

# “Doing *unpayable debt*”

**Esther Gabara**

Duke University, USA

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## Abstract

This response to Denise Ferreira da Silva’s *Unpayable Debt* (2022) takes seriously the author’s self-description as a scholar and artist, and so considers the study within a genealogy of contemporary experiments with the book form in the Americas. *Unpayable Debt* calls for a reader who will assemble its sequence of moments and texts into an accounting of the debt that Western epistemologies, disciplines, and habits of reading owe to the people and cultures subjected to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and to the dispossession and genocide of indigenous peoples. Fiction, distinct from history and the other disciplines that use the written word, proves essential to calculate that liability, and Ferreira da Silva exercises its inventive power in her scholarly critique as much as in videos, performances, and social practice collaborations.

## Keywords

artist books, fiction, coloniality, racial capitalism, art practice and theory, blackness, reparations

*Unpayable Debt* is a scholarly book that asks to be used otherwise. It is book to be done as much as read, rehearsed as much as analyzed. Denise Ferreira da Silva warns from the outset that: “Any attempt at summarizing each chapter—and the whole book for that matter—will be lacking and most likely misrepresent it, because a description of what is done cannot repeat *how* it is done” (Ferreira da Silva, 2022: 16). The title announces an unending exercise of accounting, which the book spells out in activities that propel modes of reading toward that task. What follows here, then, can only be one, provisional attempt to narrate certain practices of doing *Unpayable Debt*.

A warning of my own: while I will endeavor to respect Ferreira da Silva’s admonition against summary, this response cannot conceal its origins in a social relation of pedagogy.

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## Corresponding author:

Esther Gabara, Departments of Romance Studies, and Art, Art History & Visual Studies, Duke University, 205 Languages Bldg, Box 90257, Durham, NC 27708, USA.

Email: [egabara@duke.edu](mailto:egabara@duke.edu)

My exercise of reading was first rehearsed with students in a graduate seminar on the topic of “Coloniality and Contemporary Art,” just after *Unpayable Debt* was published in fall 2022.<sup>1</sup> The performative necessities of teaching and the voices of contemporary artists and theorists from the Global South therefore register in this essay. We read Ferreira da Silva’s book as much for its invitation to do and to read—as a practice—as for its direct inquiry into the conditions of coloniality that had framed our conversations. Since this was a course on contemporary art, the seminar allowed for proximity between teacher, students, critic, and artist, as well as an attitude toward research that drew theory and practice closer. My response seeks more than anything to embed *Unpayable Debt* in a methodology of conceptual-philosophical making distinct from philosophy, theory, or even critique. Ferreira da Silva’s self-description as an artist and a scholar sustains this approach.

Our first exercise was to comprehend the structure undergirding this complex book. At the level of argumentation, we found the design of *Unpayable Debt* to lead readers along discursive excursions and returns. At the level of the sentence, readers similarly face frequent parenthetical interruptions and regressions in their trains of thought. Those departures, returns, and interruptions orbit like planets around the sun around a primary confrontation with “the wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation.” Hortense Spillers provides that phrase to conjure the enslaved Black woman, which Ferreira da Silva insists properly constitutes neither an image nor a concept. The phrase is rather a kind of performative that shapes the call to attend to the violent economy that binds all subjects—in radical inequality—in the relation of debt that titles the book. Ferreira da Silva calls the phrase a “reading tool,” one that employs a force that seems to me exercised in equal parts like a magnet (or gravity) and a lever (or torque). The “wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation” as a magnet draws the reader always back toward the scene of encounter. As a lever, the phrase pries the book free from the idealist and materialist genealogies that have dominated philosophy since the Enlightenment, and that have obscured, denied, and ignored how slavery shaped their very core.

## Book Material

Time and again, readers are brought to that defining encounter with “the wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation” through an analysis of Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred* (1978). Even more than Spillers’ landmark critical essay, Ferreira da Silva features literary fiction as the protagonist of *Unpayable Debt*, to such a degree that her book not only retells Butler’s story but also repeats its temporal rhythms of necessary regress and futurity. The deep intertextuality between the novel and *Unpayable Debt* requires me to enact my own retelling of Butler’s story here, if I am to properly account for Ferreira da Silva’s contributions to philosophy, theory, sociology, and history. The science fiction novel tells the story of Dana, an African American writer caught in a loop of time travel between 1970s Los Angeles and 1830s Maryland. Dana’s fate turns out to be tied up with that of her ancestor, Rufus, the self-destructive son of white slaveowners, whose life Dana must repeatedly save so that she herself eventually will be born. Dana must do this as an

enslaved person, a status imposed on her despite having been born one hundred years after abolition, because of how Blackness was and continues to be lived.

