

LAMIN FOFANA *BLUES*

The background of the entire page is a dark, almost black, abstract composition. It features several large, organic, glowing shapes that resemble cells or biological structures. The most prominent shape on the left is filled with a cluster of bright orange and purple particles, with a blueish-purple glow around it. To its right and below are other smaller, more translucent shapes with similar glowing interiors. The overall effect is that of a microscopic or cellular view, rendered in a dark, moody aesthetic.

MISHKIN GALLERY
NEW YORK



JIM C. NEDD
RAISES DEL CARIBE, 2018

UNSETTLING THE BLUES

by ALAINA CLAIRE FELDMAN

This issue is that of the genre of the human, the issue whose target of abolition is the ongoing collective production of our present ethnoclass mode of being human, Man: above all, its overrepresentation of its well-being as that of the human species as a whole, rather than as it is veridically: that of the Western and westernized (or conversely) global middle classes. Sylvia Wynter¹

In her 2003 essay *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument* the Jamaican writer and theorist Sylvia Wynter asserts that one cannot destabilize the nexus of power and the colonial without developing a concept of the human outside the terms of our present affirmations of it, which she calls “Man”. In an essay that intertwines history, law, science, theory and epistemology, Wynter lays out why it was impossible to envision the human in other versions beyond the hegemonic representation of the European Man. She traces how race informs what it means to be, or not be, human. As such, her work negates the idea that “we are all human” and considers the racialization of Man through a fundamental inability to imagine the human other than as Man.

In an effort to redescribe and undo the human, Wynter calls for new classifications of the human to be established by asking whose freedom and well-being is prioritized, and therefore whose is systematically overlooked. Perhaps art, in conjunction with the critical apparatus provided by the idea of the oceanic, can aid in answering this emancipatory call. The oceanic is anti-representational; in its unfixed, watery ways, it can bring about new kinds of subjectivity. If representation comes to mean visibility, art can represent and generate knowledge beyond the current order of Man. Ideas of race will continue to be repeated until there are alternatives. Art, as well as epistemological and educational institutions, need to acknowledge and change the roles they play in reproducing the overrepresentation of the human.

BLUES. The Atlantic. A spectrum from azure to navy. Melancholia. The police. Amiri Baraka’s (then LeRoi Jones) *Blues People*. Blues music. The oceanic, the cosmos. *BLUES*. An Afrofuturism that looks to the sea in order to create a new world and a new human. Since so little is known of the extraterrestrial, its vast expanse of blue lends itself as a projection screen for new ideas and redescriptions of Man, made audible in the sounds of Detroit techno musicians Drexciya among others. Lamin Fofana’s interest in Wynter’s work along with his interest in history and the sonic are mechanisms that grapple with creating a space to introduce new modes of representation.

The discussions I had with Fofana ahead of the exhibition spanned a broad array of writings ranging from Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* to Christina Sharpe’s *In*

the Wake—texts that articulate formidable ideas for contending with living in the present amidst the legacies of slavery and in a world where “being human” is not a universal concept. Fofana identified three influential texts within Black Studies, Wynter’s unpublished manuscript *Black Metamorphosis* from the 1970s, W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920), and Baraka’s *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963), in order to resurrect the unsettling and unsettled narratives of those affected by slavery and to deal with them today. The works in this exhibition respond to these texts in emotive and sensual ways, shifting our attention from land to the sea and other liminal spaces that make us more aware of our bodies. The work seeks to rethink kinship, sovereignty, and belonging within the fluidity of Atlantic history. “What happens when black people find themselves in the West?” was the question raised when Fofana’s first album, *Black Metamorphosis*, made its debut at SAVVY Contemporary in Berlin last fall.

Fofana’s exhibition features three individual tracks of electronic music with intentional sound spill in the gallery. They are titled *Black Metamorphosis* (2019), *And All the Birds Sing Bass* (2020), and *I ran from it and was still in it* (2020), and are accompanied by videos and photographs by Fofana’s collaborators Nicolas Premier and Jim C. Nedd. *Black Metamorphosis*, titled after Wynter’s manuscript, begins with slow swishes, which evoke Doppler effects, while layers of melancholic chords slowly seep in, suggesting a sense of longing. The corresponding video of the same title by Premier shows a young woman preparing for Carnival at night. Close shots of her putting on makeup are interspersed with footage of alienating passages such as a car driving through a tunnel or the rolling waves of the ocean’s surface passing a jetty. Archival documentation of Carnival processions with figures made by the likes of Peter Minshall and others are shown alongside schools of fish, only to cut to the woman watching said videos on an iPhone, alone. These connections between processions both on land and sea are key to the video. Historically, the vocabulary of electronic music writing draws heavily on the oceanic. Words like wave, channel and ear canal point to the cartographic and colonial drive towards expansion.

