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Answering the Call: Disrupting the Logics of Capitalism Through Indigenous Economies

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Cover Page Footnote

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“The only acceptable response to the call for decolonization is nothing less than the return of the total value expropriated from and yielded by the productive capacity of Native lands and slave bodies [...] It is a call for the return of the total value extracted under total violence”
-Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Reading the Dead: A Black Feminist Poethical Reading of Global Capital” (2020)

In her essay on Black feminist readings of global capital, Brazilian scholar Denise Ferreira da Silva makes a call for more critical approaches to understanding anticolonial resistance by Indigenous communities in the long legacies of colonialism. She describes this shift in thinking as the act of translating or otherwise re-reading “the Dead¹.” From this theoretical position beyond the living, da Silva makes a critical connection between the violence of slavery and imperialism and the way this violence has embedded itself into state formation. The “Dead” in this example are the Indigenous and enslaved peoples whose lives were taken through this system, “as well as the pasts, presents, and futures that were no longer because of their obliteration” (da Silva 2020:50). Colonialism and imperialism are death-dealing endeavors. They use a litany of weapons to enact this death, from chattel slavery to land appropriation, extractive economic systems and sanctions, gendered violence, and the intersections of these innumerable forces².

Understanding the connections between race, capitalism, and indigenous exploitation in the settler colony is a case study not only of overt abuse but also of insidious, long-lasting violence. Further, and in a more optimistic direction, learning from social organizations that defy capitalist logic keeps our attention focused on the possibility for an “otherwise world,” an imaginary praxis which is explored at length in

¹ This refers to a declaration made by leaders of the Zapatista National Liberation Army at the “Second Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle.” “Facing the mountain we speak with our dead so that they will reveal to us in their word the path down which our veiled faces should turn. The drums rang out and in the voice of the earth our pain spoke and our history spoke. “For everyone, everything,” say our dead. Until it is so, there will be nothing for us.”

² Among many others, explorations of this include: Deer, Sarah. 2015. *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press. King, Tiffany Lethabo. 2019. *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press; Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. “Decolonization is not a metaphor” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*. 1(1):1-40.

Editors Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro, and Andrea Smith's³ collection by the same name, from which this da Silva piece is drawn (2020). In this paper I will begin, with da Silva, with the Dead, and the process through which this "total value" of the formerly living was expropriated. This entails a discussion of race-making, indigeneity, and capitalism in the formation of settler colonial systems, drawn from the larger project of *Otherwise Worlds*. From this outline I will move to thinking through processes of prevention and mediation, trying to elucidate pathways towards alternate futures proposed by da Silva. In reviewing this book chapter, I think through and engage with Indigenous Oromo histories and cultural practices. The Oromo people are Indigenous to the Horn of Africa but were colonized by the Abyssinian Empire in the late 1880s and remain a part of the settler colonial state of Ethiopia. Taking a decolonial lens to racialization and capitalism in the Oromo context sheds light on the global nature of capital through an example which has not been given extensive study. This paper functions therefore as a partial book review, focusing primarily on da Silva's chapter, that then operationalizes the work and uses it to elucidate an empirical example. Thinking through capitalism and colonialism without accepting their inevitability draws attention to liberatory otherwises that offer some form of justice to the Dead.

Introducing the material: placing the Dead in Otherwise Worlds

The collection of essays in *Otherwise Worlds* is part of a critical convergence between Black Studies and Critical Indigenous Studies. In line with this collaboration, the study of race and indigeneity in the long afterlives of slavery and colonialism takes place by igniting and encouraging Black and Indigenous community conversations. The collection centers on the ideas of boundaries and boundlessness, with each of the four sections named according to a boundary or framework they are writing against: Bodies, Ontologies, Socialities, and Kinship. Across these sections, the list of authors, most of whom are Black and Indigenous and write strategically from their sociocultural positionalities, take diverse approaches to their critiques of Black and Indigenous relationality and paths forward. Emancipation and

