

LAMIN FOFANA: BLUES

a companion zine, 2022

Since *Lamin Fofana: BLUES* first opened at the Mishkin Gallery on March 12, 2020, our world has been unthinkably altered. In reopening the show now, we are reflecting on what has transpired over these long two years.



BLUES installation view, 2020

From the ongoing pandemic, to the Black Lives Matter uprisings of the summer of 2020, to the current war in Ukraine that has sparked yet another refugee crisis, we are finding a new set of resonances with the work presented in *BLUES*. Considering these works anew in 2022, we are struck once again by the importance of collective listening, community, and connection to place to the works on display, as meaningful today as ever.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SCREEN

Nicolas Premier in conversation with Alaina Claire Feldman

Alaina Claire Feldman: Nicolas Premier has come to New York for the opening of *BLUES* at the Mishkin Gallery (Baruch College, City University of New York). The exhibition, which is comprised of three sound works by Lamin Fofana, six photographs by Jim C Nedd and two videos by Premier, opened on March 12 to a modest audience right before the consequences and spread of the coronavirus in New York became evident. The exhibition has migrated to this online platform while the public programs have been postponed. Furthermore, flights have been cancelled and hotels shut down. In the face of this uncertainty, Premier and I have the rare opportunity to slow down, to learn about one another in a way that wouldn't have been possible before. We've been discussing his practice, the videos in the exhibition, and the profound ways the coronavirus will change our lives.

Nicolas, hi. Could you explain how the first collaboration around *Black Metamorphosis* (2019) came to be? When did you first meet Lamin Fofana and how did you go about creating the beautiful and evocative videos currently on view in *BLUES*? The material is both archival and that which you filmed yourself.

ACF: It seems as if the main female character of this video, getting dressed up in her Carnival uniform, is some kind of stand in for Wynter herself. It's not clear if the archival clips we see are what she's watching on her iPhone, but oceanic images of schools of fish, waves crashing ashore, cars driving through tunnels at night juxtaposed with historic and festive Carnival processions create a paradox of loneliness for her. Was this the first time you encountered the work of Sylvia Wynter? How did her work influence the video for you?

Nicolas Premier: Lamin and I met in Stuttgart where there was a show of my photography in conjunction with Membrane Festival, a literature festival where Lamin was also performing. I shared a version of *Africa is the Future* with him, the video project I was unfolding at the time. And when I attended his live music performance, I immediately knew we spoke a common language. Our connection and friendship escalated quickly thereafter. A few weeks later, Lamin suggested we find a way to collaborate because he was planning to release *Black Metamorphosis*. He sent me the full album to listen to and I felt a special feeling with the eponym track. The material was already there by way of our respective backgrounds within the afro-diasporic experience. I remember there was a certain urgency due to a deadline, so it has been the opportunity to move intuitively.

NP: Yes, it was the first time I encountered the work of Sylvia Wynter, but I did a lot of reading and research which gave me further context and methodological frames. Her essay "1492: A New World View" really resonated with me, as she argues for a less binary view of the world after colonial expansion. I also drew a lot from her personal biography. For instance, one particular episode of Wynter's life, almost anecdotal but that was creatively fruitful, was that she was part of a dance troupe led by the artist and choreographer Boscoe Holder from Trinidad and Tobago.

When I read, I have a deep unconscious and creative nourishment from the material rather than an immediate reaction like a stereotypical "spark" of creative genius. It's a slow process. My starting point for this work is also heavily influenced by Lamin's track *Black Metamorphosis* which is also the album title, the title of my film, and the title of Wynter's book. The evolution of metamorphosis is deeply evocative for me as a process and as an analogy for black experiences amid





within the ability, or rather the necessity, to adapt, evolve, transform, transmute one's appearance, language, movements, culture, beliefs in order to survive. Also, the connection between these practices and Carnival as politically and playfully expressed in Brazil, the Caribbean and in communities that live in the aftermath of the transatlantic deportation and slavery was an obvious connection to me. I'm interested in merging time and space, creating passages, attending to the manifestation of bonds, and to make the aftermath of such narratives visible. Principles more than details. My work is about the other side of the screen. I attempt to interrogate the side on which you are situated. Seeing and being seen, seeing and being invisible, not see and being seen. In this video, the dancer (Sylvia Wynter's echo) collapses in time by revisiting her own past experiences while searching and preparing for something new.

