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1575

## Memoir

Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda

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### Recommended Citation

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# Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

## Escalante Fontaneda, Memoir

*At mid-century, a thirteen-year old Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda shipwrecked on the Florida Keys. On his way to Spain, where he had been born, to start his formal education, Fontaneda was captured by the Florida Indians and lived amongst them for seventeen years, traveling with the Indians, learning native culture, and acquiring valuable knowledge about the Florida peninsula. His 1575 account, or “Memoir,” describes the rugged environment, flora and fauna, foodways, geographic and ethnic regions.*

*Before Fontaneda’s arrival, others sought gold and a river of eternal youth in Florida. However, Fontaneda’s experience in La Florida had him in desire of other things—valuable pearls around the Southern coast of Florida, cattle and Spanish supremacy over the Florida natives.*

*Historically, Fontaneda’s account provides the city of Tampa’s earliest written mention (“Tanpa”) as well as the names of the important villages of the Calusa. Also, this document is instrumental to the development of the fountain of youth legend, as it contains one of the earliest mentions of Juan Ponce de León’s search for the healing waters of Florida.*

*Many Spaniards on cross-Atlantic trade routes had shipwrecked on the Florida Cays or sandbars and coral reefs like Fontaneda. He had shipwrecked on what is known today as the Florida Keys, but were then the Martyrs (Martires) because so “many [Spanish] men have suffered from them.”*

Edited by Alisa Roberts, University of South Florida St. Petersburg

### Further Reading

Brickhouse, Anna. *The Unsettling of America: Translation, Interpretation, and the Story of Don Luis Velasco, 1560-1945*. New York: Oxford U P, 2014.

Escalante de Fontaneda, Hernando. "Memoir of the things, the shore, and the Indians of Florida, to describe which, none of the many persons who have coasted that country knows how to describe it" [ca. 1575]. Transl. Buckingham Smith. Washington, 1854.

Very Powerful Lord:

The Islands of Yucayo and of Ahite fall on one side of the Channel of the Bahama. There are no Indians on them, and they lie between Havana and Florida.

There are yet other islands, nearer to the mainland, stretching between the west and east, called the Martires; for the reason that many men have suffered on them, and also because certain rocks rise there from beneath the sea, which, at a distance, look like men in distress. Indians are on these islands, who are of a large size: the women are well proportioned, and have good countenances. On these islands there are two Indian towns; in one of them the one town is called Guarugunbe, which in Spanish is *pueblo de Llanto*, the town of weeping; the name of the other little town, Cuchiyaga,<sup>[1]</sup> means the place where there has been suffering.

These Indians have no gold, less silver, and less clothing. They go naked, except only some breech-cloths woven of palm, with which the men cover themselves; the women do the like with certain grass that grows on trees. This grass looks like wool, although it is different from it.

The common food is fish, turtle, and snails (all of which are alike fish), and tunny and whale; which is according to what I saw while I was among these Indians. Some eat sea-wolves; not all of them, for there is a distinction between the higher and the lower classes, but the principal persons eat them. There is another fish which we here call *langosta* (lobster), and one like unto a *chapin* (trunk fish), of which they consume not less than of the former.

On these islands are many deer, and a certain animal that looks like a fox, yet is not, but a different thing from it. It is fat and good to eat. On other islands are very large bears; and, as the islands run from west to east, and the land of Florida passes eastwardly towards these islands, that must be the reason of bears being on them; for the mainland is near, and they can cross from island to island. But what was a great wonder to the captives who were there, and to those of us in other places, was the existence of deer on the Islands of Cuchiyaga, the town of which I have spoken. Much more would I relate of each thing, but that I have other objects which concern me more, and I leave it.

On these islands is likewise a wood we call here *el palo para muchas cosas* (the wood for many uses), well known to physicians; also much fruit of many sorts, which I will not enumerate, as, were I to attempt to do so, I should never finish.

