

# Florida: *Dirty South, Global South*



Memorial Tree #1 by Peter Nolan

*The Memorial Tree, also known as Roy's Tree*

BY RUSS McSPADDEN

PHOTOS BY PETER NOLAN AND CLYDE BUTCHER

## **Paramilitaries and Gators**

"This is beautiful country here, real rugged. See that tree, that's Roy's tree, that's where a guy hung himself. Some people come out here to get married," Grey says, pointing out an old-growth mother cypress with a sprawling canopy and a fortress of cypress knees circumnavigating the trunk. Its eerie, almost erotic form speaks of another world, far from the manicured and sanitized coastal Florida sprawl just 100 miles east or west of here. Grey points out everything on our walk through Fisheating Creek, a riverine swamp of live oak and bald cypress forest that feeds Lake Okeechobee. Pre-Columbian peoples created mound villages in the area, piling Earth above the mosquito line, at about oak canopy height. My friend talks fast, excited. It takes a minute to catch up with the pace.

Grey lives in a small, hand-built shack on the edge of the Wildlife Management Area with only a car battery for electricity and water from a nearby artesian well pumped into glass jars stacked on the kitchen table to let the sulphur smell evaporate. This is "Real Florida," as Grey says a 100 times, pointing out bear tracks and wild hog droppings as he guides me across swamp, chin deep at times, with alligators all around us. He clamors about someone's recent panther spotting. "They don't often attack, never bothered

me." I wonder if he means the gators or the panther.

Grey and I have met—a rough-and-tumble rural redneck and an urban eco-anarchist with redneck lineage—because construction of a private paramilitary base threatens the watershed of this primordial swamp. Grey raves a bit about Earth First!, knowing only that they are "pretty wild I heard, especially with bulldozers."

We hike to a popular fishing spot where the swamp deepens and channels to a real lazy river. Cypress trees lean over, dangling with spanish moss. Boards nailed to one old cypress lead to a rope swing hanging over gators. It's here that Grey's two friends from Chiapas, Francisco and Dionisio, are fishing.

Grey is a Florida Cracker, a term given (mostly with love and nostalgia) to white Floridians with generational history in the region, an anomaly in a mosquito-infested tourist-colony of the empire. Grey goes back six or seven generations. Historically, Florida Crackers drove small, lean, feral Spanish livestock, Cracker Cattle, down from North Florida in the mid 1800s, settling on lands stolen from Seminoles, letting their stock roam wild, foraging on wild foods, to round up from the prairies and swamps later. They are still an unruly bunch. Some are large land owners that hate development with a passion, just not enough at times to pass up the millions offered by developers to convert their land to subdivisions or military bases. Before Fisheating Creek was taken by the state from a big cattle outfit—the Lykes

Brothers, which used the land for wild grazing—Grey rode horses through the huge live oak pastures surrounding the swamp, a cowboy for the company.

But Grey is not a land owner. He is, akin to the region and the times, poor and white. His current seasonal employment is as a team leader in the orange orchards and tomato fields of South Florida. “*Son mis amigos de Immokalee.*” Grey introduces me after we all shake hands. On our hike we talked a bit about the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a group fighting to get fair wages and humane conditions for migrant workers. “I make sure my people get paid,” he assures. Headlines from Immokalee and other towns in the area continue to report cases of modern-day slavery, workers held at gunpoint for years without pay.

“*¿Como está la pescando?*” I ask Francisco and Dionisio. They interpret my poor and nervous Spanish and point to a bucket of seven or so small bluegills churning around. The two men are quiet but smiling. Their thin frames stand stoic at the water's edge. Grey calls the two “good people, you know, from the land. These Chiapas boys love the swamp. You see that?” He points to a few swallow-tailed kites hovering, guiding wind up through their giant wings with shifts of their tail feathers. Half the hemisphere's population come to Fisheating Creek to nest.

The moment is telling. For me it's the blending of Florida's worlds. The peninsula sits as epicenter of several spheres in a global struggle between freedom and ecocidal profit. I'm here surveying a bit of the land, some of the wildest, most dreamy land I've seen, in the buildup for a fight against a Blackwater-esque development, called Eagle Training, that would damage this wilderness. The two *compañeros* from Chiapas—pushed by neoliberal policies encased in the North American Free Trade Agreement—which turn land-based communities into war zones and resource graveyards—have made the long trek from southern Mexico across the militarized border in Arizona or Texas to the *maquiladora* fields of South Florida. These are the fields drained from the Everglades by a century and a half of theft and geo-engineering—the madness of industrial and white culture. The very same forces of racism, greed and profit that uproot wildlands into extinction uproot communities into diaspora.

