

Isabella Menichiello

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Thesis Supplemental Paper

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As a historically and philosophically minded artist, the marrying of the academic and creative domains is essential for me. My exposure to research methods and scholarly sources in the subjects of history and philosophy through Honors courses has naturally overlapped with my inclination toward period piece and experimental storytelling to coalesce in an artistic mission and title equal parts philosopher, historian, and filmmaker. Through studies of phenomenology, I've become completely enamored with ways in which to explore time, perception, memory, and space in film. My tendencies in stories to distort and omit details of time, resulting in a more obscure temporal setting, as well as write from a place of subjectivity, have been strengthened in different ways by this psychology-philosophy hybrid, out of which the narrative structure for this concept was born.

So, the Honors Thesis project presented me with the opportunity to fully develop a concept I've had that involves all of that. That project is *The Swamp*. *The Swamp* is conceptualized as an hour-long horror, detective television series. In 1890s Florida, a town of outcasts comes under investigation when the three daughters of the resident royalty, the Crowley family, disappear without a trace at a nearby swamp. Tonally, the series is *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (2018) meets *The Knick* (2014) in that it is an unconventional period piece.

It's set in 1890s Florida, but not the one promised many of the advertisements I found during my research. The town where this mystery takes place may be "tropical and sunny," but it's a far cry from "a safe and valuable investment" (New York Times). The fictional town would

be located somewhere in the central, Southern region, just on the cusp of the massive Everglade Swamps, in between the already prosperous Florida Keys and the soon-to-be-discovered Miami.

Hodges' Crossing is a single strip of road lined with battered buildings on both sides and surrounded by marshy swampland. It's like the towns of the old west, but with humidity and palm trees. The structures all look as if they're sinking in on themselves. Buildings dip at odd angles and the greenery of the area slightly caves in. The central character of the show is the town itself. A savagely mistreated piece of land, war and constant reacquisition by Spain and Britain as well as US attempts to drain its water have left what was once sacred ground, disturbed. The supernatural is the actual judge and jury here. The dark swamp is inhabited by creatures ranging from alligators and snakes to the more mythical. Enchanted flora and fauna plague the area, everything from disease-ridden insects to poisonous plants. Meanwhile, a native cougar known as the Florida Panther and Owl witch stemming from Seminole legends roam the area along with a whole series of free agent beings of Native and Spanish origins.

Considering the period piece nature, my research has been primarily historical. The historical weirdness of Florida that has clearly influenced how odd the state still is. This time of settlement is an often forgotten part of American history. My research has led me to plot the history of colonial rule by Spain, briefly France, and Great Britain in addition to the conflicts with the Native American Seminole tribes who had previously occupied the area until its eventual acquisition by the United States. A great migration, especially from the North, followed shortly after the Civil War. While the Keys were quickly settled as a convenient trading port, cities like Miami were just gaining traction due to a new railroad under construction and destination resorts in the year when *The Swamp* is set, 1895.

While introducing the *Life and Adventures in South Florida*, published in 1885, Robert W. Davis spoke of the territory's fluctuating state, saying,

The life of the early “settler” when the bear and panther roamed the wilds of a then sparsely inhabited State... immigration from North and South and East and West has filled or is rapidly filling our waste places – when the palatial steamboat plies the waters where once quietly glided the canoe, and when the scream of the locomotive is borne upon the balmy southern air where once the warwhoop of the red man resounded.

(Canova)

With all the hype surrounding this migration, Florida was often mis-marketed and it's many regions were confused and misunderstood. Andrew Canova continues in his accounts as a soldier during the Seminole wars about this, saying,

Many people who have heard of the Everglades all their lives, have no idea of what the country looks like. Some imagine it to be a beautiful forest, where tropical birds fly through fruitladen trees; others imagine that it is an El Dorado, where one is almost sure to find gold or jewels. I understand that one prominent writer, and a citizen of Florida, pretending to write from experience, says that the Everglades will yet become the greatest winter resort in Florida. He speaks of “high, rolling land wild orange groves, and a rich soil and healthy climate, which must some day gain for it a world-wide reputation as a resort for invalids.” I can scarcely conceive of a more shameless misrepresentation.

(Canova)

This reputation as the next resort settlement could not have been further from the truth. Its decaying vegetation, dangerous animals, and labyrinth-like appearance cause many accounts of encounters with the land to sound something like “one of the most desolate deserts known to

mortal man” or that men declared that “one hundred dollars in gold would not tempt them to make another trip through the Everglades” (Canova). Thus, the fictional town of Hodges’ Crossing is a result of just this type of misconception.

Its residents are composed of odd, volatile, and eccentric characters who were fooled into settling in the area. They are criminals, travellers, and runaways that were stranded here by bad luck, of one sort or another. This cast of characters includes everything from a crass local dentist, Charlie Daggs, and a dwarf, Everett Sinclair, who runs an elusive apothecary shack, to a local, Roy McCreary, raised down the river in Ft. Thompson. However, the investigation will be followed through Mencía Santiago, a previous resident of Hodges’ crossing. Originally Spanish royalty, Mencía eloped with an Englishman and the two found themselves in Hodges’ in 1888. But after the tragic death of her husband and newborn, Mencía escaped in the night and found her way to New York where she has been working as a secretary at the police department for the past 16 years. She returns to investigate at the request of The Crowleys who are looking for someone with experience of the local terrain, exposure to law enforcement, and a personal connection to the case. Mencía is referred to in the slang for those of Spanish heritage who formed settlements that were secluded from larger communities, which, oddly enough, was the term “cracker.” The dynamic between Mencía and the other townspeople is representative of the volatile and often mismatched cultural identities that existed in these semi-settled Floridian communities.

