

Foreword: Mothers and Sikh Studies

An Introduction to Forum on Gil Anidjar's *On the Sovereignty of Mothers: The Political as Maternal*

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"Mothers—where else would one begin?" asks Gil Anidjar in his *On the Sovereignty of Mothers: The Political as Maternal* (Anidjar, 2024, p. 22).¹ Anidjar's inquiry into mothers and the political does not locate an origin of sovereigns, the one who gives birth to kings, but raises the question of maternal writing, a field of "transmission and translation," of preservation, but also of devastation (6). There is a maternal contract, the mothering of mothers, which sustains and enables reproduction, Anidjar teaches us. It is a contract we must read (and reread) to learn of the plurality of maternal functions, of being mothered and unmothered (18).

If the project of a journal is always already a collective one (itself a field of transmission and translation), we can say this new editorial venture for the *Sikh Research Journal* begins with mothers because, as Anidjar insists, we have all been mothered. It is unquestionably a verb that is central to Sikh Studies, especially since scholars have often invoked mothering to prove the Sikh tradition's feminist credentials.² We have recognized, albeit in limited form, that the collective is maternal: "From her, we have been born." Yet it might be time for all of us to reread, with Anidjar and his interlocutors, the maternal contract that we may have taken for granted, to ask of the significance of the claim that sovereignty is birthed by mothers who have themselves been mothered, a sovereignty of mothers. What collective has been made and preserved by mothering? Is the 'her' reducible to the feminine? Is it singular or plural? Should we have been saying, "from them, we have been born"? Has our monomaterialism allowed us to forget mothers, the chain of mothers, the mother and the slave? Yet the proliferation of other mothers invites a reading of the maternal function that, as Elissa Marder demonstrates, is "an uncanny, ambiguous vessel that contains uncontrollable events, ideas, temporalities, and that paradoxically creates a space for the birth of futures that may have otherwise remained unimaginable" (Marder, 2012, p. 8).³ What collectives are possible when we read the maternal contract? What, then, of the political and, yes, of the secular?

Scholars in Sikh Studies have, of course, asked of mothers. The Guru Granth Sahib, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh has argued, shares a "feminist emphasis that the mother *bodies* forth her child," which, alongside other images of mothering, "validates femaleness" (Kaur Singh, 1993, p. 58). For Kaur Singh, the mother is to be revered precisely because she mothers. As she writes, "The Mother in the Sikh tradition is revered because she is a Mother—one who has gone through the natural processes of conception, gestation, giving birth, and lactation" (Kaur Singh, 1993, p. 59). These processes promise, we are told, reciprocity and accord: "the crux of the mother-child relationship is harmony: it is a state where there is no opposition, no conflict, no suggestion of fear, or possibility of hostility" (Kaur Singh, 1993, p. 68). But, as I suggested above, perhaps such a reading of the maternal contract in Sikh Studies has moved a bit too quickly, both historically and theoretically. The continuum of bodies that Kaur Singh celebrates—bodies still marked, however, by sexual difference—certainly raises more questions than it answers. What to make of the assumption of an undifferentiated mother-child unity, especially when we consider, say, the prohibition against incest (even

¹ Gil Anidjar, *On the Sovereignty of Mothers: The Political as Maternal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), 22. Hereafter cited in text.

² For a caution regarding the analytic moves that lead to such an easy conclusion, see manmit singh, "Gender Abolition, Limits of Sikh Feminism, and Critique," *Sikh Research Journal* 10, no. 1 (2025): 43-58.

³ For one reading of other mothers in the Sikh tradition, see Satbir Singh, "Dandy (de)livery," *An und für sich*, May 20, 2025, itself.blog/2025/05/20/dandy-delivery-prophetic-maharaja-book-event/

though that prohibition might not be reducible to strictly an anthropological culture) (Derrida & Roudinesco, 2004, p. 37)?

To center unity necessarily requires that we theorize a separation, for which unity comes to offer a solution. There is the formation of distance, which is why we speak of mother *and* child. It is a separation that institutes limits, limits that allow the child not to be devoured by a maternal crocodile (Fink, 1995, p. 56). Let us call the institution of limits a question of *maryada*, of ethical conduct, of the establishment of rules. The difficulties around how these limits are instituted, if at all, are why the mother is a critical psychic presence and absence, one who is good and bad, angelic and narcissistic, nurturing and attacking, ordinary and devoted, loving and cruel, even depressed and dead.⁴ Such theorizations allow for a mapping of the "mother's inner empire," but these maps invite numerous claims, threats, and aggressions (Lacan, 2006, p. 93). "Which mothers," indeed, as Anidjar queries? Which horizons have become narrowed?

To follow one crucial, but disputed, map in the atlas, we can say that the goal cannot be to discover and uphold a natural reciprocity between mother and child, but to ask about an interdiction in which the mother is inaccessible to the subject (Copjec, 2015, p. 94). What, then, are we to make of the desire for such a unity when the mother is lost, a question of castration, the granting of a "fatherly reprieve," that paternal function?⁵ But perhaps such a corrective reading of unity has also moved too hastily; "a limited sequence" is what Jacques Derrida called it (Derrida & Roudinesco, 2004, p. 37). Once unity is no longer sequential or natural, the mother and maternal function lose their integrity and appear as uncanny, disturbing our understandings of time and space, to return to Marder, troubling origins and ends (Marder, 2012). Note, for example, how "the very concept of the 'Mother (as bearer of human birth),' " Marder writes, "is haunted, from the very beginning, by a radical confusion concerning the possibility of discerning between birth and death, and between presence and absence" (Marder, 2012, p. 4). We remain "both bound to and exiled from our own birth" (Marder, 2012, p. 4). And, therefore, from mothers too, who are more than one, "an irreducible plurality," says Derrida and Anidjar following him (Derrida & Roudinesco, 2004, p. 41).

