Indian Storytelling, Scientific Knowledge, and Power in the Florida Borderlands

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In 1824, the American naturalist James Pierce traveled to the newly acquired Territory of Florida, where a Seminole chief told him a story “through the medium of our interpreter, a shrewd native negro.” Pierce wrote that “it is believed by the natives that a monster, with a large serpent’s body shining like silver, whose breath is destructive to all that approach, occupies a large sink or cave in East Florida, guarding a mine. Similar stories are current among the Cherokees. The Spanish authorities made a fruitless search for this treasure a few years hence.” Pierce published this anecdote in the American Journal of Science as part of an article on Florida’s geography and natural resources, yet he included the Seminole’s story merely as “an instance of Indian credulity,” an ethnographic curiosity that might amuse his readers but was unrelated to the scientific observations that made up the bulk of the article.¹ Far from being credulous, however, this Seminole was recounting an actual scientific expedition that had occurred in Spanish East Florida in 1790, one in which Native storytelling was central. Through the power of his stories, a Creek Indian named Yaolaychi motivated this expedition, influenced how its members pursued and narrated knowledge while in the field, and shaped how officials and

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men of science in Saint Augustine analyzed and acted upon the information the expedition generated.

Indian storytelling simultaneously circulated knowledge and produced it. Historians of science and empire have argued that European men of science consistently stripped indigenous knowledge of its narrative, social, and cosmological contexts to better fit desirable elements of it into scientific and commercial frameworks. Yet Creek stories were coherent, memorable, and—in certain circumstances—compelling packages of information, and the collections and observations that the expedition members generated in the field remained associated with these narratives even after the expedition’s return to Saint Augustine.²

Tracing the presentation and reception of Yaolaychi’s stories reveals how geopolitical power and knowledge production were interconnected in some of the Southeast borderlands’ many geographic and social contexts. These included spaces in which Indian political power and approaches to nature were preeminent, particularly the Florida interior, as well as sites such as Saint Augustine where European rule and ways of knowing had a stronger foothold. Indian-European power relations at the individual, local, and regional levels did affect how European colonists and Natives incorporated and related each other’s knowledge.³ These potential influences, however,


³ Historians have examined the role of storytelling in the political relations between Creeks and Anglo-Americans. Joshua Piker has argued that Creek and British leaders in eighteenth-century South Carolina each developed entangled lies meant to bolster their authority. These stories revealed the ability of “local narratives to shape interna-
were contingent on several factors, including the settings in which knowledge was presented, the congruencies between Native and European approaches to nature, and the narrative forms in which knowledge was embedded. Power, place, and narrative—and not any set difference between Indian and European epistemologies—shaped the pursuit, circulation, and validation of natural knowledge in the Florida borderlands.

On February 15, 1790, an Indian-language interpreter named Alonso Gil visited the Saint Augustine office of Bartolomé Benítez y Gálvez, the royal treasurer of East Florida, to share some information he heard from a Lower Creek Indian named Yaolaychi about a deposit of shiny rocks in the northwestern part of the province. Benítez, who had some experience with mineralogy, believed these metals would prove to be silver or mercury. Spaniards had been disappointed in their hopes that East Florida contained lodes of precious metals since the days of Juan Ponce de Léon, yet Gil’s report about the mine excited Benítez. Spain had only repossessed East Florida from Britain six years earlier, and its control was still tenuous at best, with Creeks and Seminoles controlling nearly the entire province and Anglo-Americans encroaching on its northern frontier. Although Spain’s main goal in Florida was to protect the sea-lanes of the Gulf of Mexico and forestall U.S. intrusions into New Spain, Benítez expected that the discovery of...
a silver or mercury mine could bring an influx of settlers, money, and prestige to a province with a reputation for stagnation (Figure I).  

Benítez had arrived in Florida only a few months earlier and was among the several scientifically trained officials appointed to the borderlands of Spanish America during the late eighteenth century to make those posts more efficient, secure, and profitable. He had previously served as intendant of Ilocos in the Philippines before being appointed royal treasurer at Saint Augustine in 1789 and, as he told East Florida governor Vicente Manuel de Zéspedes, the court had sent him in the hope that he would work toward “the development of this country.” At least rhetorically, Benítez shared the zeal for serving both “the King and the public good” that motivated men of science throughout late eighteenth-century Spanish America, and collecting samples from the purported mine gave him the chance to raise imperial revenues, promote the prosperity of Florida, and support his own advancement in the imperial bureaucracy. He thus claimed to have organized the expedition because it “could result in the progress of the State, benefit these Provinces, and give credit to my patriotic spirit.” For Benítez and many other colonial officials, scientific investigations initiated within Spain’s colonies were most “patriotic” when they promoted both local and imperial agendas.


6 Bartolomé Benítez to King of Spain, St. Augustine, Dec. 30, 1791, EFP, sect. 16, bundle 78 (reel 30, PKY/LOC) (quotation); Benítez to Vicente Manuel de Zéspedes, Sept. 12, 1789, Havana, EFP, sect. 16, bundle 78, no. 1 (reel 30, PKY/LOC). All translations are mine. I have included additional or clarifying information in brackets. In July 1789, the crown had sent royal orders to bureaucrats throughout the empire to collect and write reports about potentially valuable natural productions. Daniela Bleichmar, “Atlantic Competitions: Botany in the Eighteenth-Century Spanish Empire,” in Science and Empire in the Atlantic World, ed. James Delbourgo and Nicholas Dew (New York, 2008), 225–52, esp. 235–36.

Although Bourbon Spain funded many massive scientific expeditions, Benítez was obliged to finance this journey out of his own pocket and at his own risk.\(^8\) Governor Zépedes gave him permission to explore the mine and provided passports for the expedition members, yet the governor was unwilling to support the endeavor financially until the Indian’s claims had been

“proven to the satisfaction of expert men.” Benítez’s exploratory party did not consist of experts. It included only the two men who had informed him about the mine, Yaolaychi and Gil, and a young official named Bartolomé de Castro. Benítez described the interpreter, Gil, as “totally ignorant” of the knowledge needed for a mineralogical expedition and complained that he had to employ Castro to keep the expedition’s journal because “the interpreter writes and reads minimally.” Benítez referred to these two as “ignorant men” and lamented that they were not qualified “to carry out a charge that certainly merits talents, enlightenment, and ideas in metallurgy and mineralogy.” He told the governor that his poor health prevented him from leading the expedition himself.

Benítez put together a detailed set of mineralogical, geographic, and botanical instructions for his three commissioners that spelled out where they should explore, what they should collect, and how to preserve what they found. The treasurer probably modeled this list on the printed instructions that Spanish naturalists were using to promote the collection of potentially valuable specimens throughout the empire and ensure their safe shipment to Madrid. Benítez’s instructions told the expedition members to travel to the spring in Yaolaychi’s account, gather any shiny rocks they discovered, collect water and mud and seal these samples in glass bottles, perform mineralogical “excavations,” pick potentially valuable herbs and preserve them in paper, and note the region’s topography, trees, and soils. Although Benítez regretted

9 Bartolomé Benítez to Governor Zúñiga, Feb. 17, 1790, EFP, sect. 16, bundle 78 (reel 30, PKY/LOC) (quotation). Governor Zúñiga may have also refused to fund the expedition because he resented and disliked Benítez. Zúñiga had hoped to choose Florida’s next treasurer himself and was upset to hear that the intendente of Cuba had appointed Benítez to that post. Moreover, on the same day that Gil told Benítez about the mine, Zúñiga had penned a memo about a dispute he had with Benítez over some misused funds. Zúñiga to Domingo Cavello, St. Augustine, Feb. 15, 1790, EFP, sect. 2, fol. 41 (reel 8, PKY/LOC); Helen Hornbeck Tanner, Zúñiga in East Florida, 1784–1790 (Jacksonville, Fla., 1989), 201.

10 Benítez to Governor of Florida, Apr. 7, 1790, fol. 444 (quotations); Bartolomé Benítez to Governor Zúñiga, St. Augustine, Feb. 18, 1790, EFP, sect. 16 (reel 30, PKY/LOC). Officials throughout Spain’s colonies initiated expeditions to identify local natural resources that would promote the prosperity of their provinces. See Bleichmar, “Atlantic Competitions,” 237–45. Like Benítez, Guatemalan officials sent subordinates to make preliminary observations of the Mayan ruins at Palenque—another potentially interesting site located in a predominantly Indian-populated area—before engaging specialists to confirm their findings. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World (Stanford, Calif., 2001), 323.

“commit[ting] the investigation . . . to two men without education, without the most basic training in the material, and without the first notion of how to describe the place,” the instructions gave him hope that the expedition members would concentrate on gathering the information he considered most valuable, instead of relying on their own judgment about which aspects of Floridian nature merited attention. Benítez would analyze the commissioners’ collections and observations upon their return. The treasurer seems to have hoped to develop Saint Augustine into one of Spanish America’s many colonial scientific centers, cities from which officials organized research about their colony’s resources (often through written instructions), compiled and analyzed local information, and used this knowledge to develop the province and empire alike. Although far smaller than Lima or Mexico City, Saint Augustine was nevertheless a node that blurred local/global and center/periphery distinctions in Spanish imperial science.

