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Undoing Matricide as Maternal Radical Care

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Abstract

The concept of matricide theorizes the marginal position of the mother within a phallo-
centric and patriarchal society from a psychoanalytic perspective. This article seeks to con-
tribute to the understanding of transformative nonmatricidal processes by analyzing the
relations between the psychic and political aspects of these processes. We argue that non-
matricidal spaces can be created through the mobilization of a maternal affect as a care
practice that transgresses social and normative boundaries. By reading the biblical story
of Moses's birth and childhood, we depict the emergence of a nonmatricidal space and
the ways in which this space defies and disturbs social boundaries forced by a heteronor-
mative, phallocentric, and patriarchal law. We draw on Luce Irigaray's and Kelly Oliver's
concept of a "loving look" to theorize how maternal affect is mobilized as an ethical and a
political commitment, which affirms alternative positions of subjectivity and agency. We
conclude by arguing that an integrated account of nonmatricidal relational spaces and
maternal radical care practices might offer a wider understanding of the political effects
of maternal politics as radical care practices.

The notion of matricide has been one of the major contributions of the feminist critique
of psychoanalysis. Coined by Julia Kristeva, it aims to critically analyze the role of the
loss of the mother in the Oedipal subject-formation and the ways in which this loss
functions as the psychosocial infrastructure of violent, gendered social relations
(Kristeva 1989, 38). In the Oedipal model, the forced acceptance of the law is
represented by the father's body and the child's rejection of the emotionally embodied
relations with the mother, which are the necessary and interrelated conditions for
becoming a subject (Freud 1923). In this model, the Maternal is positioned as the
negativity in relation to which the phallic human subject is constituted. The Maternal
remains beyond the reach of the subject's symbolization and does not serve as a principle
underlying a sociosymbolic life (Irigaray 1985a; Kristeva 1989).

Feminist critique of psychoanalysis has argued that the Oedipal model expresses a
deep-rooted theme of Western culture (Irigaray 1985a; Benjamin 1988; Mitchell
2013). As a psychosocial construction, matricide reflects the dominance and primacy
of masculinity that manifests in patriarchal social structures and has been associated

with wide-scale forms of objectification and dehumanization (Kristeva 1989; Irigaray 1993a; 2008; Cavarero 2009). Feminist scholars have offered visions of nonmatricidal, psychosocial principles that would challenge the primacy of the Oedipal model as a necessary model for subject formation (Kristeva 1991; Irigaray 2001; 2002; Jacobs 2007; Baraitser 2009; Stone 2012; Rozmarin 2016). Many of these theoretical efforts reinterpreted myths to open cultural and symbolic spaces for imagining a nonmatricidal future (Irigaray 1985a; Jacobs 2007; Ettinger 2014). However, there is very little elaboration on the possible political practices that might create a nonmatricidal relation. Very few suggestions concentrate on the intimate relations between mothers and daughters or the individual processes that mothers should go through to constitute a nonmatricidal, maternal subjectivity (Irigaray 1993b, 43–50).

Our article rests on the metatheoretical claim that a critique of matricide should provide a rich account of transformative practices that could counter different normative conditions and produce nonmatricidal options. It aims to contribute to the understanding of transformative nonmatricidal processes by unpacking how nonmatricidal relations are created through specific sociopolitical practices that challenge social patriarchal structures. We offer a reading of the biblical myth of the birth of Moses to show how practices transgressing spatial, racial, and class boundaries create transformative, nonmatricidal relational spaces. Drawing on this reading, we argue that focusing on the psychosocial effect of maternal politics, in terms of the creation of nonmatricidal spaces, can support the radical political potential of certain kinds of maternal politics as radical care.

Moses's story sparked the imagination of many scholars, including Sigmund Freud (Freud 1939). Our interpretation of the biblical story neither explicitly engages with any of its religious interpretations, nor with the Freudian interpretation. Instead, our reading is based on a feminist approach in which the biblical story is reviewed as a myth—a story that embodies numerous layers of cultural meaning.

Feminist theory has turned to ancient texts and myths to work through phallocentric and patriarchal cultural structures. Engagement with myths stems from the realization that they are an axis of a phallocentric symbolic order, revealing its imaginary foundation (Jacobs 2007, 18). Myths can also be used as "a structuring device to mediate the inclusion of previously excluded imaginary phantasy structures into the institutions of the social and symbolic order" (43). Feminist rereading of myths can offer an alternative to the Oedipal myth as *the* myth of the origin of civilization and patriarchal social order (Kelso 2007, 58). It can also inspire the imagination to grasp worlds that are different from the known (Söderbäck 2010, 13).

