

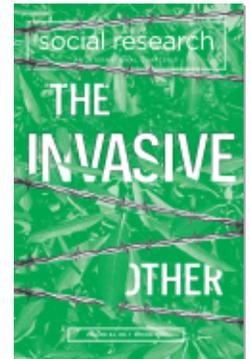


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Jean Comaroff

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Jean Comaroff

Invasive Aliens: The Late-Modern Politics of Species Being

IT IS NOW NO LONGER NEWS THAT SOME VERY THOUGHTFUL HUMAN scientists have been part of a “species turn,” being moved by evidence of the intensifying “entanglement” of human with other forms of life in what has become known as the Anthropocene. The term refers to an epoch in which human action is having unprecedented effects on the earth’s geology and ecosystems, dramatically accelerating the rate of species extinction. And while bioscientists hotly debate its provenance, it has proved to be enormously suggestive nonetheless, especially among philosophers, literati, and “environmental humanists.” Ironically, while this vantage attributes almost godlike agency to humankind in transforming the planet, as metaphysic (or “ontology,” to use the currently favored word) it has fostered an urge to move *beyond* the human per se,¹ to view that species as merely one among many.

Whether in hope or in weary disdain for “the foolishness of human exceptionalism” (Haraway 2008, 244), there has arisen a brave new discourse about “nonhierarchical alliances” among human and animal life (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; see also Kirksey and Helmreich 2010), about “more than human publics” (Smart 2014, 3), and about what Anna Tsing lyrically terms “collaborative survival” at the “end of the world” (2015, 2). This impetus is sometimes referred to as “posthumanism,” but it seems, at the same time, to deploy a decidedly anthropocentric language in its quest to extend subjectivity and agency—a kind of species-being—to “other kinds of living selves” (Kohn 2007, 4).

My concern here is with a different, less rhapsodic process, one that exists in counterpoint to this “continuist” (see Golub 2014) or posthumanist move: the impulse to reinforce dominant-species control over natural resources and processes, at a time when received boundaries are dissolving, and territories—both intellectual and geographical—are being overrun. To be sure, the modernist understanding of the human, à la Lévi-Strauss, is born of the primal act of setting culture apart from nature, of projecting an independent domain of rule-governed action, for which nature provides totemic reinforcement. In similar fashion, the modern idea of the social sphere, according to the likes of Durkheim, was as a *sui generis* realm of collective existence, one emerging from a uniquely human form of collective consciousness, and resting on the capacity for boundary-making and categorical thought. Critics have noted that approaches that strive to “dissolve the boundary between human and nonhuman, to ‘flatten’ the social world as it were”—approaches like Latour’s actor-network theory, for example—end up abetting the “erosion of the identities, however phantasmic they might be, that motivate action and mobilize solidarities” (Chagani 2014, 428). In the effort to avoid a putatively “spurious” privileging of human intention over material causality (Latour 2005, 76)—as if the two could ever be cleanly separated!—this approach makes it difficult to deal, in any principled manner, with inequities of influence in relations of humans and objects, or in generating priorities of value or critique.

It is my claim that a good deal of current popular activism, focused on the redrawing of boundaries, the building of walls, and the reemphasis of “primordial” species distinctions, springs from precisely the erosion of mobilizing identities at issue in this debate. Hence the sorts of popular crusades I focus on here, ones that struggle to recuperate a form of nature that can serve as sublime object from which to recover a politics after the philosopher Carl Schmitt, one that can restore the distinctions that set friend apart from enemy and thereby “relativize” and prioritize identities and enmities (cf. Lievens 2010). The recent worldwide preoccupation with invasive

plants, I suggest, serves such a purpose, enabling a displaced, supplemental politics of demarcation, prioritization, exclusion—and also of dehumanization—especially in situations of scarcity and deterritorialization. The rhetoric of alien nature and the strong forms of action it authorizes—what Joshua Comaroff calls “paramilitary gardening” (2012)—together strive to separate ever less clear-cut categories of native from alien, host from invader, life from death.

