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Michael Neagle. "The Magnificent Land of Sunshine, Health, and Wealth": How U.S. Entrepreneurs Sold Cuba's Isle of Pines. *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 11:4 (October 2012): 575-611.
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Cuba's Isle of Pines is generally remembered, if it is remembered at all, for its famous prisoners; José Martí, the revolutionary poet, was a prisoner on the island in 1870, and young Fidel Castro, was imprisoned on the island from 1953 until his release in 1955. Today the island remains in a peripheral position within the Cuban political imagination and its history as a prison remains prominent. However, Michael Neagle offers an alternative perspective on the Isle of Pines. Neagle documents how from 1898 until 1925 a small colony of U.S. citizens hoped to make the Isle of Pines 'American.' Their successes, and far more pointedly, their failures, are the subject of his new essay, "The Magnificent Land of Sunshine, Health, and Wealth: How U.S. Entrepreneurs sold Cuba's Isle of Pines."

Neagle's essay uncovers the history of white U.S. settlers' ambitions for annexation in the early twentieth century as well as their ultimate disillusionment. His work looks at entrepreneurs and speculators (although they refused the name), and he argues that their small-time investment in the Isle of Pines differed both qualitatively and quantitatively from large corporate U.S. investments, such as those of the United Fruit Company. Rather, their more middling status signaled their disenchantment with turn-of-the-century domestic politics and their desire to be 'pioneers' in a new tropical frontier. Over the course of a decade, more than 10,000 Americans purchased land on the Isle of Pines, and by 1910, Americans held 90% of the island's land (578, 610).

First, Neagle analyzes an often overlooked element in the 1901 Platt Amendment, which curtailed Cuban sovereignty and drove diplomatic and private investment in Cuba in the early twentieth century. The Platt Amendment is better known for the stipulation that enabled U.S. troops to enter the island for the "preservation of Cuban independence." However, Neagle points the reader's attention to Article VI which stated that "The Isle of Pines shall be omitted from the proposed constitutional boundaries of Cuba, the title thereto being left to future

adjustment by treaty.” Neagle argues that Senator Orville Platt (R-CT) intentionally carved out the Isle of Pines and placed its sovereignty in question because he believed it had strategic value. In 1903, the U.S. relinquished its claims to the Isle of Pines in return for a leasing agreement for the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay; however, machinations in the U.S. Senate left the Isle agreement hanging and the island’s political status in limbo. Between 1903 and 1925, U.S. settlers held out hope that the U.S. would annex the Isle of Pines. Some settlers even labeled the island as the “Isle of Pines, West Indies,” to obscure the island’s Cuban political status (603). It was not until 1925, when the U.S. Senate finally ratified the Hay-Queseda treaty, that U.S. settlers acknowledged the island was definitively Cuban (611). The fact that the Isle of Pines’ status could have been ambiguous for more than two decades underscores the unexplored contours of neocolonialism and the Platt Amendment.

Second, Neagle’s work demonstrates the hopes and dreams of American settlers. Neagle explores how Americans viewed topical spaces as possessing a wide array of possible uses, and he argues that the Isle of Pines was marketed as a “sanitary resort.” Along with the idea of a “health resort,” investors held out hopes that they could develop citrus groves and export profits (581). Its draw was in both its ‘foreign’ tropical climate and in its geographic proximity to the United States. Unlike Hawaii or American Samoa, Cuba was close. Neagle convincingly argues that this proximity was a key draw, allowing settlers to make a stake in a foreign (but potentially American) place, without venturing too far afield (598).

Finally, Neagle successfully demonstrates the disillusionment that many of these American settlers experienced. Perhaps not surprisingly, U.S. settlers did not find the local *pinero* population to be particularly welcoming, nor were the economic opportunities as abundant as they had imagined. Other settlers were frustrated by the isolation of their outposts, the lack of fertile ground, the mismanagement of local government, and again, not surprisingly, the local population of color. As one man wrote, “it is not a fit place for white people to live” (610). By the 1920s when Cuba’s sovereignty over the island was affirmed, the number of American settlers declined, from a high of 2000 to only around 700. Moreover, many of these individuals had lost their money and sold their land at a loss. The dream of a tropical paradise ripe for small scale pioneering had largely failed.

Neagle’s research provokes even more questions about the role of private investment and U.S. expansionism. For example, it would be worth considering the middling entrepreneurs in a broader context of U.S. expansion and annexation in the early twentieth century. Did the American settlers on the Isle of Pines look toward Hawaii as a potential model of annexation? How did they conceptualize the Isle of Pines in comparison to the massive state project in the Panama Canal Zone? Was there a similar cohort of entrepreneurs who went to Puerto Rico *because* of its U.S. status? Christine Skwiot’s new work on tourism in Hawaii and Cuba asks us to consider the evolution of Hawaii and Cuba in tandem, and Neagle’s work could open up a similar line of analysis.¹ While the annexation of Hawaii was both audacious and violent, there

¹ Christine Skwiot, *The Purpose of Paradise* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

was a precedent for the U.S. recognizing an American settler colony. Did the American settlers on the Isle of Pines ever refer to it?

Neagle is also clear that he is examining the Isle of Pines through the perspective of American boosters and settlers; however, there still seems plenty of room to incorporate Cuban sources. How did the Cuban media in Havana report on the Isle of Pines? Was it seen as a backwater? A place of possible Cuban investment, wealth, and escape as well? When and how did the Cuban government assert its sovereign rights to the island? How did the Isle of Pines mirror (or not) the peripheral position of Guantánamo within the Cuban national imagination? Was there a great deal of interaction between *pineros* and Americans? To what extent did U.S.-Cuban relations on the ground adhere to American racial hierarchies and white supremacy, and to what extent did U.S. citizens on the island have to negotiate with Cubans of color and Cuban political norms?

Neagle's work goes quite far in demonstrating the limits of white settlement. It would be worth considering how his work argues for the Cuban government's sovereignty even in a marginal region with a large settler population as well as the shift in the U.S. government's overseas ambitions. In an era which also saw the construction of the Panama Canal and U.S. invasions in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti, the U.S. settlers in the Isle of Pines received relatively little U.S. government support. In many ways this demonstrates a complicated interplay between state and non-state U.S. actors under the Platt Amendment and the politics of neocolonialism.

Finally, Neagle's article raises questions about the continuum of government and non-state projects from prisons to resorts that were generated for the Isle of Pines. After the revolution, Fidel Castro re-imagined the Isle of Pines as *La Isla de la Juventud*, as a giant revolutionary international boarding school. How did these projects acknowledge the island's earlier history as a place for prisons? Or of imagined American pioneers? Neagle's research is promising, and if brought into conversation with that of other scholars of U.S. empire, could move the field forward in terms of the way in which state and non-state actors imagined the islands as part of both utopian, and sometimes dystopian, projects.

Jana K. Lipman as an Associate Professor in the History Department at Tulane University. She is the author of *Guantánamo: A Working-Class History between Empire and Revolution* (University of California Press 2009). Her work has also been published in *American Quarterly*, the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, and *Radical History Review*.

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