UC Santa Barbara
Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title
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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5kd1v51d

Journal
Journal of Transnational American Studies, 8(1)

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Publication Date
2017

DOI
10.5070/T881036604

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La Floride française: Florida, France, and the Francophone World

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Florida was a central concern of French governments between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries in their repeated attempts to secure a French presence in the New World. From the expeditions of the Huguenot Jean Ribault and Rene de Laudonniere that led to the creation of Fort Caroline in 1565, somewhere in the vicinity of present-day Jacksonville, to bold plans at the time of the Louisiana sale, in 1803, to turn Eastern Florida into a French dominion that could somehow compensate for the loss of Canada and Saint-Domingue, these endeavors pitted France directly against rival colonial powers. First England and Spain, which successfully colonized territory North and West of the Florida peninsula, then the United States, which competed for control of territory in North Florida and along the Mississippi. France also carried on trade and traffic in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries between Florida and the neighboring French colonies in Louisiana and what is now Mobile, Alabama, as well as the Caribbean.

As befits a publication based on the proceedings of a conference that marked the anniversary of the building of Fort Caroline, three contributions on the Ribault and Laudonniere expeditions open this *JTAS* Special Forum.[1] Although very different in their methodology and aims, all shed new light on an episode that too often remains clouded in myth.

Frank Lestringant, author of the seminal *Le Huguenot et le sauvage* (1991), and long considered the doyen of French Florida scholars, opens the forum with a virtuoso analysis of an engraving from the *Brevis Narratio* of Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues that depicts Timucua Native Americans prostrating themselves in 1565 before the column that had been erected three years earlier by Jean Ribault. Lestringant's careful reading of the interactions between image and text grapples

with the geopolitical context of the work's publication, some twenty-five years after the event, while attempting to reconstruct Native American perspectives, which he discerns in the graphic codes of the conqueror.

Because of his interest in the textual legacy of French Florida, John H. Pollack, who is currently working on the circulation of Native words in early European texts about the Americas, chose to analyze all contemporary accounts of the 1565 Spanish attack upon the French colony of Fort Caroline and the "*écriteaux*" (literally labels, or signs) that the leader of the Spanish expedition, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, placed near the necks of the people he hanged. As reported by Laudonniere, these "*écriteaux*" read: "I do this not to Frenchmen, but to Lutherans," thus inflecting Menendez's actions with the religious controversies and struggles of the Reformation and its Catholic response. Conversely the French attempts at colonizing North Florida have been generally interpreted as a Protestant response to the persecution of Huguenots at the eve of the French wars of religion. Minutely deconstructing the narratives of the event, with an emphasis on Laudonniere's, Pollack calls into account the dominant scholarly perspective. More than Protestantism, he argues, it is the alliance, even the *amitié*, with the Timicua that contemporary French and English accounts promoted as central to the identity of French Florida.

Building on his previous work about transcultural commerce and global systems theory for the interpretation of Elizabethan theater, Daniel Vitkus gives a Marxist reading of the same 1562–1565 events within the context of commercial capitalism and European colonization that fostered permanent war among the European settlers, especially in border zones such as Florida. Beyond the indispensable microhistorical approach, he pleads for an understanding of the tumultuous history of Fort Caroline as "a local conflict within a trans-imperial system."

Using little-known primary sources from Spain, Florida, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico, Jane Landers extends chronologically the examination of the French–Spanish conflict in Florida to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She also extends it geographically to situate Florida in a "Mediterranean" space that involved the Caribbean Sea as well as the Gulf of Mexico. This meant that the plight of black slaves in the Spanish and French colonies, where they sometimes formed the vast majority of the population, became an essential consideration in the struggle between the two colonial powers until 1819, when Spain sold Florida to the United States. Landers sheds new light on the revolutionary period in particular, when France sought to instigate rebellion in Florida and the "Black Auxiliaries" of Carlos IV responded by fighting for Spain.

