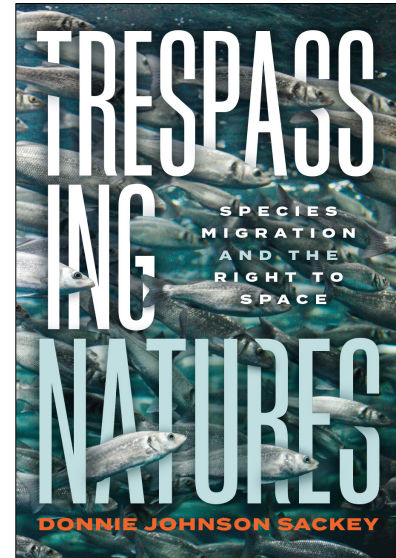


Donnie Johnson Sackey, **Trespassing Natures: Species Migration and the Right to Space**, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2024, 190 pp., \$32.95 (paperback), \$99.95 (hardcover).

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Burmese pythons are currently ravaging the Everglades. Cane toads in Australia have permanently altered entire ecosystems. Spotted lanternflies are to be killed on sight in the United States. These species are all labeled “invasive,” and as the effects of the climate crisis become less abstract with each passing year, invasive species will become increasingly prevalent. In ***Trespassing Natures: Species Migration and the Right to Space***, Donnie Johnson Sackey asks the salient question through which his book can be approached: “If the planet is melting and homes are becoming inhospitable, is it fair to frame any species as invasive?” (p. 3). Any ambition for a more just and holistic world for all of its residents demands that we answer firmly in the negative. As such, Sackey advocates a new paradigm that interrogates familiar categories of space and participation within it that privileges humanity over all other life, an attitude that has allowed us to rhetorically impart the right to certain spaces to some species and not to others. Those unfortunate species labeled invasive are then met with hostility, but the rhetorical slippage involved renders any label fickle at best, and more important, applicable to any species whatsoever—if they dare to trespass into spaces to which they do not belong.



“The identification of a species as an invader is not merely an innocuous scientific act,” writes Sackey; “it is also a cultural and political decision that reverberates through biotic communities” (p. 7). Needless to say, politics permeates all discourse on anything (or anyone) labeled invasive, human or nonhuman. Sackey rightly draws a connection between anti-immigrant rhetoric and language and policy directed toward the removal of invasive species. Rather than overemphasizing the discursive significance of science, politics, and culture as separate fields, though, Sackey shows how each of these inform the other. Because Sackey is especially concerned with the “invasive” label, the pluralism that dictates his approach uses rhetoric as its guiding principle, as well as the concentration on “the peculiarities of space” (p. 10). After all, if all spaces were truly free, the label “invasive” or “trespassing” would not be relevant—or even scientifically viable—whatsoever. A final point of contention with conventional rhetoric concerning invasive species that Sackey’s approach permits is the questioning of the “native” and “alien” dichotomy, the in-group/out-group dynamic rebranded for ecological studies. This dichotomy is inextricably linked to discussions concerning the right to space, the other focus of the book.

Early on, Sackey explains the colonialist ties to the right to space. Broadly speaking, colonizing/occupying human forces ideologically determine who and what is invasive. An important step in establishing the right to space is fulfilled whenever space is set aside for a specific purpose, from a

national park to national borders, keeping the “native” species in and the “alien” species out. Sackey observes that “before species can be declared invasive, there has to be a nationalization of nature” (p. 13), allowing for both the designation of “native” and “alien” along lines reminiscent of citizenship and the processes to obtain it, qualifiers that determine one species’ right to a space and another’s lack of that selfsame right and consequent castigation. Sackey’s efforts here can be connected to similar work that challenges rhetorical hostility to invasive species, such as Stanescu and Cummings’s (2017) edited volume, *The Ethics and Rhetoric of Invasion Ecology*. Like Sackey, they set out to “think differently” about nonnative species by imagining “different kinds of relationships and to disassemble the logics at work in the circulation of problematic labels” (Stanescu & Cummings, 2017, p. 12).

