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CONSTRUCTING TROPICAL PARADISE: THE SOUTH FLORIDA NARRATIVE THAT STUCK

> The aim of this book is to change "landscape" from a noun to a verb. It asks that we think of landscape, not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed.[1]

In his insistence on a critical reading of the field of landscape painting, W. J. T. Mitchell begins to destabilize a genre that has historically been read as harmless and truthful. Mitchell's argument in the book *Landscape and Power* lays the groundwork for a critical reading of landscape beyond the painted image. I argue that landscape itself is a cultural medium with an agenda outside of its pleasurable aesthetic. This landscape is presented to its visitors and inhabitants as an image of the state's tropical identity. It passes as natural, neutral, normal, inoffensive, nonconfrontational, and even "native."

The use of this landscape as a cultural medium goes unsuspected. Plants don't say anything, they just "are." But, in fact, they do say something. These plants in particular narrate a history of the colonization of the tropics through a spatial-temporal simulation. To analyze the construction of this landscape beyond commercial interests, this study will branch out into several areas of history and perception: from the history of shifting perspectives on wilderness, which led to the designation of the national parks, to the role of colonial expansion in the development of Western images of the tropics, which informed the landscape designs in south Florida. The landscape was designed to bolster the tourism and commodification of newly developed south Florida. The aesthetic of the landscape, as incorporated in the garden park attractions and the resorts that accommodated its tourists, cohesively disseminated the same vegetative compositions of a pan-tropic escape. The pleasurable aesthetic of these spaces quickly spread throughout the region, and soon all vestiges of the pioneer era that tropical Florida replaced was a nostalgic memory.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, south Florida's landscape was transformed from the pine and oak forests of the state's pioneer era, to the bright flowers and palm groves of tropical paradise. The landscape was constructed by developers

1. W. J. T. Mitchell, introduction to *Landscape and Power*, edited by W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1.

to create a new tourist economy in Florida, offering American northerners tropical travel within the United States. The design of the new landscape embedded the colonial rhetoric of the domestication of an untamed tropical culture. The new Florida landscape was informed by mis-representations of the torrid zone that were made by travel writers and naturalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Henry Walter Bates's etching from the travel and natural history book *The Naturalist on the River Amazons* is illustrative of those mis-representations (fig. 1). The people in the image are portrayed very small so as to render the plants and the jungle massive. The humans are given the same amount of detail, if not less, than the foliage, to establish that they are but a part of the jungle, as they blend into the vegetation. Etching and lithographic processes like this were preferred over photographic representations, even after the technology was available, for their ability to manipulate the scene, incorporating plants that wouldn't have existed in those regions, and pushing elements together to compose a compelling vista. The inhabitants depicted in these prints were as interchangeable as the foliage, as physical traits of people from one geographic region were portrayed in completely different landscapes.

This transition marked the death of the frontier fantasy in Florida, and the birth of a fantasy of the state as a pan-tropic Eden. The frontier fantasy was formed around the found landscape. The myth of the frontier was built of colonial rhetoric: the illusion of free land, the civilian militarization of armed occupation, and the desire to get back to nature while stepping away from modernity. Like similar, and larger, migrations to the western United States, Northerners came to Florida in search of "free land," and the fantasy of freedom from civilization and rugged individualism that came with it. After the formal occupation of Florida by the United States government in 1821, an influx of migrants came to establish agricultural settlements. They predominantly came from the neighboring states, but also as far as the country's northmost regions. The new frontier settlers raised cattle and hogs, and some grew crops, especially corn. A group known as "crackers"[2] was identified among these settlers. Crackers were known for their transience, creating settlements on whatever land their travels led them to. Squatting on the land they currently occupied, they were not a part

2. The term "crackers" later came to represent the white, native-born Floridians who did not support the new culture of tropical tourism that was being developed in south Florida.

of the frontier fantasy, which was ingrained in the value of land-ownership. It was Florida's next wave of settlers that established the frontier fantasy in the state. In the Armed Occupation Act of 1842, the U.S. government offered free land to any white men who could establish settlements in Florida. Each man received weapons, food, and 160 acres of land. The act came at the end of the Seminole War, which had deterred homesteaders from settling in Florida up until that point.[3] Soon after this migration, the frontier fantasy was thought to be dead, as the last parcels of (what pioneer settlers considered to be) free land in the United States began to disappear. In less than a century, all vestiges of this era would disappear in Florida, replaced by the tropical paradise fantasy established by a new wave of northern migrants.