³ I take seriously the allegations that Andrea Smith has falsified her Indigenous identity, however I believe the esteem of the other editors and contributors outweighs the tarnish of Smith's participation. For more details on Smith's deception: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/25/magazine/chokeberry-native-american-andrea-smith.html>

liberation underwrite each of these stories, from the artistic exploration of Hotvluke Harjo's images of a "Mississippian Black Metal Grl on a Friday Night" and a sonic elsewhere space where Black and Indigenous people find refuge together, to Ashon Crawley's meditations on the chorus of "stayed, freedom, hallelujah" of the Black Pentecostal church of his youth.

Da Silva's essay is one of the few chapters in the text which take an explicit stance on economic systems and global capital, but the question of commodification in the aftermath of conquest shadows several other texts. Rinaldo Walcott's essay on "transnationalism and the decolonial project" (which was also adapted as part of his 2021 book *The Long Emancipation*), is one such critique. Walcott recounts the ways in which Black diaspora studies "tell the alternate and much more disturbing story of global capitalism's apparent triumph" (2020:345). The celebratory narrative that normalizes capitalism's operation also works in service of the erasure of the ongoing struggle of Black and Native peoples. The alternate is a much grimmer tale, one also found in Jared Sexton's description of slavery's "Vel." Sexton offers a fairly damning account of the way slavery functions in a way beyond capitalism and colonialism, as slaves are not colonial subjects or objects of colonial exploitation, nor are they settler colonial subjects or objects of genocide. Rather, the existence of the slave is conditioned by a genocide that is "endemic to enslavement" because slavery bans "the reproduction of enslaved peoples as peoples," and "the loss of any self that could experience such loss" (Sexton 2020:106). Sexton's discussion of capitalist formation and its decolonial alterities contextualizes the challenges and limitations of Black and Native solidarity, while also maintaining attention to the Dead.

Tiffany Lethabo King, in both her individual essay and conversation with Frank Wilderson in a separate chapter, similarly emphasizes slavery's role as a constitutive element of conquest and colonialism, including their economic components. Drawing in part from the work of Sylvia Wynter, King elucidates how both Marxist and feminist thought fail to theorize Black and Native peoples. Both "Marx's worker and its female counterpart" are made human "due to the enslavement of Blacks that expelled them outside of the limits of the human-worker" (King 2020:87). As King describes, both the Native and Black are rendered nonhuman fleshy commodities by the political economy of conquest (Ibid, 86). The commodification of lifeworlds fundamental to the process of conquest links back to the Zapatista's idea of everyone and everything, from the Dead to the unknown Otherwise.

King's work offers a useful companion to da Silva's more exhaustive juridic-economic study. By "tarrying with conquest" as King suggests, da Silva exposes the way Indigenous peoples' protests are "the articulation of a political subject emerging against the colonial apparatus for land and labor expropriation that has been so crucial for the accumulation of capital" (Ibid, 39). Within the larger conversation of the de/colonial, da Silva deftly and elegantly weaves the complex nuances of cultural heritage and kinship into an analysis of capitalist economies in the post-empire and settler colony. Taking up da Silva's work in this contextual "otherwise" world is an acknowledgement of the need for further study and careful analysis of political and economic institutions in the fight for decolonization and emancipation.

