

Mythic Operations

Myth has had an extensive role in the historical reception, alteration and abstraction of place. The explorer, colonizer, and speculator have long utilized myth as part of their repertoire, affecting the future of the lands they chose to inhabit, with image and story.

Katherine Harvey
Woodbury University

The transference of myth upon any territory has simultaneously acted to define and deny existing realities and their physical and perceived character, embedding new ways of reading existing and altered terrains. As Gregory Bateson pointed out it was with “conscious purpose” that such territories were transformed,¹ a process of reducing the perceived complexity of native lands has historically taken place in order to alter and modify the landscape for the purpose of occupation.¹ Myth as an operation has had a vital role in parsing such perceptions. While myth has often widened the disparity between fabricated experience and the actual one in many problematic ways, it also holds the potential to aid in reinventing, re-conceptualizing and modifying the perception of place as an advantageous tactic.

FLORIDA AND MYTH

Florida has had a long relationship with myth as an agent of physical and perceptual manipulation. A trajectory of myth-making in Florida can be identified throughout its history: beginning with early European explorers and their predisposition to identify the emblematic paradise of Eden, to a 19th Century elite leisure class, an auto-touring generation, and finally to a contemporary condition of privatized paradise. This trajectory exhibits early projections of pre-established histories and aspirations upon the discovered landscape. These projections evolved and were activated as the landscape was more widely viewed and experienced. What were once situated elements of the landscape in its natural springs, lush forests and abundant wildlife were increasingly extracted, simulated, and fragmented allowing myth to adapt to more fleeting desires and contemporary measures of convenience.

An exceptional environment made Florida vulnerable to such operational modes. A native terrain that could be both benevolent and intractable, it was inevitable that taming this wild land would appear a promising exploit borne



1

out of optimistic aspirations for the future. The early northern colonies paled in comparison to the lush, wet, and florid subtropical landscape of Florida. The pragmatism in settlement brought to other parts of North America was infused with a psychology of exceptionalism, where the ingredients of climate, abundance, and the liberation of a frontier created a permissive proving ground for multiple iterations of paradise. Such experiments would require an ambitious deployment of labor and resources and lead to unanticipated transformations. The operative use of myth would promote the allure, the entitlement to, and the modification of the landscape. Such mythic operations would increasingly justify the transformation of the native terrain while further extracting and separating the constructed paradise from what would become fragments of the original landscape.²(Figure 1)

The result is a contemporary Florida that is a complex construction of remnant landscapes, reinvented terrains, and imported occupational regimes. These resultant territories relied on the use of mythic operations to cultivate, humanize, and ultimately propagandize paradise. The contemporary condition of the myth-operated landscape is a collection of remnant habitats, swaths of commercial homogeneity, and parcels of privatized paradises. While structurally much of North America might appear similar in these terms - a dispersed sprawl. Florida presents significantly different questions from the post-industrial city or the typical bedroom suburb. It is also vulnerable to very specific problems as it heads into the future. Part of Florida's exceptionalism is its existence on a dynamic low-lying terrain. A fluid and fragile hydrology and geology present problems in maintaining segregation between wastewater, stormwater, sea water and fresh water. Tropical storms and hurricanes further complicate scenarios for maintaining a balance in what has become a tangled matrix of fragmented natural systems and disjointed development trajectories.

Sanford Kwinter has pointed out that we've created a vicious cycle where the exploitation of the environment supports the appearance of balance, when this balance becomes vulnerable, our solution is more exploitation.³ Mythic

Figure 1: Women viewing Payne's Prairie, off I-75, Gainesville Region. Photo by Hackett, 1975, State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

operations have evolved our relationship with our environment, yet they are a thin buffer that constantly needs new resources and transformations to remain opaque. In Florida this perpetuates an ecological crisis that consistently re-surfaces as a reminder of this fragile balance. Here mythic operations have created a deterioration of the native terrain in exchange for supplying and perpetuating a paradise that is both dysfunctional and destructive.

While myth's manipulations have imposed a problematic transformation, its tactical potential should not be denied. Perhaps instead of expunging myth it might be useful to reappropriate it. Early renderings of the Florida landscape as full of supernatural opportunity have evolved over time and remained, even in their diluted formations. These optimistic fixations about the landscape which inspired the various operations of extraction, simulation, and fragmentation, may actually present contemporary solutions with a set of tools for reversal. It is possible that this patchwork of paradise, infrastructure, and ecological function could be repaired through the reengineering of mythic operations. Myth denies fixity, staleness, and inertia, and it could present an exuberance, which if appropriately implemented could create a new structure of resilience.

