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Original Article

The most hated tree in America: negative difference, the White imaginary, and the Bradford pear

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Abstract

Against claims that we now live in a post-racial era, this article argues that panic over so-called "invasive species" illustrates how negative conceptions of difference are built into the White imaginary. We argue that the calls to exterminate the infamous Bradford pear tree across the US function as a kind of nanoracism, or what Achilles Mbembe defines as the organization of everyday affairs according to us–them logics that further justify overt racist practices. Performing a close reading of the discourse about the tree, we show how xenophobia and anti-Blackness lurk in a debate about non-human biota, specifically by normalizing inferential racist language that attacks difference, expressing fears of racial impurity, and calling for exterminating the Other.

Keywords: anti-Blackness, environmental rhetoric, post-racialism, race, White supremacy

The West Coast of the US was responsible for the bulk of the country's pear production until fire blight decimated the crop in the early 1910s. Attempting to breed a variety that would be resistant to the destructive bacterial disease, researchers looked to species collected by plant explorers sent to China, settling on a kind of Callery pear retrieved by Frank Meyer on what would be his last trip to the region before his untimely death (Culley & Hardiman, 2007). The tree was ornamental, with thick shiny leaves and a full shape, few thorns, and no messy fruit. A survivor from Meyer's collection was discovered by John Creech of the United States Department of Agriculture in 1952, and he grafted it and produced identical versions to sell as the ideal landscaping tree (Culley, 2017). Though there would be many cultivars of this particular species, most would be called the "Bradford pear" after this original tree.

Americans fell in love with the Bradford pear. Released commercially in 1961 and praised by *The New York Times* as "unusually close to the ideal" tree thanks to its early white blooms resembling Japanese cherry trees on the National Mall ("Bradford Pear Has," 1964), it was planted across the Eastern seaboard (Culley, 2017). After Lady Bird Johnson planted one in Washington, DC, the tree became the top choice for landscaping residential streets and city boulevards (Popkin, 2016). By the 1970s, Baltimore declared it the "official city tree," urging citizens and government agencies to plant them widely (Kiehl, 2008). Becoming the second most popular tree in the US by the 1980s (Jervis, 2018), many neighborhood associations even *required* the tree to be planted in front yards (Culley, 2017). It was a landscaper's dream because it grew quickly, thrived in drought and excessive rain, and could grow almost anywhere. As one horticulturalist for the National Park Service remarked, "You don't even have to plant it (...) Just throw it off your truck and walk away" (Kiehl, 2008, para. 17).

As it multiplied across landscapes, though, the Bradford pear eventually became the most hated tree in the country by the 2010s. Once thought to be sterile, the tree started cross-pollinating with the 20+ genetically unique Callery cultivars that had been developed from the original specimen. The fruit produced from this cross-pollination was consumed by birds, the seeds spread via guano, and suddenly the already ubiquitous Bradford was appearing in forests, abandoned parking lots, and by the side of the highway. The contemporary disdain for the tree is best illustrated by landscape designer Durant Ashmore's polemic first appearing in the *Greenville News* in 2016 and reprinted widely almost every spring since. Calling the Bradford a "curse," Ashmore (2016) complained it had a weak structure, cross-pollinated with everything in sight, and produced "evil offspring" that choked out native trees. "Save the world," he begged, and "cut down your Bradford pear trees" (para. 11).

Ashmore's Archie Bunker-like condemnation of the tree that did not belong in the neighborhood was part tongue-in-cheek, but it speaks to a larger conversation among some biologists about the xenophobic nature of the rhetoric about "invasive" species. Referring to organisms as "alien" or "exotic" is now said to "cloud the science and make rational discussion more difficult," especially when some plants and animals are regarded as "hyper-fertile 'foreigners' colonizing 'native' ecosystems" (Crawford, 2018, para. 7). With over 50,000 non-native species in the US (para. 9), some environmentalists have pointed out that a return to pure native landscapes is impossible since humans "have been moving biota for thousands of years" (Peretti, 1998, p. 186). Similarly, biologist Davis (2011) and 18 other ecologists declared in *Nature* that lands are always changing, and that a "preoccupation with the native–alien dichotomy" distracts from more pragmatic responses by "classifying biota according to their adherence to cultural standards of belonging, citizenship, fair play, and morality" (p. 153). While some scholars claim this dichotomy is the product of "environmental purism" rather than any racist tendencies (Peretti, 1998, p. 189), we suggest

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that the racialization of debates about organisms like the Bradford pear tree may be understood through the nature of language itself.

