

Unleashing the capacity of Blackness: The scene of total violence and the ongoing present of slavery

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Abstract

In the effort to critically interrogate the state (and law) and global capital (and property) through Blackness as the enduring figure of the total violence of slavery and colonialism, Denise Ferreira da Silva's *Unpayable Debt* (2022) centrally targets the Marxian critique of capitalism (or historical materialism) as the premier example of an Enlightenment conceptual apparatus that is simply “of no use.” This review rebuts Ferreira da Silva's contentions regarding Marx and Marxian critiques. Marx identifies slavery, colonialism, genocide, and warfare as necessary foundations for the very possibility of capital accumulation, rendering the colonial and racial underpinnings of capital accumulation indispensable for any viable analysis of our contemporary sociopolitical world order. As the racialized figure of the enduring legacy of enslaved labor, then, Blackness is indeed crucial for a renewal and further radicalization of Marx's theory of labor.

Keywords

capital, colonialism, historical materialism, labor, law, Marx, property, race

Denise Ferreira da Silva's *Unpayable Debt* (2022) is fashioned as “a one-off experiment” (2022: 13) that proposes a “black feminist reading tool”: “the figure of the *wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation*” (along with its attendant procedure or method of reading as de-composition and re-composition) (2022: 15). This tool is devised to “render explicit how slavery (as an economic structure) and raciality (as a symbolic arsenal)

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remain operative in the global present and thus are crucial in the functioning of the state and the accumulation of capital” (2022: 15).

Ferreira da Silva’s book is inspired by an allegory introduced in Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred* (first published in 1979), in which Butler unfolds a parable of time travel by the Black American protagonist, Dana, who repeatedly moves between her late twentieth-century Los Angeles home and a Maryland plantation in the early nineteenth century. Dana is presumed to be a descendant of the plantation owner and a Black woman whom he rapes. Dana is first confronted with the predicament of saving the slave owner’s life when he is still a child, and then again thereafter, despite his eventual cruelty toward her and others (among them, her Black ancestors), because as her (white) ancestor, her own future existence depends on his preservation. Eventually, in subsequent returns, Dana is confronted with that same child as a grown man, by then the heir of his father’s plantation and himself a slave owner. Finally, her ancestor attempts to also rape Dana and she succeeds to kill him, but upon her return to her proper life, in the future, her own body is mutilated. Dana loses the arm that the slave owner clutched as he perished. Ferreira da Silva ponders this allegory in terms of what she depicts as an “unpayable debt” that Dana never herself incurred but which she nonetheless “owes” as an obligation to her reprehensible ancestor, without whom she would never have come to exist. “The debt,” Ferreira da Silva explains, “is the condition of possibility for her existence, in which family and slavery are indistinguished and indistinguishable” (2022: 14). Dana’s “obligation is incomprehensible” according to any of the customary conceptions of morality “because it is instituted by slavery” and paradoxically compels her “to protect the physical integrity of someone who could kill, rape, maim her, in order to ensure her own physical existence” (2022: 74). Dana’s “submission to [this] formidable obligation,” Ferreira da Silva argues, is an instance of the Slave’s “refusal to comply to the logic of obliteration”: “she kept her Owner-father alive in the past to ensure her own existence in the present and, in so doing, she honored her Slave ancestors’ refusal to die” (2022: 77). Furthermore, the fact that Dana does not finally emerge unscathed, but instead is mutilated, is, for Ferreira da Silva, “a reminder of the ongoing operation of total violence” (2022: 78). By no means a work of literary criticism or analysis, *Unpayable Debt* nevertheless offers an extended meditation on this parable and various episodes in its narrative as a device through which to theoretically and philosophically contemplate the figure of the *wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation*, as “a referent of the Slave in the scene of total violence” (2022: 16) that “exposes ... how Blackness records the juridical and economic ‘relation’ that has been crucial in the assembling of state and capital” and “[collapses] the distinctions that render the specificity of the liberal polity” (2022: 17).

