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# Sikh Research Journal

ISSN: 2771-3520

Vol. 10 - No. 2 - 2025

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## Foreword: Mothers and Sikh Studies

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

Rajbir S Judge

"Mothers—where else would one begin?" asks Gil Anidjar in his *On the Sovereignty of Mothers: The Political as Maternal* (Anidjar, 2024, p. 22).<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> 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

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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/](https://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.<sup>4</sup> 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?<sup>5</sup> 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

<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> 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.

### Author Note

*Rajbir Singh Judge is an Associate Professor of History and an Associate Member of Asian and Asian American Studies at California State University, Long Beach. His first book, Prophetic Maharaja: Loss, Sovereignty, and the Sikh Tradition in Colonial South Asia, was published by Columbia University Press in 2024.*

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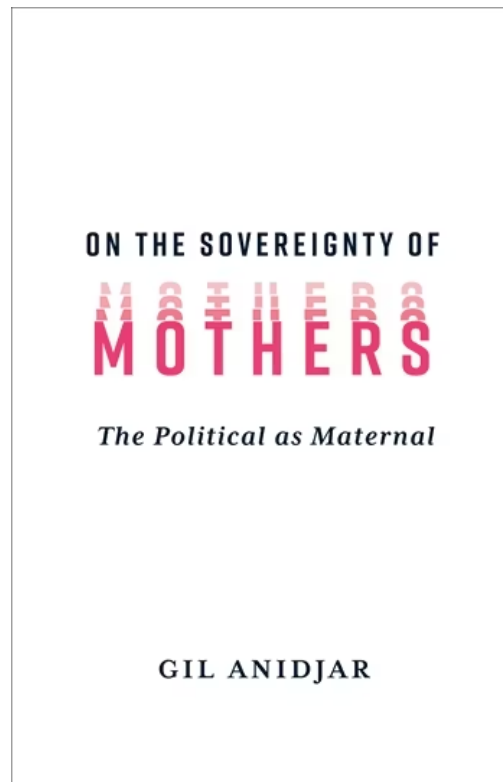
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## Book Forum

Book: *On the Sovereignty of Mothers -The Political as Maternal*

Author: Gil Anidjar

Publisher: Columbia University Press, 2024



## Abstract

This forum brings together reflections on Gil Anidjar's recent book, *On the Sovereignty of Mothers: The Political as Maternal* (2024). Following the essays is a response from the author.

1. **Twos, Ones, and Zeros: Mothers, Sovereigns, Slaves** - Sara-Maria Sorentino
2. **Hagar and History** - Timothy Snediker
3. **Mother Wolf** - Marika Rose
4. **Neither Mother nor Slave** - Leah Kaplan
5. **Umi Says** - Roy Cherian
6. **We Are Because She Was/Is** - Theresa Gregor
7. **To Grieve, or Not to Grieve** - Zehra Mehdi
8. **Author Response: Maternal Difference** - Gil Anidjar

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

Sara-Maria Sorentino

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

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

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

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

<sup>1</sup> On unsovereignty, see Sexton (2014).

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

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

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

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

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<sup>2</sup> On anoriginality, see Moten (2018, pp. 1-40).

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

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

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

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Bohrer (2019).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>5</sup> Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, 7–26.

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

#### Author Note

*Sara-Maria Sorentino is an Associate Professor of Gender & Race Studies at the University of Alabama and her research works on developing the limits of a critical logic of slavery. She currently serves as Associate Faculty for the Mimbres School for the Humanities, for whom she thanks, among other things, for hosting a reading group on Anidjar’s book.*

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## Hagar and History

Timothy Snediker

“The Bible is itself a political battlefield.”<sup>1</sup> Gil Anidjar writes this apropos of the distance between the exuberance and chaos of the Bible when considered alongside the systematic and mathematical precision of ancient Greece. One suspects that Anidjar has in mind the comparison drawn by Erich Auerbach in the opening pages of *Mimesis* between Homer and the Elohist (viz., the Greek and the Hebrew). In the former, all is present, illuminated, explicit; in the latter, all is past and future, shrouded, implicit.<sup>2</sup> Auerbach infamously argues that it is from the biblical Elohist, not Homer, that the spirit of Western literature descends. (So, too, the very idea of history, but I am getting ahead of myself.) Indeed, Anidjar mentions (but does not cite) Auerbach on the very next page (27) of his short but dense *On the Sovereignty of Mothers*. The passing reference to Auerbach, and more specifically to Auerbach’s theory of “figuration,” is worth dwelling on. For when it comes to the biblical-political battlefield, much depends on what one understands by figuration, or figural interpretation—indeed figura itself—to say nothing of the figures of Sarah and Hagar, the mother and the slave.

Anidjar has written a beautiful and provocative book, and I am grateful for it. If, in what follows, I fixate on but a handful of its pages, this reflects the limits of my own reading and understanding. I want simply to say something about what Anidjar has said about the Bible and about race. Doing so obliges me to draw out some of the stakes of Anidjar’s reading of Hagar (and thus, too, his reading of Paul—and of Augustine, who too reads Paul). I have in mind the profound tension between historical and symbolic readings of the Bible, a tension that the Christian mode of figural interpretation claims to have the power to dissolve. Accordingly, I will be obliged to say a few words about Auerbach’s theory of figuration, as it is most comprehensively developed in his 1938 essay “Figura.” I’ll conclude with a thought—as yet only a thought—about the ‘history’ of ‘race.’

To put it briefly and bluntly, what I see in *On the Sovereignty of Mothers* is an attempt to think mothers and slaves in a way that resists easy reterritorialization by—what else?—Christianity. It is also an attempt to think history and race (scare quotes dropped) in a way that rhymes with justice and truth. In the end, it is my sense that Hagar both confirms and confounds these attempts, because—one must insist on this—Hagar is not ours for the taking.

### Neither Historicist nor Symbolic

In note 31 to Chapter 1 (p.119), Anidjar makes an interesting methodological remark. He raises the question of the historicity—specifically, the *modernity*—of the ‘racial contract’ theorized by Charles Mills and others, as well as of the concept of race itself. After affirming the modernity of race, Anidjar remarks that the

<sup>1</sup> Gil Anidjar, *On the Sovereignty of Mothers: The Political as Maternal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), 26. All references to this text will be cited hereafter in the body of the essay.

<sup>2</sup> See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. William R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3-23.

argument of his book is “neither historical nor historicist.” He instead proposes to read the “dialectic of mother and slave as implicating, figuring, or prefiguring, the problem of race.” That Anidjar takes this dialectic seriously becomes clear a few pages later in the body of the text (32ff.), where he offers an ingenious reading of Hagar and Sarah through Hegel’s infamous master-slave dialectic. Spoiler alert: the slave Hagar turns out to be the truth of the mother Sarah (37). What interests me most, however, is the claim that this dialectic figures or prefigures the problem of race. The implications of this claim for thinking about the Bible, history, and race are illuminating.

First, one should remark on the temporal torsion (which is not to say distortion) effected by the invocation of figuration. One could ask: Is the dialectic of mother and slave an ancient or a modern dialectic? A Biblical Hebrew or a German Idealist dialectic? We are told that it is neither historical nor historicist; thus, it is perhaps both ancient and modern. What matters is that this ancient-Biblical-Hebrew-modern-German-Idealist dialectic *figures or prefigures something modern*, namely, “the problem of race” (p.119, n.31). Second, Anidjar goes on to make clear that what is at stake in the figural dimension of his argument, and of the political battlefield in which it is entrenched, has nothing to do with a hermeneutical reduction of the figures of Hagar and Sarah to *mere symbols*. That is to say, Hagar does not ‘symbolize’ slavery any more than Sarah ‘symbolizes’ motherhood. The specifically *figural* relation of Hagar to slavery is not symbolic. It is, rather, a genuinely historical relation, though its historicity is, in an important but paradoxical sense, downstream from its figurality. (This will bring us, in just a moment, to Auerbach.)

Anidjar’s avoidance of the conceptual pitfalls of symbolism is well warranted, especially given that he draws from an archive penned by Black women such as Jennifer Nash, who are concerned with “a form of relationality, a set of practices, a form of labor, an embodied experience,” rather than with the reduction of Black motherhood to a “political category that is synonymous with pain.”<sup>3</sup> Anidjar is instead interested in what Nash calls the “*longue durée* of slavery,” which goes back—all the way back—to antiquity, to the writings of Saints Paul and Augustine.

In the Bible, and at least since Paul, Hagar—that ‘shadow,’ as the famously mother-loving Augustine described her, ‘the foreshadowing symbol [that] was itself foreshadowed’—is undoubtedly considered a slave, a servant and a slave. 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. (27)

Here, Anidjar refers to Auerbach, who “would have spoken of *figuration*,” who would have spoken “of Hagar as a prefiguration of ancient and modern slavery” (27-28). But what does it mean to say that Hagar is a prefiguration—a *figura*—of something or someone, perhaps some *people*, yet to come?

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Nash, qtd. in Anidjar, *On the Sovereignty of Mothers*, 119, n.34. See Jennifer C. Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021). See, too, the other pivotal Black authors cited by Anidjar in this passage: Dolores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Ossining, NY: Orbis, 2013); Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Amaryah Armstrong, “Of Flesh and Spirit: Race, Reproduction, and Sexual Difference in the Turn to Paul,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2017).

This is a question worth pressing, because Anidjar rightly seeks to avoid the traps of both historicism and symbolism. And yet it is precisely the figural hermeneutics of the Christian tradition that presents us with a reading of scripture in which Hagar the slave is irreducible both to historicist criticism (because she is a prophetic figure of a truth yet to come) and to symbolist or allegorical reduction (because she is a historically real person). In this sense, the reference to Auerbach is warranted. But the book is perhaps not yet finished with Auerbach, to say nothing of figural interpretation itself, which, as I've argued elsewhere, was the hermeneutical mechanism by which the logic of supersession was crystallized in the Christian tradition.<sup>4</sup> There were certainly precursors and forerunners (Justin Martyr comes to mind), but the chief alchemists of this logic were the Latin theologians Tertullian of Carthage and Saint Augustine of Hippo. This, in any case, is what Auerbach demonstrates in his pathbreaking and painstaking *criticism* of figural interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

### *Figura*

Auerbach offers a dense and illuminating account of *figura's* antiquity. The term was exceptionally versatile: it referred not only to a 'sensible three-dimensional shape,' but also to 'form' in the sense of poetic form; to 'figures of speech' or 'allegories;' to the 'figure' of a man or a woman, as in English usage; and to 'copy' or 'image,' as in Lucretius. Indeed, Lucretius is one of Auerbach's privileged examples, because it is in *De Rerum Natura* that the "playful association between original and copy" is most strikingly captured by *figura*.<sup>6</sup> By far the most significant development in the semantic life of *figura*, however, lies in the way it was deployed by Tertullian of Carthage in his polemics against his theological enemies: on the one hand, the arch-heretic Marcion of Sinope; on the other hand, the Jews. In Tertullian—and in Augustine after him—*figura* is meant to safeguard nothing less than the historical truth of the Christian faith.

