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Julian C. Chambliss

Rollins College, jchambliss@rollins.edu

Denise K. Cummings

Rollins College, dcummings@rollins.edu

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Florida: The Mediated State

by Julian C. Chambliss and Denise K. Cummings,
Guest Editors

In a March 2007 *National Geographic* article titled, “Beyond Disney,” writer T.D. Allman wrote, “Everything happening to America today is happening here...”¹ The article went on to suggest that Orlando had become a prime example of the “ascendant power of cities’ exurbs...” While this assessment was focused on the iconic Central Florida community, the implication that Florida’s experience foreshadows the country’s future highlights a crucial role the state plays in the broader U.S. experience, a role that this special issue of the *Florida Historical Quarterly* aims to render. Indeed, as Anne Rowe writes in *The Ideal of Florida in the American Literary Imagination*, “In spite of the state’s assimilation into the mainstream of American life, *the idea*

Julian Chambliss is an Associate Professor of History at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. His teaching and research focus on urban history and culture in the United States. He is the coordinator of the Africa and African-American Studies Program at Rollins, coordinator of the Media Arts and Culture Special Interest Section for the Florida Conference of Historians and a board member of the Society for American City and Regional Planning History.

Denise K. Cummings is Associate Professor of Critical Media and Cultural Studies at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. She focuses her teaching and research on film history, theory, and criticism with an emphasis on American and American Indian film, and media culture. Her collection *Visualities* (Michigan State University Press, 2011) deals with contemporary American Indian film. She has also written about film history, cinema exhibition, and Indigenous film and literature. She has curated numerous film programs on Indigenous films from the U.S., Canada, and Latin America, and annually serves on selection committees for the Florida Film Festival (Maitland, Florida).

1. T.D. Allman, “Beyond Disney,” *National Geographic Magazine*, March 2007, accessed September 5, 2011, <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2007/03/orlando/allman-text>.

of Florida—the subtropical land, idyllic, exotic paradise—continues to be a powerful seductive force.² In recent memory, however, the seductive Florida has been inexorably linked to nightmarish prophecy as concerns about urbanization, immigration, and environmental despoliation have exerted considerable force upon the collective mediation about Florida.³ Moreover, from presidential politics to the housing crisis, contemporary observers across the country and around the world hope to glean some greater understanding of the broader national story from Florida's experience.⁴ Florida has been and continues to be marked by the interplay between imagined expectation and real experience. This special issue confronts the bifurcated profile Florida occupies in the popular mind with essays that explore some of the distinctive issues that shape popular understandings of Florida as both a geographic place and a symbolic space. While the recent academic works, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams* and *Paradise Lost?* address Florida's social and environmental histories, and as substantial analyses such as *The New History of Florida and Florida's Working Class Past* explore the intersection of the state's political and economic concerns, this special issue seeks to re-evaluate Florida's impact on the broader cultural dialogue about the postwar transformation of the United States with essays that analyze the dynamic between popular cultural outputs and lived reality, thereby illuminating how practices of documenting Florida help shape understandings of time and historical change.⁵

2. Anne E. Rowe, *The Idea of Florida in the American Literary Imagination* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 6.
3. For a consideration of urbanization, see Bill Belleville, *Losing It All to Sprawl: How Progress Ate My Cracker Landscape* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006). For a consideration of immigration, see Mary E. Odem, Elaine Cantrell Lacy, eds., *Latino Immigrants and the Transformation of the U.S. South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009).
4. For a consideration of Florida's role in national politics, see Susan MacManus and Thomas R. Dye, *Politics in State and Communities* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009). For a consideration of Florida and the U.S. Housing Market, see Howard Wial, "Not the Same Old Jobless Recovery: A Tale of Two Metros," Brookings Institute, March 2010, accessed September 10, 2011, http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0318_jobs_wial.aspx.
5. Robert Cassanello and Melanie Shell-Weiss, eds., *Florida's Working-Class Past: Current Perspectives on Labor, Race, and Gender from Spanish Florida to the New Immigration* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011); Jack Emerson Davis and Raymond Arsenault, eds., *Paradise Lost?: The Environmental History of Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998); Michael Gannon, *The New History of Florida*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996); and Gary R. Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008).