The figure of the *wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation*, in Ferreira da Silva’s account (following Hortense Spillers), “performs the task that Blackness alone can” (2022: 28), in that “as a referent of slave labor,” Blackness “instead of a signifier of cultural difference” is salient as “a mark (er) of a juridico-economic structure that yields a symbolic order mapped onto the captive body” (2022: 33). “The juridical position of captivity (total domination) authorizes total violence” (2022: 36). These propositions, for Ferreira da Silva, decisively disrupt, derange, and subvert the possibility for anything like the famous Hegelian dialectic of recognition between Master and Slave, because their

duality is not that of rival personages at all: the Slave confronts her Owner not as a Human but as a Thing (as property), mediated by the slave owner's juridically inscribed title to his property and thus, his authority to deploy absolute physical force and coercive power (2022: 40). Hence, she contends, "the captive is not a modern person ... but property"; "the captive body (one of the referents of Blackness) does not play in the ethical scene of representation because she is fundamentally a juridico-economic thing" (2022: 43). She is "owned like an animal or thing," but possesses the exclusively human trait of having a will and thus, the capacity to refuse the owner's authority, whereby "the Owner's right to deploy total violence" is rendered "acceptable and necessary" (2022: 44). In this way, Ferreira da Silva argues, the *wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation* is a key to understanding the operation of "the Colonial and the Racial" (2022: 24) in the very constitution of both capital and what she calls "the post-Enlightenment political architecture," for which "the threat of total violence lies at the core of the modern political program" (2022: 36). What is at stake, she continues, is (re)"thinking the political through Blackness" (2022: 67) and "unleashing ... Blackness's capacity within the modern political architecture" (2022: 70) — unleashing Blackness to perform its distinctive critical task: "to dismount modern thinking from within" (2022: 78). As a juridico-economic category, Blackness, in Ferreira da Silva's analysis, opens the prospect of "a satisfactory account of the Colonial/Racial/Capital triad" (2022: 70), by compelling us "to approach existence from the scene of total violence" (2022: 71). In another iteration, furthermore, she affirms, *Unpayable Debt* seeks "to register the *ongoing present* of slavery in/as global capital" (2022: 76; emphasis in original).

And, Ferreira da Silva adds: "This is not an easy task" (2022: 71).

This, indeed, is not an easy task, and this is not an easy book. *Unpayable Debt* is an experimental but also propositional assemblage of vital questions, the radicality of which catapults and elevates her inquiry to levels of philosophical abstraction that can be as exhilarating as they can at times be dizzying. Or, perhaps more importantly, the book takes the reader to these heights because of the radicality with which Ferreira da Silva admirably and fearlessly pursues these questions. Yet, Ferreira da Silva's not-easy (and perhaps also uneasy) task is truly a vital and urgent one — one in which I recognize a deep consonance with some my own most central concerns, and with which I discern an itinerary in common (at least partially). For, I too discern "the *ongoing present* of slavery in/as global capital" (p. 76; emphasis in original) in my efforts to elaborate "a racial theory of labor" (De Genova, 2018; 2023). Remarkably "turning to physics" (Ferreira da Silva, 2022: 251), however, Ferreira da Silva takes a cue from Butler's science fiction allegories of transubstantiation across space and time to explore questions which, admittedly, I am unprepared to adequately assess and am therefore reluctant to engage, and in any case, which I frankly struggle to comprehend. Provocatively, at one point Ferreira da Silva characterizes hers as a "raw-materialist approach" (2022: 263), poignantly alluding to the raw materials, particularly cotton, produced by enslaved labor, through which the life force and creative powers of enslaved African Americans entered the global circuitry of capital accumulation. However, her interest in the materiality of such raw materials is utterly transposed from the customary analytical registers of social theory or political philosophy into the ontological and epistemological implications of quantum physics.

Undoubtedly, if the figure of the *wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation* confronts us with the veritable Thing-ification of enslaved humans reduced to property and expelled from the reputable precincts of the Human, then this avenue of inquiry arguably presents one sort of intriguing option. This is at least plausible, above all because quantum physics' emphases — on the ultimate indeterminacies of matter and energy, of space and time, and the infinite implicatedness and mutual imbrication of all things — potentially subvert and perhaps literally collapse all of the conceits of post-Enlightenment thinking — all of the “terms, tools, and formulations” of its “determinative and interpretive moments,” which Ferreira da Silva deems to be “of no use” (2022: 270). In contrast, she exalts in the image supplied by quantum physics of “the perpetual re/de/composition of everything that has existed, exists, and will come into existence” which, she suggests, “refers to any body, everybody's body, whichever, however, whatsoever” after which “everything else — I mean everything ... is up for grabs” (2022: 270). Ferreira da Silva may be right, in some sense. Her erudition is impressive. Her intellectual imagination is breathtaking. And as I confess, I do not pretend to be in the position to fully understand, much less judge, some of these dimensions of her argument. Regrettably, though, among all of the post-Enlightenment analytical frameworks with which she might take issue, Ferreira da Silva centrally targets the Marxian critique of capitalism (which she prefers to designate as historical materialism) as “perhaps the best example” of such a conceptual apparatus that is “of no use” (2022: 270-271), “has nothing to offer” (2022: 190), and will “at best remain useless to the colonially and racially subjugated” (2022: 212). In this regard, I am more confident to disagree. Ferreira da Silva posits that the Marxian framework simply “cannot account for the political figure [of] ... the wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation,” and that “there is no point in trying to ... make [the captive body] fit where she does not belong” (2022: 272).

