

# Christina León

ON ANNA JANE McINTYRE

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## Of Face and Forest: Tricky Textures in the Work of Anna Jane McIntyre

So history is spread out beneath this surface, from the mountains to the sea, from north to south, from forest to the beaches.

Maroon resistance and denial, entrenchment and endurance, the world beyond and dream.

(Our landscape is its own monument; its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history.)

—Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*

Forests display a form of sensate resilience, an ability to show relation and affliction. The forest of El Yunque in Puerto Rico was the first area to show signs of recovery in the devastating aftermath of Hurricane María. The time of a forest is multilayered; it remembers the deep time of volcanic movement, registers the present through environmental signals we still have yet to decipher and envisions a futural promise with the glimmer of new growth. Caribbean forests have historically and figuratively been sites of dense meaning making as well as spaces of escape from the onslaught of colonial land management from the plantation matrix—a system that exterminated indigenous peoples from the land and tried to manage the very same land with the forced labor of the enslaved and the indentured. Despite years of monocultural investment in crops like sugar, Caribbean ecologies sometimes find a way of taking land back, ruining the exploitative work of coloniality and creating a space for dreams of other, more free worlds.

*Game Face (Now You Know)* (2018), Anna Jane McIntyre's latest work for *Small Axe*, creates a face from a forestry of prints, collaging fetid materials that assemble a face that quietly blooms from land and history alike. From afar, the piece registers as the abstracted face of the artist: a black woman, face adorned with red lips and blue lining on the lower eyelid, with a small, contained afro puff. McIntyre's *Game Face* is neither spare nor unadorned, but is instead made up of incongruent and collaged patterns of drawn forest foliage, small iconographies, demanding a long encounter that slowly reveals less about the artist's facial identity and more about the viewer's awareness of this face and its tricky textures and larger-than-life scale. McIntyre has created an aesthetic encounter with a scalar theory of difference, charged with ecologies of history that defy the objectification of black women's visage.

Rather than charting the interiority with the face as an easy portal or as a verifiable identification document, *Game Face* beckons one outside the forest for a broader, scalar view of its details.

### Textures of the Weave: Into the Forest, into the Face

The forest imaginary conjured by McIntyre's *Game Face (Now You Know)* is not an Edenic garden. This forest recalls the creative ruminations of Cuban surrealist Wifredo Lam's *The Jungle* (1943), wherein the trees are peopled and the African diaspora pulses collectively. The woven, layered composition of McIntyre's work resonates powerfully with Édouard Glissant's directive: "Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly *one must focus on the texture of the weave* and not on the nature of the nature of its components."<sup>1</sup> Following Glissant's ethos, the face and the features it holds are not reducible to the characteristics of the stereotype or to referentiality to, and singularity of, the artist's own face. It is a composite that demands attention to composition. These entangled ecologies of forest spread out across the skin of *Game Face*, incorporating natural and synthetic forms, patterns, and objects that travel through the Caribbean and into its diasporic resonances in Canada and Great Britain.

Recent work in environmental humanities asks us to think urgently about the Anthropocene and to consider lives, thoughts, and meaning making in the more-than-human world. One consistent critique of such movements, though, is that moves to discard the human, or merge the human with ecology, also tend to eschew concerns that are perceived as matters of race and gender and, therefore, as too humanistic. This elision of the social human has the often pernicious outcome of re-centering and universalizing masculinist, white, and global North conceptions of ecology. As we well know, though, environmental disasters disproportionately affect the most vulnerable places and peoples—certainly islands and island peoples. Instead of separating nature and culture, to think like a forest is to think the two together—to think with images and senses that register the colonial, imperialistic, and extractionist violence laid upon lands and peoples. According to Eduardo Kohn, the point of thinking like a forest is to think with images, and, indeed, *Game Face (Now You Know)* creates a pointillism of images, textures, quiet sounds, and haptic textures.<sup>2</sup> The layered surface of *Game Face* does not grant one access to a black woman's interiority, but asks one to chart a new relation to image and entanglement.