Such an approach to harnessing the dualities of Florida in the popular mind offers the opportunity to expand our dialogue about the U.S. experience in part because the state's fortunes have always been shaped by a hemispheric experience. Since the 1990s, social scientists and humanities scholars have brought a global focus to the consideration of the U.S. experience and Florida's role as a gateway to the Caribbean and Latin America. Beyond the characterization of Florida as a contested space, recent scholarship has emphasized interconnected communities, multicultural origins, and blended identities that define the reality of the Florida existence. As such, the relationship between perception and realities in Florida creates a new space for reflective consideration of the changing nature of the national experience.

To mediate is "to act as intermediary agent in bringing, effecting, or communicating," or simply "to convey." Thus, our title for this issue, "Florida: The Mediated State," functions to describe our presentation of how perception interacts with public dialogue to shape the reality defining Florida. We contend that Florida acts as a "means to transmit," as a mechanism for grasping how the United States has expressed its national aspirations in the post WWII American half century.⁶

Florida's rich and diverse geographic gifts have allowed the state to play a defining role in a postwar culture of consumption, leisure, and growth central to discussions and debates about U.S. popular culture. The values associated with Florida's development and the state's many "identities" are not simply regional values or provincial identities; rather, they offer insights into the benefits, challenges, and concerns associated with modern living. In describing Florida as the mediated state, we continue a pattern of inquiry linked to questions of space, community, and identity that scholars have pursued in recent critical assessments of the broad U.S. experience. Space acts as a mediating factor in the relationships that define our national identity. The forms these relationships take—home, neighborhood, suburb, city, state—provide the setting for the formation of social consciousness.⁷

This interpretative analysis associated with postmodern theory allows social scientists and humanities researchers to understand the

6. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 9-10.

7. Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), xiv.

intersection of space and place associated with a consumptive ethos with deep historical roots in the United States. In Florida, a fractious political climate, a harsh environment, and unstable population complicated this consumptive pattern. As a space of contested control with formable obstacles to development, Florida's *potential* has driven individual and governmental perceptions of the consequences linked to their actions since contact. While recent analysis has challenged the simplicity of Bernard Bailyn's early characterization of "visions of Xanadus" driving British "Florida Fever"⁸ in the mid-eighteenth century or Spanish struggles over regulatory authority in late-eighteenth century Florida,⁹ the reality of a sparse European population, active Native American opposition, and unsympathetic natural world was that Florida was (and often still is) defined by those with limited experience and imprecise perspectives. Indeed, in considering this early period Daniel Murphree demonstrated that colonial experiences were filtered through "inaccurate assessments written by individuals to promote their economic, religious, or imperial interests."¹⁰

A multicultural borderland in the early nineteenth century, Florida transitioned to a sparsely populated U.S. territory in 1821 and joined the union in 1845 with fewer than 60,000 residents.¹¹ Southern politics interrupted any settlement opportunities in the state. A strong supporter of the South's cause during the Civil War, Florida arguably benefitted from the Confederacy's defeat, as the door opened to long forestalled development in the South. In the aftermath of Reconstruction, Florida struggled during the New South transformation. Henry Grady, the herald of the New South, spoke of a southern industrial revolution to promote industrial and urban growth.¹² Yet, this pattern of development concentrated on "shoring up" existing social and economic patterns.¹³

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8. Patricia C. Griffin, "Blue Gold: Andrew Turnbull's New Smyrna Plantation," in *Colonial Plantations and Economy in Florida*, ed. Jane G. Landers (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 2000), 14.
 9. James Gregory Cusick, "Spanish East Florida in the Atlantic Economy of the Late Eighteenth Century," in *Colonial Plantations and Economy in Florida*, ed. Jane G. Landers (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 2000), 169.
 10. Daniel S. Murphree, *Constructing Floridians: Natives and Europeans in the Colonial Floridas, 1513-1783* (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 2006), 14.
 11. U.S. Census Bureau, *Resident Population and Apportionment of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1789-2000*.
 12. Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970) 71.
 13. Lawrence H. Larsen, *The Urban South: A History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 73.

