

# The Value and Uses of Blackness

## A Conversation with Denise Ferreira da Silva

Denise Ferreira da Silva is a scholar and an artist who in her work addresses the ethico-political challenges of the global present through what she calls a “black feminist poethics”. Da Silva, who is currently a professor at the University of British Columbia, Canada, published her first book – the groundbreaking *Toward a Global Idea of Race* – in 2007 and along with that she has published extensively in leading interdisciplinary journals. Her forthcoming book, *Unpayable Debt*, will arrive this fall.

We met da Silva through her guest professorship at the Department for Arts and Cultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen, where she has been conducting weekly seminars throughout this winter and spring, and we were struck by the complexity and generosity of her thought. In this interview, da Silva talks about what blackness means to her and how she approaches blackness as a method in her work and writing.

**SARAH EL-TAKI (SET):** *In keeping with the framing of this special issue, we would like to focus on blackness as an entry point to our conversation today. Could you outline, briefly, what kinds of questions you have been posing around blackness?*

**DENISE FERREIRA DA SILVA (DFS):** I have approached blackness from different “places” throughout my career. Initially, I approached blackness more in terms of its significance in political discourse, in particular the Brazilian national discourse, and then eventually the US in a comparison. That’s how I started, and it had to do with an interest in philosophy, in social thought as we called it in Brazil in the 80s. But at the same time, because I was an activist in the Black Brazilian movement, I was also interested in the immediate political significance of blackness that was obviously tied to the racial ideology that informed Brazilian discourse. I think I have mentioned that I was a good Marxist back then; my MA thesis was on black characters in Brazilian soap operas, because I was interested in the role of soap operas in perpetuating the Brazilian racial ideology. I was also, because it was part of my experience growing up, very much aware of the ways in which blackness operates in terms of what we would call the juridical context in regard to the state, but particularly in terms of policing. So I was very much interested in police brutality. I wrote my first short piece on police brutality in 1988, and I continued to write about it. Blackness became crucial to me precisely because, when looking at police brutality, it allowed me to propose a version of critical legal theory that foregrounded the state in the critique of the law – so to make the argument that critical legal theory should also address the state. Because without doing that, critical legal theory would remain bourgeois and liberal and only concerned with exclusion and discrimination and not with racial violence.

Recently I have been spending more time really privileging blackness, still thinking in terms of racial violence, but instead of only looking inwards to how blackness works in the structuring of modern social configurations, and in particular how it works within and for state capital, I also became interested in speculating about: What is that violence all about? What is it that blackness announces or suggests that needs to be met with so much violence? Because, really, it’s too much. That now has taken me to consider more fundamentally how blackness – it’s not a tool because the tools are designed after blackness – but how blackness itself can become the point of departure for a more radical engagement with modern thought. One that reaches both its metaphysical level, its image of existence, and, at the same time, our existence itself.

I think that everything was there from the very beginning, you see. Even though I was framing blackness in Marxist terms and looking at it as it operates as an ideological tool, meaning at the level of the symbolic. I'm still doing that, but it has taken different lines of investigation to highlight the implications of blackness to get to the metaphysical.

**NINA CRAMER (NC):** *An aspect of your praxis that we have been very interested in is the way you frame blackness as a method and how this is expressed in your texts through performative phrases that associate blackness with gestures like hacking, disrupting, dissolving, exposing, unleashing and confronting. I would like to focus on two particular quotes. First, in "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics" you write that "the Category of Blackness already carries the necessary tools for dismantling the existing strategies for knowing, and opening the way for another figuring of existence without the grips of the tools of scientific reason".<sup>1</sup> Could you explain how you use these kinds of performative formulations in your writing?*

**DFS:** The Category of Blackness holding what's needed for dismantling modern thought – there is a lot implied in that statement, but I like it because as a statement in itself it carries a force that may not be immediately graspable. You can realize its significance if you stop and try to think about it. It's not quite poetry but I like the density of the statement. Now, what do I mean by that force? Maybe the best way of describing the force that I find in the category has to do with the fact that blackness is a racial category and as such it immediately takes us to the scientific arsenal in which it was initially deployed, where the terms used were "Ethiopian", "Negro", sometimes "black" or "African". Those terms, as they are deployed in the scientific rendering of the concept of race that we find in the nineteenth century, immediately challenged the primary version of the subject, of the human or even of humanity which had existed up until the nineteenth century. And what this challenges is precisely the statement that the human, of all existing things, is the one that is *in* this world but is not like everything else of this world. That somehow the human occupies a special position between the brutes and God, as they said in the Middle Ages. But blackness as a scientific concept refers to how the human, even this human that is described as superior to everything else in the world, is also describable as a product of the operations of the laws of nature. So it is in that sense that blackness, when you look at it as a category, as a term that comprehends physical and mental differences, makes the human, man, the subject, humanity, subjectivity things *of* the world and not only special positions from which the world is contemplated.