In Tertullian's usage, *figura* means "historically real prophecy." In the practice of figural interpretation, one reads "the people and events of the Old Testament as 'figures' or historically real prophecies of New Testament eschatology."<sup>7</sup> What makes Tertullian's procedure so important and novel is the insistence that "both the figure itself and what it prophesies are historically real in equal measure."<sup>8</sup> What is essential, then, is that for Tertullian a figure is a real, literal, and historical person or event that nonetheless signifies something beyond itself. *Figura*, one might say, points up its own negativity. What is decisive is that this negativity (and what it indexes) is itself historically real. But this means that we have to guard against the confusion endemic to the semantic range of *figura*, especially the way that its English usage almost always

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Snediker, "Figural Interpretation and the Logic of Supersession," PhD Dissertation, UC Santa Barbara, 2024, esp. Chs. 1 and 2.

<sup>5</sup> I specify that Auerbach's "Figura" is a criticism of figural interpretation to signal my profound agreement with the arguments of James I. Porter, who, to my knowledge, is the only reader of Auerbach to have fully digested Auerbach's deeply ambivalent view of figural interpretation. See James I. Porter, "Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Autumn 2008): 115-147; James I. Porter, "Disfigurations: Erich Auerbach's Theory of Figura," *Critical Inquiry* 44 (Autumn 2017): 80-113; James I. Porter, "Old Testament Realism in the Writings of Erich Auerbach," in Shai Ginsburg, Martin Land, and Jonathan Boyarin (eds.), *Jews and the Ends of Theory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 187-224. By contrast, the lion's share of scholarship on Auerbach has dubiously assumed that *figura* is not only the 'skeleton key' to his thought, but that Auerbach himself subscribed to the Christian-figural-interpretative view of history!

<sup>6</sup> Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in *Selected Essays: Time, History, and Literature*, trans. Jane O. Newman, ed. James I. Porter (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 69.

<sup>7</sup> Auerbach, "Figura," 80.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

signifies something non-literal, that is, something figurative or allegorical. Instead, we should understand that Tertullian explicitly opposes his *figural* reading of scripture to a merely *figurative* reading of the same.

To take one well-known example: in *Adversus Marcionem* III.16, Tertullian claims that the Old Testament figure Hoshea son of Nun, receives his new name (i.e., Joshua; see Num. 13:16) from Moses in order to prefigure, or prophesy, a Joshua yet to come —namely, Joshua, or Jesus, of Nazareth (the two share the Hebrew name *Yehoshua*). Joshua thus becomes a figure of the Christian concept of grace. Unlike the Law, here figured by Moses, Joshua can, and does, lead the people of Israel into the promised land. As a figure of grace, Joshua son of Nun is also, and already, a figure of Joshua the Christ, who is the fulfillment of Joshua son of Nun. Here we can see how *figura* internalizes the original-copy distinction under the rubric of prophecy and fulfillment. For this reason, *figura* is able to point to a ‘future original.’ In the example above, Joshua the Christ is the true origin (because he is the fulfillment) of the figure Joshua son of Nun; yet Joshua son of Nun already pertains to Joshua the Christ, because *figura* is ultimately nothing other than this literally and historically real pointing-away-from-itself towards its own—its *proper*—fulfillment, which is itself literally and historically real. Within the historical schema of figural interpretation, a figure like Joshua son of Nun is, paradoxically, a copy that temporally precedes its original.

When, some two hundred years after Tertullian, Augustine takes up the program of figural interpretation, he preserves this emphasis on literality. What Augustine adds to the mix is the ambition to formulate a full-blown theology of history (as one glimpses in *Civitas Dei*). The entire Old Testament is, as it were, up for grabs in the game of figural interpretation.<sup>9</sup> And Hagar is swept up in the game as well. It’s worth noting, too, that Anidjar’s musings about what Auerbach *would have* said about Hagar are not idle. In fact, Auerbach does mention Hagar, albeit briefly and in passing, amidst a litany of examples drawn from Augustine’s figural interpretation of scripture. Auerbach specifies that, for Augustine, “Hagar the slave is a *figura* of the Old Testament, [and of] the *terrena Jerusalem*.”<sup>10</sup> Anidjar adds: *and of the (modern) problem of race*.

Doubtless, there is more than one way to read *figura*, more than one way to practice figural interpretation, and more than one way to speak of, and to understand, what is meant by ‘figuration’ in the sense given it by Auerbach and his inheritors. But it is also clear that Hagar *belongs*, if I may be permitted to use this term, to the practice of figural interpretation in a way that is indubitably Christian. As James I. Porter has very keenly pointed out, the ‘figures’ of the Old Testament never get to just *be themselves*.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps this is

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that another development in Augustine is the way that the New Testament, too, is increasingly subject to the protocols of figural interpretation. This should come as no surprise, since Tertullian’s aims were more polemical and thus much narrower. Tertullian was an apologist in a way that Augustine need not have been, which allowed Augustine to consider promises and prophecies within the Gospels themselves as prefiguring heavenly, especially eschatological, realities rather than ‘merely’ historical ones. See Auerbach’s commentary on this development in Auerbach, “Figura,” 100-101.

<sup>10</sup> Auerbach, “Figura,” 85. See Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed and trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16.11. Augustine is glossing Paul’s letter to the Galatians; see Galatians 4:21-31.

<sup>11</sup> “When,” inquires Porter (“Disfigurations,” 91), “are Saul—or Moses, or Aaron, or Hagar, and so on—ever *themselves*?” The answer is obvious: never, not even in their concrete historical existence, which is always already a sign-symptom of salvation history. Compare Porter’s gloss on Auerbach’s reading of the same ‘figures,’ which “affirms the real, concrete, and individual reality of each of the actors whose lives it, narrates in all their psychological complexity and depth, each of them deeply etched with time, from Adam and Noah to Sarah and Hagar, to Abraham and Isaac, David, Joab, Absalom, and the rest, none of whom is a stand-in for something else because all of them just are *themselves*” (ibid., 101).

everyone's fate, since (enter historicism!) no one can ever simply be themselves, if by 'being ourselves' we mean a straightforward extraction or abstraction from our social and historical context. But the point of revisiting Auerbach's analysis of *figura*, however, is to be mindful of the fact that what he ultimately uncovers is nothing less than the uniquely Christian character of the figural enterprise—and, one should add, the indelibly supersessionist logic of the Christian tradition.

What, then, does it mean to say, as Anidjar does, that Hagar *prefigures* the problem of race, given that this implies that the modern problem of race is the *fulfillment* of Hagar's rather ambiguous victory in the mother-slave dialectic? What, then, is the modern slave? Or, rather, *who*—for it cannot be Hagar—is the modern slave?

### A Thought

In an important essay, "Natural Slavery, Real Abstraction, and the Virtuality of Anti-Blackness," Sara-Maria Sorentino argues that the concept of slavery is an "emergent abstraction of anti-blackness," such that the canonical theorization of natural slavery (viz. Book I of Aristotle's *Politics*) can only be retrieved in an anti-Black manner.<sup>12</sup> The ramifications of Sorentino's argument far exceed the parameters of the present essay, but I refer to her here because her analysis has something to teach us, and perhaps to unteach us, about Hagar.

The natural slave, as it appears in Aristotle, is distinguished from the legal slave. Legal slavery refers to "the contingent (and not natural) condition of becoming adrift from the whole."<sup>13</sup> In other words, historic defenses of slavery, which frequently map onto regimes of indebtedness or captivity in war, are not defenses of slavery *as such*. Only Aristotle, it seems, was willing to offer a defense of slavery construed as natural. One key passage runs, roughly, as follows: natural slavery is justified "where it is advantageous as well as just for the one to be enslaved and the other to be master."<sup>14</sup> Here, the slave is something like a hand of the master's body. It is good for the (slavish) hand to serve the (master's) body, especially because the master's body needs to be able to leave the household (the *oikos*) to appear in the *polis*, where his potentiality can be most fully actualized. The slave, bless her heart, makes him, the master, so able.

As we might expect, Aristotle's defense of slavery is deeply ambivalent. Sorentino notes that "natural slavery not only exposes the enslavability of the Greeks" (because anyone, in principle, could be 'suited' for slavery), but "also turns mastership into a form of slavery, creating 'in the master a kind of desire that turns

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<sup>12</sup> Sara-Maria Sorentino, "Natural Slavery, Real Abstraction, and the Virtuality of Anti-Blackness," *Theory and Event*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2019), pp. 632. "To encircle the terms of the historiographical dilemma: if, on the one hand, blackness was operable among the ancient Greeks, then blackness (as philosophical indeterminacy) and slaveness (as its ontological infusion) risks being of such universal provenance that its categories could offer nothing substantial to the comprehension or critique of the trans-Atlantic trade. On the other hand, if blackness is a purely historical invention, consequent *from* early modern ruptures of slavery and codified through race, then it is one divisive construct among others on a spectrum of claims of belonging and its relationship to slavery is incidental. By arguing for a third option, slavery as an emergent abstraction of anti-blackness, I hope to clarify how natural slavery comes to invade and occupy the position of the transcendental, such that we can't go back without its freight, such that our exposure of the ancients will always be anti-black."

<sup>13</sup> Sorentino, "Natural Slavery," 634.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1255b7–8, 10.

him away from his obligations as citizen.”<sup>15</sup> There are other deep ambiguities, and much more ambivalence, in Aristotle’s theory of slavery, but what is most striking to the modern eye is that the slave, the *natural* slave, theorized by Aristotle is just that: a theory. The slaves that Aristotle knew were contingently enslaved. The natural slave did not exist for him as such. Or, rather, we should say that the natural slave existed for Aristotle only virtually, potentially, in theory.<sup>16</sup>

Sorentino’s work, conducted in the complementary registers of afro-pessimism and Black feminism, is concerned with the fact that the concept of natural slavery was taken up *in its actuality* in the sixteenth-century theological debates over the political-ontological status of Native Americans in the so-called New World.<sup>17</sup> The Spanish Dominican Francisco de Vitoria set the terms of the emergent theological consensus: Native Americans did *not* fall into the category of natural slaves. Of this decisive moment, Sorentino remarks that “it was the *application* of natural slavery that had become open for debate, not its relative truth, which suddenly was assumed.”<sup>18</sup> Given the spectacular reappearance of the ancient (hypothetical) category of natural slavery in the context of the very real dispute over the very real slavishness of very real (human?) beings, Sorentino trains her attention, and ours, on the curious “connection between the re-appearance of natural slavery as fact and the reification of blackness as unquestioned slaveness.”<sup>19</sup> For it turns out that, for the men of conscience in the sixteenth century, to be Black is to be slavish, to be enslaved, indeed, *to be a slave*. Naturally.

What was merely virtual in antiquity is actualized in modernity. But this means that the virtual slave is colored, so to speak, by the Blackness of the actual, natural slave. Should we say that Aristotle’s virtual slave *prefigures* the actual, natural, Black slave of the trans-Atlantic world-system? Or should we say, rather, that the actual, natural, Black slave is the truth (the future original!) of the virtual slave, who, for her part, is ever and always “the foreshadowing symbol [that] was itself foreshadowed?”<sup>20</sup>

And what, after all, shall we make of Hagar, who will have been the truth (the future original? or the mother?) of Sarah?

## Author Note

*Timothy Snediker* teaches philosophy and religion at Capital University. He received his PhD in Religious Studies from UC Santa Barbara, where he wrote a dissertation on figural interpretation and the logic of supersession in the Christian tradition and its afterlife in Hegel’s philosophy of religion.

<sup>15</sup> Sorentino, “Natural Slavery,” 638.

<sup>16</sup> Sorentino dwells at length on the hermeneutical problem of whether Aristotle’s description of the natural slave should be read as defense or denunciation. See Sorentino, “Natural Slavery,” 636-639.