The region's economic changes were more evolution than revolution as the emerging industrial economy continued a pattern of natural resource exportation, retail and commercial activities and agrarian production.¹⁴ Florida was ill suited to capitalize on this new activism. Although the second largest state east of the Mississippi River, it ranked thirty-four of thirty-seven in terms of population and the transportation system remained underdeveloped.¹⁵ Despite or perhaps because of these factors, Florida re-emerged as a space of desire defined by imagined opportunities. As George Pozzetta has documented, the state sought to entice settlers throughout the postbellum period.¹⁶ Indeed, immigrant agents and land promoters lauded Florida as a land of opportunity for white settlers equal to and in some ways surpassing western lands.¹⁷

Despite these efforts, broader national trends shifted perceptions of Florida beyond the frontier mythos. As Gilded Age excess transformed the country, worries about urban congestion gave rise to a popular conservation movement that glorified natural spaces while at the same time extolling their proper use.¹⁸ Florida's coastal beauty, typified by communities such as Key West, Jacksonville, and Pensacola, served as a real and imagined site to balance these competing views. Indeed, Florida shifted from wild frontier to "unspoiled" paradise in numerous travel narratives written by northern visitors during this period.¹⁹ In the hands of entrepreneurs like Henry Flagler, Florida's natural splendor combined with infrastructure investment, sparked greater interest in the state. Flagler recognized the state's potential as a vacation

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14. David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982) 84-86.
 15. Raymond Arsenault and Gary R. Mormino, "From Dixieland to Dreamland: Demographic and Cultural Change in Florida, 1880-1980," in *Shades of the Sunbelt: Essays on Ethnicity, Race and the Urban South*, eds. Randall Miller and George E. Pozzetta (Baton Raton: Florida Atlantic University Press, 1989), 161-163.
 16. George Pozzetta, "Foreigners in Florida: A Study of Immigration Promotion, 1865-1910," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 53:2, pp 165-81.
 17. Henry Knight, "Southward Expansion: The Myth of the West in the Promotion of Florida, 1876-1900," *European Journal of American Culture*, 29:2, pp 111-129.
 18. Roderick Nash, "John Muir, William Kent, and the Conservation Schism," *Pacific Historical Review*. 36:4 (November 1967), 432-434.
 19. Jon A. Peterson, "Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.: The Visionary and the Professional," in *Planning the Twentieth-Century American City*, Mary Corbin Sies and Christopher Silver, eds. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 37-55.

destination and, by 1885, had developed the Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine. Consolidating the existing rail system under his control and extending it southward, Flagler created exclusive resort hotels in Daytona and Palm Beach. His efforts re-made the Florida coastline into a playground for the wealthy and not so wealthy.²⁰

As the South entered the twentieth century, Florida's cities benefitted from the emergence of timber and textile mills, turpentine plants, and petroleum and shipping to create new jobs and stimulate expansion in ports such as Jacksonville and Tampa. Despite this growth, Florida's popular identity was glamorized in northern newspapers by the manifestation of Miami Beach as a new exclusive destination to match 1920s excess. A speculative real estate market in that decade help to expand Florida mania away from the coast as thousands of investors looked to Florida's tropical landscape hoping to capitalize on its idyllic wonder. Florida's land boom and bust forewarned the Great Depression. In the aftermath, the modern post WWII emergence of the Sunbelt once again returned Florida to the center of popular dialogue as paradise. Yet, unlike previous generations' assumptions of the wealthy dominating the state, in the postwar era the average citizen was encouraged to strive toward living the Florida dream.

In the postwar boom, Florida's transformation was bolstered by the experience of thousands of veterans who returned to the state, drawn by memories of days spent training on its pristine beaches. The demands of postwar Cold War politics encouraged Americans to live a life that extolled the triumphant values of capitalism linked to family, home, and suburban affluence.²¹ The postwar political consensus within the United States rested on an overwhelming popular cultural mainstream message that deftly overlooked the inequities of gender and race that forestalled racial and gender minorities from enjoying freedoms. With ideological struggle against the Soviet Union as the external threat and emphasis on guarding community as the internal goal, a normalized holistic narrative provided a framework for the U.S. experience.²² As a leisure destination open to the vast middle-class that emerged in

20. Flagler Museum, "Henry Morris Flagler," http://www.flaglERMuseum.us/html/flagler_biography.html.

21. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xviii.

22. Leroy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture since 1830* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 279-80.

the postwar years, Florida was involved in and had an effect on this postwar narrative. The postwar automobile explosion coupled with the postwar leisure patterns meant that Florida's exotic locales and plentiful beaches were open to millions of new visitors.²³

Florida, of course, is not the only mediated state. In idiosyncratic ways California, Texas, and New York are also often understood and shaped by interplay of imagined and real and are often cited as bellwethers. Indeed, California enjoys similar focus from scholars who see that state as a place where imagination and aspiration work together to inspire action.²⁴ Broadly, southern and western states have been tightly associated with material transformation linked to the decline of industrial power in the northern "rustbelt" and the rise of the service oriented "sunbelt" economy. The clustering of the former states of the Confederacy with western states in the "Sunbelt" associates regional identification with public sentiments that recognize that the South and the West have been the key growth sectors in the American economy since the end of WWII.²⁵

Although perceptions about regional character seem consistent, no single variable unites the Sunbelt, except perhaps economy. In this regard, the South and West share the experience of being re-defined in the midst of a public dialogue whereby the norms of commercial process became tools to construct political reality. For scholars this process of definition and embellishment through mass culture is tied to a sense of abundance that historian David Potter suggests was defined through advertising in the

23. John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *Motoring: The Highway Experience in America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 116-117.