To expand upon Wynter’s argument, Western epistemologies, including the sonic, rely heavily on troubling concepts of management and control. The electronic musician and author Tara Rodgers has written extensively about the connections between electronic music, technology, the oceanic and power. “In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries,” she notes,

“as sounds became electronically produced and reproduced as signals and modern listening techniques were cultivated to interpret them, there were stakes in the representational conventions established in audio-technical discourse. It is my contention that a world of others—other to the white and male subjects of science and history—inhabit the metaphors that constitute knowledge about sound. So much of our Western epistemologies are built on problematic logistics of control, the sonic included. Practices of classifying sounds as individuals, sorted by desirable and undesirable aesthetic variations, were deeply entwined with epistemologies of gender and racial difference in Western philosophy and modern science.”²

The second video in the exhibition, *I ran from it and was still in it* (2020), also by Premier, was shot in black and white at the *Jardin d'Agronomie Tropicale* (Garden of Tropical Agriculture) in Paris, the site of a 1907 exhibition, which showcased France's colonial powers. The *Exposition Coloniale* was both simultaneous and contradictory to the publishing of the civil rights journal *The Horizon: A Journal of the Color Line* edited by W.E.B. Du Bois. In the video, a young black man walks through the garden watching his reflection in puddles among a large group of figures by French sculptor Jean Baptiste Belloc. This *Monument to the Glory of French Colonial Expansion* is a five-part sculpture including a depiction of a Caribbean woman that has been vandalized and decapitated several times since 2015. Fofana's accompanying music features a very high, synthetic and metallic sounding drone in the background. The multilayered melody begins to crescendo before quickly fading out for about the last minute of the track.

With its faster rhythm and distinct melody and sound palette, *And All the Birds Sing Bass* differs greatly from the other two tracks. There are clear piano tones, repetitive chirping, and distorted crackle that evokes the surface noise of a vinyl record. Fofana has collected this material from various sources, making it his own in the process. Alongside the music, six color photographs by Jim C. Nedd, each about 20 by 24 inches, are distributed across the gallery walls. They are faceless portraits of family and friends from in and around the river Guatapurí in the Colombian city of Valledupar. These collaborations between two visual artists and a musician reconfigure the visual and the sound within the traditional form of the "narrative artwork". Typically, image supersedes sound, which is used to amplify mood (as with cinema) and sound is used to reinforce the visual narrative. The opposite holds true here, as the sonic is paramount.

By foregrounding sound and supplementing it with images, Fofana and his collaborators allow the audience to formalize representation to new ends. The portraits are faceless, the videos employ many close-ups with little information beyond the frame, and the sounds are not easily distinguished from one another. Crucially, *BLUES* extends an invitation to stay and listen. The active practice of listening and encountering or imagining new narratives offers possibilities for world-making, and new ways to describe what being human can be. Here, the practice of listening is a call to re-imagine and challenge current meta-representational approaches that ensure colonial power ensconced in the notion of the "human" stays in power. As we reimagine the ocean and the salty journey, and feel the melancholia, but also the hope and the perseverance of the past, we encounter a collectively articulated counter-narrative by those who feel over-determined by the power of logistics, along with a call to think differently about the operations of power itself.

1. Sylvia Wynter: "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument. In *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3 (Fall, 2003): 313.
2. Tara Rodgers: *Synthesizing Sound: Metaphor in Audio-Technical Discourse and Synthesis History*, Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 2010, pp. v-vi.



JIM C. NEDD
ALASDIR, 2018

OCEANIC SOUND: An Interview with LAMIN FOFANA by DINO DINÇER SIRIN

BLUES is the first exhibition ever at Mishkin Gallery that foregrounds sound as a medium alongside video and photography. How do you feel about presenting your work at Baruch College, where you were previously a student?

I studied briefly at Baruch College and then transferred to Hunter College, another CUNY school. It feels like a long time ago. I'm not sure what to expect, so I'm looking forward to it.

Your exhibition complicates the format of a solo presentation, as you invited two other artists, Jim C. Nedd and Nicolas Premier, to collaborate with you. How did you decide to open up the form of the exhibition to this kind of plurality?