<sup>17</sup> Sorentino, “Natural Slavery,” 643.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 637 (Book 15, Chapter 3).

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## Mother Wolf

Marika Rose

*On the Sovereignty of Mothers* sets out to “think the political otherwise than as paternal or patriarchal, otherwise than as fraternal”; to “think the political *as it has always been: maternal.*”<sup>1</sup> Into this project, Anidjar enlists Thomas Hobbes, the only social contract theorist to locate the origin of sovereignty not in the right of the father over the child, nor in the right of the husband over the wife (Pateman, 1989), but in the right of the mother (p. 72). In *Elements of Law*, Hobbes argues that the mother’s right derives not from her generation of the child but from her preservation of the child (p. 71). In *De Cive*, he writes that the mother who chooses to raise the child does so on the condition that, “being grown to full age he become not her enemy.” Mothers thus suspend the state of nature as a state of “universal enmity” (p. 72), occupying a double function as both “mother” and “lord.” In *Leviathan*, Hobbes holds that the mother’s natural dominion derives from the fact that it is she who first decides either to “nourish” or to “expose” the child (pp. 73). The maternal contract, Anidjar suggests, is that which “binds mother and child” but also “two mothers, two maternal functions, *two maternal powers*”: the power of preservation and the power of destruction (pp. 73), what Walter Benjamin calls founding or instituting power and divine power. It also marks a form of social life that stands between the undifferentiated multiplicity of the state of nature and the undivided unity of the commonwealth: one (the father), two (the mother), many (the state of nature). It is the sovereignty of the mother that mediates between the state of nature and the social contract. It is mothers who make and unmake the collective. It is mothers who “guard the world...preserve it and also guard us from it” (pp. 84-85). It is mothers who force the recognition that nations, unlike Hobbes’ men, are not created equal (pp. 96).

For Hobbes, however, it is not only mothers who bear the power both to destroy and to preserve. All contracts, all corporations, all nation- states are constituted by and around a single figure of sovereignty who, like the figure depicted on the cover of the *Leviathan*, holds a sword in one hand and a bishop’s crozier, symbol of pastoral power, in the other. The sovereign, like all mothers, stands in the gap between the social contract and the state of nature. The sovereign must threaten enough violence to hold back both the threat posed by other sovereigns and other nations, which, for Hobbes, remain forever in the state of nature, and the ever-present threat of chaos and rebellion posed from within by subjects who do not fear the sovereign’s capacity to enforce the contract (Hobbes, 1991, p. 90). Yet the sovereign must also know when to hold back, to ensure that the threat of violence does not overshadow the promise of preservation. Because, for Hobbes, the one inalienable right is the right to defend oneself against death, no contract can hold in the face of a threat to life.

Preservation, too, can be understood as a balance between the enactment and the withholding of violence. Preservation requires property, possessions, and commodities, which in turn require a kind of truce: a relinquishing of the universal natural “right to all things” which is the source of the war of all against all that

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<sup>1</sup> This piece was made possible by my Coombe Trust fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh. I am very grateful for the time and space given to me by IASH. Conversations with Anthony Paul Smith helped me work through the ideas and arguments here.

characterises the state of nature (Hobbes, 1991, p. 92). The first two laws of nature, Hobbes says, are to “seek peace” by laying down our right to all things and, second, “to defend ourselves” (Hobbes, 1991, p. 91). The sovereign must not only protect but also nourish. The sovereign nourishes their subjects, here both the sovereign’s own body and the sovereign’s children, by ensuring the proper circulation and distribution of commodities: both the blood which “nourisheth” the national body and the milk which subjects suckle from “the two breasts of our common Mother, Land, and Sea” (Hobbes, 1991, p. 170). Here again, preservation is not distinct from destructive power. Commodities can be acquired through exchange, labour, or war, and the sovereign must withhold sufficient land to “sustaine the whole expence to the common Peace, and defence necessarily required” (Hobbes, 1991, p. 173-174).

The question of the relationship between destruction and preservation was woven through Hobbes’ own life, as well as through his relationships with fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and children. Hobbes was born in 1588, a year widely prophesied to be a year of catastrophe and destruction, taken by some to be the eventual result of Martin Luther’s filial revolt against papal authority (Rogow, 1986, p. 18). 1588 was also the year that the Spanish Armada invaded England in an attempt to force submission to the spiritual authority of the papacy. Where spiritual and temporal authority oppose one another, Hobbes would later write, “the Common wealth cannot but be in great danger of Civill warre, and Dissolution” (Hobbes, 1991, p. 227). The Armada was defeated by Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen. Hobbes’ mother, he famously said, “brought twins to birth, myself and fear at the same time” (Rogow, 1986, p. 17). Not only Hobbes and fear, but also enmity: Hobbes’s “hatred of the enemies of my country” (Martinich, 1999, p. 2). His father was a violent drunk who, not long after Hobbes left home for Oxford, was forced to flee his parish after hitting another man at the door of his church. Hobbes spent much of the rest of his life in the service of more powerful men and women, caught up in both familial and civil conflict. He was employed by both men and women alike, by mothers, fathers, and sons, and he tried at least once, unhappily, to serve two masters, both the mother and the son of the Cavendish family (Martinich p. 87). Hobbes distributed his own property along lines neither straightforwardly filial nor familial. He gave “a little farm” to his brother “because he loved him” while he was alive (Rogow, 1986, p. 22), and, when he died, bequeathing what remained to nieces, including “an orphaned girl, entrusted to his care” as well as “ten pounds to one Mary Dell” (Martinich, 1999, p. 5). Those around him did the same: an uncle took in Hobbes’ mother and siblings when their father abandoned them, and Hobbes’ childhood home was inherited by one of his sisters.

As *On Sovereignty of Mothers* insists, so too for Hobbes the fact of patriarchy did not erase the power of women or of mothers. Yet, rather than thinking sovereignty otherwise than paternal, patriarchal, or fraternal, Hobbes insists that “although Man may be male and female, Authority is not” (Hobbes, 1680 in Ng, 2012). For Anidjar, the story of Medea, above all, figures the destructive power of maternity which “no collective I know of has delegated, officially delegated, to *mothers*” (81). But for Hobbes, the story is, more than anything, a lesson on the wisdom of *withholding* violence. A translation of Euripides’ *Medea* is the first text we know Hobbes to have written, composed as a gift for the tutor of his teenage years. “No other dramatic or literary work,” one biographer observes, “is referred to as often in his writings” (Rogow, 1986, p. 38). While it is tempting to read Hobbes’ choice of text as a comment on his relationship to his own mother, this analogy may reveal as much as it conceals. The translation was completed not long before his mother, like Medea, was abandoned by her husband, but it might be better understood as a commentary

on his father, already facing social censure for his inability to regulate his rage in the face of perceived insult. Hobbes cites the text three times, not for Medea's act of filicide, but for the patricidal acts of Pelias' daughters who, on Medea's treacherous advice, cut their father into pieces in the hope of restoring his youth. In Hobbes' hands, this episode becomes a warning of the danger that "they that go about by disobedience, to do no more than reform the commonwealth, shall find they do thereby destroy it" (Hobbes, 1991, p. 234). Here, Medea's "eloquence" wins the consent of Pelias' daughters through their "lack of judgment." When Medea appears alone elsewhere, it is as again as a figure concerned with the proper regulation of destructive force: "though Medea saw many reasons to forbear killing her children, yet the last dictate of her judgment was, that the present revenge on her husband outweighed them all, and thereupon the wicked action *necessarily* followed" (Hobbes, 1839 cited in Rogow, 1986, pp. 38-39).<sup>2</sup>

Where social contract theory, in its more fully developed bourgeois forms, valorises self-possession and equality, Hobbes is unusual in identifying submission and subservience as the price of exiting the state of nature. The earliest of the social contract theorists, Hobbes is, as Carol Pateman suggests, almost unique in his recognition that the foundation of contract is not consent between equals but coercion (Pateman, 1988, p. 26). What differentiates servitude from slavery—the social contract from the state of nature—is, again not violence as such but its regulation. The contract emerges in the transition from the immediate coercion of prisons and fetters to a form of agreement in which the vanquished party agrees "not to run away, nor to do violence to his Master" in exchange for "corporall liberty" (Hobbes, 1991, p. 141). Contract, then, makes possible the suspension of violence over time, and it is for precisely this reason that there can be no contract in the state of nature, where the war "of every man against every man" renders meaningless any agreement" wherein neither of the parties performe presently, but trust one another." A contract requires a sovereign, both to suspend the state of nature, and to act as one "over them both, with right and force sufficient to compell performance" (Hobbes, 1991, p. 96).

The prototype of the contract, then, is the covenant God makes with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and also with Hagar. In recounting the story of Hagar, Hobbes makes no mention of her status as a slave, nor of her maternal double, Sarah. Instead, Hagar stands among the progenitors of Israel with whom God covenants directly, and through them, with their seed. Like the temporal sovereign, the sovereign God demonstrates power not through destruction but in rescuing his subjects from destruction. God appears to Hagar to promise survival, "*I will multiply thy seed exceedingly,*" just as God intervenes to Abraham, "to stay his hand from slaying Isaac," and "went before the Army of Israel to the Red Sea" to guide them through the desert (Hobbes, 1991, p. 275-276). Where, for Anidjar, Hagar is the double of Sarah, the mother and the slave,

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<sup>2</sup> As Rogow notes, "In the light of what we know, admittedly too little, of the family history, particularly the history of Hobbes's "collirice" father, we may wonder about the private meanings or resonances of Euripides' tragedy for the elder Hobbes's second son, who could not have been more than fourteen or fifteen years old when he presented his translation to the schoolmaster Latimer. Did he see in Jason's treatment of Medea and their children some elements of his father's treatment of the family, and did he observe in Medea's maniacal rage something of the temper that, in 1604, had led his father to assault Richard Jeane? Was Hobbes himself, and his siblings as well, the occasional target of that anger, thereby leading him to identify to some extent with the victims of Medea's fury? Or did Medea, who had sacrificed much for the husband who ultimately betrayed her, and whose lust for revenge was insatiable, arouse complicated emotions in the youthful Hobbes similar to those ambivalent feelings he may have been experiencing in connection with his mother, left behind in 1603 or 1604 with three adolescent children to support? In Medea, Hobbes perhaps also saw certain images of himself, for he too, as we shall see, could give expression to aggressive anger and even rage, albeit not in the forms preferred by the jilted, venomous sorceress." (1986, pp. 39-40).

the Jew and the Arab, Israel and Palestine (96), for Hobbes Hagar stands alongside the patriarchs, the fathers of great nations, bringing with her into the covenant all her “seed” precisely through her motherly, her “paternall” right of generation (Hobbes, 1991, p. 139). Hagar “is not called mother” (29), but is she not, for Hobbes, a father? If “the slave is granted *neither gender nor maternity*” (29), can the same not also be said of the sovereign?

