

Interview:

Day 3 Dianna Ferris

Tags:

Reference to the afterlives or impacts of slavery and colonialism, thoughts on freedom.

Local Tags:

Effects of physical and verbal acts of dehumanization, fiction of emancipation, unfreedom, references to oppressed or submerged consciousness, memory as the life-force of re-imagination, the burden of memory, the refusal to forget as rebellious and redemptive, emergence and/or transcendence of material conditions, genealogical memory, the significance of one's name, misnaming, reclaiming one's name, the meaning of one's name, classification, declassification, non-racialism, racial classification as a method of "divide and conquer," the ideology of separate development, institutionalized segregation, teaching and mentorship, poetry as the attempt to find one's voice, political consciousness, government repression of dissent, cultural silencing, the prevalence of fear, the erasure of colonial history in education, children kept ignorant to history of enslavement, the arc of colonial evolution, genealogical search in the archive, external-definition, self-definition, the social liminality of coloured South Africans, the myth of racial purity, affirming one's beauty, the experience of bearing witness, pre-language, language and/or voice as a vehicle to freedom, comparative freedom, freedom as relative, the suggestion that freedom is found in struggling, co-existence of freedom and unfreedom.

Summary:

In this interview, Dianna Ferris recites three poems exploring themes of genealogical memory, emancipation, social and political consciousness, the living state of burial/submergence/being beneath the surface, concepts of emergence and/or transcendence, and the act of reclaiming. After reciting her poems, Dianna discusses the origins of her writing as a response to current events, a method of expressing the depth of experience and feeling which she held within her, and an attempt to cultivate a voice against the repressive forces of governance which had contributed to the culture of fear and silencing. In her young adult life, Dianna describes her genealogical search in the archive and investment in history as an important part of her poetic evolution, since the history of enslavement in South Africa was not a part of her early education in South Africa. The significance of history and memory as tools, sources of knowledge, and launching points of the imagination, is underscored again and again throughout Dianna's recitations and interview.

- After expressing her family name, Februarie, and thinking about her genealogical memory through her poetry, Dianna introduces herself by her first name and describes her commitment to writing, teaching, and mentoring younger writers.
- Dianna discusses how her first poem emerged from the want to express the depth of her experience and feelings about a train accident in which many Black people had died. In other words, her poetry began as a response to current events—a search for voice. Dianna also claimed that this first poem emerged from her inability to "forget," which is suggestive of this theme of the burden/resource that is memory.
- Dianna describes her early writing as a distillation of experience that was deeply politically conscious. She attributes this political consciousness to her family, and, in particular, her family's surname. She said the family's surname is "connected to that struggle, but also to fear." This underscores the

significance of name and naming, reclaiming one's name, external-definitions, and self-definition that is highlighted throughout her poetry and interview.

- Dianna describes the government's repression of dissent, the culture of silence, and the laws that instilled fear and enforced the ideology of separate development. Dianna also describes how the history of colonialism and slavery in South Africa wasn't taught in schools and wasn't discussed in her family. She claims that it wasn't until the first democratic elections in 1994 that widespread political consciousness came and people began to learn about the long history of colonial structures in South Africa.
- Dianna describes her archival search to know more about her genealogical background and the history of South Africa. She discusses how this research indelibly impacted her writing. In fact, knowing the earlier history of South Africa provided her with a sense of "ease" because now she was able to "relate that trauma of those years to now" through her poetry.
- Dianna discusses the impact of racial classification on self-perception and her writing as a practice of reclaiming her humanity through self-definition. "The myth of purity, the myth of purity, is then killed by my knowledge and my telling of my ancestry. My mixed, my diverse, my beautiful ancestry." In this context, racial classification is suggested to be a method of divide and conquer.
- Dianna describes herself as a child that bore witness to many atrocities but was unable to verbally respond to them. Pre-language was a helpless and defenseless state. For her, language and the struggle to find her voice was a vehicle to freedom.
- Dianna describes herself as free compared to her previous condition of voicelessness in childhood and the history of colonialism and slavery that preceded her birth. But she also describes freedom as a relative term or concept. She claims that as long as classification, injustice, and prejudice remain, there is still unfreedom—that freedom and unfreedom might actually co-exist. Finally, she seems to suggest that freedom comes from struggling against the forces of dehumanization that one finds themselves mounted against.

Main Themes:

Impacts of Dehumanization: Dianna describes the impacts of dehumanization in her poetry by making use of genealogical memory, history, and imagination. In her interview, she also describes how the social and political attempts to dehumanize and divide and conquer coloured and black South Africans were encompassing.

Ideology of Separate Development: Dianna describes racial classification as a method of divide and conquer that reinforced the ideology of separate development.

Repression of Dissent & Culture of Silence (Fear): Dianna discusses the government's repression of dissent and the sense of fear pervaded coloured and black South African communities. This contributed to what she suggested was a culture of silence, in which there were only "whispers" of dissent among the oppressed majority.

