

Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Fractal Thinking*

Artist Commissions



Amy Balkin, *War-Thinking*

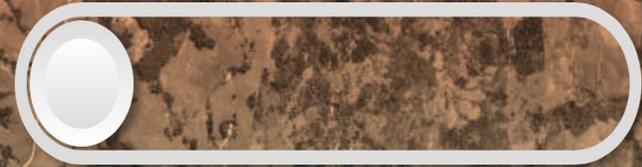
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Poethics of the Open Boat — aCCeSsions

*In Response to Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Fractal Thinking”*¹

I.

In her essay “[Fractal Thinking](#),” Denise Ferreira da Silva moves through a series of assertions made by Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou regarding Europe’s so-called refugee crisis. Žižek and Badiou, she argues, fundamentally fail to grasp the racial as “the single most important ethico-judicial concept in the global present.” Da Silva is a philosopher whose 2007 book, *Toward a Global Theory of Race*, has been hugely influential for many of us invested in understanding how the conceptual logic of race has historically contoured the grammars of global modernity and the modern subject. *Toward a Global Theory of Race* advances the claim that raciality is globally invented to establish the distinction between modern subjects and the racial subaltern. Building centrally upon that understanding of the racial, “Fractal Thinking” argues further that the racial is the particular socio-logic that becomes constitutive of the logic of global capital, and that the capitalist order guarantees the total and symbolic violence that continues to “produce the figure of the Racial/Cultural Other of Europe.” For Da Silva, capital’s ascendancy is unthinkable outside of its attendant regimes of conquest and colonialism.

“Fractal Thinking” takes something else as its object as well. Da Silva explains that it is against the racial specifically that the horizon for universal subjectivity, politically and economically legitimated in this context as Western European, becomes framed, and is legally secured. She argues that Žižek and Badiou employ degrees of linear thinking that permit them to delink the symbolic and total violence (also understood as racial and ideological/narrative violence) that sustained colonialism from the displacements and migrations of the global present. For Da Silva, these overlapping regimes of violence enable state-capital to reproduce itself: “These forms of violence create the conditions for today’s flow of refugees while at the same time justifying the enforcement of ‘protective’ measures that result in the death and incarceration of many black and brown people.” It is the life and sociality of these many black and brown people that remain at issue in Da Silva’s philosophy—those beings whose forms of life were taken by the consequences of imperialism are figuratively extended through the violent expropriations of native land and slave labor in the global present. Additionally, Žižek and Badiou consistently conflate race and cultural difference; not only does the latter term become the “organizing principle for European existence,” but da Silva insists that it also stands in for the “refugees’ cultural ‘shortcomings’ relative to the proper—European—values of universality and equality.”

There are a few things critically at stake here: the first, Da Silva tells us, is the linear thinking that can command no thought outside of a certain Western European critical philosophical trajectory (which is to say Enlightenment or modernity, or the philosophy of history). As an alternative to the linear thinking of Žižek and Badiou, Da Silva proposes a form of non-linear thinking that animates and drives what she refers to as her expansive poethical project. When “poethical thinking contemplates the present situation in Europe, it does not image ‘unprecedented crisis,’ but rather business as usual for global capital.” In other words, the *so-called* refugee crisis is not without example, but sustains an

accumulated history. In a similar vein, Ian Baucom and others have insisted that slavery's particularly brutal and exceptional event does not belong to a distant and concluded past, but is indeed a fundamental and paradigmatic event in the historical formation of our own present and its dominant cultural logic. Furthermore, the moment of hyper-financial development of capitalism that we associate with the late twentieth century finds its ideological and epistemological prerequisite in the eighteenth-century circum-Atlantic cycle of capital accumulation, centered on the slave trade. ²

But even beyond this, Da Silva is pointing to a specific philosophical aporia. The violent mechanisms of sovereignty, enclosure, and domination that characterized the age of slavery, which in fact enabled the Enlightenment project of emancipation as well as the spread of capitalism in its current global form, are the very history to which global capital now finds itself irrevocably sutured. Da Silva is pointing to contemporary Western philosophical discourse's "hysterical historical blindness" to this fundamental fact. Hers is a fundamental challenge to contemporary philosophy's reductive logic that would gloss and subsume the racial within/as cultural difference, and conceive of cultural otherness as a disruption to the Western European way of life. It is imperative that we

[t]race how (a) the colonial (juridico-economic) matrix that sustained merchant capital (b) operates through the racial (political-symbolic) arsenal which still supports industrial capital as well as (c) financial capital through racial violence. This tracing produces an ethico-juridical assemblage that includes the wars of global capital forcing millions out of their homes to cross the dangerous waters of the Mediterranean Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