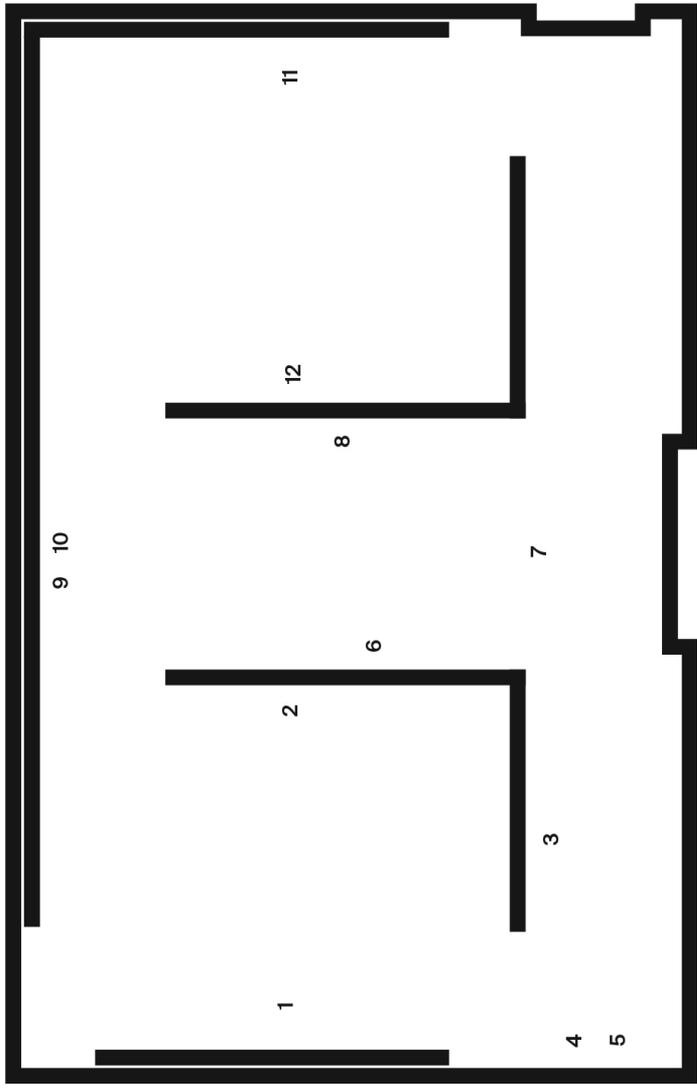


ACF: In the opposite room, and this time in black and white, your contribution is a video staring a young man. And like *Black Metamorphosis*, the character in I ran from it but was still in it (2020) is alone. He walks, gazes and poses through the Jardin d'Agronomie Tropicale (Garden of Tropical Agriculture) in Paris, the site of a 1907 exhibition which showcased France's colonial powers and is very much still open to the public today. As an American, I didn't know about this particular history until seeing this work of yours. Could you share more of your research and how the sculpture by Jean Baptiste Belloc came to play a central role?

NP: My characters in this exhibition are always filmed alone and amidst the global history of Modernity. They navigate it through their own experiences. I discovered the Jardin d'Agronomie Tropicale a few years ago when I was scouting for another project. I was intrigued after finding out that the 1907 Colonial Exhibition took place there and that you still could still find architectural remains of the pavilions, which were made to display different French colonies. What made me return to it was the visual impression left by the overgrown bamboo forest. After I listened to Lamin's track I ran from it and was still in it, I returned to the Jardin and started shooting the leaves and other elements until I literally bumped into Jean Baptiste Belloc's sculpture as I was about to leave. The sculpture consists of five parts: four female figures (the African woman, the Asian woman, the Caribbean woman and the French Republic) and a rooster (the symbol of France) atop a globe. One was seemingly unintentionally beheaded which intrigued me. After researching more, I understood that that specific sculpture was intended to embody "the" ideal African woman. She had been beheaded through petty forms of recent vandalism. I felt a great sadness, compounded with anger and the desire to commemorate and to heal. From that moment I knew that sculpture was going to be central part of the work.