Schmitt was scandalously dismissive of the capacity of liberalism to yield a viable politics, one that did not dissolve all too easily into economic competition and moral rationalization. He was equally skeptical of the “humanitarian conception of humanity” as presumed by the liberal polis. A politics waged in the name of the humanitarian, he insisted, had no option—when the going gets tough—but to turn its opponents into nonhumans (1996, 72). As evidence of what he famously termed the “two-sided” idea of humanity, he pointed to the ways in which noted “humane” imperialists, like Francis Bacon, managed to deprive indigenous colonial inhabitants of their rights by putting them beyond the bounds of humanity—arguing that they were cannibals, for instance (Schmitt 2003, 103). Schmitt predicted that future erosion of nation-state borders would result in ever more global wars, fought in the name of absolute enmity; that is, of “humanity” against its “subhuman” others.

Whatever one might feel about his theory of the political, Schmitt is certainly “good to think with” about the workings of power in late modern times. In these times, as Matthias Lievens (2010) has suggested, struggles have become ever more deterritorialized, and received borders are less and less capable of “relativizing enmity,” or defining local identities, loyalties, and antipathies (Schmitt 2007). Under such conditions, the search for the sources of the political must be oriented elsewhere. This insight, in turn, provides clues to a range of recent preoccupations, from the boundary-making urge of popular politics to the relatively sudden, yet strangely overdetermined, preoccupation with the scourge of invasive plants. This latter threat has gained considerable traction of late, prompting floral dramas in many

places and spurring urgent calls to action that prefigure a more full-blown politics of xenophobia.

MILITANT ECOLOGIES

I first became aware of “alien nature” and its provocative powers in the late 1990s, in the disarmingly bucolic setting of the Angel Island State Park in San Francisco Bay. Here, a clutch of relict state buildings stood somewhat forlornly in a landscape that seemed to be populating the island with exuberant growth. It soon became apparent, though, that this luxuriant vista was itself the product of considerable violence—some of it still ongoing. For one thing, appearances to the contrary, the site was a longstanding botanical battleground. A series of prosaic signs made plain that the current “native Californian” vista had only recently emerged from a protracted struggle with colonial invaders of various kinds. The island, it turned out, was a National Historic Landmark: a former fortress, and immigration and quarantine station, it had long been an exemplary frontier along which the politics of state-making and American ethnogenesis had been enacted—this by way of the ceaseless sorting, whether military or bureaucratic, biometric or horticultural, of civil from savage, citizen from alien.

Official narration begins with the fact that the island was a fishing and hunting site for Coast Miwok Native Americans, who “used regular fires to expand the grassland and shrublands at the expense of the woodlands,”² despoiling this native Eden and its “frozen moment” of original authenticity (cf. Thompson 2014, 6). By the early nineteenth century, settlers had introduced cattle and European vegetation to the island, which was then taken over during the Civil War by the US military; its fort subsequently served as a base from which an infantry garrison launched campaigns against Native American peoples across the West (Natale 1998). The troops were a motley crew of conscripts from all over the world, and they introduced other useful foreigners from distant colonial frontiers—in particular, the Bluegum Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globulus*), to be used for “windbreaks, beau-

tification, timber, and erosion control.”³ In 1891, as the frontier morphed into an international border, the site became a quarantine station where “ships from foreign ports could be fumigated, and immigrants suspected of carrying diseases ... kept in isolation” (Angel Island Conservancy, nd). The facility subsequently expanded into a center that between 1910 and 1940 processed approximately 1 million Asian “aliens,” becoming known as “The Ellis Island of the West.” Among documents still on view at the site is a broadsheet dating from August 1910 entitled “The White Man,” a “monthly magazine devoted to the Movement for the Exclusion of Asiatics.” The issue on display ran a feature on “California, a unit for exclusion.”

The island facility would process and detain “Alien enemies” during both world wars. Thereafter it became, until 1968, a Nike anti-aircraft missile site, thus reinforcing the hardening border—the sharpening line of enmity between “West” and “East”—put in place by the Cold War. By the 1970s, however, it appeared to have become strategically obsolete, a relic of an older era of technonational security. Native Americans briefly sought to reclaim it in the 1960s (Laylor 2005, 311), and then Chinese Americans began to press for it to be declared a State Landmark and memorial to earlier, less ethnically benevolent times.