Castro, Yaolaychi, and Gil were not as ignorant or unqualified as Benítez portrayed them to be. A promising young official, an Indian with local knowledge, and an experienced translator made a suitable team for accomplishing the expedition’s basic scientific goals. Castro was a dependent in Benítez’s household at the time of the expedition and would go on to become a public attorney, customs official, Major Supervisor of Royal Works at Saint Augustine, and successful slave-owning planter. Alonso Gil, who was “more or less forty-six years old,” had worked as an official Indian interpreter in Florida for at least three years and had several more years of experience interacting with nearby Indian groups. Despite Benítez’s insults regarding his

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12 This list of “Instrucciones” was included in Benítez’s copy of the expedition’s diary. “Diario que hicieron los comisionados Alonzo Hill, Ynterprete de Yndios, y Don Bartolomé de Castro y Ferrer, para la Expedición de averiguar la verdad de quanto expusó el Yndio llamado Yaolaychi de la Nación Yuchises natural del Pueblo de Gechiti” [Diary made by the commissioners Alonso Gil, Indian interpreter, and Don Bartolomé de Castro y Ferrer, for the expedition of discovering the truth of all that the Lower Creek Indian named Yaolaychi from the town of Hitchiti described], Apr. 6, 1790, EFP, sect. 89, bundle 353, no. 17, fols. 433–41 (quotation, 433) (reel 173, PKY/LOC). While this expedition may not appear particularly scientific compared to those of contemporaries such as Alejandro Malaspina and Alexander von Humboldt, much of Europeans’ knowledge of the Americas relied on individual indigenous people and minor local officials acting on behalf of their superiors. James Delbourgo and Nicholas Dew, “Introduction: The Far Side of the Ocean,” in Science and Empire in the Atlantic World, ed. Delbourgo and Dew (New York, 2008), 1–28, esp. 5.


14 Bartolomé Benítez to Governor of Florida, St. Augustine, May 17, 1790, EFP, sect. 16, bundle 78 (reel 30, PKY/LOC); Governor Quesada, St. Augustine, Oct. 10, 1793, EFP, sect. 62, no. 5 (reel 118, PKY/LOC); Governor of Florida to Minister of Indies, St. Augustine, Feb. 22, 1816, EFP, sect. 13, nos. 1–2, fols. 215–25 (reel 19, PKY/LOC); James Cusick, The Other War of 1812: The Patriot War and the American Invasion of Spanish East Florida (Gainesville, Fla., 2003), 174, 208.

15 Interrogation of Alonso Gil, Apr. 9, 1790, EFP, sect. 89, bundle 353, no. 19, fols. 463–67 (quotation, 467) (reel 173, PKY/LOC); Governor of Florida to Gonzalo Zamorano, St. Augustine, Apr. 22, 1787, EFP, sect. 15 (reel 24, PKY/LOC).
literacy, Gil wrote and read well enough and, by the late 1790s, he had been put in charge of a detachment of Indian soldiers and operated a ferry on the St. Johns River. Both Castro and Gil were described as Spaniards throughout the expedition’s sources, though Gil may have had mixed Indian and European parentage.

Yaolaychi was from the small town of Hitchiti on the Chattahoochee River in present-day southwestern Georgia, and he described himself as “a poor man.” He had a family of seven, all of whom were with him in Florida in 1790. Like most Hitchitis, they had left the town to hunt for the winter, and Lower Creeks often hunted deer and bears in Florida well into February. While Hitchitis and other Lower Creeks had extensive interaction with Anglo-Americans in Georgia and South Carolina, it was not unusual for Lower Creeks to travel to Saint Augustine to deal with Spanish officials. Yaolaychi understood a little Spanish but Hitchiti was his primary language.

The sources are not clear about Yaolaychi’s motives for informing Gil about the mine and participating in the expedition, but by placing what we do know about him in the context of Hitchiti society in early 1790 it is possible to hazard some speculations. According to U.S. Indian agent Benjamin Hawkins, Hitchiti was a place of “poverty and indolence” in the 1790s, and its lack of fences indicated that the townspeople had not begun ranching, one of Creek country’s latest sources of wealth. Poor Hitchitis were often eco-

16 Alonso Gil to Governor of Florida, St. Augustine, Jan. 19, 1797, EFP, sect. 44, no. 115, fol. 29 (reel 79, PKY/LOC); Governor of Florida to Josef Martinez, St. Augustine, Dec. 14, 1795, EFP, sect. 32 (reel 53, PKY/LOC); Governor of Florida to Gonzalo Zamorano, St. Augustine, Oct. 11, 1796, EFP, sect. 15, fol. 240 (reel 26, PKY/LOC). I have found no evidence regarding Alonso Gil’s ethnicity. While some official interpreters in Florida were of mixed Indian and European heritage, there were also several ethnically European translators. See Tanner, Zépedes in East Florida, 92. On how individuals of mixed race, Natives, and free blacks could sometimes achieve social status as “españoles,” see Weber, The Spanish Frontier in North America, 326–28.

17 “Diario,” Apr. 6, 1790, fols. 437 (quotation), 433; Benítez to Governor of Florida, Apr. 7, 1790, fol. 443.

18 For hunting practices, see Robbie Ethridge, Creek Country: The Creek Indians and Their World (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003), 135; Angela Pulley Hudson, Creek Paths and Federal Roads: Indians, Settlers, and Slaves and the Making of the American South (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2010), 20. For Lower Creeks traveling to St. Augustine, see Hudson, Creek Paths, 4. For Yaolaychi understanding Spanish, see “Diario,” Apr. 6, 1790, fol. 437.

19 Although Spanish officials described Yaolaychi as part of the Uchise (Lower Creek) nation, he would have identified himself primarily as a Hitchiti, and any political or economic reasons underlying Yaolaychi’s actions should be put in the context of that town. See Ethridge, Creek Country, 93; Joshua Piker, Okfuskee: A Creek Indian Town in Colonial America (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

nomically dependent on wealthy locals such as the mestizo John Kinnard, a 
rancher, slave owner, and trader who “supplie[d] all the Indians around him, 
who [were] dupes to his avarice.”21 The deerskins Yaolaychi collected during 
a winter in Florida probably would not have been sufficient to get him out of debt with such traders.22 By offering to reveal a mine to the Spanish, 
Yaolaychi was perhaps pursuing an alternate source of income: like other 
Creeks who acted as guides or traded medicinal plants for cash, Yaolaychi 
may have sought to profit from offering local knowledge as a service in the 
Southeast’s “frontier exchange economy.”23

The Seminoles were the most formidable group in East Florida, but 
Creeks maintained a strong presence in the northern part of the province 
and claimed to possess large swaths of it as their exclusive hunting grounds.24 
Spanish officials recognized that Florida’s interior was Indian country; they 
formalized many of the Seminoles’ and Creeks’ territorial claims through 
treaties and worried about offending Creek leaders by impinging on their 
boundaries. Even the council of King Carlos IV realized that “in the Floridas 
we occupy only the ports and forts of Mobile, Pensacola, and St. Augustine 
and their surrounding areas; the Indians occupy and utilize the interior of the 
country.”25 The Creeks were a crucial buffer against the expansionist United 
States and thus Governor Zéspedes was particularly eager not to cause any 
offense in early 1790 when Alexander McGillivray, the self-proclaimed head 
of the Creek Nation, was showing signs of abandoning his political and com-
mercial relationship with Spain in favor of a closer attachment to the United 
States. Although McGillivray had walked out on a treaty with the United 
States in September 1789 and officially remained attached to Spain in early 
1790, Governor Zéspedes was treading very lightly in all Creek affairs for 
fear of pushing McGillivray into an alliance with the region’s newest impe-
rial power. The governor therefore only granted passports to the expedition 
members after Benítez promised him that the spring and mine were not situ-
atuted within recognized Native boundaries.26

21 Caleb Swan, “Report to Henry Knox on Creek Indians,” May 2, 1791, Violetta 
Delafield-Benjamin Smith Barton Collection 1783–1817, ser. 3, bound volumes, vol. 1, 
23 Daniel H. Usner Jr. introduced the concept of a “frontier exchange economy” in 
Usner, Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi 
Valley before 1783 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1992); also see Ethridge, Creek Country, 175, 179; 
Piker, Okefuskee, 105, 154–56.
24 Saunt, New Order of Things, 128, 152; Ethridge, Creek Country, 30, 120; Frank, 
Florida Historical Quarterly 84: 10–27; Hudson, Creek Paths and Federal Roads, 1, 19.
25 Session of Nov. 3, 1792, Actas del Consejo de Estado, 1792, in Archivo Historico 
Nacional, Madrid, Estado, Libro 5, quoted in Weber, Bárbaros, 204; see also 75, 214.
26 McGillivray would officially ally with the United States as a result of the Treaty 
of New York on Aug. 7, 1790. John Walton Caughey, McGillivray of the Creeks (Norman, Okla., 
1938), 37–44; Tanner, Zéspedes in East Florida, 210–15. For passports, see Benítez to Zéspedes, Feb. 17, 1790, EFP.
Bartolomé Benítez sent Yaolaychi, Alonso Gil, and Bartolomé de Castro to carry out their observations and collections in the Indian-controlled interior of Florida and, almost as soon as the expedition left Saint Augustine, the commissioners began to stray from the treasurer’s instructions about which types of information they should attend and record. After settling into camp on February 20, the very first evening of their journey to the spring, Yaolaychi told the two Spaniards a story that would have a profound effect on the rest of the expedition.