Da Silva's chapter begins with a quote from which the essay's title is also drawn, a section from a proclamation made by the Zapatista National Liberation Army that describes a conversation with the dead, one in which they demand "For everyone, everything." From this very start we are pushed towards an understanding of capital and value that disrupts its accumulative normativity. While focusing on global capital, the strength of da Silva's focus comes in with her concluding section on Black feminist reading. This is a practice, a tool for critique, a compositional method, a confrontation, and a critical intervention, "aimed at what is without space-time" (Ibid, 49). In the beyond and "elsewhere" of space-time, we can see sharply the implications between past and present. This non-place is in fact where the dead reside, where the "everything" is eventually touched by everyone. In a more straightforward description, Black feminist readings work to comprehend and elucidate the deathly rise of global capital as a project with specific implications in Black and Indigenous lives. Slavery and conquest are not only "relevant as moments of primitive accumulation" by serving as their "violent preconditions" but further remain "crucial to the ongoing accumulation of (industrial and financial) capital" (Ibid, 44). Taking this point as fundamental, we can begin to better process how the "total value" of the dead was extracted. *Otherwise Worlds* as an entire text contributes to our understanding of race and capital in various ways, but da Silva's attention to Indigenous insurgencies "as anticolonial and racial critiques of global state-capital" allows for a serious critique of capitalism as an assault on Indigenous lives (Ibid, 40).

How the value was expropriated: racialization, settler colonialism, and global capital

Theorizing the expropriation of the “total value” of the Dead is critical to unpacking the formation of global capital. This interrelated system draws on racialization and settlement (both aspects of “conquest”) to establish global systems of economic relations. Imbuing race or rather establishing racial categories was a fundamental aspect of the colonial project, albeit one that can be challenging to describe. The project of “racialism” remains relevant to settler colonialism as it entails “the legitimation and corroboration of social organizations as natural” (Robinson 1983:2). As the “development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology” (Ibid). The resulting formation, designated as “racial capitalism” by Robinson, is described similarly by da Silva as an “arsenal of raciality” used by the state to produce particular socioeconomic positionalities for Black and Indigenous people (Ibid, 40). A *process of racialism* helps to make sense of these hierarchies in sociocultural environments with a wide variety of racial and ethnic peoples, wherein phenotype may not be the most easily exploitable trace.

Racialism as a weapon in the “arsenal” of the settler state is a simultaneously a tool for the accumulation of capital. While *Otherwise Worlds* is broadly applicable to studies of conquest, its focus on settler colonialism sheds light on racialization and capitalism as also a question of land. In the establishment of a settler colony, unique from other sociopolitical forms, the settler and its empire came and never left. Through the construction of the state, the settler renamed and erased Indigenous lifeways, instituted oppression, and transformed relationships of kinship and connection into extraction and exploitation. “Whereas the colonizer demands of the Native ‘you, work for me,’ the settler colonizer demands of the Native, ‘you, go away” (Sexton 2020:96). The legacies of settlement and ongoing coloniality make certain forms of discrimination and social exclusion legible, as the commodification process enacted through settlement does not foreclose that “the Indigenous relation to land precedes and exceeds any regime of property” (Ibid, 109). The extraction of value and creation of global capital that emerged from the spacetime of settlement is distinctive because of the social, juridical, and ideological nature of settlement as a racialized economic project. Through the establishment of a settler colony, the colonizer uses racialism and labor exploitation alongside an explicit focus on the extermination of the Native.

It is in this space of convergence where da Silva's theorization begins: a racialized capitalist system that functions politically as a settler colony. The spatiality (and indeed temporality⁴ as the afterlife of conquest) of the settler colony leads to certain conditions in the creation and spread of global capital. As da Silva describes, "global capital consists in nothing more than the expropriated productive capacity of slave bodies and Native lands" (Ibid, 43). The flesh and the soil hold the mark and sign of colonial violence and thus the Dead "remain in the very compositions of...raw material, that nourishes the instruments of production, labor, and capital itself" (Ibid). Further, da Silva writes that at least part of the purpose of her chapter is to "challenge the disavowal of slave labor as productive of exchange value" (Ibid, 45). Reading the Dead therefore helps to "expose fissures through which possibilities can be contemplated" (Ibid, 48). Capitalist logics encourage ways of relating that "operate on the primacy of endless accumulation" and correspondingly alter ways of existing to reaffirm this way of living (Wallerstein 1984:15). A fissure in the normalization of capitalist thinking is the existence of economic relations outside of the logics of accumulation, which demonstrate the feasibility, practicality, and the very need for the expansion of such practices.

