1

Shell Mounds and Indianness

On January 16, 1966, the Daughters of the American Revolution's Boca Ciega chapter unveiled their marker at Pinellas Point Mound, a twenty-foot shell midden near my adopted home in St. Petersburg, Florida. The plaque commemorated Fray Luis Cáncer de Barbastro, a Dominican killed in 1549 on a "friendship seeking expedition" with the "Calloosa" Indians. The weather gods cooperated with the DAR, delivering one of those obscenely temperate, postcard-perfect winter afternoons on the southern Gulf Coast—clear skies, light breeze, high in the upper sixties. The ceremony went off without a hitch. A guest speaker explained the mound's significance. The ladies unveiled the bronze marker. Chapter regent Lena Blomstrom and her sister drove the speaker home. Then Blomstrom's day soured. While she was sitting in the car, a thief snatched her sister's purse. Blomstrom, a stocky, pistol-packing redhead, took off after the purse-snatcher, "hollering like a banshee," but the thief got away. That evening, Blomstrom called the mayor to complain about crime in the city. While she had him on the phone, she asked why he had missed the dedication. The mayor dodged, claiming that he had failed to wake up from a nap.[1]

Local politics, however, suggest other forces at work. The mound, as Blomstrom well knew, already had a story. Six years earlier, the DAR's more established and prestigious Princess Hirrihigua chapter had planted a sign at the exact same site. The later decision made no sense. The new marker trespassed onto the turf of a better-connected social set; to make matters worse, the revised history diminished the site's cachet. According to the Princess Hirrihigua ladies, on this spot their namesake rescued a castaway named Juan Ortiz from the Pánfilo de Narváez expedition. The smitten Indian princess saved a helpless Spaniard. Locals claim Hirrihigua, also known as Ulele, as an inspiration for the Pocahontas myth. St. Petersburg's mayor gained little by tinkering with this cherished bit of local lore, particularly as it was endorsed by the town elite. The site (8Pi108 in state files) would remain what it is called today, Princess Mound.[2]

FIGURE 7. Manuscript map showing the ubiquity of "shell heaps," or middens, in the early Tampa Bay area. From S. T. Walker, "Preliminary Explorations among the Indian Mounds in Southern Florida," *Smithsonian Institution Annual Report*, 1879. (Smithsonian Institution Archives, Image # SIA2019-006028a)

The lesson here? We have a deep-seated need to fix history onto a place. The urge to commemorate can blow past details, and in Florida especially, faux history will run amok. "You have no idea how hard it is to invent a tradition," a beleaguered booster in the John Sayles film *Sunshine State* cries.[3] Something about this tourist haven of a state feeds the desire to physically site a storied past. Blame "Disneyfication." Blame the turnstiling population. Blame catastrophic hurricanes that periodically wash the landscape clean, but no Indian mound in this sandy sprawling peninsula will be left unmarked. The fixation with markers is problematic, because Florida's First People built mounds everywhere (figure 7). Up and down the Gulf Coast, precontact groups gathered mollusks and fish from the mangroves and sea grass flats. They tossed the leftover shells and bones into heaps. The shell heaps grew into middens, or mounds. As food sources waxed and waned, the Indians repurposed the old mounds. They buried the dead in middens. Some middens were adopted for sacred or ceremonial purposes. Others remained garbage dumps. Many shell deposits became road fill in the early twentieth century.

The mounds that did survive would get a sign, as mid-twentieth century developers latched onto famous names and slapped up markers. Case in point: site 8Pi108, or Princess Mound. This particular midden (once part of a larger complex) inhabits the heart of Pinellas Point, a charming neighborhood labeled in the 1920s "the healthiest spot on earth" and known among realtors for its pink concrete streets. When property values in the "Pink Streets" spiked in the 1960s, not one but two DAR chapters sunk a plaque at the most obvious landmark.[4] Official histories often follow the money, that is no secret, and while the second marker was forgotten, the earlier story stuck. Homes in the "Pink Streets" easily top six figures today. To question the veracity of a love story between the Spanish conquistador and Indian princess, in short, runs against the economic grain. And if the local color is good for business, why dig too deeply?