_The Story, Version One: Told February 20, 1790_

The Indian said, that the Animal about which he had spoken to the interpreter [Gil] at this place [Saint Augustine], (who told me [Benítez] nothing about this matter; and he [Gil] had believed it to be a caiman, crocodile, or lizard); was as big as a one year old calf: that it was ferocious, and that it had killed many Indians; eight men from the town of Afasqui had joined together with several dogs to hunt it, they found it and faced it, and shot at it five or six times, but the balls would not enter its body . . . , he [Yaolaychi] told that only one [of the Indians] escaped by the road; the others perished because the Animal was very quick, and that with its breath it attracts, and the Spirit cuts the people.²⁷

After recounting this story, Yaolaychi told Gil and Castro that he would guide them to the area near the deposit of shiny metals but that he would not go near the beast’s cave himself. As Castro recalled after the expedition, “not withstanding the Indian’s warning, [Castro and Gil] determined they would continue to the mine.”²⁸

The three men arrived near the cave on February 28, and despite Yaolaychi’s protests, the two Spaniards compelled him to visit the cave alone

²⁷ “Diario,” Apr. 6, 1790, fol. 434. Yaolaychi’s tellings of the stories cannot be separated from the voices of the individuals who translated and recorded them. Gil translated the two versions told during the expedition and Bartolomé de Castro wrote them down. The extant version of the diary is a copy made by Benítez that is sometimes written from his perspective. Bracket insertions are my own. Regarding the “eight men,” the number four and its multiples are common in Creek stories and sacred in Creek cosmology. See Greg Urban and Jason Baird Jackson, “Mythology and Folklore,” in _Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 14: Southeast_, ed. Raymond D. Fogelson (Washington, D.C., 2004), 709–19, esp. 717. Regarding “with its breath it attracts,” monsters with reptilian features and the power to attract prey were part of a shared mythological tradition in the Southeast that dated back at least to the Mississippian Period (ca. 900–1600). George E. Lankford, “The Great Serpent in Eastern North America,” in _Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian Iconography_, ed. F. Kent Reilly III and James F. Garber (Austin, Tex., 2007), 107–135, esp. 114.

to collect the mineralogical samples that the treasurer had requested. The entry in the expedition’s diary following Yaolaychi’s excursion to the cave interweaves the story of the hunters and the beast with Yaolaychi’s account of his own experiences.

*The Story, Version Two: Told February 28, 1790*

[Yaolaychi spoke] about the veracity of [the area near the spring] having minerals . . . and he swore by Feosé, which is God, about the proofs he gives: By He that is there above, He that sees all, that I do not lie; I do not deceive you; and that the wind was wrong for beginning anything on this day, because it goes towards the spot where the beast lives, which would perceive them with its sense of smell, and the danger was great, because of the powers of attraction that it has.

At seven in the morning they [Gil and Castro] determined to send the Indian alone to the spot, to look for earth and stones . . . giving him a pick, the best horse and a shot gun, the two [Spaniards] staying at camp: He left, and returned frightened at 12:00 . . ., they asked for his news, he said: that arriving at the spot he had mentioned, where he should have taken the stones, mud, water, and the rest that they would prepare [for analysis in Saint Augustine], believing the wind favorable, he tied the horse to a pine tree, and went forth on foot, he heard the Beast roaring a short distance away, which surprised him, dreading that it would smell him, or see him, and take away his life, that returning to the site where he left his horse, he found in the path the bones of a deer, dead, because of the Beast, which devoured it, and plants that had been uprooted by the same, with which the two travelers formed an idea of his [Yaolaychi’s] prediction being true.

Asking him [Yaolaychi] about the Beast, its shape, and name he said that its name was Achuguilipalascó, which means Big Ferocious Animal; and he described its shape by its separate parts, being unknown to [the Spaniards], who then asked [Yaolaychi] for its color, he said that its head is similar to that of a Bear, but without ears, or that it has them very close to its head, and the head, and neck, is the color of gold, that its tongue is split in the middle in the shape of scissors, or like that of a serpent, that the body is similar to that of a bear, with a very short tail, that its skin is very hard, having been verified by shooting it with bullets, and it reflects the balls . . . ; the Indian affirming, that an expedition had been formed in the town of Afasqui to kill it, composed of eight men of his [Yaolaychi’s] same nation, and there was among them a mighty war
captain and nine dogs, they attacked the Beast, which facing up to them, killed them, first the captain, and six of his companions, only one escaping. . . . This same Indian [that escaped the beast] returned to his town, recounted the misfortunes, with which he induced the utmost terror in those people, that they no longer go near that place [the cave of the beast], . . . the Indian [Yaolaychi] added one more thing to his relation, that its sense of smell is extraordinary; it is able to perceive from long distances, and its breath is so active, that it discovers birds, deer, and any other animal, and even with man, it conquers, demoralizes, and amazes until not leaving the least action to him.

Yaolaychi said that approaching the cave at this time was incredibly dangerous because the only way to drive the beast away was by setting fire to the undergrowth, and a recent burning in the area had made this impossible. Castro and Gil then asked if Achuguilipalascó was “the only beast of its species known in these Provinces,” and Yaolaychi responded that “he only knew of four[:] one near the Cherokee Indians, another near the pueblo Nocosuque, another far . . . in the Northern part, and that which is here nearby.”

At one level, Yaolaychi’s tale was similar to the adventure stories about monstrous animals attacking humans that were common among the Creeks and other southeastern Indians. More specifically, twentieth-century ethnographers have recorded Hitchiti, Muskogee, Yuchi, and Seminole tales—collectively known as Monster Lizard stories—in which the scenario, action, and beast correspond with Yaolaychi’s narrative about Achuguilipalascó. In twentieth-century versions of the story, a group of hunters and their dogs used fire to flush out the monster, which was often described as glittering and impervious to bullets. The Monster Lizard killed most of the dogs and hunters before being defeated by esoteric magic, a clever trick, or—as we shall see in Yaolaychi’s telling during his interrogation—the timely intervention of a tiger.


30 Yaolaychi was telling an adventure story, but his own role in the expedition and its aftermath was more akin to that of Rabbit, the principal trickster figure in Creek stories. According to Greg Urban and Jason Baird Jackson, Rabbit’s “antics are frequently amusing, sometimes misguided, and once in a while border on tragic. . . . He is an incessant imitator of the high and mighty, and a repository of the need to be accepted, though these motivations receive invariable frustration. For his well-used instinct of preservation he has only a certain native cunning to rely upon.” Urban and Jackson, “Mythology and Folklore,” 713–16 (quotation, 713). On the Monster Lizard story in comparative perspective, see John R. Swanton, Myths and Tales of the Southeastern Indians (Washington, D.C., 1929), 267–75, esp. 272. Twenty-first-century versions of this story had different names for this monster, including “Hazolebah-Hlacunn” among Florida Seminoles and, for some Creeks, the “atcukliba,” the same word for “a
Yaolaychi showed creativity and improvisation in how he incorporated the narrative of the story with the circumstances of the expedition, a talent that gets at the heart of storytelling’s place in southeastern Indians’ understandings of nature. Generally speaking, southeastern Indians did not draw sharp distinctions between a particular fact and its social, historical, and extranatural contexts, and they often expressed the complex interplay of these factors in the form of stories. Based on recent fieldwork among the Yuchis, a nation that shares many storytelling traditions with Creeks and other southeastern Indians, folklorist and anthropologist Jason Baird Jackson has argued that stories, including the Monster Lizard story, connect the mythical past to ritual life and the present circumstances of the community. Stories are thus not dead or closed narratives of an inaccessible past but a bridge through which present and past, quotidian and extranatural, can be brought together in adaptive and creative ways.31

Yaolaychi’s story may have expressed southeastern Indians’ interpretations of the relationship among precious metals, dangerous powers, and European colonialism. Indian groups throughout the Spanish American borderlands told stories in which deposits of minerals or buried treasure were closely tied to monsters or spirits. Such stories, it seems, reflected the world-changing effects of Europeans’ violent search for American gold and silver and may have been meant to warn Natives against searching for and revealing


mineral treasures. These narratives were prevalent in northern Florida, often centering on the ruins of the Spanish mission of San Luis de Apalachee. As late as 1824, one Floridian writer described how “the Indians have preserved a superstitious story, which keeps them at an awful distance from San Louis. They say that the Spaniards, on quitting San Louis, buried their church ornaments and with them some bottles of medicine, (magic,) which would prove fatal to them if they touched [the bottles].” Stories such as this expressed enduring associations among disease, death, Spaniards, and precious metals. The relational worldview of southeastern Indians was, it seems, a fitting lens for interpreting key aspects of European-Indian contact.