Erasure of Colonial History in Education: Dianna discusses the absence of colonial history throughout her education.

Social and Political Consciousness: Dianna describes her family as having an innate social and political consciousness that derived from her family's surname. While she claims that her early writing was politically conscious, she also admits that her historical and ancestral search in archives enhanced the social and political awareness of her writing. In her poetry recitations, there are also frequent references to the buried/submerged consciousness.

Language/Voice and Freedom: In her youth, Dianna's inability to verbally respond to the horrors of current events was among the greatest sources of her pain. As such, she describes language/voice and the ability to distill one's experience and express one's feelings as an invaluable source of freedom.

Memory as Burden and Life-force (Genealogical Memory): Dianna discusses memory in her poetry and in her interview. In both, memory is either used or explicitly referenced as both a burden and an invaluable source of knowledge—an act of rebelliousness and redemption.

Name & Misnaming: Dianna discusses the significance of name, her family's surname, and misnaming in the context of the history of colonialism, slavery, and racial classification during apartheid. The significance of name and naming is closely allied with external-definitions and self-definition, which Dianna also discusses.

Value of Historical Knowledge: Dianna discusses the value of historical knowledge and its contributions to her poetry as providing a sense of "ease."

Social Liminality of coloured South Africans: Dianna discusses the social liminality of coloured South Africans. She claims that coloured people are often told that they don't have a cultural identity and that they are disliked by both white and black South Africans.

Teaching and Mentorship: Dianna claims that she's retired, but she still teaches a local writing workshop and mentors a few young writers.

Comparative Freedom: Dianna describes herself as free in the context of South Africa's colonial past and in comparison to the voicelessness that she experienced as a child. This is the concept of comparative freedom.

Relative Freedom: Dianna claims that freedom is relative.

Freedom in Struggling: Dianna suggests that freedom is tied to actively struggling against the forces that one finds themselves against.

Co-existence of Freedom and Unfreedom: Where there is freedom, there is always unfreedom nearby. This is another one of Dianna's ideas about freedom.

Quotes From Interview:

Poetry Recitation:

- [00:00:06 - 00:01:03] Submerged consciousness, the refusal to forget, memory as a source of freedom, emergence/transcendence, narrative of reclaiming, memory fueling one's imagination of a better future.

- My name is February. Two hundred years after the São José, I was given the vote, they said I was free. But don't you see how often I am submerged, weighed down? I am the soiled, the sunken, forgotten and yet memory will not leave me! My name is February, stranded at Third Beach, but no one comes to look for me, no one waves from the dunes, no bridges back to Mozambique. My name is February. I shall be resurrected, brought to the surface. Unshackled, unchained, unashamed! My name is February.
- [00:00:10 - 00:02:23] Echoing of one's ancestry, genealogical memory, the attempt to remember the past lives of one's ancestors, the significance of name.
 - We come from there. Was it my mother's mother's mother, her mother, her mother or her father's father, her father, her father, her father. Bound in shackles, and thrown deep into a ship and the day too long and the nights too long. Felt how waters hit their ears hard? What were their thoughts? Did they cry? Were they afraid? Did they pray for death to come? Was it my mother's mother, her mother, her mother, her mother, her mother or her father's father, her father, her father, her father? And when they landed here, far from family ties - what were their thoughts? Did they long? Did they grieve or accept? Now we are January, February, March and April, Fortuin, Arendse, Fransman and Gabier. But somewhere, long ago, far away from here we celebrated our festivals under our own name! January, February, March and April and April. Fortuin, Arendse, Fransman and Gabier and Gabier. But it must have been a long time ago, far from here, that we celebrated our festivals under a different name. January, February, March and April and April.
- [00:00:12 - 00:02:00] References to burial/submergence/being beneath the surface, speaker exclusively discusses the conditions of young boys and men.
 - They built a house admired from afar, these men – prison-walled bodies but memory-free, journeyed through seas and open skies to where their true remembrance still lies. And I look at them, these men—my ancestors, my fathers, my brothers, my sons—and I wonder what was committed to memory by these men – my ancestors, my fathers, my brothers, my sons who never stopped limping into the next set of chains with half of their hearts broken and buried in the cities and towns of our land. And I grieve for them, these men.

Interview Answers:

- [00:00:13 - 00:02:17] Retirement, Teaching and Mentorship.
 - My name is Dianna Ferrus. I am retired and now I enjoy retirement with having writing workshops in between performances and obviously the most of—what takes the most of my time is writing. And I also—I try and mentor a few younger writers and I am part of a writers group called the 'Mengelmosdigters' the 'Mengelmos' poets and that is most of the stuff that I do. Otherwise I am at home trying to organize my house.
- [00:00:16 - 00:13:36] Dianna describes the circumstances that brought her to pen her first poem.
 - I was 15 years old when I wrote my first poem. It was influenced by a report in the newspaper on a train accident, on which many black people died. And the white workers on the train came out unscathed. It was probably the 5th train accident that happened that way. And we were reading all about it in the Sunday paper. Because we used to read the Sunday papers. And the pictures of that accident just went through my heart. And I couldn't forget it. And that is when I "penned" my first poem.
- Dianna discusses her awareness, writing, and political consciousness.