We must understand that the obliteration of Syria is an iteration of the war of global capital more generally. ³ Furthermore, any attempt to pose a structural and organizational alternative to capitalism—communism for example—if it is to avoid repeating the fundamental gestures of reduction and containment that defined colonialism, must contend with this actuality. A *true* historical materialism understands the intra-relation and total imbrication of coloniality with capitalism. In the same way that contemporary Marxist discourse fails to account for this history as bound up with the global present, Žižek's communism will also fail. And not only Žižek's prescriptive communism: think of a text like Antonio Negri and Felix Guattari's *Communists Like Us*, which in 1985 insisted upon the "liberation of work" as the basis for a future communism. Yet any communism, if it is to ground itself in "singularity, autonomy, and freedom," must understand not just simply "the fundamental ability of communities, racial and social groups, indeed minorities of every kind to conquer and establish autonomous modes of expression," as Guattari and Negri insist. ⁴ After Denise da Silva, we understand that any communist project must recognize that *the racial has been engineered as a particular socio-logic precisely in order to obstruct our access to autonomous modes of expression in the current political order.*

Da Silva's fractal thinking subverts the ontic presupposition that subtends our reality—the assumption that "any instance, moment, or event has three dimensions because it happens somewhere (location) and somehow (form) in space." For Da Silva, this must be overturned by a form of *compositional thinking* that understands events in the present as "reassembled" from what has happened before, and from what has yet to happen. The goal is to comprehend *what happens* as an "instantaneous composition." Time is no longer the privileged analytic. Time, which has long conditioned our sense of

what happens, is merely a compression of four dimensions: space (depth, width, and length) and time. This is why da Silva insists that “images of poethical thought are not linear (transparent, abstract, glassy, and determinate) but fractal (immanent, scalar, plenteous, and undetermined), like most of what exists in the world.”

II.

We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.

—Édouard Glissant ⁵

I want to think about two specific images of poethical thought that have been immanent to the lexicon of the slave, the migrant, the immigrant, and the refugee. The first, the sea—the Mediterranean Sea in this instance—as scalar, plenteous, and undetermined, is the image of poethical thought that constitutes what Da Silva refers to as *the plenum*. For centuries the sea’s history has shaped and defined the perilous journey of slaves, migrants, and refugees from Africa and the Middle East across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. Importantly, we must note that a conversion of sorts takes place via the sea crossing. Following Da Silva,

once Algerians arrived in France to be exploited as workers by capital, the colonial relation with France vanished. Crossing the Mediterranean transforms the Algerian from ‘native,’ to use Fanon’s term, into ‘poor worker,’ allowing the French Republic to deny responsibility for the plight of Arabs and Muslims.

The crossing, or more precisely the *arrival* on European shores, forges something else, a different relation to capital, so that the racial is subsumed under this strategic labor relation. The native, when converted to poor worker, is abstracted from her racial history. This subsumption—we could say of race by class, though my sense is that it is an operation far more nuanced than this—is the ruse that structures a neoliberal political order that demands the civilizing of its citizenry through mechanisms of assimilation, regulation, and repression. It is important to understand that the severed relationship between racial history, coloniality, and capital, comes to define the Western European creed of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, and the neoliberal political order as such.

What is needed is the ability to think proletarianization and racialization together. Stuart Hall knew this when he wrote:

Race is intrinsic to the manner in which the black labouring classes are complexly constituted [...] Race is thus, also, the modality in which class is ‘lived,’ the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and ‘fought through.’ ⁶

But, as has been suggested most recently by Joshua Clover, drawing from Frantz Fanon, colonization must be understood as a global process “whose terrain of context is not that of the classical working class.” ⁷

Returning to the figure of the sea, and introducing that of the boat, I would like to briefly consider what happens in the midst of, alongside and with/in the event of the Mediterranean crossing, what happens prior to arrival, as some have dared to do. ⁸ I want to think about the sea, and even more the boat, as figures that animate new possibilities for fractal thinking. In 1906 Joseph Conrad wrote: “... *The sea has*

never been friendly to man. At most it has been the accomplice of human restlessness..." ⁹ Conrad, forever fascinated with the sea, knew what made the sea perilous, and had a sense of its terrifyingly abstract vastness; the sea is a space of conversion and exchange that flexes beyond the limits of its own geography and compels us to rethink how we conceive not only of geographical categories, but of human categories as well (if we understand human categories as explicitly forged at the nexus of race, labor, and capital). Though the slave, the seaman, and the refugee's journeys will be different, "each is ultimately at the mercy of the sea." ¹⁰