Much as I am persuaded of the powerful interpretive potentialities of Ferreira da Silva's positing of the *wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation* as a tool for reading, with respect to Marx at least, her book suffers from some unfortunate *mis*-readings. Notably, Ferreira da Silva baldly asserts (repeatedly, in fact) that she has no interest in coming up with a new reading of Marx (2022: 194), a “corrective or innovative interpretation” (2022: 195, *n.* 47). More polemically, she proclaims: “I do not have the pretension of correcting Marx's text nor am I committed to (saving) it (from itself)” (2022: 234). But as a rather more vexing preemptive gesture, she also derisively proclaims that she has no commitment “to not misread him” (2022: 194). For a book composed of four chapters, in which the greater part of one of those chapters entails a critical reading of Marx, this gesture is certainly perplexing. Nonetheless, she defends her method as the deployment of a tool for “reading otherwise,” where “otherwise” signals “not a position but a direction of reading” (2022: 211).

Subjugated through the slave owner's juridical property right, secured by the state, to exercise total violence, therefore, Blackness in Ferreira da Silva's critique has no ethical standing in “the liberal framework” for which there is an “indistinction between liberty and [the ownership of] property” (2022: 79), because “the juridical notion of *liberty* and its ethical correspondent *dignity*” (2022: 147; emphases in original) — “the specific

ethical attributes of Man and Humanity” (2022: 148) — describe conditions that “depended on the captivity and fungibility of the Slave” (2022: 147). Blackness, then — as a figure of fungibility and captivity — signals the potential to disrupt and collapse the separation between economic value and ethical value (2022: 150). Furthermore, in her formulation, “Blackness as the *wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation*” — because this figure “exposes how global capital accumulates ... through the violent expropriation of Slave labor” — “breaks through the categorial and historical separation of the Colonial, the Racial, and Capital” (2022: 80). For Ferreira da Silva, however, historical materialism assembles capital as a totality only by upholding those very separations (2022: 192), and to sustain a conceptual unity between capital and labor, “only admits” racial and colonial subjugation “as anterior or exterior to capital” (2022: 172). Ferreira da Silva contends that Marx’s theory of labor, value, and exploitation relies on presuppositions — in particular, liberty and equality (as figured in the formally “free” and contractual character of wage labor) — that were “designed to make it impossible” for its concepts and categories “to establish any connections between the Colonial, the Racial, and Capital” (2022: 77). “Historical materialism,” she concludes, “cannot remain intact after a confrontation with the Racial” (2022: 212).

Her method, Ferreira da Silva explains, is one of delimitation: “a manner of reading statements that, instead of providing an interpretation of their content, attends to how these perform their function, which is to distinguish what falls under a particular concept (as opposed to that which is determined by a given category) and what does not fit under ... and exceeds ... it” (2022: 211). More specifically, for the sake of defending her particular claims regarding historical materialism’s purported deficiencies, she elaborates: “I focus on the nonspecification of the Colonial as a political configuration in descriptions of its economic conditions (the violent appropriation of land and the prevalence of ‘slave labor’) designed to indicate that it does not fit under the concept of capital” (2022: 211). Ferreira da Silva clarifies further: “For Marx, [‘the colonies’ and ‘slave labor’] are uncomprehensible [*sic usage*] with/in the totality that is capital because they lack the historically specific juridical and ethical features.... For capital is historically specified, delimited by labor, as Marx repeatedly says, under certain ‘essential social conditions’ in which it takes the (juridical) form of private property and the (economic) form of commodity; as such, it is specific to the liberal polity, for it refers to the principles of liberty/equality (juridical/before the state) and equality/liberty (economic/in the market), respectively” (2022: 212).