In *Elements of Law*, Hobbes writes that “there be three titles only, by which one man may have right and dominion over another; whereof two may take place presently, and those are: voluntary offer of submission, and yielding by compulsion; the third is to take place, upon the supposition of children begotten upon them” (Baumgold, 2017, p. 280). Consent, coercion, or generation. But by *Leviathan*, these three have become two: Dominion Paternall, and Despotically, “acquired either by Generation” or “by Conquest” (Baumgold, 2017, p. 280, 286). What distinguishes the maternal—the “Paternal”—contract, for Hobbes, is not the power of the mother but the impotence of the child. This matters less because of what it implies for the child’s ability to resist domination by the mother—there are many ways to find oneself in a position where submission becomes necessary for survival without the helplessness necessarily implied by infancy—than because it is not clear what the mother stands to gain from this exchange. All contracts, for Hobbes, are founded on a mutual agreement to suspend the war of all of all against all; to lay down arms, at least temporarily. In a standard contract, the victor’s primary gain is relief from the fear that the defeated party will continue to attempt to kill them. In the maternal contract, by contrast, the only benefit Hobbes seems to identify is a promise of future amnesty—a promise which, as he makes clear elsewhere, can only be guaranteed by the existence of a sovereign power capable of enforcing contracts. If the only contract that exists in the state of nature relies on a promise of future good behaviour, and future good behaviour can only be enforced by a sovereign power, then Hobbes’ vision of the state of nature as a condition of “warre” interrupted only by “the government of small Families” does not quite cohere (Hobbes, 1991, p. 89). The trick, of course, is to realise that the state of nature does not exist except as a fantasy within the social contract. The threat of violence more terrible than that exacted by the collective is the only way to ensure that the collective holds together. Only against the backdrop of the state of nature does the brutality of the social contract appear as peace; only by contrast with Behemoth does Leviathan appear as a nurturing mother rather than a terrifying monster.

Time is precisely what cannot exist in the state of nature, what cannot be allowed to exist. The construction of the state of nature relies on the fantastical image of time and world held in suspension. In the state of nature, we “consider men” “as if they were but even now all at once created male and female” (*Elements of Law*), “as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms;” as a condition in which “all men of riper years are to be accounted equal” (*De Cive*). That is, we could consider one another as though our gestation and preservation, our care and feeding, made no difference between us (Baumgold, 2017, p. 276). Only natural equality can justify artificial brutality. What *On the Sovereignty of Mothers* evades in emphasising the duality of mothers is the same thing Hobbes erases in the years between *Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*: the question of the mother in relation to the father.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As Su Fang Ng notes (1989), Hobbes’ preference for the image of the wolf seems to reflect a preference for the story of the wolf who suckled Romulus and Remus over the rape of Lucretia as the founding myth of Rome. But this shift in Hobbes’ language between *Elements of Law* and

## Author Note

**Marika Rose** is Assistant Professor in Systematic Theology at Dublin City University. She works at the intersection of continental philosophy and theology; her current project focuses on angels, cyborgs, and the political theology of disenchantment. She is an associate editor of *Political Theology* and the author of *A Theology of Failure: Žižek Against Christian Innocence* (Fordham University Press, 2019) and *Theology for the End of the World* (SCM Press, 2023).

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Leviathan does not only (as Ng argues) relegate sexual difference to the state of nature, but renders the only natural inequality that Hobbes will acknowledge (that of parent and child) foundational, suggesting that the myth also functions to further legitimize Hobbes' insistence on the impossibility of mutual love between equals.

## Neither Mother nor Slave

Leah Kaplan

“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).<sup>1</sup> 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).

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

### Author Note

**Leah A. Kaplan** holds a PhD in Philosophy from Emory University. She holds an M.A. in African American Studies from Northwestern University and an M.A. in Philosophy and Art from Stony Brook University. Her research traces the continuity between slavery and contemporary tourism in the Anglophone Caribbean.

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## Umi Says

Roy Cherian

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,<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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 calculated<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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 contingent<sup>3</sup> 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

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

### Author Note

*Roy Cherian* is a PhD candidate in the Program in Culture and Theory at the University of California, Irvine. His research interrogates the relationship between anti-Blackness and secular social formation through a critical engagement with the biomedical. His work has been featured in *Black Camera*, *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies*, and *Culture, Medicine, & Psychiatry*.

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## We Are Because She Was/Is

*A Review of Gil Anidjar's On the Sovereignty of Mothers through Kumeyaay Creation, Maternal Creatrixes, and Rematriations*

Theresa Gregor

"Everywhere mothers are in chains," Gil Anidjar (2024) writes in the preface to *On the Sovereignty of Mothers: The Political as Maternal*. The force of this claim lies not in its novelty but in its recognition: mothers are structurally indispensable to collective life and yet persistently subordinated, regulated, erased, seduced, or conscripted into political orders that deny their sovereignty. Anidjar's central query asks political theory to remember what it has long disavowed—that the political has never been purely paternal, fraternal, or contractual among autonomous men; it has always been maternal. Shocking, I know!

Indigenous, First Nations, and American Indian Studies scholars, however, have long challenged and resisted the colonial imposition of heteropatriarchal systems of power, leadership, and social organization that have displaced Indigenous governance, gender relations, and epistemologies (Green, 1974; Mihesuah, 1999; Newcomb, 2001; Nelson, 2023; Leonard et al. 2024). While *On the Sovereignty of Mothers* is not a treatise on Indigenous women, motherhood, or U.S. settler colonialism, Anidjar's insistence on the political as fundamentally maternal offers a relational and generative framework through which Indigenous rematriation discourse can be reread, extended, and elucidated. His work opens a conceptual space for renewed engagement across American Indian and Indigenous Studies including women, gender, and sexuality studies; environmental and land-based scholarship; language reclamation; health and healing; and Indigenous-led movements such as Land Back, Water Back, and Fire Back (Tuck, 2011; Gray, 2022; Sogorea Te'Land Trust; Rematriation.com; Leonard et al. 2024; Adams, et al., forthcoming 2026). One of my recent students articulates this continuity in the introduction to their research on Indigenous rematriation and resistance: "For millennia, Indigenous women across the Americas—and in the Pacific and Australia—lived their everyday lives in societies not governed by the rigid patriarchal norms imposed elsewhere" (Fajardo, 2025).

It is through an Indigenous rematriation lens that I read *On the Sovereignty of Mothers*, specifically from within a Kumeyaay intellectual tradition that teaches that mothering, motherhood, and the maternal are not metaphorical functions or roles that are recovered belatedly by theory. Rather, they are cosmological, ontological, and jurisdictional principles embedded in creation epics, song cycles, sacred geographies, and practices of relational accountability. My research endeavors to show that these principles do not supplement political theory but precede and exceed it.

Kumeyaay oral traditions include two major epic, creation narratives. The first, *Maat Pehaaw*, the Creation Story, features the brother-gods Tuchaipa and Yokamatis and, in some versions, blends with Payómkawichum (Luiseño) traditions surrounding the death of Wiy:ot, the Creator, in which Frog Woman and her agency are central. The second epic, the story of Chaup, the "lightning ball" or comet, is, according to scholars such as Laylander (2004), Levi (1980), and Waterman (1901), uniquely Kumeyaay. This narrative

centers an Earth Mother figure and creatrix named Sinyahauch, whom Laylander describes as a kind of “Wonder Woman.”<sup>1</sup>

These epics are transmitted through *ashaa takuk* (bird songs), which are primarily sung by men; yet the narratives themselves preserve maternal authority, female agency, and creatrix power. In the story of Sinyahauch alone, there are over eighty song cycles transcribed by Constance Dubois, as told to her by her Indigenous informants (Laylander, 2004). These songs, when told by women for women, were also presumably sung by women for women. Together, the stories and songs teach not only beginnings but continuance: how to behave, how to maintain relationships among animal relatives, how to respect sacred mountains and places, and how to understand the often-deadly consequences of relational and sexual transgressions. Delfina Cuero, a Tiipay matriarch and plant knowledge keeper, reminds us that these stories teach us “how to behave and what to expect in the world” (Shipek and Cuero, 1972). However, due to settler colonial imposition—through the prohibition of Indigenous ceremonies, the suppression of puberty rites, and the systematic erosion of women’s knowledge and power—the transmission and significance of these stories for women, and particularly for mothers, has been profoundly disrupted. My research and teaching are shaped by efforts to reclaim these narratives, to recover Kumeyaay maternal creatrices from oral traditions, and to rearticulate their contributions to Kumeyaay cosmology and ontology where they have been silenced by U.S. settler colonialism. It is through these Indigenous intellectual frames—Kumeyaay creation, gendered transmission, and rematriation as method—that I engage Anidjar’s work. If the political has always been maternal, as Anidjar posits, then the question becomes: which maternalities, under which cosmologies, and by whose authority?

Anidjar’s central argument unfolds around what he calls “interconnected vectors” of slavery, sovereignty, and the social contract. Prior to the social contract—and even prior to the sexual and racial contracts—he locates what he names the maternal contract: a binding structure that connects mothers to mothers, mothers to children, and mothers to enslaved or subordinated others, laterally and transgenerationally (xix-xx). The maternal contract offers and sustains the condition of possibility for any collective’s endurance over time. “No collective can last without mothering,” he insists; the reproduction and preservation of the collective—even as a site of unequal composition and association—is maternal (96-97). This insistence constitutes the book’s most significant contribution.

Political theory has overwhelmingly treated motherhood as private, natural, or pre-political. Anidjar refuses this relegation. He argues instead that maternal labor is public and unacknowledged; that it takes a village not only to raise a child but to produce a mother; and that villages, nations, peoples, and religions must themselves mother mothers in order to sustain themselves. In this sense, the political is not merely influenced by maternal labor but constituted through it. This is quite literally the central tenets of rematriation: reconnecting to the sacred source of life, mothering, and motherhood that Indigenous Peoples know and are reclaiming. The Sogorea’Te Land Trust explains rematriation as “Indigenous women-

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<sup>1</sup> The Southern California creation story was represented in DuBois’s reports, either in the form of extended narrations or shorter fragments, in five Luiseno versions, eight Kumeyaay versions, and one Quechan version. Her records of this narrative had been preceded in the 1820s by Boscana’s two Luiseno versions, by another Luiseno version that had been recorded by Henshaw in 1884 but not published until 1972, and by a cognate Havasupai creation myth recorded by Frank Cushing in 1882 (Laylander, pp 21-22).

led work to restore sacred relationships between Indigenous people and our ancestral land, honoring our matrilineal societies, and in opposition of patriarchal violence and dynamics” (Sogorea Te’ Land Trust). While not “new” work in this field, Anidjar’s work offers a complementary and compelling analysis of the maternal, beginning with the conceptual vocabulary he develops—maternal field, maternal functions, maternal contract—and opening space for thinking about motherhood as infrastructure rather than burden. Furthermore, his insistence on the duality and plurality of mothers (3, 41, 45, and 52) destabilizes monomaterial assumptions that equate motherhood with biology, femininity, or singular origin. “Mothers must be mothered,” he writes, underscoring that maternal work is distributed across bodies, generations, and relations—that it is in itself a collective act, a knowing in doing and a doing in knowing. “Mothers, to put it differently, must themselves be mothered. Mothers—everything it takes to become-mother, indeed, to mother, are a village” (21). This thinking resonates strongly with Indigenous kinship systems, where mothering is relational, collective, and embedded in responsibilities that exceed the Western nuclear family.

One of the book’s most generative conceptual moves is its insistence that motherhood is a form of writing in the world.