But this charming romance overshadows a less dramatic lesson about how local history gets made. The desire to fix a story onto archeological site 8Pi108, this heap of fish bones, tells us quite a bit about interpretative authority and prestige. Place-making intersects with geography and class. The Princess Hirrihigua DAR, representing the white-gloved elite, worked behind the scenes. They stayed out of the newspaper, at least until death; their obituaries tick off family pedigrees and college degrees. Members of the Boca Ciega chapter, by contrast, held down day jobs. Unable to linger over luncheons, they met on weekends. Chapter regent Lena Blomstrom never lacked means (her uncle was the mayor of Dalton, Georgia, Carpet Capital of the World) but in St. Petersburg she worked with the evening paper (the *Independent*) and later hawked real estate, selling "the good earth and everything on it." Noted for her

crime-fighting efforts, plucky Lena Blomstrom believed in taking policy, law, and even place-making into her own hands. (Like fellow memorializer Gutzon Borglum, she was sympathetic to the Ku Klux Klan.) Newspaper profiles depict her staring down the public through cat-eye glasses, courting attention in a manner the Princess Hirrihigua ladies would have found déclassé.[5]

This is not just a St. Petersburg story, of course. Circle the entirety of Tampa Bay and one cannot help but stumble onto tales of the Spanish-Indian encounter; many of these slide freely from the implausible to the loosey-goosey to the downright absurd. No less than five different municipalities claim ties to Hernando de Soto. My favorite beach in Pinellas County is Fort De Soto, a county park constructed over a military outpost from the Spanish-American War, filled with spoilage from the nearby shipping lanes into Port Tampa Bay. Across the shimmering Sunshine Skyway Bridge, in Bradenton, the National Park Service operates the De Soto National Memorial, which each April commemorates the landing on property donated by a local doctor. In downtown Tampa, the "De Soto Oak" shades the front porch of a grand hotel, now a university, built in the Moorish style by railroad magnate Henry Plant. Under the ancient live oak and Victorian minarets, a 1926 tablet declares that here de Soto "parleyed with the Indians." Not to be outdone, even towns with legitimate claims to the past will supersize their heritage. The natural springs of Safety Harbor, favored by European tourists, sit by a mound complex once visited by Pedro de Menéndez de Avilés, St. Augustine's founder and La Florida's first successful *adelantado*, or governor. Probably because Menéndez's name lacks the same recognition, Safety Harbor felt compelled to latch onto better-known conquistadors. A marker, approved by the Florida Historical Society in 1998 (!), claims that de Soto passed through Safety Harbor, having found "the legendary fountain of youth somehow missed by Ponce de Leon."

Who writes this *mierda*?

How on earth did Safety Harbor get the state historical society to sign off on obvious fluff? In Florida the transient population has created a countering need for monuments; self-styled natives scramble to memorialize what they see as vanishing or lost, defending what they regard to be the "real" Florida. But authenticity is never an easy quest, particularly here. A place-oriented history runs counter to what the documentary record can deliver; put differently, the archive will not yield what boosters want. The scholarship mistranslates. Unlike the first English invaders of North America, Spanish conquistadors marked their landings by date. White settlers of New England said "where," while the Spanish focused on "when." The Pilgrims stepped onto Plymouth Rock, while Ponce de Leon christened La Florida de las Pascuas—naming the sandy spit he took for an island after the Easter season, not for its flowers.[6] Using liturgy

as a temporal map, conquistadors couched reports rhetorically, for readers on the far side of the Atlantic. The initial fixation with time over space would then shape what later residents could recover. As a result, Florida history has descended into a game of commemorative piñata, where antiquarians tease out the longitudes and latitudes from documents that are cycled around the calendar of saints. Later claims on markers swim between varied forces: evidence read against the grain, local politics, and the desire for cast-bronze stories on a landscape of transience.

Take Pánfilo de Narváez, an early adelantado who landed somewhere off the Pinellas Peninsula on Good Friday, 1528. Narvaéz's disastrous decision making and misadventures were memorialized by one of the expedition's four survivors, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca—he of the "cow's head." Cabeza's de Vaca's one book goes by many titles, sometimes referred to as *Naufragios* or *Shipwrecks*, elsewhere as *Relación* or *Chronicle*. Regardless of the name, his short work stands as one of the true classics of early American literature, a staple of the survey course and a readable account that Gabriel García Márquez augustly credited as the starting point of Latin American fiction. The story's prominence has fed the inevitable speculation about landing sites, with locals taking their turn to swing at the piñata of place. Many St. Petersburg residents claim a large mound, about ten miles north of Pinellas Point, locally known as Jungle Prada. With archaeological evidence at slim to none, the popular histories rest on probability, a thin paper trail, and the residue of earlier histories. No one cares about the archaeology of a story (not if the research undermines the significance we have preemptively given a place). For example: the Cabeza de Vaca–Jungle Prada connection dates back to the early twentieth century, when a realtor and antiquarian named Walter Fuller started looking for meaning in Pinellas County. Fuller owned property near the Jungle Prada mound, in what was still a developing part of town, and he wanted the city to run a streetcar in the direction of his investment. So the speculator snatched the low-hanging fruit of Cabeza de Vaca and created a destination. (Walter Fuller also fed the Fray Cáncer de Barbastro story to Lena Blomstrom.) The story circulated as local lore. It got an upgrade when academically trained historians cited Fuller. With no one checking the backstory behind the footnotes, antiquarian speculation hardened into scholarly fact.[7]