SUPERNATURAL WATERS

One of the earliest myths to shape Florida was the Fountain of Youth. Emerging from ongoing myths within both native and colonial populations, the desire for longevity was manifested in the supernatural properties attributed to Florida's natural springs. Northeast Florida, where early European explorers first settled, with its unique hydro-geological structure provides for over fifty freshwater springs. Here freshwater rises from deep within the limestone layers creating the characteristically crystal clear pools. These pools were prime elements in the native terrain for the formulation of myth in the history of development of Florida. The trajectory of their appearance in the Floridian imagination traces an arc of manipulation and hope, one that today includes amusement parks, retirement communities, and new age attributions to rejuvenation.

In the Victorian era the springs were treated as a picturesque element of the landscape. To be viewed as a spectacle rather than inhabited. The springs themselves were reached by river steamboats which navigated the murky, dank, and densely vegetated swamps, before arriving at limpid water ways that led into the springs. Described as nearly indistinguishable from the atmosphere, these crystal springs were seen as a phenomenal wonder, particularly in lieu of the frightful journey that preceded the arrival.⁴ Here the operation of extracting the wonder from the less desirable elements of the native terrain was initiated. (Figure 2)

In 20th century iterations, the springs were exploited for much more immersive amusements, in the form of glass bottom boat rides, acrobatic spectacles, underwater film-making and other recreational pursuits. The areas around the springs were more specifically developed and designed, tailored to a new generation of myth seekers.

The contemporary power of the springs is evident in a recent development in Fort Myers. Pyramid Village reveals the spring's associations with sensuousness and the supernatural. Here the natural spring has warranted replication



2

in a spring fed artificial lake, complete with sandy beach front. The architecture takes on a crystalline form; pyramidal chalets are placed to draw new age energy from the lake according to the promotional literature.⁵ Such claims of “wellness” have a direct lineage with the fountain of youth, proclaiming a supernatural energy emanating from the source of the native hydrology. The aspirations of this particular development aspire to an immersive landscape experience, where the natural and manufactured can be conflated. Pyramid Village prescribes special value to what has otherwise been treated as a landscape to be bounded, circumnavigated, and cul-de-saced. Yet the resource and energy of the spring remains significantly filtered through prototypical modes of development. Occupying a typical suburban tract, aligned with the trajectories of sprawl, the development obeys the rules of real estate more evidently than the rules of hydrology. (Figure 3)

Today the springs represent an essential character in a struggle to redefine Florida’s use of mythic operations. The springs and their connective geology represent a sensitive metric for Floridian ecology. The permeability of this terrain presents clear challenges for Florida and its vast subsurface freshwater resources. Each deviation in agricultural and industrial practice that allows any leakage will find its way to this fluid underworld. Compromising a precious aquifer and what is a precious and little discovered ecology.⁶ Florida’s combination of karst geology and topographical relationship to sea level makes the terrain particularly susceptible in a time of climate change. With the rise in sea levels the potential for salt water intrusion and pressure on freshwater resources is seemingly inevitable. On the other hand, if the aquifer continues to be drained and redistributed, this will threaten the brittle karst geology and accelerate the occurrence of sinkholes, as has already been seen. These catastrophic possibilities are markers of the future of Florida, one where arrogance in the face of sensitive environmental conditions will swallow the land or succumb to the deluge.

Yet in the face of all this fragility, where mythic perception has allowed for environmental ignorance, there is something in the combination of scientific frontier, recreational territory, and nostalgic amusement that could resurrect

Figure 2: Silver Glen Springs, photo by author, 2008.



3

the springs and their connected system of water and limestone. As portals to a vast underworld of limestone caverns and passageways, today the springs are explored by adventurous divers and superficially appreciated by remnant tourism. A recent feature on Weeki Wachee springs in the *New York Times* magazine, where daily mermaid performances are presented in an underwater theater, revealed an optimistic narrative of state and municipal cooperation in preserving this ecological and cultural landmark. The reappropriation of mythic operations for preservation and reinvention have proven quite essential in this example. It is an optimistic marker that the continued use of the springs is for their early mythical purpose, in the presentation of the mermaids, while simultaneously engaging a sensitivity to the native terrain. Here a narrative of rural female empowerment engages with the conservation of a fragile landscape in an unexpected way, only possible through the use of mythic operations.⁷

PRIVATIZED PARADISE

Another landscape image that has been simultaneously drawn from the native terrain and formulated by myth has been that of the subtropical paradise. The most obvious way that this was propelled was by the native climate and vegetation. While the summer heat and humidity were to be contended with, as a winter destination Florida has easily been promoted as a snowbird's playground. The myth of a paradisiacal garden gave purpose to the transformation of the vast impenetrable landscape of swamp and marsh. Even in the naturalist John Muir's estimation this place was simultaneously covetous and frustrating.