*Kindred* begins with a Prologue, narrated in a present tense, which takes place after the diegetic time of the novel. The reader first meets Dana in a hospital room, her left arm amputated after her body had been caught, entombed in the wall of the house she had just bought with her white husband, Kevin, and following her final return journey from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. Ferreira da Silva transforms that scene into something more than just another textual citation: “That arm stuck in the wall, the incomprehensible evidence of Dana’s travels in time, has inspired the black feminist reading tool assembled to carve the image of unpayable debt, which is this book” (Ferreira da Silva, 2022: 15, emphasis added). The book is an image, it is a sculpture (carved), and it is another loop in Dana’s returns to Rufus’s story. *Unpayable Debt* therefore must be understood itself as a material that sparks a process to be performed and revised by readers. In this sense, it advances and redirects a long and fascinating genealogy of artist books, one in which Brazil has played a leading role on the international stage. Concrete Poets in the mid-twentieth century made letter into image and page into stage. Neo-concretists transformed books into sculptures and objects into “non-objects,” which themselves came into existence only when manipulated by the hands of the spectator rather than placed upon a pedestal. Mexican poet, artist, and cultural organizer, Ulises Carrión (1941–1989), a collaborator with the Concrete Poets, wrote a revelatory manifesto for “El nuevo arte de hacer libros” [The New Art of Making Books], first published in Octavio Paz’s journal, *Plural* (February 1975), and subsequently republished many times in English, Spanish, and other languages. Like Ferreira da Silva’s warning, the manifesto calls for a fundamental revolution in the meaning and making of books. It begins with a definition of “what a book is”:

A book is a sequence of spaces.

Each of these spaces is perceived at a different moment—a book is also a sequence of moments.

A book is not a case of words, nor a bag of words, nor a bearer of words...

The fact that a text is contained in a book, comes only from the dimensions of such a text; or, in the case of a series of short texts (poems, for instance), from their number. (Carrión, 1975: 33).<sup>2</sup>

These sorts of books exceed the size, medium, and potential to circulate of those things we find in libraries and bookstores, and the scope of this reinvented book goes beyond Carrión’s Brazilian collaborators: “Concrete poetry represents an alternative to poetry. Books, regarded as autonomous space-time sequences, offer an alternative to all existent literary genres” (Carrión, 1975: 35).<sup>3</sup> *Unpayable Debt*—as such a book—offers such an alternative to academic books that are only read.

How is Ferreira da Silva’s philosophical study such a book? Its pages do not include photographs or drawings, poetry, or fiction, nor even experimental graphic design. Much as Carrión imagined, though, it seeks alternatives to the form, function, and content of the books that have structured knowledge in five American centuries violently organized by

colonial modernity and racial capitalism. While the author undoubtedly challenges the founding distinctions between the disciplines of sociology (which she studied in Brazil), philosophy, literary studies, and art history, all of which appear in her analysis, she is not satisfied with textual, scholarly interdisciplinarity alone. More fundamentally, *Unpayable Debt* calls for a reader who will assemble its sequence of moments and texts into an accounting of the debt that Western epistemologies, disciplines, and habits of reading owe to the people and cultures subjected to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and to the dispossession and genocide of indigenous peoples. *How* to “contar”—in Portuguese, the verb used to tell a story and to count, to account, for a debt—is at the heart of the project of *Unpayable Debt*.

## Fiction

“The trouble began,” Butler’s Dana tells us: “long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it.” This reflection about the beginning of the story— *o conto* or *a história* in Portuguese— accompanies her process of unpacking books in the house that she and Kevin had just bought. Curiously, as she sorts a stack, the narrative continues: “Fiction only,” they had decided, and when she “put a stack of nonfiction down in front of him. He stared at it unhappily” (Butler, 2003: 12). It is immediately after this exercise of liberating herself from non-fiction that Dana is thrust, dragged, pushed, pulled back, and pried out of time and from west to east. What does fiction, itself, distinct from history and the other disciplines that use the written word—sociology, philosophy, communications—provide to these Black women writers as they seek to calculate an unpayable debt?<sup>4</sup>

In her second journey back to 1830s Maryland, one of Dana’s forced labors is to read to Rufus, who is bedridden from one of the many accidents from which she traveled in time to save him:

The book was *Robinson Crusoe*. I had read it when I was little, and I could remember not really liking it, but not quite being able to put I down. Crusoe had, after all, been on a slave-trading voyage when he was shipwrecked. I opened the book with some apprehension, wondering what archaic spelling and punctuation I would face. I found the expected f’s for s’s and a few other things that didn’t turn up as often, but I got used to them very quickly. And I began to get into *Robinson Crusoe*. As a kind of castaway myself, I was happy to escape into the fictional world of someone else’s trouble (Butler, 2003: 87).