In this article, we analyze public commentary about the Bradford pear—especially from Internet news sites across the US—to illustrate how it represents White racial panic. Against claims that we now live in a post-racial era, we suggest that public debate about the tree illustrates how negative difference is built into the White imaginary and how those differences are categorized by racial schema even when race has nothing to do with a particular subject. We suggest that the calls to exterminate the Bradford pear function as a kind of nanoracism, or the organization of everyday affairs according to us–them logics that further justify overt racism (Mbembe, 2019, p. 58). Though we are focused on the racialized reactions to the tree, we do not neglect the ecological dimensions of the debate, or what Barnett (2021) warned as treating the "conditions of earthly coexistence" as "ancillary to our fields of study" (p. 366). Instead, we investigate how, as he argues, democracy is a "more-than-human endeavor" (p. 367), and particularly how the "rhetorical framing of the non-native justifies a militarized relationship to particular species, in much the same way international border conflicts, refugees, and migratory populations heighten attention to belonging and defense against the other" (Stanescu & Cummings, 2017, pp. vii-viii). The racialized discourse about trees illustrates not just nanoracism and the White imaginary, then, but the way "invasivity is a highly political and non-neutral calculation regulating both human and non-human bodies, often simultaneously" (p. vii). In other words, the case of the Bradford pear illustrates the complex entwinement of anthropocentrism, nativism, racism, and modern necropolitics.

Our argument develops over three sections. First, we review the concept of negative difference and explain how nanoracism functions in a post-racial White imaginary. Second, we perform a close reading of debates about the Bradford pear to show how they illustrate anti-Blackness in a debate about non-human biota, specifically by normalizing inferential racist language that attacks difference, expressing fears of miscegenation and racial impurity, and calling for exterminating the Other. We close with a discussion of the implications of our study.

On Whiteness and negative difference

McPhail (2002) contends that racism is embedded within the very structure of language, which compels subjects to perceive their entire social world in negativistic and polarizing terms. He suggests that the principles of Western modernity molded language in such a way as to render otherness and difference negative, inferior, and therefore threatening to the Western subject. Around this conception of "negative difference" Euro-Americans built epistemologies in which otherness denoted essential biological, cultural, and ontological divergence from the idealized ego image of the Western subject. McPhail writes that "racism has historically been defined and enacted in terms of a discourse of power grounded in negative difference, and has created an existing contemporary social reality in which communication is constrained by argumentative strategies which are counterproductive and have failed to facilitate positive interaction between the races" (p. 17). Similarly, Hall (2017) characterized race as "the centerpiece of a hierarchical system that produces difference," even though it has no such biological or ontological basis. The "sliding signifiers" of race anchor Western "systems of meaning" by perpetually reproducing, classifying, and managing difference (p. 33). Race, thus, asserts so "powerful a hold on the human imagination" that it pervades nearly all systems of classification that sociohistorical differences of all kinds are transformed into biological facts (p. 33).

As such, we contend that traces of racial categorization are imbedded in most rhetorics of negative difference—even where race is not directly concerned. Race is such a foundational organizing principle of the White imaginary that it persistently migrates into other schemas of difference, such as those used to classify the natural world. Drawing from what Chávez (2021) calls "alienizing logics," individuals might characterize a plant species as "foreign" and "invasive" in the same way that racist discourse characterizes immigrants and racial minorities as "unwelcome" because race and borders have evolved as the ultimate and definitive system for comprehending and managing difference (p. 4). Race is a rhetorical resource or handmaid, something akin to what Mbembe (2019) calls a "scullion": a servant that aids in the mundane and menial task of categorization that supports the broader culture of hate, enmity, and violence (p. 58).

