

A Most Perfect Hallucination: *Unpayable Debt* by Denise Ferreira da Silva

Review by Scott W. Schwartz
City College of New York

Ferreira da Silva, Denise. Unpayable Debt. Sternberg Press 2022, 328 pp.

Unpayable Debt is a monumental book. “Monumental” is not used here as a disposable adjective, rather it implies that the book feels more like a sculpture than a text. Not a lifeless statue that flattens time into a monochrome moment, this book reads like an omni-dimensional memory. As debates over removing statues of slaveholders and other normalizers of racial violence climaxed in summer 2020, Denise Ferreira da Silva was sculpting a lexico-epistemic apparatus for making new knowledge and a new kind of existence—a monumental existence outside today’s dominant teleological existence.

One could read the main character in *Unpayable Debt* as the “wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation” (WCB-SOS). It is through this entity that the reader considers a medley of turbulence—“the Colonial, the Racial, the Juridical, and Capital” (70). This construct proves effective in conveying Ferreira da Silva’s radical ambition: to decompose and recompose post-Enlightenment onto-epistemology (or “re/de/compose” in her words). In this pursuit, the WCB-SOS is personified by the character Dana from Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred*, who is undergoing a spacetime bifurcation between 1970s Los Angeles and 1830s Maryland.

Dana’s plot forces a challenging interpretation of the title *Unpayable Debt*. In finding herself in 1830s Maryland, Dana encounters her ancestors—the white slaveholding Rufus and the Black captive Alice. Dana, valuing her own existence, is compelled to keep Rufus alive and, more wrenchingly, ensure procreation with Alice. The unpayable debt, then, does not refer to a gift or loan so magnanimous that the burden of recompense is impossible. It is not referring to something that has been lent that is now lost and irretrievable. Rather the inverse, the title works toward a defiant sentiment like: “I know I owe my very existence to you, but I simply cannot bring myself to give you a penny of backpay (or even acknowledgment).” Or more directly, “I would rather kill you and risk ending my existence (or ending the world) than give any compensation or gratitude.” The unpayable debt is unpayable because to pay it would be to legitimize or vindicate the premises under which the “loan” (in this case, existence) was made. The debt must be **un**paid (“un” as an action).

This unpayability resonates with today’s multivalent derangements. While Ferreira da Silva does not directly point to this, there would not be eight billion people on the planet today if not for capitalism’s need to produce and sell commodities, if not for capitalism’s need to extract wealth and exploit labor. Many of us exist simply because capitalism needs to exploit us. Our ancestor is our oppressor. Should we be grateful? Must we “pay back” this

existence through a life of wage labor, as capitalism intends? Dana's "existence required the existence of another who held the authority to decide on her life and death. Her obligation is to keep alive someone who could kill and rape her at any given time" (93). How different is this predicament from that of all the world's capitalized?

One should, of course, not too closely liken the situation of modern wage laborers with Black slaves. Ferreira da Silva spends nearly fifty pages nuancing the distinction between a Marxist account of labor and a more colonially and racially informed architecture of slave labor. "[T]he distinction between 'slave labor' and 'wage labor' is qualitative" (210)—the two are distinguished by how they relate to time. The slave exists outside of time (at least the linear sequential form normalized by Eurocolonialism) because, unlike the wage laborer, the slave's labor-value is not measured by time. "The quantity of labour...is measured by its duration...In short, the time expended in the production of commodities accounts for their being exchangeable" (223). As unpaid labor, the slave is untimed. The slave may age but they do not progress to another state. This "timelessness" speaks to the means by which Dana is able to shift her experiences from the 1970s to 1830s. "[N]o white person back in the mid-1970s seemed to realize that how things were for black folk had to do with how things were...in the southern United States in the 1830s" (165).

Black existence is an alternate form of existence than the Enlightenment's Human. However, rather than romanticize Human existence and lament its denial to Black people, Ferreira da Silva uses this a-human existence to open "an onto-epistemological wormhole, through which an image of existence without separability, determinacy, and sequentially can be contemplated" (47). Counter to Cartesian assumptions, existence might be more than an atomized telos. "[I]t is necessary to expand our *image of existence* beyond the limits imposed by Galileo's, Newton's, and Kant's Nature... an image of existence...in terms of untemporality...and unspatiality" (158). To move past Kant's way of being, Ferreira da Silva calls for "the release of existence from knowledge" (161).

