“Invasive” Species

A Historical and Social Inquiry of the Foreign Enemy

and

Theater as a tool of engagement
Celeste Mari Williams is a playwright, former television animation professional, and graduate student completing an MA in biology this semester. Her program focuses on conservation, inquiry, voice, and community engagement. Her creative and academic work center on interdisciplinary projects that intertwine the arts, science, and social justice to foster trust, empathy, and emotional connection with human and wildlife communities.
“Invasive” Species & Language of the “Other”

- Value-laden, hyperbolic, and militaristic language from a settler colonial Euro-American lens
- Inflames Xenophobia & Racism
- Social implications and impacts on underrepresented communities
- Consider broader social contexts of historical and systemic racism and negative perceptions of the “other”
- Strive for language that is holistic, non-polarizing, and culturally sensitive to underrepresented communities
Theater as a Tool of Inquiry & Engagement

Fostering empathy and emotional connection for all species, Human, plant, and animal

Resistance by Celeste Mari Williams. Produced by Infinity Box Theater. Photo by Robert Falk

Beaver Town by Celeste Mari Williams, Produced by Mirror Stage. Photo by Celeste Williams
Gills! Gills! Gills!

Theater as Storytelling through a Social Justice Lens

“Invasion of the Chinese Mitten Crabs”

- This short play reading draws parallels between the Chinese mitten crab and the "invasive" rhetoric of COVID-19, which fueled anti-Asian sentiment and hate crimes
- Theater can foster emotional connection, empathy, and humor
- Through entertaining arts, conservation organizations can witness perspectives from underrepresented community members regarding the impacts of demonizing language
“Invasive” Species: The Problem with Common Names and Place of Origin

• Common and scientific names that include the country of origin can ignite xenophobia and prejudice if the species is perceived as causing ecological or economic harm

• When common names (e.g., African, Mexican, Chinese, Asian) are paired with words such as enemy, threat, menace, or peril it demonizes the species and creates a negative parallel with the associated human community (e.g., Africanized killer bee)
Militaristic, Value-laden, Hyperbolic Language Create a Foreign Enemy

- Personification of “invasive” species as aggressive, evil, murderous, enemies can justify war-like actions and policy decisions.
- “Invasive” insects as metaphors for unwelcome immigrants (e.g., Brexit).
- Fear and revulsion justify lethal force.
- Native = Good/ Non-native “invasive” = Bad dichotomy.
- Reinforces biases and stigmatize people associated with the country of origin.
- Reinforces nationalism and xenophobia, where the native species is morally superior.
- Well intentioned conservation management programs still promote military-like missions to remove or eradicate animals and plants considered “invasive.”
The Power of Words

COVID-19 Fuels Anti-Asian Hate

• Fear-mongering language such as the “China Virus”, “Wuhan Virus”, and “Kung Flu” slung by former president Trump incited xenophobic and racist hate crimes, slurs, and inflammatory insults like “Go back to China!” towards those of Asian descent

• Impetus for my academic research and plays about “invasive” species
Historical Context

Anti-Chinese Cartoon from 1886. Depicts common anti-Chinese sentiment in 19th century Australia and other parts of the world (PD-1923).
What’s in a Name?
“Invasive” Species’ Country of Origin Can Inflame Xenophobia and Racism:

• Language of nonnative “invasive” species can be insensitive and exclusionary to underrepresented communities.

• Missions to remove or eradicate “invasive” animals and plants with the common name Asian__, Chinese__, Japanese__ paired with ‘enemy,’ ‘evil,’ ‘invader,’ ‘menace,’ ‘peril,’ ‘and foreign’ has negative implications.

• People of Asian descent have been historically scapegoated as carriers of pestilence and disease.
Anti-Chinese sentiment in America began with the first Chinese laborers arriving in the mid-19th century during the Gold Rush and imported as low paid laborers to build the Transcontinental Railroad.

Chinese people were often scapegoated during public health crises as carriers of infection.

Invasion rhetoric and fear-mongering words such as ‘Oriental invasion’ and ‘menace’ were used by Congress and the Supreme Court to justify the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.
Political cartoons and news media portrayed Chinese people as “dangerous to the white, living in most unhealthy conditions” with a “standard of morality immeasurably below ours.”

- 1882 - Chinese Exclusion Act
- 1924 – All Asians banned from entering the US
Japanese Beetle (*Popillia japonica*)

- The Japanese beetle was used to demonize Japanese immigrants as public health threats, particularly with the rise of Japanese agriculturalists in America.
- Fueled “Yellow Peril” rhetoric and anti-immigration laws.
Anti-Japanese Propaganda

During World War II, anti-Japanese propaganda images dehumanized Japanese people as vermin, portraying them as rats and snakes with overly slanted eyes and buck teeth.

Words such as “dirty Japs” and “Jap-snakes” fueled negative perceptions that justified the Japanese American internment camps.

1942- President Roosevelt signs Executive Order 9066

Human Introduced “Exotic” Plants Become Enemy Invaders

- European colonists purposefully and “accidentally” import plants since 1600s
- Changing attitudes and perceptions
- **Purple Loosestrife** – From ambivalence to “invader, menace, pest, plague, and killer”
- **Himalayan Blackberry** – Introduced by Luther Burbank, eugenicist and plant seed trader.
  - Burbank wrote, *The Training of the Human Plant* in 1907 in response to rise of immigration
  - Blackberry – Once prized for its large, tasty berries and growth capacity becomes reviled as a nuisance.
Current Context
How this race/ecology intertwining continues today

**Chinese Mitten Crab** *(Eriocheir sinensis)*

- Language used to describe mitten crabs parallels propaganda rhetoric against Chinese immigrants from the mid-1800s to the turn of the 20th century
- Infestation, Pest, Steal, Aggressive, Exploit, Most formidable.
- “A Menace to the West”
- “Mittened mini-monster”
- “On the front lines” and “on the lam” are war and border control rhetoric that criminalize Chinese mitten crabs as a threat
- --Origin & Introduction of species, natural history, behavior, global expansion, disease, conservation efforts
- --“Invasive” etymology; historical context, play reading
The demonizing language around Asian giant “murder” hornets (Vespa Mandarinia) has fueled the fire of negative perceptions of pathogens, wildlife, and humans associated with those of Asian descent during COVID-19. Negative perceptions of unwelcome insects parallel the recent and historical marginalization of human communities by dehumanizing them as pests, vermin, and insects to be eradicated.
Who Are You Calling ‘Invasive’
Short Play Excerpt

The play reading gives voice and perspective to Asian giant hornets (*Vespa mandarinia*) and other ‘invasive’ insects (e.g., Japanese beetles). It was intended as a creative tool to foster engagement in critical thinking and spark conversation.
Best Practices and Take-Aways

• Create alternative language when describing “invasive” species that is holistic, non-polarizing, culturally sensitive and inclusive

• Possible alternatives to “invasive”: Newcomer, novel, highly adaptive, successful, alienated

• Critically examine the historical and social contexts of language and how words are used
• Create welcoming safe spaces for members of underrepresented communities
• Include and collaborative partnerships with indigenous communities for ecological restoration projects from conception to completion
• Build empathy and community through the arts and multidisciplinary discussions
Questions??