To the west of these islands is a great channel, which no pilot dares go through with a large vessel; because, as I have said, of some islands that are on the opposite side towards the west, which are without trees, and formed of sand. At some time they have been the foundations of cays, and must have been eaten away by the currents of the sea, which have left them thus bare, plain sand. They are seven leagues in circumference, and are called the Islands of the Tortugas;

for turtle are there, and many come at night to lay their eggs in the sand. The animal is of the size of a shield, and has as much flesh as a cow; it is like all kinds of meat, and yet is fish.

Running from south to north between Habana and Florida, the distance to the Tortugas and the Martires is forty leagues; twenty leagues to the Martires, and thence other twenty to Florida—to the territory of Carlos, a province of Indians, which in their language signifies a fierce people, they are so-called for being brave and skillful, as in truth they are. They are masters of a large district of country, as far as a town they call Guacata, on the Lake of Mayaimi, which is called Mayaimi because it is very large. Around it are many little villages, which I will speak about hereafter. The distance in going from Habana to the farthest islands, which are beyond the Cape of the Martires and almost adjoin Florida, is sixty leagues; because those islands are near seventy leagues in extent, and run from west to east.

This channel has many passages, and many different outlets and little channels. The principal channel is very wide; across it are the Islands of Vermuda, of which I have some recollection of what the Indians said; but not wishing to extend this account in that direction, I return to what I was talking about, the termination of the islands of the Martires.

Toward the north the Martires end near a place of the Indians called Tequesta, situated on the bank of a river which extends into the country the distance of fifteen leagues, and issues from another lake of fresh water, which is said by some Indians who have traversed it more than I, to be an arm of the Lake of Mayaimi. On this lake, which lies in the midst of the country, are many towns, of thirty or forty inhabitants each; and as many more places there are in which people are not so numerous. They have bread of roots, which is their common food the greater part of the time; and because of the lake, which rises in some seasons so high that the roots cannot be reached in consequence of the water, they are for some time without eating this bread. Fish is plenty and very good. There is another root, like the truffle over here, which is sweet; and there are other different roots of many kinds; but when there is hunting, either deer or birds, they prefer to eat meat or fowl. I will also mention, that in the rivers of fresh water are infinite quantities of eels, very savory, and enormous trout. The eels are nearly the size of a man, thick as the thigh, and some of them are smaller. The Indians also eat *lagartos* (alligators), and snakes, and animals like rats, which live in the lake, freshwater tortoises, and many more disgusting reptiles which, if we were to continue enumerating, we should never be through.

These Indians occupy a very rocky and a very marshy country. They have no product of mines, or thing that we have in this part of the world. The men go naked, and the women in a shawl made of a kind of palm-leaf, split and woven. They are subjects of Carlos, and pay him tribute of all the things I have before mentioned, food and roots, the skins of deer, and other articles.

The Auditor Lucas Vasquez, a resident of Santo Domingo, and six others, townsmen of his, I think, left there with vessels, (of which some Indians of the Island of Yeaga, at the end of the Lucayo Islands, give account,) to see the river and land of Santa Elena. Seven leagues to the north of these is a town, which, instead of pronouncing it Orizta, they who went there called Chicora; and as to the other town, for Guale they said Gualdape. The Spaniards saw no more towns; for they explored no farther, and did not enter nor examine the coast in earnest, for fear of grounding their vessels and getting them lost. Thus they accomplished no more; although it is true that neither

gold nor silver is to be got there, as they are to be found only at places remote. It is said, that sixty leagues inland towards the north there are mines of gold and copper. At the mouth of a river, and by lakes, are towns, Otapali, Olagatano, and many others. The inhabitants are neither Chichimecas nor the people of the Jordan. The king is called *mayor y gran Señor* (chief and great lord) in our language; and in that of the Indians of Carlos, it is Certepe. The cacique is the greatest of the kings, having the renown of Montesuma.

The natives are poor at the place to which Lucas Basquez and other Spaniards went, although some seed pearls are found there in certain conchs. The catfish, oysters (roasted or raw), deer, roebuck, and other animals. While they kill these, the women bring wood to cook or broil on grates. If the Spaniards found any gold, it must have come a long way, from the mountains, and from that king of whom I just spoke.