Yaolaychi’s skill as a storyteller, the settings in which he told these stories, and the congruencies among the three expedition members’ understandings of nature all enhanced the Monster Lizard story’s capacity to influence how the commissioners pursued and narrated knowledge. Like other Native storytellers, Yaolaychi shaped the content and presentation of his story in response to his audience and their reactions. The second telling was thus far more detailed than the first because Gil and Castro now feared the nearby beast and pressed Yaolaychi for more details about it. Although many of the nuances of Yaolaychi’s narrative were probably lost in translation, the way that he performed the story may have made an encounter with the Monster Lizard seem imminent. Furthermore, as historian Steven C. Hahn has

32 John Sibley of Natchitoches described how Indians told a hunter who had found “plenty of an Oar” in Spanish Louisiana that it “was his (meaning the white peoples) treasure, and that amongst these mountains of Oar a noise was often heard like the explosion of a Cannon, or distant Thunder which the Indians said was the Spirit of the white people working amongst their Treasure.” Sibley to William Dunbar, Natchitoches, Apr. 2, 1805, in Eron Rowland, ed., Life, Letters and Papers of William Dunbar of Elgin, Morayshire, Scotland, and Natchez, Mississippi Pioneer Scientist of the Southern United States (Jackson, Miss., 1930), 171 (quotations). A Mississippi planter recounted a tale “of an uncommon Animal having been seen by the Natives in a considerable lake in . . . New Mexico. It is compared when somewhat elevated in the water, to the upper part of the body of a Spaniard with his broad brimmed hat. . . . The Indians who are often Superstitious express a dislike or abhorrence of the place . . . and assert that the departed Spirits of the first Spaniards who conquered their Country dwell in the lake.” Dunbar to Thomas Jefferson, Natchez, Aug. 22, 1801, Thomas Jefferson Papers (TJP), ser. 1, gen. correspondence., 1631–1827, LOC, fol. 19890 (quotation).


34 Claudio Saunt argued that the flexibility of the performative aspect of storytelling allowed it to serve as a means of promoting social cohesion among Creeks before the social and political changes of the 1780s and 1790s. Saunt, New Order of Things, 31–33. For Gil and Castro pressing Yaolaychi for details, see “Diario,” Apr. 6, 1790, fols. 436–37. As ethnographer Rodney Frey has suggested, “the creative power of language, coupled with the various techniques used by storytellers, coalesces to help encourage the listeners of the stories to become participants within them, travelling the same trails alongside Salmon, Coyote, or Burnt Face.” Frey, “Oral Traditions,” 164.
noted, “the stage upon which the storyteller recites the tale . . . might be viewed as an arena of power, where the storyteller may establish or reinforce his or her authority as a keeper of wisdom.”35 By performing his story near the spot where the action of both the Monster Lizard story and the expedition were situated, Yaolaychi added to his credibility as an expert on local nature while also bolstering his influence as a storyteller.

Although Yaolaychi most likely did have a different understanding of nature than Gil and Castro, they all probably shared a belief that encounters with otherworldly powers were possible and particularly likely to occur in the specific spaces of the expedition: forest paths and bodies of water. Many Creek adventure stories—including most tales about the Monster Lizard—began with men traveling on forest trails and ended with deadly encounters with monsters; bodies of water were thresholds to the Lower World and, thus, the abodes of dangerous beings. Most early modern Europeans would have agreed that beasts such as the Monster Lizard could exist. Like Yaolaychi, Gil and Castro would have experienced forests and water sources within multiple mythological and historical contexts, and spiritual associations could shape their scientific practices within these settings.36 Gil, for example, later claimed to have smelted some metallic rocks near the spring, a basic mineralogical operation that he infused with Christian elements by “putting two sticks in the form of a cross” in the fire below the minerals.37 Moreover, Gil and Yaolaychi had extensive contact with both colonial and Native societies and, at least in Gil’s case, his experience with Hitchiti-speaking people and their stories may have made him more open to believing Yaolaychi’s tale. As Gil later told the governor, he “had heard talk for more than seven years that there was a wicked beast infesting the territory of the Shawnee Indians . . . but that the first notice he had of a wicked beast in this province, was from [Yaolaychi].”38

36 For eighteenth-century Creeks, according to Angela Pulley Hudson, “a spirit path and a path through the woods could be one and the same and a journey that appears mundane in our historical remove could take on universal importance in the right circumstances.” Hudson, Creek Paths and Federal Roads, 6 (quotation), 14–21. Creek cosmology included three worlds—Upper, Lower, and Middle. Humans inhabited the Middle World but were in constant contact with the other two. Grantham, Creation Myths, 21. For early modern Europeans’ views of monstrosities, see Keith Thomas, Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800 (New York, 1996), 89–91; Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750 (New York, 1998), esp. chap. 5. For Europeans’ understandings of forests and water, see Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory (New York, 1996), 207–39, 257–67. On how symbolic and religious associations could influence scientific practices, see Delbourgo and Dew, “Introduction,” 12–13.
37 “Diario,” Apr. 6, 1790, fol. 440 (quotation). Gil made it clear that he situated this cross independently of the logs burned for heat.
38 Interrogation of Alonso Gil, Apr. 8, 1790, fols. 461–62 (quotation).
Like accounts of the expedition itself, Yaolaychi’s stories expressed aspects of how power and knowledge were interconnected during and after journeys into the woods. The heroes in some versions of the Monster Lizard story—especially Shawnee and Yuchi variations—were medicine men or hunters whose triumph over the beast depended on, or led to the development of, esoteric knowledge about powerful words or plants. The revelation of new sources of knowledge and power was less pronounced in Creek stories. However, with the exception of the Seminole tale about the 1790 expedition that James Pierce penned in 1824, Yaolaychi’s tellings seem to be the only recorded variations of the story in which the Monster Lizard resided near mineral treasures. This detail may have reflected historical associations among dangerous forces, Spanish adventurers, and precious metals, or perhaps it derived from—or was meant to resemble—European stories about treasure-guarding beasts. Yet one point of Yaolaychi’s story was clear: the Monster Lizard stood between the commissioners and the acquisition of mineralogical knowledge that, Benítez hoped, would promote Spanish power.

Although Yaolaychi, Bartolomé de Castro, and Alonso Gil made only a few observations and collections during the eight-day journey to the spring, their knowledge-gathering practices were then mostly in keeping with the treasurer’s instructions. Castro and Gil preserved samples of some useful plants, including China oranges and sarsaparilla, and described the topography and trees they passed on their journey. After listening to Yaolaychi’s story about his excursion to the cave on February 28, however, Castro’s and Gil’s inclination to follow scientific conventions began to wane. As Castro wrote in the diary, the Spaniards “were full of amazement and confusion with the reasoning of the Indian, and lost the effective desires of the commission for which they came.” Based on Castro’s description and the itinerary in the diary, it seems they had arrived at or near Ichetucknee Springs, now a state park between the Suwannee and Santa Fe Rivers. According to recent mineralogical analyses, there is no evidence of silver, gold, or mercury at this site; there is, however, an abundance of phosphorescent algae. On

39 Jason Baird Jackson has claimed that “Muskogean stories, while retaining a concern with power, do not relate directly to its provision in the form of collective ritual or the revelation of medicine plants or objects. In contrast, the available Cherokee, Yuchi, and Shawnee narratives share these dimensions and are generally more fully elaborated than the Muskogean stories.” Jackson, *Yuchi Ceremonial Life*, 236–38 (quotation, 238), 231–14, 223–28. On how Native and European traditions about esoteric knowledge and precious metals converged during Sir Walter Raleigh’s South American expeditions, see Ralph Bauer, “A New World of Secrets: Occult Philosophy and Local Knowledge in the Sixteenth-Century Atlantic,” in Delbourgo and Dew, *Science and Empire in the Atlantic World*, 99–126, esp. 110–18.

40 “Diario,” Apr. 6, 1790, fols. 437 (quotation), 434–35.