One of the presuppositions of feminist interpretations of myth is that these canonical texts became canonical through a long tradition of phallocentric interpretation, which suppressed the possibility of women being the subject of interpretation. Thus, to reconstruct new political imaginations, the main goal of feminist reading strategy will not be knowing the past interpretations but "founding a new ethics" (Kelso 2007, 24). Julie Kelso argues that such an interpretation requires learning to listen beyond the silence of women in the text. This listening is a creative "production of a representational framework that especially enables something of a feminine imaginary relation to origins to *begin* to be articulated within the Symbolic" (104).

Our reading aims to interfere with the phallocentric cultural imaginary that is tied to the story of Moses and makes way for new, nonmatricidal and political imaginations. This is achieved by focusing on what mainstream interpretations consider merely a prologue to the story of Moses as a leader of the Jewish people in their passage from slavery

to free people: a story about the women who care for the baby Moses against the law that ordered his death.

We interpret the actions of the women who care for Moses by focusing on their appearance as ethical and political subjects and not by their relative marginality in the biblical story of Moses. Thus, although it might be argued that by sustaining the life of Moses, the women played a key role in establishing a monotheocratic patriarchy, we weave our political imagination in these short passages to locate contemporary possibilities for nonmatricidal politics. Our interpretation aims to locate how these women's actions actualize a shared ethical commitment to the life of a baby, which creates a relational space that resists the law of the father, on both the social and psychological levels. We argue that the unusual actions of these women suggest a radical alternative for mobilizing maternal affects to initiate political resistance.

Matricide as a Psychosocial Formation

The concept of "matricide" indicates the psychosocial function of the Maternal in Western culture and the Oedipal model. This concept and its evolving discussions rest on a presupposition that the Oedipal model reflects and sustains normative and cultural structures that are deeply rooted in Western traditions. Juliet Mitchell laid the foundation for criticizing the Oedipal structure for adhering to the patriarchal family and society (Mitchell 1974). From this perspective, Oedipus is a structural condition for generating a gender identity in a social symbolic order that produces privileged connections between male corporeality and the speaking subject's position. In this context, the concept of matricide pertains to an analytic category that aims to locate the psychosocial processes through which the maternal is shaped.

According to Freud, the loss of primary relations with the mother is a psychically necessary condition for the constitution of the social subject. In this process, with the forced acceptance of the law represented by the father's body, the child turns away from emotional, embodied relations with the mother, who is beyond the reach of the subject's symbolization (Freud 1923, 31–34). The loss of primary relations—an immanent aspect of the Oedipal complex and its dissolution—consists of two stages of negation. The first negation occurs when the boy who enters the Oedipal complex intensifies his identification with the father and withdraws his primary affective connections with the mother (Freud 1924, 175). The second negation occurs when the signs representing the loss of the mother are disavowed and leave hardly any traces (Freud 1925, 256). Consequently, the maternal and feminine body, in which the Maternal is incarnated, does not serve as a principle underlying sociosymbolic life. Instead, the Maternal is positioned as negativity, and subject-formation is produced only in relation to the phallus and fear of castration. Unlike the dead father—whose loss becomes a generative principle in culture—the negated loss of the mother does not operate as a parallel principle.

This structural matricide serves as a condition for the cultural linkage between masculine and social law. Irigaray connects the double negation of the mother with the constitution of the phallic father as the signifier of social law (Irigaray 1991, 36). This law justifies and naturalizes women's banishment from Western culture (Green 2012, 3–4). Phallocentrism also coalesces the father, as a model of subjectivity, with his role as the head of the patriarchal family and as a political leader. In this framework, relations with the mother cannot yield the principles of subjectivity, kinship, and social and political spheres. Moreover, this cultural logic forecloses the possibilities of the maternal

becoming an aspect of the embodied subjectivities of mothers. Instead, the maternal functions as an affective relational aspect of their reality, which cannot be fully integrated into women's ethical and political agency.

The psychosocial formation of matricide also shapes the relations between mothers and their children. Unable to pass on the meaning and value embedded in the presence of the maternal body, motherhood signifies for the daughter her own annihilation (Mayock 2013, 172). For the boy, matricide is a precondition for entering the symbolic order and becoming a subject of social law and ethics.