We are the books our mothers write, we are her words made flesh. What this means is that, as I speak, since I speak, I speak the words of my mother, the words of her mother, words made flesh, if you wish, and the (m)other way around, which we breathed day in and day out. The words, and also the silences, you are hearing (now reading), the words (the bodies and souls) you are missing, are also words I have rendered to my mother; words I have tried, still try, to listen and hear, also to speak, write, and read to her—albeit in another tongue, from another mother tongue. (4-5)

Anidjar describes maternal sovereignty as the capacity to inscribe bodies, psyches, and collectivities: onto children, onto the body politic, and onto the world itself. “We are the books our mothers write,” he observes; we speak our mothers’ languages, including their silences. Maternal labor is not only work but “dream-work” (2, 99) and memory-work. We are structured through our mothers’ tongues, even when we speak in other languages. Read through Kumeyaay epistemologies, this claim becomes more than a metaphor. Kumeyaay creation epics, transmitted through bird songs, are not symbolic narratives but what Annette Angela Portillo calls “sovereign stories” told through blood memory (2017): original, maternal instructions that explain relations among humans, animals, land, and the sacred. Story, then, becomes governance. Language is not merely expressive but constitutive of being. To be mothered within Kumeyaay worlds is therefore to be inscribed into a constellation of responsibilities that include land tenure, ceremonial cycles, and being in relation with other-than-human beings.

Anidjar’s reflections on his mother’s tongue in the Coda—his meditation on his mother’s divided languages and identities—gesture toward this embodied palimpsest. Indigenous frameworks sharpen what his analysis approaches: maternal writing is not only psychological or cultural but territorial and cosmological. Rematriation, in this sense, is the practice of restoring maternal inscriptions that have been erased, returning language to land, voice to women, and story to its sovereign place. For Anidjar, this is a reckoning with the ruptures in silence, revealing the slippage of his mother’s suppressed Arabic origins and affiliations.

Christine Nelson, Robin Zape-tah-hol-ah Minthorn, and Heather Shotten (2022) in *Indigenous Motherhood in the Academy*, remind us that “Indigenous feminist scholars have discussed at length the central and sacred roles of women in traditional Indigenous societies (Gunn Allen, 1986; Kame’eleihiwa, 2001; Mihesuah, 2003; Risling Baldy, 2017, 2018). Mihesuah (2003) points to an emphasis on balance between gender roles in largely egalitarian Indigenous societies, noting that Indigenous women traditionally held “religious, political and economic—not more power than men, but at least equal to what men had” (p. 2). The invitation to contribute a chapter to *Indigenous Motherhood in the Academy* deepened my research and continues to impact my scholarship on Indigeneity, motherhood, writing, knowledge production, and what it means to be an academic. In researching and writing my chapter, “Kuhkwany Kuchemayo’Aaknach, an lipay Mother’s/Teacher’s Story,” the editors convened several collaborative meetings to discuss our ideas, theoretical conceptions, and cultural principles surrounding mothering and motherhood. They write:

Broadly, we have defined motherhood as a paradoxical space between loss and reclaiming. We know our realities of Indigenous motherhood have been and continue to be impacted by settler colonialism. This means that we need to consistently and thoughtfully interrogate the construct of our motherhood realities. ...From an Indigenous perspective, mother and mothering extend beyond biological connections to include and value axiological and ontological orientations that defy the settler-colonial narrative of what it means to be a mother. ...The settler disruption is prudent to note because existing research on motherhood in the academy rarely discusses motherhood through a settler-colonial lens. Rather, existing research emphasizes motherhood through the settler-colonial gaze, which is that lived experiences of mothering are not connected to historical injustices and oppressive colonial forces. (pgs. 3-4)

Although we did not explicitly frame the production of our chapters or the book itself as an act of rematriation, we nonetheless enacted our writing in the way Anidjar describes in terms of making the political maternal. In this sense, our writing became a sovereign act. In thinking and writing about these concepts, my chapter focused on my connection to the land, kinship, and on relationships that sustained life in my development as both a mother and scholar. Returning to the Santa Ysabel Reservation during graduate school was not merely a practical choice; it constituted a re-rooting in lipay land-based relationality; an act that reinforced the kinship networks I was raised in, the responsibilities and rhythms that shaped my upbringing, and supported my birth as a mother. In the chapter, I describe being surrounded by extended family and immersed in the practices that “mothered” me—reinforcing Anidjar’s claim that “mothers must themselves be mothered.” I also trace the influence of the many mothers who taught me how to navigate both academic and familial roles. The act of returning home is not unique to my experience; it is, in fact, a central premise and recurring theme in American Indian Literature. Michael D. Wilson describes it as a form of Indigenous narrative of resistance by “writing home.” Wilson explores narratives in which characters leave their homelands, physically and sometimes spiritually, and attempt to return with new perspectives on themselves and their communities. Rematriation’s emphasis on reconnecting the stories, practices, and relationships to land-based feminine knowledge and governance, and on situating motherhood as a sovereign Indigenous practice grounded in the land, or ancestral homelands, is the primary source from which Indigenous identity emerges.

The heart of Anidjar's argument lies in the dialectic between mother and slave, developed most fully through his reading of the biblical figures Hagar and Sarah. Slavery, he argues, violently interrupts motherhood by severing the bond between mother and child and by denying enslaved women gender, maternity, and recognition. At the same time, sovereign motherhood, figured through Sarah, depends on the instrumentalization of the enslaved mother. Sarah's becoming-a-mother is enabled by her domination of Hagar, whom she treats as a physiological extension of her own maternity.

This reading powerfully reveals how sovereignty and slavery are co-constitutive and how maternal captivity becomes foundational to racialized political orders. Hagar emerges as a paradoxical figure: slave and mother, queen and exile, prophetess and refugee. Anidjar rightly situates this dialectic as a template for understanding the ongoing entanglement of race, reproduction, and political power. However, he does so within the limits of a black/white binary (Europe and Africa; Judeo-Christian and Other) that does not fully account for the dynamics of settler-colonialism in the Western Hemisphere. When read from Indigenous contexts, this framework reveals its limits. The captivity narrative that Anidjar traces through biblical and African diasporic histories finds echoes in U.S. settler colonial formations: the figure of the Puritan Mary Rowlandson, redeemed from "savage" captivity, is juxtaposed against Indigenous women like Weetamoo, the Wampanoag queen, who is beheaded and erased. Similar logics recur in representations of Pocahontas, Sacagawea, Mallinali, and other Indigenous women whose motherhood is framed through captivity, mediation, or sacrifice for colonial projects (Green, 1974; Mihesuah, 2003). The paradox of Indigenous captivity narratives is that the Indigenous captors eventually become the Euro-American captives: their land is stolen, their children forcibly removed, and entire Indigenous Nations exiled into urban diasporas far from their homelands.

More specifically, settler colonialism has systematically targeted Indigenous motherhood through boarding schools, the removal of Indigenous children, blood quantum regimes, and the coerced sterilization of Indigenous women. These interlocking practices operate as forms of reproductive policing within a genocidal policy to erase Indigenous people. Like slavery, these mechanisms interrupt the maternal contract by severing relationships between mothers and children, denying maternal authority, and displacing Indigenous forms of kinship and care. Yet they are distinct from the system of chattel slavery in their land-based logic of elimination. Rather than extracting reproductive labor for incorporation into the national body politic, settler colonial regimes seek to diminish, absorb, or ultimately erase Indigenous peoples as distinct sovereigns tied to what they fantasized and fabricated as a "vacant virgin land." In this sense, Anidjar's mother/slave dialectic powerfully illuminates how sovereignty and subjugation are co-produced through the regulation of motherhood, but his explication does not fully account for settler colonialism as a reproductive regime oriented toward the elimination of Indigenous futurity—that is, the systematic disruption of Indigenous continuance across generations, lands, and relational worlds.

Still, the concept of the maternal contract is Anidjar's most enduring contribution. Unlike the social contract, which begins with fully formed subjects, the maternal contract begins in dependency and care. It binds unequal parties and is perpetually rewritten. Because it can be revoked through abandonment, rejection, or exclusion, it holds the power to sustain or undo the collective, a revocation often met with social disdain, ostracism, criminalization, imprisonment, and exile for so-called "bad" mothers. From a

Kumeyaay perspective, however, the maternal contract is not abstract but enacted through ceremonial cycles, kinship obligations, and relationships to land. Creation epics teach not only how the world began but how it must be continually renewed through proper behavior and relational accountability. For instance, in the stories of Sinyahauch and Frog Woman, each woman is sexually assaulted, even though the narratives do not explicitly name the violence. The audience understands that the males in the story, Gopher and Wi:yot respectively, are the perpetrators of bodily transgression, lasciviousness, and rape. Sinyahauch bears the two Hero Twins, Yokamatis and Tuchapai, following Gopher's encounter with her in the water. Yet the didactic lessons passed on in most communal narratives gloss over these aspects and focus on the role of the men, the death of Wi:yot, or the antics and creations of the Hero Twins. I contend that these elisions reflect ethnographic and patriarchal biases from settler-colonial institutions that devalue, demean, and discard female agency, let alone maternal power, either biological or political. Settler colonialism refuses to acknowledge these aspects precisely because they sustain Indigenous collectives over time. The suppression of puberty rites, the silencing of women's ceremonial knowledge, and the removal of children are all attacks on the maternal contract as Indigenous governance. Where Anidjar frames the revocability of the maternal contract largely through figures of exile and abandonment, Indigenous epistemologies affirm continuance—what Gerald Vizenor names as survivance (Vizenor, 2008). Maternal sovereignty, in this view, is less about the power to undo than about the responsibility to maintain balance across generations.

Anidjar's most provocative—and possibly most contentious—claim is his linkage of maternal sovereignty to the sovereign power to kill, a position that marks a clear departure from Indigenous views of the sacred that affirm life (Beck, Walters, and Francisco, 1977). Drawing on Hobbes, he argues that mothers regulate entry into the collective, guard borders, and, through abortion or rejection, exercise a form of lethal authority. Abortion, he insists, is not a matter of individual choice or rights but a political practice concerned with the preservation of the collective as maternal. As he writes, "Abortion is not about freedom of choice, and it is not a right. It speaks of a political vision. It enacts and practices the preservation, the duration of the collective as maternal. The sovereignty of mothers is about the power to kill, a power that, produced and reproduced over time, is intrinsic, intrinsically essential to the maternal contract" (82). This framing exposes how deeply reproductive politics are entangled with visions of collective survival. Yet it also reveals the limits of a Western sovereign imaginary that equates authority with violence and exile. In Kumeyaay worlds, land is not wilderness outside the polity but a relative within it. Exile into "nature" does not signify sovereign punishment or permanent separation from kin, but a shift within ongoing relational, familial, and Tribal ties. Moreover, Anidjar's claim that no society officially delegates lethal authority to mothers overlooks Indigenous matrilineal governance systems—such as those of the Haudenosaunee—where clan mothers hold decisive authority over leadership and war, oriented toward accountability and balance rather than domination. As Anidjar himself notes, "No collective I know of has delegated, officially delegated, to mothers the power to kill, the capacity, if not the authority, they always already exercise that they must exercise, to take the measure of the world, to monitor entry points, to guard the borders of the collective..." (81). In settler colonial contexts, Indigenous mothers' reproductive decisions are further constrained by state violence: blood quantum laws regulate entry into the polity, child welfare systems remove children, and ICE and carceral regimes criminalize Indigenous and migrant motherhood. Under

such conditions, maternal sovereignty cannot be meaningfully theorized solely as the power to kill without reproducing the very sovereign violence the concept seeks to unsettle.

*On the Sovereignty of Mothers* compels political theory to acknowledge what it has long denied: that mothering is public, infrastructural, racialized, and indispensable to collective life. Anidjar provides a powerful vocabulary for naming the maternal as political, and his insistence on plurality, dependency, and endurance offers a vital corrective to liberal imaginaries of autonomy. At the same time, reading the book through Kumeyaay creation epics and rematriation practices reveals what remains unresolved. Anidjar names inequality but leaves it as a difficulty; Indigenous frameworks offer methods of reconciliation, or at the very least a reckoning. Rematriation—the return of language, ceremony, land-based knowledge, and maternal authority—is not symbolic but practical. It restores maternal contracts where settler colonialism has attempted to sever them.