The application of racist vernacular to comprehend non-racial difference is not simply an accident or unwanted inheritance of a culture underwritten by the history of colonialism and chattel slavery. By proxy, racist categorization purchases something for White subjects in a post-racial world. Post-racial rhetoric is animated by a series of substitutions, displacements or terminological exchanges that make racial signifiers ostensibly disappear so that they may be supplanted with a neutral language of colorless humanity (Griffin, 2015). Those who insist that race and racism continue to shape any aspect of social, economic, and political life assume all blame for the persistence of race as a social reality (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Watts (2017) observes how this disappearing act is the mandate of a White imaginary that conflates race with Blackness and, further, where Blackness represents a negative difference that is abject, moribund, and unassimilable. Post-racialism ultimately seeks the disappearance *not* of race but instead Blackness itself in all its material and figural manifestations. The trick, as Fanon (2008) reminds us, is that Blackness has such a hold on the White psyche that "the true 'Other' for the white man is and remains the black man, and vice versa" (p. 139). Blackness—feral, promiscuous, and rampaging—must therefore be continually reproduced and differentiated to sustain and fortify the borders of the White post-racial imaginary. Watts argues that Blackness "must be reinvented and it must become an object of destructive force so that the entitlement of White male sovereignty can be reauthorized" (p. 328). The ritualistic reanimation of Blackness polices the borders of the post-racial society by conjuring racial threats in both overt and covert form—from panics about Black Lives Matter "rioters" and "racist" teachers of Critical Race Theory to more amorphous and figural manifestations such as zombies, aliens, and even "invasive" species that menace White neighborhoods. This model of authority constantly reproduces death and debilitation to ward off the threat of racial others to preserve White masculine power (Johnson, 2021). Its incarnations are virtually as limitless as the White imaginary, but each reinvention stages a relation of enmity to racial difference that prompts cycles of securitization,

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militarization, and preparation for "tribal warfare" (Watts, 2018, p. 441).

Racial enmity, thus, appears in unexpected places; yet it is not accidental. That is to say that threats to spaces of White sovereignty, such as the suburb or the Midwest farm, necessarily take on racial qualities where difference is understood to be a signifier of enmity, violence, otherness, suspicion, alienness or an absence of humanity (Mills, 2017; Moten, 2018; Sexton, 2008). In the same way that Watts's figural zombie horde represents an insurrectional form of Blackness, we suggest that the Bradford pear also represents a blackened biothreat through which White communities restage a relation of enmity toward racial otherness, albeit under the guise of fighting an ugly and promiscuous enemy. Mbembe (2019) argues that enmity sustains the drive of modern sovereignty: invaders, intruders, and infidels are an existential threat that galvanize imagined communities. Although enmity manifests as a kind "hydraulic racism" that drives large-scale state violence against racialized populations, he suggests that the society of enmity is also sustained by "nanoracism," which he defines as quotidian violence and discrimination "expressed in seemingly anodyne everyday gestures" but also "conspicuously spiteful remarks" that reflect a "dark desire to stigmatize and, in particular, to influence violence, to injure and humiliate, to sully those not considered to be one of us" (p. 58). Nanoracism tells the in-group how to perceive or make sense of signifiers of difference that, in a localized sense, organize everyday life according to us–them logics. In-group members reproduce difference-as-threat but in a symbolic order anchored where differentiating between self/Other is always already organized according to racial scripts. As scholars such as Towns (2020) suggest, the self/Other dialectic of Western society is grounded in anti-Blackness. Representations or signifiers of otherness necessarily take on the "fungible" and "figural" capacities of racial otherness to fulfill the political imperatives of enmity: to nourish White community (Hartman, 1997). Thus, tropes of anti-Blackness and nativism shift and migrate even as overt racial signifiers disappear, fulfilling the underlying desire to eradicate a terrifying object through a proxy.