By the 1980s, the gentle abandonment of human and horticultural projects on the island had proceeded apace. But then, in the late 1980s, it was suddenly recommissioned for the purpose of boundary-making, of securing the nation from invasion, now by alien vegetation—thereby underlining the point made by Schmitt: when old borders dissolve, new lines of difference must be found to spur the possibilities of the political. A National Parks initiative in California, its proponents convinced that the iconic native landscape was being overrun by unchecked foreign interlopers, began to clamor for the urgent removal of eucalyptus trees that—in resonance with an ever more audible global concern with biodiversity—had come to be seen as destructive, fire-prone “colonizers.” The barely suppressed ethnonationalism of this zestful pursuit seemed startling at the time,

coming as it did amidst heated debate about issues of immigration, both in California and the nation at large. Amidst some local controversy, all but six acres of “historically significant” foreign trees were uprooted, to be replaced with “nursery-grown native plants.”⁴ The remaining invasives, a memento mori as it were, framed the decommissioned immigration and quarantine centers. The politics of ethnic preference and “relativized enmity” had seeded itself anew on this phantasmagoric terrain.

ALIENS AND THE AFRICAN RENAISSANCE

Fast-forward a couple of years to the new millennium, now in South Africa. Until the fall of apartheid, the term “alien” had archaic connotations here, being enshrined in laws aimed most directly at barring Jewish entry in the 1930s. These statutes remained in place until amended in the mid-1990s, when immigrants yet again became a fraught issue. It was the time when the postcolonial nation set about redefining itself as a new democracy; when “imagined communities” here, as everywhere, were being beset by the demands of difference; when the new “Rainbow Nation” was seething with a surplus of the undocumented, the unemployed, and the unruly. In fact, South Africa, once relatively isolated from the larger world as global pariah, was remarkable for the speed with which it now ran into problems common to all societies, especially posttotalitarian societies tasked with reconciling liberation with liberalization. The miraculously peaceful passage to democracy was marred by a subsequent disconcerting upsurge of violence and crime, both organized and ordinary. The exemplary quest for Truth and Reconciliation, though not reduced completely to recrimination and strife, yielded uneasy fusions of enfranchisement and exclusion, hope and hopelessness. The new constitution proved incapable of redressing the radically widening chasm between rich and poor, of facilitating the birth of a modern utopia in decidedly late modern times. In the first decade after the transition to majority rule, the new government strove to establish South Africa as a player in the global market system, muting talk of

egalitarian futures, of work for all, or of the welfare state envisioned in the Freedom Charter that, famously, had mandated the struggle against the *ancien regime*.⁵ Muted, too, were the critiques of *laissez faire* and structural inequality once voiced by the antiapartheid movements, their idealism now reframed by the triumph of neoliberal policies on a planetary scale (Sharp 1998, 245).

It was at this time that concerns about the threat posed by invasive vegetation first began to circulate in public discourse, flaring into national prominence in the wake of a series of spectacular fires along the mountain spine of the Cape Peninsula at the start of the new century. The blaze consumed historic homes and squatter settlements alike, generating horrific images of animals grilled alive, of lucrative vineyards destroyed, of tourist capital going up in smoke. In total, 9,000 hectares burned, and the mountains smoldered sullenly for weeks. Fire is endemic to the region and its natural plant biome. But, being of calamitous proportions, this one raised fears about the very survival of the natural kingdom at the Cape. Its livid scars evoked elemental anxieties—flashing up, as it were, in a moment of danger—an elemental omen or “dialectical image” (Buck-Morss 1989, 33) in which scars of past struggle met portents of future apocalypse. The divinatory efforts that ensued—in the streets, the media, the halls of government—laid bare the complex social ecology whence the conflagration itself had sprung, casting a sharp light on the state of a nation then barely six years old.

Apocalypse, of course, eventually dissolves into the flow of history. Therein, to borrow Mike Davis’s phrase, lies the “dialectic of ordinary disaster” (1995). Thus, while early discussion of the fire was wild and contested, it reduced, in time, to a dominant interpretation, one that, while not universal, drew enough consensus to authorize strong state action and broad civic collaboration. Here, clearly, was an “ideology in the making.” As such, it played upon an implicit landscape of affect and anxiety, inclusion and intrusion, prosperity and loss. Via a clutch of charged references, it linked the fire to other public concerns—concerns about being and identity, about organic

society and common humanity, about boundaries and their violation—at the heart of contemporary nationhood. But its efficacy in this respect turned, in the first place, on forging a plausible explanation for the extent of the blaze itself.

