

## Author Response: Maternal Difference

Gil Anidjar

I am my mother's child. Still and always. Like everyone, like every individual in history or outside of it, I have been mothered. We have all been mothered. *More or less well. More or less by our own mothers.* You could say that, from that unavoidable universal, there emerged the reasons for my interest in dependence, I mean, in difference—that old word—and particularly in the difference mothers make or constitute. For the most part, though, and since writing *On the Sovereignty of Mothers*, I have continued to try to articulate something, well, different, something like *maternal difference* (a phrase that, incidentally, seems as rare and unused, Naomi Morgenstern (2020) can no doubt confirm, as “maternal sovereignty” or “maternal contract”). It is, at any rate, and to be more precise, *maternal differences* that have struck me as unavoidable. The French have this word, *incontournable*, which signifies the impossibility of going around, uncircumventable. Which means, of course, that such avoidance is not only eminently possible (recall Apollo's denial of the very parenthood of the mother in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and its tricky inheritors), but might, in fact, be governing our thought and conduct, our communities and polities. Still, even in the denial, ignorance, or violent effacement they might be said to generate or engender, I would argue that mothers remain *symptomatically* unavoidable—and this as soon as mothers come to mind; as soon as one encounters, which is to say, reflects and remembers, but also effaces and erases, goes around and loses mothers (we have all been mothered); as soon as mothers and the maternal become an explicit (or, again, denied) matter of concern, a question or a series of questions to be confronted or avoided, if otherwise, I would insist, than as particular or personal, local or regional, questions. Mothers, I shall try to reiterate here, do much more than reproduce the family (that protean “unit,” if there is one, that so consistently occludes what takes place “outside” of it); they reproduce the polity.

Now, if—and it is indisputably a big if—sovereign is he (or she) who decides on the exception, who declares the state of emergency, it has yet to be sufficiently acknowledged that such a decision involves a *selection* among and between a number of emergencies (elsewhere, I argue that the same is true for enemies). The sovereignty of mothers is accordingly selective, divided, dependent even (not all emergencies, after all, are of our own doing). It seems to me, at any rate, that the remarkable responses this forum generated testify to the distinct and also opaque ways in which maternal difference—and maternal sovereignty—is confronted, or indeed contained or structured, with regard to race, to Blackness and Indigeneity, but also with regard to affective, theological and political reproduction. Today, we find ourselves in the midst of multiple and competing emergencies, and my wager is that mothers—whether or not we acknowledge Gaia, say, or “Earth Mother” among them—name with a particularly compelling force a range of emergencies such as are upon us, however unequally, however incommensurably or indeed differentially. Mothers unsettle our most crucial keywords, from individualism and independence to authority and autonomy—freedom—by way of the distinction between, on the one hand, the domestic or familial, the social and economic and, on the other hand, the political. Bibliographically speaking, I might refer, for a potent illustration, to Laura Briggs' *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics* (Briggs, 2017).<sup>1</sup> Mothers,

---

<sup>1</sup> But Briggs remains confined to national boundaries and to the current state of affairs.

which is to say, maternal differences, then offer a sure way to access the enduring urgency of the political, the political as urgency. Or perhaps, given the paucity of reflections on mothers within political thought—one tentative reason to engage with sovereignty, or to linger with Hobbes, as Marika Rose agrees, I think, or with the Bible—we might argue, together with Cedric Robinson, that the maternal, along with the distinct ways in which maternal difference registered (or failed to register) on the lives of *mothers and others*, on the living and the dying, on the telling and the storytelling (the not-telling and the untold), the writing and thinking of and about mothers, holds *the antipolitical* in reserve. It is, as a matter of fact, striking that, without mentioning mothers and ever so ephemerally, Robinson himself identifies “persistence” among the terms of order that define and structure the political: “persistence in terms of social integration, biological continuity, and cultural integrations” (Robinson, 2016, p. 4). Here too is an echo of Friedrich Engels, for whom “according to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life” (Engels, 1972, p. 71). Mediation aside, one might already gloss, as I have tried to do, that the politics of reproduction have been nothing if not a partial, and outrightly perverted, acknowledgment of the reproduction less of the family (or of a most abstract “life”) than that of *the polity* over time. Yet, Robinson does not offer the family as a primary site of reflection, nor does he follow Engels in foregrounding “life.”<sup>2</sup> Rather, “with regard to persistence” specifically, which is to say, with regard to the reproduction of the polity, Robinson turns to authority and, more precisely, to “the concept of political leadership.” He does so, however, in order to reject it, arguing that it is “dysfunctional.” Indeed, “the presumption that political leadership is a concept through which the *event* of social organization can be made recognizable is a specious one” (Robinson, 2016, pp. 4-5). Robinson therefore proposes attending to “an entirely different vision of authority from that of the political” (p. 27). Accordingly, I allow myself to repeat what I have proposed in the book: namely that, at once distinct yet indissociable from sexual difference or from the family (the tribe, the class or the nation—forms and instances of the political), maternal difference and maternal sovereignty signal a different sense of persistence, of perdurance and duration, a different structure and infrastructure and, at any rate, a different material (and, we might add all too quickly, spiritual or theological) base for “persistence in terms of social integration, biological continuity, and cultural integrations.” Mothers, in my readings, do much more than make kin. They make time. On a different order of magnitude and significance than Karl Marx’s workers, they have long occupied the role of “most energetic agents of reproduction” of the polity (Marx, 2024, p. 579). In Marx’s own analogy, if still confined to the economic (or indeed to the historically bounded