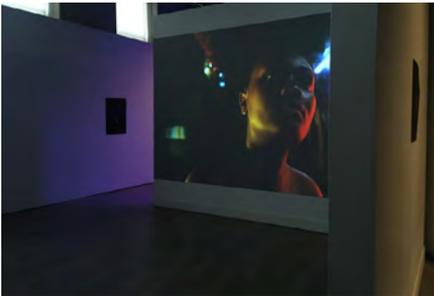
FLOOR PLAN



1. Lamin Fofana
Black Metamorphosis, 2019
Audio recording, 5'53 mins
2. Nicolas Premier
Black Metamorphosis, 2019
Video, 5'56 mins
3. Jim C. Nedd
Black Metamorphosis, 2018
Digital C-print, 20 x20"
4. Jim C. Nedd
Paula en la Mula, 2018
Digital C-print, 20 x24"
5. Jim C. Nedd
Alasdir, 2018
Digital C-print, 20 x24"
6. Lamin Fofana
Plants, Nag Champa and Frankincense
aroma, selection of publications
7. Lamin Fofana
And All the Birds Sing Bass, 2020
Audio recording, 15'35 mins
8. Jim C. Nedd
Omar en la Mula, 2018
Digital C-print, 24 x20"
9. Jim C. Nedd
Wendy Johana, Valledupar, 2018
Digital C-print, 20 x24"
10. Jim C. Nedd
Raises del Caribe, 2018
Digital C-print, 20 x24"
11. Lamin Fofana
I ran from it and was still in it, 2020
Audio recording, 6' mins
12. Nicolas Premier
I ran from it and was still in it, 2020
Video, 6'04 mins

ACF: While installing, we often took breaks to discuss other artworks, the US election, music, but you also generously gave the staff a private screening of one of your newest video works. For me, it's not an overstatement to say that this work is visually and ideologically powerful. Before giving away too much, the video began with your long-term project Africa is the Future which is heterogenous in form. From visual photography and appropriation, to hosting concerts and radio shows, to talks and even clothing, Africa is the Future is a campaign, a call. It's been a project of yours for so long, but perhaps you can tell us about what you hoped for the project to do and who you wanted it to reach.

NP: Africa is the Future was born in the wake of 9/11. I was in Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of the Congo, when it happened. Meanwhile, the Congo Civil War that broke out in 1997 was still raging on south of the capital. Ironically, this local conflict that killed more than 30,000 citizens was, and is still, mostly unknown in France and even less so in the US, despite it (the conflict) stemming from the rivalry of oil companies from both countries. I clearly remember the images of the attack in New York that immediately were broadcasted worldwide and looping on tv screens. While on phone calls with many friends back in France, I vividly remember the impression of living through a global event with them, but at the same time, I was speaking to them from the other side – the other side of the screen – from the side of the unthinkable civil war, the incommunicable, the invisible. Not to compare tragedies, but to know that there are tragedies everywhere. What impressed me the most at the time was the unconditional empathy that a vast majority of Congolese were able and willing to give toward the American people, even though they were living themselves a terrible reality for which neither France nor the US showed much solidarity, quite the opposite, a guilty silence. What I was witnessing was fundamental to understanding Modernity and its shameful and criminal but structurally essential operations. Africa is the Future, or AITF as its sometimes called, was created from that context. It is to say both, Africa gave birth to Modernity at its own costs and above all Africa survived this uninterrupted surges of violence. Probably one thing that enabled African societies to survive this violence against all odds is precisely to have keep death as a part of the human experience understood as a cycle, not as the end of it. It's what enables them to continue to move beyond it. This notion of cycle and circularity is something that seems essential to me and from which we can imagine and embody other ways of inhabiting the Earth than the capitalist impasse.



Africa is not apart from the world, like an error or an exception. It is the rule, the structure, the central core, the real matrix from which everything has been possible in the past, everything is possible in the present and everything in the future will be possible. As the continent that suffered the most from capitalist voraciousness, Africa intimately knows the nature of this destructive system. In all this violence, Africa has also been able to preserve and adapt to conceptual and spiritual inventions needed to give birth to the future. In a way, Africans and afro-diasporic

people are the first depositaries of this history. To answer your question, I think my work and AITF in particular are not so much ideological but rather spiritual, because somehow it is all about confronting one's individual finiteness within the biggest cycle of transformations: life and death. To do so, I don't want to avoid any aspects of the human experience, neither it be the inner self, the economic, the politic, the cultural, the scientific, the artistic or the poetic. Rather, I want to embrace its whole spectrum and to transcend it.

