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The Vertigo of Circum-Caribbean Empire: William Bartram's Florida

IN 1775, THE BRITISH COLONIAL TRAVELER Bernard Romans included a rhapsodic description of the Florida coastline in his *Concise Natural History of East and West Florida*:

> When we survey the harbours, Charlotte, Tampe, St. Joseph, Pensacola, all proper for the admission of ships of rank, besides others we know not yet; what a field is open here! What a prospect of power and grandeur seems to be already welcoming us! No country had ever such inexhaustible resources; no empire had ever half so many advantages combining in its behalf: methinks I see already the American fleets inhabiting the ocean, like cities in vicinity![1]

From the measured geographic survey of his opening, Romans rises to a form of colonialist fantasy that had been a staple of New World discovery narratives since Columbus. His gaze takes in a coastal region of limitless possibility, a fertile terrain that offers no resistance to its inspired discoverer and the unnamed empire he represents. It may seem curious to us, accustomed to westward-looking accounts of North American development, that Romans locates the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean as future seat of an Anglo-American maritime empire. Yet Romans's text repeatedly insists that when American fleets occupy those waters, they will dominate hemispheric trade routes of decisive consequence to global commerce.

A related vision of circum-Caribbean empire lies close to the center of William Bartram's 1791 *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, and East and West Florida*, which provides one important historical context for his aesthetics of flux and disorientation.[2] Even as Bartram's natural

[1]Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1962.

[2]New York: Library of America, 1996. The central sections of *Travels* have long been celebrated for their vivid depiction of East and West Florida. Bartram battles scores of alligators, engages in sublime meditations on Spanish Missionary ruins, and observes the rituals of the Lower Creeks or Seminoles, all the while compiling an exhaustive taxonomy of the botanical

history attempts to claim the Floridas as a superabundant resource for the new republic, it remains troubled by the author's intimate awareness of the region as a contested borderland between the plantation empires of the Carolinas and the Spanish West Indies. *Travels* stages a kind of colonialist drama in which alternative New World histories of migration and trade, often originating in the Spanish Caribbean, frustrate Bartram's efforts to taxonomize and establish mastery over a volatile and semi-tropical environment.

The desire for mastery forms a defining characteristic of the very discourse within which Bartram worked. Mary Louise Pratt has of course located natural history as a crucial culture of imperialism.[3] As they described, classified, collected, and transplanted New World nature, natural historians shaped a form of Euro-centric planetary consciousness essential to the ideology of empire. Yet Pratt's magisterial narrative elides both the particular contributions of U.S. natural historians to that ideology and the centrality of the West Indies to natural historical circulation and meaning making. Since de Ovieda's 1535 *Historia general y natural de las Indias*, natural history had been a discourse preoccupied with the Caribbean, for the simple reason that it was conducted under the patronage of powerful mercantile interests. Merchants and governments hired natural historians to survey the exotic environments of their far-flung colonial possessions, to determine whether valuable commodities such as coffee, indigo, and sugar could be cultivated there. Throughout the eighteenth century, the interests of those empires became increasingly centered in the West Indies, after the onset of the sugar revolution and the explosion of the transatlantic slave trade that made it possible.[4]

Recent scholars of the Black Atlantic have helped to recover this important dimension of eighteenth-century society, economy, and culture.

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diversity of the region.

[3] *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[4] For a concise history of this aspect of the development of natural history, see Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the "Improvement" of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

In their recent study *A Turbulent Time*, to cite one example, the historians David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus develop a powerful revisionist geography of the Americas. By the late eighteenth century, a coherent plantation society, which they term "the greater Caribbean," extended from coastal Venezuela in the south, through the islands of the Antilles, to the Floridas and Louisiana in the North. Its French, British, Spanish, and Dutch territories constituted what they call

> basically similar colonial worlds . . . shaped by developments centered in the Caribbean, principally the establishment and expansion of plantation slavery and crop production, which spawned contests for power between competing European states, between masters and slaves, and between whites, blacks, and people of mixed ancestry.[5]

Such claims build on the work of postcolonial Caribbean scholars including C.L.R. James and Eric Williams—who placed a variety of West Indian developments at the center of hemispheric and indeed Atlantic history several generations ago—even as they suggest the challenges that their insights continue to pose to Americanists in general, and to scholars of the U.S. South in particular.[6]

