

Twos, Ones, and Zeros: Mothers, Sovereigns, Slaves

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“Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.’ So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.” (Gal. 4:21-26, 28-31, *New Revised Standard Version*)

Who comes first: the mother or the slave? Gil Anidjar’s recent *On the Sovereignty of Mothers* poses the question—a variation of the now perennial gender/race/class triad—even as it appears to answer it. Its answer comes, in the guise of the “sovereignty” of mothers, before asking after the (un)sovereignty of the slave.¹ This subsumption of slavery isn’t surprising. From Friedrich Engels (1978), we are told slavery arrives on the agricultural scene as a way to supplement limitations in production: because “the family did not multiply so rapidly as the cattle...use could be made of the enemies captured in war, who could also be bred just as easily as cattle themselves” (p. 118). Subsequent Marxist feminists have debated whether Engels’s causal link between the accumulation of wealth and the sexual division of labor should instead be reversed, such that the “exchange of women” (Lerner, 1986, p. 49) becomes the basis of private property. When it comes to slavery’s origins, however, there has been little movement beyond Engels’s consignment of the “invention” of slavery to the question of “breeding.” And it is here the question has largely remained, with slavery seldom far off from any discussion of mothers, but with one given priority and the other scarcely investigated. In Marx’s grounding terms, “slavery, bondage etc.” should be considered “always secondary, derived, never original” (1993, pp. 495-496).

Anidjar’s new description—the “maternal field”—makes slavery both more original and less, calling attention to the doubling of mother and slave as a “kind of *Urzelle*, a basic cell of sociality (a ‘total social fact’), of unequal distribution of maternal functions, a division of maternal labor” (p. 62). Once again, Anidjar seems to echo Engels (1978), who understood the death of the so-called “mother right” (ultimately in the form of “monogamous marriage”), alongside “slavery and private wealth,” as “the cellular form of civilized society in which the nature of the oppositions and contradictions fully active in that society can be already studied” (p. 129). But where Marxists have long politicized and historicized the theological categories of political economy, those supposedly universal laws grounding beliefs in the inviolability of freedom and the sanctity of the bourgeois nuclear family, by processing them as expressions of commodity exchange, Anidjar resists such historicizing. In this essay, I situate the condition of possibility for Anidjar’s cellular form at the vanishing point between Marxist feminist accounts of primitive accumulation and black feminist theorizations of black maternal erasure (Douglass, 2025), examining how historical materialist attempts to denaturalize patriarchy and gender—from Engels’s evolutionary anthropology of the “mother-right” to recent calls to abolish the family—also serve to naturalize the slave and repeat slavery’s originary sexual violation.

A mother can never be one, Anidjar argues, not only because mothers must themselves be mothered, but because this “vertical axis,” comprised of “mother and grandmother,” also proliferates on the “horizontal

¹ On unsovereignty, see Sexton (2014).

axis” he identifies as “mother and slave, nurse or nanny” (p. 66). Where there is a biological mother, there is also a juridical one; where there is the mother-in-law, there is also a mother who matters; where there is social life, there is surrogacy. Two is not, then, “some magic number” in Anidjar’s account. For “before the invention of zero, one was not a number, for numbers can only exist once you begin to count, which is to say, at the number two” (p. 46). It is at two that the possibility of contract, or conflict, enters the picture. Before the slave of the dialectic and the slave of the contract, before Hegel and before Hobbes, there is the “mothering of mothers” (p. 64) and the iterative work of “tradition and education, languages and rituals” (p. 67). Displacing the field of the political, with its totems and taboos, its hordes and fraternal and paternal orders, the maternal field thus presages political sovereignty. This prefiguration of the contract, as we will see, is the book’s major intervention and guiding impulse. For now, we note that while the political “*always has been*” maternal (p. xix), it also operates “*in ways we have yet to understand*” (p. 22). Between “always” and “not yet” rest two interrelated problems:

- 1) How did we get from the two to the one, from the maternal field to what Anidjar, drawing from queer theorist Shelley M. Park, calls “monomaterialism” (p. 62)?
and
- 2) If the maternal is what “binds two and two and two together” (p. 66), why does the *slave* represent the most perfect complement to the mother in this doubling?

