

Neither Mother nor Slave

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“All collectives that sustain themselves through time are dependent on one form of reproduction or another (and mostly more than one), whether sexual or ritual, social, legal, or economic. And they all need mothers, those who perform and have performed maternal functions” (Anidjar, 64). This quote, I believe, encapsulates the totality of Gil Anidjar’s most recent text, *On the Sovereignty of Mothers: The Political as Maternal*, which seeks to expand the category of mother to all who perform its functions, even those who are barred from its titular and juridical headings. He notes that the stability of any collective, spanning all the way back to the biblical period, has and always will rely on mothers. A significant portion of the book is dedicated to connecting the role of the Biblical mother to the ways in which the maternal role is inherently plural, historically supported and ultimately allocated to nurses, maids, slaves, and servants. This multiplicity of mothers in the reproduction of a collective supports Anidjar’s argument that the “mothering of mothers” is foundational to the political and social structures we have built over and in time. In essence, our dependence on mothering throughout history, exposes how discursive investments in the paternal and patriarchal as the epitome of our political and social life misunderstands a more basic condition: intrinsic to any social body is the fact that, to persist, “a collective must mother” (Anidjar, 21). Mothers write the world by guarding it, preserving it, and protecting us from it. Motherhood and maternity are not reducible to an event, like birth, but are structured by repetition, a rewriting across generations, reproduction, family, nation, and species that embraces iterability and rejects unity or maternal unicity. Hence, what Anidjar offers is a move away from “the Father,” and even “the Mother,” and towards “mothers,” a plurality governed by a “maternal contract” that undergirds all forms of relation and permits the reproduction of collective existence.

The central relation that embodies the proposed plural structure of mothering is the mother/slave relation, illustrated through the biblical story of Hagar and Sarah. Throughout the text, these two women embody a co-dependency and interrelation that guides our understanding of how mothers and their mothering are always already a plural practices. The story of Sarah, a free woman who *wants* to bear a child, and Hagar, the slave who *can* bear that child, serves as a template of how the mothering of mothers has historically been undergirded by structures of violence, dividing those who are free from those who are called upon to support this freedom as wet nurses, surrogates, and other mothers. Hagar, the barred mother, is an Egyptian slave who Sarah, a free Hebrew woman, uses as surrogate, servant, and slave to provide her with a son. Sarah tells her husband Abraham to “go in to my slave” to obtain a child, exercising her right to both Hagar and the future child Hagar will birth (Anidjar, 33). While Hagar is the mother who gives birth to the child, Sarah is the subject who bears the title of mother, illustrating the actualization and appropriation of motherhood through the negation of Hagar’s maternity. This relation is held together by an asymmetrical contract, symbolized by the terms of slavery, that “interrupts motherhood” for Hagar and ultimately breaks the bond between her and her child (Anidjar, 29).

The text is bookended by a theory of writing and time that Anidjar calls “maternal writing.” The temporality of mothering is undergirded by repetition over and through time. This inscription of maternal writing

constitutes the sovereignty of mothers, whereby they “demonstrate their capacity...to inscribe themselves and others onto the bodies of their children and well beyond, onto the body politic, the polity and the world” (Anidjar, 2). Anidjar introduces and concludes the text with this theory of maternal writing, which begins with the traces, impacts, and effects that have structured his relationship to his own mother. “I *am* the book she has written” (Anidjar, 40). We are all the books that our mothers have written, and this writing of mothers enables their presence to persist and insist over and through time.

Using blackness as both a point of departure and framing mechanism, Anidjar brings together themes of slavery and mothering throughout the text, most clearly in the first chapter, “Mother and Slave.” In this account, the transformation of Hagar into an artificial womb prefigures ancient and modern slavery, enabling a continuous line to be drawn from Egypt to the Transatlantic slave trade; linking Hagar’s story to African American women’s histories of enslavement into one *longue durée* of slavery (Anidjar, 25). These historical echoes exemplify how “since Paul, the dialectic of mother and slave – a tale of two cities – imprinted itself, at times with extreme violence, at times in extreme silence, on a number of traditions, on a number of constitutions...” (Anidjar, 27). Anidjar thus shows how Egyptian slaves and racial slaves exist in a continuity of mothering that captures bodies to serve as extensions not only of the master but of the free mother as well. This continuity establishes what he takes to be a central truth: that the foundation of every society lies in the repetition of “mothering mothers,” a dialectical relation of service and servitude to mothers.

Anidjar informs the reader that the history and analysis of blackness “governs everything” he has to say about mothers and slavery (Anidjar, 27). Drawing on scholars such as James Baldwin, Hortense Spillers, Christina Sharpe, Saidiya Hartman, Toni Morrison, and Zakiyah Iman Jackson, Anidjar argues that the history and ontology of blackness can teach us a lot about the mother and her slave. Following Dolores S. Williams, he reads Hagar as black woman or maternal, arguing that she embodies what Jackson names the black mater(nal). He writes, “[Hagar is] undoubtedly an image of what Zakiyyah Iman Jackson calls ‘the black mater(nal),’ those discursive-material trace effects and foreclosures of the dialectic,’ not just of ‘hegemonic common sense,’ but of a long history of structure, which must contend with the ‘nullification of black maternity’” (Anidjar, 32). This nullification, for Anidjar, is the defining feature of the history of mothering throughout history. His claim is that the dialectical terms under which collectives congeal are between mother and slave, figures who must be negated and support the community for the mother to actualize her freedom and truth.