We argue that the application of racial signifiers to non-racial threats fulfills the contradictory mandates of a post-racial culture: to make racial difference disappear but only to reappear as a new talisman. The new object channels the desire for enmity, without which would mean "being deprived of the kind of relation of hatred that authorizes the giving of a free rein to all sorts of otherwise forbidden desires" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 48). The Bradford pear tree is simply one among many objects that has come to stand in for race as its signifiers disappear from view in post-racial culture; thus satisfying the condition for the "proper" functioning of the White imaginary. The remainder of this article illustrates how the hatred and disgust expressed by those who despise alien or invasive species is precisely what allows rhetors to stage an encounter with racial difference without violating the rules of a post-racial society—for the psychic life of racism to continue under another name. In other words, subjects may come across a hated object—an object that rampages, disturbs, and threatens—but they do so from within a symbolic order that is the inheritance of chattel slavery, and consequently, organized by negative difference. Chebrolu (2020) argues that the distinction between overt acts of White supremacy and the more quotidian forms of anti-Blackness "is necessary for white people who are invested in the narrative of modern history as a slow march of progress to disavow that such an origin myth relies on a white supremacist logic" (p. 6). This article contributes to scholarship on post-racial discourse by illustrating how relations of racial enmity and alienizing logics are continually reinvented to sustain the myth of a post-racial society by displacing racial signifiers into discursive fields that ostensibly have nothing, and yet everything, to do with race.

Negative difference and the Bradford pear tree

Analyzing public discourse about the Bradford pear tree, we collected over one hundred examples from local and national news sources across the US, accessed mainly via Google News. The online stories represented a genre of negative takes on the "foreign invader," and ranged from 2008 to 2022, though the vast majority came from the last six years when a noticeable public backlash against the tree began to take root. Collecting these stories until we reached a point of saturation, we adopted the critical approach of racial rhetorical criticism to trace the way that signifiers of difference were hyper-racialized in this discourse. Such an approach to criticism, Flores (2016) argues, is "reflective about and engages the persistence of racial oppression, logics, voices, and bodies" and "theorizes the very production of race as rhetorical" (p. 5). Moreover, she concludes, it allows us to "better see and understand how racist arguments and assumptions circulate and attach, in both similar and disparate ways" (p. 16). Following Flores, and focusing on how race becomes a primary way of categorizing social reality, we suggest that certain argumentative strategies become apparent in discussing communal threats, mainly through tropes of alienization and otherization that reveal how racist logics are normalized in a post-racial world by hiding in the plain site of "mundane" controversies. We identify three rhetorical moves in this discourse about a pear tree: attacking difference and marking the Other through inferential racist language, expressing fears of "native" replacement and genetic impurity, and calling for the elimination of outsider threats.

Inferential racism and marking "otherness"

The backlash against Bradford pears is often built on the premise that they should not be trusted, thus animating a non-human organism with potentially malevolent intent. As environmental humanities scholar Catriona Sandilands (2022) explained, debates about invasive species often foreground the agency of plants, as they are "depicted as active and creative, making [their] own history at the expense of other species, ecologies, and relationships" (p. 40).

While the trees appear beautiful and harmless, Ashmore (2016) promised readers they would "choke on [their] morning coffee and gag on [their] scrambled eggs" if they "knew what they actually represented" (para. 1). The comforts of suburban life were threatened by an outsider. Everyone thought the tree was great, Jervis (2018) wrote, but added "they have a dark side" (para. 1). Appearing "manicured," "desirable," and even "innocent" (Skalicky, 2018, para. 1), many critics warn the flowery trees are "anything but sweet" (Bonds, 2018, para. 2) and are actually capable of great "evil" (Ashmore, 2016, para. 13). Bradford pear critics often attribute a kind of threatening intent to the leafy organism,

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revealing a larger us–them logic that captures the White imaginary.