McIntyre purposefully chose materials that not only create a fascinating mosaic of woodcut prints on cotton rag paper but also emit organic, lively smells. One must use a whole repertoire of senses to encounter this artwork. Come closer, linger over the foliage. Look,

smell, listen. McIntyre based the outlines of *Game Face* on her own 2017 passport photo, resulting in a resemblance that McIntyre ambivalently asserts is, and is not, her: "[It's] me/not me."<sup>3</sup> The passport photo operates as a kind of silhouette boundary for the piece, outlining how the artist's face and hair have been captured and coiffed. What does it mean that the shape and outline of this face derive, in some fashion, from a passport? Consider the surveilling aspect of a passport. It allows entry to some and marks difficulties for others, constricting movement and attempting to regulate the flows of migration. Taking the silhouette or outline of a passport photo as a frame acknowledges the visual life of social affliction and the ways photography has often been a policing art. For example, Simone Browne shows how blackness has always been watched closely by visual capture: "Surveillance is nothing new to black folks. It is the fact of antiblackness."<sup>4</sup> As such, the passport operates as an undeniable frame for the imbrication of visibility and violence. Playing tricks with state subjection, McIntyre creates an ecological tapestry of face, using collage, the human hand, and the reproducibility of woodcut to assemble a face larger in scale than her entire person. This large, looming face transforms into a forest with the intimacy of the close-up. Yet only at a distance can you see the entirety of the face, thus scaling the viewer down by virtue of the object's large size.

From afar, the primary tone of the face's skin appears to be black, but on closer examination we find that its blackness is adorned and entangled with other tones. The eyes well up with blue, which may be an ocean of tears that sediment into glittery, indigo eyeliner. Look closer still and we see that in this facial ecology, forests may grow in the eye—or is it a reflection? Land and water find pathways into one another. One eye holds a foliage, another waves. The red of the lips seems to be the most starkly contrasted palette, sensually enclosing the speaking mouth and letting sound be something different than a human voice. Is this game face smiling? Is the woman holding a secret? We look closer to see the lips as a scene from a forest's floor, lush with leaves as a figure on a horse makes its way through the vegetation. Who is riding the horse—a friend or foe? We cannot know, because this person has been beheaded by the lip's line. Other objects



appear in the vegetation: a tractor, a toothy grin that topples into a crown, and a water wheel. Perhaps the glimmering toothy smile we see atop this *Game Face* is dislocated from the ruby-red mouth. And this smile, too, is haunted by the past consumption of black culture and caricature through blackface, a menacing reminder of how black bodies have been forced to entertain and smile through exploitation. Now this toothy smile becomes a small adornment, dislocated from its proper place on the face and used as a barrette. Muted, overlapping, and fractal textures lure and confuse in *Game Face*. The forest reveals as much as it hides, reminding us that forests of the Caribbean hold histories of marronage, fugitivity, and guerrilla resistance.