Scholars of early American literature like myself pay attention to these points of myth manufacturing. We are historians of stories. We want to know how, why, where, or upon what terms a given narrative takes shape. The problem with "place" is that it lends concreteness to the airy realm of writerly imagination. The work of a literary critic differs from that of a social scientist or shovel-in-hand archaeologist, because where one set of scholars seek to untangle fact

from myth, for us, it's all story. In literature classes we learn to unpack layers of narrative, only to uncover more narrative. English majors suspend—momentarily—any belief in bedrock truth. Those wanting to know "what happened" are better served with another major. We are fine with multiple versions of a truth. (That is why English majors often make good attorneys.) The distinction between scholarly disciplines deserves clarification, because so many works of early American "literature" purport to chronicle events. Literary texts, meanwhile, do not provide a longed-for grounding; if anything, they unsettle this desire for stable truth. As a result, it takes a surprising amount of training to peel back the layers of the textual onion—to weigh the early chronicles alongside literary conventions, rhetorical angles, variants, and cultural contexts.

But that is what we do with literature. With the American survey I put Cabeza de Vaca early in the syllabus, right after a unit on oral traditions, because I want students to consider experience against narrative construct. Place grounds knowledge; place also tricks us. We want to believe the signs saying, "This happened here," but any honest reading of Cabeza de Vaca calls into question the topographic impulse. His book was not a roadmap, some direct line into the precontact past. Like his contemporaries, Cabeza de Vaca wrote his *Relación* in retrospect, long after stepping foot in La Florida and fully removed from the physical setting. He had an agenda—namely to secure the position of adelantado, not in St. Petersburg, Florida, but in South America, on the Río de la Plata, north of Buenos Aires. The desire to persuade the Spanish authorities far outweighed his concern with delineating the terrain. Look no further than his account of the 1528 entrada. Cabeza de Vaca renders the landing with no regard for topography, in full procedural detail: banners unfurl ("*el governador levantó pendones por Vuestra Magestad*"), legalities fly ("*tomó la possessión de la tierra en su real nombre*"), and nods to His Majesty Carlos V heed protocol ("*como Vuestra Magestad lo mandava*"), yet the setting remains unrecognizable.[8] We get bureaucratic formalities, no clues about place.

In class I ask students to look at the frontispiece of their book. The 1542 edition features a gaudy two-headed eagle, with a crown and wings spread over an imperial crest. Cabeza de Vaca spins La Florida to fall within the realm of the Flemish-speaking Holy Roman Emperor and Spanish King Carlos V. Using Narváez as a foil, the author positions himself as the proper agent of a Christian conquest. The plot unfolds with that agenda in mind. On Good Friday 1528 (again, liturgical dates), the soldiers unlade their weakened herd of *caballos* (horses, root word for the Spanish noble or *caballero*). A sequence of bad decisions by Narváez leads to shipwreck and then privation. Cabeza de Vaca and the other stragglers survive on tree bark, sea water, caballo, and (yes) caballero. One of only four to return, the author later casts himself as a wilderness

Messiah. He rises from a makeshift tomb somewhere in Texas and heals Indians in the desert Southwest, bringing these pagans to the Christian fold and "*obediençia de la Imperial Magistad*." Florida is an afterthought, the Indians twice removed, and the Spanish exchanges, mere gibberish. The Tocobagas, he writes, "made many signs and threatening gestures to us and it seemed to us that they were telling us to leave the land, and with this they parted from us without producing any confrontation and went away."[9] Who can say what was intended, what was signaled or said?

Signs snap from their signification.