Moving beyond "evil" as a figure of speech, critics of the Bradford pear have compared it to a monster that wreaks havoc on suburbia. Higgins (2018) noted that the tree's origins were like "a comic book supervillain who had started off good" only to cross over "to something darker" (para. 7). The tree transformed, Higgins wrote, "from thornless to spiky, limber to brittle, chaste to promiscuous, tame to feral" (para. 7). Becoming a communal threat, Higgins promised, "Generations yet to be born will come to know this tree and learn to hate it" (para. 7). The monstrification of the Bradford pear is common among its critics. Comparing the tree to Frankenstein, Rojas (2021) wrote that "like the familiar plot of science-fiction stories, the creation that seemed too good to be true was, indeed, too good to be true" (para. 12). Brought to suburbia to delight property owners, the tree had suddenly "morphed into an unstoppable villain." Such descriptive language animates the tree, but also points to the logics of some of its opponents: outsiders are savage monsters and competition from such "aliens" has violent potential.

The demonization of the Bradford pear is not always so overt, as many of the racialized attacks are more inferential. The tree, for instance, is routinely characterized as inherently weak. The trees possess "the weakest branch structure in nature," Ashmore (2016) argued, and they "seldom last more than 20 years before they bust themselves apart at the seams" (para. 4). The trees self-destruct, he wrote, due to their "crotch branch structure" that causes "pear limb structures to crack, split and bust" (para. 6). According to these naysayers, the Bradford is flawed by nature. Kiehl (2008) summarized that the tree was "brittle and unstable," falling apart when tested by any environmental stress, and would eventually "[crush] cars and sometimes people" (para. 3). Focusing on the "weak crotches" of such trees, these critics appear to be describing a pragmatic problem, but the argument functions as a way of disregarding a group as outsiders due to what is considered to be a natural inferiority.

The Bradford pear is also assailed for its smell, as critics complain of some ambiguous odor that they hate but have trouble identifying. Fragrance hierarchies have been deployed throughout history, and in colonial times worked as a kind of "olfactory racism," which Kettler (2020) has suggested was an imagined discourse of racial odor inferiority used to spread harmful ideas about the cleanliness and value of Black bodies. In this way, odors have long been used to spread disgust and fear of the Other. Such sensory politics are normalized in discourse about nature, which becomes clear in discussions about the Bradford pear. At best, critics have described the tree as having an "unpleasant fragrance" (Jervis, 2018, para. 4), though others have claimed it is "pungent," and "gets in the back of your sinuses" (Bonds, 2018, paras. 5–7). Cappiello (2019) compared the "powerful scent" to a "middle school gym locker" (para. 20). Others have suggested the smell is like filling "a bucket with rotten fruit and fish, [and leaving] it in the sun" for the day (Fitzpatrick, 2020, para. 4). Critics also say the tree smells like semen, or what Morgans (2017) called "that chlorine musk that reminds you of either narrowly dodging a pregnancy or being a 15-year-old boy" (para. 1). The race to place that smell illustrates the racialized practice of detecting a foreign body, locating it with every sense possible, and expressing disdain about space being violated. Writing about olfactory racism, Reinarz (2014) argued that in the "world of racist politics, foreigners would always stink and possess the potential to contaminate" (p. 111). Thus, the debate about the Bradford pear's smell—especially when read alongside descriptions of it as a deadly villain—reveals itself to be another place where nanoracism is practiced in talk about something as mundane as lawns and gardens.