Initially, cigarette butts and cooking fires were held responsible. But these theories soon gave way to talk of arson, pointing specifically to a campaign of urban terror attributed to Muslim activists that had gripped the Cape long before 9/11.⁶ Then the discourse abruptly changed direction again, alighting on an etiology that took hold with unusual force: whatever sparked it, the epic scale of the fire was blamed on alien plants, flora that burn more readily and fiercely than does native vegetation. Outrage against those plants grew rapidly. Fanned by public media, it circulated among scientists, policymakers, and the populace at large, primed by images ever more vehement, ever more castigating of a loathsome list of “pests,” “parasites,” “colonizers,” “green cancers.”⁷ Government-issue posters pandered to the popular paranoia, enjoining citizens to “Hack those aliens!” and “Poison the Pines!” Landowners who had carelessly allowed such plants to spread were denounced by mild-mannered gardeners on talk radio, who chided them for putting the population, and the “natural heritage,” at risk.⁸

Heritage has special resonance here. It has become a construct to conjure with as markets and mass migration breach established borders, challenging national identities and patrimonies in novel ways. To be sure, this is a moment when older forms of state sovereignty are dispersing themselves well beyond formal governance—into transnational corporations and nongovernmental organizations; into shadowy, privatized parastatal cabals; into syndicated crime and organized religion; and into unholy fusions of all these things. And as this happens, borders become a present absence. National frontiers have always been more or less porous, of course. But technologies of space-time compression have effected a sea change in the global flow of humans, objects, signs, and currencies. All this, sped by the dictates of worldwide *laissez faire*, has placed nation-states in a double

bind, requiring them at once to open up their frontiers and to secure them; to deregulate the movement of those goods, people, and services; as well as to establish enclaved zones of competitive advantage. No wonder the angst, especially as waves of migrants breach the boundaries of the safer, wealthier world, about who and what should or should not be allowed entry. How, in this age of free trade and global humanitarianism, to secure the nation, to secure the line between admission and exclusion?

This angst began to take concrete shape in the heat of the millennial inferno, when invasive aliens were identified as the prime cause of the blaze, when they came to signify a denatured landscape, a national heritage despoiled. Concerted efforts to restore that heritage focused on a process of horticultural ethnogenesis in a would-be “postracial” age. In the late 1990s, the national government had begun to mount a campaign to have the Cape Floral Region declared a World Heritage Site—this in recognition of its unparalleled biodiversity—vested most immediately in fynbos (“fine bush” in Afrikaans),⁹ the small-leaved evergreens that cover the mountains and coastal foreland of the region and are ever more urgently seen endangered by invasive aliens that threaten to turn its rare diversity into “impenetrable monotony” (Hall 1979, 134). In vain did botanists protest that fynbos shares many features with similar Australian species; that as recently as 50 years ago, it was fynbos, that icon of national rootedness, that authorities dubbed an “invader” threatening native grasslands (Acocks 1953, 14, 17). For to be sure, as plant biologist Ken Thompson (2014, 9) tirelessly insists, all species are born and eventually die. And, in between, they seldom remain fixed in the same place.

In fact, as such scholars underline, no environments have original homeostatic constitutions that can be secured against migrant species. As a botanical term, “native” only acquired its current meaning in the early nineteenth century. Before that, a “native species was merely an uncultivated one” (Thompson 2014, 31). As South African natural history shows, until the late 1950s the strengthening of local plant populations through the admixture of nonlocal strains was a

process actively encouraged. It was not until the late twentieth century that migrating plants and animals became an audible concern—marked by the publication, in the United Kingdom, of *The Ecology of Invasions by Animals and Plants* (Elton 1958; cf. Thompson 2014, 40)—not long before the first public outbursts of late modern anti-immigration sentiment were launched there by politicians like Enoch Powell (Foot 1969).