At this point of the course, I emphasize the need to shake up received truths. Literary study helps us parse out the lines between narrative and experience—which is why I start with "place." For an extra credit exercise, I ask students to track down local mounds. I ask them to visit Princess Mound and Jungle Prada. On what authority does one claim possession? What do we make of this word, *authority*? I direct students to the first dictionary of the Spanish language, the *Tesoro de la Lengua Castellano o Española* (1611), by the scholar-priest Sebastián de Covarrubias Horozco. Covarrubias's appropriately titled *Treasury* includes cognates for the word *autoridad* (authority). He cites the verb form, *autorizar una cosa*, "to authorize something"; an authority, Covarrubias notes, carries the weight of Holy Writ. An autoridad also provides the basis for "funding a proposition." A scrivener who authorizes a document ensures its "fidelity" to church and Crown.[10] By shaping memory, writers stake verbal claims.

"History is never innocent," the geographer Derek Gregory reminds us. Intellectual and popular histories "are ways of locating claims," of bolstering "authoritative and legitimate" transfers also "by negation." Words hold currency; the transfers produce anxiety. Geographer and social theorist David Harvey links authority and space to money. Currency liquidates any claim from its physical grounds; when we circulate tender, we set labor in motion, accruing value here and consuming somewhere else.[11] As with currency, the integrity of words in transit demand scrutiny. When we pay for gasoline, I remind students, a screen informs us that a payment is "authorizing." What does that mean? Literally, remote and central computers interface to confirm the legitimacy of my purchasing power. By signing my name, or pecking the date of my wedding anniversary into the keypad, I agree to stand by the withdrawal. The vendor wants to know, is this chump at the pump true to his word?

An expanded realm throws language into crisis. On what basis do words keep their "fidelity?" What authority underwrites verbal claims across physical space? Cabeza de Vaca assumes the mantle of church and Crown in the push for the position of adelantado. He dedicates the account to his "Holy, Imperial, Catholic Majesty." During the party's landing, on Good Friday 1528, the

Spaniards seize possession "como Vuestra Magestad lo mandava." Credentials are shown, protocol followed, titles presented "as was required," etc. But words usurp. In this relación, I ask my students, what happens to native communication? They hide. They deceive. Then the narrative deconstructs. Although "they spoke to us," Cabeza de Vaca writes, "since we did not have an interpreter, we did not understand them." Students invariably laugh at this scene, and rightly so; were it not for genocide, for the tragic series of events that start with airborne disease and end with shell mounds used for road fill, the dubious terms of "authority" would be comic.

What is at stake in the ownership of words? Grasping for relevance, even struggling with triviality, I try to explain to undergraduates the links between language and possession. I offer an example from my own childhood. Every Christmas, before my parents divorced, they sent a holiday letter to extended family and friends. My siblings and I hated those letters. We made fun of their pretensions. I asked my parents to stop. Of course, they persisted. Near strangers learned how their eldest son graduated from college; how son number two was an advertising intern; that I made all-county in cross-country; that my younger sister attended a prestigious summer camp at the Rhode Island School of Design for artsy teens. There was never any mention of who was floundering or smoking too much pot. The embarrassing letters stripped the kids of their stories. My father asked us to read the drafts but the content never changed—so we endured his puffery. The signed and stamped Christmas letters fanned out to other suburban nodes across the United States. The appearance of a stable family was essential to my father's success in corporate life. The cards and letters served as ritualistic currency, certainly a pleasure for both of my parents but a calculated effort by my father to boost his value in business transactions. I rejected his reality of gray suits and suburban commutes, though I am guilty of similar trespasses with this book (airing family laundry for publication). My son has already told me he does not care what I write; he says he will never read this book. The kid challenges the fidelity of my account. With every essay, I ask myself, do my words carry "stamp and seal?"

Rewind and fast-forward again: from the mid-twentieth to the sixteenth century, then back to the present. Rival chapters of the DAR have spun competing historical narratives about 8Pi108. Over the decades, meanwhile, neighborhood kids staked their own claims to the mound, becoming what Michel de Certeau calls "poets of their own acts." When I first stumbled onto the park, kids were jamming dirt bikes down the midden's north face. Restless teenagers had clearly found uses for the mound. They went there to drink, smoke, toke, study human anatomy . . . to do what teenagers do. Angered by the irreverence and unmoved by the charms of youth, the Pinellas Park Civic Association

vowed to "restore" the park. Fencing went up and new meaning went in. The city cleaned out the used condoms and built an ADA-compliant staircase over the bike rut. The native plant society sank beautyberry, wild coffee, coontie, and calcium-hungry marlberry into the shelly soil. The Cáncer de Barbastro marker got moved next to the Princess Hirrihigua sign, and the city added two more signs, creating a veritable forest of historical markers.