The culture of the early republic begins to read very differently when placed on a Caribbean-centric map of the New World in the long eighteenth century. The influence of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* testifies to the importance of natural history to early American culture. Yet its very prominence has obscured a strong sub-current within the discourse. American natural historians as important as John Bartram, St. John de Crèvecoeur, William Bartram, and John Audubon presented the greater Caribbean as source of an ardently desired yet disruptive abundance. In exotic narratives and images of the region, they both extolled the benefits of the West India trade and circum-Caribbean expansion and warned of its potentially corrosive effects on national borders and beliefs.

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[5]David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus, eds., *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

[6]The classic works are, of course, C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, introduction and notes by James Welvin (London: Penguin, 2001), and Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, introduction by Colin Palmer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

That contradiction is especially sharp in William Bartram's *Travels.* While the main narrative of *Travels* chronicles Bartram's experiences in the Southeast and the Florida borderland from 1772 to 1777, it encompasses aspects of two earlier journeys into the territory. In 1765, William explored the region with his father, John, a renowned colonial botanist in his own right. And in 1766 he returned to East Florida in a failed bid to establish a rice and indigo plantation. Both those efforts were in the service of the British Empire. His father's journey was inspired by his appointment as King's botanist to the territory, after Britain acquired it from Spain. After that journey, William joined his talents and energies to the coordinated effort to settle the borderland. In order to consolidate the territory against Spanish encroachment, the British parliament awarded substantial land grants to individuals with the means to initiate large-scale, slave-driven agricultural development on the isthmus. They expected Florida to prosper on a similar scale to its colonial predecessors in the Carolinas. The Bartrams' own ambition can be measured by their use of Henry Laurens, a prime architect of the plantation system, as their closest advisor.[7]

The journey recorded in *Travels* had a more complex relationship to British colonialism than its two predecessors. Funded by a wealthy British botanical collector and colonial investor, it also coincided with the years of revolutionary foment and struggle. The record of that journey, moreover, was painstakingly composed in Philadelphia in the 1780s, during a post-revolutionary period of growing nationalism. What interests me about this chronology is how effortlessly Bartram arranges his notes from a British colonialist venture into a published text reflective of U.S. interests in the region. Even a careful reader of *Travels* might fail to perceive that any shift in perspective has occurred.[8] The very absence of a clearly designated shift must have proved disorienting for Bartram's contemporary readership. It powerfully implies that an early-national vision of development in the

[7]Details of this biographical sketch, and the one that follows, are drawn from Edward Cashin, *William Bartram and the American Revolution on the Southern Frontier* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000).

[8]*Travels* elides the very historical struggle that drove that shift. Bartram never mentions the American Revolution. It will not suffice to attribute this omission to his supposedly ahistorical consciousness, his preoccupation with a timeless vision of nature. His depiction of Seminole society in East Florida reveals an acute attention to historical specificity.

Floridas, largely driven by the interests of the Plantation South, runs parallel to a British colonial one, and thus is subject to a similarly rapid decline.[9]

That possibility haunts Bartram's overtly optimistic narrative. For though his own plantation had failed, Bartram remained confident that others would succeed. Bernard Romans's rhapsody has nothing on Bartram's description of an expansive cane-break on the banks of the Suwannee River:

> This vast plain, together with the forest contiguous to it, if permitted (by the Siminoles who are sovereigns of these realms) to be in possession and under the culture of industrious planters and mechanics, would in a little time exhibit other scenes than it does at present, delightful as it is; for by the arts of agriculture and commerce, almost every desirable thing in life might be produced and made plentiful here, and thereby establish a rich, populous and delightful region; as this soil and climate appears to be of a nature favourable for the production of almost all the fruits of the earth, as Corn, Rice, Indigo, Sugar-cane, Flax, Cotton, Silk, Cochineal . . . : and lying contiguous to one of the most beautiful navigable rivers in the world, and not more than thirty miles from St. Mark's on the great bay of Mexico, is most conveniently situated for the West India trade, and the commerce of all the world. (p. 201)

By possessing the Floridas, the nation might compete in the production of a range of profitable commodities then cultivated almost exclusively in the West Indies proper, and would secure a gateway to Caribbean commerce and global exchange.