Although Anidjar's formulation of the political as maternal unsettles Cartesian individualism and social contract theory alike, Indigenous philosophical traditions challenge these tenets even further (Descartes, 2008; Hume et al., 1947; Locke, 1772). Brian Yazzie Burkhart (Cherokee) posits a revision of Descartes's infamous syllogism as "We are, therefore, I am," and offers a Native phenomenological corrective that recenters existence within collective and relational continuity. This stands in stark contrast to the Cartesian premise *cogito ergo sum*—"I think, therefore I am"—which privileges disembodied reason and underwrites European and Euro-American legal, economic, and political institutions. When coupled with John Locke's formulation of land as inert matter available for domination, ownership, and extraction, Cartesian dualism becomes foundational to U.S. settler colonial governance and its ongoing conflict with Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Yazzie's formulation insists that selfhood emerges from community, land, and interdependence rather than from individual cognition (Burkhart, 2004). Reading *On the Sovereignty of Mothers* through this Indigenous philosophical genealogy allows for a further reframing. If, as Yazzie reminds us, "we are" before "I am," then Anidjar's maternal contract invites an Indigenous rearticulation: *we are because she was/is*. This reframing restores maternal presence not only as the infrastructure of the political, but as the cosmological and relational condition through which collectives come into being, endure, and remain accountable to land, kin, and future generations.

In Kumeyaay worlds, *she* is not an abstract or universal mother. *She* is Earth Mother, Wonder Woman, Sinyahauch, Frog Woman, Delfina Cuero, my mother, my grandmothers, myself, and the living maternal relations who teach us how to behave and what to expect in the world. If the political has always been maternal, then political theory must learn not only to recognize mothers, but to listen to the worlds they have already made—the worlds they continue to renew—and those yet to come.

#### Author Note

**Theresa Gregor**, PhD (Kumeyaay-Yoéme), Director of the American Indian Studies Program at Puvungna, known also as California State University, Long Beach. Her research focuses on California American Indians, rematriation, literature and writing, Tribal leadership, and cultural and climate resilience.

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## To Grieve, or Not to Grieve

### *Reflections on Gil Anidjar's On the Sovereignty of Mothers*

Zehra Shama Mehdi

#### Between Life and Death

Besides whatever else may be said about Chloé Zhao's 2025 cinematic adaptation of Maggie O' Farrell's pandemic novel *Hamnet* (2020),<sup>1</sup> there is little doubt that it lays bare one of the most elusive—when not entirely evasive—affective experiences: grief. In portraying what can be called the 'myth' (Shapiro, 2025) behind William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the movie narrates the specter of death that births the tragedy. Yet the movie, much like the novel itself, is not only about William's attempt to mourn the loss of his 11-year-old son, *Hamnet*, which allegedly inspired the eponymous play. It also intimately focuses on Agnes Hathaway and, consequently, the persistent and enduring trajectory of her maternal grief.<sup>2</sup> Muted in its salience. Deafening in its silence.

Even though the movie finds its ending in the first (ever) performance of the play that allows us to glean the haplessness of a father who can only reveal his agony by displacing the object of loss (Hamlet is, after all, struggling to come to terms with a dead father), it is the grief of the mother that lingers like a festering wound. Unwilling to speak. For there can be no language for grief. No Lacanian signification to grasp loss. Perhaps only paroxysms of speechless tears. Like the many that dripped from the dazed eyes of Jessie Buckley (actress who plays Agnes Shakespeare) every time she remembered her son. Every time he was alive. Every time he died. Every time was the first time. Life. Death.

But Agnes is not alone in grieving her dead child. She is like the innumerable mothers of Palestine, Sudan, Yemen, Iran, Kashmir, and the United States of America, who are struggling to come to terms with the abuse, hunger, imprisonment, and murder of their children. Since children, all over the globe, 'are always ours' (Baldwin, 1985), maybe we all need to be grieving the loss of life, living, and childhoods. Of children who were. Of children who are. And of those who will never be. If the political is, as Gil Anidjar's elucidates in *'On the Sovereignty of Mothers* (2024), a maternal contract that negotiates life and death, I ask, with sufficient hesitation (for when has one ever been certain about questions of loss), how can we understand grieving in this delicate arbitration. This is not a question that seeks to privilege the lived experience of grief over its articulation. Rather, it asks how the political might incorporate a phenomenology of grief as the

<sup>1</sup> While some film critics have described it as 'visual poetry' (Clyde, 2025), 'hauntingly beautiful' (Zeitsman, 2025), a 'sensory experience' with 'striking visual compositions, (Lemire, 2025), and profound and life-affirming (Ordōña, 2025), *Hamnet* has also been called 'exploitative than insightful' (Barber, 2025), a genre of 'grief porn' that is 'ruthlessly manipulative' of loss (Chang, 2025). None of these criticisms, however, ponder on the possible motives underlying this emotional coercion. Does the suffix *porn* itself reveal that there is a chance we might have lost touch with the experience of grief and find any suggestion of it as a pitiful simulation? I wonder if the rage is not a defense against a narrative that threatens to uncover our collective apathy to grief. Due to the constraints of time and space (even if not of relevance), I shall pause this line of reflection. The furious negation of grief demands its own essay. Elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup>Anguished by the 'poor treatment' of Agnes (Anne) Hathaway by the Shakespeare scholars, who repeatedly dismissed her as an illiterate peasant, casting her as an impediment to the intellectual forays of the playwright, O'Farrell decided to attend to the life of the Bard by recognizing the centrality of his wife and their life together as a premise of his work (*Creative Screenwriting*, 2026, January 7). She underscored it by highlighting the character of Agnes in the screenplay adaptation that she co-wrote with Chloé Zhao.

maternal. To unpack the stakes of my inquiry (yes, there are some), let me first offer a reading of Anidjar's maternal contract.

It's usually a good idea to start from Mothers. And all that they do.

### The Maternal as the Political

In taking the "immeasurable measure" (p. xv) of mothering, *On the Sovereignty of Mothers* speaks of the vast "maternal field" (p. 13) of inscriptions where mothers have labored across generational demands of time and space as one and many, writing us into the world, writing the world onto us, writing the world.<sup>3</sup> In attending to this all-encompassing landscape of the maternal functions, the book draws upon a rich and exhaustive corpus of psychoanalytic theory, theology, religious studies, literary criticism, and feminist literature to propose the "maternal in the political, the maternal as the political" (p. xviii). It is important to note that in this proposition, Anidjar is not particularly interested in the politics of mothering. That is, he is not focused on the incessant ways in which mothers have navigated instructions of dominance repeatedly unfolding on bodies of gender, ordering their definitions and limits, deciding their capacities and abilities. On the ways in which rules, sanctions, conditions, and prohibitions of and on mothering have frequently never really been about mothers at all.<sup>4</sup> This is not the drawback of the book but rather its theoretical stance. Away from prescriptive, redemptive, or celebratory arguments, Anidjar's aim is "descriptive" (p. xx). In other words, he explores the question: *What* is a Mother? Instead of *Who* is a Mother? A question that shifts the foreclosing of maternal identities around gender (Who can be a mother?), and instead invites us to consider the field (yes, it's a landscape indeed) of maternal labor (What all (do) mothers do?).

In framing the political as the maternal, Anidjar centers the practices of mothering. He asks us to recognize the ways maternal functions inform and unfold in the creation and sustenance of collectives, beginning with the child. If the central maternal function is to raise a child, and it takes a village to do it (a phrase Anidjar underscores as the opening line of each chapter), then considering the political as maternal is an invitation to recognize how villages raise their members like mothers: through conflicting desires and multiple bodies, in glory and servitude, perduring abundance and abandon. In reading the political through the interpersonal intimacy, generational labor, dual bodies, affective ties, and repetitive endurance of mothering, Anidjar not only blurs the discursive sphere of the political (forcing us to confront what is and what is not deemed political) but also illuminates the maternal commitment to the continuity of the communities. Life. Death. To the political itself.<sup>5</sup>

Reading the maternal configurations of politics, Anidjar writes the familiar intimacy of mothering not as nostalgia or gratitude but as a political practice, an adherence to the maternal contract: a contract of preservation and destruction between mothers and slaves, mothers and us, mothers and the world. In the

<sup>3</sup>Anidjar offers us somewhat of a definition of maternal field— 'it's a vast field of inscriptions' [of the maternal functions] (p. 13). It is the expanse of what all mothers have been doing, holding, undoing, re-doing in, across, through and for generations.

<sup>4</sup> The preoccupation with maternal bodies rests in their reproductive potential to raise children (largely sons) in service of the socio-political communities: nation, religion. See Das (1995)

<sup>5</sup> Anidjar explores this maternal commitment through three interrelated themes: slavery, the maternal contract, and the sovereignty of mothers. My responses attend to themes of maternal contract and mothers as sovereign.

“mothering of mothers” (p.67), this contract serves as the origin of polities that survive through the generational repetition of mothers who have borne us in bodies, through actions, in memories, and through absence.

But when has intimacy been without limits and contracts without conditions?

In the maternal contract, these limits and conditions emerge in Anidjar’s discussion on the sovereignty of mothers. It is here that he offers us a provocation: the sovereignty of mothers lies in their power to kill!

It is quite a provocation. Instead of locating the sovereignty of mothers solely in the acts of producing and raising new members of polities, Anidjar finds it in their capacity to take life. Consideration of this capacity challenges not only our narcissistic assumptions of what mothers are and what they should do (shouldn’t all mothers exist *only* to love children?) but also what sovereignty entails—the power to dictate life—and more critically what it demands: to resist the temptations of such power. Although political discourse has consistently articulated the sovereign as a parental entity that exercises absolute power,<sup>6</sup> it has solely rested this power in paternal figures: Father (fathers, uncles, brothers, sons), Gods, Leaders, States. These sovereigns have righteously helmed the charge of death frequently enough for most of us to not only expect but also accommodate their devastation. The possibility of mothers as destructive is unsettling.

But where would the academic world—whatever is left of it—be without such unsettling?

Perhaps too comfortable trapping mothers in reverence and honor, leaving them alone and ashamed of their murderous impulses. The least we can do, perhaps, is acknowledge ‘maternal hate,’ (Winnicott, 1949), which is necessarily inseparable from ‘maternal care’ (Winnicott, 1960).<sup>7</sup> Maybe we needed this book to remind us not only how villages are formed but also how villages survive—through multiple mothers who have repeatedly written the entire maternal field of functions that determine the trajectories of our life and death, and, well, more importantly, our living, by navigating and negotiating their own sovereignty: it’s inclinations, insistence, justifications, and compulsions to kill.

In highlighting this destructive maternal potential, Anidjar is not trying to terrify us (at least I hope he is not). His argument is not a caution to avoid the wrath of the maternal (though it’s a good caution) but to delineate the work of the maternal: the subtle and painstaking ways in which mothers have been working, and re-working, through their destructive power upholding the maternal contact. Writing and inscribing. Producing and reproducing. Creating and destroying. Making and re-making. Often alone, abandoned, isolated, and guilty. Polities have found ways to continue because mothers have remained invested in performing and practicing the work of the maternal. Worlds have survived. Worlds have perished. More importantly, worlds have always managed to *be* because mothers have found ways to mother them.