---

<sup>2</sup> Sara-Maria Sorentino’s insistence that, after Engels, I am concerned with the family is surprising, for I specifically criticize the focus on “the family,” and even on “kinship,” which have long hidden so much of the unrecognized and coerced labor of reproduction occurring outside of their (changing) normative limits. Mindful of the historicity of the notion of “population” (or of the Latinate history of the notion of “family”), one might revisit Karl Marx’s account of the production of a “reserve army,” a “surplus population of workers” relative to capital, and extrapolate from it the historically varying correspondence with the reproduction of the polity well beyond the “elastic” (Marx’s word) limits of kin and family (Marx, 2024, p. 576). Marx identifies “early marriage” and “the incentive to reproduce” that accompany the exploitation of children (p. 587), “orphans and the children of paupers” (p. 589), migration too, and more broadly “the accumulation of misery, torturous labor, slavery, ignorance, brutality and moral degradation” (p. 591). Accordingly, prostitution, rape and incest, surrogacy, abduction and slavery—Hagar and Sarah—are also historical and, needless to say, horrific instances of “the production of a relative superfluous population exceeding [the family’s] average valorization” (p. 579, replacing Marx’ capital with family), the “various forms of existence” (p. 587) whereby the polity is produced and reproduced and what I am calling maternal difference. As it were prior to the economic, mothers appear here as means of production and reproduction, the political as maternal.

polity called “nation”), “a nation’s wealth corresponds to its population and its misery corresponds to its wealth” (p. 591).<sup>3</sup>

It goes without saying that maternal difference might well be understood as one possible iteration of Adrienne Rich’s lesson, which distinguished between experience and institution (Rich, 1986). Yet, maternal difference divides and distinguishes further, and no doubt earlier. It divides and distinguishes, first of all perhaps, *within and between mothers*. Are mothers not, since Eve and Pandora, Hagar and Sarah, figures of collaboration and exploitation? Of rupture and partition? Figures of distinction and of comparison? Figures of *plurality*? Are mothers—of the species or of the tribe—not themselves bound and divided on the basis of rank and class, race, nation, and religion? And generations? By way of time, therefore? Mothering, and the mothering of mothers, constitute the very mechanism, one might say, the first and last instance, whereby such differences are *collectively* established, maintained, and reproduced. Yet consider that, aside from the marginal attention they receive, mothers continue dominantly and so very often to be spoken of in the singular. Maternal difference undoubtedly demands to be uttered in the plural as well: a plurality—“a Kentucky of mothers,” as Dana Ward famously has it (Ward, 2024). I do mean to insist on this collective, political register, and on the question of number.

Whereas “the mother” continues to be identified with the individual body and is almost exclusively located in that body (“there is no such thing as a baby,” explained Winnicott), maternal difference—might one invoke Talal Asad’s “ensouled bodies”?—draws different coordinates, a different cartography (Asad, 2020). To repeat, maternal difference opens onto the obvious and dangerous divide that binds and separates mother and mother (the mothering of mothers), but also woman and mother, gender and sexuality, and what Hortense Spillers, in a pertinent context, called “ungendering” (Spillers, 2003, p. 214). The difference between woman and mother, between sexual difference and maternal difference, is, in any case, at once a necessary and impossible, unavoidable distinction for reasons that include, but are not limited to, trans mothers or, indeed, to the afterlives of slavery. That difference is also, today, an expanding one as we witness, if not everywhere equally, the old invention of surrogacy taking new forms of advanced technological proportions and global extractive dimensions.<sup>4</sup> As Nicole Loraux and Elissa Marder have explored and underscored, maternal difference has always multifariously evoked, or been haunted by, technology, art and artifice, nature and nurture, with growing and fabricating, and, of course, exploiting (Loraux, 2000; Marder, 2012). Although it can be divided into many stages and functions, actors or elements, maternal difference has been dominated, Jennifer Nash recently reiterated, by birth, by pregnancy and birth, by the *fetishism of birth*, one might say after Marx, of the moment of birth, of a time insistently marked as one of beginning, of novelty, at time of firstness (think of Hannah Arendt here, on natality) (Nash, 2021; Arendt, 1998). This is, of course, all too often, a moment of death as well: the death of the mother. Hear it, if you will, as the death of the author. Or, as Roy Cherian, Sara-Maria Sorentino and Leah Kaplan underscore, as the (modern) birth of the slave. I shall return to this. But maternal difference

<sup>3</sup> Foucault’s argument about the emergence of “population” and its links to statistics and demography, is of course pertinent here, even if Foucault (and Marx) were not too interested in mothers.