24. See Kevin Starr, *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950-1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (Brooklyn and London: Verso, 2006); and Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon, eds., *California Dreams and Realities: Readings for Critical Thinkers and Writers* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St.Martin, 2004).

25. See David C. Perry and Alfred J. Watkins. "Regional Changes and the Impact of Uneven Urban Development," in *The Rise of the Sunbelt Cities*. Eds. David C. Perry and Alfred J. Watkins (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977): 19-54; Carl Abbott. *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); David R. Goldfield and Howard N. Rabinowitz, "Epilogue: The Vanishing Sunbelt," in *Searching For the Sunbelt: Historical Perspectives on a Region*, Raymond A. Mohl, ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); and Robert Fisher, "The Urban Sunbelt in Comparative Perspective: Houston in Context," in *Essays on Sunbelt Cities and Recent Urban America*, Robert B. Fairbanks and Kathleen Underwood, eds. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1990).

postwar period.²⁶ For Florida, this abundance is built upon an already distorted perception. Our contemporary discussion of the perceived and the real Florida then seeks to bridge the gap between the conceptual landscape created in the postwar period and complexity of the material reality created by the unique social, political, and economic circumstances that have affected the Florida experience. By providing a space for thoughtful consideration of the popular reflexive ideas associated with modern Florida, we create an opportunity to understand both the continual evolution of the idea of the state and the state itself. In adopting this approach, we challenge and expand more traditional examinations of Florida by linking the state's imagined spaces to critical assessments of those forces that are shaping the popular mind.

Herein, we present three essays coupled with two shorter ruminations whose ideas coalesce around this larger conceptual framework. In this quintet, perception and reality are refracted through a variety of eyes: historian, literary scholar, environmental historian, architectural theorist, new media rhetorician. The two shorter essays further punctuate the power created by popular ideas about Florida double in service in their ability to invoke—and indeed, welcome—an imagined Florida while simultaneously and powerfully affecting real contemporary times and shaping the future. These synthetic narratives embrace the myriad elements associated with how we experience Florida and by extension how we might apprehend the broader U.S. experience.

“Florida: The Mediated State” begins with Alison Meek’s investigation of the relevance of the television program *Miami Vice* in counteracting the negative media image of Miami in the 1980s. Specifically, the essay explores the historical context of the negative media image of Miami in the early 1980s, the original concerns held by Miami’s tourism officials regarding a weekly show focusing on Miami’s seedier underside, and the ways in which *Miami Vice* provided an alternative image to a crime-ridden tourist destination. Meek, an historian of Cold War America and American popular culture, astutely demonstrates that *Miami Vice* did have an impact on counteracting the negative media image of Miami, but the counteraction was not as widespread or as long lasting as Miami’s tourism officials had hoped. In this regard,

26. David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 176-177.

Meek's essay, while underscoring the complexity of South Florida's profile, illuminates how the desires of real individuals—e.g., from Miami's tourism officials to state boosters to television viewers—intersect with a fictional serial written for prime-time American broadcast television in order to alter consumer perception about Florida.

The specificity of Meek's focus on South Florida resonates with David Miller Parker's comparative analysis of the twin discourses in American thought that present Southern California and South Florida as areas displaying the consequences of American excess and poor planning. Noting that Southern California and South Florida have remarkably similar histories, Parker reminds us that both locales lagged behind the northern part of their states in terms of development, both were the beneficiaries of land booms promoted by civic boosters, both became known initially as centers of citrus production and tourism, and both spent their boom years as predominantly Anglo-Saxon cities distinguished from the rest of the U.S. by temperate weather and eccentric populations. Southern California developed its current identity immediately after World War II, while South Florida fully entered the popular mind after Castro's takeover of Cuba in 1959. While the discourse on dystopian Southern California has diminished in recent years, the discourse on South Florida (and increasingly Florida as a whole) has grown. The ethnic makeup of South Florida dominates much of this narrative, but a significant portion of it rests on the novels of Carl Hiaasen, a native Floridian and a longtime columnist for the *Miami Herald*. As Parker argues, Hiaasen is more concerned with the environment and the sins that rapacious developers have committed against it, although Hiaasen finds an equally appealing target in the people who the developers have attracted to South Florida. Parker's analysis of Hiaasen's novels reveals that Hiaasen writes from a genuine concern for the ecosystem of Florida, and that his popular comedic yet critical writings have come to represent Florida for many in contemporary America.