Indigenous economies as an otherwise world: the dabo

Learning from Oromo Indigenous practices is a step towards da Silva's Black feminist reading, a critical intervention that "images the World as having always been otherwise" (Ibid, 48). How do we prevent the extraction in the future, and reorganize our remaining productive capacities into relationships that refuse exploitation and offer equitable ways of living together? "Reading," as encouraged by da Silva, is both a lesson-plan towards the building of a more equitable otherwise, and a way of respecting the lives lost in the creation of the capitalist economy of exploitation and accumulation. In practice, I read for radical potentials and alternatives that refute the

⁴ Christina Sharpe, in her 2014 text *In the Wake*, describes the concept of "residence time" in relation to the lives of enslaved people thrown off ships during the transatlantic slave trade: "the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today. They were eaten, organisms processed them, and those organisms were in turn eaten and processed, and the cycle continues [...]. The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean is called residence time. Human blood is salty, and sodium, Gardulski tells me, has a residence time of 260 million years. And what happens to the energy that is produced in the waters? It continues cycling like atoms in residence time."

normativity of capitalist logics of exploitation.⁵ In order to briefly operationalize da Silva's theorization of the Dead and the types of fissures she discusses, I will turn to an Indigenous Oromo economic practice called a *dabo*. The *dabo* was a way of ensuring economic stability within the community and mitigating against potential exploitation. *Dabo* gatherings were called when members of a community needed support in completing a large-scale project; common occurrences were the construction of a house, plowing of large fields, or harvesting of a crop like coffee which covers a large area of land. Systems like the *dabo* both threaten capitalist logic, by showing that other worlds are out there, and remain unintelligible to capitalist logic because they have evaded the originary process of accumulation and exploitation that capitalism relies on. In addition, as the *dabo* operated into the 1970s, despite both the cruel reign of the former Emperor Haile Selassie and rising fascism, we can situate the *dabo* as a critique of global state-capital as well as celebration of Indigenous insurgency.

The specific example of the *dabo* comes from Macha Oromos, Indigenous to Western Oromia, part of the Ethiopian settler colony⁶. The name and basic principle of the *dabo* itself is not unique to Macha Oromos. Similar forms of collective organization and solidarity groups exist in communities like the Malo of Southwest Ethiopia or some Amhara groups (Takeshi Fujimoto compiled a list of 20 different groups in a 2013 article). The most extensive study of the *dabo* system comes from a piece written by Lambert Bartels, Waquma Tolera, Ensermu Waquma, and Asafa Disasa. The latter three researchers are Macha Oromo informants and research assistants, but only Bartels is listed as an author on the piece⁷. The *dabos* of the Macha Oromos are distinct because of the way they incorporate Oromo ideologies and cultural practices as integral aspects; rather than an Oromo version of an economic system, it is an Oromo system that functions economically. Economics, as such, follow Wallerstein's description of the "measurable social reality of

⁵ Frank Wilderson describes the two faces of oppressive capitalist white supremacy as two dreams, that of "worker exploitation" and of "accumulation and death" (2003:233). These "dreams" are made logical and normalized through the capitalist pursuit of accumulation.

⁶ For an extensive study of the establishment of Ethiopia as a settler colonial state see Bonnie Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa's seminal text *The Invention of Ethiopia*

⁷ This is among a few other small critiques of the data collection; however, I think the core findings speak volumes to Oromo production and labors of the pre-colonial and settler variance.

interdependent productive activities” or the “effective social division of labor” (1984:2). Productive activities in the Oromo context are measured not necessarily in kilos and quarterly growth, but in their ability to uplift and support the community at large. Each dabo began and end with a prayer that “reflects the kind of work involved” and addresses the particular dangers that accompany each job: wood falling while a house is being built, snakes in the fields being harvested, the strength of the oxen who must plow (Bartels 1975:922). The interdependent productive system acknowledges each aspect of the labor for its contribution, as personified through the language of songs and prayers.