Perhaps what Conrad instinctively knew was that one undergoes a sea conversion, but not just at the level of personhood or subjectivity. The one who voyages or has no choice but to journey out to sea, endures a forced oceanic migration that engenders a new relationship to humanity. For what is consistently commented upon are the makeshift refugee boats always appearing over capacity, carrying rejected and deported refugees presumably destined for death as they sail from Syria, Libya, Egypt, Greece, and Turkey. And yet it is the European's encounter with the figure of the refugee or migrant that is fully at stake here, for it is an encounter that is inevitably contoured and will forever be shaped by a metamorphosis or transformation aided by the traces of bodies exchanged or lost at sea. In other words, the European experience is and will be defined by the history of such crossings, and by the bodies of those who have crossed the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Indian Ocean. If the migrant/ refugee/ immigrant shows up on the shores of Europe utterly dispossessed, might we think about the dispossessive force of the ones who stake their arrival on nothing more than their having escaped the obliteration and decimation of war? Is it possible that the migrant/ refugee/ immigrant, by showing up disarmed, without papers or property, dispossesses the very idea of Europe?

This brings to mind the Scottish-Guyanese artist Hew Locke's homage to boats in his show "Wine Dark Sea" at Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art Gallery in New York. "Wine Dark Sea," the title of which Locke draws from the Homeric description of the Aegean, presents ships, "gold-filigreed galleons," boats, canoes, and sailboats suspended from the gallery ceiling. Boats suspended and unlocatable in time or space: Locke's work offers itself as a dedication of sorts to refugees from Syria and Iraq, but also blends together the Caribbean and Mediterranean seas. These various boats, embellished by Locke, bear the weight of overlapping histories of migrations. Writing about Locke in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, the Guyanese novelist Gaiutra Bahadur has observed:

British artist Hew Locke didn't know of the boats until encountering them in a Portuguese fisherman's chapel in 2009. Ships had long been in his visual vocabulary, but in that sacred setting he saw them anew: In constellation, in the context of journeys so difficult they require either pleas or gratitude to the gods [...] *Boats mean life as much as death* [...] We feel for boats in a way we don't for planes. "Boats," Locke says, "are much closer to our hearts in a way, in carrying people around for thousands of years." ¹¹

My comments are by no means exhaustive, but I want to think about the declension from *ship* to *boat*. And I want to consider how thinking with the boat lends itself to the *raw materialism* central to Denise da Silva's project. As Bahadur writes, "We're all in the same boat. The cliché to express solidarity is nautical." ¹² Could the refugee boat be the figure of the *open boat* Glissant traced – the open boat that sets out in the name of a different humanity, for all humanity? Could the boat, in all its deterritorializing

horror, contain the beauty of a new communism? Could the open boat think the world anew? Locke's boats of various sizes and shapes compel us to consider the overlapping histories that constitute the sea as plenum. Where the ship often has a direction and a clear course, the makeshift boat has no recourse to home. These provisional boats brave the crossing without a sure sense of the shoreline. The crossings, the deaths, the suicides that happened at sea are expressed through the boat, which is itself a poethical figure that condenses, in Da Silva's words, "whatever exists under, above, and alongside; what has already passed, and what is yet to come."

1. I want to especially thank my colleague Alvaro Reyes, Assistant Professor of Geography at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Our recent conversations and productive disagreements have inspired much of the writing in this article. I have been aided by Reyes's insights regarding the global dispossession of refugees as a disruption of the myth of European benevolence. And I am particularly grateful for his insistence on the general need to establish a collective "ethical organizational response to that dispossession." ↩
2. Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). ↩
3. We might even say that obliteration of Syria is the result of a violently reactionary civil war that been waged over the course of the last five years as a response to the possibility of the event that was the Arab spring. ↩
4. Felix Guattari and Toni Negri, *Communists Like Us: New Spaces of Liberty, New Lines of Alliance* (New York: Semiotexte, 1990). ↩
5. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of the Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MA: University of Michigan Press, 1997). ↩
6. Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," in Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg (eds.), *Race Critical Theories: Text and Context* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 450-51. ↩
7. Joshua Clover, "Surplus Rebellions," <<http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/surplus-rebellions/>> (excerpt from *Riot Strike Riot: The Era of Uprisings*, New York: Verso, 2016). Clover includes the same quote from Stuart Hall, which I have reproduced in expanded form for emphasis. ↩
8. See M. Noubese Philip's text *Zong* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011). ↩
9. Joseph Conrad, "Initiation," in *The Mirror of the Sea* (Doylestown, PA: Wildside Press, 2003), 110. ↩
10. Gaiutra Bahadur, "Hew Locke's Wine Dark Sea," *Virginia Quarterly Review* online <<http://www.vqronline.org/2016/04/hew-lockes-wine-dark-sea>>. ↩
11. Ibid, emphasis added. ↩
12. Ibid. ↩