

Umi Says

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What is a mother? Who are mothers? Who mothers? What is the relationship between mothering, slavery, sovereignty, and the social contract? These are some of the critical questions Gil Anidjar considers in his latest work, *On the Sovereignty of Mothers: The Political as Maternal*. With the same ingenuity and insight he offers in previous work on the enemy (Anidjar, 2003), the Semite (Anidjar, 2007), and blood (Anidjar, 2014), Anidjar's deconstruction forces us to contend with a new, more capacious, understanding of mothering as repetition and iteration (Anidjar, 2024, p. 45). In problematizing a concept, a figure, and a social function we often take for granted, Anidjar helps us see the political in new ways that have far-reaching implications. Considering Anidjar's capacious and critical examination of mothering, what are some of these implications in relation to Black studies and the anthropology of religion and secularism? More precisely, how does Anidjar's intervention force us to reevaluate how sovereignty is conceptualized in these literatures by considering the unappreciated and undertheorized role of mothering in social formation? In what follows, I will consider how Anidjar's meditation on mothering can help us appreciate how the secular is a tradition like any other, reproduced by a mode of mothering that is not only particular but perhaps also peculiar.

Anidjar's argument is anchored in what he calls the "neglect of the maternal" (Anidjar, 2024, p. xxii) the observation that, for far too long, the political has been enacted and elaborated as decisively paternal or fraternal, with little to no attention given to its maternal aspects. As Anidjar writes, "the universal in me, the universal in us, which is not the equal in us (which might very well be the unequal in us, is that we have been mothered" (Anidjar, 2024, p. xi) With the recognition of this "unequal universal" (Anidjar, 2024, p. xii), Anidjar argues that the "political must be thought of as otherwise than paternal or patriarchal; otherwise than fraternal too; rather, as maternal" (Anidjar, 2024, p. 61).

Against this tendency, Anidjar interrogates the relationship between the mother, the othermother, and the unmother not only in relation to each other, but to political sovereignty. With the critical caveat that he "write[s] of mothers, *not of women*" (Anidjar, 2024, p. xxii), Anidjar enters into conversation with Hortense Spillers, who likewise cautions that "one treads dangerous ground in suggesting an equation between female gender and mothering" (Spillers, 1987, p. 459). Refusing to provincialize the role of mothering to the home and equate female gender with mothering, Anidjar argues that "*the political is, in many ways we have yet to understand, maternal*" (Anidjar, 2024, p. 22) Mothering, in Anidjar's account, is at the core of social and political life, the essence of social reproduction, broadly imagined. In an act of what he calls maternal writing, mothers "inscribe themselves and others onto the bodies of their children and well beyond, onto the body politic, the polity, and the world" (Anidjar, 2024, p. 2) Mothering is not simply a mode; it is *the* mode of political formation and, as such, it must be at the center of any examination of sovereignty. As Anidjar writes, "the maternal contract...is a crucial, if unacknowledged, condition of possibility for the existence of a collective, of any collective, over time" (Anidjar, 2024, p. 63). Further, Anidjar problematizes the common conceptualization of the mother in the singular, as a figure championed by the nuclear family, to argue that mothering is a collective act. The mother is less a figure and more of a

function fulfilled by a plurality of subjects. Birth mothers are mothers, of course, but so too are fathers, sisters, brothers, uncles, aunts, cousins, teachers, nannies, and more. These figures, whom Anidjar calls othermothers, contribute to the collective act of mothering, willingly and unwillingly, towards the reproduction of the political. Anidjar throws into relief that behind any political subject is not only a mother, but also an assortment of othermothers; in some cases, there is also the accumulation of unmothers.

In his reading of Hagar, Anidjar also brings to attention that, in some particular and peculiar cases, mothering and othermothering are subtended by unmothering. Through an incisive reading of the Biblical narrative of Abram, Sarai, and Hagar,¹ he draws our critical attention to the relationship between mothering and enslavement. Hagar enters the narrative as a concubine and surrogate given to Abram by his wife Sarai, who, unable to conceive, hopes to “build a family through her” (Perkins, 2018, Genesis 16:2). As Anidjar writes, “Hagar figures as an artificial womb, a legal and technological extension of Sarai, an instrument writ large, and indeed a slave” (Anidjar, 2024, p. 32). However, discontent with being a surrogate, Hagar does the unspeakable and, as Delores Williams argues, asserts herself as the mother (Williams, 2013). For this transgression, Sarai, as sovereign, drives a pregnant Hagar into the wilderness, where a certain death awaits. Doing so, she not only releases Hagar from bondage by exposing her to death, but also the child. . In this act, she has “*made Hagar, made the slave, a mother*”—albeit under impossible circumstances where death is the only conceivable outcome (Anidjar, 2024, p. 35).