We do not, in other words, know how we arrived at the priority of the two over one or zero, nor do we have a perspective from the unsovereignty of the slave.

In my earlier work (2019 and 2023), I mobilized the Marxist methodology of “real abstraction” to ask what disruptions are effected to critical thought if we sublimate abstract labor with the abstract slave, logically prioritizing Afro-pessimism’s critique of political ontology over the critique of political economy. While slaves were historically tethered to various origin stories, from warfare to debt to crime to kinship, *racial* slavery names an abstraction into (non-)being whose anoriginality precipitates, and continues to make possible, the social subject of the wage-contract.² Something similar could be said about motherhood and raciality: the other side of the abstraction of the slave is the abstraction of mothering from a context of communal reproduction into a singular figure who gives birth (Anidjar’s “monomaterialism”). As with abstract labor and the abstract slave, we might say that the abstract mother is always a potentially valid conceptual generalization. But it is only in a particular society that the abstract mother becomes, in Marx’s (1993) phrasing, “true in practice” (p. 105). While it may go without saying that societies always reproduce, this “mothering of mothers,” as Anidjar reframes social reproduction theory, becomes visible as an abstract problem of social reproduction only from a certain historical vantage. Before we positively determine this vantage as capitalism, before we submit, that is, to Marx’s (1976) dialectical method of presentation, we would need to re-examine the ground of the categories (pp. 102-103). We would need to return to the scene of original accumulation, to the roots of the general assumption that “biology is destiny,” in order to overturn the claim that “patriarchy is a set of gender relations transferred from the pre-capitalist past onto capitalism” (Coontz & Henderson, 1986, p. 1), and to grasp anew what the histories of violence that isolated women’s reproductive function might reveal.

² On anoriginality, see Moten (2018, pp. 1-40).

Silvia Federici's landmark 2004 *Caliban and the Witch* offers an account of the primitive accumulation that produces the abstract mother. While we are more familiar with the criminalization of the worker, presumed male, in the birth pangs of capitalism, Federici argues that the womb becomes man's new commons, as the period we call the witch-hunts dissolves communities of mothering, deprioritizes women's autonomy, and creates the social conditions for labor-power to appear divorced from the home. Note, Federici is not overturning Marxism; she is supplementing it. While Marxism at times presupposes two bodies—the social-historical and the natural, casting the sexual division of labor outside the realm of production—the grounding of the production of human beings in human nature itself, the fact that, as Engels (1978) writes, “labor created man itself” (p. 251), means that materialism requires a theorization of maternity to account for its reproduction. Social reproduction theorists have elaborated such a theorization by expanding the hidden abode of reproduction that informs Marx's (1993) critique of a “working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws” (p. 899). In this stretched dialectic, patriarchy is not nature's fate; it is the name of capitalism's own concealment of its other side from itself. Patriarchy consolidates the securitization of the contingencies of gender and class through the suppression of the maternal function and the social reproduction it implies.

We might imagine abstract labor dialectically filled out by the theorizations of abstract mother and abstract slave alike, yielding a more robust theory of capitalism in which gendered, raced, and classed subjects finally assume the form of a consciousness capable of revolutionary unity. We might then suppose that post-racial futures—whether assimilatory or revolutionary—would have theoretical parallels and entanglements with post-workerist and post-gender ones. This is certainly the promise of much intersectional Marxism.³ It isn't hard to theorize how contemporary procreative technologies, from the capitalist transformation of wet nursing to in vitro fertilization, prenatal testing, infant formula, and surrogacy, could herald the possibility of “gestational communism” (Lewis, 2019), also imagined as an “ungendering of social reproduction” that actualizes collective practices of “co-mothering” (Best, 2021, p. 898, p. 916).