The implications of matricide are not confined to the intersubjective intimate level. Sarah LaChance Adams and Caroline Lundquist suggest that matricide is the denial of the maternal as an origin—a denial that leads to the rejection of materiality as the basis of life (LaChance Adams and Lundquist 2013, 17). Irigaray argues that matricidal culture reduces the body to an object and thus ignores the lived connections between people as corporeal sensate beings. This objectification of the body constitutes the symbolic infrastructure of the different forms of social and cultural objectification of women's bodies and the instrumental and competitive relations between women (Irigaray 1993a, 102). In a culture that privileges the phallocentric gaze over the sense of a lived body, women lose the singularity of their body as a source of desire. Moreover, the phallocentric denial of the primary lived bodily relations with the Maternal disconnects language from its lived origins (Irigaray 1999, 151). In her recent writing, Irigaray stresses that phallocentric culture is the core logic behind the inability of humanity to situate itself as "living beings among other living beings in an environment that allows life to exist and develop" (Irigaray 2015, 101).

Nonmatricidal Spaces as Sites of Resistance

Because matricide has been conceptualized as a structural aspect of the Oedipal model, feminist accounts of nonmatricidal options tend to focus on the structural possibilities for understanding a culture that is not based on matricide. Amber Jacobs argues that creating new structural constellations is necessary to interfere with Oedipal symbolic structures (Jacobs 2007).

For Kristeva, although the primary loss of the mother is necessary, as Alison Stone explains, the "infantile-maternal stratum of the self always returns into speech as its material-semiotic aspect: its expressive rhythms, intonations, affective, and sonorous quality" (Stone 2012, 120). If a culture were to acknowledge the semiotic resonance of the primary relations with the mother, the maternal could become a source for rethinking the subject. Lisa Baraitser emphasizes that nonmatricidal relations present an alternative model of I–other relationships in which the child's and the mother's otherness become transformative (Baraitser 2009). Unlike Kristeva, for Irigaray, a nonmatricidal culture is possible as an immanent aspect of a postphallocentric and post-Oedipal culture, which is governed by the logic of sexual difference (Irigaray 1993a). The emphasis on theorizing the possibility of nonmatricidal relations may be the reason that there are very few elaborations on how mothers and others can undo matricidal positions through concrete practices. One rare example is Irigaray's list of recommendations for actions intended to create an actual space in which nonmatricidal mother–daughter relations may exist (Irigaray 1993b, 47–51).

However, it is important to remember that matricide is always actualized in a specific social context and in relation to a normative background, authoritative discursive practices, and social institutions. To establish the creation of nonmatricidal spaces, we need

to look at the practices, actions, and gestures that constitute matricide in different symbolic, normative, and social contexts. Moreover, the cultural resources that women have for creating nonmatricidal relations are driven by these components and their cultural excesses. Focusing on nonmatricidal options as they materialize in specific social and cultural contexts reveals how concrete actions not only *express* relational, intersubjective psychic possibilities but also constitute spaces in which nonmatricidal relations might appear.

In the following section, we offer a reading of the biblical story of Moses's childhood as a myth that portrays the emergence of a nonmatricidal space and the ways in which this space defies and disturbs social boundaries of race and class as well as of phallocentric and patriarchal law. We show how this nonmatricidal space is created through the mobilization of maternal affect as the basis for ethical and political agency.

The book of Exodus opens with the migration of the Israelites to Egypt, seeking to secure their material needs. After many decades of working as builders, their proliferation threatens the new Pharaoh, who enslaves them. The text also emphasizes their brutal and hard enslavement (Exodus 1:14). The description of the hardship of enslavement directly leads to that of Pharaoh's decree, which commands the midwives to kill every male newborn at birth. The decree emblematizes the patriarchal logic in which the father/king wishes to destroy the community of slaves by hurting future bloodlines. It also affirms the ultimate authority of the patriarchal leader as signifying the conditions for social life. In addition, it symbolizes the centrality of the phallocentric order in which women's bodies are mere executors of patriarchal law.

The midwives secretly refuse to follow this command and blame their failure to carry it out on the Israeli women who "are not as the Egyptian women; for they are lively, and are delivered ere the midwives come in unto them" (Exodus 1:19). This is the first act of resistance to the law. Invoking the dichotomy between cultured Egyptian laboring bodies and natural, beastly Israelite bodies, the midwives posit the Israelite women's bodies as beyond the reach of the specular gaze of law. Following his failure to uphold his control over the Israelites' maternal bodies, Pharaoh directs the power of law to the Egyptian people, commanding them to throw any male newborn into the river (Exodus 2:22).