I've marched with the CIW in Miami and worked on boycott campaigns in my hometown. I try to speak with Francisco, but Grey, who speaks Spanish fluently, albeit with the most beautifully awkward Cracker drawl, has to translate. Francisco doesn't belong to CIW but he supports them. He is paid nearly 70 dollars a day, a 10-hour day, six days a week, and says he is happy. He has worked with other outfits that have taken advantage of his documentation status and refused to pay him at the end of the month. In fact, he allows Grey to crash on his couch through the work week, since the fields are 40 miles from here and Grey's truck has been repossessed. “It took them years to find that truck out here,” Grey says. I ask Francisco about the proposed development of a for-profit mercenary training camp nearby. He doesn't respond. Dionisio looks toward me for the first time in a while but then goes back to attending the lazy mo-

tion of the fishing pole over the swamp. I wonder about the paramilitaries that harass the communities at the edges of the Lacandon jungle to open up industrial logging and farming in Chiapas, but I don't ask.

“*¿Es bonito no, este rio?*” Grey asks. We all agree. Grey notes nonchalantly to me, almost a whisper, that we must stop the military base if it's to remain so. “Some folks moved out here near Venus a couple years past and they put up a street light. Someone shot that light out the first night it was turned on,” Grey says. “People like to see the stars.”

A few months later the paramilitary project is dead in the swamp from public pressure.

## What is Now Called the State of Florida

“No, you live in what is illegally called Lake Worth,” a stout man in a wheelchair wearing a cowboy hat says firmly but with a bit of a grin. Oannes, a Wabanaki-Penobscot from what is illegally referred to as Maine, spends a good portion of his life working with white allies in academia, cultural centers, children's camps and activist circles. It's a responsibility, he says, handed him by his foremothers. He is a professor at a Florida University—“a token Indian, so I can say anything I want,” in his words—and the director of the Yat Kitischee Native Center. He speaks to me with a great deal of intimidating humor in his eyes. “But yes, I know the town. I have friends there.”

Lake Worth, named after General William Worth, is land originally settled by Jeaga Indians, then Seminoles and self-emancipated Africans, then swindled away by white developers and turned into a white-only Southern town with black and immigrant communities situated as labor satellites. In his genocidal military career, Worth served as the commander of US forces in Florida to fight the Seminole and Maroon African alliance. He is noted for ending the conflict by focusing the offensive onto villages and supply lines, destroying the land- and community base of the resistance, and isolating the Seminole warriors deeper into the swamps. Worth was then commissioned to join the invasion of Mexico in 1848. He engaged in every battle from Veracruz to the Mexican heartland, personally placing the US flag atop the Chapultepec Castle in Ciudad Mexico.

Oannes and I are at an anarchist conference in South Florida where he has been invited to speak about what he calls “Earth justice.” I listen to his talk—slow and deliberate in his approach—with great interest, especially noting his critiques of white social and environmental movements. During my presentation on grassroots resistance in the Everglades he falls asleep, but wakes up toward the end to interrupt and remind me that “it is land that is now called the state of Florida. It is illegally referred to as Florida, and the Everglades is also not the honest name.” I had once again fallen back on the imperialist languages of English and Spanish geography in this hemisphere.

Oannes, a true warrior and participant at several Earth First! gatherings, died in April at his home amidst the slash pine of the southwest coast of what still remains a colonially named and colonially exploited peninsula.

## Miss Iris and Ni'lin

I'm driving north on 710 toward a place called Indian-town with a borrowed truck. Panagioti insists we listen to "the Boss, the only Boss worth listening to." There's a roadkill armadillo, a roadkill otter, a roadkill gator. We think about picking up the otter for a weird snack but at 60 mph and the radio loud, we can't think of changing the pace. We are going to visit Miss Iris Wall, the 80-year old cowgirl matriarch of the little town. She's a rascally anti-development cattle rancher, an old Cracker that made her start in the 1950s, right after school, camping for years in Big Cypress with her new husband, cutting cypress into fencepost to sell. She has a special liking for Panagioti. She calls him, "my little hippy" and scolds the local sheriffs when they call her new friends—the ones she invites into her home, the ones she's opened her land to for a regional gathering—eco-terrorists.