Yet it is at this point of inflection—the question of “ungendering”—that the differences between slave and mother become most acute and the protocols of historical materialism break down. While ungendering, in its Marxist feminist variants, involves gathering the contradictions of gender to leverage their collective undoing, for Hortense Spillers (1987), famously, the ungendering of captive bodies is processed through (and is the purpose of) slavery's “living laboratory” (p. 68). In this primal scene, the ungendering of the slave, warehoused and brutalized as so many units of flesh, is concomitant with the gendering of the mother as “the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community” (p. 74). The ungendering of the slave is the raw material for the libidinal economy of the plantation family form and its various bourgeois descendants. In Afro-pessimist parlance, the mother is conscripted as a “junior partner” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 38) of the human, and her social forms serve to consolidate human lines of flight, “structurally adjusting” sexual violence, slave rebellion, and Spillers's (1987) “*insurgent ground*” (p. 80) into legible forms of capacity. When Spillers insists that “the quintessential ‘slave’ is *not* a male, but a female” (p. 73), we can surmise that the reverse isn't true: the quintessential mother is not a slave. Federici's (2004) argument that “the condition of the enslaved woman...most explicitly reveals the truth and the logic of capitalist

³ See, for example, Bohrer (2019).

accumulation” exemplifies this occlusion (pp. 89–90). Her riff on the “enslavement of women to procreation” presumes a genetic and historical unity between slave and woman through the figure of the “natural breeding-machine” (p. 91), at the very same time that it continues the Marxist maneuver of unthinking treating slavery as a transitional vestige of past natural economies.

Does Anidjar reproduce the same occlusions? Despite occasional citations of Engels and Federici, Anidjar resists following the trail whereby the abstract mother becomes “true in practice.” While a throw-away line tantalizingly situates monomaterialism as “preceding and buttressing the modern myth of the individual” (p. 49), coincident with the making of capitalist subjectivity (or, if one follows the Afro-pessimist, human subjectivity more abstractly), the book also insists it has “nothing to say...about that isolate of origin and power called ‘mother-right’ or patriarchy, that other—or not—origin story” (p. xix). At first glance, Anidjar simply links the slave and mother in order to understand the servility of motherhood: motherhood secures the status of the wife as the one who willingly subjects herself to the realm of familial reproduction. As Anidjar writes of the “plurality of maternal functions,” in “service and servitude...lies a truth—partial as it might be—of motherhood, of a mother’s work, of the work of mothers” (p. 39). What Wilderson (2010) would call Anidjar’s “ruse of analogy” (pp. 35–53) ends up sounding a lot like Engels’s (1978) account of how the “woman... degraded and reduced to servitude...became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children” (p. 121). By refusing Engels’s vision of a matrilineal primitive communism sans slavery, Anidjar is able to argue that “*mother and slave constitute the basic structure of motherhood*” (p. 57). But do mother and slave constitute the most basic structure of enslavement?

What registers and what fails to register in the chiasmus can show the dialectic at its limit. While the slave may be required to be sexed for political economy, she also need not be. As Patrice Douglass’s (2025) insightful *Engendering Blackness* clarifies, “sexual violation of the slave occurred for no other reason than the fact that it could.” In other words, “the cause of the sexual violability of the slave is the opacity of its condition” (p. 2). The slave mother has neither child nor violation to claim; her only issuance is the same zero she also inherits. A mother with no mother, a mother David Marriott (2024) calls “no-mother.” The sublation of slavery is an effect of this infinite fungibility and its chain of zeros. There can be no so-called primitive accumulation of anti-blackness. The slave mother resists historicizing because she has an origin story whose opacity is constitutive, a violence that exceeds any origin and is endlessly renewed through the enforced kinlessness and impossibility of zero multiplied. For while enslaving took various contingent forms (a debtor, a criminal, an enemy), and while any of these forms can be activated for the racial slave, they need not be. Blackness coheres beyond the event horizon. Beyond conceivable space and time, the problem of the slave mother underlies Frank B. Wilderson’s (2010) declaration that the “question of origins...does not concern me, for it might clarify the historical record at the expense of mystifying paradigmatic relations of power” (p. 48). Thus, when Federici (2003) surveys the historiography of the slave trade, whose abolition she argues led to a rise in sexual assault driven by the profit motive and its imperative to produce ever more slaves (p. 112), her accumulation of historical details mystifies the paradigmatic currents running through slavery’s libidinal economy.