Dangerous reproduction and fears of native replacement

Unsurprisingly, the tree that smells like sex is often regarded as a danger for its reproductive abilities. As the tree's critics argue, it was loved for the job it was imported to do—save the European pears from fire blight—but it betrayed those who planted it. Why the trees are "such a disaster," Ashmore (2016) argued, is that they were supposed to be sterile but they "cross pollinate with every other pear tree out there" (para. 7). Cursing society's inability to control the population of these trees, Ashmore remarked that they "have now proliferated exponentially across our environment" (para. 8). The shock for many critics, who sound eerily like those complaining about demographic shifts, is that the neighborhood never looks the same. Stanescu and Cummings (2017) have argued that such rhetoric about invasive species "has obvious and prominent parallels to nativist discourses used in anti-immigrant arguments," since in both cases a "construction of imagery of a beautiful homeland" is described as "threatened with utter elimination by infiltrators who have no care for the way things are" and endanger native purity with "contamination" (p. xii). At the core of these fears, Sandilands (2022) notes, is a White colonial concern about a loss of control to an "unruly species" that exceeds the economic and aesthetic purposes of cultivation (p. 35). Plants that "take up a lot of space" can be seen as "a crop, an ornamental, or a commodity" if they benefit those controlling the landscape, but when their movement into the space is of their "own weedy volition, [they become] an invasive" (p. 36). Such colonial logics are often applied, too, to the human resources that may be seen as outliving their purpose.

Critics are often aghast at the Bradford pear's visual dominance in a region. They are described as a "real menace" by some naysayers who claim that adding only a few to a neighborhood can spawn thousands ("Why Smelly Bradford," 2022). The change is obvious everywhere. As critics describe, Bradfords have quickly "done their best to invade every ecological nook and cranny," eventually moving into the "abandoned parking lot (. . .) a fallow field, roadside, railroad track or, quite frankly anyplace with more than a teaspoon of dirt" (Cappiello, 2019, para. 17). Moreover, forestry experts declare, the trees eventually reproduce to create "dense thickets and crowd out everything else" (Bradley, 2020, para. 8). The mixing with other pear trees, and the creation of dense populations, means that the Bradford pear poses other threats, according to its critics. It is overproducing, some say, meaning the "ill-conceived progeny of Bradford pear will be cursing our environment for decades or possibly centuries to come" (Ashmore, 2016, para. 3). While adding a few to the landscape might seem minor, critics argue, their spawn are dangerous. Dluzen (2020) contended, "This new iteration of trees are not as attractive and tame as their straight-laced parents. They're scruffy-looking (. . .) [and] are of all different sizes" (para. 6). The offspring are said to do "some genetic

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damage" in the long run (Bonds, 2018, para. 10), but worst of all they pose a threat to native communities portrayed as having a natural place in the ecosystem.

Representing a modern form of environmental populism, critics of the Bradford pear frequently charge that it poses a danger in replacing native biota. The trees are "obliterating our wonderful native trees from the rural landscape," Ashmore (2016) complained, as if romanticizing Indigenous flora as pure and invested with rights to the land (para. 2). The terms used by environmental experts suggest they are stuck in an us–them duality mirroring racial scripts that organize the world. Speaking of the "non-native Callery pears," one forester argued, "they're entering our forests," clarifying that the invaders are "taking up space for the native trees and shrubs" (Bradley, 2020, para. 11). While there is real scientific concern expressed here, especially because native creatures depend on native plants to survive, the language still reflects dominant racial schema. Trees from other regions are welcomed when they perform their roles and pose no threat to natives. As one horticulturalist from Harvard's Arnold Arboretum stated, "Without thinking much about it, we have globalized our environment in much the same way we have globalized our economy" (Higgins, 2018, para. 51). Using the same logic that has underwritten conservative populism in recent years, such globalization means natives ultimately get replaced by outsiders. This us–them trope constructs identity, with implied devil figures and heroes, and perpetrators portrayed as some racialized Other. The point is emphasized by those who stress that the Bradford pear tree is not only weak, smelly, and overly fertile, but also a drain on the financial system. Callery patches are said to be dense and overgrown, and filled with "nasty thorns" that "cause damage to everything from tractor tires to livestock" (Bradley, 2020, para. 9). They are portrayed as being part of a problem of invasive plants costing taxpayers "something on the order of $120 million in damages annually," proving they are not the "well-behaved citizens" that many Americans had hoped for (Cappiello, 2019, para. 15). The dangers posed by the alien tree are immense, according to this criticism, and warrants a fitting response.

