the cattle-fever-carrying ticks, particularly when they cross the Rio Grande into Mexico and come back into the United States. Nilgai were brought to the region in the 1930s from India, and have since flourished in the wild spaces of dry Texan

landscapes. Unlike the white-tailed deer with whom they compete for rangeland, the Nilgai must face an open-hunting season. Increasingly, there are also government efforts to control their movements through the quarantine line, in an effort to ensure that the damaging cattle-fever disease does not affect local livestock populations.

I am wondering, still, how to think about the stark but swirling differences in that space, and about the ostensible invasiveness of migrants who, perhaps, were not from that far away; the abiding hospitality for migratory birds in protected natural spaces that also make border patrolling easier; the “invasive” label as attached to a species (Nilgai) that in no plausible way invaded local ecologies but was introduced and encouraged; and the many ways that invasiveness attaches to both human and nonhuman life. The three papers gathered here highlight for me some of the ways that we might want to think about the politics of invasiveness, and the practices both beyond the human and in intersection with various figurations of it.

One way we might think about invasiveness is in relation to a series of oppositions. Some of those oppositions can be politically generative in troubling ways, in particular in the opposition of invasiveness to nativeness and purity. This sense is frequently invoked, especially when invasiveness is discussed in an ecological setting, partly in debt to ecology’s own language and history of thinking in terms of invasive species and native species, and with an eye to the troubling ways that this has sometimes been read from or back onto political projects of nativeness and purity.

But each of the authors, in their contributions here and elsewhere, also raise other oppositions, or antonyms, of “invade” that open a wider range of possibilities: to aid or assist; to help or protect; or to leave alone. Eleana Kim does this through an engagement with cosmopolitanism and hospitality; Hugh Raffles does so by starting with native plants and nativist politics but also via a “thoughtful and inclusive response” to invasive species in a basic condition of cosmopolitan impurity; and Fabio Parasecoli does it by considering ways to affiliate with small-scale bacteria, to create “pluralities, interdepen-

dence, and innovation.” These other oppositions to “invasive” raise a powerful series of alternative ways we might start to understand invasiveness.

This leads to a second general point about invasiveness and language. The description of the conference panel whose remarks are represented here suggests that it is a focus on the common language of invasion that links native and invasive together, ecologically and politically. And such a linkage is certainly central to this politics. Yet academic discussions over invasiveness and ecology frequently make it difficult to study these linkages in ways that “meet up.”

Natural scientists point to the need to engage with the destructive power of invasive species—economically, culturally, and ecologically—which are understood through technical (if sometimes contested) definitions and categories, in relation to particular ecosystemic relations, with identifiable causal effects. While they may accept the rhetorical problems with “invasive” as a marker of these species, their focus remains on a biological materiality and set of interconnections that are not directly tied to the ways that we speak, write, or think about it. For those who come from the perspective of interpretative social sciences, the discourse of invasiveness itself is understood as the politically significant and productive aspect. In these interpretations, invasiveness in a species draws from an imaginary of bounded community founded on a strong distinction between insiders and outsiders, and this has effects in the ways it circulates in society. It is attached to humans who are sometimes cast discursively and symbolically as a species; it is enacted through wider social practices such as those that focus on cultivating native plants, and parties aimed at weeding out invasive ones; and it contributes to generating ecosystems that might reflect unexamined sensibilities about who belongs where and why. While the ecological problems generated by invasive species may be accepted, the focus generally remains in the domain of problems marked as “social.”

The linguistic emphasis in many interpretive approaches allows us to see common but complex threads across rhetorics of inva-

sive (nonhuman) species and invasive humans. The Nilgai are invasive in multiple senses, as it turns out—ecologically speaking, relative to local Texas ecosystems; as a non-American species, allowing discourses of American belonging to function; and additionally as a border-crossing creature who leaves and then reenters the United States, possibly carrying disease, subject to quarantine. When are things invasive, and in which senses?

The emphasis on invasiveness as a linguistic phenomenon that motivates social practices allows an analysis of invasive species and invasive humans within a common frame, as something that permits social science to think about natural worlds as well as social ones (just as ecological sciences, through their own categories of knowledge, indeed, think about human, “social” worlds alongside natural, non-human ones).

But it is interesting that a linguistic focus *also* redivides the human from the nonhuman, through the assumption that linguistic competence is not something that nonhuman species are generally held to share with humans, and that what is most important is the ways that humans speak (and then act) about them. To what extent, then, is human language sufficient as a common thread when it comes to ecologies, which include a whole range of nonhuman actors? What other concepts or practices of signification might we be attentive to in order to better understand this kind of “social”? How much of the problem has to do with the way we think of “invasive” mostly as a feature of language, rather than as part of a broader sense of sign relations, of which human language is but one? In short, is there a way to rethink invasiveness as not only a human linguistic phenomenon, but also a matter of interspecies practice, and if so, what can we then learn about the way social life works? Through their highly insightful and careful analyses, the papers in this section each help us to approach these difficult questions and to open up the ways we understand what invasiveness is and does.