In refusing the “arbitrariness of beginnings and of foundations” (p. xix), Anidjar’s cellular form proves more agile, receptive to the interventions of Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Joy James, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and

Amaryah Armstrong, among others. But if Anidjar's sovereignty of mothers is to connect with my understanding of the abstract slave, if we are to grasp the play and violation between zeros and ones and twos, we would require a less underdetermined account of race than the book provides ("Even absent or dead mothers—so many of them Black today" (p. 7); "It is racial, and has been for too long" (p. 63); "but, for some time now, mostly nonwhite mothers" (p. 66)). This is not to say that we need more historical detail, which would only occlude the puzzling fact that there was no sustained debate about the origins of the African trade commensurate with the rights of Indigenous Americans or the jurisprudence of the Inquisition that preceded it. Rather, it is to glimpse that even Anidjar's (2014) instructive prior claim that "the one-drop rule has no history" (pp. 107–15) has not gone far enough. He has not arrived at the problem of the zero, the indeterminate space of blackness, nor has he tried to theorize from its abyss (for who can?). This is not a theory, in Wilderson's (2010) stunning terms, from "the hold of the ship" (pp. 279–80).

Yet Anidjar's resistance to the historical does discern something of the violence from above. The mother's sovereignty is "broader and wider" (p. 13) than Engels's twofold character because, alongside the mode of production and reproduction, Anidjar introduces a forgotten third: destruction. In the "beginning that is not a beginning" (p. 46), mothers have the power over life and death. Through the suspension of this right, sovereign power authorizes itself. As Anidjar observes, with some hint of lament, destructive power has never been socially delegated to a collectivity of mothers (pp. 81–83). It has, however, been "seized and usurped" by "men, churches, and states" who have "monopolized the function of the border police, of judges and executioners, of those who let in or reject, often most violently, most destructively" (p. 82). Anidjar's thin yet suggestive historical sketch seems, then, to speak of the master's power. In what Mary Nyquist (2013) calls the "war slavery doctrine" (p. 7), this power is derived from the military victor's decision to save captives' lives, rather than kill them. In Anidjar's reconstruction, the power over life and death follows from a usurpation of the mother's power, situating the sovereign production of enmity against the originary mother and secondary slave. Yet Anidjar's iterative landscape of mother and slave also reveals, alongside Jew and Arab, Greek and Persian, "the remembered and the forgotten, the nurturing and the rejecting," a further division: "the sovereign and the slave" (p. 59), which splits *sovereignty* in two. In this couplet, the father's sovereignty (one) and the mother's sovereignty (double) operate in joint collusion against a third figure, the slave (zero).

For the mother and the slave to achieve cellular form, the mother seems to logically and historically precede the slave. In his allegorical attention to the biblical story of Sarah and Hagar (pp. 24–41, pp. 95–101), Anidjar can be read as suggesting that in deciding not to kill, mothers make some slaves while making themselves sovereign. For the mother's sovereign decision, the right to kill the child, doubles as a sovereign decision regarding surrogacy: the right to command another's womb. This is what the mistress and master share; it is the source of their dialectic (Sorrentino, 2021). But even this collusion does very little to help us understand the extimacy of slaves who, as Anidjar admits, "have been denied their maternity, even as they have been mothers or mothering" (p. 31). All that remains visible is the wildness ascribed to the slave, the place Hagar and the child (Sarah's child) are cast, as an effect of Sarah's sovereignty, her "double, lethal gesture," that "not only exposed the child but also made Hagar, made the slave, a mother" (p. 34–35). In deciding not to kill, the mother suspends the state of nature and thus retroactively becomes a mother through her double sovereignty. The mother becomes a mother by becoming a master. That is to say, the