As Anidjar writes, “if Hagar is an image, she is undoubtedly an image of what Zakiyyah Iman Jackson calls ‘the black mater(nal)’” (Anidjar, 2024, p. 32), a being whose deprivation of the capacity to be a mother, indeed of capacity writ large, is the condition of possibility for becoming Human. Unmothering, like ungendering, is a consequence of what Spillers describes as “severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire” (Spillers, 1987, p. 445). The theft of personhood that characterizes enslavement renders the enslaved mother an extension of the master’s or mistress’s imperatives, under penalty not merely of unemployment but of sale, torture, and even death. As Anidjar writes, “the enslaved mother, the servant or the nurse, is not considered a mother, not even an othermother” (Anidjar, 2024, p. 29). Whatever vital role the enslaved mother plays in the reproduction of a master class, which is to say the reproduction of the human, is denied and disavowed.

To the extent that the Human cannot be taken for granted but rather signifies a particular mode of subjectivation born within a no less particular tradition, neither can we take for granted the style of mothering that (re)produces it. Perhaps the tendency to repress the role of mothering the Human has to do with the fact that mothering in this tradition is so deeply entangled with enslavement and unmothering. Perhaps if the function of mothering in the reproduction of the political is repressed, it may be because its function in the secular is fulfilled by (non)beings whose very social existence is called into question. If, as Spillers writes, “motherhood and female gendering/ungendering appear so intimately aligned that they seem to speak the same language” (Spillers, 1987, p. 460), then the lack of attention mothering is given in

¹ I emphasize Biblical to draw attention to the fact that there is another, antagonistic, narrative of Hājar in the Islamic discursive tradition where, although unnamed in the Qur’an—as Anidjar points out—she is revered as a matriarch whose acts of faith are emulated annually during the rites of Hajj.

debates on political sovereignty may derive not only from its overdetermination as female, but also from the fact that the unmother who mothers the world is paradigmatically Black. As Spiller's writes, "only the female stands *in the flesh*, as mother and mother-dispossessed...a female with the potential to 'name'" (Spillers, 1987, p. 463). However, the unmother does not reproduce herself; rather, as a speaking implement executing the motive will and active desire of the sovereign, she reproduces a master. Were she to reproduce herself, what would emerge would be, following Spillers, a monstrosity that poses an existential threat to sovereignty itself. An episode of Donald Glover's *Atlanta* titled "Trini 2 De Bone" considers this very possibility (Temple, 2022), when Sylvia, the nanny to a wealthy white family cultivated Caribbean affects and sensibilities in their child, Sebastian. The planting of an insurgent within the white family, however, came at the cost of raising her own children. Whereas Sebastian felt affection towards Sylvia, her own children only felt resentment for her absence.

Hagar, however, is not Black, or even African, categories which did not yet exist (Mudimbe, 1988; Marriott, 2022). She is Egyptian. Nor is she demanded to produce a slave, but rather a sovereign. Further, this sovereign is decidedly Hebrew, not Human. However constructed, the Hebrew and the Egyptian exist historically, culturally, literarily, Biblically. The Human and the Black African, however, are invented (Mudimbe, 1988), as it were, from nothing at all (Warren, 2018; Marriott, 2022). As Fanon reminds us, "the Negro is not. Anymore than the white man" (Fanon, 1952, p. 231). Neither is Hagar charged with mothering Isaac, but rather cast out shortly after his birth. Hagar's unmothering is calculated² and contingent whereas for the Black mater(nal)'s it is gratuitous. The unmothering of the Black mater(nal) is metaphysical, meaning that she can never be made into a mother. A sovereign decision has been made that renders Blackness as absence, an absence that cannot be undone for it subtends the world. The paradigmatic condition of social death makes it impossible for the Black mater(nal) to be both mother and slave. Envisioning Hagar as the Black mater(nal) is perhaps to analogize absence with lack, and the paradigmatic with the contingent.