Mindful of the root of dystopian fear, Charlie Hailey's "Florida Porch Reverie" invokes the cherished ideas represented by the porch as a social space offering a site for exchange and engagement with the environmental paradise linked to Florida. Ultimately, the dangers associated with Florida's despoliation rest upon the challenge that degenerative forces pose to both our mental and physical well-being.

Hailey looks at the porch as frontier space. For him, the porch is a contemporary space still critical to understanding suburban identities, climatic imperatives, and domestic experiences. In Florida, the porch is also a space for writers. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings wrote from the porch—it's a scene of imagination and a frame for perceiving the world. For Harriet Beecher Stowe, the porch was a site for displaying the public persona of a writer—steamboats passed by her house in Mandarin, Florida, so that tourists could glimpse her (simulated) writing on the front porch. Fascinated, Hailey muses in terms of the Florida landscape and in the context of Stowe's early arguments for fresh air in domestic space. Porches and sleeping porches play an important role, too, in Zora Neale Hurston's stories (Hurston links the sleeping porch to gender and it is Arvey's "space of belonging" in *Seraph on the Suwanee*), at her Eatonville home, and as a site for documenting music and oral histories. And Hemingway's elevated porch framed his view of Key West's lighthouse. From the other direction (outside-in), the porch mixes the formal with the informal—in New Urbanism (e.g., Seaside, Celebration, etc.) the commodification of the porch yields an idea of fresh air and community. In all cases, the porch is an interface between public-private, real-imagined, viewer-viewed, and person (viewing)-place. Literally and figuratively, the porch links the nineteenth-century frontier with twentieth-century suburbanism.

The loss of paradise formerly so accessible makes Hailey's exploration of the porch a meaningful segue to Leslie Poole's essay, within which she recounts the literary, collaborative, and creative processes that led to the development of the 2007 PBS documentary, *In Marjorie's Wake*. The many ways in which the St. Johns River of Florida over time has shaped culture—literature, art, and music—are celebrated in this film that re-creates an historic trip that Pulitzer-prize winning author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings once made on the river in 1933. Following the river from its marshy headwaters in Central Florida to the Ocklawaha River more than 100 miles away, Poole as traveler follows the path Rawlings wrote about in her "Hyacinth Drift" chapter of *Cross Creek*. As an historian, Poole provides unique insight by recounting the creative journey of the making of the documentary film and in doing so educates and informs us about the ways Rawlings' work and the St. Johns River remain inspirations capable of drawing people together and helping to forge a sense of place that is critical to the state's

ongoing assessment and activism concerning environmental fears.

As point of contrast and contestation, the final short essay by Jeff Rice, "Miami Stories," ideologically resonates with the others in that it concerns the interplay between the imagined expectation and the real experience of Florida, yet takes a different tack entirely in its self-reflexive confrontation between hermeneutics—the interpretation of written texts—and invention. For Rice, any imagined Florida or real Florida is essentially bound up in the act of writing which, as he has argued in his oeuvre, is best understood and practiced as a form of invention. To stage his theory, Rice takes us on an associative (mental) and written journey (putatively about Miami) that includes stops at popular culture's landmarks—music lyrics, novels, television episodes, movie scenes, short stories. When these are combined with facts, his own lived experiences, and "internal representations"—those that may never be fully expressed but can be felt—Rice's landmarks can be read as touchstones of history that is oftentimes hidden as such, or "secret," to borrow his term—history that is there yet must be mined and then claimed through the act of writing. While Rice attempts to account for or represent other, associative, temporal moments often overlooked or left behind by more conventional processes, he overturns commonplace and reveals how individual lived experience and the act of writing are in essence open invitations to many imagined Floridas, all that are concomitantly and inextricably tied to real, lived experience yet, he cautions, each just out of reach of totalizing narrative. Of course, the greater lesson from his performance is that he's not merely addressing Miami. Or Florida. Writing moments—as his and each of these essays variously yet differently illustrate—are about our postwar U.S. experience.