Ferreira da Silva suggests that “it seems appropriate to start from a strategically naive question: How did Marx manage to keep the colonial context out of his assembling of capital?” (2022: 200). This question is indubitably strategic for the larger argument of *Unpayable Debt*, but its strategy ultimately seems not so much naive, even if only strategically so, as it is disingenuous. Ferreira da Silva acknowledges that “reading *Capital*, we find explicit and implicit statements that comment on the colonial context,” but, abiding by her larger strategic method of delimitation, she contends that “it is the postulation of capital’s characteristic presentation of liberty and equality — namely, the pervasiveness of (free) labor and (private) property — that supports Marx’s distinction between the Colonial and the proper context of Capital” (2022: 200-01). At the risk of what

Ferreira da Silva might characterize as an “interpretive” approach (interested in the substance of Marx’s claims and their meaning, rather than only their forms), I read Marx otherwise.

One of the most forceful and famous articulations of Marx’s perspective on the Colonial, and indeed on the Racial (to adopt Ferreira da Silva’s nomenclature), appears in his discussion of “the so-called primitive accumulation” in Volume One of *Capital*, in a passage that Ferreira da Silva notably does not cite or consider. Marx declares with a flourish:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize *the dawn of the era of capitalist production*. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. Hard on their heels follows the commercial war of the European nations, which has *the globe as its battlefield* (1867/1976:915; emphases added).

Importantly, Marx’s critique identifies slavery, colonialism, genocide, and warfare — what with Ferreira da Silva we might recognize as multiple sites and conditions of “total violence” — as veritable preconditions for the very possibility of capital accumulation. But this passage also verifies that an elementary predicate of Marx’s analysis of the regime of capital accumulation is its *global* scope and scale, from the outset. The Colonial, in other words, is indispensable and inextricable for Capital. Arguably, this historical analysis, so integral for Marx’s understanding of capital as a unity (in Ferreira da Silva’s phrase) and for capitalism as a totality, lends force to the contention that the Marxian critique of capitalism inherently, and of necessity, requires an appreciation that capitalism was always, from the outset, not only global — indeed, colonial — but also racial. Could one realistically expect or reasonably conclude otherwise from Marx’s own depiction of “the dawn of the era of capitalist production” as one “chiefly” distinguished by such systemic phenomena as the mass “extirpation, enslavement and entombment” and “conquest and plunder” of indigenous peoples, worldwide, and the notorious “commercial hunting of blackskins”? Capitalism, for Marx, was indeed saturated from its inception, not merely ideologically but also materially and practically, with colonial/racial subjugation as a decisive predicate.

Ferreira da Silva might reasonably object that, inasmuch as this passage is framed under the titular heading of what Marx termed (derisively) “the so-called primitive accumulation,” it may be delimited as “anterior” to Capital proper. That would be plausible, but not finally persuasive. Notably, the term “primitive accumulation” is a phrase that originated in the works of bourgeois political economists, which Marx referenced with derision for its euphemistic and misleading character, hence the “so-called”; Marx likens this to the contrivance of Original Sin (1867/1976:873). These processes of expropriation and dispossession, we know, just as Marx knew, just as Ferreira da Silva also knows, were — and *continue to be* — manifestations of the expansion and intensification of capitalist social relations, and they are coterminous with the

generalization of wage labor, worldwide. Their character as “prior” to capitalism proper is strictly apparent and is at times presented in this manner by Marx strictly for heuristic purposes. In fact, they were not only constitutive, historically, of capital and indeed necessary preconditions for the formation of a regime of capital accumulation, as Marx makes emphatically clear, but they have also co-existed alongside the more formally “pure” ideal type of (wage) labor relations throughout the ongoing history of “actually existing” capitalism. Marx’s broader discussion of slavery abundantly verifies this point.

With specific reference to the disfigurement of the nascent struggles by the white working class in the United States because of the coeval existence of slavery, Marx famously proclaimed, “Labour in a white skin can never emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin” (1867/1976:414). This, too, is a passage that Ferreira da Silva neglects to consider altogether. Yet this classic (explicitly and emphatically) *racial* watchword of anti-capitalist struggle confirms that Marx’s conception of “labor” can never be extricated from what Ferreira da Silva designates as *the wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation*. Referring to this global history of colonial/racial subjugation as a material necessity for not merely jump-starting but also *sustaining* the processes of capital accumulation, Marx contends poignantly: “In fact, the veiled slavery of the wage labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal” (1867/1976:925). This formulation’s meaning is unequivocal: with the phrase “needed ... as its pedestal,” Marx plainly contends that slavery was *necessary* as the base or foundation that materially supported wage labor in industrializing Europe. Ferreira da Silva might object that this is a case of the construction of a relation of exteriority. However, what is plainly figured as a geographical separation that corresponds to the New World’s exteriority *to Europe* cannot be reductively traduced as anything like an exteriority to capital. Marx is making the precisely opposite point. Less elegantly, perhaps, but with a bluntness that is difficult to misunderstand, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx similarly confirms the inextricability of these two spatially separated but temporally coterminous and structurally co-constituted historical realities: “Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry” (Marx, 1845/1920:121).