Material reality, however, is obviously not so rhetorically black and white as “native” and “alien.” Throughout the book, Sackey provides examples of invasive species whose history and contemporary status in their nonnative ecosystem confounds binary logic, such as cattle egrets or various species of armadillo. Consequently, identity plays an important role and merits its own chapter, centered on what is known as the Asian carp, an identity that exists in markets, legal code, and politics—but not in the wild. At least five different species of carp can be classified as Asian carp, though Sackey focuses on two species invasive to the United States: bighead and silver carp. Sackey reminds the reader that “any investigation into the rhetorical construction of any invasive species has to take into account the full range of associations with humans who confer its identity in space” (p. 53). In other words, one nation’s cultural symbol is another’s invasive menace, a transmutation effected in space and communicated linguistically. Animals in a national park are considered wildlife whereas the moment they leave its borders they are considered vermin and subject to extermination, to relate Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga’s (2011) insightful work on the fluidity of animal identity in human spaces to Sackey’s book. Sackey’s chapter maneuvers through the complexities of ascribing identity to an invasive species as it moves through multiple articulations in space and discourse. He contends that the problem lies not in the species of fish itself but in the fact that their presence within a given environment or system points to internal problems that may be resolved without resorting to the demonization of the “invasive Other,” be it human, plant, or animal. As Sackey argues, “Making sense of the networks that give rise to invasive or noninvasive identities offers opportunities to revise ideas and facilitate better discussions,” breaking free from the invasive/noninvasive dichotomy (p. 79).

The parallels with discourse regarding human migration and immigration are very much intentional. Amid the climate crisis and its consequences on humans and nonhumans alike, the repetition and reinforcement of this connection is crucial and the main strength of the book. Sackey underscores the importance of assemblage theory (particularly in the sections devoted to space) to this argument, in that the recognition of agency in any actor entangled within an assemblage is worth exploring and acknowledging. In this sense, Sackey continues the familiar tradition within studies of nonhuman animals, ecology, and nonhuman agency that advocates a similar analytical position centered on how actors within an assemblage operate as an assemblage. Instead of focusing on the invasive species, for example, also focus on the elements around it and what problems arise within the whole network.

The political angle to Sackey’s book forces the reader to grapple with their own role in their own assemblages, their own identities as they move through various spaces. Understanding ourselves as

actors in a wide communal space can extend empathy to those deemed “invasive,” or “illegal,” rhetorical labels likely to increase going forward. How we respond to these labels—not reactively, but with critical thought—will be vital. In this respect, Sackey’s book finds itself in a (growing) niche of research centered on politically inflected invasion rhetoric and ecology studies that offer potentially fruitful alternative options for societal organization. Exemplary of this trend is Kenneth Walker’s (2022) book, *Climate Politics on the Border: Environmental Justice Rhetorics*. While Walker’s book is more explicitly concerned with humans and border policies, both works are important contributions to this realm of scholarship, and many of their insights dovetail nicely together.

Sackey never underplays or denies the destructiveness that certain species have wrought in certain ecosystems; instead, he urges the reader to reflect on the bigger picture and the factors explaining *why* that destruction occurred. Generally, Sackey does a stellar job detailing these factors in the examples that he analyzes. However, a stronger emphasis on economic conditions is an additional avenue that Sackey could have analyzed more profoundly. Exploring the economic interests behind invasive species rhetoric may have been an additional chapter or at the very least a consideration to have incorporated into his interdisciplinary methodology. In fairness to Sackey, his objectives with this book are not centered in economics, and without care an analysis of this type can easily privilege economics as the be-all/end-all of modernity.

Trespassing Natures is useful especially for communication scholars interested in further scrutinizing what “animal” means in contemporary society, as well as for anyone interested in expanding societal boundaries to accommodate a more inclusive environment. These last points are highly pertinent to the challenges facing society today. The climate crisis has been met with the amplification of rhetoric that vilifies any organism seeking a way into “safer” countries, or countries perhaps better equipped to face the immediate threats of climate collapse. At a time when the right to a particular space is such a controversial topic, this book provides a potential framework for cooler heads to prevail and for an alternative understanding of all things “invasive,” human or otherwise.

References

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