These transformations were first enacted in the landscape of resorts, as sites of domestication and leisure. Landscape architects like Frank Button carefully constructed tropical landscapes that clustered small areas of calculated chaos, surrounded by well-trimmed lawns. In addition to designing the Miami Biltmore Hotel's interior and exterior gardens, Button designed the landscape for the entire community of Coral Gables when the city was originally established in 1925. Each home and yard were given an independent design, but were connected by the ethos of the domesticated tropics. Each yard featured a few of the expansive variety of palms found throughout the community, almost all newly naturalized to the Florida landscape, which had previously boasted thirteen species. Densely planted beds of colorful shrubs surrounded each of the palms, and all were surrounded by a manicured lawn (fig. 2). This equation was repeated in each yard, with varying densities, variations of palm and shrub species, and the addition of tropical fruit trees or bamboo to contribute to the diversity of flora, color, and texture. This formula continued to spread beyond the borders of Coral Gables, and eventually extended throughout all of south Florida.

As the tropical theme was disseminated throughout south Florida, it was first inserted into the already present fantasy of Florida as a rugged frontier, a theme in many ways at odds with the tropical fantasy—the refusal of modernity versus the domestication of wild nature. To incorporate the new tropical identity into the former frontier, a hybrid of both aesthetics was created. Sites of

3. James W. Covington, "The Armed Occupation Act of 1842," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (1961): 41–52.

Figure 1: Henry Walter Bates, "Interior of Primaeval Forest," *The Naturalist on the River Amazons,* 1863; etching.

Figure 2: Packer Residence in Coral Gables, photographed 1925 by William A. Fishbaugh. Collection of HistoryMiami Archives and Research Center.

domestication were buffered by unruly wilderness, incorporating the new message of the tropics and the old message of the pioneer lifestyle. This in turn gave visitors glimpses of "untouched" nature before returning them to the comfort of the familiar landscape of capitalism: billboards, roadside vendors, and accommodations, each of these offerings referring back to the experience of the wild landscape, either as souvenir or simulation. In a 1939 book financed by the Works Projects Administration, an unknown author describes the early pioneers' transition into the economic landscape of tourism as seen through Florida's roadside economy:

> ...carved coconuts, polished conch shells, marine birds made of wood or plaster, cypress "knees" pottery, bouquets made of tinted sea shells or dyed sea oats. And an endless assortment of other native and imported handicraft...but, to maintain the contrast, long stretches of uninhabited pine woods intervene with warning signs, "Open Range—Beware of Cows and Hogs."[4]

The psychological state of the tropical land of leisure was introduced to Florida, and the pioneer's way of life was slowly pushed aside. The appeal of the former homestead culture lied in its connection to labor. By the end of the pioneer era, in the late nineteenth century, that way of life was already nostalgic for much of the country. The new developments in Florida produced a radical shift away from the lifestyle the pioneer sought in the state. Members of the lingering settler culture tried to find their way into the new capitalist culture by making craft goods. This effort was unsuccessful as an unalienated form of labor, because the material goods that were created were souvenirs of a simulated landscape built to fortify a capitalist fantasy.

The preserved pine from the excerpt operates as a sign of the projected identity of Florida as a wild and uninhabited frontier, creating temporal distance from the pioneer era. The pine tree represents a nature untouched by civilization. The images that construct the frontier fantasy in Florida are dependent on the pine. It's the pine tree that the settler chops down with the axe; it is the pine tree that is used to construct the log cabin.[5] When clearing the land for the city of Coral Gables, Frank Button and Coral Gables developer and proprietor George Merrick retained small hammocks

4. Federal Writers' Project. *The WPA Guide to Florida: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s Florida*, written and compiled by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Florida (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 5.

5. Pine trees are the state's most common tree, even today, after a century of tropical landscaping.

of the original pine. For Coral Gables, and all of south Florida, the preserved hammocks offer a nostalgic reminder of the pioneer past—a fantasy itself made up entirely of nostalgia—and exoticized Florida's own history, along with those locations appropriated through the vegetation.

Prospective developers moving to the state at the turn of the century saw the palmetto palms that dotted the pine forests as a symbol of the tropics and Florida's tropical potential, and expanded the symbol's impact by adding diversity and variation to Florida's palm populations. Palm trees became a state obsession. While only fifteen palm species are known as native to the state, by the 1930s over one hundred species had been added, according to the *WPA Guide to Florida*.[6] Travel writers and naturalists had previously framed the palm tree as an iconographic symbol of the tropics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Katherine Manthorne depicts the palm's construction as a sign: "Traversing the continent, travelers saw countless palm varieties—many which lacked species names—and therefore held them in their minds synonymous with the tropics. The stately palm became a *genius loci* of these southern regions; its nearly ubiquitous presence in the painted and verbal imagery indicated transport to the torrid zone."[7] By increasing the diversity of palm species in Florida, developers re-created the mythos of the fruitful variation of the tropics.