BLUES is situated within the field of Black Studies and is part of an ongoing project that is resisting closure. It is a musical project, a collaborative effort. I was already exchanging ideas and images with Jim and Nic while working on it. They both responded to my music with images: Jim with photographs and Nic with videos. We are interested in certain forms of expression, in different ways of seeing things, in experimenting, and turning things around. The idea was to make it fractal and imminent, scattered and plentiful, have it spiral out of the gallery, onto the campus, and into the streets.

The trilogy of your albums *Black Metamorphosis*, *Darkwater*, and *Blues* is closely related to what is now often referred to as Oceanic Humanities. This field of inquiry emerged when the social sciences began to develop an interest in the oceanic. It considers the ocean with its movements (flow) and changing forms (fluidity) as a model for “wet” ontologies, which replace the static concepts of human geography, borders, and territoriality. You mentioned in another interview that your work explores new perspectives through what you called “noir noir,” a mode of sound production you inherited as “black noise” from early Detroit techno pioneers. You structured the exhibition at Mishkin Gallery by placing your trilogy in three consecutive rooms and extending the seriality of the albums through oceanic imaginary. Could you talk about how oceanic thinking shapes your work?

We have gone from the seas to the shores, to the land, and back again. I am currently very interested in the atmosphere, in the space between the surface of the water or the land and the sky. On land, we feel a kind of atmospheric prejudice; we are confronted with it daily. There are structures of dehumanization that incapacitate people. Their purpose is to put you in a position in which your capability to relate to the world collapses entirely. The system is designed to drive you mad. This is abundantly clear. In certain spheres of whiteness, to be a black person, to be African is to be endangered. As James Baldwin noted: “a Negro has his difficult days, the days when everything has gone wrong and on top of it, he has a fight with the elevator man, or the taxi driver, or somebody he never saw before, who seems to decide to prove he's white and you're black.”¹

Your album *Black Metamorphosis* approaches the question of how to contextualize the processes of subject formation and of the racialization of black bodies in Europe, which have been critically analyzed by Sylvia Wynter and other theorists. The title of the album comes from Wynter's unpublished manuscript *Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World*. Postcolonial theory and Black Studies have been an important part of your work, and I am curious about the exchanges between the formats of sound and text, you and Wynter... Can you talk about your relationship with Wynter's writing?

I have mentioned this somewhere else before, but I would say my overlapping interests in history and the present, and the practice of transmuting text into the affective medium of sound brought me to Sylvia Wynter's "Black Metamorphosis" and the wider project of Black Studies, for that matter. My starting point was Fred Moten's "In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition," which led me to Saidiya Hartman's "Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route," which then somehow led me to Wynter's "Black Metamorphosis," arguably one of the most important and most compelling interpretations of the black experience in the West. It is reflecting on a paradoxical conundrum... that question: What happens when black people find themselves in the West? In what ways are African aesthetics forced to permutate in the in-between spaces, and what transformative potential lies on the outskirts of normative existence, in the liminal zones? The music is simply an attempt to articulate my interpretation of concepts I find to be deeply inspiring and illuminating vis-à-vis my own experience as a black African in contemporary Europe.

You live in Berlin now. Were you interested in the Afro-German experience before you moved there?

I think of this quote from Joseph Roth: "Who in all the world goes to Berlin voluntarily?"⁴ According to Roth, Berlin is a place that people are forced to come to and where they get stuck in miserable circumstances. He was writing about immigrants and refugees from Eastern Europe, from Hungary, or Romania, people who find themselves in the city and are falling between the cracks. Being black in Berlin today is synonymous with being an African immigrant, a migrant, a refugee, and therefore a target. The darker your skin, the more you're exposed and vulnerable. African people are subjected to a debilitating level of scrutiny and violence, and in certain cases people are physically assaulted. Anyway, yes, I am interested in the Afro-German experience, but I am also interested in the distance between Europeans of African descent and newly arrived Africans. The work that is being done and the task of building and maintaining connections, I am interested in that.

1. James Baldwin: "The Uses of the Blues." In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan. New York: Vintage Books 2011, p. 72.
2. Fred Moten: *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2003.
3. Saidiya Hartman: *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2008.
4. Joseph Roth: *The Wandering Jews: The Classic Portrait of a Vanished People* (1927). Translated by Michael Hofmann. London: Granta Books 2001, p. 68.