<sup>4</sup> *The Guardian* reported on November 5, 2025, about a device called “AquaWomb” under review with the USFDA. Its makers, the article reports, prefer to call it a “womb-like life support system,” as they are “wary of the political and science-fiction associations attached to the term ‘artificial womb’.” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/05/baby-alive-outside-womb>

carves a more complex trajectory between life and death, the womb and the tomb, which, under the insufficient figure of care (or abandonment), is, to repeat, the difference that time makes: the time and duration of mothering, the endurance, the persistence, as Robinson had it, of the polity, its reproduction within and across generations.<sup>5</sup> *Mothers and time*, I called it, referencing, with no small degree of implausibility, Martin Heidegger. Maternal difference is thus a question of duration: of asymmetric and non-teleological stages that, neither Hegelian nor Marxian, might promise a different dialectic or consciousness. It oscillates between attachment and detachment, connection and separation, weaning and letting go, cleaving (split and sever, but adhere and cling too), and, if ever, the realization—and failure—of emancipation. This strange notion of emancipation derives from the Latin *mancipium*, a taking by hand which, in Roman law, was also a gesture of ownership and possession, of a child or a slave. Maternal difference opens and shortens the distance between mother and abortion, between contraception and infanticide, between adoption and abandonment, belonging and enslavement. It speaks to being and having, to being and becoming, and to the difference between being and nothingness. Why, after all, is there something rather than nothing? Why am I something rather than nothing? If not necessarily better, it certainly seems more *plausible* not to have been born at all. Yet by what power, by what maternal sovereignty? At an ambiguous distance from Carl Schmitt, Arendt invokes the miracle together with “the fact of birth.” She might have attributed to mothers, rather than to generic man, the ability “to perform what is infinitely improbable” (Arendt, 1998, p. 178).<sup>6</sup> Even the birth of “nothing,” in any case, necessitates and mobilizes forms of mothering. Maternal difference did not invent metaphysics, in other words, but it seems to me to pose its most pressing questions, unsettling, once again, the terms of order of the political and of the ontological. And whereas I would ask about the plurality of mothers, some of my respondents insist on invoking other differences, indeed other ontologies, other *political* ontologies. Although we are rarely told of its contribution to the building of cities, the making and unmaking of worlds and polities, maternal difference did not wait for modern demography to signal, however opaquely, the rise and fall of families, tribes, or nations. Yet, maternal difference still appears to stand and fall on the inside of the house walls, the home or *oikos*. All in the family, but so obviously beyond it, maternal difference has something to do with the intimacy of language, the language of intimacy, at least with the so-called mother tongue (never a private language, nor simply a familial one). And though it did not make the distinction between word and thing (or word and deed, as Arendt would say), much of the difference between inside and outside lingers with it (Arendt 1998, p. 176). Neither could maternal difference reduce the distance between the literal and the figurative—the space of metaphorical and symbolic mothers, goddesses or motherlands, and other perfect mothers that have weighed on mothers everywhere. Effaced and denied mothers, too. Consistently tied to imaginaries of origins and beginnings, if not to the origin of all figures, maternal difference has, I have said, as much to do with duration—with the long and patient (or impatient, even violent) labor of accompaniment and inscription (to be distinguished from care, obviously). With death and erasure as well. Of death and erasure, too. In Derridean terms, maternal difference has long recast the

<sup>5</sup> I tried to expand this argument by attending to the university, or *alma mater*, that is to say, to another maternal institution, in my essay “*Alma mater* (The University at War)” available at [shc.stanford.edu/arcade/interventions/alma-mater-university-war-part-1](http://shc.stanford.edu/arcade/interventions/alma-mater-university-war-part-1)

<sup>6</sup> Incribing my own proximate distance vis-à-vis Arendt, I acknowledge that I still have some more work to do. Suffice it to say that if, as Jeffrey Champlin argues, “natality opens a distance between man and his essence that is a general precondition for entrance to the political” (Champlin, 2013, p. 151), what I called “maternity” seeks rather to acknowledge the indissociable and heterogeneous link between mother and woman, as well as between child and *polites* (the member of the polity). Maternal difference, or maternity, underscores that universal is not that everyone was born, but that we have all been mothered. More or less well. More or less by our own mothers.

distinction between speech and writing. And mothers, *pace* Adriana Cavarero, are on the side of writing (Cavarero, 2005). Exposed to death and to the elements, exposed to absence and to erasure. Is it not obvious? Yet, are mothers text or context? Which would be a reason to consider anew that maternal difference is also a difference of and between functions, most of which are still under erasure, unread or unrecognized. Mother is a verb, as Sarah Knott (2019) demonstrated, signaling vectors of activity, continuity, and ephemerality. Mother—the word—renders a plethora of maternal functions, of maternal fictions.