A new, canelike grass or big lily, or gorgeous flower belonging to tree or vine, would catch my attention and I would throw down my bag and press and splash through the coffee-brown water for specimens. . . Oftentimes I was tangled in a labyrinth of armed vines like a fly in a spider-web. At all times, whether wading or climbing a tree for specimens of fruit, I was overwhelmed with the vastness and unapproachableness of the great guarded sea of sunny plants. . .⁸

Figure 3: Sink hole, Winte Park, FL, 1981 .
State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

The ultimate extraction of desirable attributes from this landscape would be possible and in fact enhanced by importing other elements for the cultivation and creation of individual paradises. Attaining and taming the swamp and marsh would come to fruition at the hand of multiple visions. In some cases small patches of swamp would be cleared for the cultivation of a personal paradise in others large swaths of land would succumb to the homogenous denaturing by a singular ego or body. Increasingly the contemporary condition of Florida reveals the use of mythic operations to distinguish the native terrain from a more desirable, invented, and privatized paradise.

Initially in the early 20th century, Florida still allowed for the formulation of a paradise situated within the native terrain. As a frontier territory it was open to the possibility of certain liberal freedoms and social experiments. Not far from Pyramid Village a communal utopia staked out a portion of the scrublands on the Estero River. The main founding principle of the Koreshans was the idea of cellular cosmology or the idea of the hollow earth and that we all lived on the inside of a hollow sphere. Marked by scientific inquisitiveness and egalitarian social beliefs, the Koreshans created the self-sufficient community of "New Jerusalem". The Koreshan's leader Cyrus Teed's ambitions for the "New Jerusalem" were not minor, promoting the settlement in the image of "a thousand world's fair cities". Their accomplishments in clearing the saw palmetto and oak scrub landscape were similarly ambitious. Dredging and diverting the Estero River, irrigating the land, cultivating agriculture and building a power station. This early commune civilized the scrub and swamp.⁹ (Figure 4)

The Koreshan community was short lived but would be a lasting precedent for development in Florida, revealing all that could be accomplished in the taming of the native landscape into a more idealized occupiable and social environment. The Koreshan's relied on mythic operations to invent and curate their Florida garden paradise. Yet they also engaged the developing Florida around them, providing power for later settlements in the Fort Myers area. In their waning years they adapted the commune's mission and owned a general store, curio shop and trailer court, on the Tamiami Trail until the late 1940's. While their efforts to stake their claim on paradise were significant they did not segregate their commune from the outside economic and social movements around them. This would inevitably occur as such cultivated paradises became increasingly privatized scenarios.

The next phase of Floridian utopianism would see more ambitious renderings of "world's fair cities". The scale of Disney's coup on the Floridian land acquisition reached forty square miles. In Disney's case myth recreated the entire environment, reducing as much as possible any connection to the native terrain which was to be bounded, sculpted, climate-controlled and then scripted for an omnipotent orchestration of experience. Other large parcels of monocultural development such as the age-restricted retirement community of the Villages similarly challenged the need to maintain any reverence for the native terrain. Here on a 5.6 square mile tract a privately controlled community development district dictates not only the age of the residents but how they can landscape, stylize, and modify their homes. The results are unsurprisingly bland and as inoffensive as possible. The residential neighborhoods are punctuated by "traditional town squares", where a series of thematized commercial zones, feature familiar franchises with names such as Spanish Springs, the



4

Paddock square, and Market Square. This is all complimented by eleven golf courses and secured by perimeter gates, making it entirely unnecessary to embark on a journey to the outside world. Here myth has become penal and the paradise has been bounded and enclosed.

