



Securing forests from the scourge of chestnut blight: The biopolitics of nature and nation



Christine Biermann

Department of Geography, University of Washington, Box 353550, Seattle, WA 98195, USA

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ABSTRACT

Bringing a biopolitical framework to bear on historical geographies of nature, this article traces the recent history of the American chestnut, with a focus on the pivotal time period in the early 20th century (1905–1925) during which the tree's ecological, economic, and cultural role changed dramatically. Once an ecologically dominant and culturally important forest tree in eastern North America, the American chestnut was rendered functionally extinct following the accidental introduction of a fungal pathogen, known as the chestnut blight, at the turn of the 20th century. Calling attention to the historical ties between nature and nation, I demonstrate how blight control, chestnut breeding, and restoration efforts were formulated in conversation with broader anxieties about the fate of the American nation in the wake of social, environmental, economic, and racial change. Through an exploration of three themes distilled from archival research—chestnut blight as national threat, fear and desire for exotic nature, and the shared histories of plant breeding and racial improvement—this paper illustrates the role that nature has played in the construction and circulation of biopolitical discourses, nationalist sensibilities, and gendered and racial logics.

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“This was the tree that built America.”

[Mark Double, West Virginia Chapter of The American Chestnut Foundation (Teslis, 2015)]

1. Introduction

Since 2012, over two thousand volunteers have planted more than 70,000 native tree seedlings on an unassuming field in the hills of southwestern Pennsylvania, marking the transformation of a “common field one day [into] a field of honor forever” (National Park Service, 2004). These plantings serve a dual purpose: to heal the land, which was cleared of its forests, stripped of its coal, and reclaimed as non-native grassland, and to heal the American nation in the wake of September 11, 2001. It was on this field and former surface mine that United Airlines Flight 93, the fourth plane involved in the 9/11 attacks, crashed. A decade after 9/11, the U.S. National Park Service dedicated the Flight 93 National Memorial and initiated the multi-year Plant a Tree at Flight 93 project, with the goal of reforesting hundreds of acres of former mineland using native trees.

While numerous species have been planted, the crown jewel of the reforestation project is the American chestnut (*Castanea*

dentata). Like the unassuming fields of the memorial, the American chestnut was once an ordinary and commonplace tree in the eastern U.S. but has over the past century come to serve as a symbol of the American nation. In 2009, Bryan Burhans, then President and CEO of The American Chestnut Foundation, wrote, “If you think of all of the ecological devastation in this country—we lost the buffalo, we lost the passenger pigeon—but this is one thing where we’ve stuck a flag in the ground and said, ‘Not this tree!’” (The American Chestnut Foundation, 2009, p. 4). The species is now widely revered as an “icon of hope for our children to look to” (Rutter, 2007, p. 261) and its restoration has been called an “American dream that is close to becoming a reality” (Case, 2007, p. 3), with celebrated plantings at not only the Flight 93 National Memorial but also the White House grounds, the Kentucky birthplace of Abraham Lincoln, and numerous other sites of national significance. As such, the case of the American chestnut raises a series of questions about the material discursive traffic among nation and nature. What role do nonhumans play in securing the nation and ensuring its flourishing? By what processes do certain species become saturated with socio-political meanings and national identities? And how might we look to the past to glean the residual logics and histories that haunt human relations to other species, summoned here when Americans “[stick] a flag in the ground” and say “not this tree”?

E-mail address: biermc@uw.edu

Bringing a biopolitical analytic to historical geographies of nature, this paper draws on archival research to revisit the pivotal time period in the early 20th century (1905–1925) during which the American chestnut's ecological, economic, and cultural roles changed dramatically. In so doing I examine how the American chestnut and chestnut blight were rendered legible through racialized and gendered national imaginaries while the nation was figured as a 'natural' body to be secured, purified, and strengthened in the face of threat. In the first decade of the century, chestnut trees in the New York City area began showing signs of infection by a fungal pathogen that came to be known as the chestnut blight (*Cryphonectria parasitica*). The blight swept through the species' range and killed virtually all mature trees in its path. Drawing on historical evidence from policy documents, newspaper articles, scientific publications, and conference proceedings, I lay bare the social and intellectual subsoil out of which the chestnut blight emerged as a national threat and the American chestnut a symbol of the nation. While previous accounts of the American chestnut have focused on the tree's material history (Freinkel, 2009), changing ecological role (Paillet, 2002), significance in rural Appalachian culture (Davis, 2006; Hepting, 1974; Lutts, 2004), and tensions among restoration methods (Curry, 2014; Freinkel, 2009), here I foreground the ways in which early 20th century blight management and chestnut breeding were interwoven with nationalist sensibilities and racial and gendered logics. The framing I employ contextualizes these sensibilities and logics within a broader biopolitical project—the project of defining the national population as a 'natural' entity ("man-as-species" (Foucault, 2003, p. 243)) and distinguishing between perceived threats and advantages to the nation, all the while authorizing particular subsets of the population to act as promoters and defenders of the general well-being. In particular, I show that responses to the blight hinged on questions of what it means to be American, who or what counts as internal to the nation and who or what constitutes threat, and how to best protect and improve national stock in the age of empire.

