

NAMES

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We call ourselves
the Seminole people
Mikasuki, Creek, Oklawaha, Trail
But we've gone by other names
we won't translate
Names we can't repeat
that are nobody's business but our own
and other names
they didn't want us to keep

We come from many places
but we were always here

Before the Spanish came
We were Ikaniuksalgi
The **original** *Penisulares*
Kooti Bread eaters
Calusa, Timucua, Ais
Tekesta, Apalachee, Alachua
We were sailors, farmers, fishers
Our queens protected us
Our priests danced for us
Augustine was not our saint

They called us
fierce and powerful peoples
death-obsessed
serpent worshippers
giants and smooth-faced pirates
Before half of us left
for Cuba, Bahamas, Nicaragua

And the rest of us who survived
Spanish Christian kindness
baptism at the point of a sword
Escaped up North

Before the French came
We were Natchez, Biloxi
Alabama, Chitchimacha, Toltec
We venerated the women, the dead and the sun
With song, smoke, and shell-laden pyramids
We spoke many languages
We knew all our neighbors
They called us *moundbuilders*
sunworshippers
formidable foes

When they grew envious and impatient
before the messengers could gather
five nations of warriors
they killed women and children
fought a war of extinction
Those of us who weren't sold to English plantations
down south or to Haiti
Escaped to the East

Before the English came
we were Hitchiti, Cherokee
Yuchi, Yamassee
Tunica, Oconee
Many peoples coming together
Creating and recreating ourselves
Moving when necessary
united against a common foe
We became a nation of nations
We survived in our stories
We learned to love strangers
We traveled South

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Before Jackson
Before rabid flesh-hunting Carolinians came

We were fluid and raceless
Ibo, Dahomey, Ga.
Fon, Hausa, Yoruba.
We were Ewe and Dogon
farmers teaching hunters
clans expanding
We were Mikasukee, Tallahassee, Muskogee
allies and kinfolk
Before they called us
Mulatto, Mestizo
Mustee, Negro
Stolen property
Creek

Before they tried to separate us out
One from another
We were families
Our neighbors called us
Eufala, Estee Seminolee
(Those who camp at a distance)
Remnants and renegades
Trailblazers and healers
Clever and careful
We fought war upon war
We called ourselves
Ki Tishshay, Looche, Hatke
Red, Black, and White
Esta Caddee
Esta Luske
Kanyuksa Esta Chattee
(People of the pointed land)
Regardless of Oklee
We were Yatee
Human
We traveled in circles

But they could not defeat us
so they called us *savages*
Could not baptize us
so they called us *heathens*
Could not find us
so they called us *wiped out*

Could not understand us
so they called us *mysterious*
Could not educate us
so they called us *backwards*
Could not convince us
to learn their language
so they called us
hostile, shy, afraid

But they were like
Pahaykoshlay to us
And we had Ayekchay
We had medicine for that
We kept moving
We took in strangers
We moved South
Back to the point
To a place where soft pink people
could not survive/many of their soldiers died
They took to passing laws
and telling stories about us

and they made up names

When they couldn't identify
Our diversity anymore
They called us
Florida Indians or
Florida Creeks or else
Seminoles
(convinced it was an English corruption
of *cimarron*- Spanish for wildman)
And not the name our cousins gave us

When they got tired of fighting us
we became a legend
They spent a hundred years
Trying to find the
Last Unconquered Indians
Sent in the army
Government surveyors
Sports fishermen

Anthropologists
Missionaries
But we were untrackable
And intractable
When found

We cost the government
an embarrassment of riches
and dead white men

In their eyes
We were the *last frontier*
So they did what a man does
Who cannot fish
They drained the whole pond
In search of us

Brought in heavy machinery
And sucked dry
The glorious Everglades
Turned the swamp to
sand and rock and clay
rounded us up
To ask our names

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Some names are for lovers
Others are for friends
Our names are for our people
And we never told them to white men
We said: Sally, Tommy, Cypress, James
You didn't understand why we all had
The same names.

But before namegiving or namecalling
We were here

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We say
Before you left Spain in search

of your splintered self
We were here
Before you realized England
Was cramped and dirty
We were here
Before you left France
For your piece of the pie
We were here
Before you tried to
Carve a nation
out of our expatriation
Before you defined your red-blooded
American selves
In terms of our absence
We were here

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Some names sort
Others deceive
These names tell stories
Historians
Refuse to believe

We call ourselves the Seminole people
Mikasuki, Creek, Oklawaha, Trail

We call you Ochkochay
The smoke in our eyes