

*Fred Moten & Denise Ferreira D'Silva;
Imagined Conversation*

FM: We've got to try to understand the connection between that resistance and political movement, locating that movement's direction toward new universalities held within the difference/s of phonic substance, in the difference of the accent that cuts and augments mourning and morning, a different semiotics has heretofore thought either to be fatal to its desire for universality or proof of the foolishness and political and epistemological danger of that desire.

DFS: *The call for Black Lives (to) Matter hides the question it answers: Why don't black lives matter? More precisely, it exposes how this question already contains the Kantian program and its equation of the universal and the formal—through articulating determinacy as efficient causation, or effectivity—which guides modern ethical, economic, and juridical formations. For, as a tool of modern knowledge, the category of blackness figures the operation of efficient and formal causes (that is, anatomic forms and organic processes) in the production of a racial subject destined to obliteration.*

FM: In positing that this photo and photographs in general bear a phonic substance, I want to challenge not only the ocularcentrism that generally—perhaps necessarily—shapes theories of the nature of photography and our experience of photography but that mode of semiotic objectification and inquiry that privileges the analytic-interpretative reduction of phonic materiality and/or nonmeaning over something like a mimetic improvisation of and with that materiality that moves in excess of meaning.

DFS: *Put differently, both the anthropological and sociological versions of racial knowledge transform the consequences of hundreds years of colonial expropriation into the effects of efficient causes (the laws of nature) as they operate through human forms (bodies and societies). In sum, as a category of racial difference, blackness occludes the total violence necessary for this expropriation, a violence that was authorized by modern juridical forms—namely, colonial domination (conquest, displacement, and settlement) and property (enslavement). Nevertheless, blackness—precisely because of how, as an object of knowledge, it occludes these juridical modalities—has the capacity to unsettle the ethical program governed by determinacy, through exposing the violence that the latter refigures.*

FM: This second challenge assumes that the critical mimetic experience of the photograph takes place most properly within a field structured by theories of (black) spectatorship, audition, and performance. These challenges are also something of a preface to such theory and attempt to work out a couple of that theory's most crucial elements: the anti-interpretive nonreduction of nonmeaning and the breakdown of the opposition between live performance and mechanical reproduction. All this by way of an investigation of the augmentation of mourning by the sound of moaning, by a religious and political formulation of mourning that animates the photograph with a powerfully material resistance.

DFS: *To explore this potential of blackness to unsettle ethics, I will now tackle the unquestioned question reiterated by the disregard for lives lost in the streets of the US and in the Mediterranean Sea: Why don't black lives matter? To do this, I use that which grounds the modern knowledge program—mathematical reasoning—to devise a procedure that unleashes blackness to confront life. Using what I call the Equation of Value, I describe blackness's capacity to unravel modern thought without reproducing the violence housed in knowledge and in the scene of value. My proof of this equation is designed to sidestep the hegemony of the Kantian subject and to make it possible to expose the disruptive/creative capacity that blackness hosts/holds.*

FM: Nevertheless, we've got to cut the ongoing "reduction of the phonic substance" whose origin is untraceable, but that is at least as old as philosophy, at least as old as its paradoxically interanimate other, phonocentrism, and predates any call for its being set into motion, either in Descartes or Saussure or in Derrida's critical echo of them. The refusal to neutralize the phonic substance of the photograph rewrites the time of the photograph, the time of the photograph of the dead. The time of the sound of the photograph of the dead is no longer irreversible, no longer vulgar, and, moreover, not only indexed to rhythmic complication but to the extreme and subtle harmonics of various shrieks, hums, hollers, shouts, and moans. What these sounds and their times indicate is the way into another question concerning universality, a reopening of the issue of a universal language by way of this new music so that now it's possible to accommodate a differentiation of the universal, of its ongoing reconstruction in sound as the differential mark, divided and abundant, dividing and abounding. But how many people have really listened to this photograph? Hieroglyphics, phonetic writing, phonography—where is the photograph placed in all this?

DFS: *In the modern Western imagination, blackness has no value; it is nothing. As such, it marks an opposition that signals a negation, which does not refer to contradiction. For blackness refers to matter—as *The Thing*; it refers to that without form—it functions as a nullification of the whole signifying order that sustains value in both its economic and ethical scenes.*

FM: Here lies universality: in this break, this cut, this rupture. Song cutting speech. Scream cutting song. Frenzy cutting scream with silence, movement, gesture. The West is an insane asylum, a conscious and premeditated receptacle of black magic. Every disappearance is a recording. That's what resurrection is. Insurrection. Scat black magic, but to scat or scatter is not to admit formlessness.

DFS: *When taken not as a category but as a referent of another mode of existing in the world, blackness returns *The Thing* at the limits of modern thought. Or, put differently, when deployed as method, blackness fractures the glassy walls of universality understood as formal determination. The violence inherent in the illusion of that value is both an effect and an actualization of self-determination, or autonomy. My itinerary is simple. It begins with considerations of the role of determinacy—formal determination articulated as a kind of efficient causation—in modern thought, and closes with a proof of the Equation of Value, intended to*

release that which in blackness has the capacity to disclose another horizon of existence, with its attendant accounts of existence.

FM: The aftersound is more than a bridge. It ruptures interpretation even as the trauma it records disappears. Amplification of a rapt countenance, stressed portraiture. No need to dismiss the sound that emerges from the mouth as the mark of a separation. It was always the whole body that emitted sound: instrument and fingers, bend. Your ass is in what you sing. Dedicated to the movement of hips, dedicated by that movement, the harmologically rhythmic body.

DFS: *What if blackness referred to rare and obsolete definitions of matter: respectively, “substance ... of which something consists” and “substance without form”? How would this affect the question of value? What would become of the economic value of things if they were read as expressions of our modern grammar and its defining logic of obliteration? Would this expose how the object (of exchange, appreciation, and knowledge)—that is, the economic, the artistic, and the scientific thing—cannot be imagined without presupposing an ethical (self-determining) thing, which is its very condition of existence and the determination of value in general? Black Lives Matter, as both a movement and a call to respond to everyday events of racial violence (the killing of unarmed black persons by police) that rehearse the ethical syntax that works through/as the liberal democratic state, signals a political subject emerging in the scene of obliteration through a sentence without a (self-determined) subject.*