And so it was that in South Africa, foreign plants became the stuff of both ecological emergency and national renewal (Hall 1979, 138). The most striking symptom of this process was the Working for Water Programme, launched in 1995. Part of the postapartheid Reconstruction and Development Plan, the scheme was a flagship project to create jobs and combat poverty, centered on routing out alien vegetation. Its tone was urgent: alien plants are like “a health epidemic, spreading widely out of control,” said the Programme’s home page.¹⁰ Out-of-work women and youth, ex-offenders, the disabled, even the homeless were to be rehabilitated by joining exuberant eradication teams—and by laboring in industries that turned the invaders into marketable commodities. Alien nature, in other words, was to be the raw material of communal rebirth. Meanwhile, the public was exhorted not to buy foreign plants

The blaze in Cape Town gave yet further impetus to this. As popular feeling focused on the foreign “scourge,” the African National Congress seemed intent on coaxing “a spirit of community” from the ashes (Villiers 2000). Ever more overt connections were made, in official discourse, between the war against aliens and the health of the nation. A much-publicized symposium, held in 2000 to discuss international cooperation in dealing with invasive species, drew four ministers of state and several high-level representatives from other nations, most notably Australia, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom.¹¹ (In Britain there had been discussion for some years about removing huge expanses of alien rhododendrons, once very popular in public parklands, from National Trust properties.) Global trade and tourism, it was asserted, were being accompa-

nied by ever greater flows of unsolicited migrants across the face of the earth; with them had come a new class of “unwanted traveler,” foreign flora and disease-bearing insects (Merten 2000). But the most portentous words at the gathering were those of the then-president of South Africa Thabo Mbeki: alien plants, he said, “stand in the way of the African renaissance.”¹²

“ALIENS” JUMP THE SPECIES BARRIER

And so invading plants became embroiled in efforts to remake the state and reimagine the nation. The work of “paramilitary gardening” had begun. But to what precise anxieties, interests, and historical conditions did the allegory of alien-nature speak? An answer is to be found in the cluster of organic images and associations that pervaded public discourse, giving insight into the infrastructure of popular consciousness-under-construction. What Lacan has termed a “metonymic displacement” (1977, 146f.)¹³—the unconscious transfer of emotions, ideas, or wishes from their original object to a more susceptible substitute—is evident here. Talk of invasive aliens made it possible to express the unspeakable—and to do so in the name of a new nation striving to transcend past divisions. Thus did a novel species of politics arise out of a politics of species, one that authored claims to belonging and exclusion amidst compromised boundaries and a desire to transcend race. Take this satirical comment by a well-known South African journalist (Bliksem 2000):

Doubtless there are gardening writers who would not think twice about sounding off in blissful praise of something as innocent ... as the jacaranda tree ... But ... you may be nothing more than ... a racist ... Behind its blossoms and its splendid boughs, the jacaranda is nothing but a water-hogging ... weed-spreading alien.

Once upon a time, the jacaranda had been described as “almost South Africa’s national tree” (Moll and Moll 1994, 49). Now, in a bi-

zarre drama in which flora signify what politics struggles to voice, it has become an object of estrangement, even racialization. No wonder that some commentators began to protest what they saw as an “ethnic cleansing” of the countryside, or an alarmist rhetoric of invaders that used alien plants to raise concerns about state security (Lazar 2000). Note: this debate was being voiced in a post-colonial polity, a land obsessed with who was or was not a citizen, with constitutional rights and wrongs, with routing out all vestiges of racism. But it was a wry letter from a West African scholar in one of the nation’s newspapers of record that made the political subtext most brutally plain:

It is alien-bashing time again. As an alien ... I am particularly prickly about criticisms of aliens even if they are plants ... Alien plants cannot of course respond to these accusations. But before the Department of Home Affairs is dragooned into investigating the residence permits of these plants I, as a concerned fellow alien, wish to remind one and all that plants such as maize ... soybean, sunflower ... originated outside of the continent of Africa. In any case, did the fire-and-flood-causing alien plants cross the borders and establish plantations ... by themselves? (Aken’Ova 2000)

For this self-conscious alien, ecology had become the site of a distressingly familiar *kampf*: the demonization of migrants by state and its citizenry alike. How long, one wondered, before the chauvinism of this ethnonaturalist rhetoric would attach itself to its prime object, before the metaphorical spark would leap the species barrier and alight on the human subjects to whom it had been reaching? How long before the “natural order” would yield a clear line of enmity in a hopelessly entangled world?