**NC:** *Similarly, in “Hacking the Subject”, where you deploy a gender-specific blackness, you explain that you “stage a confrontation between the female figuring of blackness and the very notions of the subject, ‘object’, and the ‘other’ that organize feminist and black and other critical discourse on difference”.<sup>2</sup> How might we understand blackness working as a method here?*

**DFS:** In terms of the black female subject in “Hacking the Subject”, my move there is to focus primarily on the concept of the political subject itself. And I am following Hortense Spillers’ argument in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (1987). As the referent of the juridic-economic condition of the slave, the black female, or the figure of an X, is a threat to the cis-hetero-patriarchal matrix precisely because it exposes how, in addition to all that is captured by the concept of gender or the concept of patriarchy, that position is also constituted by the juridic-economic aspects of the colonial context. Blackness is a referent to slavery and therefore a referent to the colonial context. It allows us to look at the figure of the citizen in liberal text, not as that transparent entity, and not only as a gendered entity, but also as a racial, colonial entity. And here is the method: Those aspects of the political subject become apparent, they become observable, they become thinkable from the position of the black female subject.

So how can that method do that work? For blackness to do that work, again, we have to shift the view of racial subjugation from preoccupations with purity and identity, from preoccupations with hierarchy, and we have to look at authority, because authority is the concept that defines the political subject as such. There is a double movement: Before blackness can do this undoing, do this dissolving, this exposing, this confronting that then says, “Well, this transparent subject cannot stand before the black subject”, we need a description of racial subjugation that does not render it as something exceptional, but that looks at it as the very functioning of modern thought or modern existence. In the case of the political subject, the main descriptor is authority and not superiority, for instance, which is how we often talk about racism, right? “Black folks are seen as inferior.” More importantly, black folks are seen as killable. Or, if we are talking about Asian folks, somehow there is something about the racial subjugation of Asian people in the US and Europe that makes the individual person somebody who can be attacked without anyone caring. What I’m saying is that the method makes sense only when you shift the account of racial subjugation and think of it as something that is constitutive and expressive of modern thought and the modern social situation and not as exceptional.



Operation Black Vote: "A vote is a vote" Campaign, 2016.

**SET:** *I want to show an image for the next question. The image you are seeing is a campaign poster by Operation Black Vote. A UK-based not for profit, non-partisan organization that encourages Black, Asian and minority ethnic people to vote in elections. This poster was created in 2016 for the EU referendum. Have you seen this image before?*

**DFS:** No, this is the first time I have seen it.

**SET:** *I initially wanted to frame this question in relation to your text "On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value",<sup>3</sup> but in fact, a few of the points you have just made are quite relevant to this image. It encourages the black subject viewing this image to believe in this political system and to keep it in existence rather than imagining something different. But if I go back to your text "On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value", you use an algebraic formula to show that blackness can destroy life, whereas this image presents equality between these two individuals and we are not really sure what the outcome will be. And funnily enough, the result of the EU referendum was almost tied at 49-51%, which means that we are at this standstill. Would you be able to talk about how you use ideas of balance, equality, and equations in relation to racial discourse?*

**DFS:** There is so much in that image. Of course, it begins with a level, a level playing field. Which it is not. At the same time the white character is the irrational one, the explicitly violent one and she is so collected and unafraid of him. It is a social justice statement that begins with the presumption of equality. It is beautiful as a presentation of the equation but it does more than that. It also has a presentation of the unreasonable white nationalist, which leaves open the conclusion that white folks that don't behave that way are okay. It is a liberal piece of advertisement. And then, on the other hand, there is the multicultural aspect, there is a valorization of South Asian culture. It is a liberal statement and

it is a gesture of inclusion within the limits. There is no critique of the “good”, left or liberal white British person. A vote is a vote is a liberal motto. Yes, it should be, but then when you look at it in the context of what is happening in the US, the challenge to the elections, a vote is not a vote, because when the vote was black and brown then the vote and election were stolen. Now they are changing democracy so that a black and brown majority will not rule white America. A vote is not a vote, and a vote has never only been a vote.

**EMIL ELG (EE):** *Earlier you mentioned that blackness is not a tool, but isn't there a risk of producing or reproducing blackness as a tool once one starts to stage these confrontations, as you do, between blackness and post-Enlightenment thought? In other words, by keeping blackness in relation to this tradition, or asking blackness to be the tool that addresses this tradition, does one risk a re-instrumentalization of blackness? I really like a quote from “Hacking the Subject” where you write: “I illustrate what becomes possible when blackness wonders and wanders in the world [...] to release the imagination, and to welcome the end of the world as we know it, that is decolonization, which is the only proper name for justice.” So my question is, would it be better for blackness to wander somewhere else entirely?*

**DFS:** Actually, I play precisely with that in *Unpayable Debt*. The book begins with incomprehension in the sense that the ethical demands made from the position that blackness identifies are incomprehensible. And then it moves on to confrontation, which is what we've been talking about – blackness as a method or as a tool that confronts modern thought. Once you get to confrontation, you can sit with the dialectics: So you have, on the one hand, whiteness, the whole world, and then on the other hand you have blackness. And you may think of it in proper Marxist terms, which assume that out of that confrontation something will be destroyed, but something else will come out which represents the interests of blackness. Or you can think of it in afropessimist ways.