Reading Blackness onto Hagar could be considered falling for what Frank B. Wilderson, III calls the "ruse of analogy" (Wilderson III, 2010, P. 37). I would like to pursue a more generous reading, however. The ease with which this can be done is symptomatic of a chain of association between the Muslim and the Black within the secular symbolic order that Anidjar draws our attention to. Rather than equating Hagar with the Black Mater(nal), I think it is more generative to consider how Anidjar's intervention throws into relief that the Black was in fact not invented out of nothing. The secular terms of endearment, estrangement, and exclusion governing relations of kinship, enmity, and enslavement are elaborated from somewhere. Anidjar has perhaps helped us identify precisely where: Christendom.

The "Muslim Terrorist" and the "Black Slave" are not parallel figures so much as elaborations and intensifications of relations of enmity and social death from within a particular, and arguably peculiar, discursive tradition (Barber, 2016). The break with Judaism and the invention of Christianity by Paul provides the conceptual coordinates (i.e., blood, flesh, sovereignty, etc.) for the universalizing project of the secular (Barber, 2016). I maintain that the secular is best understood as the reformation and

² Biblical scholars identify Hagar as a gift given by the Pharaoh in response to a series of misfortunes after taking Abram's (not yet Abraham) wife Sarai (not yet Sarah) into his household.

transformation of Latin Christian materiality and metaphysics. Even if Latin Christianity does not encapsulate the totality of the secular, which is in a perpetual process of (re)making (Asad, 2003; Sheehan, 2013), there is no discursive and embodied tradition more privileged in its formation (Anidjar, 2014; Keel, 2018). Latin Christianity provides the architecture for the secular. It functions as the standard, or framework, through which all other discursive and embodied traditions are judged, translated, and reformed in its image and likeness. What we might call the conceptual economy of the secular cannot be disentangled from Latin Christianity and its transformation through the Protestant Reformation, the European Enlightenment, and into what has been deemed modernity. As such, the sociogeny of the secular and the enactment of what it means to be friend, enemy, and slave therein, thus has genealogical roots in Christian texts, discourses, embodied practices, and institutions. In this regard, we can consider Hagar as the proto-unmother before the invention of the Black Mater(nal) such that the mother of enemies bears a close relation, and perhaps even resemblance, to the mother of slaves in the secular order that emerges from Christianity.

Anidjar's reading of Hagar helps us better apprehend why her estrangement from the family and Ishmael's exclusion from the covenant subtend the estrangement of the Muslim and exclusion of the Black from the modern secular order. The abandonment of Hagar and Ishmael sets the stage for the domination of Africa and Arabia as space occupied by non-human slaves and sub-human enemies, whose presence prevents its substantive transformation into a place. While Africa is invented as a space outside of human history, culture, civilization, and thus unsuitable for development or secular progress until the end of time, the Middle East, by contrast, is imagined as a space primed for secular placemaking, as the terrifying project of Greater Israel demonstrates ("Arab, Islamic Countries Condemn Netanyahu's 'Greater Israel' Remark," *Al Jazeera*, August 16, 2025). In this way, Anidjar shows that not only that mothering lies at the core of political sovereignty, of social formation, preservation, regulation, and reproduction, but also that the particular mode of mothering that enacted the secular body and world we inhabit is distinctly, and peculiarly, Christian.

To follow Anidjar's insight into the function of mothering allows us to apprehend how that mode and manner of mothering that reproduced Latin Christianity has been reformed, transformed, and globally imposed to reproduce the secular subject. If the reproduction of the secular subject cannot be disentangled from the particularity of Christianity, then it also cannot be disentangled from the peculiar institution of slavery. Christianity, as Orlando Patterson has remarked, "begun in and was fashioned by the Roman slave order" (Patterson, 1982, p. 76). If we are to read the secular as the preservation of Latin Christianity, then it should come as no surprise that the unmother, or the slave, occupies an essential place in secular worlding. For both Christianity and the secular alike, the unmother is the condition of possibility for this particular and peculiar mode of mothering. The universalization of sovereignty within secular humanism is thus achieved through a global consensus in which the Black mater(nal) paradigmatically occupies the position of the unmother.