mother takes the place of the master and thus precipitates him. Anidjar observes Hobbes saying as much, writing in *De Cive* that “in the state of nature, every woman that bears children, becomes both a mother and a lord...Wherefore original dominion over children belongs to the mother; and among men no less than other creatures, the birth follows the belly” (cited in Anidjar, pp.71-72).

The refusal to procreate—the destructive power Anidjar seeks to theorize through maternal sovereignty—has been extended into a resistant act for enslaved women and framed as an African retention of indigenous contraceptive practices. Federici (2004), for example, acknowledges that whether low birth rates among slaves were a “result of outright resistance” or an index of “harsh condition” remains a matter of “debate” (p. 112), yet she ultimately sides, with little argument, with resistance. If the slave mother, however, is form-determined by *partus sequitur ventrem* and its distinct regime of ungendering, then the plantation’s reproduction of the division between life and death poses a problem of power that cannot appear for either abstract labor or the abstract mother. It is not merely a problem of resistance, but a problem of ungendering the very terms through which resistance becomes legible. The mother’s destructive power, in other words, is not the same as the slave mother, who reproduces destruction as destruction. In Marxist-Hegelian terms, one births capacity and the other incapacity; together they give rise to the conditions under which each appears obvious in inverted ways (singular and many, generative and destructive, present and absent). For what infanticide reenacts, as a “metacommentary on motherhood as aborted slave potential or signification” (Douglass, 2025, p. 97), the “im/possible claim of a begotten nothing” (ardan, 2024, p. 194), is the infinitely receding origin of the abstract slave. In the choice between the slave staying a slave or being killed, in the flesh of the ungendered slave mother, the impossible condition that characterized the slave’s origin story—slavery as a reprieve from death—is fully dramatized.

Hobbes, as Anidjar emphasizes, stages this violent drama for his early modern audience. In moving the theological dial from Adam’s paternal power (Robert Filmer’s doctrine of divine right) to marriage and procreation as derived “from the Child’s Consent, either expresse, or by other sufficient arguments declared” (p. 139), Hobbes (1996) poses marriage and parenting as voluntary contracts internal to the social bonds of sovereignty.⁴ Yet for these voluntary contracts to hold, Hobbes also posits a *prior* political servitude that, against Anidjar’s insistence on the maternal field as sovereignty’s “condition of possibility” (pp. 63-66), resituates *slavery* at the threshold of the state of nature as, in the words of Nyquist (2013), “sovereignty’s necessary precondition” (306). For Hobbes (1996), “the act of our *submission*” is what grants us “both our *obligation* and our *liberty*” (p. 141). In transvaluating slavery as the positive condition of familial and political subjects, Hobbes must imagine a more chaotic fate beyond these bonds, an excessive violence dramatically embodied by those who refuse sociality’s activity of preservation, those who, with “no obligation at all,” “break their bonds, or the prison; and kill, or carry away captive their Master, justly” (p. 131). In this perspective, absent from Anidjar’s account, mother, child, citizen, and enemy bow down and receive sovereignty through submission. They do so, however, by not being the more willful slave. The founding split, this reading of Hobbes suggests, is not between the good and bad mother, but between the good and bad slave, a distinction newly available for thought in light of Hobbes’s involvement in the Virginia Company and his holdings in Barbados (Springborg, 2015).

⁴ For more on the question of the mother in Hobbes, see Stanlick (2001).