Jochebed, an Israelite slave, looks at her son after giving birth to him, and the text states, "she *saw* him that he was a good child" (Exodus 2:3). Although this sentence may be read as stating some elementary inclination of the mother toward the child as sweet or healthy, considering the extreme conditions in which this first encounter with the child took place, it is plausible that this first look is a crucial judgment about the value of the child's life. This newborn, who was deemed to be killed, cannot survive without someone willing to value his life beyond the law. Thus, the mother's judgment of his life, which might be trivial or expected under usual circumstances, becomes an act of ethical commitment to the child's sustainability. This, in turn, becomes a political act of resisting the law and affirming an alternative normative possibility.

In our reading, this is the first element of creating a relational network of care supporting the life of the child and a nonmatricidal space. Gazing at her child, Jochebed attributes value to her son's *life* as a singularity that is immanently good and decides to disobey Pharaoh's deadly law by keeping him alive. Thus, *seeing* in this manner is an immanent ethical action. Jochebed's judgment affirms the ethical value of her son's life, and the connection between her body and her son as a connection of life itself. Her ethical position then becomes an epistemological resource. Jochebed *knows* what she needs to sustain her son's life, and she hides him at home.

From a contemporary perspective, Jochebed's gaze is immanently different from the gaze as constructed in Western culture, being governed by an alternative ontology that launches the possibility for the ethical and political actions unfolding from her gaze. Since its origins in Western thought, the gaze has been considered the most reliable source of knowledge (Jay 1993, 24–25).[1] Vision is understood as grasping objects at a distance and is, therefore, associated with the illusion of separation from the world and control over it (Oliver 2001a, 57). As an epistemological ideal, it supports the notion of consciousness that is free of the personal and embodied and tends toward the objective (Oliver 2007, 121–22).

The ascendancy of sight has come under significant criticism by Irigaray, who associates the specular subject with the privileged phallocentric subject. Irigaray argues that the predominance of vision echoes the phallocentric imaginary in which women are the passive objects of contemplation, and femininity is reduced to negativity (Irigaray 1985b, 25–26). For Irigaray, vision in phallocentric Western culture is an alienating sense that separates the subject from others and the world.

Irigaray theorizes space, light, and air as the preconditions of sight (Oliver 2001a, 67–69). By theorizing air, Irigaray reconnects vision with its material origins and offers a new notion of vision in terms of touch (Vasseleu 1998, 12–13). Kelly Oliver stresses, "Air generates life but without hierarchy, genealogy, domination, or ownership" (Oliver 2001a, 68). Thus, she argues that the conceptualization of air as a precondition of vision also emphasizes generosity as a precondition of the specular subject (68).

Oliver maintains that sight, which rests on acknowledging the gift of life given by air, generates a *loving look* that circulates an "affective psychic energy," nourishing and sustaining the body and soul (71). This loving look echoes the primary relations and bodily drives between the bodies of the mother and child. This affective circulation constitutes proto-dialogs between bodies (Oliver 2000, 10). By reconnecting vision to its affective and relational origins, "vision becomes a circulation of energy between and among, rather than an artificial and inadequate bridge between a subject and an alien world" (Oliver 2001a, 76).

A *loving look* entails an immanent ethical aspect. Oliver develops her account of the loving look as a form of what she later characterizes as witnessing. According to Oliver, subjectivity is constituted through the response to the call of others and addressing oneself to others. When facing the other, one is ethically accountable for the possibility of the other to appear as a subject, beyond any judgment (Oliver 2001b, 15).

In the context of maternal relations, Gail Weiss argues that, in birth, the newborn emerges naked and exposed, which constitutes an urgent ethical appeal for protection (Weiss 2013, 116). This encounter occurs not only through the visual field, but also through touch (113). For Weiss, the activity of labor produces the newborn and the responsibility for their life (113, 117). The responsibility of the birthing mother has its origin in the relations between the maternal body and the fetus. However, these relations change when, during birth, the undeniable bodily dependence of the fetus on the mother, who commits her body beyond her will, becomes an appeal that can be ignored and, thus, a site of freedom and ethical choice (115). Weiss argues that maternal responsibility also constitutes "responsibility networks," which are responsible for the life of the newborn (119).