41 Castro noted that “the Indians call the spring Oycayagua, spring of Water”; “Diario,” Apr. 6, 1790, fol. 438 (quotation). See Brenda J. Herring and Walter S. Judd,
March 1, Yaolaychi led the two Spaniards to the spring where he claimed they would find the shiny metal, and they proceeded to collect some stones, mud, and water that they put in sealed containers and “presented for tests” on their return to Saint Augustine. Yet the commissioners failed to “perform excavations” near the spring and could not locate any of the shiny rocks that Yaolaychi had described.\textsuperscript{42}

Benítez’s instructions faded further from the commissioners’ minds as Castro and Gil grew upset about the lack of precious metals. The Spaniards “attacked [Yaolaychi] anew, saying that he was a liar,” and Castro even blew up at Gil, “angrily telling the interpreter that he was to blame for all of these troubles because he had expounded [Yaolaychi’s] credit at St. Augustine.” As on other occasions, Yaolaychi became furious when the Spaniards questioned his credibility. He told them that he would risk death to prove his veracity and “that if they had any courage they would join him in searching for the place of the beast, but if not then he would go alone, and if he did not return tonight . . . it would mean that he has been killed.”\textsuperscript{43} Yaolaychi then marched off toward the cave and, reluctantly, Castro and Gil followed.

When they arrived near the beast’s cave, Yaolaychi stripped off his clothes, put on a loincloth, and covered his face and neck with musk oil. He advised Gil and Castro to follow suit and “in effect they imitated him,” removing their clothes and donning loincloths fashioned from their scarves. This shift in physical appearance was so appropriate that it could pass for a literary device: they had become the hunters in their own version of the Monster Lizard story. Yaolaychi then led the two Spaniards toward the cave, showing them “many footprints and traces of the Beast, tracks that were the same as a bear’s, but much larger.” Darting from one pine tree to the next for cover, the three men approached “the cave of the mine.” When they were about one hundred yards away, Yaolaychi froze in his tracks, and “speaking low to the interpreter, and signaling with his finger that the Animal was there, he withdrew immediately, fleeing with the greatest haste, full of fear.” The Spaniards soon realized why. Castro recorded that they “saw the beast” prowling around its den; its body was “very brilliant, silver-plated and smooth, rays of the sun reflect [off it,] just as in the glass of a mirror.”\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{42} “Diario,” Apr. 6, 1790, fol. 437 (quotations).
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., fols. 437 (“attacked”), 438 (“angrily”).
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., fol. 438 (quotations). Gil recalled that Yaolaychi “seemed very worried about taking off his boots and shirt, and putting on a loincloth,” and it is possible that Yaolaychi considered this specialized clothing as essential to surviving the encounter with this beast: at least one Creek version of the Monster Lizard story included a similar change of dress before a hunter speaking powerful words was able to outmatch the beast.
These were the only observations that the Spaniards were able to make, for they soon followed Yaolaychi’s example and ran away. After this harrowing adventure, the three men decided to head back to Saint Augustine.

In their diary, reports, and eventual interrogations, all three expedition members insisted they had seen Achuguilipalascó. Benítez had expected the expedition to produce natural knowledge that would bolster Spain’s geopolitical power. According to the commissioners, however, it was the alleged power of a beast defined through Hitchiti stories that determined the scope and success of their mineralogical activities. Native storytelling, particularly in Indian-dominated spaces, could undermine imperial officials’ presumptions about the relationship between knowledge and power.

Royal treasurer Bartolomé Benítez’s goal for the expedition had been to accrue enough evidence of valuable natural productions to convince Governor Vicente Manuel de Zéspedes to approve of a second expedition to the spring, one conducted by “expert men.” Yet in the days immediately following the commissioners’ return to Saint Augustine, Benítez feared that they had failed in this task. He complained that the botanical samples Alonso Gil and Bartolomé de Castro had gathered were useless because, “like ignorant men,” the commissioners had not preserved the plants in paper, and “they all got jumbled up together, and mixed into one.” The mineral samples were equally disappointing. Benítez conducted chemical analyses of the rocks, mud, and spring water for evidence that would “encourage our hope” of discovering precious metals, but his experiments did little to indicate that the commissioners had found anything of value.

Twelve days after the expedition’s return, Benítez’s luck apparently changed. He was “meditating over the observations that I should practice to ascertain something good from the waters, mud, rocks, and plants that they had presented to me,” when Gil brought him “three little pieces of a metal that seemed like gold due to its specific gravity and fine color.” Gil claimed that he had collected and smelted these nuggets near the spring while his two companions were asleep and had since forgotten all about them. After conducting some experiments, Benítez reported that this metal was “very

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46 Benítez to Governor of Florida, Apr. 7, 1790, fol. 443 (“expert men”), 444 (“like ignorant”).
47 “Diario,” Apr. 6, 1790, fol. 439 (quotation).
fine copper . . . , gold of low quality, or platinum.” 49 Ten days later, Gil told Benítez that all three expedition members had observed “shiny, silvery little globes” beneath the spring water but had not collected any of this substance because they were scared of entering the cold water. Benítez thought that these globules “may well have been Mercury, [which] can be more important to us than any other metal.” He ruefully to collect any of this material as another unfortunate “result of commissioning two ignorant men for an undertaking of such importance.” 50

Despite the legitimizing power of his experiments and mineralogical expertise, Benítez worried that Gil’s belated and shady presentation of the new materials might not appear credible enough to the governor to merit a second expedition. He therefore looked to the expedition’s other major discovery, the Big Ferocious Animal, to add validity to the commissioners’ mineralogical collections and observations. Instead of isolating the mineralogical aspects of the expedition from the zoological ones, Benítez made the beast a central focus of his report to the governor and used his analysis of it as a way to verify the truth of the expedition’s mineralogical claims. As he informed the governor, “although it could be doubted if this metal is truly extracted as [Gil] declares,” he would “make for Your Lordship the same reflections [about it] that [were] in order for the beast.” 51 Even in Saint Augustine, confirming mineralogical facts was intertwined with the natural history of a beast in a Hitchiti story.

Though it seems that some Saint Augustine residents ridiculed him for believing the commissioners’ accounts, Benítez boasted that his own knowledge of natural history was superior to that of his unnamed critics because only the most novice naturalists would claim that nature could not produce a beast like Achuguilipalascó. Spanish and other European men of science shared an increased interest in monstrosities during the late eighteenth century and, by contemporary standards, Benítez was right to criticize his peers for denying the possibility that the beast existed. 52 He explained to the

49 Benítez to Governor of Florida, Apr. 7, 1790, fol. 446 (quotation).
50 “Diario,” Apr. 6, 1790, fols. 440 (“shiny”), 441 (“may well”). There was a state-sponsored search for mercury throughout Spanish America in the 1780s and 1790s; some linguists in New Spain even worked to use the knowledge they believed was embedded in Indian place-names to uncover new mercury deposits. See Cañizares-Esguerra, How to Write the History of the New World, 308. Benítez compared the experiments and observations on the spring water with a study he had made of the medicinal mineral springs at Málaga, Spain, arguing that since both of them had mercury, the Florida spring should also have curative properties. Benítez suggested bottling the water as a health drink and hoped that “physicians will make experiments on sick people” at the spring. He thought that the time was “not very far off that [the spring] will result in something good for humanity.” Benítez to Governor of Florida, Apr. 7, 1790, fols. 446–47 (quotations, 447).
51 Benítez to Governor of Florida, Apr. 7, 1790, fol. 446 (quotation).
52 Paula De Vos, “The Rare, the Singular, and the Extraordinary: Natural History and the Collection of Curiosities in the Spanish Empire,” in Science in the Spanish and
governor that some “señores naturalistas” refuted the reality of the beast on the grounds that “the famous Buffon, and other authors, do not describe an animal that is in all respects similar.” Benítez retorted, however, that nature had not yet presented “all of its wonders” and that there were many hitherto unverified kinds of “monstrosities, that derive from mixed species.” He even chided his critics for “admiring the same Buffon, who says he has spent sixty years observing rare prodigies of nature, and finds himself more ignorant about it than on the first day of his studies.”

Benítez went beyond the writings of European naturalists and drew on the spoken narratives of Indian experts to further bolster his case. On March 22, he held an interview with “Ocaspa of the Seminole Nation, because he was one of those that had information on the beast of which the travelers had spoken.” Speaking through interpreter Antonio Huertas, Ocaspa said that “he had not seen it, but that his countrymen have informed him, that there certainly is [a beast],” that “its body shines like a mirror,” and that “there are many deer skeletons in the immediate area around its cave.”

From Benítez’s perspective, Ocaspa’s testimony may have been more authoritative than Yaolaychi’s in establishing the reality of the beast. Ocaspa presumably lived in Florida and had extensive experience with its animal life and, more importantly, his account of the monster came from a prominent Creek whose social status lent credibility to the tale.