In Marx’s invocation of slavery as the proverbial pedestal for the exploitation of wage labor, he identifies a particular and literally indispensable condition for the actual historical genesis of capital and the capitalist world market. Nonetheless, because Marx’s principal aim is to theoretically clarify the capital-wage labor relation, he prioritizes the logical development of its form in a manner that, in effect, treats slavery as a kind of externality. These analytical distinctions regarding the respective forms of enslaved labor and wage-labor in Marx are what Ferreira da Silva seems to take as evidence of Marx’s basic disregard for the total violence underwriting the juridical scene of colonial subjugation and enslavement in favor of wage labor, ostensibly as a figure of liberty and equality within the tenets of the modern liberal political architecture. However, as Dale Tomich notes, “the historical hierarchy among forms of labor is not, and cannot be, the same as the theoretical hierarchy” (2004:31). There is, in other words, a conflation of real historical social formations and the abstract formalizations of their distinguishing social relations. The conceptual or formal autonomy of enslaved labor and wage labor has indeed led many would-be Marxists astray, leading them to treat both “capitalism” and

“slavery” as ahistorical, static, abstract categories (presumed to be fundamentally separate, distinct, and inimical social formations or modes of production). Regrettably, Ferreira da Silva seems to attribute these genuinely counter-productive formalist misreadings and plainly crude, reductive distortions of various “historical materialist” analyses to a fundamental (and fatal) flaw of Marx himself. But even if Ferreira da Silva suggests unapologetically (indeed, almost belligerently) that she makes no commitment to *not* misread Marx, this is not only a mis-reading. It rather seems to be a deliberate misconstrual of Marx’s theory of labor altogether in order to relegate historical materialism to the proverbial ash heap of post-Enlightenment liberal thought.

Marx relies extensively on the heuristic utility of contrasts between enslaved labor and wage labor, precisely to underscore the affinities between the two. Furthermore, he does not shun depictions of ostensibly “free” (waged) labor as a reconstructed form of servitude: “The starting-point of the development that gave rise both to the wage-labourer and to the capitalist,” Marx insists, “was the enslavement of the worker” (1867/1976:875). Marx notably initiates his greater project in Volume One of *Capital* with the proposition that Political Economy “has never once asked the question ... why labour is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labour by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product” (1867/1976:173). His solution to that puzzle – tellingly, if perhaps counter-intuitively for some readers, including many would-be Marxists – is that capitalism is “a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man” (1867/1976:174). His purpose is not merely a technical (economistic) investigation into the calculation of economic value, as expressed in wages and the prices of commodities. His emphasis on “mastery” is emphatically and explicitly *political*. What really mattered for Marx was indeed to produce *a theory of labor* – a theory adequate to the specific ways in which labor is systematically understood and represented under capitalism, as if it were simply a matter of calculating and commensurating quantitatively different but qualitatively homogeneous and interchangeable exercises of labor (in the abstract). Marx was interested in why the substance of labor assumes the form that it does under capitalism – a form in which what is predominant is its *abstraction* as something reducible to *quantity*. His contention was that this socially and historically specific predominance of abstract labor under capitalism signaled a particular sociopolitical organization of the *mastery* of human life by production (as its own end), whereby the productive power and creative capacities of human life (refigured and perverted by capital as “labor”) is subordinated to a regime of production “for the sake of production” (1867/1976:1038).

The characterization of wage labor as a “veiled” form of slavery, therefore, speaks directly to Marx’s preoccupation with why labor (and its mastery) systematically appears under capitalism in this particular form: “the value and price of labour-power” come to be expressed in the form of wages, and thus “makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed presents to the eye the precise opposite of that relation,” thereby supplying the basis for “all the notions of justice held by both the worker and the capitalist ... all capitalism’s illusions of freedom” (1867/1976:680). Nonetheless, Marx also discerned in the “unqualified slavery” of colonial capitalism the production of commodities for the world market whereby “the civilized horrors of over-work are grafted onto the barbaric horrors

of slavery” (1867/1976:345). Hence, the total violence and expropriation of New World slavery — or in Ferreira da Silva’s phrase, the wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation — was not only a material and practical prerequisite for that illusory freedom attributed to wage labor, but also a kind of exemplar of the raw unveiled truth of *all* labor under capitalism (De Genova, 2023).

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