It has been noted that the migrant is the specter on whose wretched fate the triumphal politics of the “new” Europe was founded (Seabrook 2000); certainly, the refugee is the apparition on whom

that union now threatens to dissolve. In South Africa too, a phobia about foreigners, above all foreigners from elsewhere in Africa, has been the underside of the hard-won democracy—waxing, paradoxically, alongside appeals to *ubuntu*, a common African humanity. In the 1990s, that phobia congealed into an active antipathy to what is perceived as a shadowy alien nation of “illegal immigrants” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001); the qualifier (illegal) has become inseparable from the sign (immigrant), just as, in the plant world, “invasive” has become locked, adjectivally, to “alien.” Popularly held to be “economic vultures” who usurp jobs and scarce resources and foment crime and disease, these anticitizens are accused—in close analogy with nonindigenous flora—of spreading uncontrollably and siphoning off the wealth of the nation (Sinclair 1996, 14f; Reitzes 1994, 7).

Aliens, then, are a distinctive species in the popular imagination. In a barely suppressed replica of colonial rhetoric here, they are profiled by color and culture, looks and gestures, thence to be expunged from the moral community. Once singled out, “illegals” are seldom differentiated from bona fide immigrants. All are dubbed *makwerekwere*, a dehumanizing term for people incapable of proper speech. Not surprisingly, they live in terror that their accents will be detected.

The fear is well founded. With the relaxation of controls over immigrant labor under the new, liberalized dispensation, South Africa—the continent’s “America”—has become the destination of choice for many people from the north; estimates, which have fluctuated wildly over the years, range from an official 2.2 million to more than double that number, of which a sizable proportion is held to be illegal (Statistics South Africa 2012, 11).¹⁴ This influx has occurred amidst transformations in the domestic economy that have altered the relation of labor to capital, leading to a radically downsized job market in which over 80 percent of employers opt for “nonstandard” labor (Adam, van Zyl Slabbert, and Moodley 1998, 209). Much of this toil is done by lowly paid, nonunionized “illegals,” whom farmers and industrialists claim are essential to their survival in competitive global

markets (Reitzes 1994, 7). Small wonder, then, that routing the alien, who, rightly or wrongly, embodies the threat to local work and welfare, began to emerge as a persuasive mode of confronting economic dispossession, of reversing job loss, of regaining a sense of organic community.

And so the stage was set. In 2008, amidst sharply increasing unemployment, rising food prices, and growing discontent about the lack of housing and services, violent attacks were unleashed against foreigners, first around Johannesburg and then across the land. “Troops Called In as SA Burns,” screamed the local press (Sapa 2008), while media all over the world carried graphic images of property torched and bodies set aflame: fire and aliens again. Young men, armed with sticks and matches, took to the streets to purge their neighborhoods of foreigners (Robins 2008)—as if destroying those bodies conferred a kind of sovereignty, a signature of belonging, entitlement, enmity the state had failed to deliver. They acted to draw a line in the ashes, as it were, one that would secure the ground of the citizen against the interloper.

This story was repeated in 2015, when amidst renewed unrest over deepening immiseration, King Goodwill Zwelithini, traditional leader of the AmaZulu in KwaZulu-Natal, was reported to have told a gathering of his restless subjects that foreigners “should pack their bags and go back home” (Ndou 2015). National news cameras paused briefly on a man standing in a crowd, bearing traditional weapons. He also bore a handwritten sign: “8 Years Looking. No Job.” Within hours of the royal call, purported strangers were dragged from their homes, angrily accused of usurping scarce housing and employment, of committing crimes, and of spreading AIDS. The national profile of victims has varied, successive outbreaks having vented their wrath, at one time or another, on most of the populations that have entered the country in visible numbers: Zimbabweans, Malawians, Mozambicans, Ethiopians, Congolese. Usually, those targeted are of relatively humble socioeconomic status, although in the Western Cape Province, Somali shopkeepers have also been specially singled out, per-

haps because they have managed to establish viable businesses in precarious locales, relying on strongly bounded kin and ethnic networks. In each case, the alien serves as foil for a desperate struggle to forge a sense of autochthony and citizenship, of priority rights to inclusion and benefits long promised but still denied.