Through its structure of embedded intertextuality with *Kindred*, *Unpayable Debt* exercises that same force of fiction—the readers of *Unpayable Debt* castaways like Dana and Crusoe in the never-ending narratives of slave voyages. As such, Ferreira da Silva compels them, as Dana herself is compelled, to be caught up in and transported by a story that they certainly do not like but that they cannot put down. In the process, Ferreira da Silva demands that readers confront that question of whether this is a story of “someone else’s trouble,” and their role in accounting for it.

## A turning of the grounds of post-enlightenment thinking and the onslaught of materiality as thinking with the flesh

The carving out of an image of how someone else's troubles become, unflinching and unwillingly, Dana's concern, seems to me a concrete way to picture the colossal philosophical intervention that *Unpayable Debt* is compelled to make. I hope it will allow me to summarize in broad strokes (though admittedly against Ferreira da Silva's stated desire) what this book-work works against. Together with the students in my graduate seminar, we admired the scope of that intervention, how Ferreira da Silva reaches across idealist and materialist philosophy, how she calls to account equally the Enlightenment subject and Marxist materialism by way of the figure of the wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation.

Ferreira da Silva makes tangible how the captive body confronts the "transparent I" of Husserl and Kant, which she writes constitutes as a "natural attitude, pure consciousness or even historical consciousness... 'the first person singular,'... [whose] restating of separability —between the Human and the world and between other existents and events— delimits what in the post-Enlightenment episteme becomes the basis of humans' uniqueness" (Ferreira da Silva, 2022: 111). The concept of the transparent and ineffable individual and interior subject was fundamental to racist hierarchies among humans, and for privileges of human over non-human persons. Even so, Ferreira da Silva rejects any solution to that derogatory distinction presented as a demand for the pure interiority of the Black subject. Citing Spillers again, she argues that not only is Black subjectivity not retrievable from the historical record, but also that casting it in an Enlightenment mold can never provide reparations for that unpayable debt (Ferreira da Silva, 2022: 144–146). She notes that white abolitionist commiseration and fulsome sympathy for the suffering of the enslaved subject only reconstituted the white slaveowner's point of view *as if it were universal* — as if it were the enslaved person's. The wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation is not able to know (herself) through this idealist paradigm. Instead, "what this re/de/compositional tool of the figure of the *wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation*, allows is a turning of the grounds of post-Enlightenment thinking" (UD 15).

Ferreira da Silva follows that turn to Marxism's materialist critique of Enlightenment thought (Ferreira da Silva, 2022: 46). However, Marx's historical and philosophical exclusion of colonialism and the slave as prior and external to capitalism makes the wounded captive body mute in the articulation of critique. She writes: "Historical materialism cannot remain intact after a confrontation with the Racial. For one thing, raciality immediately renders plain the liberal (ethical-juridical) basis of Marx's assembling of capital as a totality" (Ferreira da Silva, 2022: 212). Not only does Ferreira da Silva suggest that for Marxism, slavery is "not its problem," she also suggests that—unlike fiction—Marxist critique does not provide "reading tools" that might make its readers care about that problem. Instead, she builds on a genealogy of thinkers for whom Blackness is a radical force that grounds a distinct materialist tradition. Sylvia Winter and Aníbal Quijano center raciality in the coloniality of modernity (Ferreira da Silva, 2022: 66–67), and for Fred Moten, it is "the existential and logical necessity that turns the history of

[what Cedric Robinson termed] racial capitalism, which is also to say the Marxist tradition, inside out” (seen [Ferreira da Silva, 2022: 50](#)).

Once again, *Kindred* opens Ferreira da Silva’s reflection farther yet, for she proposes that Dana’s necessary (ethical) and embodied relation to Rufus is what figures unpayable debt as re-countable—tellable, recounted again, and yet never fully accounted for. “All that connects” Dana and Rufus, she argues, “is her flesh, organs, cells, molecules, atoms, protons, phonons, electrons, nucleons” ([Ferreira da Silva, 2022: 73](#)). The “onslaught of materiality” of slavery requires a “thinking with the flesh” ([Ferreira da Silva, 2022: 46](#)) that nonetheless explodes beyond the integral (human) body and into the matter of the world.<sup>5</sup> Ferreira da Silva senses this matter at all scales and in all substances, and she urges that its eternal, infinite existence makes an ethical claim. While the wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation offered a first encounter for that claim in the book, ultimately it “recalls the body as a re/de/composition of the land on which it is conceived and grows [...] each and every person in North America holds an unpayable debt to the original inhabitants and ancestral guardians of these lands, which is also a debt that we own (even if through no decision of our ancestors) and that is ours to honor” ([Ferreira da Silva, 2022: 295](#)).