Dana's misadventure reveals that different kinds of existence manifest different kinds of experience—non-linear, undetermined, non-discrete. Dana is not separable into an 1830 and 1970 existence. She is inseparable. Separability is a key aspect of colonial epistemology (Lugones 2010). "Without separability and the local spatiality that provides determinacy...the formulations of the post-Enlightenment...are of no use" (270). Kathryn Yusoff's mineralization and geologization of the world in *Billion Black Anthropocenes* (2018) points to this entanglement of exchangeability and separability. Crucial to the notion of separability is the notion of equality. In Yusoff's critique, ten grams of copper is considered equal to a different ten grams of copper. Two different pieces of matter with different experiences are rendered equal in order to make them exchangeable. The same can clearly be said of the slave. To this end, Ferreira da Silva directly critiques the exploitative alchemy of the = sign itself. "[T]he rendering of *equality* in the format of *identity*, where the sign = ...turn[s] *equal* into *the same* or *equality*...into *identity*" (148). Two different Black people may be made *the same* by the = symbol.

Discussing the history of thermodynamics, Isabelle Stengers makes a similar critique. Nineteenth century physicists "figured out a way to put heat on one side of an '=' sign and work on the other in a manner that is mathematically true" (Schwartz 2021, 67). In Stengers' words, "The = sign serves as the...condition of possibility for reducing mechanical problems to a problem of mathematical analysis" (2010, 127-8). This history of thermodynamics is relevant to the ambitions of *Unpayable Debt*. Ferreira da Silva describes labor as "a pure and

simple transfer of potential energy” (249). Today’s widely normalized concept “energy” was directly conceived through efforts to maximally exploit the labor of heat via the steam engine (Daggett 2019). It’s been argued that only the cheaper labor of coal and oil could end the slave economy (LeMenager 2014).

Unpayable Debt may not be catalogued within Science Studies, but it sharply examines prevailing scientific ideas of determinacy and causality. Ferreira da Silva refers to the doctrine of determinacy as the “view that productive knowledge operates linearly, as does the cause in relation to the effect” (121). As she writes elsewhere (2017), contemporary science has been built upon prioritizing cause and effect relationships, particularly through motion (dynamics). This kinetic emphasis, though, is a product of capitalized ways of knowing, whether the hydrodynamics of the watermill or the thermodynamics of the steam engine. Against dynamics-based knowledge, *Unpayable Debt* inspires a monumental knowledge, where monument suggests notions of “bringing to mind” or “to make think (of).” There are ways of knowing which need not rely on the irreversible temporality of cause and effect (see Deutsch and Marletto’s Constructor Theory, 2015, which privileges information over dynamics in causality). In Dana’s case, “the impossibility of a person meeting their ancestors by traversing spacetime, only holds because we think of the body as...the object of classical physics” (157).

While perhaps not every reader’s primary takeaway, *Unpayable Debt*’s most immediate contributions are the novel architecture of thought it prescribes and its assault on capitalized epistemology. The book’s critique of colonial-capitalist-racial ways of knowing offers a path out of hegemonic thinking; offers a mechanism for change outside the constrictive temporality of colonial-capitalism (cause and effect)—Blackness as a way to “dismount modern thinking” (78). Thinking should be “released from the imposition to comprehend” (264). This call for a new kind of knowledge and thinking is part of a larger onslaught in Black (Science) Studies over the past few decades. Building on the work of Sylvia Wynter (and others), a generation of scholars, including Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020), Tiffany Lethabo King (2019), Katherine McKittrick (2021), Christina Sharpe (2016), and Calvin Warren (2018) have undertaken a sustained attack on epistemology (specifically, today’s dominant Eurocolonial means of knowledge production).

McKittrick concisely articulates these efforts: “If we do not collaboratively call into question a system of knowledge that delights in accumulation by dispossession and profits from ecocidal and genocidal practices...we are doomed” (2021, 74). We will not measure our way out of environmental collapse and mass starvation. We will not solve the problems of environmental destruction and mass starvation with an efficient fusion engine. The Eurocolonial tradition produces knowledge that suggests destroying the planet is a reasonable (if not good) idea. The conclusion of Ferreira da Silva and others in this cohort is that if we do not produce other kinds of knowledge, we won’t stop murdering the planet and its inhabitants.

Unpayable Debt offers the subtle idea that knowledge is (or should be) vulnerable. Colonial-Enlightenment knowledge is designed to be authoritative and impervious (impervious even to its own incorrectness). “Vulnerable” shares an etymology with wound, suggesting the WCB-SOS as a model for what I would call “pervious” knowledge (pervious indicates “affected by” or “letting things through”). A vulnerable knowledge is an undeterminable knowledge. Ferreira da Silva distinguishes between indeterminate and undeterminable (the

former referring to the as yet unknown and latter referring to the unknowable) (291). Determinacy is an utmost Enlightenment virtue, signaling Man's control over nature and God. "[D]eterminacy emerges as the defining gesture of modern knowledge" (269).