Benítez also looked to Saint Augustine’s small learned community to corroborate his claims about the minerals and the beast. He hosted a kind of scientific conference in which the city’s leading intellectuals witnessed “some singular experiments with the metal” and discussed the monster’s characteristics. As Benítez assured the governor, “the presence of persons that I considered learned in the material” made his experiments and zoological deliberations “authoritative.” For a small and isolated city, Saint Augustine was home to an impressive multinational community of learned men. The group that witnessed the mineralogical tests and discussed the monster

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54 “Diario,” Apr. 6, 1790, fol. 440 (quotations). Ocaspa heard about the beast from “Estahazachechi, brother of Filatuchi [Philatouche], a very well known chief.” Ibid., fol. 440. Philatouche was a Lower Creek trader and leader of mixed African and Indian descent. Whether Benítez knew about Philatouche’s African heritage is unclear, but Benítez may have noted Philatouche’s social status—and not his ethnicity—to add to the credibility of Ocaspa’s account. On Philatouche, see Christina Snyder, Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America (Cambridge, Mass., 2010), 236–37.
included the city’s captain of engineers, a physician at the royal hospital, a Cuban pharmacist, a “very knowledgeable” Swiss planter, an Irish “Professor of Chemistry,” and, for better or worse, “many other people who happened to enter the house.” They concluded that even though the beast “is lacking some of the signs of the true figure of a bear, it is not surprising that it would be this animal, and some mix with another; much information agreeing that it is ferocious and that there are four in these provinces.” Even these educated men based all of their knowledge of the beast on narratives derived from the Monster Lizard story; this was especially apparent in their agreement that four such beasts lived in the region, information that none of their informants claimed to have observed themselves. Famed European naturalists, Indian experts, and Saint Augustine’s learned elite all agreed that a mixed beast such as Achuguilipalascó could exist, and their collective authority added substantial weight to Benítez’s claim that the expedition members had been honest in describing the beast and, therefore, their mineralogical observations and collections could be valid as well.

Bartolomé Benítez argued that the expedition had made significant discoveries “in the three kingdoms, animal, vegetable, and mineral,” including a bizarre beast unknown to natural history, the “useful commodity” sarsaparilla, and precious metals. Yet he recognized that all of his conclusions about the expedition’s findings relied on whether or not the three commissioners were telling the truth about what they saw and did near the springs. Benítez proposed interrogating the expedition members, particularly

55 Benítez to Governor of Florida, Apr. 7, 1790, fol. 445 (quotations). These men were, respectively, Mariano de LaRocque, Bernardo de Madrid, Ramón de Fuentes, Francisco Fatio, and Thomas Travers. Around 1790, the free population of St. Augustine consisted of at least 772 individuals, including about 469 Minorcans, 87 non-Hispanic whites, and a group of 216 Floridanos, Cubans, and Spaniards. While the small size of the city’s scientific community reflected this small population, its constituency of officials, physicians, military engineers, and planters was consistent with those of larger Spanish American cities. See Sherry Johnson, “The Spanish St. Augustine Community, 1784–1795: A Reevaluation,” Florida Historical Quarterly 68, no. 1 (July 1989): 27–54, esp. 38–39. On the ways that experiments and observations relied on multiple credible witnesses to establish matters of fact among the men of science in England’s Royal Society, see Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life (Princeton, N.J., 1985), 55–60; Barbara J. Shapiro, A Culture of Fact: England, 1550–1720 (Ithaca, N.Y., 2000), 105–27.

56 Some of the continent’s most learned naturalists saw scientific value in Indian tales of bearlike monsters. In 1805, Philadelphian Benjamin Smith Barton wrote that such tales were “in some respects, so very extravagant, that they may, perhaps, be deemed altogether unworthy of attention. I must confess, however, that I cannot but consider such traditions, though imperfectly handed down to us, and evidently disfigured by fable, as entitled to the notice of the naturalist, and philosopher.” Barton, “Remarks,” in Philadelphia Medical and Physical Journal 1, no. 2 (1805): 161–65 (quotation, 164). See also Paul Semonin, American Monster: How the Nation’s First Prehistoric Creature Became a Symbol of National Identity (New York, 2000), 101, 182–83, 308–10.
Yaolaychi, to verify their credibility. He told the governor that “it will be necessary to detain the Indian, and his family, to further justify the reality of all of this; so as not to deprive the State, this Province, and the Public, of the benefits that could result [from] not dismissing all that has been said as fabulous, and the metal [as] a fiction.”

57 Vicente Manuel de Zéspedes agreed. From April 4 to 9, Saint Augustine’s leading officials—Governor Zéspedes and Colonel Bartolomé Morales, the commandant of the garrison—interrogated Yaolaychi, Bartolomé de Castro, and Alonso Gil about the minerals, territories, and monster they allegedly encountered during the expedition. Like Benítez’s laboratory and the spring, the interrogation room was a site where narratives circulated, shaped, and produced knowledge.

One of the main emphases of the governor’s interrogations was to determine the validity of the expedition’s mineralogical observations and collections. He thus asked Gil and Castro about their knowledge-gathering practices, including whether Benítez “had given them instructions for [their] management.”

58 Gil acknowledged that he and Castro did have “instructions to bring from the spring . . . water, mud, soil, and herbs of all qualities” but admitted that they were initially content with sending Yaolaychi to collect these samples. The two Spaniards only went to the spring themselves after Yaolaychi had returned with just “some bones of a deer that the beast had killed, and some herbs it had uprooted.” Moreover, Zéspedes recognized that the doubtful origins of Gil’s gold called the interpreter’s honesty into question, and the governor berated Gil that “the discovery of metal or a metallic mineral, had been the principal object, and in reality the only [object] of the expedition to the Indian provinces, and it is particularly strange that [Gil] did not present the piece of metal at the same time [as] the water, earth, sand, and plants that the instructions had ordered.” Gil’s reply, that he did not present the gold initially “because of natural forgetting,” no doubt did much to undercut his credibility.

Information about valuable minerals was potentially critical to Indian-Spanish power dynamics. Zéspedes’s overriding concern in early 1790 was maintaining good relations with powerful Creek leaders and, both before and after the expedition, he tried to ensure that the travelers were not violating Indian territorial boundaries. He asked all three commissioners if the spring was “in the district that the Indians believe to be theirs,” and although Gil and Castro were unsure if that land belonged “to the Indians or us,” Yaolaychi responded confidently that “the spring proper is inside the limits

57 Benítez to Governor of Florida, Apr. 7, 1790, fols. 447–48 (quotations, 447).
58 Zéspedes asked both Castro and Gil this same question during their interrogations. See Interrogation of Bartolomé de Castro, Apr. 8, 1790, fol. 453; Interrogation of Alonso Gil, Apr. 8, 1790, fol. 461.
59 Interrogation of Alonso Gil, Apr. 8, 1790, fols. 461 (“instructions”), 462 (“some bones”); Interrogation of Alonso Gil, Apr. 9, 1790, fol. 466 (“discovery”).
of the [Indians’] hunting grounds.” Natives remained more populous and powerful than the Spaniards in Florida, and Benítez voiced concern about “the grave damage that could result” if Indians controlled the mineral wealth at the spring. In the borderlands, regional competitions with Indian nations could influence Spanish officials’ pursuit of natural resources as much as Atlantic competitions with European empires.

Powerful Creeks such as Alexander McGillivray would have taken the presence of mines in their territory—and a betrayal of their existence to Spanish or U.S. officials—very seriously. During this period, some wealthy Creeks were working to turn the loose confederation of Creek towns into a Creek Nation, a political entity against which individual Creeks could commit crimes and that had a police force to punish these offenses. Though some poor Creeks and Seminoles resisted the economic and social influence of this “new order,” Yaolaychi was probably just trying to avoid its most impoverishing aspects by pursuing novel economic opportunities. Nevertheless, he was aware that some Creek leaders would have construed his activities in Florida as a crime against the Creek Nation as a whole. Yaolaychi reportedly claimed that the Creeks “have some knowledge of the value of the mine” and feared that the nation’s leaders would execute him for revealing this potential source of wealth to the Spanish. Zéspedes asked Gil if Yaolaychi “would not want his compatriots to be aware of the motives and ends of the expedition.” Gil replied “that it is certain, that the Indian [had told him this] because the rest of the Indians, even though they knew about the brilliant rocks, have never wanted to give any part of them to the English, nor the Spaniards; and if they knew that [Yaolaychi] had made it known, they would kill him.” This was a story about Creek power, the power of the nation’s leaders to police the actions of individual Creeks and control the flow of information and resources across national boundaries.

It is possible that Creek leaders would have killed Yaolaychi for revealing the location of a mineral deposit, a threat evident in later Creek stories about mines within their territory. These stories were meant to keep individual

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60 “In the district . . .” appears in both of the following sources: Interrogation of Bartolomé de Castro, Apr. 8, 1790, fol. 458 (also “to the Indians”); and Interrogation of Alonso Gil, Apr. 9, 1790, fol. 467. Interrogation of Yaolaychi, Apr. 4, 1790, fol. 449 (“spring proper”).

61 Benítez to Governor of Florida, Apr. 7, 1790, fol. 446 (quotation).

62 See Saunt, New Order of Things.

63 Benítez to Governor of Florida, Apr. 7, 1790, fol. 446 (quotation).

64 Interrogation of Alonso Gil, Apr. 9, 1790, fol. 467 (quotation). Leaders of other non-European groups also viewed individuals who shared local natural knowledge with Europeans as traitors meriting punishment. See Schaffer et al., "Introduction," in Schaffer et al., The Brokered World, xxix, esp. n. 29.