## Making

The concluding pages of *Unpayable Debt* name the necessity of “imagination at play” to comprehend the “onslaught of materiality” at the heart of this re/de/composition ([Ferreira da Silva, 2022: 299](#)). The intertexts and intermedia between Butler’s novel, Ferreira da Silva’s critical study, and other inventive works that she describes as her own artist practice, reframe critique as a concept and as a praxis that enact that exercise of the imagination. If *Unpayable Debt* follows academic norms when it comes to authorship—only her name is listed as the author, and the voices of others appear as citations—her collaborative artistic research and practice elucidate the kinds of reading or doing she embeds in this book.

All of Ferreira da Silva’s artistic projects have been collaborative: she created the videos *Serpent Rain* (2016) and *4Waters-Deep Implicancy* (2018) with artist Arjuna Neuman, and *Poethical Readings* and *Sensing Salon* with artist Valentina Desideri. *Serpent Rain* (2016), described as a “film essay,” emerges out of the same inescapable encounters with slavery that shape *Unpayable Debt*:

The collaboration began with the discovery of a sunken slave ship, and an artist asking a philosopher – how do we get to the post-human without technology? And the philosopher replying – maybe we can make a film without time. The result is a video that speaks from inside the cut between slavery and resource extraction, between Black Lives Matter and the matter of life, between the state changes of elements, timelessness and tarot ([Desideri and Ferreira da Silva, 2016](#)).

In her consistent voiceover narration of the video, Ferreira da Silva again articulates the concern that Marx relegated slave labor to the “pre-life of capital as primitive

accumulation but not the life of capital,” and offers a correction that: “As money, slave-labor lives in/as capital” and “raw materialism replaces these forms with the element—recovering slave-labor as timeless” (Desideri and Ferreira da Silva, 2016). The work reflects on the liveliness of non-human persons: plants, animals, rocks, organic and inorganic matter.<sup>6</sup> The Sensing Salon expands this interest in the material of life in a series of “relational art practices,” which study and promote social interactions among enlivened entities. It is:

a studio practice, conceived by Valentina Desideri and Denise Ferreira da Silva, that expands the image of art beyond objects, events, and discourse to include the healing arts. Through formats that facilitate collaborative studying and experimenting with different practices and tools for reading (e.g. Tarot and Astrology) and healing (e.g. Reiki and Political Therapy), it fosters a form of sociality that attends to our deeply implicated existence (The Sensing Salon, 2020: n.p).

In Sensing Salon as much as *Unpayable Debt*, “these tools assemble a reading or an image. Reading as imaging [...] consists of an assembling that exposes and navigates the complex context constituting the situation, event or problem that concerns a person or collective at a given moment and place. As such, it aims at expanding the horizon of interpretation, that is, to open up possibilities and unsettle realities” (The Sensing Salon, 2020: n.p). For Desideri and Ferreira da Silva, as for Dana and Butler, those elements that unsettle reality—the imaginary, fiction, poetics—are necessary tools for accounting in social practice as much as textual exegesis. Since I have not participated in any of the Sensing Salons, I cannot provide a nuanced account of this experience. I can only surmise that in these collaborative, research-based art projects, sensation, intellect, and the haptic immerse the participants in at least a partial experience of the matter that Ferreira da Silva recounts in *Unpayable Debt*. That they sweep them up in the stories of other peoples’ problems, engage them in the work of the imagination at play, and so return them (again and again) to an ethical confrontation with the wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation.

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- Fitzpatrick, Hugo Idárraga Franco, María Paula Molano Parrado, Mateus Sanches Duarte, Frederica Simmons, Nzinga Simmons, and Samuel Zepeda.
2. The Spanish original reads: “Un libro es una secuencia de espacios./Cada uno de esos espacios es percibido en un momento diferente: un libro es también una secuencia de momentos./Un libro no es un estuche de palabras, un saco de palabras, un soporte de palabras.../El que un texto esté contenido en un libro se debe únicamente a la dimensión de dicho texto; o tratándose de varios textos cortos (poemas por ejemplo) al número de ellos.”
  3. “La poesía concreta representa una alternativa a la poesía./El libro, considerado como una secuencia espacio-temporal autónoma, ofrece una alternativa a todos los géneros literarios existentes”.
  4. For more on the political potential of contemporary forms of fiction outside literary narratives, see Gabara, 2022.
  5. Space constraints and my own limitations in the discipline of physics require me to bracket Ferreira da Silva’s engagement with Karen Barad’s agential realism and quantum theory (Barad, 2007), and related debates over her privileging of Niels Bohr over David Bohm (Pinch, 2011; Faye and Jaksland, 2021).
  6. Foundational studies of non-human personhood in Amazonian thought available in English include Eduardo Viveiros De Castro (1992, 1998) and Eduardo Kohn (2013).

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