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"The Beaver Diaspora: A Thought Experiment"

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For decades the role of invasive species has been central to discussions of anthropogenic loss and change. Conceptual debates over whether "native" and "invasive" species are useful to our understanding of dynamic processes of world making have significantly challenged traditional approaches to conservation biology and conservation practices. Yet decommissioning the "invasive species paradigm" requires us to grapple with new ethical and political frameworks for stewarding the Earth in a time of loss. In response, this essay offers a thought experiment. Instead of referring to invasive species, I reframe the migration and settlement of nonhuman beings as diasporas. Doing so illuminates the political complexities of loss and change in Chilean Tierra del Fuego, where I have been conducting fieldwork for the past five years. Integrating approaches from political ecology, multispecies ethnography, and postcolonial theory, this essay focuses on the introduction in 1947 of Canadian beavers into the Fuegian archipelago (now considered the region's most significant environmental problem). The introduction of plant and animal life is bound up in the apparatus of settler colonialism, as what Alfred Crosby so famously called "ecological imperialism." Yet, as I explore in this essay, ecological imperialism is not just the remaking of landscapes to look like Europe but also a process of remaking nonhuman life through the constitution of new multispecies assemblages. Finally, this reframing allows me to destabilize the species concept as a stagnant and apolitical category of difference. (Text from author's abstract)

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