Through all of this, the state has remained an ambiguous actor. On the one hand, those who speak in its name have joined outraged voices at home and abroad in condemning the attacks, insisting that universal human rights be respected. On the other, the forces of law and order have been relatively slow to respond to the violence. Furthermore, while government agencies have invariably censured “savage” xenophobes, claiming they have been abetted by criminal gangs and/or an insurgent “third force” (Robins 2008), they have been conspicuously silent about the worsening social conditions and sense of desperation that has set the scene for these recurring dramas. At times, the regime has also reinforced populist antipathies by permitting the South African Police Services (SAPS), their effectiveness ever more in question, to stage their own high-profile raids on immigrant neighborhoods.

These tactics have been accompanied by official promises, loudly declared in the media, of forceful national strategies, like a “US-style bid to rid SA of illegal aliens” (Brand 2000, 1). A controversial “crime-fighting blitz operation” that targeted undocumented immigrants—code-named Operation Fiela (“to sweep away” or “remove dirt” in Sesotho; Malala 2015)—was launched by the SAPS in 2015, shortly after King Zwelithini’s unfortunate call to arms. The campaign, in which the SAPS accosted presumptive foreigners and demanded to see their residence permits, led to the arrest of over 9,000 people, prompting widespread accusations of “state-sponsored xenophobia” (Maromo 2015). In addition, deportation procedures have long been the object of criticism: at the main, privately owned Lindela Repatriation Centre, foreign nationals have been harshly treated, their rights violated, their property looted.¹⁵ The state has made little visible effort to regulate the facility, despite investigation by the South African

Human Rights Commission, critique by civic organizations, and an inmate riot at the facility in 2012 (Witherden 2008; Kotlolo, Hosken, and Nombembe 2012).

As in the United States and elsewhere, political action here struggles to deal with the ambiguous place of strangers, many of them claiming the status of refugees, people who, despite popular antipathy, are acknowledged by state and citizens alike to enjoy universal human rights, people who have in many ways become essential to domestic production. These strangers mix intimate local knowledge and foreign loyalties, real or imagined, and they raise specters of crime and terror. They are simultaneously indispensable and disposable, visible and invisible, human and subhuman, residing ambiguously inside, and yet beyond, the law. They embody the conundrums of an increasingly entangled, borderless world, one in which global humanism jostles unprecedented precarity, and violent ethnonationalism feeds off the nightmare of ourselves as beings who are denatured and homeless.

CONCLUSION

“Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language,” Raymond Williams once remarked (1983, 219). And he went on to note that it has carried within it, for a very long time, consequential differences in human thought—if often implicitly. Derived from *nasci*, “to be born” (hence “native” and “nation”), it has come to refer, in our time, simultaneously to (i) the “essential quality of something”; (ii) the “inherent force” that directs the world and/or human beings”; and (iii) the “material world itself,” of which those human beings may or may not be taken as part. Its modern emergence, qua abstract universal, is cognate with the emergence of God as absolute creator, God as inscrutable being, distinct from the knowable world of His creation (Williams 1983, 166). It is the latter, the “state of nature,” that is capable of revealing divine reason to God’s creatures; capable too, in its perfection, of redeeming the less perfect “state of society” that has become thinkable in a humanist world—the relatively corrupt, “arti-

ficial” domain produced by a fallible humankind. The term “naturalization” enters into this semantic field as a critical construct, voicing suspicion of the ideological implications of “nature’s law,” whose ostensibly immaculate and transhistorical “truths” always mask particular, interest-bearing social investments (Jones 2004, 88). In this understanding, naturalization takes us back to the issues with which I began this essay: to totemism, and the role of natural categories and lore as models of and for human culture and organization.

“Naturalization” is itself a word with multiple connotations, of course. In biology, it means the process whereby a plant or animal is able to live wild in a region where it is not indigenous. In everyday terms, it refers to the legal process by which persons of foreign birth may acquire citizenship or nationality—become native, as it were. In the lexicon of critical theory, however, it implies the treatment of social, interest-bearing processes—the sanctity of self-regulating markets, for instance, or of original plant ecologies—as a kind of “second nature,” ie, as existing without context, history, or human will, beyond the mediation of politics, power, or production (Lukács 1968, 86; cf. Marx [1867] 1906). In this guise, naturalization is integral to the way in which social value is rendered as transcendent truth, just as “denaturing” is key to unmasking the commonsense workings of domination, abstraction, and exploitation.