The Jordan that is talked of, is a superstition of the Indians of Cuba, which they hold to because it is their creed, not because there is such a river. Juan Ponz de Leon, giving heed to the tale of the Indians of Cuba and Santo Domingo, went to Florida in search of the River Jordan, that he might have some enterprise on foot, or that he might earn greater fame than he already possessed and close his life, –which is the most probable supposition; or, if not for these objects, then that he might become young from bathing in such a stream. This thought was of itself proof that all must have been fiction that was told by the Indians of Cuba and its whole neighborhood, who, to satisfy their tradition, said that the Jordan was in Florida; to which at least I can say, that while I was a captive there, I bathed in many streams, but to my misfortune I never came upon the river. Anciently, many Indians from Cuba entered the ports of the Province of Carlos in search of it; and the father of King Carlos whose name was Senquene, stopped those persons, and made a settlement of them, the descendants of whom remain to this day. And the same objects that they who left their country came in quest of in the River Jordan, the kings and caciques of Florida, although savages, took information of and sought after, as though they had been a more polite people, that they might see what river that could be which did such good work, even to the turning of aged men and women back to their youth. So earnestly did they engage in the pursuit, that there remained not a river or a brook in all of Florida, not even lakes and ponds, in which they did not bathe; and to this day they persist in seeking that water, and never are satisfied. In the attainment of the promises of their faith, those of Cuba determined, for such was their vow, to venture their lives on that sea; and it ended in all that numerous people who went over to Carlos forming a settlement: but to this day youth and age find alike that they are mocked, and many have destroyed themselves. It is cause for merriment, that Juan Ponz de Leon went to Florida to find the River Jordan.

We will speak of the country of Abalachi, which is in the direction of Pánuco, where resounds the fame of its abundance of pearls; and it is certain that they do exist. Between Abalachi and Olagale is a river the Indians call Guasacaesgui, which means in our language, *Río de Cañas* (river of canes). On this river, arm of the sea, and coast, are the pearls, which are got in certain oysters and conchs. They are carried to all the provinces and villages of Florida, but principally to Tocabaga, the nearest town; because in it resides the king, who is chief cacique of the region lying on the right-hand side coming to Habana. He is called Tocabaga chile, has many vassals, and is an independent king. He lives inland on the last cape of the river. There are more than forty leagues of distance, following up the stream, to where Hernando de Soto thought to colonize; but

he did not do so, in consequence of his death. When that took place, the intention was abandoned, and the soldiers marched on. The Spaniards, on their way, hung the cacique of Abalachi, because he would not give them provision of maize for the journey; or, as the Indians of the town of Abalachi say, because their cacique had around his neck some large pearls, and in the middle of them a very big one, about the size of an egg of the turtledove, which there are in that country, and have nests in their season on trees; and this is what the Indians state. There are no mines of either silver or gold, at least the natives do know of any. Their food is maize and fish; and there is a very great deal of both. They kill a great many deer, antelopes, and other animals, that they eat; but their usual food is fish. They make bread from a certain root, such as I have described before as growing in swamps; and they have much fruit of many different kinds, which to mention would be endless.

These Indians do not wear clothing, not even the women. They go naked, except some dressed deerskins made into breechcloths, with which they only conceal their shame. The females cover themselves about the waist with the straw that grows on trees. This plant is like tow, or wool, but is brown, instead of white.