The two DAR chapters can still claim the Indian princess and a martyred priest. A third marker now also asks, "What Happened to the Tocobaga Indians?" If accuracy is the concern, the additional sign is admittedly an improvement; the "Calloosa" who killed Father Luis lived further south, down the coast. But some archaeological liberties remain. The new sign folds scientific precision into fuzzy romance. It depicts pot shards, measured to the millimeter, alongside racy illustrations of a priest wearing a loin cloth and of a copper-skinned fisherman battling a hammerhead shark. My patience runs out with the disclaimer on the fourth sign. "Although some of the markers placed around the mound are not historically accurate," the newest sign reads, "they have been a significant part of the lore surrounding the mound and its early inhabitants. They have been left here to remind us of those who sought to preserve history as they perceived it." Okay, so every generation gets its turn. But this disclaimer, with its excruciating prose, replicates a common scholarly error. The sign exploits the unspoken latitude granted to the word "history." When using the word as an adjective ("historically accurate"), we draw an unconscious equation (or homologue) between story and Truth. The "some," in "some of the markers," implies that not *all* of the signs are inaccurate. A "Truth" is out there, the sign implies, even if prior interpreters were mistaken. Good historians do not conflate "history" and the "past," of course. The past is what happened, history is the telling, and "historically inaccurate" can mean two different things. All narratives are historical; they change over time. As an archaeologist who shovel-tested this site told me, "interpretations change as you get more information." To push the suggestion further: stories change as societies' needs for the stories change.

Landscapes fib, just like the signs. Nature's materiality—and the moral weight of native history—keeps us from seeing a city park as human construct. With Princess Mound, the least ingenuous claims actually came from the local native plant society. To supplement the new signs and ADA-compliant handrail, the local environmentalists put in native Florida plants. On the old shell mound, they sank alkaline-loving, shade tolerant flora. In doing so, they also misinterpreted the site. If Florida's first people could travel back in time, they would not recognize the environment today. Pines were the dominant species in the sixteenth century. The Spanish named the Pinellas peninsula after *Pinus elliottii*, a fire-dependent species that thrives in highly dynamic landscapes. Early

visitors described the area as being full of scrub oak, dwarf palmetto, and Florida rosemary, a fragrant shrub that needs full sun. Through most of its modern history, 8Pi108 was bare except for a single tree, on top, with 1840 carved in the trunk. (The tree is no longer there.) A Smithsonian report from 1879 described the Pinellas Point area as a mosaic of scrub, sawgrass ponds, mangroves, and hammock. The Pinellas peninsula, ecologically speaking, should be in constant flux. Hurricanes are meant to tear through this area periodically, and what the storms do not clear, fire then should level.[12] Twentieth-century users stabilized the flux. Today's suburban landscape favors hardwoods and shade. Scientists do not have a name for this current ecosystem, but I would call it "xeric hammock with a Chemlawn understory." The native plant society constructed a habitat that is, for lack of a better term, *unnatural*.

Traveling into the past is tricky business. As we dig into the story of a place, we pull out crosshatched memories. A concretely experienced setting can deceive. Because the native plant society deals with flora, "authentic" flora at that, locals in St. Petersburg, Florida, stop seeing the physical landscapes as a field of interpretation. Any literary journey into early America will cut across misremembered terrain. Cabeza de Vaca's rhetorical aims testify to the dangers of equating between literature and fact, narrative and truth. Squabbles over the Pinellas Point Mound remind us, as well, that readers of early American texts sift through interpretative layers. We read the texts and their legacies simultaneously. The forest of historical markers around site 8Pi108 speaks to the ongoing process of explanation. The native plant society half-knowingly froze a landscape that should be defined by constant change; the signs today present our most recent history as the most accurate. If early writings from the Spanish borderlands teach us anything, it is that all accounts remain subject to challenge. Topographic histories, real or imagined, remain gloriously open. Any fool who tries to pin down the one story of a place will fare no better than the upstart DAR chapter, who challenged a city's elite and then called to badger the mayor. When pressed, the mayor of course lied, reminding us now to proceed with caution. The pursuit of "real place" quickly descends to folly. Stories of a place always have a backstory. Every town has its Lena Blomstrom.