Miss Iris tells us she has a dozen cowboys working for her. She's got a wild grin, and I picture each one of them with her brand on their ass. Its real odd and powerful to be in her presence. When I walk into her house to her back patio I notice she has, on the table before her, a hunting magazine and a bible splayed open. She's hard to pin down. Though part of an old order, she is iconoclast. Her family worked with a Nicaraguan village of Sandinistas in the '80s. Challenging the law and the embargo, and just to spite it I imagine, Miss Iris worked with other ranchers who ship cattle and bull semen to Cuba. She is devious, saintly, terrifying. "We'll clean up after ourselves," we tell her. "We'll get the swamp re-opened and we'll stop the LNG [liquid natural gas] proposal," Panagioti says.

A week later, about 50 of us are in a five-day stand-off with local sheriffs, Joint Terrorism Task Force and Homeland Security at the edge of—and strategically interspersed throughout—a magical old-growth swamp of thousand-year-old cypress trees surrounded by the nation's largest fossil fuel power plant and its 17-mile cooling pond. Florida Power and Light claims it as private property and has walled it off to die—we believe otherwise. This is also the last state side-action of an activist named

Tristan, who a few weeks later is severely injured during a protest against the apartheid wall being built through the Palestinian town Ni'lin when an Israeli soldier fires a tear gas canister into his head.

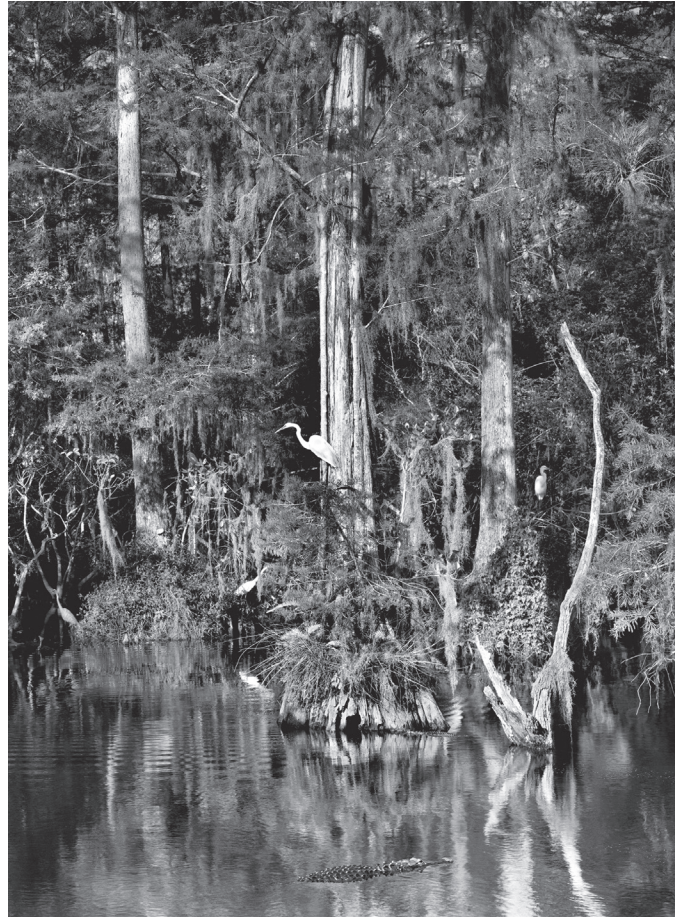
Miss Iris didn't mind about the Sheriff; she seemed to trust us more than them and in the end we helped stop the LNG project and put Barley Barber Swamp back on the map. We still work with Miss Iris and, on occasion, Panagioti drives out to take her tomatoes and honey from the backyard of our collective house.

## Getting Dirty in Big Cypress

Big Cypress is named so, not because the cypress trees are big, but because it stretches over 1,000 square miles, an actual forest at the southwestern edge of the nearly 20 million acres of sawgrass marshes and sloughs known as the "river of grass." Big Cypress drains southward through Florida Bay and the Ten Thousand Islands, its waters laying the foundation of renegade drug runners and wily environmentalists, at times one and the same. While native sovereignty was stripped to the East by the development of Everglades National Park, Seminoles and Miccosukee peoples still hold land rights here.