We will now leave Tocobaga, Abalachi, Olagale, and Mogoso, which are separate kingdoms; and I will name over the villages and towns of the deceased cacique Carlos, who was put to death by sentence of the Captain Reynoso. First, a place called Tampa, a large town, and another town, which is called Tomo; another, Tuchi; and another Soco; another by the name Ño, which signifies town beloved; another, Sinapa; and another, Sinaesta; and another, Metamapo; and another, Sacaspada; and another, Calaobe; and another, Estame; another, Yagua; another, Guevu; another, Muspa; another, Casitoe; another, Tatesta; another, Cayovea; and another, Jutun; another, Tequemapo; and another, with the name of Comachica; also, Quisiyove, and two other towns of that territory, the names of which I do not recollect, for it has been six years since I came from there. Besides, there are others inland, on the Lake of Mayaimi; and another town, and the first is Cutespa; another, Tavaguemue; another, Tomsobe; another, Enempa; and other twenty towns there are, of which I do not remember the names.<sup>[ii]</sup> There are also two towns more, which are on the Islands of the Yucayos, subject to Carlos, the Indian before mentioned; the one is called Guarungunve, and the other, Cuchiyaga. Carlos, after his father, was lord of these fifty towns, until the time of his execution, as I have said; and now Don Pedro reigns, the son of Sebastian. These two were brought to Havana by Pedro Melendez, that he might gratify them, and he directed that they should be so named; but they became worse than they were before he made them gifts, and still worse would matters have stood had they been christened; but, as I did not wish that they should be, they were not; for, by their conversation, I discovered that baptism was not lawful for them,—they were heretics; and since then it appears they have returned to their old ways, and are more wicked than they were formerly.

That people understand the greater part of our strategy, and are archers and men of strength. No one knows that country so well as I know it, who write this; for I was a captive among its inhabitants, from a child the age of thirteen years until I was thirty years old. I speak four languages but not the language of Ais and Jeaga, which is a country I never traveled into. I wish only to say this more of Carlos, —it is a large country, is rich in pearls, and possesses little gold, because it is far from the mines of Onagatano, which are distant on the snowy mountains of Onagatano, who is the farthest vassal of Abalachi and Olagatano, and is far from Olagale, Mogoso, and the people of

Cañegacola. These last, the Indians say, are numerous, and are great warriors; they go naked, although some of them are clothed in skins; and they are great painters, and whatever they see, they paint. They are called Cañogacola, which means a people without respect, skillful with the bow. But the good arms of the Spaniards will overcome them—good crossbows, firelocks, and shields, swords broad and sharp, good horses and escopetas, with one or two persons who understand their ways, the interpreters being true and trustworthy, not like the Biscayan, who would have betrayed Pedro Melendez to the Indians had it not been for me and a mulatto, who discovered the treason, otherwise everyone must have been slain, and I among the rest.

Pedro Melendez would not then have died in Santander, but in Florida, in the province of Carlos. There is no river nor bay there that can be hidden from me; and had I received the consideration I merit, the Indians at this day would be the vassals of our powerful king Don Felipe, whom God preserve many years! I have already said that the cacique is lord of the River of Canes, where the pearls and lands of lapis lazuli are, and that the gold is afar off in the last dependency and town of Olagale [Olagatano].

One Don Pedro Vizcaino, whom His Majesty made Keeper of the Swans, was a captive in this province. If he on whom this gift was graciously conferred had been more of a man, the Indians of Ais, Guacata, Jeaga, and their vassals, would already have been subjugated, and even many of them made Christians; but he was a man of little intelligence and capacity, so there is nothing more to be said. He understands well the language of Ais, and the languages of the other places mentioned, which are spoken as far as Mayaca and Mayajuaca, places toward the north; but I think that because of the order of Pedro Melendez to hang him, in consequence of a falsehood that he raised against Domingo Ruiz, his companion, he was frightened, and came to Spain with the news about Florida, and would not go back again. If he did go back, it must have been to bring with him a son he had among the Indians, as he brought him here and never went there more. And because of the unjust treatment to the interpreters, he desired not to go back, as others of us have not, remaining as we are without pay to this time; for, as we came destitute, it gave us little wish of returning to Florida to serve without an recompense.

The King of Ais and the King of Jeaga are poor Indians, as respects the land; for there are no mines of silver or of gold where they are; and, in short rich only by the sea, from the many vessels that have been lost well laden with these metals, as was the case with the transport in which Farfan and the mulatto owner were; with the vessel of the Vizcaino, in which came Anton Granado, who was a passenger, and was captured; and with the vessel of which Juan Christóval was master and captain, lost in the year '51 when the Indians murdered Don Martin de Guzman, the Captain Hernando de Andino, Procurador of the Province of Popayán, and Juan Ortiz de Zárate, Distributor of Santa Martha; and there came in her also two sons of Alonzo de Mena, with an uncle, all of them rich. He that brought least was I, but with all I brought twenty-five thousand dollars in pure gold; for my father and mother remained in Carthagena, where they were *comenderos* and served His Majesty in those parts of Peru, and afterwards in the city of Carthagena, where they settled, and I and a brother were born. Thence they sent us to Spain to be educated; when we were wrecked on Florida, as I have stated.