That broad geo-economic vision informs Bartram's representations of the local environment and is especially evident in his 1775 landscape *The Great Alachua Savannah in East Florida.* The drawing was composed during Bartram's visit, in the company of a group of Carolina-based traders, to the Seminole territory in East Florida. Bartram's landscape depicts a plain near the Seminole capital of Cuscowilla, which we see reduced to a single building near the bottom right of the savanna. On one level, the drawing celebrates British North America's first venture into the tropics. A column-like royal palm, icon of tropical exoticism and possibility in the

[9]During the depression of the 80s, the new republic pinned its commercial hopes on the Spanish and French Caribbean, as a series of embargoes blocked access to the British islands. And growing numbers of southern settlers disregarded the Spanish border, driving a slow but decisive process of informal annexation.

visual culture of Bartram's day, dominates the left foreground of the image, evoking classical antiquity at the same time that it suggests a glorious future. The palm crowns a high eminence from which the viewer surveys a vast and richly varied savanna, which supports a veritable catalog of the exotic flora and fauna of the region. The very elevated perspective of the image—an almost classic instance of what Pratt terms the "monarch-of-all-I-survey scene"—implies an attempt to take possession of that abundance.[10]

Part of the brilliance of *Travels*, however, is that it simultaneously insists on the hazards of colonialist desire. Conspicuous details of the *Alachua Savannah* suggest that the very landscape resists possession and mapping. The drawing is full of geographic inaccuracies. The town of Cuscowilla and the adjacent lake, for instance, should be located at the top of the image, near the sink-hole fountain. Subtle yet dramatic violations of perspective and scale reinforce a sense of disorientation. While the details of the foreground gesture toward conventional perspective, the lowland features of the drawing violate those conventions. The level of focus and detail is uniform throughout the entire savanna. Nor does animal size grow smaller as we move from foreground to background. The three cranes flying into the distance of the upper right of the drawing, for instance, are as large as the standing crane in the left foreground. Such details combine to create a two-dimensional perspective and a uniform scale more in keeping with a map than a landscape. Details of this cartographic overview, however, are utterly fantastical. Flowers are often larger than adjacent trees. Two spears of wild grass to the right of the savanna are four times as high as the oaks beside them. Such details suggest that the broader region of which the landscape forms a part cannot be perspectivally managed. The entire drawing creates the sensation Bartram describes in the accompanying text, "How is the mind agitated and bewildered at being thus, as it were, placed on the borders of a new world" (p. 169).

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[10]See Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*. Details of my reading of the drawing, though not the sense I make of them, have also been drawn from: Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Natures of John and William Bartram: Two Pioneering Naturalists, Father and Son, in the Wilderness of Eighteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 1996), and Amy R. W. Myers, *Sketches from the Wilderness: Changing Conceptions of Nature in American Natural History Illustration, 1680-1880* (diss., Yale University, 1985).

That same sense of disorientation pervades many of his botanical drawings. Images such as *Colocasia* mark a radical aesthetic departure from traditional botanical illustration, in which flattened specimens are isolated against a white background, identified by Latin titles, and measured by numeric scales. Thus depicted, specimens could be definitively placed within the abstract, universal orders of the Linnean system and the Great Chain of Being. In *Colocasia*, it is as if the Floridian environment refuses to submit to conventional botanical order. As Amy Meyers argues, Bartram depicts complex environmental relationships between plants and animals within a highly expressive landscape of almost surreal scale. Blossoming water-lilies tower above the Great Blue Heron in the left foreground as it hunts a small fish near the vast, upturned surface of a lily pad. The relative size of bird and plant in the image stands as a subversive challenge to their proper hierarchical ordering within the Great Chain of Being. The very presence of a carnivorous Venus Flytrap in the left foreground poses a similar challenge to conventional boundaries between the animal and vegetable creation.