What I do in the book is to stage the confrontation, but in the third moment, which is the moment I call negativation, blackness becomes a blacklight mirror. A mirror that reflects blacklight which reaches the other side to destroy the subject, the white European subject, that sees itself reflected as better or more powerful than blackness. The mirror that reflects blacklight actually changes the code of the subject, it breaks away the code, it dissolves the whole architecture and infrastructure that holds that modern subject. And in doing so, it releases all the micro-elements that allow us to then build a different image of existence. And along with that, also to raise other questions, questions different than

the ones that characterize modern thinking. So the aim is not to stay within the Marxist dialectics, it's not to inhabit that position in the afropessimist sense, but to destroy the whole context in which that confrontation takes place.

**NC:** *Is it blackness that has the confrontational power that you are describing, or the concept of blacklight and its reflective properties? How do blackness and blacklight, as well as dark matter, relate to each other in your work?*

**DFS:** Blacklight is a tool. Like the equation of value is a tool, like the equation in “Hacking the Subject”, they are all tools and at the same time I see them as objects, as artworks that I am making. So I see blacklight as an analytical tool and the way I initially described it was a commentary on Otobong Nkanga’s *In Pursuit of Bling* (2014).<sup>4</sup> It was very much inspired by the way the bringing together of (1) the spaces of obscurity and (2) the places of shine in Otobong’s work allowed for some commentaries on value that if one were to write a book about, the book would be really long! 1000 pages! Then I experimented with the image of blacklight as something that makes things visible. Experimenting with that was amazing because it made explicit the ways in which all the elements we need for criticising Marx’s account of value are within the account itself. But because he highlights some things with white light, we tend to think that only those things matter, and they are the only things we can see. But with blacklight you make the other things also visible and then you can tell a different story. And it is related to blackness.

In *Unpayable Debt* I write that blacklight is a high frequency, and I have been playing with correspondences between this kind of high frequency and the intensity of the judicial economic violence of slavery and the violence of raciality. Blacklight is as powerful as the power and the force that had to be deployed in order to extract people from the African continent, to expropriate the labour from them, in order to displace people in the Americas and extract from the land. Imagine how much force is necessary to extract petroleum from the soil. The critical tool has that same force. Blacklight has that force.

In terms of dark matter, I am also interested in what happens at the lower range of the spectrum, at the level of microwaves and, in particular, infrared radiation. Because, as you know, everything that exists radiates at the infrared level. You don’t have infrared radiation at absolute zero but since that doesn’t exist outside of labs, everything, all the time is radiating at the infrared level. And that invisibility is a touch, it vibrates. It is a vibration that releases particles that are called photons that touch each other, similar to dark matter. But dark matter takes us

even beyond that because it doesn't interact with the electromagnetic spectrum at all. It doesn't even produce microwave-level vibrations. It's a different kind of entity that may not even vibrate, who knows? Thinking with it allows us to image existence in such a way that instead of taking into account only material things that you can sense with the body, there is a materiality that is constitutive of the body and of everything else that cannot be sensed in this way but is nevertheless always there, in operation. You don't see infrared radiation but, for example, my glass here is radiating in infrared and the same way as my top is. It is impacting me and it is constituting me too.

So these are correspondences and possibilities of thinking of these things that are given to me by blackness. When I started thinking with blackness, when I started thinking with that which is not visible – whether because it is the highest frequency or the lowest frequency – then the imagination can do all kinds of things.

The whole point of *Unpayable Debt* is beginning with incomprehension instead of saying, “We already know what blackness is”. Blackness is the base for the demand of the unpayable debt; blackness is incomprehensible. If we follow blackness through that demand, it will immediately expose aspects of the modern political subject. Once those aspects are exposed that figure cannot stay, but it is not only because of that figure but because of those aspects and that exposure will reveal the constitution of everything that holds that subject together. Once that is revealed, it can no longer rely on transparency or universality and then it's up for grabs. I hope that other folks will do the same and revisit modern philosophy. Revisit it, not only on its own terms, but actually doing this kind of work of exposing and dissolving.

So with blackness, you make that movement and the intention is to make the demand for decolonization, which is the return of total value, which is actually comprehensible. It's not just a question of, “Now we can wander”. There is an ethical line all the way. My demand is incomprehensible; what it would take to be comprehensible is the end of the world as we know it. And so that is my demand.

## NOTES

- 1 Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The quest (ion) of Blackness toward the End of the World.” *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 82.
- 2 Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Hacking the subject: Black feminism and refusal beyond the limits of critique.” *PhiloSOPHIA* 8, no. 1 (2018), 21.
- 3 Denise Ferreira da Silva, “1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value”, *e-flux* #79, February 2017.
- 4 Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Blacklight,” in *Otobong Nkanga, Luster and Lucre*, eds. Clare Molloy, Philippe Pirotte, and Fabian Schöneich. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017.