Other vessels have been lost, among them the armada of New Spain, which it was said the son of Pedro Melendez, was General for the Indians took a Spaniard that reached the shore whom they

found starving. And I saw him alive and talked with him and one Juan Rodriguez, a native of Nicaragua. He told us that they came from New Spain, and were going to Castile; that the General was a son of Pedro Melendez, the Asturian; that he came as a sailor in another vessel; and that the people of neither knew any thing of what had befallen the other, until the Indians armed themselves to go to the coast of Ais, when he saw them go and return with great wealth, in bars of silver and gold, and bags of reals, and much clothing. As he was newly captured, or found, and understood not the Indians, I and Juan Rodriguez were the interpreters for this man, and others, as we already knew the language. It was a consolation, though a sad one, for those who were lost after us to find on shore Christians companions who could share their hardships and help them to understand those brutes. Many Spaniards have saved their lives by finding themselves with Christian companions already there. For the natives who took them; would order them to dance and sing; and as they did not understand, and the Indians themselves are very mean, (for the most so of any are the people of Florida,) they thought the Christians were rebellious, and unwilling to do so. And so they would kill them, and report to their cacique that for their meanness and rebelliousness they had been slain, because they would not do as they were told; which was the answer, as I have said, made to the cacique when he would ask why they had killed them. One day, I, a Negro and two others, Spaniards recently made captives, being present, the cacique, in conversation with his vassals and great chiefs of his train about what I have just mentioned, asked me, I being *mas ladino* (better acquainted with the language than any one), saying: "Escalante, tell us the truth, for you well know that I like you much: When we tell these, your companions, to dance and sing, and do other things, why are they so mean and rebellious that they will not? or is it that they do not fear death, or will not yield to a people unlike them in their religion? Answer me; and if you do not know the reason, ask it of those newly seized, who for their own fault are captives now, a people whom once we held to be gods, come down from the sky." And I, answering my lord and master, told him the truth: "My Lord, as I understand it, they are not contrary, nor is it for any evil reason, but it is because they cannot understand you, which they earnestly strive to do." He said it was not true; that often he would command them to do things, and sometimes they would obey him, and at others they would not, however much they might be told. I said to him: "Even so, my lord, they do not intentionally behave amiss, nor for perversity, but from not understanding. Speak to them, that I may be a witness, and likewise this your free Negro." And the cacique, laughingly, said: "Se-le-te-ga," to the new comers; and they asked what it was he said to them. The Negro, who was near to them, laughed, and said to the cacique: "Master, I will tell you the truth; they have not understood, and they ask Escalante what it is you say, and he does not wish to tell them until you command him." Then the cacique believed the truth, and said to me: "Declare it to them, Escalante; for now do I really believe you." I made known to them the meaning of Se-le-te-ga, which is, "Run to the lookout, see if there be any people coming;" they of Florida abbreviate their words more than we. The cacique, discovering the truth, said to his vassals, that when they should find Christians thus cast away, and seize them, they must require them to do nothing without giving notice, that one might go to them who should understand their language. And so it happened, that the man just spoken of, who was called Pijiguini, was the first found after that. In our tongue his name was Martinez, a sailor, as before stated, who came from Mexico in the flota that was lost.

Leaving this matter aside, I desire to speak of the riches found by the Indians of Ais, which perhaps were as much as a million dollars, or over, in bars of silver, in gold, and in articles of jewelry made by the hands of Mexican Indians, which the passengers were bringing with them.