These modern day developments rely on exclusion and fabrication as the contemporary modes of mythic operation. The Villages ultimately preys on a generation increasingly excluded from societal integration with sentimentality and then reinforces this segregation. Such developments are regulatory islands, subject to the hegemonic rules of their visionaries. The space outside the gates becomes leftover, remnant, and in-between, impossible to connect and pertaining to isolated logics. The deterioration outside the gates is only heightened by the consumption within. Lars Lerup defined these zones of Houston as the stim, the suspended space of luxury and fantasy.¹⁰ Seemingly floating and detached from specific location, which becomes irrelevant. These spaces epitomize the mythic operation of enclosing where the idealized version is cultivated within a bound scenario at the sacrifice of the native terrain, which is further frayed by a shadowy simulation which it inspired. It is a perversion of reality, one that needs a foil to be supported and perpetuated.

FRAGMENTED TERRAIN

The foil to the privatized paradise is a dulling connective infrastructure, supporting the expectations of convenient travel, consumption, and access. Threading its way through the leftover territory where eight lane roads feed into strips of commercial homogeneity, this is the back-stage of paradise. This is the zone which supplies the resources and conveniences that support the myth: from labor to produce, gasoline to seafood, water pumps to waste management. Here the idea of "sprawl" and its inescapable development becomes evident. Yet a resultant concentration also exists here, beyond the role as economic supplier and facilitator, this landscape channels all ecological capacity.

Figure 4: Painting of the plan for "The New Jerusalem" on display in Art Hall at Koreshan State Historic Park, Estero, FL. State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.



5

Existing in both private and public domains these patches of the preserved native terrain: the remnant forest, marsh or scrubland, inform the ecologist of the environmental past. It is also here that the once fluent landscape stutters, the waters that once spread freely across the terrain are now directed into pathways of convenience, avoiding catastrophe by concentrating the dynamic into the engineered solution. What once existed of Florida's original biodiversity is concentrated into small patches and has been joined by a multitude of invasive and exotic plants and animals. From Asian ducks to Amazonian snakes, the playground which once featured wrestling alligators has exploded and now supports all manner of wildlife invasion.

As the backstage, this space does not play a leading role in the narrative of any myth and yet it may be the space with the most potential to resurrect the mythic operations for a more progressive purpose: the last frontier where all other zones are occupied, degraded, and gated. This fragmented terrain could be the seeding sites for a different future, one turned toward conservation and growth of resources, scientific strategy, and ecological performance. The fragments of the back stage have the potential to support watershed management, carbon sequestration, and air quality improvement. The infrastructure of convenience which holds together the back stage is connective, even in its dysfunction, and it can begin to tie the fragments together. This tenuous network of the backstage if properly considered and invested in, could have incredible potential to initiate the transformation of current modes of development. Changes in economic and planning policy would need to reward the growth and foregrounding of the fragmented terrain inverting the perception of the "leftover". This strategic reversal of mythic operations would not be so foreign to the Floridian psychology.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on the motivational aspects of mythic operations, a strategic realignment of its tactics could be promoted to intercept the cycle of exploitative land use and consumptive buffering. While the fragmented terrain cannot be fully

Figure 5: Aerial view of the Magic Kingdom, Orlando, FL. Showing a forest fragment surrounded by the expansive parking lot, taken 1971 the year Disney World opened. State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

ENDNOTES

1. Gregory Bateson, "Conscious Purpose versus Nature", *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, edition 2000), 432-445. In Bateson's lecture, it is the human tendency to reduce complexity whether it is "an oak woodland or an organism". In this way he says, interpretation and a selective editing of the situation for human purposes takes place before the act of transformation.