Much critical thought has gone into showing how evolving forms of modern capitalism have come to be second nature in lived experience. What kinds of naturalization are at work, we might ask, in the recent rise of “continuist,” posthumanist visions of species entanglement? What are the implications of dissolving the lines at the *edges* of the human while lines that separate humans from one another are ever more avidly drawn and redrawn, often with fatal consequences for all forms of life? What of deemphasizing human agency—in the name of natural emergency—while that agency takes on every more desperate, globally destructive forms? The fetishism of alien species and the dangerous politics of enmity it begets should alert us to the consequences, in these times, of the all-too-human ef-

fort to enroll nature as alibi in the effort to address vexed questions of sovereignty, belonging, entitlement, and distribution—to draw lines, sometimes necropolitical lines—in what is an increasingly borderless, yet unequal, world.

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This discussion of the campaign against invasive alien species in South Africa revisits an earlier account (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001) in light of later historical developments. As ever, I thank John Comaroff for his creative input.

NOTES

1. “My goal is to leave the human, to try to get beyond that kind of thing,” says Eduardo Kohn (Golub 2014).
2. *Wikipedia*. “Angel Island (California).” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angel_Island_\(California\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angel_Island_(California)). Accessed June 9, 2016.
3. The island also served as a detention camp for prisoners taken during these campaigns and during the Spanish-American War. See *Wikipedia*, “Angel Island (California).” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angel_Island_\(California\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angel_Island_(California)). Accessed June 9, 2016.
4. *Wikipedia*. “Angel Island (California).” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angel_Island_\(California\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angel_Island_(California)). Accessed June 9, 2016.
5. The Freedom Charter was, for all practical purposes, the founding document in the populist fight against the apartheid state. Signed in 1956 at Kliptown by all the protest organizations in the so-called Congress Alliance, it made a commitment, among other things, to nationalize major industries and to mandate a heavily state-run, welfare-freighted political economy (see eg Walshe 1971; Lodge 1983; Meli 1989; Holland 1989).
6. See eg Bobby Jordan, “Ash City: Why the Fires Were So Bad,” *Sunday Times*, January 23, 2000. 7. See also *BBC News*, “Pagad: Vigilantes or Terrorists,” September 13, 2000. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/923701.stm>. Accessed June 6, 2016.

7. The term “green cancer” appears in the title of a volume, *The Green Cancers in South Africa* (1959). Its given publication details are somewhat ambiguous; we annotate it under Control of Alien Vegetation Committee, Kirstenbosch. Kirstenbosch, situated in Cape Town, is the national botanical garden of South Africa.
8. See John Yeld, “Force Landowners to Clear Invading Alien Plants,” *Sunday Argus*, January 22–23, 2000, 7. See also Villiers 2000.
9. Recognition was granted in 2004. For early technical accounts of fynbos and its ecology, see eg Kruger (1978) and Day, Louw, and Jarman (1979).
10. This homepage, www.dwaf.pwv.gov.za/idwaf/projects/WFW/Default.htm, accessed 27 February 2000, has since been replaced. While the text has changed, both its essential substance and its urgent tone remain. So does the promise that the Programme will continue to create jobs and take a lead in the national “fight against poverty”; see <http://www.dwaf.gov.za/wfw>, accessed July 4, 2007.
11. International Symposium on Best Management Practices for Preventing and Controlling Invasive Alien Species, Kirstenbosch (Cape Town), February 22–24, 2000.
12. Message from President Mbeki, read by Valli Moosa, Minister for Environmental Affairs and Tourism, at the International Symposium on Best Management Practices for Preventing and Controlling Invasive Alien Species, Kirstenbosch (Cape Town), February 22–24, 2000. See also Bliksem (2000).
13. See Bornali Nath Dowerah, “Lacan’s Metonymic Displacement and Its Relevance to Post-Structuralism,” *The Criterion: An International Journal in English* 4: 4 (2013). <http://www.the-criterion.com/V4/n4/Bornali.pdf>.
14. Statistics South Africa claimed that 2.2 million foreigners were living in the country in 2012, of whom nearly half might be undocumented (2012, 11; see also Wilkinson 2015).
15. There have been many reports in the mass media of violence at this center over the years. In one case, the Cameroonian embassy lodged a formal protest to the South African government; see Banda and Clifford 2000, 1.

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