The majority of the series’ plot lies with the Crowley sisters and family, but not in the traditional sense considering the three girls are already missing at the start of the series. The elusive and suspiciously prosperous family lives on the fringes of the community, transforming seemingly futile swampland into fertile farming grounds for bananas. They are a pillar in the

community for strictly financial reasons after having established a long-running power dynamic over the town and its residents upon initiating the original settlement. It is the task of the residents of Hodges' crossing to tell the viewer about the young girls, Clara, Edith, and Olive, as well as Mama and Papa Crowley. Perspectivism through narrative and editing structures brings together the overarching thematic throughlines of the series.

Folklore and its creation are at the heart of this story. What's been most important to me is establishing the overall thematic purposes of the narrative and its philosophical implications. The show is intended to operate in an air of mysticism and fear that can only come from a good ghost story around the campfire, exploring how societies construct dysfunctional truths through legends and ideologies. Hodges' Crossing is a place where people trap themselves in stagnation; imprison themselves to the idea that we are unchanging and stable beings. This way of thinking is solidified through our primacy of knowledge, thought, and philosophy in our various cultural systems and infrastructure. Mencía will go on a journey of debunking this untruth, this swamp in which "all human life is sunk deep," according to German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (Nietzsche). Mencía's character arc is reminiscent of Zarathustra's prophetic teachings for man's evolution. She will journey to become the "Overman" or *Übermensch*, in Nietzschean terms, to leave behind the contemptible "Last Man" of mediocrity and homogeneity that stem from our societal denigration of that which is sensuous and self-differentiating. In other words, our conditioned inclination to trade that which makes us unique for that which communes us. In the end, Mencía will give into the wickedness which Nietzsche believed essential to the drives and creativity of man, especially as he bridged the gap to the next evolution.

In phenomenology, there is a principle about "equipmentality" which states that when equipment – defined as our tools and our gear, something as simple as a pen - breaks, our

relation to the order, or nexus, of operation is called to attention. You're moved into the second mode of consciousness, the reflective, as you finally consider the equipment as equipment, rather than the conditioned first mode, the pre-reflective utilization of the useful. In the world of Hodges' Crossing, the disappearance of the Crowley daughters is the break of equipmentality; it brings awareness of the object sharply into focus. In this case, the object is the narrative construction about the truth of what builds a successful society. This is questioned and thus there is a breaking/shattering of narrative as equipment.

It's also a main concept of phenomenology that it is impossible to remove subjective experience. The search for objectivity, for "truth," is futile. Likewise, to Nietzsche, truth is equated with convention. This primacy of perception will be illustrated through point-of-view flashbacks, that tell and retell the events leading up to the disappearance and the dynamics of the town itself through distinctly subjective lenses. The narrative structure, thus, hinges on this subjectivity, on providing perceptions and aperceptions to unify the whole image of this object, this narrative construction of the Crowleys, of truth, etc.

The concept for this storytelling method originated when I read John Fowles' novel *A Maggot*. Instead of his usual style of meta-fictional narration, nearly the whole story is pieced together from the records of question and answer interviews that are presented as such. This style influenced me to apply a similar detective story method to the visual medium. It also fits nicely into the framework established in the historical accounts I've read. It is a great theme in the reports of the time that many of these writers were helping to settle the area by publishing detailed reports or communicating progress through letters. Many approach the task, however, with a certain gravitas about the state as they were attempting to be storytellers of their own narratives. They considered themselves pioneers and authorities because of their experiences.

These explorers and settlers wanted to relate their truths about a place that was so often misunderstood. Like Alonzo P. DeMilt, who introduced his novel saying, “This volume, as its title purports, is simply a record of the ramblings and adventures of a young and very adventurous American, who, commencing at the age of nine years, makes a bold midnight escape from the lighthouse keeper of St. Marks, FL” (Fitch). Likewise, Canova introduced his work, saying, “As this little book is not published for general circulation, I trust that the few family friends and relatives into whose hands it may find its way will judge it leniently and absolve me from the charge of undue egotism in placing so much of my personal experience in print. It is largely due to the fact that both children and grandchildren have so many times said papa or grandpa, tell me a story!”

These types of personal accounts of experiencing the world are the cornerstone of *The Swamp*. It is about the ontogeny of lore, the way and why of relating what we experience in the world, whether that be in a mystical swamp or not. This is, of course, something humans have always done and we do today – except it’s more often now in the form of posts on Instagram and Facebook. We’re all trying to connect and share our experiences of the world because we are all experiencing it in such unique ways. But are we better off because of the way in which we are interconnectedly perceiving this world?

The Swamp will explore how to reconcile our subjective experience in the world with our attempts to objectify it. This series is intended to condense these philosophical ideas and historical “truths” into a narrative for audiences. As Mencía and Hodges’ residents learn the dark family secret buried in the lineage of the Crowleys that can account for both their prosperity and misfortune, they will also discover what truly lies in the darkness of the swamp of humanity.

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