2. T.D. Allman, *Finding Florida: The True History of the Sunshine State*, (Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 2013)
3. Sanford Kwinter, "Notes on the Third Ecology", in *Ecological Urbanism*, ed. by Moshen Mostafavi et al, (Lars Muller Publishers, 2010) 94. "For if there is an ecological crisis at hand, it is one that as much concerns the deterioration and deformation of human experience (and the infinite improvisations that make up its history) as it does that of the physical habitat on which we rely to provide the overabundant wealth we too often use to hide from ourselves this uncomfortable fact."
4. Margot Ammidown, "Edens, Underworlds, and Shrines: Florida's Small Tourist Attractions", *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, Vol. 23, Florida Theme Issue, (Florida International University Board of Trustees, 1998), 241.
5. Taken from the promotional language on the Pyramid Village Park webpage, July 2013: www.pyramidvillagepark.com. "With the right arrangement of the buildings around the bowl formed lake which is in its capacity of capturing the natural omega waves, the water in this bowl special is given a quality and characteristic. In combination with Alpha and Omega waves the inhabitants may really relax and have a special well being. Their own body biofeedback is going to increase."
6. David Owen, "Notes from Underground", *The New Yorker*, March 18, 2013, 39. "Among the marvels they've encountered are buried coral reefs, ancient fossils, and cathedral-like "rooms" . . . they've also seen life forms that don't exist on the surface including a blind, translucent lobster-shaped mini-crustacean called a cave crayfish".
7. Virginia Sole-Smith, "The Last Mermaid Show", *New York Times Magazine*, July 7, 2013, 24-29.
8. Jack C. Lane and Maurice Sullivan, *The Florida Reader*, (Pineapple Press, 1991), 132.
9. Landing, James E., "Cyrus Reed Teed and the Koreshan Unity", in *America's Communal Utopias*, ed. Pitzer, Donald E., (University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 259. Accounts from a visitor describe the idealized Floridian landscape that the Koreshans had managed to cultivate. "This ravine . . . is crossed by several artistic foot-bridges made of bamboo and other woods. Almost every kind of tropical fruit possible to grow in Florida can be found in this delightful garden, flowering vines cover the verandas of the houses and the foot-bridges in the park."
10. Lerup, Lars, "Stim and Dross: Rethinking the Metropolis", *Assemblage*, no. 25, (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1994). The stim as described by Lerup: "in these enclaves or stims, time is kept at bay, suspension is the rule, levitation the desire, be it the office, the house, the restaurant, the museum or the ever-marauding suburban." The foil then becomes the dross or debris - "the ignored, undervalued, unfortunate economic residue of the metropolitan machine."
11. Lars Lerup, "Among Suburban Abecedaria", in *Fast-Forward Urbanism: Rethinking Architecture's Engagement with the City*, ed. by Dana Cuff et al, (Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), 94-103. "What will happen to the dwellers when builders begin to slowly convert their construction processes from the most "rational" to the greenest? Will they change their lifestyle and turn from consumption to husbandry? Will Jefferson and Thoreau return to walk among us again? Will the shapes and 'scapes become one? . . . This insistent demand for integration will force each alphabetic trope in the abecedarium to abandon its introversion -its autonomy- and to radically lose its own horizon so as to act collectively . . ."

restored or reconnected it can be re-figured and foregrounded. A set of new operations which evoke preservation, reinvention, and alternative occupational modes could find momentum in the contemporary situation.

While nostalgia is often problematic in such forms as the Villages, where the "small town" is imposed within the vapid confines of development, when it is repurposed in concert with preservation it can offer some value for shifting perception. "Old Florida" still has a place in the contemporary terrain. While not environmentally or politically correct, the "Old Florida" of landscape amusements, spectacles, and frontier adventure proffers a situatedness within the landscape. As at Weeki Wachee, it is no longer important that the fantastical undertaking of an underwater theater has disturbed the springs; their history of coexistence now allows a continued attention toward the springs and a subculture of mermaids which flourishes. This form of preservation should not be overlooked but encouraged as a source of identity that ties human occupation with the landscape.

Another useful operation for myth will be reinvention. With a population that expediently moves through the fragmented terrain, moving from turf grass lawn to turf grass putting green. The possibility exists to dissolve this monoculture and reintroduce native diversity that blurs the confines of the privatized paradise and the fragmented terrain. This suggests a blending of these segregated modes through an investment native regimes thriving in the fragments. These could be strategically introduced to the privatized paradise where moments of fluidity and wildlife migration are invited in. This need not be a totalizing but instead a stitching which unlocks the current system of barriers, exclusion, and invisible boundaries. It suggests a new porosity is imposed on the enclave and that ecological engineering is overlaid onto the privatized paradise.¹¹

Lastly the potential for alternative occupations to repopulate the native terrain exists, breaking with the consistency and redundancy of the franchise. The Koreshans' earlier hybridization of their enclave to accommodate new touristic consumers suggests that economic and policy operations could stitch micro-economies into the preexistent fabric, eroding lines of privatization. It is unrealistic to think that the possibility of myth lies in beige stucco, myth instead should be energized by policies which engender non-conformity and varied opportunity. This would be a reclaiming of the exceptionalism that initially brought so much appeal to the early ideations of Florida.

A new regime of mythic operations should be seen as innately hopeful, it will not solve all the intricacies of the environment but it could begin to reformulate perceptions, refocus the typical Floridian's view toward the true attributes of a subtropical paradise with ecological implications. With these subtle maneuvers new collectivism could come into being, where it is not just the individual unit of paradise that is recognizable, but a larger, more inclusive view of paradise that is not static but evolving, resilient, and progressively reformulating.