On guard, the friends of psychoanalysis have taught us well that the child and the paternal and maternal functions require more attention, although such a conclusion might not be too far from the problem set forth by psychoanalysts themselves. With whom are we dealing? "If it were only a question of Mummy and Daddy," Jacques Lacan himself recognized, "I would find it difficult to see how we could explain the facts that we are dealing with" (Lacan, 2017, p. 322). There is, for one, a question of language and grammar, which we have never done away with (67). Which is why we must ask: what of the "historic outline of dominance," of enslavement, our American Grammar Book, to follow Hortense Spillers (a grammar book

⁴ The citations, like mothers, are endless, but, for this list, see Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on Sexuality" (1905), trans. and ed. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. VII* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 125–243; Karen Horney, "Maternal Conflicts," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 3, no. 4 (1933): 455–463; Melanie Klein, *The Psychoanalysis of Children*, trans. Alix Strachey (New York: Grove, 1960); David Winnicott, *Babies and their Mothers* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 1987); André Green, "The Dead Mother," in *On Private Madness* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986); E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992); Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

⁵ I borrow "fatherly reprieve" from Hortense Spillers. See Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 80. We would do well to recall, following Spillers, that the paternal function is not merely a question of discovering a pre-given structure that determines role of the father. That is, the Name-of-the-Father is not simply a given point, but a process in which any object, thing, activity, etc. can function to mediate. The paternal function is plural. As Lacan writes in relation to the case of Little Hans, castration, and the horse that constitutes Little Hans's limits: "To understand the function of the horse, the path to be taken is not that of trying to find what the equivalent of the horse is, whether it's little Hans himself, or Hans's mother, or Hans's father, because it's all of these and many other things besides. It can be anything and everything in all this, in that little Hans makes successive attempts to apply to his world, in order to structure it, the signifying system that is coherent with the horse. Throughout these attempts, the horse manages to cover one or another of the major composite elements in the world of little Hans, notably his father, his mother, himself, his little sister Hanna, his little playmates, the fantasmatic girls, and many more" (299, emphasis added). See Jacques Lacan, *The Object Relation: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book IV*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020).

that has called into question psychoanalysis itself) (Spillers, 1987, p. 66)? What then when we write and think under the pressure of the Atlantic Slave Trade? What of the "fatherly reprieve" in the reversal of the castration function—if the father is not spoken of and removed from "mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law (Spillers, 1987, p. 80)? This does not mean, however, that we can simply locate and celebrate a system of matriarchy, of historical difference, of other mothers. As Spillers writes, "Such naming is false because the female could not, in fact, claim her child, and false, once again, because 'motherhood' is not perceived in the prevailing social climate as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance" (Spillers, 1987, p. 80).

In different ways, Anidjar and his readers in this forum, Roy Cherian, Sara Maria-Sorentino, Theresa Gregor, Zehra Mehdi, Leah Kaplan, Marika Rose, and Timothy Snediker, all caution against quick readings of the maternal function. What of "the destructive power of mothers"? What of, as Mehdi asks, "their power to kill?" With such power, the maternal contract binds, Gregor writes, "unequal parties and is perpetually rewritten." It is a writing that occurs in relation to the father, even though that relation can be elided, as Rose compels us to remember. It is a writing that is also bound to a context, Kaplan argues, in which racial slavery might be incommensurable to the maternal function as Anidjar understands it. Consider Hagar. Is Hagar relegated to the same "assetification primarily reserved for the transatlantic racial slave"? What if "Hagar is not for the taking," to follow Snediker? What these readings require we consider is that the mother might be, as Sorentino writes, "conscripted as a 'junior partner.'" What destruction, and whose fear, then? Is it reproduction or destruction, to borrow from Roy Cherian, or reproduction *and* destruction?

Such questions force us to attend to a different number than one or two, but a number that Sorentino pushes us to study: zero, which "gives birth to twos and ones, sovereigns and mothers, but none it can claim." Therefore, rather than the singularity or plurality of the mother, the maternal contract, we must ask of the slave as sovereignty's condition of possibility, in which the question is "not between the good and bad mother, but between the good and bad slave." But Anidjar maintains there are *mothers*, a question of quantity rather than order, which is also a question of time and difference, between generations and race, nation, class, caste, religion, gender, and more. Mothering is where differences are established, divisions are marked, which again makes possible the question: which mothers (itself a question that might be a game of seductions)?

What we learn in the questioning of mothers and mothering is that we must continue to ask, following Anidjar and his vigilant interlocutors here, of persistence, duration, and perdurance of collectives, their (im)possible foundations, absent or plural, especially in the ongoing catastrophes that continue to devour the world today. These emergencies require we continue to read, and re-read, the maternal contract, which is itself being rewritten. It is a reading risked by our generous contributors here, but also now, I hope, by the readers of this journal.

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