These things Carlos divided with the caciques of Ais, Jeaga, Guacata, Mayajuaco, and Mayaca, and he took what pleased him, or the best part. These vessels, and the wreck of the others mentioned, and of caravels, with the substance of the Indians of Cuba and Honduras who were lost while in search of the River Jordan, and who came well off, were taken by Carlos, and by the chiefs of Ais and Jeaga. The Indians of the Islands of Guaragunbe are rich; but, in the way that I have stated, from the sea, not from the land. From Tocobaga to Santa Elena, which may comprise a shore of six hundred leagues, there is neither gold nor silver native to the country, and only that of which I have spoken as coming by the sea. The land is abundant in pasturage; but I do not want to say for certain whether there is any fit for settlement or not, since the Indians can live on it; nor yet for the planting of sugar-cane, as I do not know it positively, although some stalks were set out which grew; but as I was not afterwards present, I did not see the result.

In all these provinces which I have named, from Tocobaga-chile to Santa Elena, the people are great anglers, and at no time lack fresh fish. They are great bowmen, and very faithless. I hold it certain they never will be at peace, and less will they become Christians. I will sign this assertion with my name as a very sure thing, for I know what I say. If my counsel be not heeded, there will be trouble, and matters be worse than they were before time. Let the Indians be taken in hand gently, inviting them to peace; then putting them under deck, husbands and wives together, sell them among the Islands, and even upon Terra Firma for money, as some old nobles of Spain buy vassals of the king. In this way, there could be management of them, and their number become diminished. This I say would be proper policy; and the Spaniards might then make some stock-farms for the breeding of cattle, and be there to safeguard the many vessels that are wrecked all the way along from Carlos to the Province of Sotoriva, in which is the port of San Agustin, and river of San Mateo. There the Lutherans of France had made a fort, and found a nook whence to plunder as many ships as should come from Terra Firma, whether from Mexico, or Peru, or from other parts; which they did, and retired to that river of San Mateo, where resides the perfidious cacique of Sotoriba, Alimacani, and of other places, his dependencies. Midway up the river San Mateo, sixty leagues inland, is another cacique, having an independent sovereignty, and being Lord of his land, whose name is Utina; and Saravai, and Moloa, and many others are his vassals, until coming to Mayaguaca, in the land of Ais, which lies towards Cañaberal, so called by our pilots who sail thither. With these two caciques Pedro Melendez made treaties of friendship. They have no gold, silver, or pearls; their people are poor, very treacherous and wicked, and great archers. They go naked, like the rest of whom I have spoken before.

By way of this River San Mateo, one may go to Tocobaga, on the other side of Florida, to the west; I do not mean all the way by the river, but in this manner: Enter over the bar of the San Mateo, and arrive at Zaravay, which is fifty or sixty leagues in the interior up the river, or at the Province of Utina, and there disembark, keeping a westerly course from town to town, until coming upon the people of Cañogacola, subjects of Tocobaga; and thence upon the country of Tocobaga itself, which lies within on another large river, where Soto was, and where he died.

With this I will end, and say no more; for, if the conquest of that country were about to be undertaken, I would give no further account of it than I have rendered. Its subjugation is befitting His Majesty, for the security of his armadas that go to Peru, New Spain, and other parts of the Indies, which pass, of necessity, along that shore and channel of the Bahama, where many vessels are wrecked, and many persons die; for the Indians are powerful archers, and oppose

them: and because of this, I say, it is well to have a small fort for the protection of that channel, with some income for its repair, and the maintenance of soldiers as a garrison in it, which income might be drawn from Mexico, Peru, the Island of Cuba, and all the rest of the Indies. Thus much should be done; and another thing also-to go in search of pearls, for there is no other wealth in that country. So, I conclude, and as this account may become important, I sign it.

HERNANDO D'ESCALANTE FONTANEDA ....

[i] Ku-chi(cha)ya-ya: "going-out (to) wail."

[ii] Escobedo, considered an important source on place names, provides clues to several toponyms: A-toh-che ("pouch"); Suk-ko ("muscadine grape"); Sint ap-a ("snake eaters"); Ni-ta im am-po ("bears their bowl"); Kal-li fo-bi ("deep spring"); Tek im am-po ("women their bowl); and Ton-so-be ("swallow tailed hawk").