In the puff of canopy atop *Game Face (Now You Know)*, we see a water wheel that spills water onto the dense foliage of hair. First built in Scotland and then assembled in Tobago in 1765, the Arnos Wheel registers the relics of coloniality. It was rebuilt in 1856 for more expedient function in the sugar plantations. Upon its retirement, the Arnos Wheel sits in a natural forest refuge in Tobago, a former sugar plantation. The wheel no longer circulates in the exploitatively lucrative time of sugar's modernity and instead is caught—as many former sites of the plantocracy—between the speed of the island's ecological comeback and the consistent pleas of the tourists who delight in the hanging bats and lush landscapes surrounding the wheel. Monoculture has given way to the enmeshment of regrowth, the land taking time back and halting the wheel. When it was still turning, the Arnos Wheel propelled a plantation where at least 220 enslaved peoples lived and worked with the peril of losing an arm feeding sugarcane to this wheel, which, in turn, fed colonial greed. In 2015, local vandals chimed in with nature's agency and burned the site. Now, the wheel sits unused, charred, and the site struggles to attract tourists. Browsing travel guides, it seems that the main attraction of the Arnos Wheel is the decrepit ruin of a plantocracy, the flora and fauna that have reclaimed the land and the various plants, like rope plant, that are also part of the forced African diaspora. This wheel invokes Michelle Cliff's notion of *ruination*—a word that “signifies the reclamation of land, the disruption of cultivation, by the uncontrolled, uncontrollable forest. When a landscape becomes ruinate, carefully designed aisles of cane are envined, strangled, the order of empire is replaced by the chaotic forest.”<sup>5</sup> As an accessory or an adornment to *Game Face (Now You Know)*, the Arnos Wheel serves as a reminder that the dominating forces of coloniality do indeed break down and get reclaimed in the ruinate work of forestry—the resilience of land that arrests the wheel's exploitatitve turns, halts its oppressive production, and repurposes it to create a new topology for birds to nest.

The composition of *Game Face* is a collage that provides camouflage; the game in the title seems to be one of hide and seek. Often eclipsed by the legacy of her hus-

band Aime, Suzanne Césaire was a formidable Caribbean critic in her own right and referred to the appearance and thinking of the Caribbean as a “great camouflage.” The Césaires often thought with forests, specifically the Absalon tropical forest close to the Mount Pélée volcano in Martinique. There, the forest was “the privileged site of communion for themselves and . . . a remarkable circle of writer, artist, and intellectual intimates,” including Wifredo Lam, André Breton, André Masson, and René Ménil.<sup>6</sup> During the years of World War II, which ensnared the French territories into the Vichy Regime, Suzanne Césaire wrote “The Great Camouflage” for *Tropiques*, an essay inspired by her time in the forest, grappling with her political critiques of postslavery debt and her interest in surrealism. Césaire’s notion of camouflage is as a game of hide and seek, where the Caribbean presents itself in parts and wholes—turning between overwhelming beauty and absolute dispossession. In this space, the forest takes on a life of its own, and “life lights up in vegetal fire.” The camouflage of the forest holds the sounds and visions of the night, presenting a frenzy of animism: “Here the tropical vines rocking vertiginously, take on ethereal poses to charm the precipices, with their trembling fingertips they latch onto the ungraspable cosmic flurry rising all throughout the drum-filled nights.”<sup>7</sup> Note that in this camouflage vines rock and drums fill the night—the human, inhuman, and material world blend and beat together.

The radical ambivalence at the core of Césaire’s notion of camouflage could perhaps be an invitation to consider the danger at the core of human relation, where the primary sense of the landscape is beauty that hides affliction, struggle, and resistance. Any face-to-face encounter, and especially one as charged as the racialized and gendered aesthetic encounter with *Game Face (Now You Know)*, carries risk and vulnerability. The facial forestry of *Game Face* becomes an affective landscape of the quotidian navigation of a visual world where xenophobia and gendered violence register, but so too do escape and resistance. The image’s ecology not only visualizes affliction but also feels it and imagines beyond it. As the history of blackface might signal, racism is not a closed story wherein racial subjection can only lead to stultifying objectification. Erik Lott shows that the very counterfeit nature of blackface, rather than its visual veracity, has made it a slippery and enduring trope of racialized and racist performance in which black performers learned to engage in order to gain the stage and wages.<sup>8</sup> The texture of *Game Face* plays with this history but refuses the caked-on makeup, whether by cork or grease, of blackface—rendering a black face with defiant femininity and a forested vitality to tell a story in images and foliage, rather than with the script of minstrelsy.

