

# When Did You Wake Up And Realize It's All A Game? (2024) by Julianna A.S.

Exhibition essay by Tamara Jones

If it is, in fact, all a game, what are the rules? Is there a set by which we all must abide? Beyond playing, what does it mean to win? To cheat? To quit? Julianna A.S. works through these questions in *When Did You Wake Up And Realize It's All A Game?* (2024), an interactive exhibition featuring sculpted ebony pawns atop a game board. Its companion piece — a public web archive documenting art, agricultural and political stories from Haiti, Jamaica, Grenada, and Cuba — plays on a loop. An artist shaped by those she communes with, this project draws out Julianna's impulse to knead collaboration into an often solitary craft.

Activated by voices of Caribbean elders and youth, this exhibition aims to not only underscore the exploitation of the land and its people but also contribute to the preservation of news and storytelling customs; this is where the artist's desires converge with those of the Caribbean Solidarity Network (CSN). Birthed from resistance to the U.S.-backed coup in Ayiti (Haiti) in 2004, CSN is a collective creating media and educational events on and for those in the Caribbean and its diaspora. The network's praxis is rooted in the radical Black tradition — feminist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist — working ultimately toward the liberation of the region.[1] With repercussions of imperial ventriloquism in Ayiti as the crux of their organizing, CSN aims to foster dialogue and action against the orchestrated human, economic, and ecological decimation of the Caribbean.

Extractive industries are the lynchpin of global colonial regimes. Before genocide, there is ecocide — in the case of Ichirouganaim (Barbados), the British deforested the entire island in the first decade after contact.[2] Deforestation is a form of socio-cultural and psychological control, pruning Indigenous ways of life like the limbs of a baobab tree. However, like the baobab, once calloused, wounds sprout unexpected off-shoots; making alternative pathways both possible and necessary. Through this installation, Julianna expresses a deep connection to these nascent branches — these possibilities existing within resistance — and how they drive her artistic practice. The news accompanying the board game reminds us that the land didn't simply bear witness to the atrocities, it experienced them alongside us and holds its own memories. Rather than denying shared histories, Julianna reclaims sacred materials often discarded by Western woodworkers, embracing its obstinance and complexity.

Ebony is one such material that carries the weight of a poor reputation due to its unwillingness to be tamed. In other words, it makes itself unruly enough to ward off those motivated to dominate. Its foregrounding in Julianna's work asks us to consider how we carry the rules of the game within ourselves; it calls for a rejection of binaries, paternalism, and the myth of utility as worth. Approached with intuit familiarity, her practice regards the ebony as a co-conspirator, evoking a sense of harmony as they negotiate which rules they'll follow and which they intend to break.

In framing this exploration through the lens of gameplay, Julianna creates fertile ground to study the system in which we perform, identifying moves we can make to push it toward

the point of collapse. In *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe described the very structure of the plantation system and its aftermath as emblematic of the state of exception.[3] The enslaved — enduring a simultaneous loss of home, bodily autonomy, and political status — appears as the perfect existence of a shadow expelled from humanity. In the shadows, however, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney theorize there exists a space where we can pass unobstructed:

***There is no outside, refusal takes place inside and makes its break, its fight, its exodus from the inside [...] This debt was shared with anyone whose soul was sought for labour power, whose spirit was borne with a price marking it. And it is still shared, never credited and never abiding credit, a debt you play, a debt you walk, and debt you love.***<sup>[4]</sup>

How can we protect cultural inheritance from capitalism's panoptic eye? When the Government of Canada passed Bill C-18, curtailing our ability to share news on our most relied-upon social media platforms, it motivated CSN organizers to invest in offline spaces. They discovered to evade detection, corruption, and deletion, we must create pockets of our own community-run spaces perpetually. Enslaved Africans in Xaymaca (Jamaica), granted only a few yards of cloth annually, supplemented it with the bark of the *lagetta lagetto* tree to produce garments that could withstand the strain of forced labour in the harsh climate. Some who escaped the plantation melded with the indigenous Taíno where lacebark, harvested and produced for community rather than industry, continued to be a symbol of resilience.[5] Like lacebark, CSN functions as a gauzy membrane disseminating knowledge and stretching imaginative capacity within the Caribbean diaspora.

Pockets of resistance are also found in passing down histories, customs, and ideas through folklore and mento music, ancestor worship, and the preservation of artisanal crafts like woodwork. Old-growth jungles also carry memories through lineage — the transfer occurs through root systems concealed from view. Inspired by the intimacy of multigenerational relationships, Julianna used as little machinery as possible, constructing tight bonds without the buffer of synthetic joints. The game's existence claims to necessitate competition, but the tools we need to strategize and work collaboratively to topple the board are already within us.

Though this exhibition is centred on the Caribbean experience, it cannot be divorced from the global context: the same capitalist colonial forces looting the Caribbean are wreaking havoc on Turtle Island and waging wars in Palestine, Sudan, Tigray, and Congo. The collaborative nature of the work asks audiences to consider the possibility that the successful destruction of this system requires us to move as a unit. *When Did You Wake Up And Realize It's All A Game?* disrupts our expectations by making visible the exceptions we've been conditioned to accept as the rules. Are we limited to survival or can we flourish? To participate in a game is to be engaged in a negotiated performance; you have opted in by virtue of your attendance. As you encounter the space, consider how you're implicated in the complex structures that created the conditions for each conflict. Exercise compassion and ingenuity when visualizing alternative futures. Though porous, the boundary between simulation and reality can only stretch as far as its players are willing to take it.

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[1] "Our Politics." Caribbean Solidarity Network. Accessed April 17, 2024. <https://caribbeansolidarity.org/batch-3>.

[2] "About Barbados: History Of Barbados." Accessed April 17, 2024. <https://barbados.org/history1.htm>.

[3] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," in *WORK: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Friederike Sigler (Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2017), 192-194.

[4] Moten, Fred, and Stefano Harney. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions.

[5] Soth, Amelia. "Lacebark as a Symbol of Resilience." *JSTOR*. April 28, 2022.