Reading *On the Sovereignty of Mothers*, however, raises the question of whether Hagar’s enslavement is structured by race rather than another form of domination. While Anidjar assigns her the same nullification that attaches to the black mater(nal), the relationship he analyzes is one between Egyptian and Hebrew. The question that emerges, then, is whether Hagar’s slaveness can be understood as a form of blackness and, further, whether assigning this categorization to Hagar opens the door for all slavery to be retroactively assigned the kind of slaveness particular to racial slavery. Indeed, Hagar is denied motherhood in her role as surrogate and compelled to copulate with Abraham to reproduce a child. This forced reproduction and coercive sexual dynamic is certainly one that defines racial slavery; however, the rest of this review considers how the black female slave significantly departs from the Egyptian slave and, thus, Anidjar’s

reading of Hagar. Hagar, in her flight from Sarah, reappropriates her maternity, enabling her to assume two roles at once: the title of the mother and the role of a slave. Anidjar writes that in Hagar's fugitivity, she is still a slave, but "she is now also a mother. This, then, is the dialectic of mother and slave" (Anidjar, 36). Important differences between Hagar and the black female slave emerge here. Hagar is never foreclosed access to her gender, nor is she relegated to the assetification primarily reserved for the transatlantic racial slave. Further, her capacity to become a mother signals that she was never outside what Anidjar calls "the maternal field," rather, she always had the *capacity* to be a mother. Blackness, in contrast, deforms and transforms the concept of mother altogether. Not only at the level of gender, but at the level of the human, motherhood has access to a kind of particularity that makes one human. As Anidjar himself notes, "What blackness exposes...is that the inviolable essence of the human's individuality and incommunicability is a racial privilege" (Warren, 396). Hagar's capacity to be both a human mother and a slave at the same time is what distinguishes her from the originary void that constitutes the black female slave or racial slave. Saidiya Hartman has pointed to how the violence of humanization has plagued the black female slave in her juridical form, but what Anidjar attempts is a reinscription back into the human mother category rather than noting its violence. As Christina Sharpe writes, "the word mother never took hold for Black women in and then out of slavery in the 'New World'...Motherhood...cannot possibly remain unmodified..." (Sharpe, 76-77).

Throughout the text, Anidjar democratizes slavery and motherhood, both of which fail the racial slave by attempting her integration into various instances of mothering and enslavement through precisely the kind of discursive gesture that distinguishes racial slaves from all other forms. The temporal and historical reconstruction at work here reifies blackness as that which is always already Slave and positions it as the paradigmatic instance of enslavement from and against which one can derive all other understandings and instances of violence. Although Hagar and Sarah represent a historically prior instance of slavery, Anidjar constructs his argument by retroactively using elements of modern racial slavery to clarify and elaborate the structures of violence at work in biblical slavery. The formal gesture is what Frank B. Wilderson III has called "the ruse of analogy." This "ruse," as Wilderson describes it, is an attempt to "incorpora[te] a being that is dead" by structurally adjusting them into the paradigms of Human capacity (Wilderson, 41). By attempting to write blackness into the paradigm of motherhood, and into the histories of both slavery and mothering, Anidjar engages in a fantasy in which blackness is like every other instance of slavery and motherhood. This fantasy presupposes blackness's "subjective capacity to be universal" (Wilderson, 42). Blackness's mutability, in this account, enables the assumption that the racial slave can be a slave in any sense of the term and a mother in any sense of the word. In fact, what Anidjar performs is a universalizing gesture that theorists of humanism attempt in rescuing blackness from its exile. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson expertly elaborates this point by noting that "within the structure of much thought on race there is an implicit assumption that the recognition of one as a human being will protect one from (or acts as an insurance policy against) ontologizing violence" (Jackson, 20). By extending the category of mother to the racial slave, the text assumes that situating her within this category will allow her to emerge unscathed in the community of mothers, one among the many who have mothered throughout history.

By mobilizing the force of the black female slave while simultaneously relegating her to the abyss to which she always already belongs, Anidjar declares the following:

For multiple reasons, and without restricting myself to a particular period or periodization (Atlantic slavery, modernity), yet learning from and inspired in great part by James Baldwin (who understood Blacks in their maternal position and function vis-à-vis whites) and by Hortense Spillers (who grammaticalized mothers and showed Black mothers caught in the double gesture that exploits and founds, but also denies and even eradicates, motherhood, I have proposed to read the biblical, maternal, figures of Hagar and Sarah, the dialectic of mother and slave (Jackson, 62).