I am suggesting not only that Bartram's images depict the inadequacy of natural historical orderings to a representation of the Floridas but also that they attribute the difficulties of Floridian possession to its volatile, semi-tropical environment. At the same time, however, his text helps us to read tropicality as a trope for a variety of forms of human resistance to Anglo-American sovereignty. For within the conventions of eighteenth-century natural history, nonwhite peoples formed one part of the natural environment of a region. Throughout *Travels*, those peoples refuse to remain inert. Their mobility constitutes their resistance.[11]

Bartram's description of a visit to a Seminole trading village is revealing, as his observations on some cypress canoes take an unexpected turn. Seminole mariners, he explains, use those canoes to make journeys of surprising distance:

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[11]One important form of resistance, which Bartram neglects to mention directly, is slave insurrection. That reality was intimately known to him from his own plantation, where Henry Laurens described him as living "alone among six negroes, rather plagues than aids to him, of whom one is so insolent as to threaten his life" (John Bartram, *The Correspondence of John Bartram, 1734-1777*, ed. Edmund Berkeley and Dorothy Smith Berkeley [Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1992], p. 672).

> In these large canoes they descend the river on trading and hunting expeditions to the sea coast, neighbouring islands and keys, quite to the point of Florida, and sometimes cross the gulph, extending their navigations to the Bahama islands and even to Cuba: a crew of these adventurers had just arrived, having returned from Cuba but a few days before our arrival, with a cargo of spirituous liquors, Coffee, Sugar, and Tobacco. One of them politely presented me with a choice piece of Tobacco, which he told me he had received from the governor of Cuba. They deal in the way of barter, carrying with them deer-skins, furs, dry fish, bees-wax, honey, bear oil, and some other articles. They say the Spaniards receive them very friendlily, and treat them with the best spirituous liquors. The Spaniards of Cuba likewise trade here or at St. Mark's and other sea ports on the west coast of the isthmus, in small sloops; particularly at the bay of Calos, where are excellent fishing banks and grounds; not far from which is a considerable town of the Siminoles, where they take great quantities of fish, which they salt and cure on shore, and barter with the Indians and traders for skins, furs &c. and return with their cargoes to Cuba. The trader of the town of Talahasochte informed me, that he had, when trading in that town, large supplies of goods from these Spanish trading vessels, suitable for that trade, and some very essential articles on more advantageous terms than he could purchase at Indian stores either in Georgia or St. Augustine. (pp. 195-196)

Both the Seminole presence in Cuba and the Cuban presence in Florida would have been highly alarming to British colonial officials intent on maintaining the mercantile restrictions of the Navigation Acts. British colonies, within such a system, were strictly limited to trade with the metropole in London, and other British colonies. Bartram here describes parties of Seminole mariners exchanging frontier commodities directly in the Spanish Caribbean. That trade appears to have profound implications. A Spanish colonial official as prominent as the Governor of Cuba has given one of the Seminole mariners the gift of a choice plug of tobacco. Tobacco served a crucial symbolic function in Seminole diplomacy, centered as it was on the Calumet ceremony, which Bartram witnessed several times during his travels. His reference to the largesse of the Cuban governor thus strongly implies that the Seminoles have powerful allies. The tribe has formed commercial connections with a Spanish Caribbean seaport and capital, the population of which surpassed that of New York by some 10,000 residents in the year *Travels* was published. By 1791, the explosive growth of the Cuban economy promised to reenergize the entire Spanish American Empire. Bartram indirectly argues that the bordering southern colonies

could not risk alienating the Creek nation through dispossession and full-blown war, without being drawn into a conflict with Spain.[12]

The passages on Seminole trade with Cuba offer a counter-geography of the Floridas based on dominant patterns of exchange, across national and racial boundaries, which took Havana as their focal point. For the new nation, attentive to the interests of the Plantation South, such a vision entailed both possibility and peril. Future possession of the Floridas might well prove untenable given the deep historical connections between its indigenous inhabitants and the Spanish Empire.

[12]The prospects for such a conflict were real during Bartram's revolutionary-era wanderings, when the Southeast was filled with rumors regarding Spanish insurgency. In July 1773, authorities in Cuba offered a commission to the rising Creek Lieutenant Escochabey, promising to provide ammunition if he opened war on the white settlements. Escochabey refused, but in the summer of 1774, the young Creek traveled to Havana to encourage expansion of the illegal Spanish trade to the gulf coast of Florida. For details of this incident see Cashin, *William Bartram.*

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