

APOCALYPTIC POLLINATIONS: the disappearance of “site”

By Kelty Miyoshi McKinnon

“Legions of alien invaders are silently creeping into the United States and quickly taking over...this tide of invasive aliens poses one of the greatest threats to the United States...”

While not out of character to the current U.S. administration’s paranoid accusations, this statement comes not from the Department of Homeland Security, but from the National Park Service’s public website. Prophesying disaster if the enemies are not destroyed, the NPS states that “Invasive plants are one of the greatest threats to the natural ecosystems of the United States and are destroying America’s natural history and identity”¹. In 1999, then President Bill Clinton passed Executive Order 13112 which established the National Invasive Species Council of America. At the inaugural meeting, co-chair and Interior Secretary Bill Babbitt advocated for the passing of a government approved ‘White List’, a limited list of approved species that calls for the extermination of all unapproved species existing in the United States. Those species deemed ‘safe’ for import, possession and transport are limited to an estimated 0.25% of the earth’s biota. The remaining 99.75% is considered “...contraband, with penalties for possession and mandated extermination”².

The imposition of a list of those that belong and those that do not asserts a kind of eugenicist order on an invaded land, drawing a clear boundary between what is ‘American’ and what is ‘other’. The miniscule quarter of one percent is deemed the moral majority that manifests America’s natural identity: the progenital material of America’s genus loci. The belief that, like the Garden of Eden, the United States is Natural and Pure and needs to be sequestered from the rest of the world in order to maintain its purity is a common one, echoed in the nostalgic rhetoric of environmental organizations and governmental agencies alike. It isn’t and never has been possible to seal borders and freeze genetic drift, so to prevent the propagation of the 99.75% noxious and impure while protecting a ‘pure race’ of particularly American plants under globalized conditions seems absurd. The issue should not be whether environmental degradation is moral, but how it is addressed and portrayed. Standard policy assumes that “...exotic species are presumed guilty until proven innocent”³. The implication that invasive plants are immoral and politicized, indeed that they are ‘unnatural’, is farcical, as is the assertion that this kind of earnest environmental rhetoric is apolitical and moral. This kind of language is a misleading camouflage that speaks more of warfare than of restoration.

The current NPS assertion that space is being stolen and identity subsumed reveals a fundamental belief that ‘place’ is defined and understood as an assertion of boundaries and of difference, and that isolationism is the key to maintaining identity. Invasive plants magnify that a site is only considered culturally (or ecologically) significant when it is unique- when it embodies difference. Genus Loci is described as the distinctive atmosphere or pervading spirit of a particular place, and locates meaning as innate, divine and independent. A unique genus loci is considered a prerequisite to the authenticity, or aura, of the site. To blur the boundaries is to lose identity. The characteristic rapid, infinite reproduction of invasive plants cancels this notion of originality, enveloping space in an undifferentiated, pollinating miasma. Replicated thousands of times, each copy of the mother plant resists demarcating limits, creating a generic condition that is neither solid nor liquid, a vague terrain formless, placeless and drifting. A kind of botanical sprawl ensues, emulative of the suburb in its disregard of formal limits or definitions. ‘Nature’ is lowered from the National Park to the abject realm of suburban mass production. With ceaseless horizontal plant pollination, ‘site’ becomes ‘flow’ rendering both space and time ambiguous.

In IVY League (www.ivyleagueinvasion.net), a recent web based collaboration with Jillian McDonald, our research into invasive species focused on *Hedera helix*, commonly known as English Ivy. This plant has simultaneously been glorified for its abilities to rapidly anchor erosive soils and filter polluted air, and vilified as an invasive plant which can rapidly dominate native ecosystems, outcompeting other plants for nutrients, sunlight and air and eventually choking out any growth but its own. An attack on the hyperbole that surrounds *Hedera helix*, the website documents web-based ivy research, revealing conflicted, bizarre and oft times militant forms of nature worship. Recent rhetoric surrounding native vs. invasive plants is concurrent with notions of hybridizing identities and nationalisms due to the forces of globalisation. In all biological life, 'immigrants and foreigners' tend to be the scapegoats for local problems. Invasive species are constantly blamed for the changing 'degraded' landscape, camouflaging the role that irresponsible land use patterns have played in large scale environmental destruction.

The IVY League web page is a hypertextual tangled vine of knowledge that explores the similarities between the rhetoric of the war against invasive plants and the war against terror that is espoused by environmental groups, the mass media and governmental agencies. Under the conditions of globalisation, global cities such as Vancouver and New York are havens for invasive plants, where they thrive in almost any condition, creating lush green oases in the concrete jungle. A hypertextual garden manual, the website also offers conflicting directives for the propagation and eradication of English Ivy. IVY League raises the notion of a global and a virtual garden, where *Hedera helix* tangles issues of transculturation, globalisation, colonialism, the placelessness of contemporary urbanisms, and the privatization of the public realm. Invasive plants are a rude interruption to the nostalgic reverie that a unique place is a discreet and isolated unit, reminding us that globalisation makes it even more impossible to hermetically seal borders, that political and geographic boundaries are rarely aligned, and that we are deeply implicated in, not separate from, ecological process. Invasive plants become the memento mori of contemporary life, constantly present, peppering our garden with the solemn, sublime reminder "Et in Arcadia Ego"- "Even in Paradise There am I"⁴.

www.ivyleagueinvasion.net

Notes

1. nps.gov/plants/pubs/actionagenda/apwg/apwgaction.pdf
2. <http://www.geocities.com/nnowhite/whitelist.html> gives further explanation of the White List
3. Natural Areas News, Vol.3, No.4, Autumn 1999
4. An art historical reference to the paintings "Et In Arcadia Ego" c1621-1623 by Guercino (Galleria Corsini) and others by Poussin containing the element of drama and surprise on the part of shepherds that encounter the tomb with this inscription. In Poussin's second version of "Et In Arcadia Ego" c1630, the element of drama and surprise on the part of the shepherds is eliminated – instead displaying pensive contemplation. Quoting Erwin Panofsky: "*Poussin's Louvre picture no longer shows a dramatic encounter with Death but a contemplative absorption in the idea of mortality*". Poussin used Sannazaro's poem as the basis for his second version, from Arcadia lines 257-267 (relating to the tomb of Phyllis):
"I will make thy tomb famous and renowned among these rustic folk. Shepherds shall come from the hills of Tuscany and Liguria to worship this corner of the world solely because thou hast dwelt here once. And they shall read on the beautiful square monument the inscription that chills my heart at all hours, that makes me strangle so much sorrow in my breast: 'She who always showed herself so haughty and rigid to Meliseo now lies entombed, meek and humble, in this cold stone'."