



Seminar

HELEN ANNE CURRY

Pro Futura Scientia Fellow, SCAS.

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*From Mandan Maize to Pioneer Hi-Bred:
'Indian Corn', Industrial Corn, and
the Spectre of Extinction*

Tuesday, 13 February, 11:15 a.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
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S W E D I S H
C O L L E G I U M
for ADVANCED STUDY

ABOUT HELEN ANNE CURRY

Helen Anne Curry holds a BA in History and Science from Harvard University and a Ph.D. in History from Yale University. After completing her doctorate in 2012, she took up the Peter Lipton Lectureship at the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge and became a Fellow and Director of Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science at Churchill College. A historian of recent science and technology, she is particularly interested in the entangled histories of modern biology and biotechnology, industrial agriculture and environmental change. Her current research considers the history of global conservation, in particular efforts made to preserve the genetic diversity of agricultural crop species through the practice of seed banking.

Curry is the author of *Evolution Made to Order: Plant Breeding and Technological Innovation in Twentieth-Century America* (University of Chicago Press, 2016) and co-editor with Nicholas Jardine, James Secord and Emma Spary of the forthcoming volume *New Cultures of Natural History* (Cambridge University Press).

During her time at SCAS, she will prepare a book manuscript, *Endangered Maize: How a Ubiquitous Crop Became a Global Conservation Concern*, which will chart the history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century efforts to collect and conserve the genetic diversity of maize in the Americas.

ABSTRACT

In the 1910s several visitors made their way to the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota to search for corn varieties grown by Native American farmers of the northwestern United States in generations past. At the time, most white farmers dismissed such varieties as “squaw corns,” a racial epithet that denigrated Native American corn and its cultivators as an unproductive, undifferentiated mass. Yet the visitors to Fort Berthold prized specific varieties of “Indian corn” along with knowledge about their cultivation, seeing these as potentially valuable for American agriculture. They further worried that both were endangered as a result of the continued disintegration of Native American communities and the onslaught of modern commercial varieties. In this paper, I chart the history of efforts made by commercial seed companies, Indian ethnographers, and government scientists to extract corn varieties and corn knowledge from Fort Berthold residents. In so doing, I reveal how the growth of industrial agriculture and the spread of industrial crop varieties (1) fostered new, albeit limited, appreciation of the diversity of prior agricultural practices and varieties and (2) set in motion collecting activities that would define the relationship between “indigenous” and “industrial” agriculture for the rest of the twentieth century.