From Suzanne Césaire’s “The Great Camouflage” to Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, black women writers have long thought about how beauty can hide injustice and how black women’s bodies are often the most vulnerable at the crossroads of such pursuits of profit and pleasure. Visibility is a very specific kind of trap for women in the African diaspora.<sup>9</sup>

Inspired by Hortense Spiller’s work, Nicole Fleetwood draws our attention to modes wherein black women artists have contended with such hypervisibility in what she calls “excess flesh.” And this resistance does not shatter the problems of visibility. Instead, black female bodies who enact excess flesh resist “dominant visual culture[,] and . . . its troubling presence can work productively to *trouble* the field of vision.”<sup>10</sup> The excess flesh grafts onto a forest, rearranging a field of vision that wants to consume and dominate. Xenophobic fantasies of the dark—of what is deemed “below” and needing cultivation—entwine blackness and forest. But so too do we see the deft acts of fugitivity that seized upon simplistic, colonial fantasies—hewing a different relation to land. The time of the forest is both past, present, and future. We often go to forests to see the effects of climate change, to look for resources that may guide us into the future. Both real and imagined,<sup>11</sup> there is a promise in the peril: “[The forests are] places and people of black identification that are most lively as horizons of possibility, a call from afar that one keeps trying and trying to answer.”<sup>12</sup> Communication in a forest reaches beyond language to the semiotics of root systems, the call of birds, the flickering sounds that vary according to time of day. While some creatures sound their morning call, others come alive at dusk. Lingering in this encounter with *Game Face (Now You Know)*, we find the weave of relations within the face becoming more important, more haptically salient, and more motivating than the identification of the singular face. In this face’s forest, we are called to listen.

### Quiet Image, Resounding Face

How can we listen to this image of a forested face? In speculating on images like the passport and other forms of identification, Tina Campt contends, “The choice to ‘listen to’ rather than simply ‘look at’ images is a conscious decision to challenge equating vision with knowledge by engaging photography through a sensory register that is critical to Black Atlantic cultural formations: sound.” She finds promise in listening to these noisily quiet and insistently quotidian images that require us to attend to their context and bring our whole sensorium to feel their effects on us. Such a listening asks us to home “our attention on their sonic and haptic frequencies and on the grammar of black

fugitivity and refusal that they enact reveals the expressiveness of quiet, the generative dimensions of stasis, and the quotidian reclamations of interiority, dignity, and refusal marshaled by black subjects in their persistent striving for futurity.<sup>13</sup> This forest creates a sonic disruption in the taking in of a face, suffusing it with a terrain that seems more-than-human in a form of quiet refusal marked by the closed lips of *Game Face*.

There is a subtle performativity and animism to this face that gives way to the relational stirrings between air, paper, and movement. When one walks by *Game Face (Now You Know)*, one may hear the rustle of layers of prints. The layered leaves of this face are not glued down and flattened, but rather arranged in place with copper nails, a metallic conduit for energy work. Neither exactly fixed in place nor fully free to disperse, these layers are saturated with so much ink that they are weighed down. In that flux of cotton rag paper with woodcut prints, the trees that give way to paper are rendered as new leaves, enmeshed in organic and synthetic material, creating quiet but insistent sound. Fred Moten writes, “Where shriek turns speech turns song—remote from the impossible comfort of origin—lies the trace of our descent.” In Moten’s sonic genealogy, sound operates to mitigate and, perhaps, transform the violence of objectified visuality:

Might it not be necessary to hear and sound the singularity of the visage? How do sound and its reproduction allow and disturb the frame or boundary of the visual? What’s the relation between phonic materiality and an original maternity? If we ask these questions we might become attuned to certain liberating operations sound performs at the intersection of racial performance and critical philosophy that had heretofore been the site of occlusion of phonic substance or the (not just Kantian) pre-critical oscillation between the rejection and embrace of certain tones. *Sound gives us back the visuality that ocularcentrism had repressed.*<sup>14</sup>

Moten is often cited for his register of the resistance of the object, which plays with, rather than conforms to, the violence of a white supremacist visual culture that enjoys blackness as entertainment, as object, as a visage captured and rendered static without movement. It is through the musicality of *Game Face* that we are invited to hear a rustle, a song, the imprint of cries and laughter and sounds blending a sonic tradition that murmurs in the beat of diaspora, the ludic notes that attenuates pain and affliction—creating music from misery and contrapuntal echoes across various displacements.