We were reading, my students and I, the early work, the remarkable work, of fiction-nonfiction, the “critical fabulations” of Saidiya Hartman in *Lose Your Mother* (Hartman, 2007). The book is admittedly a striking tractate on motherhood, an ambiguous elegy to the lost mother—a series of preemptive and “impossible” answers to Zehra Mehdi’s questions—as well as, finally, the formulation of a command to “lose your mother.” As we read it, we wondered about the imperative inscribed in Hartman’s title and reiterated throughout the book. It is at once a general and a historical command, reiterating the consequences of its issue while enigmatically doubling down on what remains tragically the case. The mother is lost, Hartman tells us in a surprising reiteration of earlier proclamations. The mother is lost. Lose your mother. Yet, which mother is this? Which mothers are these that Hartman is telling us about, and reminding us to lose? I shall return to the mother and the slave below, but I will point out for now that there are, undeniably, many mothers in *Lose Your Mother*. So many, in fact, that one might feel at a loss, not only between losses (there would be more to say about loss, its meanings, forms, and temporalities, what Rajbir Singh Judge calls “the various rhythms of loss,” but this is not the place), but also *between mothers* (Judge, 2024, p. 13). To begin with (though such is never the beginning), the narrator does have a mother, another mother, one might say, about whom she tells a number of stories: stories of distance and rebellion, stories of difference and dissemblance, disappointment too. There are other mothers as well, othermothers and grandmothers, even great-great-grandmothers. And then there are those whom I hesitate to call metaphorical mothers (Hartman never does), if only because they seem to testify—analogy or difference?—to what James Baldwin called “a blood relationship, perhaps the most profound reality of the American experience” (Baldwin, 1984, p. 42). There is, most explicitly at least, only one mother country in *Lose Your Mother*, and she alone is the mother who was lost and that will have to be (it is an imperative) lost. But what about other mothers? What about, by way of the mother, America? What about “the hostile world of the Americas” (Hartman, 2007, p. 7), where the narrator and her mother were raised, along with her grandmothers (fathers and grandfathers too)? What about “the benediction and the curse... the cause of every complaint and the excuse for every foul deed” that America is fleetingly described to be (pp. 14-5)? With understandable and repeated reluctance, the narrator acknowledges that she is an American (“Maybe the soldiers would leave me alone because I was an American” [p. 21]), an African-American, and a “black American” (p. 29). The narrator is a stranger, so she explains, in Africa. And perhaps she is in America as well. But is Africa her mother? Her only mother? “Was Africa merely a cipher for a lost country no one could any longer name? Was it the remedy for our homelessness or an opportunity to turn our backs to the hostile country we called home?” (p. 30) A version of Hartman’s question recurred to my students and me: if Africa is the mother country, the mother that was lost and must be lost, what of that other mother called America? What of the mother who, in fact, raised the narrator, inscribed herself and her history, her violences and her silences, upon the narrator? Does the imperative to lose your mother apply to these