Extending Jane Landers's pioneering work on Georges Biassou, one of the principal leaders of the Saint-Domingue slave revolt of 1791, Erica Johnson proposes here a new perspective on the black royalist, viewing him as a free man of color from a French colony trying to adapt to a new life in a Spanish frontier settlement. The

capital city of St. Augustine, home to a great deal of French revolutionary intrigue, became the place of residence of Biassou when he sided with Spain after leaving the island in 1795, following defeat by his rival Toussaint Louverture. Using Biassou's case as a litmus test for a comparison between the French and Spanish slave systems, Johnson emphasizes that his case was not unique, as other members of the Black Auxiliaries continued to serve in Florida's black militia until Spain surrendered the colony to the United States.

After the failure of French diplomatic and military attempts to reconquer it, Florida took on the status in France of a Romantic myth embodied in Chateaubriand's novel *Atala la Floridienne* (1801), the bestseller of Napoleonic and Restoration France. Meanwhile, French travelers, writers, and journalists repeatedly contrasted an ideal French colony that never was—despite the constant flow of individual French settlers into Florida—with the harsh realities of Spanish and English colonization, and then, in turn, the allegedly "barbarian" society imposed by the United States, especially after the Civil War.

Following Chateaubriand's *Atala la Floridienne*, which ignited a fashion for all things Florida in France that lasted well until the 1830s, Jules Verne's two novels set in Florida—*From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) and *North Against South* (1886)—helped keep the French floridian dream alive to the end of the nineteenth century. As Jean-Philippe Mathy convincingly shows, Verne's own version of the bountiful American Eden in *From the Earth to the Moon* occupies a central place in the French intertextual representation of the New World. In *North versus South*, by contrast, Verne uses the opposition between Northern and Southern Florida to side with the Union. Celebrating the abolitionist cause, he unequivocally condemns the Southern alliance between rich slave-owners and a reactionary "populace" of poor whites. The epic conflict between Good and Evil in the tropical wetlands of the Everglades offers one of the most effective examples of Verne's political streak.

By the twentieth century, French and Francophone observers came to see Florida less as an object of nostalgia and more as a partner in a new relationship. The performances given by Sarah Bernhardt, the most celebrated actress in France, in Tampa and Jacksonville in 1905-1906, amidst one of her many American tours, signaled the state's coming of age from an agrarian frontier to a playground for the rich and famous. Lela Felter-Kerley illustrates how Bernhardt's visit took place at a propitious moment in the state's history as the extension of railroad lines and the building of luxury hotels not only aided in the larger reconstruction of a "New South," but also contributed to the amalgamation of French culture with Florida pioneer life.

The last two essays in the collection address francophone issues that have become pressing in present-day Florida. The state now draws growing numbers of French and francophone holidaymakers and Quebecois "snowbirds," while serving as a refuge and coveted haven for Haitian boat people and refugees. Haitians, in fact,

now constitute a significant part of the floridian population, above all in Miami and the South.

Taking account of these developments, the sociolinguist Hélène Blondeau offers here the results of a pioneering inquiry based on her own fieldwork to identify and classify changes in the linguistic habits of French speakers on the move. She focuses her attention on the Quebecois snowbirds along with, as they are sometimes called in Southwestern Florida, first- and second-generation "Floribecs," who maintained ties with the *Belle Province*. Joubert Satyre, for his part, examines representations of a utopian Florida for the refugees and asylum seekers fleeing Haiti in the novels of two major figures in the literature of the Haitian diaspora: Émile Ollivier's *Passages* (1991) and Dany Laferrière's *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune Nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit?* (2002). Both works take as their starting point the "Little Haiti" of Miami.

These contrasting social realities, along with the presence of a growing number of francophone Africans in Orlando and Tampa, and French nationals throughout the state, has helped ensure that the French language is spoken today by more people in Florida than in any other state in America. That fact gives new meaning to the age-old expression of *Floride française*, and suggests that the future of the French and francophone presence in the state may be as rich as its past.

Notes

[1] On 20-21 February 2014, as part of the celebrations of the four hundred and fiftieth anniversary of French heritage in Florida, Florida State University's Institute for Contemporary French and Francophone Studies and the Institute on Napoleon and the French Revolution organized an international scholarly conference about the place of French and francophone culture in Florida from the sixteenth century to the present day. The best papers were selected and carefully revised to present a global overview of *la Floride française.*