65 For a different way that storytelling and conceptions of the land overlapped “to promote compliance with standards for acceptable social behavior,” see Keith H. Basso, Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 1996), 41 (quotation).
Creeks from exploring and revealing sites of mineral wealth, but they also expressed how Creek leaders understood natural resources in the context of regional geopolitics. Writing from Creek country in 1801, southeastern explorer John D. DeLacy told Thomas Jefferson that “it is said and asserted as fact that there is a gold mine in this Country [and that] an Indian took a small quantity of the ore to the Spaniards at Augustine who having essayed [sic] it begged of the Indians to bring him a larger quantity and that he would pay him well for it.” However, when news of this transaction came “to the ears of the Head of the Nation they assembled in general Council and decreed the death of any person that should ever attempt to shew discover or open the mine or take carry or give any of the ores to any white persons whatsoever but especially to the Spaniards whose inordinate thirst for it they considered as the sources of all the evils inflicted on them and the many oppressions exercised by the Spaniards in this Country heretofore.” According to DeLacy, the Creeks feared that Spanish knowledge of the mine could lead to war and “the loss of their Country and independence.” He concluded that the Creeks have therefore “wisely resolved to shut [the mine] up forever if such a thing there be.” It seems likely that DeLacy was relating a story about Yaolaychi, one that placed the events of the 1790 expedition in the context of historical connections between precious metals and Spanish violence while asserting the territorial sovereignty of the Creeks. The detail that the Spaniards offered to “pay him well” for the metal suggests that Yaolaychi’s motive for sharing information about the mine was, indeed, financial.

There was much at stake in determining if the commissioners’ mineralogical observations and collections were credible. So, just as Benítez had done in his report, Governor Zéspedes incorporated information from stories of the beast to better determine the veracity of the expedition’s questionable mineralogical findings. Yaolaychi was the first of the expedition members that Zéspedes interrogated and, when the governor asked him to describe the beast, Yaolaychi told his story for a third time.

66 John D. DeLacy to Thomas Jefferson, Dec. 18, 1801, TJP, 9 (quotations), 8, 15 (fols. 20437–38, 20441). DeLacy also shared similar accounts about how Creek leaders viewed the relationship between buried riches and geopolitics. He wrote that there was “an inexhaustible mine of salt Petre and little below that is valuable native Allum, there are rich mines of Iron, Copper, Tin and lead” on the Chattahoochee River, “but the Indians are cautious of shewing them.” And in a discussion of San Luis de Apalachee, he claimed that “the Spaniards it was said had during the siege [in 1704] built a kind of subterranean vault in which they buried the treasure of the town, one of the poor Indians in alliance with the Spaniards being privy to the burying [of] the treasure and afterwards taken by the Muscogean offered to discover where the treasure was hid if they would spare his life which they refused doing preferring that the treasure should remain buried in oblivion to eternity as the source of every evil than be again brought to light.” Ibid., 15.
The Story, Version Three: Told April 4, 1790

Questioned [Zéspedes]: What did you do when you saw the beast, and give a description of it.

Responded [Yaolaychi]: That he saw the beast at the distance of some 200 rods, . . . it has a round head, not so big as the rest of it, like that of a bull, without ears, and without horns, that it is about three feet high, with four legs, similar to those of a caiman, but longer, with some very long and sharp claws: the tail is also similar to a caiman, but shorter, and that its movement is so swift, that not even deer can escape it: the thickness of its body is about six feet, and its length about two rods, he cannot figure out how to express its color; the best that he can do is compare it to the rays that a metallic mirror gives off in the sun, and he has heard it said, but he does not know it from experience, that bullets do not penetrate it.

Questioned: If there are other beasts of the same species in this province.

Responded: That there could be many, and that he has heard that there is one fully similar near the stream of Rollestown. . . .

Questioned: If he knows if the beast has killed or eaten men.

Responded: That he does not have any proof of what the beast has killed or eaten other than what he has heard said, and in particular he remembered having it recounted that two Indians having on one occasion left to hunt bears, with many dogs, they encountered the beast, or another of its species, it climbed into a tree, and the dogs rushed to attack it, it grabbed hold of them, and killed them with its tongue, and once the dogs were dead, it went down from the tree, and overcoming one of the men, took him and dragged him a good distance until by chance it met with a tiger, and while [the tiger] attacked the beast [the man] was able to escape, alive but very badly hurt: [Yaolaychi] adds that the beast has a tongue divided in two, and that it wields [its tongue] so effectively that it makes flying eagles come to its mouth. 67

Yaolaychi included the story of the hunters on all three occasions that he described the monster, yet he altered how he employed evidence about the

67 Interrogation of Yaolaychi, Apr. 4, 1790, fols. 451–52 (quotation). John Hambly translated Yaolaychi’s responses into English and another interpreter converted these words into Spanish. Rollestown was about twenty-seven miles southwest of St. Augustine on the east bank of the St. Johns River. The intervention of a tiger or panther was common to several versions of the Monster Lizard story recorded in the twentieth century, and Yaolaychi’s account during this interrogation was particularly similar to a Hitchiti version recorded by John Swanton. In both of these Hitchiti tellings, the tiger fought the Monster Lizard long enough for the last surviving hunter to escape but did not kill it. See “Hitchiti Story 15: The Monster Lizard,” in Swanton, Myths and Tales, 96–97.
story and the beast during his interrogation. In the first two tellings, he had sworn to the “proofs” and “veracity” of his description of the monster and included the story of the hunters as evidentiary context that buttressed his claims. In his interrogation, however, he drew distinctions between what he knew “from experience” and what he had “heard said” and made it clear that he “does not have any proof” regarding some aspects of the Monster Lizard story. Yaolaychi’s authority and influence as a storyteller, and the epistemologies on which he based his authority, depended on his audience and his stage. In the Indian-controlled spaces of Florida’s interior, his storytelling shaped the expedition’s knowledge-gathering practices and the Spanish commissioners’ accounts of their activities and findings. In Spanish-dominated Saint Augustine and particularly during an official interrogation, Yaolaychi modified his story to better conform to the expectations of the powerful men questioning him. Neither Natives nor Spaniards had a single, set toolkit for understanding or describing nature in the Florida borderlands; power and place influenced how Indians and Europeans alike approached the acquisition and relation of knowledge.

Yet even in a Saint Augustine interrogation room, Yaolaychi’s story continued to influence European narratives about the expedition and the knowledge it produced. Both Gil and Castro repeated for the governor how they had stripped down, stalked the beast, and seen a mirror-colored monstrosity with their own eyes. They both insisted that the beast looked just as Yaolaychi had described it, and Gil supplemented his testimony with information from Yaolaychi’s story about the hunters and the monster, an account that he related as if it were fact.

Indeed, the Monster Lizard story may have determined how Gil and Castro carried out and recounted all of their knowledge-gathering activities near the spring. According to Yaolaychi’s testimony, “neither of the two white men left the camp to go to the spring, and even though they brought two bottles of mud [and] water with them to this place [Saint Augustine], . . . this was not from the spring where the shiny rocks are found, but from another spring . . . some eight or nine miles distant.” Yaolaychi claimed that the two Spaniards had not collected any of the precious metal because they “never arrived at the spot where they are found” and, moreover, that he was the only one of the three expedition members who had actually seen the Monster Lizard. He explained that the two Spaniards had neither observed the beast nor conducted their mineralogical work at the correct spot because they were afraid of the monster. Yaolaychi told the governor that he had informed Gil about the beast before the start of the expedition, and “Gil responded that

68 “Diario,” Apr. 6, 1790, fol. 436 (quotations).
69 Interrogation of Yaolaychi, Apr. 4, 1790, fol. 451 (quotations).
70 Interrogation of Bartolomé de Castro, Apr. 8, 1790, fol. 456; Interrogation of Alonso Gil, Apr. 9, 1790, fol. 466.
he was not a fearful woman, and that the beast would not frighten him: yet experience verified the contrary.” 71 According to the expedition’s diary, Yaolaychi’s stories had shaped the expedition’s practices, objectives, and results; according to Yaolaychi’s testimony, his stories had such power over Castro and Gil that all their written and spoken accounts of what they did during the expedition amounted to little more than stories derived from his own tales. Yaolaychi’s Monster Lizard story—as mediated by translators and situational power relations—was more than a vehicle through which Native natural knowledge circulated to Europeans; it constituted and circumscribed the knowledge that commissioners in the field and analysts in Saint Augustine produced.

