



Liquid landscape: geography and settlement at the edge of Early America

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BOOK REVIEW

Liquid landscape: geography and settlement at the edge of Early America, by Michele Currie Navakas, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, 235 pp., \$49.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9780812249569, \$49.95 (ebook), ISBN 9780812294422

When I recently ran a field trip to Florida, my co-instructor asked me some basic questions about Florida's early history and I realized that I knew almost nothing that happened in my home state prior to the twentieth century. Which is why I was surprised, upon picking up the very excellent *Liquid Landscape*, to discover that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Florida was a literary object of fascination for both the British and the newly independent Americans.

In *Liquid Landscape*, Navakas traces the literary and cartographic representations of Florida at a time in which it was understood as Other to the physical geography appropriate for British-style settler colonialism. Indeed, the swampy, unstable land of peninsular Florida was so anathema to the plantation-style colonization occurring up north that it was portrayed – well beyond the time when people knew better – as a series of islands rather than as a coherent 'continental' landmass. Indeed, one of the themes of Navakas's work is the ambivalence of Florida, as either the southernmost part of the United States or the northernmost part of the Caribbean. This ambivalence – as a place of both land and sea – came to be of profound importance as American federalism began to trace out what an 'American' subjectivity might look like, in terms of domestic spaces, political economy, and relation to place. It is here that Navakas's thesis broadens out beyond the context of Florida, as she argues that Florida offered an alternative model of place-based living in early America.

To explore this, Navakas examines a broad range of texts, from John James Audubon's evocative description of mangrove trees to Harriet Beecher Stowe's autobiographical description of wintering in Florida in *Palmetto Leaves*. As might be intuited from these examples, a leitmotif of these authors is the way in which flora serve as a metaphor (or an instructional manual, perhaps) for successful 'rooting' in Florida. In contrast to the deep, vertical roots of continental foliage, Floridian plants (and people) tend to root horizontally, or laterally, in the sandy soil of the peninsula, creating a more flexible relationship to place that is dynamic and able to survive floods, hurricanes, and – for a time perhaps – colonization.

This becomes economically realized in Florida via the figure of the Wrecker, a nimble sailor who pillages shipwrecks on the Florida reef via his superior knowledge of the reef, before selling the commodities of the slave-based economy in the markets of the West Indies. Literally living life on the reef, the figure of the wrecker offered a model of political subjectivity more like the Caribbean pirate than a settler. In living parasitically off of the plantation economy, the Wrecker was both admired for his maritime skill and loathed for preying on the settler colonial economy. Indeed, the tipping point for the aforementioned ambivalence – when the United States became cartographically and politically interested in integrating Florida with the rest of the union – comes with the Seminole Wars. These wars have been largely ignored in popular historiography, but they are a key element not only of the settler colonial project but also in the burgeoning imperial U.S. interest in the Caribbean and all points south. Navakas artfully relates the portrayal of the Floridian swamp at this time to racial anxieties around institutional slavery and the vulnerability of Southern plantation culture to a potential invasion of free Blacks (and Seminole).

Navakas avoids romanticism, but it is hard as a reader not to feel the loss of the Florida she describes. It is not for nothing that the Florida State Parks' slogan is 'the Real Florida'. The parks offer a last vestige of the landscape that had once captivated the nation. After the Third Seminole War quelled the remaining Native American and Maroon resistance, much of what had been until then the Everglades was drained and turned into massive sugar agribusiness, while retention ponds, air conditioning, and mosquito spraying made the coastal areas amenable to sprawling settlement, including the now ubiquitous gated communities and strip malls. It is this modernism that has erased Florida's past, except for where it was appropriated to name gated communities and country clubs, and has made scholarship like *Liquid Landscape* all the more crucial. Speaking more critically, her work would have benefitted from the recent flurry of interest by geographers in this area (e.g. Peters, Steinberg, & Stratford, 2018), and at times the distance between the literary representation and the lived experience of Florida seems to collapse through her analytic. Nevertheless, Navakas has produced a volume that will be of more than passing interest to geographers interested in literary and cultural geography, political geography, and historical geography. As a native Floridian, I am grateful to her for bringing these stories back to light.

Reference

Peters, K., Steinberg, P., & Stratford, E. (Eds.). (2018). *Territory beyond terra*. London: Rowman and Littlefield International.

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Preview "Liquid Landscape by Michele Currie Navakas. Liquid Landscape: Geography and Settlement at the Edge of Early America. by. Michele Currie Navakas. 4.33 - Rating details. - 3 ratings - 0 reviews. In Florida, land and water frequently change places with little warning, dissolving homes and communities along with the very concepts of boundaries themselves. While Florida's landscape of saturated swamps, shifting shorelines, coral reefs, and tiny keys initially impeded familiar strategies of early U.S. settlement, such as the establishment of fixed dwellings, sturdy fe In Florida, land Michele Currie Navakas's Liquid Landscape: Geography and Settlement at the Edge of Early America convincingly demonstrates that Florida has always "and importantly " compromised master narratives of US nationalism. " "To many early Americans," Navakas writes, "the liquid landscape appeared not as an obstacle to settlement, but rather as a provocation to think beyond more familiar ideals of land and boundaries that made it possible to imagine the United States as settler nation and empire in the first place." Geography 508 Landscape and Settlement in the North American Past. Robert Ostergren. Read more. Article. Full-text available. Analisis Susunan Hierarki Kefungsian Pusat Petempatan Daerah Batang Padang, Perak. October 2015. - Join ResearchGate to discover and stay up-to-date with the latest research from leading experts in Geography and many other scientific topics. Join for free. or. Discover by subject area. Recruit researchers. Join for free. Login.