The act of “learning from” in this passage demonstrates how blackness functions as a metaphor for discursive power. To allow the mother/slave dialectic to emerge, Anidjar must use blackness as a ground, a springboard from which to propel his theory of maternal politic into the world. James Baldwin, Hortense Spillers, Christina Sharpe, Saidiya Hartman, Toni Morrison, and Zakkiyah Iman Jackson thus function as captive maternals that prop up the argument of a universal maternal. This political theory of mothering reenacts humanism’s desire to universalize, ultimately repeating the ritualistic positioning of “black(female)ness as opacity, inversion, and limit” (Jackson, 10). This ritual is how the world instrumentalizes blackness, monumentalizing itself and making itself appear through and by its excesses.

By bringing together the black female slave and the Egyptian slave as two figures in the long history of slavery, Anidjar attempts to articulate a shared form of subjugation under the category of “Mother.” The theoretical coherence attempted in equating the Egyptian slave and the racial slave renders one intelligible as mother while relegating the other to its proper abyssal locale. This theoretical move misunderstands that the racial slave cannot be a mother, even in a fugitive state. The analogizing of these two figures under the category of mother misreads the distinct *genres* of violence under which these two figures lived, demonstrating precisely why blackness is distinct in its slaveness: “the suffering of Black people cannot be analogized,” and “‘we’ are not all claimed by life in the same way; ‘we’ do not experience suffering on the same [plane] of conflict, since the Black is characterized, as Wilderson tells us, by gratuitous violence” (Sharpe, 29).

The use of blackness throughout the text prompts the question posed by Fanon: “What is the black other than comparison?” (as cited in Wilderson, 2010).¹ It serves as a metaphorical function for all other instances of violence and subjection, no matter how historically distant the two slave regimes may be. What Anidjar performs is precisely the unique vocation of blackness, its potential to be analogized. The analogizability of the racial slave is what makes it both nothing and everything. Sorentino and Garba write precisely of this discursive move: “anti-Blackness is animated by the gratuitous substitution that marks metaphoricality...that *slavery is (nothing but) metaphor*” (Garba and Sorentino, 3). In other words, racial slavery in Anidjar’s text demonstrates that “[racial] slavery is only ever available as semantic displacement. Slavery-as-metaphor is the being-of-slavery” (Garba and Sorentino, 11). If racial slavery is the *sine-qua-non* of slavery, then Hagar can only be understood through blackness; to be a slave is always to be black. Said differently, no black, no slave(ry).

¹ Fanon famously asked, “What is the black other than comparison?” See Frank B. Wilderson III referencing Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Saidiya Hartman understands the use of the racial slave for any and all desires as the result of the racial slave embodying the fungible character of the commodity. This phenomenon of stretching the racial slave's function to serve affective and laborious ends aims to articulate how the slave may be put to wanton use for any and all ends. Hartman writes:

The fungibility of the slave, the wanton uses of the black body for producing value or pleasure, and the shared vulnerabilities of the commodity, whether male or female, trouble dominant accounts of gender. Depending on the angle of vision or critical lexicon, the harnessing of the body as an instrument for social and physical reproduction unmakes the slave as gendered subject *or* reveals the primacy of gender and sexual differentiation in the making of the slave (Hartman, 168).

The force of this passage lies in the “or” of blackness. The black female slave was made to provide value *or* pleasure *or* social reproduction *or* physical reproduction. When this passage is taken to its logical conclusion, we see that the slave occupies no single position, but exists between “unmaking” and “primacy.” By conjoining these two possible states, blackness both sutures and separates all at once. On the one hand, gender could and was abandoned in the commodification of the female slave's body, and, on the other, her gender qua “breeding unit” becomes the condition of possibility for the differentiation in gender, both within the slave community and more generally. The “or” indexes total possibility, a kind of ellipsis that contains the past, present, and future in one punctuation. She may be one or the other at any given time, and thus her wanton use(s) is always already available for the taking. The black female slave is...

Lastly, Anidjar's theory of maternal writing is the final distinction between slave and racial slave. He argues that maternal writing is how mothers exercise their capacity to “inscribe themselves and others onto the bodies of their children and well beyond, onto the body politic, the polity of the world” (Anidjar, 2). The racial slave is not a signatory of any contract and does not have the capacity to inscribe herself into the polity of the world. This brings us back to Spillers and to that which constitutes the racial slave. Blackness is the body upon which all others inscribe but cannot inscribe itself. This capacity for inscription, Hagar's inscription on the world, significantly departs from the branding that is inscribed on the flesh of the racial slave.

While Hagar and the racial slave remain incommensurable figures throughout *On the Sovereignty of Mothers*, the text nevertheless teaches us how to think plurally about mothers and how the maternal requires more attention in the theorization of the political. Anidjar asks us to think otherwise about what and who constitutes a political whole, and how the shadowy existence of the maternal demands attention to its dialectics, antagonisms, and aporias.

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