To promote the new landscapes being constructed across the region, advertisements were circulated in northern newspapers and mailers (fig. 3). The 1930s State Department of Agriculture produced an advertisement depicting the lawn of a resort, foregrounding the state's psychological export: a domesticated version of the tropics, first, and the state's most marketed commodity, oranges, second. To establish the domestication of Florida's wild landscape, the "Know Florida" image depicts a perfect balance between unbridled wilderness and cultivated terrain. The forced perspective draws the focus to the information in the distance: an unkempt forest that surrounds the resort, framing the leisure space and bisecting it from the agricultural space of the orange grove. Seen next to the well-manicured lawn of the resort space, the forest wall is presented as an immersive presence of south Florida's savage nature, but contained to the perimeter for the visitor to enjoy safely in the distance. The unkempt forest

simultaneously creates a view of the savage nature of Florida and acts as a lush barricade protecting the visitors from unwanted intrusions, where the foliage performs the role of wall.

For tourists visiting a resort like the one depicted in this brochure in the era the advertisement was created, the 1930s, the forest wall would have been more of a representation of a fearful and savage wilderness than the actual presence of such. By the turn of the century, cultural perspectives of wilderness had undergone a shift. In previous eras, wilderness was perceived as wasteland, savage, the realm of Satan, where Moses was lost and Jesus was tested, or more generally sites to be feared. In the new era, wilderness was sanctified; it was bestowed with grace and fragility, and understood as a site in need of protection from civilization. By the turn of the twentieth century, fearful representations of nature were nostalgic, and while the forest wall surrounding the resort in the advertisement is actually a forest wall, preserved while the rest of the grounds were cleared and developed, its purpose is for entertainment.

The first move toward sanctification of the wilderness came in the eighteenth century, when wilderness was imbued with qualities of the sublime. But the sublime is not devoid of fear. For Immanuel Kant, overwhelming landscapes that mix pleasure and fear trigger the sublime. The landscapes that most evoked the sublime were often the most treacherous. The awe was earned in the fear one experienced while braving such a landscape. Kant believed the sublime was the feeling of absolute freedom that one experienced in awesome landscapes. This perspective on wilderness gave way to the frontier narrative. In the American wilderness, the United States constructed its national identity. The myth of free land and an opportunity to shed civilization and start a more primitive life became the ideal American experience. As the country's development progressed, the free land that established America's national identity vanished, and the impetus to preserve some of the free land was born. Wild landscapes were preserved as national monuments, but also as sites of entertainment. By the nineteenth century, the feelings of fear, the sublime, and the absolute freedom infused in the wilderness landscape had given way to a more sentimental observation. As more tourists set out for the wilderness,

6. Federal Writers' Project. *The WPA Guide to Florida: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s Florida*, written and compiled by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Florida (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 22.

7. Katherine Manthorne, "The Quest for a Tropical Paradise: Palm Tree as Fact and Symbol in Latin American Landscape Imagery, 1850–1875," *Art Journal* 44.4 (Winter 1984), 374–382.