Restoring purity, eliminating the outsider

There are sensible ways of talking about the harms of the Bradford pear. Some critics of the tree are more inclined to ground their arguments in the need for ecological diversity. As the ornamental Bradford was introduced because it was resistant to insects, it has repelled caterpillars and created food deserts for some avian species (Herzog, 2022). Thus, some experts suggest that the sale of Callery pear cultivars should be phased out to restore ecological balance (Culley, 2017), and states like South Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania have now made sales of the tree illegal (Blanton, 2022). Many critics go further, though, by pushing for extermination of the tree, often using rather grim language celebrating its death. Holman (2022), for instance, suggested that readers "plant a better tree on the rotting corpse" of the Bradford (para. 5), playing with the logic that the only good pear cultivar is a dead one. The ritual of identifying invaders and calling for death, we suggest, replicates racial schemas that lead to violence against racial others. As Marten (2020) argued about this impulse in debates about biodiversity, "the role of killing at times still seems to be posited as an unfortunate side effect rather than a systematic logic" (p. 50). In the calls for the Bradford's removal, we see this logic come to fruition.

The collective fantasy driving the removal of the Bradford pear has been exacerbated by community "bounty" programs. Following one of the first programs launched in Fayetteville, Arkansas, cities across the country have encouraged citizens to chop down their Callery cultivars, photograph the fallen tree, and exchange the picture to collect a native replacement (Gill, 2019). The photograph, which many refer to as "proof of death" (Johnson, 2020), or evidence of the "slain saplings" (Ryburn, 2019, para. 2), is meant to conjure the spirit of the Old West. Bounty programs are advertised on social media via "WANTED" posters, inviting citizen-deputies to strike down the Bradford wherever they see it. In one poster for a program in Franklin County, Kentucky, the local Extension Office clarified that the tree was wanted "DEAD NOT ALIVE!" (Kentucky Invasive, 2022). Other posters, like one circulated by the Clemson University Extension Office, contained a description of the tree, and in bold letters lists the "REWARD" as "FREE, healthy, native, young replacement trees" (The South Carolina, 2021). The often-excessive language is effective, as John Scott of the Urban Forestry Advisor Board noted, since such bounty programs have "gained widespread social media attention" (Ryburn, 2019, para. 4).

Underlying the imagery of the Bradford bounties, however, is an implication that those deemed as Other should be met with force if deemed a threat. As Kelly (2020) wrote, the modern adoption of symbols of the Wild West "references a generic history of justified violence" (p. 127). Even when the bounty programs operate with humor, they replicate us–them logics from this history. Advertising a bounty program in Kansas City in 2022, one nursery owner spoke to television station KSHB while dressed up as Dog the Bounty Hunter, calling attention to the "problem" of the Bradford. The business owner warned that the Bradford is invasive and takes over native lands, and complained it smells like cat urine (KC Spotlight, 2022). "We're going to do something about it," he playfully says, announcing a bounty to "take care" of them. Emphasizing the markers of the Other, the comment shows how such programs contribute to a larger rationale of necropolitics that marks some species as "deserving empathy" and even subjecthood, while those characterized as alien are "deemed disposable" (Marten, 2020, p. 54).

Such bounty programs work through fears of replacement. The harm of the Bradford pear, according to critics, is that it takes root where it does not belong. Such logic is problematic, Marten (2020) contends, because its concept of biodiversity "posits a specific moment in time and a particular ecosystem at a specific place (...) as that which belongs there and needs protection" (p. 55). That protection is driven by a mission to "replace" the invader with a "native," just as the invader started to "replace" those trees that once occupied the land. The bounties suggest that the work can only be accomplished with force. Yet the work is seen as necessary to restoring value to the landscape. As one spokesperson for a bounty program in Kentucky argued, it was an "opportunity for property owners to contribute to the health of their community by replacing an invasive tree with a native tree," which he contended in language reminiscent of gentrification, is just like "replacing a derelict building with a beautiful hotel and restaurant" (Massengill, 2022, para. 7).