<sup>6</sup> The theorists of the political—Hobbes (1651), Pufendorf (1672), Schmitt (1922), and Kantorowicz (1957)—have unequivocally described or defined it by invoking or alluding to paternal authority.

<sup>7</sup> In *Hate in Countertransference* (1949), Winnicott lists 18 reasons for maternal hate. He develops this idea further in the *Theory of Parent-Infant Relationship* (1960), making it a critical part of maternal care. Maternal care, for Winnicott, emanates from the attunement a mother has with the child that allows her to provide for the child’s physiological and psychological needs, primarily of dependence, but at the same time opens her up to (maternal) hate, her rageful response against that dependence.

Written in elegant prose and sharing dazzling insights, *On the Sovereignty of Mothers* is an ode to mothering-- all its impossibilities, repetitions, memories, dualities, exiles, and promises that make up the political. Yet I cannot help but ponder the interruptions in mothering. All the fractures, ruptures, gaps, and absences that not only undergird mothering but more crucially pose a challenge to its workings. The losses that struggle to translate in mourning and remain locked within the contours of the collective. It is through this pondering about the arrests in mothering and their political function that I return to grief.

### Interruptions in Maternal Political

Unlike mourning, which attempts to establish a relationship with loss (through detachment or incorporation),<sup>8</sup> grief is the affective response that struggles to acknowledge the occurrence of loss and tragically continues to remain trapped in it. Forever asking, always unsure: Did it really happen? No answer is convincing enough.

Unable to symbolize, grief becomes inassimilable in signification: language or meaning. This unintegrated grief unfolds like a psychic void that blocks all attempts at vitality, casting shadows like an eclipsed sun that can no longer radiate life.<sup>9</sup> These shadows have long shrouded, one might say with unfortunate certainty, the being of mothers who have all known grief viscerally with painful, tragic, collective familiarity. Of death, devastation, displacement, brutality, incarceration, absence, and abduction. If the political is another term of the all-encompassing landscape of maternal labor, what can we understand about the political, and indeed about mothering, from mothers who more often than not find themselves in the throes of grief? Of grief that halts all maternal functions, ability, capacity, willingness, effort, interest, duty, and joy, rudely interrupting everything that is mothering.

In his evocative rendering of maternal inscriptions, Anidjar's sovereign mother is not only the Winnicottian mother who provides the facilitating environment (of her body, attention, presence, tolerance of hate) for the child to flourish but also the Bionian mother who absorbs the unformulated, unsignified, unbearable, and unknowable raw insistence of affect as a psychic container and transforms it into meaning.<sup>10</sup> This

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<sup>8</sup> Freud (1917) described mourning as the psychological process of disinvesting (decatechizing the ego) from the lost object. This is often misread as a call to get over loss and move on. I receive this disinvestment as Freud's invitation to forge a detached relationship with the loss object, one where we acknowledge its existence (that loss indeed happened) but aren't necessarily consumed by it. Derrida (2001), in somewhat of a continuation of Freud's thesis, framed mourning as an interiorization of the lost object, where we carry it within us, preserving its alterity. The two thinkers differ in their characterization of mourning. For Freud, mourning is 'successful' when you have detached yourself from the lost object. For Derrida, such a success undoes the work of the mourning, which is to carry the loss within.

<sup>9</sup> In her exploration of loss and language, Kristeva (1989) uses the metaphor of the 'black sun' to speak of melancholic (depressive) states, an experience of a psychic void where the world loses meaning, vitality, and symbolic coherence. If, for Freud (1917), melancholia is the *refusal* to grasp the reality of loss (the fact that it happened), for Kristeva it is *inability* to comprehend this reality. Her reading of melancholia as a psychic collapse of meaning finds company in the theorization of loss by Green (1986) who attends to profound emptiness, an unrepresentable absence at the core of the melancholic self (he calls it the 'Negative'). For both Kristeva and Green, melancholia is a response to the early maternal loss or withdrawal.

<sup>10</sup> Freud was not interested in the "phenomenology of mothering" (Phillips, 1993, p. 110). Nor, for the most part, was psychoanalysis. Instead, it focused on the psychic representations of the mother. Mothers were all kinds of (psychic) objects.: Libidinal, (Freud 1917), Good/Bad (Klein 1946), Imaginary (Lacan 1949), Primary (Fairbairn 1952), Dead (Green 1986), Transformational (Bollas 1987), Semiotic (Kristeva 1989), Love (Ogden 1990). What mothers actually did--mothering--was never particularly important for psychoanalysts. Except for Winnicott (1960), who theorized mothers (and all that they did or did not do) as the psychic (holding) environment for the child that facilitated its growth; and Bion (1962), for whom mothers were responsible for 'containing' the unprocessed anxieties and primitive thoughts of the child and returning them back to them in a form they can comprehend. Mothers, one can therefore argue, with some conviction, were the first psychoanalyst for the child.

containing emerges not from intention or deliberation but a state of maternal reverie—the unselfconscious reflective and receptive state of mothering that is generational, shared and co-created, allowing mothers to carry all that the villages, polities, communities and children struggle to articulate. The maternal contract is etched within this holding and containing; where mothers forbear their hate of us (we should at least be able to admit to our intolerability) and from our primitive affective state of wordlessness create scripts of meanings: life itself. But what happens when their attempts are stalled by their own untranslatable affective intensity? When grief casts a pallor on all possibilities of translation? Though it would not be entirely unreasonable to accommodate mothers’ ability to mourn—with all its protracted, symptomatic, incomplete, and persistent modalities—to be a part of maternal functions (it’s a good argument). But I remain curious about the interruptions in the maternal political. About the unmitigated grief that challenges the mothering of mothers. Mothers themselves. I suspect (one can never really be sure, nor should one be), that I am asking how unmourned loss constitutes the political. Or those who compose it. Mothers. Us.

Let me conclude by returning to *Hamnet*’s Agnes, the mother whose intransigent grief informs my present reflections.

### The Grieving Sovereign Mother

Raised by a herbalist mother, Agnes grows up to be a healer. She spends her time in the forest, hiding in tree trunks, swaying between plants and shrubs, preparing potions that alleviate all mysterious aches, fevers, and illnesses. Her mother is rumored to be a witch, because who else but God could relieve the human body of its ailments? Agnes carries the legacy of this rumor, but the embrace of the lush green forest is too encompassing to cause worry. She welcomes her children into the wilderness, who soon become extensions of their mother, unencumbered by any urgency of order and organization, inhabiting the world instead with a joyous presence. This lyrical maternal rhythm is jolted by the scourge of the black plague that seizes them in its grip. First her daughter Judith (who eventually recovers), then her son Hamnet. Trembling with panic, Agnes frantically prepares potion after potion to find a cure. In vain. Hamnet dies. Unable to fully register her failure to save him, it takes her a while to approach Hamnet’s dying body. When she finally does, she cradles the cold body of her son, unable to believe death. His death. Unable to believe that she, the healer, could not save him. Even when everyone else—the sisters, the father—are able to inch towards the painful realization of Hamnet’s departure, Agnes remains mired in her agony. How could she not have saved him? Wasn’t she the mother? The healer. The one who turned away death. The sovereign.

Agnes’s insistent grief interrupts the maternal contract of mothering, the promise mothers make to themselves, other mothers, and us. To not only raise us but more importantly to not let us die. To save us. Protect us. To keep us alive.

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Unsurprisingly, psychoanalysts are often trying, in one way or another, to learn from mothers, be them, or at least, in somewhat sincerity in the words of Adam Phillips (1993, p. 108) “play” them.

The devastating visuals of these interrupted promises are embossed in the children who are maimed, starved, raped, tortured, murdered, bombed, incarcerated, and deported. In the grief of all their mothers. Of mothers who lost children to the regimes of violence (state, settler, police, and army). How does this collective grief alter the workings of the maternal contract? What becomes of the political—villages, communities, nations, religions, people—when vagaries of state power overwhelm the maternal capacities to mother? Perhaps, I am trying to ask is what becomes of us in a world that is not only furiously unmaking itself but doing it on the bodies of children.

To grieve or not to grieve.

It is not (at least I hope it's not) a question about the prophecy of the world that is ripping itself apart. Rather, it is a query about the palimpsest of grief that becomes the field of maternal inscriptions. Today.

It's an impossible question.

In need of some impossible answers.

Gil, kindly, do us the honor.

#### Author Note

*Zehra Mehdi is a practicing psychoanalytic therapist with a doctorate in Religious Studies and advance certificates in Psychoanalysis and South Asian Studies from Columbia University. Her research interests lie at the blurred borders of psychoanalysis, religious/ theological ethics, and politics. She is particularly attentive of the arc of Muslim minority experiences, Hindu-Muslim relations, limits of secularism, and iterations and textures of violence and suffering.*

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## 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,

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<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

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<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> Inscripting 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).

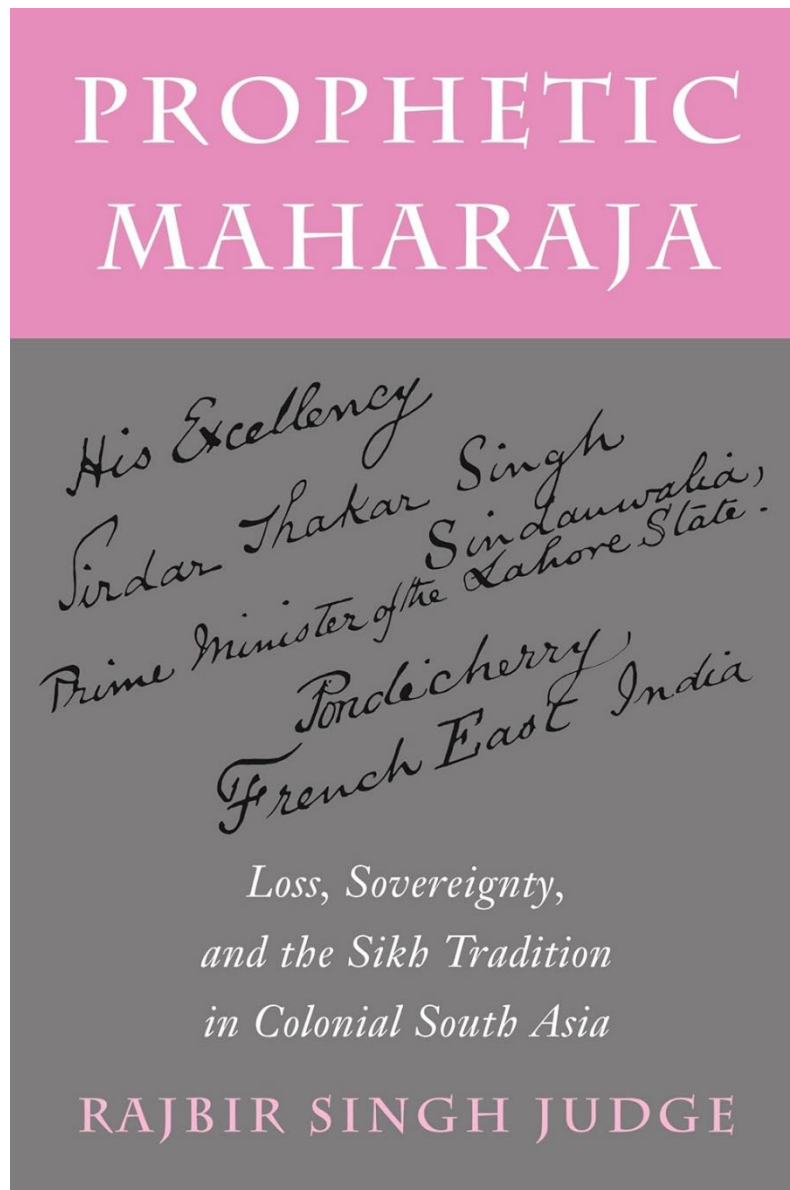
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Book review: *Prophetic Maharaja* by *Rajbir Singh Judge*