Also reflexive of the radical power of the dabo is the way it engages with the body (or what da Silva, reading Hortense Spillers, describes as the flesh), which the colonizer seeks to expropriate for its productive capacity. At the start and end of the dabo, all the workers are blessed, an act which is meant to impart “one’s own vital force to others” (Ibid.). While capitalism extracts, the dabo infuses and provides. Further evidence of this respect for the human is the level of autonomy involved in dabo participation: workers were self-motivated to act, not working as a form of survival under capitalist extraction. Individuals participated both because of a shared sense of community and social responsibility, and because they knew they would be treated with respect during their labor. In this autonomous decision-making process, “the freedom of their help and, at the same time, their willingness to cooperate, are stressed” (Ibid, 895). Their cooperation is not rooted in expectations of return (nor an extraction of the “total value”), rather it is seen as a reflection of relationality and kinship: “The amount of participation in a dabo also depends on the sympathy enjoyed by the family who gives the dabo. So a rich man may well get less helpers than a less wealthy neighbor” (Ibid, 891). In its ideological thrust, the dabo reveals an aspect of Oromo culture that refuses to conform to the norms of global capital. When prompted by Bartels to elaborate on the role of the elderly, whose physical abilities were not well matched to the arduous labors that dabo called for, Ensermu provided a question. His short response captures the heart of what the dabo has to offer, an element diametrically opposed to the death-dealing traffic of capitalism: “They can do what they are able to. They like to come. Why should we refuse help, little as it may be?” (Ibid, 892). Joy, desire, feelings, and sociality come to prioritize the way the work is performed.

There is little written about the dabo after the 1980s, and the rise in dangers like neoliberalism, land grabbing, and state violence in Ethiopia do not offer a hopeful narrative about its continuation. It was also in this era (particularly the mid to late 1980s) when the looming danger of the racialized Othering of the Oromo would cohere, as the state expanded resettlement programs into Oromo homelands, severing land relationships and transforming sacred homelands into deforested capitalist hubs. Despite its diminishment, in the broader global conversation of Indigenous insurgency, the dabo offers a contribution to radical world-building that resisted being subsumed into the colonial state. The dabo demonstrates a deep, intrinsic understanding of the implications between past, present, and interminable violence. While operating an economic system and guiding the “social division of labor,” the dabo cannot be condensed into the logics of global capital (Ibid.). As a form of Indigenous economics, it is one foundation of a world that is Otherwise, one that the Dead know well, and the living can continue to learn from.

Conclusion: Returns on extracted value

While capitalism necessitates Othering to operationalize exploitation, Indigenous economic systems like that used in Oromia celebrate and include differences, seeing and recognizing the varieties of humanity within local communities. Though capitalist systems devalue the labor of those outside of the normative sociocultural form, economies like the dabo are more in line with communal logics, and value each human for their personhood rather than their commodifiable flesh. How do we return the total value extracted from the lives and land lost in the long afterlives and wakes and transits of slavery and colonialism⁸? This question is outside of the scope of this paper, something that can only be answered after deep, communal conversations, once we have had time to sit with our grief and fully mourn our losses. These formations exist outside of nation-state structures, in a world outside of the colonial and imperial, in pursuit of un-settlement. Da Silva wants our approach to include “imaging of what happens and has happened as well as what has existed, exists, and will exist otherwise—all and at once” (Ibid, 43). Economies based on respect and kinship, communities that sustain

⁸ Notions like Saidiya Hartman’s “afterlives of slavery” (2007), and Jodi Byrd’s “transit of empire” (2011) speak to the intricacies of these historical formations and the way that have mutated and evolved in the present.

themselves through logics of care, and a sociolegal framework that listens to and respects the Dead; through exploration and celebration of these events in even their smallest iterations we can move towards a liberatory, decolonizing elsewhere, beyond the violence of the world as we presently know it.

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