The loving look as an act of witnessing yields unique positions for mothers as subjects of knowledge. The commitment of the mother as a witness to the child's living singularity makes her responsible for the open future of her child; thus her accountability cannot constitute a narrative that affirms her position as a knowing rational subject.

Parts of her obligation to the singularity of the open future of the child will remain as the primary affective labor beyond language (Rozmarin 2017, 143). The affirmation of her maternal subjectivity is dependent upon "the willingness of others to be witnesses to meaning beyond coherent narrative" (143).

Oliver stresses that the primary affective intensity of the *loving look* can challenge the relations of domination and oppression (Oliver 2001a, 71). As an affective medium that affirms the presence and immanent value of relational subjects beyond power formations, it defies the conditions of concrete forms of social violence and domination based on dehumanization or erasure from the public sphere.

Back to Jochebed: although the text merely states that Jochebed saw her child as good, we suggest that, when this act of looking is interpreted as part of the series of unusual acts that eventually save Moses, it may indicate a crucial affective relation that is mobilized as an ethical and political affect. Jochebed's look is a *loving look* that embodies an affective psychic energy and constitutes a proto-dialog between her body and her son's, which eventually transmits to the other women who will care for young Moses. Jochebed's gaze affirms the singular value of the life of the baby against the judgment of the law that attributes value only to Egyptians as such, his life has value only in death. This commitment appears to be an immediate source of action against the law to preserve her child's life.

After three months, when Jochebed can no longer hide baby Moses, she builds an ark, places him in it, and releases the ark to the flow of the River Nile, hoping to protect her child from the law of the sovereign. Moses's sister, Miriam, stands by the bank, watching her brother "to wit what would be done to him" (Exodus 2:4). The text does not mention any dialogue between Jochebed and her daughter; however, Miriam stands and watches the ark as if she is continuing the loving look of her mother. Aware of her limited power to watch over her brother, Miriam looks at the ark as an eyewitness to record and remember what will become of him.

Pharaoh's daughter then comes along and notices the ark. She takes it out of the water and opens it, letting the air and light enter, as if to perpetuate the motion of the life therein. When she looks at Moses's weeping face, she feels compassion toward him (Exodus 2:6). Sharing the ethical loving look cast by Jochebed and Miriam, the princess responds to Moses's life and becomes committed to him. As with Jochebed, her gaze also becomes a resource for knowledge. The text does not hint at her hesitation or wonder. Pharaoh's daughter declares that the baby is an Israelite (Exodus 2:6). Although the text does not explicitly offer any further information about her thoughts and knowledge about the decree, it is unlikely that in a time of infanticide, she does not know that this baby, an Israelite, should not be alive according to the law of the land, and that his very existence is an act of resistance and defiance.

However, her gaze is not governed by the identity of a privileged Egyptian princess, nor is it an expression of pity. Instead, her look carries with it the logic of the *loving look* of Jochebed, which affirms the value of the singular life of the baby beyond any collective identity or law of the land. Through this gaze, the otherness of the child does not appear only as a forbidden worthless life of a future slave but as a life that calls for care. Looking upon his precarious home, Pharaoh's daughter committed herself to acting in response to the life in front of her.

Miriam, Moses's sister, immediately reacts to this response. She allows herself to address the princess, transgressing her position as a slave girl, and asks if the princess would like her to get an Israelite wet nurse for the baby. Her suggestion is pragmatic and clear. It reveals that there is a relatively safe space for her to address the princess

—a space that emerges through the continuous loving look exchanged and carried by different bodies. The unreserved action of Miriam suggests that she can trust the shared space as an ethical and political space of shared commitment, which is also a shared space of defiance concerning the law of the Father and the sovereign.

Pharaoh's daughter accepts the suggestion without any hesitation, alarm, or wonder regarding the unusual dialogue with the slave child. Miriam brings Jochebed, who would then raise her son as his wet nurse and later return him to the palace where he will be raised until he becomes the leader of Israelites in their journey toward liberation.

Is it possible that the princess does not see the expression on Jochebed's face when she sees her son again? Is she oblivious to the possibility that Jochebed is Moses's biological mother? This is unlikely. Until this moment, the princess understood the situation considering its social and political complications.