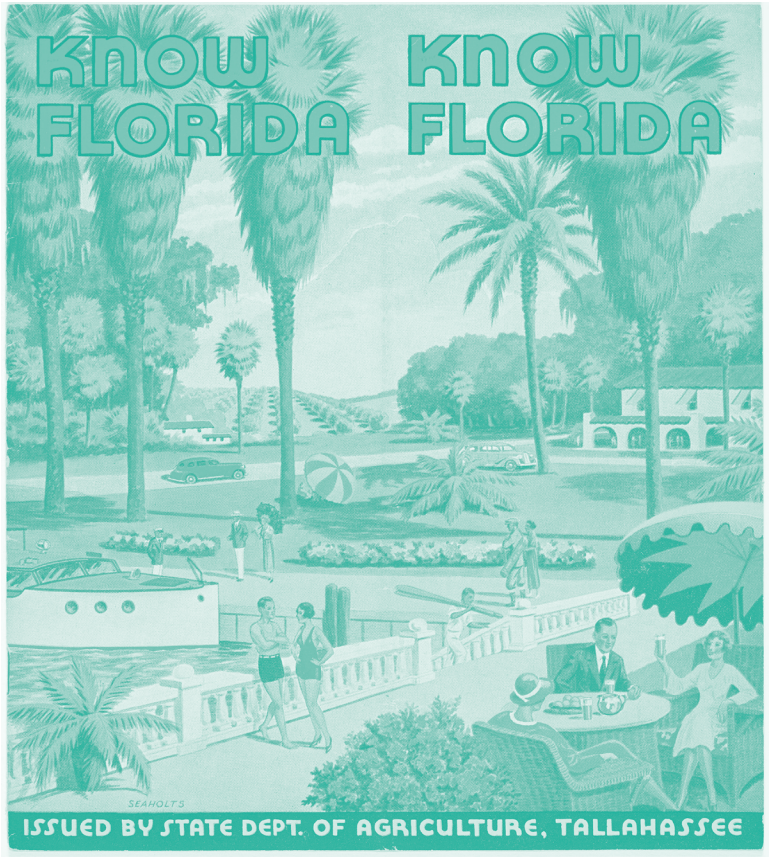

Figure 3: Seaholts, *Know Florida*, 1930s, Florida State Department of Agriculture. Collection of Wolfsonian–Florida International University.

the landscape became more accessible and domesticated. Fear gave way to the souvenir, and as the great outdoors stepped into capitalism, it became merely a site for amusement.

Through the nature of its pleasurable aesthetics, Florida's tropical simulations show no signs of stopping. It replicates itself perfectly, and most perfectly in residential landscapes. The aesthetic and vegetative myth is consumed and reproduced, over and over again. Domestic landscape architects of the region know no other version of the state. In a promotion for a south Florida landscape architect (fig. 4), Australian foxtail and Chinese fan palms line the garden's edge, bright red Hawaiian ti plants grow on top of a South American selloum, and the bushy Brazilian xanadu fills out all of the undergrowth. All of these surround the perfectly manicured lawn. Hemmed in by the immersive presence of the thick tropical vegetation, the lawn becomes the site of Western domestication of the tropics, and a safe reprieve from the visual stimulation and implied danger of the thick brush and dark crevices of the jungle. The backyard is authenticated as "tropical" through this excess of its re-creation. Over time, the cultural associations of those compositions have been transformed to read as the genius loci of Florida.

The backyard perfectly reproduces the formula first produced by the Miami Biltmore Hotel. As the convention is repeated, the landscapes of Henry Walter Bates's etchings advance toward a reality, through the quantity of the strategically composed vistas. Together the endless sequence of the tropical backyards mirror his collection of landscapes published in the book of his travels. The yard comes at the end of a lineage of colonialist landscape production, whether in representation or reproduction, that is so far removed from its original context that it is hard to recognize the landscape's implicit power. Each depiction of plant life within the resort from the advertisement reinforces the psychological and atmospheric conditions being sold, the domesticated form of a dangerous tropics. Sculpting the chaos of Bates's Amazonian jungle into an orderly scene, the lawn's every position offers a perfectly composed vista. Brightly colored flowers surround walking paths in perfectly symmetrical clusters. Each color rotates in its order, offering a hint of the exotic that is immediately tamed into the submission of a pattern. Monumental palm trees dominate the composition and dwarf the resort guests. Wandering in a contour along

Figure 4: South Florida backyard landscape design, Sanibel/Captiva R. S. Walsh Landscaping, Inc.

the drive, the palms offer just a hint of "wild" with their slightly unkempt shag of dried and dead frond. In a show of power over the barbarian palm, the wicker dining set that seats a group of visitors weaves the shaggy palm detritus into a perfectly structured grid. All are surrounded by the closely shaved sprawl of the great lawn, which allows for panoptic views from any position within the resort grounds. Visitors can sip their juice in the shade and enjoy the power of their view. Where the Amazonian people of Bates's etching were relegated to the landscape as nonhuman elements that add exotic character to the jungle, the subjects of "Know Florida" are featured prominently, bright, shiny, and white. The humans are presented as props, demonstrating how the landscape is used, in images imagined by white, Western illustrators that dictated those locations' narratives. The relationship between the viewer and the human props in each image differs. In the "Know Florida" advertisement, the viewer is meant to identify with the resort guests; in the Bates print, the human subjects are anthropological specimens from a time long ago and a place far away, demonstrating white European and American superiority. "Know Florida" portrays the future of Bates's colonial dreams, and that landscape fantasy continues to reinforce its survival as it is subsequently repeated in one backyard after another. The pan-tropic aesthetic that was first brought to Florida by landscape architects and developers like the Biltmore's George Merrick and Frank Button, informed by fictional representations of the tropical South, spread throughout the region to create a new tropic, a singular location that encompasses the entirety of a region that spans the globe. South Florida became a domesticated form and hybrid of all these disparate regions.