Enacted as a void, the Black mater(nal) is a repository for anything. She is everything and nothing all at once, which is to say the zero-degree of social conceptualization, what Hortense Spillers calls "flesh."

Resonating with the contingent³ unmothering of Hagar for the birth of the Hebrew nation, the unmothering of the Black mater(nal) obliterates the possibility for relationality writ large. Antagonist to being itself, the paradigmatic severing of the motive will and active desire constitutes a metaphysical violence that makes the Black womb a wound, one that gives birth to the secular world (James, 2016; Jackson, 2020). While the estrangement of Hagar and Ishmael from the covenant cannot be equated to the exclusion of the Black mater(nal) from the social contract, it is, in many ways, what makes the bestialized dehumanization of the latter thinkable (Jackson, 2020). In this sense, Hagar's estrangement functions as a precedent, not an analogue, for the Black mater(nal)'s exclusion.

Mastery of the self and the natural world is universalized as whiteness, or humanness, while the annihilation of being is essentialized as Blackness, or slaveness. Unlike (other)mothering, which is, in many ways, necessary for the formation, preservation, and regulation of *any* polity, unmothering is particular and peculiar: a gratuitous, non-subjectifying violence that exceeds what is necessary for social reproduction. In universalizing a mode of social reproduction unique to Latin Christianity and the Roman slave order under which it was elaborated, the process of secularization only proliferated this gratuitously violent mode of (un)mothering for the reproduction of sovereign subjects. What was once reserved for Roman emperors and Christian kings has been democratized and made available for all secular subjects as the condition of possibility for the reproduction of the nuclear family, the republican civil society, and the secular nation-state (Hegel, 2012).

Anidjar helps us appreciate how the trinity of capital, nation, and state is reproduced through a particular and peculiar mode of (un)mothering, namely the nuclear family, a mode parasitic on social alienation, estrangement, and exclusion, and subtended by relations of domination. This reproduction depends on the production and accumulation of strange flesh. The universalizing project of secular modernity is not formed against slavery and social death, but through a global consensus on who occupies the position of the slave, which is to say, who is paradigmatically unmothered and unsovereign. If we have so far been unable to think of the political as maternal, it is because mothering in the secular order is associated with beings who are a priori estranged from and excluded within the political. Even more than othermothers, the secular subject is reproduced by unmothers, which is precisely where its vulnerability lies—in the “monstrosity...of a female with the potential to name” (Spillers, 1987, p. 462). Enough Sebastians could very well mean the end of the world.

If secular mothering is neither universal nor ordained by God, but rather the reformation, transformation, and universalization of the particular and peculiar manner which reproduced Christendom, then how might we mother otherwise? To begin to answer this question, we might consider the modes and manners of mothering invented by the enemy in the camp and the slave on the plantation, where reproduction is displaced by destruction—as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* so painfully illustrates. As Anidjar reminds us, “mothers can and do kill” (Anidjar, 2024, p. 68). In spaces where suffering and death are manufactured and overdetermined, the imperative for reproduction is displaced by a demand for destruction, and mothering

³ Not all Egyptians were slaves to the Hebrews in the same way all Africans are slaves to Humans. Hagar was a gift given Abram to resolve a particular transgression that occurred with regard to Sarai in Pharaoh's home.

becomes the teaching of the dance of death (Wilderson III, 2003). As expressed by a Palestinian mother, “Death is beautiful for the sake of Quds [i.e. Jerusalem]. Yes, wallah, Alhamdulillah, and if all my children died for the sake of Quds it won’t be a problem for me” (*The Rockets That Explode History*, 2021).

In closing, Anidjar helps us to appreciate that for too long mothering has been (over)determined by the motive, will, and active desire of secular(izing) man, to the point of its disavowal regarding its political significance. To see the political as maternal, however, forces us to confront the necessity of reimagining mothering otherwise, not for the sake of secular humanity, but its strangers. Anidjar’s work thus pushes us to consider how Black(ened) mothers might offer a line of flight, a space of fugitivity, and an otherwise way of being and knowing, of living and dying in the wake of catastrophe and in the afterlife of slavery, through destruction.

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