mothers? Have they been lost? Should they be lost? “I, too, am the afterlife of slavery,” Hartman famously writes (p. 6), explicitly locating herself as a *descendant*. Which certainly explains why she wants to document, “to retrace the process by which lives were destroyed and slaves born” (p. 6). Allow me to repeat, as Hartman herself does, this extraordinary phrase: “the slave was born” (p. 31). Was the slave not raised and marked, inscribed? Does the slave have a mother, then? One or many? Some mothers (absent, denied, or killed), mothers more (and also less) than others. Some mothers are not necessarily mothers. Loaded with the histories and commentaries of *partus sequitur ventrem*, this is a fraught question, therefore, one that, rhetorically at least, resonates throughout Hartman’s book and elsewhere as well. A maternal lexicon—I will not say a metaphorical reserve, much less an analogy—inscribes itself, among other pertinent sites, in the work of Frank Wilderson, who writes that “slaves birth slavery and morph its terror” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 104). Wilderson further describes that “amazing reverse symbiosis of the process during chattel slavery when enslaved mothers gave birth to slave children,” whereas “now, enslaved children are capable of giving birth to slave parents” (p. 108). At the same time, the violent denial of motherhood is, of course, the lesson Hortense Spillers imparted toward a more accurate understanding of slavery. There remains, in Jared Sexton’s words, a “strict prohibition of nativity” (Sexton, 2010, p. 40). Which is why the slave cannot be compared, or rather, can only be *compared negatively* with, say, the refugee. “We might say to the refugee that you may lose your motherland, but you will not ‘lose your mother’ (p. 41). Might we *command* him to that effect? Should we? But again, which mother? And by what analogy? By what ruse, or what denial, of analogy?<sup>7</sup> By what resemblance? It is imperative, Hartman concludes in what may be mistaken for a universal tone, to acknowledge that there is no choice, “no choice but to avow the loss that inaugurates one’s existence,” which means, “to lose your mother, always” (Hartman, 2007, p. 100).<sup>8</sup> Ever so fleetingly, Hartman explains that this loss and its avowal also mean “to be bound to other promises.” Our questions linger. Other promises or other mothers? In the market or the household? The plantation or the city? (Hartman, 2016) The home or the world? (Hartman, 2016)<sup>9</sup> Indeed, since any promise implies a threat, what might it entail to acknowledge threatening mothers along with caring ones? Along with murdering, enslaving, and terrorizing mothers? Destructive mothers? A plurality of mothers. Is America not such a mother? Did slavery not mother America? Are Black and Brown women not mothering (white) America still? “The plantation is the belly of the world,” Hartman writes as she evokes a “lexicon of the political” that remains to come (Hartman, 2016, p. 166, 171). I venture, in any case, that maternal difference might be another name for *maternal alienation*—a history of which, should there be sense in it, remains to be understood in its scope. In Patrice Douglass’ compelling formulation: “the mother is the link between freedom and captivity” (Douglass, 2025, p. 107). Ah, but which mother now? Or again, which mothers?

As I have begun to indicate, the thoughtful, exigent, and also generous responses (the latter word is Roy Cherian’s, and I’m grateful for it) that *On Sovereignty of Mothers* received here rightly insist on a number

<sup>7</sup> Wilderson’s “ruse of analogy” (2010, ch. 1) is invoked, if quite differently, in the responses of Roy Cherian, Leah Kaplan and Sara-Maria Sorentino, more silently, perhaps, by Timothy Snediker.

<sup>8</sup> See Naomi Morgenstern’s compelling reading of Hartman, which raises the question of address and, implicitly, of universality (Morgenstern, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> Although I allude to Rabindranath Tagore’s famous novel, for Hartman—who insists on the domestic and rightly underscores the labor of black women as “central to the reproduction and security of the white household” (Hartman, 2016, p. 170)—there seems to be neither world nor nation thereby produced. “In short the slave exists out of the world and outside the house.”

of differences—and no doubt limitations—which seem to me to accrue significance once they are recognized as maternal differences. I underscore this notion because the disagreements that transpire are, for the most part, quite open to conciliation or reconciliation—or perhaps to a different kind of disagreement. Most obviously, I have learned much from Theresa Gregor’s expansive knowledge of “Indigenous rematriation” and cannot but agree with her argument that, far from exhaustive, my book does little more than offer “a complementary” analysis, no more than a tentative confirmation of Indigenous knowledges and practices. I also agree that my explanations fail to “make room for the myriad complications and impacts of settler-colonialism,” and that they do not “fully account for settler colonialism as a reproductive regime oriented toward the elimination of Indigenous futurity.” I do see other vectors of reconciliation, or of disagreement, between what Gregor describes as “a departure from Indigenous views of the sacred that affirm life” and the fact that, as she points out, “clan mothers hold decisive authority over leadership and war.”

In a different manner, no doubt, the theologico-political inheritance that is the Bible—or perhaps it is (a frightening thought) *historical*—is essential to confront as a matter of, well, *mater*. Timothy Snediker is entirely right that there is more to be said about Christianity and figuration, more importantly about Christianity and race (about Hagar too). I have tried to do some of that work (reading Auerbach too) in *Blood* and elsewhere, and I allude to it in *Mothers* (Roy Cherian’s brief allusions notwithstanding). My readers, incidentally, seem only occasionally interested in (a non-African?) Egypt, and not at all in Jews and Arabs, race and religion, and even less, in Islam—those other emergencies. To be sure, I would hesitate to insist on justifying my use of the word “prefigure” now that I have read Snediker. What puzzles me still, however, is whether we might recognize the enduring significance of the Bible less for the accuracy of the readings it has generated than for the force, famously, of “the curse of Ham,” and less famously for the role Christianity played in investing slavery with, let us call it, an ambiguous *charge* (a word I use in the psychoanalytic and also explosive senses). As I made clear in the book, I am certainly not the first to acknowledge Hagar in this context, although Snediker seems to think my own contribution leaves the question of Hagar (and Sarah) as open as before. Perhaps. Snediker’s theologico-philological acumen aside, I do wonder what my Afro-pessimist readers might have to say about the theological and theologico-political inheritance carried by Hagar’s name. Roy Cherian comes close enough, though I would propose to rephrase and submit that “Hagar’s estrangement is the *perdurance* of the Black Mater(nal)’s exclusion.” Amaryah Shaye Armstrong has made it most difficult to ignore the “wayward theology” at play in seemingly secular explorations that treat history (and periodization) casually rather than antagonistically. She has also explored, in more detail than I have, the enduring significance of Hagar toward a thinking of reproduction, of “theological reproduction” (Armstrong 2017). In that context, I do appreciate the history lessons I receive from my readers (about the *historical* Hagar! about mothering and its periodizations) but, as Sara-Maria Sorentino recognized, I am perhaps most skeptical of the privilege accorded, across disciplinary and theological fields, to historical difference, to the pushing into the past of what continues to linger as means of production and reproduction, as mothers (Anidjar 2010).