By unearthing these dynamics and bringing them into conversation with ongoing chestnut restoration, I do not aim to suggest that particular socio-political logics are inherent to or uniformly sedimented in the discourses of native and non-native species. Nor do I contend, however, that recent charges of nativism and xenophobia in invasion science and management (e.g. Subramaniam, 2001) are merely the result of rhetorical cross-breeding among the terminology of human and nonhuman immigration, or that ties between conservation projects and racial thinking, "once substantial, have largely dissolved" (Coates, 2006, p. 10). Instead, I begin with the assumption that historical dynamics of biopower, empire, and race tinge everyday nature-society relations in the present—and here I consider relations with native and non-native species—and I take up the charge of postcolonial scholar Stoler (2008), echoed by Collard et al. (2015) and DeSilvey and Edensor (2013), to "keep an eye on the past to reckon with how we got to this place of ruination and ecological impoverishment" (Collard et al., 2015, p. 323). This paper thus looks backward to excavate a set of themes from the 20th century history of the American chestnut and blight—the blight as national threat, fear and desire for exotic nature, and the shared logics and histories of plant breeding and racial improvement—themes that are rarely included in narratives of the tree's downfall and resurgence. In so doing I grapple with the roles these species have played in struggles to secure a particular vision of the American nation and ensure its flourishing.

In the sections that follow, I first bring scholarship on biopolitics, nature-society relations, and racialized and gendered nationalisms into conversation with the history of U.S. conservation and environmentalism. I highlight two fundamental insights about

environmental politics in early 20th century America: first, that conservation went hand-in-hand with nation building, and secondly, that natural resources and the environment were key sites in which Progressive Era biopolitical discourses were articulated. I then turn to the specifics of the American chestnut and chestnut blight, emphasizing the multiple narratives that these two storied species have come to embody. Drawing on archival research I illustrate how chestnut breeding and blight control efforts have been marked by and have indeed helped to constitute notions of nationhood, threat, purity, and security since the early 20th century. I conclude with a reflection on this case's relevance to the politics of restoration and conservation today.

2. Biopolitics of nation and nature in early 20th century America

By the turn of the 20th century, U.S. elites were increasingly calling for environmental conservation. No longer immediately threatened by the perils of nature, new urges to protect the environment and wisely use resources emerged. At the same time, concern for the nation's nature intermingled with other Progressive Era issues, among them urban living, hygiene and sanitation, food purity, immigration, eugenics, and national character and morality (Bobrow-Strain, 2008; Domosh, 2003; Farmer, 2013; Rome, 2008; Spiro, 2009). While these concerns varied in their material emphases, they shared an implicit commitment to the protection, expansion, and efficiency of the nation-state and crucially, the vigor and health of the population. It is here that Foucault's (1990, 2003) work on biopower and biopolitics is relevant; I posit not just that environmental anxieties and interventions can be analyzed through this lens but that nonhuman nature was central to the Progressive Era construction of the American nation as a biological formation—a national body—to be regulated, policed, and improved.

This argument builds on a longstanding tradition in nature-society research that considers the environment as a terrain of power, hardening particular social formations into truths and uprooting others (e.g. Cronon, 1996; Haraway, 1989; Moore et al., 2003). Specifically with regard to plants, scholarship has explored the moral, patriotic, and political economic dimensions of horticulturalism and tree culture (Farmer, 2013; Pauly, 2008), perceptions of nativeness, invasiveness, and belonging (Coates, 2006; Head, 2012; Head and Muir, 2004; Lien and Davison, 2010), and trees and forests as constitutive of regional or national identity (Campanella, 2003; Rutkow, 2012; Samuels, 2005) or animated by the dynamics of settler colonialism, race, and class (Bowcutt, 2015; Braun, 2002; Cohen, 2004; Kosek, 2006). A particularly vibrant debate has emerged around the extent to which native and non-native species management and discourse are marked by nativism and xenophobia (e.g. Eskridge and Alderman, 2010; Hettinger, 2001; Subramaniam, 2001; Warren, 2007). While some call for new ways to judge species other than geographic origins (Davis et al., 2011), others defend concerns about exotic species as rooted in material ecological and economic impacts (Simberloff et al., 2012), and still others promote the restoration of native species as a means of decolonization (Mastnak et al., 2014).

At the same time but largely separately, nature-society scholars have begun to consider species conservation through a biopolitical analytic that foregrounds how certain species are made to live while others are allowed to die (or killed) in the name of fostering life in general (Biermann and Mansfield, 2014; Braverman, 2015; Collard, 2012; Holloway et al., 2009; Lorimer and Driessen, 2013; Rutherford, 2007; Srinivasan, 2014). Bringing this analytic to bear on the American chestnut and chestnut blight deemphasizes the

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