On April 10, the day after the last interrogation, Governor Vicente Manuel de Zéspedes sent Bartolomé Benítez his final decisions regarding the validity of the mineralogical, zoological, and geopolitical information embedded in the commissioners’ narratives and whether he would grant the treasurer’s request to fund a second expedition to the spring. Although the governor had taken Alonso Gil to task about the seemingly incredible circumstances by which the interpreter had acquired and delivered the precious metals, Zéspedes accepted that the mineralogical collections and observations that Gil presented in Saint Augustine were true and potentially valuable. Zéspedes wrote that “I do not doubt that there could be a mine of silver, or at least, of copper,” an assertion that he based as much on Gil’s testimony as on a 1719 Real Cédula about Floridian mines that he had in his possession. 72 Yet the governor told Benítez that although “I agree in the reality of the mine, my natural sincerity obliges me to express to you that I in no way give credit to the existence of a quadruped animal, whose skin repels bullets and reflects light like mirrors in the sun.” Zéspedes did not concur with Benítez and Saint Augustine’s other intellectuals that the Monster Lizard could be real. He argued instead that Yaolaychi had used a kind of cunning, perhaps peculiar to Indians, to manipulate nature and deceive the two Spanish commissioners by playing on their fears. Based on his interrogations, the governor was convinced that Gil and Bartolomé de Castro believed they were telling the truth about seeing and stalking the monster but, Zéspedes thought, this belief had developed because Yaolaychi had worked his wiles on “the imagination of the explorers.” “The cunning Indian,” Zéspedes wrote, “used a trick to turn the kind of animal nature regularly produces into a Monster that never existed except in the stories that, as you know, the old Indians, just the same as us whites, tell to amuse their grandchildren.” The governor


72 Governor Zéspedes to Bartolomé Benítez, St. Augustine, Apr. 10, 1790, EFP, sect. 16, bundle 78, no. 17 (reel 30, PKY/LOC).
recognized that Yaolaychi’s “cunning” was to blur distinctions between what “nature regularly produces” and “stories” so effectively that his tales could become the basis for natural knowledge among whites and Indians alike. Although Zéspedes denied the reality of the beast and denigrated Yaolaychi as a devious trickster, he nevertheless acknowledged the power that Yaolaychi and his stories had over the expedition.73

The governor thought—erroneously—that Benítez’s experiments and his own interrogations had indicated the material validity of mineralogical findings that the expedition members had developed from and through stories. But Zéspedes did understand that the actual collection of minerals at the spring had to be approached within a larger geopolitical context. Based at least in part on Yaolaychi’s testimony, the governor determined that the spring was located “in a district that the Indians consider to be theirs.” He thus denied Benítez’s request to send a second expedition to the site because violating the boundaries of the Creeks’ hunting grounds could alienate Spain’s Creek allies and, perhaps, lead to war. The governor worried that exploring the spring a second time might “result, on their part, in zeals, anxieties, and maybe an open break” between Indians, Anglo-Americans, and Spaniards in the Floridas.74 As Helen Hornbeck Tanner has argued, “the two vital concerns for a governor of East Florida” in early 1790 were forestalling Anglo-American incursions and maintaining peace with the region’s Indian groups, and Zéspedes feared that another expedition could undermine both of these goals.75 He thus decided that “it is my invariable ruling that, even if the mine really were of mercury, or gold, far from being in the interest of the royal service, it would actually be exceedingly harmful to it.”76 Just like the “Head of the Nation” in the Creek story that John D. DeLacy recorded in 1801, Zéspedes proclaimed the mine off-limits.77 Though the expedition revealed some of the congruencies between Native and European approaches to nature, Spanish and Creek leaders’ reactions to the mineral knowledge it generated also suggest key similarities in their approaches to regional geopolitics: long-term geopolitical concerns trumped the potential benefits of exploiting sites of mineral wealth.

73 Zéspedes to Benítez, Apr. 10, 1790 (quotations). Euro-Americans often believed that Indians and blacks had an intimate knowledge of nature that they employed for both beneficial and pernicious purposes. See Farrish, American Curiosity, chaps. 6–7. The theory that supposed encounters with mythical powers could be explained as by-products of fear—and the skill of certain cunning individuals to exploit that fear—was well established among educated Europeans in the eighteenth century. See Frank Edward Manuel, The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods (Cambridge, 1959); James Delbourgo, “Fugitive Colours: Shamans’ Knowledge, Chemical Empire, and Atlantic Revolutions,” in Schaffer et al., The Brokered World, 271–320, esp. 284, 317.
74 Zéspedes to Benítez, Apr. 10, 1790 (quotations).
75 Tanner, Zéspedes in East Florida, 220 (quotation).
76 Zéspedes to Benítez, Apr. 10, 1790 (quotation).
77 John D. DeLacy to Thomas Jefferson, Dec. 18, 1801, TJP, 9 (quotation) (fol. 20438).
Unlike officials who sought to discover natural resources that would aid Spain in its global competition with other European empires, Spanish leaders in the borderlands sometimes avoided exploring potential sources of wealth because they aimed to maintain the geopolitical balance, not to gain ascendency. Accruing natural knowledge did foster European power and wealth in many places throughout the world. But studying science in imperial borderlands suggests that colonizers were not necessarily interested in or capable of producing power-promoting knowledge, a pursuit that depended on an empire’s strength on the ground, diplomatic clout, and geopolitical goals. Instead of making Spain’s presence in Florida stronger, the 1790 expedition highlighted the empire’s regional weakness.

The official history of the 1790 expedition came to a close with the governor’s decision to forbid a second journey to the spring, and it is difficult not to find this ending disappointing. It was a Spanish governor, not a Native storyteller, who had the last word on the truth of the expedition’s findings in the archival record. It was geopolitical necessity, not the power of Hitchiti storytelling or some triumph of European science, that dictated Spain’s official response to the natural, extranatural, and political information tangled together in the expedition members’ narratives. Power—both Zéspedes’s authority as governor and the exigencies of regional geopolitics—determined what naturalists in Madrid and elsewhere would learn about Florida’s nature: no evidence suggests that Spanish accounts of the expedition and the knowledge it produced traveled to Europe. Like so much of the information that European men of science and their local associates gathered throughout the world’s borderlands, the knowledge produced by the 1790 expedition followed itineraries that were, seemingly, roads to nowhere.

Although Spain’s recorded history of the expedition was finished, stories about it—and the story within it—persisted after Spain gave up its claim to Florida in 1821. Native stories about the expedition, such as those recorded by DeLacy and James Pierce, demonstrated that the events, historical and mythical associations, and political significance of the expedition remained

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79 On some of the other obstacles that “thwarted” the flow of natural knowledge from the Americas to Europe, see Neil Safier, “Fruitless Botany: Joseph de Jussieu’s South American Odyssey,” in Delbourgo and Dew, *Science and Empire in the Atlantic World*, 205 (quotation).
known among local Indians and, through their narratives, Euro-American men of science. The Monster Lizard story has proven even more resilient and it remains an important part of the folklore and ritual life of southeastern Indian groups, many of whom now reside in western North America instead of their ancestral homelands. Although the mineralogical knowledge that Native storytelling generated in 1790 has been forgotten, the story itself has continued to generate knowledge about Native identity.80

Creek storytelling produced knowledge during the expedition but, according to the commissioners, a powerful beast developed through Native stories also limited access to knowledge that Spanish officials had hoped to leverage into geopolitical power. Although the Monster Lizard story remained central to how individuals in Saint Augustine interpreted the expedition’s findings, regional geopolitics—which were partially defined through Creek stories about the connections among Spaniards, minerals, and power—determined how Spanish and Creek leaders acted upon this potentially valuable knowledge. Knowledge production and power relations were interconnected in the multiple spaces and social encounters that constituted colonial borderlands, and power could also determine the itineraries through which colonial knowledge circulated beyond these regions. Written accounts that fit information into scientific frameworks were the primary means through which natural knowledge derived from Indian narratives traveled from the Americas to Europe, but perhaps this had less to do with any inherent advantage to European methods of relating knowledge than with the fact that the Atlantic Ocean was a space dominated by European empires and mediated by their technologies. Within the Americas, particularly the vast parts of the hemisphere in which Native groups held considerable power, Indian storytelling may have circulated colonial knowledge—and the social and historical contexts in which it was embedded—more effectively than European texts.81 Histories that follow these American continental itineraries instead of privileging Atlantic networks and the European significances of colonial knowledge production—namely science and empire—promise to reveal new stories about knowledge and power in the Americas.


81 As John D. DeLacy told Thomas Jefferson, “one principle I state as an absolute fact [is] that from ocean to ocean there is an intercourse kept up by the Indians and an Intelligence that is incredible notwithstanding their continual wars. . . . The free and warlike tribes of St. Bernard . . . will know what passes at the opposite sea or Bay sooner than can be imagined[;] indeed from the Bay of St. Bernards [Matagorda Bay, Texas] in the Gulph of Mexico on the vast Atlantic to the opposite coast of the great Pacific the chain of Indians is complete and formidable.” DeLacy to Jefferson, Pensacola, Nov. 3, 1801, TJP, 13 (fol. 20233). Borderlands histories of knowledge production offer a way to satisfy Neil Safier’s call for “more seamless histories of science that include indigenous actors and categories” without “reinforc[ing] the omnipotence of the imperial center at the expense of local or moving platforms of knowledge creation.” Safier, *Isis* 101: 137 (“more seamless”), 143 (“omnipotence”).