JIM C. NEDD

WENDY JOHANA, VALLEDUPAR, 2018

TEXTS SELECTED

by LAMIN FOFANA

DERRICK WHITE

EXCERPT from “BLACK METAMORPHOSIS: A PRELUDE TO SYLVIA WYNTER’S THEORY OF THE HUMAN.” *The C.L.R. James Journal*, vol. 16, no.1 (2010).

For populations living within a local cultural conception, its goal is to embody and become the idealized Self. This is the cultural definition of success. For populations outside a local cultural conception, it will be judged based on its cultural approximation to the normative culture. Wynter argues that behavior is not shaped by biology, nature, or free will, instead actions occur within the paradigm of an idealized Self. Wynter labels this process sociogeny, after Frantz Fanon ...

She contends that it is the liminal categories, the non idealized Self, which institute and promote a cultural transformation of what it means to be human. “The liminal categories ... experience a structural contradiction between their lived experience and the grammar of representations which generate the mode of reality by prescribing the parameters of collective behaviors that dynamically bring that ‘reality’ into being. The liminal frame of reference can provide ... the ‘outer view,’ from which perspective of the grammars of regularities of boundary and structure maintaining discourses are perceivable” Change from one paradigm to another paradigm will emerge from the liminal position. However, for any change to become truly revolutionary it must take a paradigmatic view of what it means to be human. The analysis should look at how these discourses are maintained and how it shapes behavior. Wynter’s transcultural view constitutes a new vision for the study of the Humanities, one that erases the “barrier between the natural sciences and the humanities, as the condition of making our ‘narratively constructed worlds and their orders of feeling and belief’ subject to ‘scientific description in a new way.’” For Wynter, the impetus for a transcultural theory will have to emerge from Black Studies and other “New Studies” (ethnic and gender) because intellectuals who represent these ideas exemplify the liminal perspective. Wynter sees the importance of Black Studies as challenging the ontology of Man in the contemporary order as analogous to the confrontation made by lay humanist. The transformative potential ascribed to Black Studies is central to Wynter’s theory of the Human.

W.E.B. DU BOIS

EXCERPT from *DARKWATER: VOICES FROM WITHIN THE VEIL*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920.

High in the tower, where I sit above the loud complaining of the human sea, I know many souls that toss and whirl and pass, but none there are that intrigue me more than the Souls of White Folk.

Of them I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language. Mine is not the knowledge of the traveler or the colonial composite of dear memories, words and wonder. Nor yet is my knowledge that which servants have of masters, or mass of class, or capitalist of artisan. Rather I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious. They deny my right to live and be and call me misbirth! My word is to them mere bitterness and my soul, pessimism. And yet as they preach and strut and shout and threaten, crouching as they clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness, they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes and I see them ever stripped,—ugly, human.

The discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples is a very modern thing,—a nineteenth and twentieth century matter, indeed. The ancient world would have laughed at such a distinction. The Middle Age regarded skin color with mild curiosity; and even up into the eighteenth century we were hammering our national manikins into one, great, Universal Man, with fine frenzy which ignored color and race even more than birth. Today we have changed all that, and the world in a sudden, emotional conversion has discovered that it is white and by that token, wonderful!

This assumption that of all the hues of God whiteness alone is inherently and obviously better than brownness or tan leads to curious acts; even the sweeter souls of the dominant world as they discourse with me on weather, weal, and woe are continually playing above their actual words an obligato of tune and tone, saying:

"My poor, un-white thing! Weep not nor rage. I know, too well, that the curse of God lies heavy on you. Why? That is not for me to say, but be brave! Do your work in your lowly sphere, praying the good Lord that into heaven above, where all is love, you may, one day, be born—white!"

I do not laugh. I am quite straight-faced as I ask soberly:

"But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?" Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!

AMIRI BARAKA

EXCERPT from *BLUES PEOPLE: NEGRO MUSIC IN WHITE AMERICA*.
New York: Perennial, 2002 (1963).

That there was a body of music that came to exist from a people who were brought to this side as slaves and that throughout that music's development, it had had to survive, expand, reorganize, continue, and expresses itself, as the fragile property of a powerless and oppressed People.