I should probably clarify that I was most worried about a secular reading of my arguments about the maternal. I myself have grown wary of the proliferation, the universalization, of “political theologies,” and did not want to write about “the political theology of mothers.” But I do think I could have done more to

convey my sense that “the political as maternal” is not a worldly or secular assertion. This is perhaps one of the moments where the book would have gained from referring to Cedric Robinson, as I tried to do above. Having said that, the ahistorical reading of the Bible that orients much of my argument (which, contrary to persistent doxa, does *not* mean “essential” or “essentialist”) would be, I thought, difficult to ignore. As would be the psychoanalytic bend that is, as Zehra Mehdi uniquely recognized here, of equal significance. I was mistaken, but here is not the place to explain why those who ignore the theological might find redemption in engaging with psychoanalysis, the only science I’m aware of that does not take ignorance as a horizon to be conquered but as a structural necessity of whatever we call “knowledge,” or indeed “science.” A maternal science, you could say (and Winnicott knew it).

Speaking of psychoanalysis, the sovereign manner in which a number of my readers seem ostensibly less interested in mothers, or in maternal difference, or in the political as maternal, is, I will confess, most puzzling to me. On the one hand, I am happy to be proven wrong in my reading of Hobbes, say, and I will concede that Marika Rose makes a convincing argument to that effect (I certainly did not consider that Hagar might be a father—a father!!—for Hobbes). On the other hand, I cannot help but wonder about the broader implications of that argument, and specifically with regard to mothers. Rose goes quite far in showing that—but let us acknowledge that this happens between the lines as much as on the surface of the text—mothers are *really* fathers for Hobbes. This certainly justifies (but also unsettles) the conclusion that, much as Hobbes would be erasing it, I myself would be evading the relation—shall we call it an *analogy*?—between mother and father. True, I barely talked about fathers (I find it difficult to think I really should have added to that particular, and particularly popular, entry). No doubt, I have also downplayed Hobbes’ clear preference for fathers. Still, Hobbes did write of mothers in a way that continues to puzzle (or indeed elude) his readers. And there seems to be something to learn from that (learn, not acquire or appropriate). And about sovereignty? Rose might be correct that “far from being *otherwise* than paternal, patriarchal, or fraternal,” sovereignty and authority remain within those familiar (and familial) bounds. But maternal difference, as I try to describe it, is neither dependent on my reading of Hobbes nor on *his* theory of sovereignty. Nevertheless, I still think Hobbes was helping advance the matter and contributing to the acknowledgement of maternal difference.

But of course, the specific maternal difference that has drawn the most attention from my readers here is the difference between mother and slave. Here and there, I deploy the rhetoric of the “final instance,” as well as, of course, that of the first instance, which certainly resonates with Marxist and other historicist readings. My reservations about history and historical materialism would require more space than I have here, so I will simply repeat that I have been uninterested in the rhetoric of beginnings, of birth and of firstness, and did my utmost to undo the significance it is so generally granted. The same goes for historical events that are said to constitute not only a radical beginning but also an absolute rupture and an eradication of everything that precedes it, or vice versa. I do not have one “point of departure,” as Leah Kaplan claims. I have, at least, two. Elsewhere, I have written quite a bit in order to insist on racial (and religious) difference (the Jew, the Arab) and on the historicity of (religion and) race. Obviously, I cannot judge whether I have provided “a less undetermined account of race,” as Sorentino demands. I have wondered about the strange leveling of, well, history that takes place once certain (or perhaps all) categories of historical analysis (region, religion, race, gender, and so forth) are universalized. I



