

Artists in  
Residence in  
Everglades

## The Four Moments of the Sun: Hidden Lands of Florida's Maroon Communities

a photo essay by Jeanine Michna-Bales  
at AIRIE Nest Gallery, Everglades National Park

Prior to the existence of the Underground Railroad, in the late 1700s and early 1800s enslaved Africans escaped into the American wilderness and formed their own communities, sometimes in isolation, and at other times near indigenous communities. One such southern haven was the area of land that was to become the state of Florida.

During Florida's First Spanish Period (1565-1763), a sparse population mixed with relatively liberal manumission laws lead many free blacks and enslaved Africans, to live among or near the Creek and Seminole Indians. They worked for both the Spanish and the indigenous peoples by building towns and forts, performing agricultural tasks, and providing military service. The Spanish offered freedom to fleeing African slaves from the British colonies in return for their conversion to Roman Catholicism.

Over time, the state was split into East and West Florida, with most of the land east of the Suwanee River becoming home to plantations and supporting the Southern economy. As control of the state switched to the British, then back to the Spanish during the Second Spanish Period (1784-1821), and ultimately to the Americans these —“cimarrón” or “maroon” communities were forced further and

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further south— eventually hiding deep in the swamps of the Everglades, fleeing to Cuba or to the Bahamas.

The title of the series is taken from the Kongo Cosmogram, Yowa, the Kongo sign of cosmos and the continuity of human life. Traditional Bakongo believed “that man’s life constitutes an unending cycle. The sun, in its rising and setting, is a sign of this cycle, and death is merely a transition in the process of change.” Initiates read the cosmogram by imagining God at the top, the dead at the bottom, and water in between. The horizontal line divides the mountain of the living world from its mirrored counterpart in the kingdom of the dead. The four disks at the points of the cross stand for the four moments of the sun (dawn, noon, dusk and midnight), and the circumference of the cross the certainty of reincarnation: the especially righteous Kongo person will never be destroyed but will come back in the name or body of progeny, or in the form of a representative landscape.

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### Image List

#### ***A Turn in the Path.***

*Fort Mose, St. Augustine, Florida, 2018*

Established in 1738, Fort Mose was sanctioned by the Spanish Government making it the first free African settlement to legally exist in what is now the United States. The settlement gave sanctuary to Africans challenging enslavement in the English Colony of Carolina. Approximately 100 Africans lived at Fort Mose, forming more than 20 households. Together, they created a community which drew on a range of African backgrounds blended with Spanish, Native American and English cultural traditions. The colony remained until 1763 when Florida was ceded to England.

#### ***If Trees Could Talk.***

*Bowlegs Town and Negro Towns along the Suwanee River, Florida, 2018*

Maroons start to settle in various communities around Florida along sources of water like rivers and springs.

#### ***Fleeting Seconds of Liberty.***

*Bowlegs Town and Negro Towns along the Suwanee River, Florida, 2018*

In the War of 1812, African Americans were called on to help fight the Spanish. The East Florida Patriots occupied a deserted site during the ill-fated attempt to

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overthrow Spanish rule. A local garrison, aided by the Negro militia and Native Americans forced them to withdraw.

***A Scarred Land.***

*Bowlegs Town and Negro Towns along the Suwanee River, Florida, 2018*

From 1812 - 1818, Seminole Chief Bowlegs established a town surrounded by maroon communities near what is now Old Town, Florida. At their height, the settlements along the Suwanee River stretched for approximately 50 miles. During the Battle of Suwanee in 1818, the maroons held off Andrew Jackson's United States troops, allowing others to escape further south. Abandoned homes and the community were destroyed. Survivors fled to a community along the Manatee River called Angola and its importance as a refuge grew, making it even more of a threat to the United States.

***To Be Upside Down.***

*Negro Fort Along the Apalachicola River, Prospect Bluff Community, Florida, 2018*

In the early 1800s, Spain was losing its hold on Florida and Britain took advantage by establishing a stronghold called "British Fort" on the Apalachicola River. Here, by offering land and freedom in the British West Indies for service, they recruited more slaves from Louisiana, Mobile, Pensacola, Georgia and the Lower Creek Nation. The British trained and armed about 3,000 Native Americans and 300 black soldiers to protect the fort, which safeguarded families, fields and pastures extending 50 miles along the Apalachicola River. Sometimes known as the "Negro Fort," the post earned a reputation as a threat to supply vessels that traveled the Apalachicola River between the United States and the Gulf of Mexico. In response, the United States ordered the fort destroyed in 1816. Alerted to the impending attack, black families, and Native American women and children took refuge in the fort. Early in the battle, a heated shot, landed in the

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magazine of the fort, blowing it to pieces, leaving only 33 survivors. American soldiers burned what was left of the fort and all of the surrounding settlements.

***Cross River.***

*Bowlegs Town and Negro Towns along the Suwanee River, Florida, 2018*

The pace of bloodshed and destruction increased after 1816. Settlers were killed, plantations raided, livestock, free blacks and formerly enslaved seized. Survivors of these attacks were driven south deeper into the Florida frontier.

***Rooted in the Land.***

*Charlotte Harbor Community, Florida, 2018*

African and Native alliances allowed the two groups to live side-by-side. Both Native and African cultures valued family above economic profit and had a relationship to the land.

***A Forked Branch.***

*Florida, 2018*

Many descendants from the maroon communities still live in these areas today. They hope that their ancestors' struggles and triumphs will be written back into our collective history.

***Transition.***

*Charlotte Harbor Community, Florida, 2018*

In 1818, Andrew Jackson led a force down the Apalachicola River to destroy African American, Seminole and allied Upper Creek villages in what was to become known historically as the First Seminole War.

***Grandfather's Beard.***

*Bowlegs Town and Negro Towns along the Suwanee River, Florida, 2018*

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The battle for Florida continued with Jackson's forces attacking successive settlements and continuing into the Second and even Third Seminole Wars. African Americans and their maroon communities were essentially written out of this part of American history.

***Dawning of a New Day.***

*Angola Community, Florida, 2018*

As survivors continued to flee south, many arrived in Angola along the Manatee River. At its height historians estimate its population in the hundreds, making it a significant threat to slavery. In 1821, Angola and the other Gulf Coast maroon communities were "burned to the ground".

***Mirrored Worlds.***

*Big Cypress Swamp, Florida, 2018*

***Dividing Lines I.***

*Everglades, Florida, 2018*

As the raids continued and terror reigned all over Florida, Africans disappeared into the swamps of South Florida.

***The Boundary.***

*Everglades, Florida, 2018*

***Circle of Souls.***

*Everglades, Florida, 2018*

***Everlasting Pool.***

*Cape Florida, 2018*

Some Africans made it through the sea of never-ending grass and arrived at what

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# Exhibit

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is now known as Key Biscayne, an island off of the coast of Miami. There, they were taken by British shipping vessels and Native American canoes to the Bahamas, where some of their descendants still live today.

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