- And again those pictures in the newspaper really forced me to write. I remember what it was about, but I don't have it anymore, because that year my mother cleaned out her cupboards. And she threw my book away. She threw my book away. But I'm glad that I remembered that. And so my awareness of writing, falls together with my political consciousness.
- Dianna describes the political consciousness that was an innate quality of her family, passed on by her family's surname. She also describes the culture of silencing that pervaded her home and community.
 - We were a household or a family that was politically conscious. I had a cousin who was then already under house arrest, Robben Island, and we were all thrown in it together because it's the surname that carried that. The Ferrus surname was connected to that struggle, but also fear. Because those years, in the sixties early seventies or the seventies, people were scared—when they talked about people that were in the struggle. There was always whispers. So the same happened to my work. To my politically conscious writer, I could only—there was only whispers about it. Because if it came out loud, it would spell danger for me, cause we were not allowed—I could be, I could be charged under any law.
- Dianna describes her writing as a distillation of love, too, and not exclusively of political mind. She also discusses the first democratic elections in 1994 as the first time that political consciousness was not exclusive and/or hidden.
 - And, of course, I was a teenager. I wrote about love and—but—because it was in the seventies still, I had to keep it all under wraps. But when 1990 came and the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners in 1994, I could really bring my work out and, you know, write freely and share it. So yah and then it changes to many things. It was political, it was about love, it was about family, it was social issues, yes.
- Erasure of colonial history in education, the democratization of political consciousness in 1994, the value of historical knowledge, the significance of name.
 - The awareness for me of slavery didn't come when I was at school, because we weren't really taught about it. It only came, and I don't know if I must be ashamed about it or what because people didn't speak about it—it was in later years that my uncle told me that my grandfather was a February. And, as you know, the slaves got the names of the masters they were sold into—that my uncle told me that the February's from Worcester were also called "die Masbiekers" the Mozambicans, because they were Mozambican slaves. And as I said before, the awareness of all the other things, of indigenous people, of slavery, after 1994 it was as if a whole storm, overtaken by storm, all that information, the consciousness came. Because we were told nothing, nothing when we were children or even teenagers. So slavery then became something I looked into deeply. Because I was worried about, What was going on around me? I was looking at my people, and I was thinking, What brought us here? I knew about apartheid. And then when I heard about slaves I thought, Damn, slavery must have something to do with what is now.
- Dianna discusses historical knowledge and the search for one's history as providing a sense of ease. For her, this historical knowledge, as unsettling as it was, had utility as a resource.
 - You could go to the archives or African library even at the university and the department of history and so I am very, very glad that that could happen to me. Because now I am sort of at ease, because I know that my people are not like the way they are because of what others said. I could relate that trauma of those years to now.
- Dianna describes how historical knowledge, knowledge of one's genealogy, is a tool to counter the myth of purity and other dehumanizing attempts.

- Knowing about my ancestry, digging up the information, makes me feel rooted. I can say, I come from here, I come from there. Because you know I, as a so-called coloured, or we, as a so-called coloured, we're always told that we have no culture. We don't know who we are. We are just bragging about Europeans and so on. And so whenever I go to read or I have discussions with people, I tell them, I went to find out who I am. This is who I am. Nobody can tell me I haven't got a culture. I'm rich in diversity. I have many roots, and that makes me proud. The myth of purity, the myth of purity, is then killed by my knowledge and my telling of my ancestry. My mixed, my diverse, my beautiful ancestry.
- The recounting of bearing witness, the helplessness of being pre-language, the ideology of separate development, and concepts of freedom.
 - And there was nothing that we could—I was a little girl standing in the corner and seeing all this. Not to go where I wanted to go. All these things that they said about me. That I couldn't verbally, that I couldn't verbally oppose. And all those laws, the fact that they called me a coloured in the 1950 population registration act. And there is people that they called black, and people they called white so that they could fulfill their ideology of separate development. And on that law that they made, they made other laws. The group areas Act, the mix marriages Act. So if I—if I compare that to now, I would have to say, I am free. But I think freedom is a relative issue. It's, you know, it's not a utopia. Because always when freedom comes there is something else. I think I am free. But what does, lots of changes, but not everything. And so today I'm still called a coloured. And I am not free if that is not taken away. I am not free if—corruption doesn't go, you know. Because I had a dream in those years. I thought of the freedom fighters, the strikers, as kind of angels.
- Concepts of freedom.
 - And white people are still I think, not I think, there are some white people that undermines, that sabotage. And so we—if I must struggle against that—I must struggle against corruption, I must struggle against sabotaging—does it mean I'm free? So yes I'm free in a way and not free. Struggle hasn't ended.