The significance of the willfully excessive slave, whose abstract ungendering becomes the anoriginal cause for her violation, is, as with Anidjar's Sarah and Hagar, "hardly about some return to a primordial past (the Bible is not past but a persistent and enduring resource and even engine of thought, language, practices)" (p. 27). While Anidjar situates "the deep and enduring prejudice that...identifies one mother and one mother only" within a framework "stronger than the belief in the one God" (p. 62), the links between monomaterialism, monotheism, capitalism, and trans-Atlantic slavery are left largely to the speculation of the reader. This blind spot is holographic: it produces the spectral effects of mother and slave, such that the pure opposition of their doubling blinks into view. For Sarah and Hagar were not forever white and black; they came into this interpretation, the gospel of Paul seemingly yearning for race as the interpretative frame. Yet race's theatrical technology mesmerizes away the activity behind the scenes, the way figurations are grasped retroactively, the manner in which their problematic gets resettled—or "reoccupied," in the words of Hans Blumenberg and Sylvia Wynter—within the social forms of race, the family, sexual difference, and antiblackness (Garba & Sorentino, 2025).

On The Sovereignty of Mothers is not *The Origin of the Family*, excavating past matrilineal "traces" in the present, despite claiming "no knowledge" of the overthrow of the matriline that supposedly occurred "entirely within prehistoric times" (Engels, 1978, 120), or at least outside any conceivable coevalness with nineteenth century Western consciousness. But because Anidjar is even less inclined to accept the need to genealogize genealogy, the book's monomaterialism, and Paul's transcendentalized figures, becomes stronger, somehow, than any monotheism. As a result, the antagonism structuring the book's forms seems to have no possible root, nor reason to issue the *slave* (as opposed to any other (or perhaps, the Other)) as the mother's paradigmatic pairing.

It may be that twos precede ones; it may be that the sovereign presupposes mothers and that the contract requires two parties. Yet these authorizations are stamped by zero. The contract is marked, from the start, by the threat of its own dissolution: the nullifying zero of the slave that calls the contract into being. Indeed, the two is only enumerable insofar as the zero can function as "a sign inside the number system and as a meta-sign," "an empty character" and a "character for emptiness" (Rotman, 1987, p. 13). If Brian Rotman is correct, the incorporation of zero into Christian consciousness, first through fourteenth-century Italian bookkeeping, was an antagonistic and ambiguous process, with zero's heretical implications for God's power only partially resolved through Renaissance innovations in calculus, perspective painting, and monetary exchange.⁵ Of course, another frontier for zero was being produced simultaneously: *terra nullius*. The two may historically precede zero, the mother may prefigure the slave, but as the "motherland" of Africa and its diaspora primed the anthropologized figuration of this zero, the category of the slave became an abstraction whose primary utility lay in endlessly repeating its own cover, its empty generativity, for the categories of the world (Sorentino, 2020).

The zero gives birth to twos and ones, sovereigns and mothers, but none it can claim. The abstract slave, who "stands in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed" (Spillers, 1987, p. 80), thus introduces another negation at its heart: the position of the child who, not present at their own birth, provides modern

⁵ Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, 7–26.

answers to the question of afterlife that organizes political theologies and to the question of mortality that organizes political economic ones. Though slavery becomes a historical adjunct of processes of production and reproduction, structurally corrected by categories such as mother, its abstraction registers less the life-forces that configure the child as labor-power in training, through an evolutionary analogue to the racist “great chain of being,” and more the death-drive that turns the accumulation of human needs and meaning against itself. The absolute abyss that separates the slave woman from the abstract mother activates a theorization of anti-blackness that splits the maternal within materialism, returning historical materialism’s own excess to any origin story and denuding mothering of life-giving, generative, and revolutionary powers. Slaves, only spectrally kin, name the absence of biology in production—the anti-natal dead life whose mode of destruction intensifies as biopolitical forces are increasingly managed. If mothers keep the “end of the world at bay” (pp. 85), then for insurgent slave mothers and daughters, it is already after the end of the world.

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