This quietly sonic piece was not made in silence. A clamorous and dissonant set list accompanied the process of sculpting this forested face in McIntyre’s art studio: back in time reggae, soca, Detroit house music, the BBC radio program *Desert Island Discs*, the CBC radio program *Writers and Company*, and many author interviews, such as with Toni Morrison and James Baldwin. Though these songs do not register through visual, referential symbols, the process of creating *Game Face (Now You Know)* was also a deep listening to, and with, blackness—a listening in detail.<sup>15</sup> Listen simply to the title, which McIntyre signals is a breath: “Breathe in, Game Face, breathe out, Now You Know.”<sup>16</sup> Here, in this breath that fortifies the self for the face-to-face encounter, presenting the risk of relation, we hear other echoes and lung capacities of iconic hip-hop. The title of the work itself

conjures a sonic register in addition to its breathy insistence: a mash up of Public Enemy’s “Game Face” and Notorious BIG’s “Juicy” remixed, yet again, through a black and markedly feminine face. *Game Face* orchestrates a cover of these songs rendered through forested femininity.

In the Caribbean, songs often feature storytelling and folklore that choose the forest as their setting.<sup>17</sup> Humming along, children learn what lurks after dark: soucoyants, diablasses, and other tricksters that dwell. It is neither a place of Edenic bliss nor a place of certain danger. The forest may hide and may reveal, with its fascinating camouflage and more-than-human world. As Glissant suggests in the epigraph, Caribbean surface and landscape are suffused with history—a glimmering camouflage that refuses to be taken in all at once.<sup>18</sup> Deep, thick histories weave together to grant a forestry of face in *Game Face (Now You Know)*. The texture of this face reveals the weave of “Maroon resistance and denial, entrenchment and endurance, the world beyond and dream.” Texture becomes the trickster and we cannot fix the face or silence its song. *Game Face (Now You Know)* is face alive with ecology, suffused with history, scaled to overwhelm—breathing, fluttering, and demanding an encounter.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (1997; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 190 (emphasis mine).
- 2 See Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
- 3 Anna Jane McIntyre, telephone interview with the author, 4 September 2018.
- 4 Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 10.
- 5 Michelle Cliff, “Caliban’s Daughter,” *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 3, no. 3 (2003): 157, [www.jstor.org/stable/40986153](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40986153).
- 6 Keith L. Walker, translator’s introduction to Suzanne Césaire, *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941–1945)*, ed. Daniel Maximin (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), xv.
- 7 Suzanne Césaire, “The Great Camouflage,” in *The Great Camouflage*, 45.
- 8 See Eric Lott, “‘The Seeming Counterfeit’: Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy,” *American Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1991): 223–54.
- 9 Michel Foucault writes, “Visibility is a trap.” Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 200.
- 10 Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 113 (italics in original).
- 11 This forest might be, rather than a window into one soul, what Nadia Ellis calls territories of the soul, “those spaces that embody the classic diasporic dialectic of being at once imagined and material.” Nadia Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 3.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 6, 11.
- 14 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 235 (italics in original).
- 15 See Alexandra T. Vasquez, *Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
- 16 McIntyre, interview.
- 17 In her work on the pernicious, colonial epistemologies that are deprived humanisms, Sylvia Wynter writes that “the African presence . . . ‘rehumanized Nature’ and helped to save [the African slave’s] own humanity against the constant onslaught of the plantation system by the creation of folklore and folk-culture.” Sylvia Wynter, “Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards the Interpretation of Folk Dances as Cultural Process,” *Jamaica Journal* 4, no. 2 (1970), 36.
- 18 Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 11.