Perhaps the only Enlightenment virtue more valorized than determinacy is liberty. The co-valorization of determinacy and liberty is telling. Enlightenment freedom is strictly teleological, determined (almost oxymoronic). It is a freedom that is constructed from its opposition—bondage. This is why slavery and captivity are indispensable to Enlightenment notions of freedom. The Eurocolonizer cannot be free without the slave. This is true in a metaphysical and, I would suggest, historical sense—feudalized Europeans only gained something like liberty after enslaved and legally immobilized peoples were captured. Here, liberation connotes merely *not being property*. Liberty is the ability to own property, i.e., to exclude. "Liberty, the foremost modern ethical principle, ... figured as equality, can only render violence" (76).

Many of the above-mentioned scholars argue that the "human" is a broken category. For Ferreira da Silva, "Fanon derived [an] account that...instead of leading to a further stage of development of the Human, would lead to a not-yet-conceived Humanity" (62). Ferreira da Silva has been working on this project since at least her introduction of *Black Feminist Poethics* (2014). Jackson directly confronts the broken human, discussing the "terror of liberal humanism's attempts at humanization" (2020, 47). Countering popular narratives back to the abolitionist movement, Jackson argues that it is "not...the violence of dehumanization but rather...the violence of humanization" (46) that authorized Atlantic slavery.

One wishes that Ferreira da Silva might engage these contemporaries at greater depth, but it isn't necessary to the aims of this book. Indeed, in sculpting *Unpayable Debt*, she chisels away at necessity as mandatory for knowledge. She scolds Galileo, Descartes, and Deleuze for retaining mathematical necessity in thinking (57), and Kant in particular for a program "that retains necessity...as the ground for knowledge" (123). Ultimately, she calls for "releasing thinking from necessity" (261). Dana's travails in *Kindred* may be considered a template for non-necessary thinking, "violations of spacetime separation are possible if thinking is inspired by materiality instead of necessity" (15-16). This substitution of materiality for necessity points to the abstracting and dematerializing tendencies of capitalized epistemology that legitimize the perpetual acceleration of asymmetrical economic growth (Schwartz 2021). That is, immateriality is a *necessary* precondition to pursue capitalist growth. Materialization makes such growth unnecessary (and impossible).

This critique of necessity coincides with Meillassoux's conjecture that the only necessary characteristic of the world is that nothing is necessary (2008). Meillassoux critiques the correlationist circle in which Kant has trapped all subsequent thinkers—how can we know anything if we can only know it through ourself (not *itself*)? Ferreira da Silva suggests approaching "the Thing as matter" (263), as opposed to intangible abstraction. That is, there are no immaterial essences (see also DeLanda and Deleuze, 2013). The *itself* of the *thing-in-itself* is material. Ferreira da Silva derives the ontic recipe "everything is itself + everything else (thing + non-itself, instead of *thing-in-itself*) that may or may not exist" (292). She codes this existence as: $1 + \infty - \infty$. The infinity symbols here indicate undeterminability (like what occurs in math when dividing by zero). *Itself* is "substance without form" (2017).

There are many more nooks and crannies to explore in *Unpayable Debt*. Different readers will surely walk away contemplating different contours of this monument. More than any particular insight this is the book's greatest virtue—"to help the imagination break away from the enclosures of modern thought" (2017). *Unpayable Debt* encourages us to hallucinate the end of the dominant global regime of quantum subjugation and enter a world in which our hallucinations cannot be dominated.

References

- Daggett, Cara New. 2019. *The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, and the Politics of Work*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- DeLanda, Manuel. 2013. *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Deutsch, David and Chiara Marletto. 2015. "Constructor Theory of Information." *Proceedings of the Royal Society A* 471.
- Ferreira da Silva, Denise. 2022. *Unpayable Debt*. London: Sternberg Press.
- . 2017. "1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ – ∞ Or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value." *E-Flux* 79.
- . 2014. "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(lon) of Blackness Toward the End of the World." *The Black Scholar* 44 (2): 81-97.
- Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. 2020. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. New York: New York University Press.
- King, Tiffany Lethabo. 2019. *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- LeMenager, S. 2014. *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lugones, María. 2010. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." *Hypatia* 25 (4): 742-759.
- McKittrick, Katherine. 2021. *Dear Science and Other Stories*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Meillassoux, Quentin. 2008. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. London: Continuum.
- Schwartz, Scott W. 2021. *An Archaeology of Temperature: Numerical Materials in the Capitalized Landscape*. London: Routledge.
- Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Stengers, Isabelle. 2010. *Cosmopolitics. Vol. 1*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Warren, Calvin. 2018. *Ontological Terror; Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* Durham: Duke University Press.

Yusoff, Kathryn. 2018. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes Or None*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Cite this Review

Schwartz, Scott W. "A Most Perfect Hallucination: Unpayable Debt by Denise Ferreira da Silva." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 39, 2023, doi:10.20415/rhiz/039.r02

RHIZOMES ISSN 1555-9998 ★ 230 East Hall Bowling Green State University Bowling Green, OH 43403

Editors: Ellen Berry and Carol Siegel. Reviews editor: Craig J. Saper. Technical editor: Helen J Burgess