Review by: Dr. Sarabjeet Dhody Natesan

**Prophetic Maharaja: Loss, Sovereignty, and the Sikh Tradition in Colonial South Asia**

Author: Rajbir Singh Judge

ISBN: 978-0231214483

*Editorial Note: Rajbir Singh Judge's Prophetic Maharaja was assigned for review prior to Professor Judge's appointment as Chief Editor for Sikh Research Journal. Professor Judge had no role in the review, editing, or publication decision.*

Rajbir Singh Judge's *Prophetic Maharaja: Loss, Sovereignty, and the Sikh Tradition in Colonial South Asia* offers a deeply layered meditation on sovereignty, exile, and memory. This is a work of valour and deep belief: to seek, to examine, and to unravel the strengths and weaknesses of a region, religion, and its people under the larger canopy of the unjust and unjustifiable colonial rule is a profound exercise. As a Sikh, I read this book with two thoughts in mind: first, to see it as a placeholder that defines losses I was aware of but did not understand; second, to understand the cultural pain and violence that Sikhs carry, scars that remain prominent irrespective of how much we try to camouflage them with our versions of history and mythmaking. On these themes, Judge's book makes space for introspection within the community while also offering insights for non-Sikh readers.

*Prophetic Maharaja* does not add to the books on Duleep Singh; most profoundly, it is not simply about him. It is not righting historical wrongs, nor is it filling any gaps. Yet, as the words flow, Duleep Singh emerges as the Maharaja around whom hopes of a kingdom's resurrection were ignited through the channels of prophecy, rumours, and the retelling of myths. Thus, he becomes the Prophetic Maharaja, in search of his kingdom as ordained, a role that ties him back to his royal origins. He becomes a figure both present and absent, as a blank slate and an unwritten notebook filled in by overlapping perspectives: historical, religious, communal, familial, and colonial.

Through Duleep Singh, Judge constructs a complex structure to provide Sikhism and the Sikh community their place of dignity in social history. However, how does one recreate a person and a land that he has been absent from for thirty-nine years? Memories fade even when they once existed; how can they fade when they never had the chance to form? The book tells the story that follows here: Duleep Singh, a child of five when he was anointed king, was caught not only in the shadows of regional power struggles but also in the deceptive web of extractive colonial institutional politics. Eventually, he was separated from his mother, his friends and caretakers, his language, his food, the waters of Punjab, the air he breathed, his religion, and his identity when he was exiled to unfamiliar England and raised with reluctance.

It is this deepening alienation and eventual resignation to his fate that led to Duleep Singh's passive compliance with British commands and rendered him invisible in the histories Judge relied upon at the outset. *Prophetic Maharaja* begins with the startling premise of whether he even existed. This allowed the author to create a visible Duleep who embodied betrayal, anguish, acceptance, and a sense of profound loss. Perhaps the most poignant of all is the loss of Sikhism and Sikhi. For young Duleep Singh, 'losing' his religion also meant the loss of his princely aura. What remained was an ordinary British subject. Even if it may have initially felt like a burden lifted, this transformation marked the complete erasure of Prince Duleep Singh and thus the last heir of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

The book is structured through various scaffoldings that allow the reader to observe the prince through his actions and inactions: his acceptance of a prophetic mantle, submissions to the entreaties of family, community, and faith, and finally his surrender to colonial power. As the scaffolding progressively rises, we get a well-rounded view of the lost child, the grown-up man, an astonishingly adaptable personality in a distant culture and country, and eventually the return of the prodigal son after a life spent in pursuits thrust upon him. The book's vantage points are the Sikh community and the public, including their conversations

around conversion, rumours, and reform. Judge breaks the linearity of the book by inserting a link to the subaltern that runs through it. The book identifies and connects the Prophetic Maharaja to the subaltern, fleshes out these connections as those without voices, and then shifts their identities across the text: the Sikh community, with its rumors and prophecies, becomes the subaltern in one narration, while Duleep Singh, a royal living in a gilded cage, becomes the subaltern in another. The book repeatedly shows how history constructs positional privilege, all the way from the powerful to the subaltern, thereby shifting one's location within the hierarchy depending on who holds the power.

Judge also writes about two figures who retrace their paths to Duleep Singh: his mother, Maharani Jind Kaur, exiled to Nepal, and his cousin, Thakar Siddenwalia, who partially exiles himself to the French territory of Pondicherry. Both appeal to Duleep Singh with visions of grandeur, lost inheritance, prophecies, and national pride. Judge notes that they seek to reignite in Duleep Singh the yearning for a homeland he may have forgotten. By the 1870s, Duleep Singh was a man adrift in scandalous, bustling London, struggling financially, spiritually, and emotionally. His mother's and cousin's retellings of a glorious past, compounded by present losses, entice him and inspire him to right the colonial wrongs they suffered. Here, Judge effectively and efficiently weaves the ambience of the time and the hopes and aspirations of the Sikh community into the narrative.

Judge recounts, in an almost matter-of-fact tone, the inevitable fallout of managing a volatile *quam* (community), a young religion, a fractured and wealthy region riddled with palace intrigues and mysticism. He introduces rumours and prophecies not as exotic flourishes but as subaltern processes that reflect the loss of religion while whispering possibilities of political and princely revival. Judge takes it forward by actively ratcheting up the arrogance of the colonial powers in labelling the people as uneducated and rustic, before showing how marginalized ideas, simplicity of the community, and their adherence to their *Hukum* (divine order), *Maryada* (code), and *Rehat* (discipline) created such high expectations for a revival of the Khalsa Raj that the Britishers were forced to bar Duleep Singh from entering India after his reconversion to Sikhism.

Though considered simple and ordinary, the Sikh community offered a brilliant yet nuanced performance, aware of what was expected of them when the time came. This quiet and underground rebellion orchestrated by Duleep Singh's cousin Thakar Singh, through the participation of royalty, peasants, religious priests, and provincial governments, was made possible due to the kinship demonstrated by the community. British authorities, fearful of the symbolic and political power Duleep Singh might reclaim and unable to read the inscrutable peasants or the mind games of the subaltern public, exiled him again—this time to Paris. Ironically, the same whispers from the land, floating like a minstrel wind, are what Jind Kaur and Thakar had used to draw Duleep Singh back to his legacy.

Duleep Singh's return to Sikhism, marked by the Amrit ceremony in Aden, must have been a moment of solace for him. However, his journey to reclaim his land and identity never materialised; he was denied the right to return as ruler. His legacy of loss continued. Even if seen as a broken arrow, Judge argues that the arrowhead separated from its shaft does not symbolize failure. It represents a life not allowed to be lived on its own terms and, more powerfully, aligns the future of the faith and community with Duleep Singh's

adherence to Hukum. He becomes a focal point that moves the community forward, replacing the closed-door battles with those fought by the energised Singh Sabhas in the open-air trenches of public opinion. Notably, there is a hidden yet palpable anger in Judge's words.

It comes across in Judge's particular style of constructing his arguments and in his deep, reflective reading of the past that these exercises have often escaped acknowledgment where Sikhs are concerned. The community is considered too rustic, too simple, and too woebegone to claim any intellectual space. They are thought of as only peasant farmers and soldiers, neither thinkers nor strategists. This work places, alongside deep gratitude to the community and its inherent strengths, its never-dying spirit, which comes through vividly and evocatively in this prose. The Sikh community has stood the test of time, and history has acknowledged the inability of monarchs, rulers, governments, and even fringe elements to control it. Yet it still lacks acceptance; it is rendered emotional and unpredictable.

All this adds up to Judge's analysis: even in death, Duleep Singh was denied belonging. He died not in India or England but in Paris, still in exile. His life, from beginning to end, was scripted by loss, a tragic figure manipulated like a puppet by those who held the strings. By placing Duleep Singh as a metaphor for the community, Judge forces us to recognise the deep othering suffered by the Sikh community. While steeped in Sikh history and colonial politics, the book speaks as much to postcolonial scholars, historians of empire, and diasporic readers as it does to the community itself. Judge's meticulous research and presentation of linkages are evident in the way he has illuminated the contradictions in police records and newspaper accounts of Singh Sabha meetings. His analysis reveals a subtle strategy through which the Sikh community navigated and at times exploited the colonial state's policies of creating political and religious divides in the subcontinent, leaving a subtle yet profound impact on perceptions of Sikh resilience against colonial erasure.

However, one cannot help but ask why this book was written in this way. At the very beginning, Judge informs readers that his work deliberately resists conventional narrative forms. While he views this demanding approach as a strength, the book's deeply intellectualised style and layered academic language can test the reader's patience, often requiring multiple readings to grasp its core arguments. This complexity risks distancing even those genuinely interested in the subject. Judge's dense style and focus on Duleep Singh's symbolic role, while purposeful, sometimes overshadows detailed historical evidence that might have provided a more grounded understanding. At times, the book feels less like a work of community memory or historical clarity and more like a self-fulfilling intellectual exercise, an academic monument to Judge's knowledge and sophistication. In doing so, it risks failing to serve the Sikh community that it romanticizes. Its language, structure, and theoretical frameworks seem designed to impress elite scholarly circles, resulting in a dense narrative that lacks chronological coherence and indulges in abstract digressions rooted in Western theorists like Freud and Lacan, rather than in Gurbani, Janamsakhis, or oral traditions that run through the veins of Sikh life. The author repeatedly cites the *Sau Sakhis* and the *Malwa Des Ratan Di Sakhis* as central to creating the "atmosphere of anticipation" surrounding Duleep Singh's return, but does not substantially draw on them to analyze the community, except to assert that they were emotive tools. As a result, the analysis remains primarily rooted in Western frameworks.

To understand the resistance, memory, and soul of the Sikh people, their grounded and rustic charisma, spontaneity, and cultural vitality, akin to the Gauls of old, why did Judge feel the need to use foreign psychoanalytic lenses to the point that the community becomes almost unrecognizable? Had he woven in vernacular sources or community dialogues, the book might have empowered Sikhs to reclaim their history and dignity. Instead, at times, it seems to perpetuate the colonial erasure it seeks to critique, leaving the living, breathing community, still bearing the weight of loss, to long for remembrance, clarity, and a voice it can truly call its own. I read the book through the lens of my Sikh identity and my training, which often encourages simplifying things to get to the heart of the matter. While the book met the twin criteria I set out at the beginning, its inaccessibility to the larger community once again denies us the right to be understood by ourselves.

Still, one cannot stop thinking about this book and, hence, about Duleep Singh. *Prophetic Maharaja* makes him larger than the book itself and larger than a memory, more than the losses he suffered, the sovereignty he lost, the pain he hid, and the expectations he managed. Judge's presentation leaves a haunting impression of the 'prophetic maharaja' on the reader, because it reflects on the many challenges that shaped Duleep Singh's life. Judge's words allow Duleep Singh to become the sum of many things. Perhaps he is exactly what destiny had intended him to be.