acknowledge that, toward a better understanding of maternal difference, I sought to learn—did learn—from Black and African-American studies with regard to mothers and slaves. If I have failed to inscribe the *impossibility* of thinking one without the other (after Derrida, I would say here that they are “indissociable but heterogeneous,” like reason and madness in Derrida’s argument with Foucault) (Derrida, 2001),<sup>10</sup> if what I have done instead is, as Sara-Maria Sorentino asserts, to favor and privilege, *logically and historically*, the mother in relation to the slave, then things are even direr than I feared with my writing. It matters little, in other words, whether we *begin* with the mother (or, as we have been told more often, with the father). What matters is that we—any collective, that is—endure through time by way of reproduction, which means, if not exclusively, by way of mothers—and slaves, if there is a difference. My argument, after all, is that much as I learned from Spillers, Hartman, Wilderson, and others, thinking the slave, abstract and concrete, requires that we reconsider the maternal (rarely a figure of abstraction), what Zakiyyah Iman Jackson calls “the Black mater(nal)” (Jackson 2020). Accordingly, we must reconsider the maternal in the light, the admittedly dark light, of slavery. I therefore disagree that blackness has a “unique” function, that “blackness functions as metaphor for discursive power,” as Leah Kaplan claims. For better and for worse, I argue that, opaque in its very historicity, blackness occupies a material and theologico-political, indeed maternal, role and function in the production and reproduction of the polity, in this case, the United States of America. I argue, in other words, that even the slaves, which is to say—the mothers “outraged,” “denied”—have “at the *very same time*” become “the founding term of a human and social enactment” (Spillers, 2003, p. 228). Whether or not that capacity is acknowledged or experienced, in other words, and *pace* Leah Kaplan, they “have the capacity to inscribe themselves into the polity of the world.” Describing the very extremities of that polity, is that not what Toni Morrison did? Is it not what Adrienne Rich also documented in *Of Woman Born*, when she wrote of her “Black mother”? (Rich, 1986, pp. 253-255).<sup>11</sup> Are we not all, we Americans (and not only Americans), “the afterlife of slavery”? My readers wish for a better account of the slave and of slavery. They wish for a better account of race. I aimed for a better account of the political. But I concede to their sense of urgency, to the emergency out of which they write. I do not know, therefore, that I am well placed to engage with these comparative or analogical questions, to ask for or initiate more engagements with the truly provocative issue of “junior partners”—are mothers junior partners? but which mothers?—or to provide a more explicit philosophical explanation of the process whereby analogy becomes impossible, or is rather placed under erasure. I shall, no doubt, be out of my league as well were I to add, somewhat banally, that numbers (the plurality of mothers), whether beginning with 1, 2, or 0, offer two very distinct matrices of analogy: order or quantity. In this context, I find Sorentino’s insistence on order and on firstness, along with the more general claim conveyed by others to identify the *content* of zero as if outside of an enumeration or quantification (analogy has many ruses), unconvincing, particularly when it insistently computes *suffering*. Leah Kaplan further, and surprisingly, claims that I fail to address “the violence of humanization,” and that my reasoning leaves the mother “unscathed.” Perhaps. More important, I think, is the puzzling way in which that mothering is erased or diminished, even cancelled, while it continues to make and reproduce the polity. America, of course, but any polity, along with the role that Black and brown men and women play in the reproduction, the duration

<sup>10</sup> The phrase “indissociable but heterogeneous” doesn’t appear in this essay, but it is used elsewhere by Derrida.

<sup>11</sup> In the first edition of *Of Woman Born*, Rich had ignored the suffering and exploitation involved, but this does not change the fact that, just like much of America and other polities, she too was mothered. See also, for an otherwise contained perspective, Segato 2022.

and perdurance, of everything we call, rightly or wrongly, “political”: the sum total of the world or of the polity which mothers and slaves do in fact birth and raise, produce and reproduce.

But I see no way of being content with the tentative answers I have tried to provide here, and I acknowledge that the challenges put to me by my readers are deserving of more time and space. Like my mothers, they will continue to accompany me. What I might say, in lieu of a conclusion, is that, in this time of mourning, what I take away, and particularly take to heart, is Zehra Mehdi’s powerful evocation of grieving mothers, which speaks to the impossible emergencies we face, however unequally, however incommensurably. Whatever our investment or disinvestment in the future, the mourning of mothers demands that we rethink our sense of time, of duration. For the time of mourning, mothers are telling us, that time is now. But which mothers? And which loss? Which mourning? Nicole Loraux engages with little else as she herself deploys a different sense of the word “antipolitical,” with which I began. Here too there is little by way of a direct answer to Mehdi’s questions. Loraux speaks of mourning and of the antipolitical as “the other of politics, but also another politics, no longer based on consensus and living together, but on what I call ‘the bonds of division’” (Loraux, 2002, p. 23). Though she alludes to it here (“tragedy, as an antipolitical genre, has a particular rapport with lamentation and mourning” [p. 51]), Loraux elsewhere elaborates what she calls “mothers in mourning” and the essential, but dangerous, relation—the maternal difference—they have with the political (Loraux, 1998). What she makes clear is that, whether political or antipolitical, maternal mourning is not restricted to children, nor perhaps to being or beings. It speaks less to the future, in fact, than to mothers “themselves,” which is to say, to maternal alienation, the impossibility of mourning. Maternal mourning, in other words, rather raises the very question with which my readers and I seem to be struggling and arguing: How many mothers? And which mothers? Which mourning, and for whom? And *between mothers*, which race or class, nation or religion? Which world and polity?