ACF: I love that phrase and experience of “the other side of the screen”. Media is a construction often complicit and contingent on the violence of capitalism. Filmmakers like the Senegalese Ousmane Sembene had been working to alternatively build an African anti-colonialist and marxist cinema since the Cold War. I see your work situated within such a legacy, but you've also mentioned the role of a spiritual cinema. In the newest iteration of AITF, the cycles of the precolonial Kongo cosmogram are used to structure the video in four parts. Lines are then drawn from the 1532 Misericordia to the 1884 Berlin Conference to 20th century submarine cables. I know this next part of AITF is still a work in progress, but can you share just a fragment of what we might encounter?

NP: All I can say for now is that it sums twenty years of my work and that it is, beyond my control or my will, deeply connected to the contemporary moment. I came to New York early March for the BLUES exhibition at Mishkin Gallery and with the version that I showed you and the team while we installed. In fact, I had only finished it a few days before my departure from Paris. With this work, I really get the feeling that one cycle is ending and another beginning, on so many different levels. AITF came about from being in Brazzaville during 9/11. And just now, I was in NYC during the coronavirus. I already know this experience will affect the world with the same intensity as the attacks of the World Trade Center, if not more. And it will affect my work, in all likelihood. And at the moment, I'm working on a solution for sharing AITF online during the so-called “shelter in place” period. I can't say much more, but you'll be one of the first to know!



Images:

I ran from it but was still in it, 2020, video still. Courtesy Nicolas Premier.

Black Metamorphosis, 2019, video still. Courtesy Nicolas Premier.

Black Metamorphosis, 2019, video still. Courtesy Nicolas Premier.

I ran from it but was still in it, 2020, video still. Courtesy Nicolas Premier.

BLUES installation view, 2020. Courtesy Mishkin Gallery.

Snapshot of the streets of Paris, 2020. Courtesy Nicolas Premier.

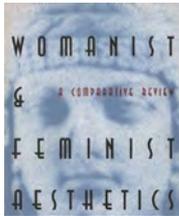
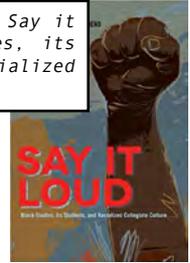
BLUES: a reading list

As we have learned through the work of Lamin Fofana, listening is as important as speaking, particularly in such difficult times. The exhibition BLUES attempts to create a space of recovery from the violent reality of racism that is systemic and needs to be undone. Learning is just a beginning, and it is unending. Baruch College was founded as the Free Academy in 1847, the first publicly financed college in the nation, and one built on eradicating injustice. The work of Baruch College's faculty has been addressing and transforming education on anti-blackness for a long time. By no means a full comprehensive list, here are a few publications by faculty that are exemplary.

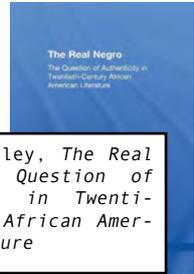


Clarence Taylor, *Fight the Power: African Americans and the Long History of Police Brutality*

Regina A. Bernard, *Say it Loud: Black Studies, its Students, and Racialized Collegiate Culture*



Tuzyline Jita Allan, *Womanist and Feminist Aesthetics*



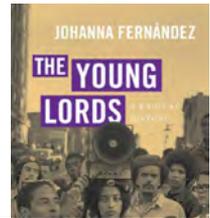
Shelly Eversley, *The Real Negro: The Question of Authenticity in Twentieth-Century African American Literature*



Barbara Katz Rothman, *Weaving a Family - Untangling Race and Adoption*



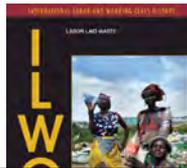
Marcus Johnson, *From Racial Democracy to Racialized Democracy in Latin America*



Johanna Fernández, *The Young Lords - A Radical History*



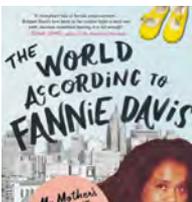
Samuel D. Johnson, *Toward Clarifying Culture, Race, and Ethnicity in the Context of Multicultural Counseling*



Marisa Solomon, "The Ghetto is a Gold Mine": The Racialized Temporality of Betterment



Angie Beeman, *Walk the Walk but Don't Talk the Talk: The Strategic Use of Color-Blind Ideology in an Interracial Social Movement Organization*



Bridgett Davis, *The World According to Fannie Davis: My Mother's Life in the Detroit Numbers*