Shiny neon spandex-clad cyclists from Miami cruise thousand-dollar bikes across Tamiami trail, which stretches nearly 100 miles through the vast swamp linking the urban coasts. But just inches from the highway, one realizes that Big Cypress is foreboding and wild country. Buzzards pick at the carcasses of 400-pound wild hogs, and mosquitoes swarm like dust clouds and suckle the flesh with a searing ferocity that sounds like a million shrunken helicopters.

The Seminoles, in a fight against a genocidal US government, harassed well-funded armies here with great success. During prohibition, Al Capone had a hunting camp and speakeasy in this swamp. In later years, saloons reachable only by airboat played host to outlaw drunks and gator poachers. Thousands of exotic pythons slink through cypress domes, occasionally eating deer and alligator. Some are so large that thermal imaging systems on helicopters pick up their slithering bod-



*An alligator rests after eating a developer in Big Cypress*

Big Cypress Gallery 14 by Chole Bruchter

ies through dense canopies. It's spooky—like a landscape out of a bad dinosaur documentary—but with ATV rednecks and yuppies, birdwatchers and developers, often one and the same.

Big Cypress, like the Everglades in general, has everything to lose by what happens further north where I live. Rock mines, development, industrial agriculture (big sugar, sod, citrus) and the two largest fossil-fuel power plants in the US, surround its watershed. The big environmental groups are quick to fight off any interior encroachment and are greatly successful, but they fail to challenge the walls of industry that are lining it like a toxic moat. They often underwrite these projects through compromises. It seems to be a strategy of industry to propose an obviously heinous project—say a coal plant in the Everglades—in order to, through strategic defeat, gather support for a more inconspicuously heinous project, say an even bigger natural gas power plant in the Everglades.

Changes in the hydrologic regime (the naturally schizophrenic drought and flood periods of the bioregion) by industrial water use threaten the natural systems and the people that depend on them. Mercury levels in fish and their predators make it ill-advised to eat from the land. The interior of the Everglades may look wild and untouched, but the quiet spoils of civilization are stealing the swamps and self-sufficient life-ways through attrition.

It's a dying wetland of mystery and brutal absurdity. Take this for example: One particularly egregious rock mine company at the northern headwaters of the Everglades, Palm Beach Aggregates, funnels money to stop rain forest destruction and mountaintop removal mining in Appalachia while they mine the land that separates the 'Glades from its water source, Lake Okeechobee. One of the company's board members, Michael Klein, also sits on the board of the Rainforest Action Network. He gets millions from the company, which mines road-grade aggregate, stripping the land and aiding the expansion of infrastructure to an already sprawled-out tourist dystopia. At a county hearing about the site's expansion into 2000

more acres of adjacent land, four of the commissioners admitted to having been personally visited or contacted by Klein, stating that he helped them make up their minds to approve the project.

## Since the Apocalypse

Florida is the apocalypse. It started here shortly after 1492. Over the next 500 years, slavery, genocide, and ecocide played out under the guise of market freedom, progress and Western civilization. Through private, state, and corporate drainage, canalization, and (sub)urban development, the Everglades has been reduced to one-third its original size. It has been fractured and left to die. The migratory bird population has been decimated by 90 percent. Apex predators like the Florida black bear and Florida panther are nearly extinct. Florida bison and wolves are only now being reintroduced. Florida's coral reef system, the only one in North America, is on its last breath.

At the same time, Earth First! has grown strong in South Florida. It is one of the only mental spaces in the environmental movement here which is action-based, holistic, biocentric and anti-racist. Road blockades, forest defense, swamp occupations, solidarity campaigns with farm workers and communities of color, rural organizing, lawsuits and an unrelenting love for the wild fill our toolbox. Our focus is on stopping the empire, not reforming it or ignoring it. The battery packs of white industrial supremacy and devastation of the wild—coal, natural gas, and nuclear power plants—pock the land and can be shut down. Not so long ago the empire nearly drowned in these swamps, and once again the waters are rising. Lots of folks in Florida know this. They feel it deeply.

*Russ is an agitator with Everglades Earth First! and an editor with the EF! Journal Collective. He has worked on campaigns against mining, biotechnology, vivisection, industrial infrastructure, deforestation, environmental racism, bad jokes and boredom. He has also spent a great deal of time swimming with alligators and collecting coconuts. Every night he dreams of cuddling with manatees, spinner sharks and other lovers in the warm Atlantic waters near his home in South Florida.*



*Dwarf cypress savanna in Big Cypress*

Monitors by Clyde Hatcher