### Author Note

*Gil Anidjar* teaches in the Department of Religion at Columbia University. He is the author, among other books, of *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford UP, 2003), *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (Columbia UP, 2014) and more recently, *On the Sovereignty of Mothers: The Political as Maternal* (Columbia UP, 2024).

## References

- Anidjar, G. (2010). Against history (G. Anidjar, Trans.). In M. Nicheanian, *The historiographic perversion* (pp. 125–159). Columbia University Press.
- Anidjar, G. (2024). *Alma mater (The university at war)*. shc.stanford.edu/arcade/interventions/alma-mater-university-war-part-1
- Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition*. University of Chicago Press.
- Armstrong, A. (2017). Of flesh and spirit: Race, reproduction, and sexual difference in the 29 turn to Paul. *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 16(2), 126–141.
- Asad, T. (2020). Thinking about religion through Wittgenstein. *Critical Times*, 3(3), 403–442.
- Baldwin, J. (1984). *Notes of a native son*. Beacon Press.
- Briggs, L. (2017). *How all politics became reproductive politics: From welfare reform to foreclosure to Trump*. University of California Press.
- Cavarero, A. (2005). *For more than one voice: Toward a philosophy of vocal expression* (P. A. Kottman, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
- Champlin, J. (2013). Born again: Arendt's "natality" as figure and concept. *The Germanic Review*, 88(2), 150–164.
- Derrida, J. (2001). Cogito and the history of madness (A. Bass, Trans.). In *Writing and difference* (pp. 36–76). Routledge.
- Douglass, P. D. (2025). *Engendering Blackness: Slavery and the ontology of sexual violence*. Stanford University Press.
- Engels, F. (1972). *The origin of the family, private property and the state*. International Publishers.
- Hartman, S. (2007). *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hartman, S. (2016). The belly of the world: A note on Black women's labors. *Souls*, 18(1), 168–169.
- Jackson, Z. I. (2020). *Becoming human: Matter and meaning in an antiblack world*. New York University.
- Judge, R. S. (2024). *Prophetic Maharaja: Loss, sovereignty, and the Sikh tradition in colonial South Asia*. Columbia University Press.
- Knott, S. (2019). *Mother is a verb: An unconventional history*. Sarah Crichton Books.
- Loraux, N. (1998). *Mothers in mourning* (C. Pache, Trans.). Cornell University Press.
- Loraux, N. (2000). *Born of the earth: Myth and politics in Athens* (S. Stewart, Trans.). Cornell University Press.
- Loraux, N. (2002). *The mourning voice: An essay on Greek tragedy* (E. T. Rawlings, Trans.). Cornell University Press.
- Marder, E. (2012). *The mother in the age of mechanical reproduction: Psychoanalysis, photography, deconstruction*. Fordham University Press.
- Marx, K. (2024). *Capital: Critique of political economy* (P. Reitter, Trans.). Princeton University Press.
- Morgenstern, N. (2020). Maternal sovereignty: Destruction and survival in Jesmyn 1 Ward's salvage the bones. In J. Wyatt & S. George (Eds.), *Reading contemporary Black British and African American women writers: Race, ethics, narrative form* (pp. 104–121). Routledge.
- Morgenstern, N. (2024). "Is your mother well?": Touch and the racialized maternal subject in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" and Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild." In S. George & J. Wyatt

- (Eds.), *Experimental subjectivities in global Black women's writing: Race and innovation* (pp. 119–133). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Nash, J. C. (2021). *Birthing Black mothers*. Duke University Press.
- Rich, A. (1986). *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution*. W.W. Norton & Co.
- Robinson, C. J. (2016). *The terms of order: Political science and the myth of leadership*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Segato, R. (2022). Black Oedipus: Coloniality and the foreclosure of gender and race (R. McGlazer, Trans.). In R. Segato, *The critique of coloniality: Eight essays* (pp. 133–158). Routledge.
- Sexton, J. (2010). People-of-color-blindness: Notes on the afterlife of slavery. *Social Text*, 28(2), 31–56.
- Spillers, H. (2003). *Black, white and in color: Essays on American literature and culture*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ward, D. (2014). *A Kentucky of mothers*. <https://us1.campaign-archive.com/?u=0809b771ad9123934911c8d9b&id=4e3ac425e5&e=84f2ed304a>
- Wilderson, F. B., III. (2010). *Red, white & black: Cinema and the structure of U.S. antagonisms*. Duke University Press.