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Conclusion

This article has analyzed a debate about a tree to illustrate how racist logics linger in more mundane discourses and thus further ground signifiers of difference in us–them logics. Moralizing a debate about a tree, Ashmore's (2016) popular polemic called on readers to blame themselves, and to realize their "solitary Bradford pear growing in your yard is what caused this problem," that they are ultimately to blame for "hundreds of evil progeny" (para. 10). The rhetoric against the Bradford pear asks audiences to take a stand, to defend borders for the sake of purity, and participate in the construction of outsiders as a threat.

The debate about the pear tree represents a newer case study of what some biological philosophers call the native/alien paradigm, one that many have considered to be problematic since the "messy fluidity of nature does not mesh neatly with our desire for tidy categories" (Warren, 2021, p. 4). And while those defending the paradigm warn against evaluating "alien species negatively *solely* on the basis of their non-native status because this closely parallels xenophobic racism" (p. 14), we suggest that the criticism of the Bradford pear tree often delves into that problematic logic. One reason for this, we suggest, is that the debate illustrates the tendency for the White imaginary to calcify us–them logics outside of human affairs to further justify overt racist practices in society. After all, many experts deem the effort to eradicate the Bradford pear to be impractical at this point, even though it could be better managed. Given that many native species like American elms, oaks, and maples also face predators and diseases that make their maintenance costly, some experts wonder if the Bradford pear has been unfairly attacked. As science writer Popkin (2016) wrote for *The New York Times*, "I wonder if our need for villains in our environmental narratives has gotten the better of us on this one" (para. 14). Noting that the tree still provides shade, sucks up carbon dioxide, and stops rainwater, Popkin concluded, "(...) if we're going to spend time and money righting past environmental wringers, there are far more important battles to fight" (para. 17). Professing an alternative approach to marking a species a pest and eliminating it, Sandilands (2022) summarized that it may be more important for critics to ask: "What would happen if we were to think about [such species] in terms of its *life* rather than always with an eye to its death?" (p. 46). Going further, Paredes (2022) echoed the works of various anthropologists who have supported "cosmopolitan impurity, plural interdependence, and an embrace of contaminated worlds" (p. 92), suggesting that it might be time to reclaim the pest label by embracing its power to resist. Otherwise, she reminds us, "human life comes to be subjugated by way of the subjugated animal," or in this case the subjugated plant, which means some communities are "endangered because the [pest] is so unquestionably subject to extermination" (p. 98).

Such debate in the lawn and garden pages of local news sites may not stop with an ax to a tree, as arguments about natives being replaced have moved to larger societal debates with increasing regularity, posing a real danger especially to marginalized communities. We see the harms of this form of nanoracism in ongoing populist discourses, particularly from the far right. When 18 year old Payton Gendron shot and killed 10 Black people at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, in May 2022, he claimed his actions were justified in saving the future of the White race. The incident highlighted the way that "White replacement" theory, a belief that a cabal of political actors seek to replace White voters by opening borders to immigration, had suddenly gone mainstream in the US. Journalists pounced on the story, showing how the conspiracy theory started among White supremacists, but eventually became a central talking point of Republican leaders (Montanaro, 2022). The theory has even been discussed by Fox News pundits like Tucker Carlson, who has attacked "the left and all the little gatekeepers on Twitter for going hysterical" at the mention of replacement theory (para. 19). Given Carlson's influence, White replacement theory has unsurprisingly caught on among Republican voters, with polls suggesting around half think a secret group is "trying to replace native-born Americans with immigrants who agree with their political views" (para. 33). While those like Payton Gendron may look to White supremacists or even mainstream political figures for their views on White replacement, we suggest that such an anti-Black ideology has been lurking in public discourse much longer, building in mundane conversations after such beliefs were considered antiquated.

Data availability

The data underlying this article are available in the article.

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