How did it do this? What was so powerful and desperate in this music that guaranteed its continued existence? Even beyond its creators' existence? This is what pushed me. But as I began to get into the history of the music, I found that this was impossible without, at the same time, getting deeper into the history of the people. That it was the history of the Afro-American people as text, as tale, as story, as exposition, narrative, or what have you, that the music was the score, the actually expressed creative orchestration, reflection, of Afro-American life, our words, the libretto, to those actual, lived lives. That the music was an orchestrated, vocalized, hummed, chanted blow, scatted, corollary confirmation of the history. And that one could go from one to the other, actually, from the inside to the outside, or reverse, and be talking about the same things. That the music was explaining the history as the history was explaining the music. And that both were expressions of and reflections of the people!

So that moving from the middle passage forward (and backward), as Jacques Roumaine said, from that "railroad of human bones... at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean," one traced the very path and life and development, tragedy, and triumph of Black people. How they had been "removed" from Africa and had been transformed by this hideous "trip," and by the context of their lives in the actual "West," into a Western people. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Du Bois points out, the majority of us were "Americans." (Here, a pause, for "canned" studio laughter!)

At each juncture, twist and turn, as Black people were transformed, so was their characteristic music. It became emphatically clear to me that by analyzing the music, you could see with some accuracy what and why that change had been. To reflect that "newer" them, which I later termed, in the boom *Black Music*, "The Changing Same." In the continuously contrasting contexts of their actual lives. My deep concentration on the continuing evidence of surviving "Africanisms" and parallels between African customs and philosophies, mores, etc., and the philosophies and their Afro-American continuum were to teach myself, and whoever, that Black people did not drop out of the sky, although, "fo' sho'," they continue to be, despite the wildest of ironies, the most American of Americans. But for all the syncretic re-presentation and continuation of African mores and beliefs, even under the hideous wrap of chattel slavery ("many have suffered as much as Black people ... but none of them was real estate" – Du Bois), there is one thing that I have learned, since the original writing of *Blues People*, that I feel must be a critical new

emphasis not understood completely by me in the earlier text. That is, that *the Africanisms are not limited to Black people, but indeed American Culture, itself, is haped by and includes a great many Africanisms. So that American culture, in the real world, is a composite of African, European, and Native or Akwesasne cultures, history, and people.* [...]

Actually, *Blues People* is a beginning text. There is much work yet to be done to properly bring the music into the open light of international understanding and collective social development and use—despite the massive commercial exploitation...



NICOLAS PREMIER
I RAN FROM IT BUT WAS STILL IN IT,
2020

LAMIN FOFANA is an electronic music producer and artist based in Berlin, Germany. Fofana's music contrasts the reality of our world with what is beyond it, and explores questions of movement, migration, alienation and belonging. Fofana's overlapping interests in history and the present, and his practice of transmuting text into the affective medium of sound, manifests in multisensory live performances and installations featuring original music compositions, field recordings and archival material. Fofana established the SCI-FI & FANTASY music imprint in 2012. Releases include *Another World* (2015); *Brancusi Sculpting Beyonce* (2018); and *Black Metamorphosis* (2019). Recent exhibitions and performances include Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, Germany (2019); 57th Venice Biennale, Italy (2017); and Documenta 14, Kassel, Germany and Athens, Greece (2017).


JIM C. NEDD lives and works in Milan, Italy. Nedd is an Afro-Colombian interdisciplinary storyteller, involved in sonic environments and visual arts. Founder of the experimental band Primitive Art alongside Matteo Pit, Nedd also operates as a photographer in both advertising and editorial projects, and as part of the Toilet-paper collective assisting Pierpaolo Ferrari. He is currently studying the Colombian tradition of Picós, profusely decorated sound systems that animate street parties on the Atlantic coast. The history of Picós can be traced back to the 1960s, yet its roots are deeper, originating during the time of slavery routes, when coastal cities like Barranquilla and Cartagena played a central role as access points in the trade.

NICOLAS PREMIER is a Franco-Congolese artist living and working in Paris. His work questions the ways of inhabiting the earth, our bodies and our imagination based on African and Afro-diasporic experiences and representations. In 2004 he co-founded *Africa is the Future*, a transmedia project that explores the Imaginary as a matrix of possibilities to interrogate modernity and its primordial taboos through African and afro-diasporic experiences and their representations. Selected works include *Regular Man* (2010); *Our Poetry* (2012); *Africa Is The Future Magazine Covers* (2015); *Style* (2017); *Misericordia* (2019); and *Black Metamorphosis* (2019). He has recently exhibited at EOTO in Berlin, Germany (2018), and Institut Français in Stuttgart, Germany (2019).

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