Here, as in other parts of this short story, the text does not elaborate on the reasons and emotions of the characters, but on a feminist reading, we speculate on the thoughts and emotions that allow these actions to be a part of coherent political and ethical subjectivities of the characters. Thus, we suggest that in her cooperation, Pharaoh's daughter affirms the bond between the three women that was created through the network of loving gazes, as they circulate affects and emotions driving them to act as a network of care. Hence, although she is arguably highly privileged and her act could historically echo histories of colonizers taking on colonized babies, her actions sustain the caring commitment of the enslaved mother to her child, and thereby resist their dehumanization and objectivization by the law.

The status of a wet nurse reconnects Jochebed to the network of care that safeguards baby Moses. In her feminist reading of biblical stories, Mara Benjamin argues that because of the relational importance of the wet nurse, her role cannot be reduced to her economic status as a household laborer (Benjamin 2018, 104). Sharing the responsibility and practices of caring, Jochebed, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter echo what Patricia Hill Collins calls *othermothers*—women who assist or replace the biological mother in caring for the child under the conditions of racism and economic and social discrimination (Collins 2000, 178). Passing the child from one woman to another allows Moses to survive. The performance of care, despite the status or ethnic belonging of the carers, creates a safe space for the baby, which is enabled by mobilizing maternal affective responses to the child beyond the boundaries of home, race, and class.

This story about the commitment to care beyond ethnicity and class does not reflect the harsh historical realities under slavery. In recent years, emerging literature regarding gender relations in American slavery shows that white women actively participated in enslaving others (West and Knight 2017; Jones-Rogers 2019). Stephanie Jones-Rogers regards wet-nursing as a unique kind of gendered exploitation, a form of skilled labor, that was inextricably linked with ideologies of race, ethnicity, class, and patterns of exploitation under slavery (Jones-Rogers 2019).

Notably, many Biblical scholars nowadays hold that there is not enough archeological evidence to suggest that the Israelites ever lived in Egypt. Thus, the biblical story about the enslavement of Israelites in Egypt and the subsequent Exodus is not empirically supported.[2] Others believe ancient Egypt enslaved Israelites but in a way quite different from European colonialism or antebellum slavery in America. Such studies suggest that Israelites arrived in Egypt as working immigrants and worked mainly on building projects. Despite their worsening conditions, they were not considered the private property of Egyptian landowners and enjoyed some autonomy over their

everyday lives and families (Samaan 2002). Thus, although this story is probably historically inaccurate and cannot be regarded as a realistic description of the interracial relations between women in slavery, our reading focuses on unpacking the political possibilities of this myth that has influenced Western culture in general, and Jewish culture in particular. As such, this myth resonates ahistorically with other conditions of radical precariousness and unfreedom and might become a feminist political myth that inspires political resistance through radical care.

Our reading does not suggest that this network of care transcends or disengages from the sociopolitical context of patriarchy and nation-based slavery. However, we argue that the commitment to the child's life serves as an affective resource for women to act in ways that challenge and postpone normative laws governing their lives. This suspension might be seen as partial and momentary since the rigid power structure of patriarchy and slavery remains firm and stable. However, on the symbolic level, this story of the origin of Moses may be a precursor to an alternative reading of Moses's unusual character. Moreover, locating the political effect of relational networks of care might lend this mythic story a feminist dimension by revealing the undetermined nature of political actions that are implemented with the hope of a better future.

Our reading suggests that the three women respond to the singularity and immanent value of life, and this response acts as a source of knowledge and an ethico-political standpoint that enables them to interpret their reality, diverging from the dominant phallocentric perspective. By their actions that aim to preserve the child's life, this network sustains a relational logic that resists the meaning that is attached to the life of the child as a risk to the racial patriarchal law. Moreover, the women's active commitment sustains a relational, nonmatricidal space that suspends the phallocentric and patriarchal erasure of the Maternal as an affirmative source of subjectivity. Ethical commitment yields agency and knowledge inspiring transgressive actions, thus affirming maternal subjectivity.

The nonmatricidal space defies and destabilizes different power formations that draw on matricidal logic and sustain it. One boundary that the nonmatricidal relational space transgresses is the division between the private space of the home and social space, as well as the ways in which social space is shaped by class and ethnicity. The network of care stretches from the Israelites' houses, where Moses is hidden, to the river, then back to the Israelites' quarters for nursing, and finally, to the king's palace where Moses is raised. This movement defies the ways in which space and motion are formed by categories of class, gender, and nation.

In addition, the nonmatricidal space cuts across normative constructions dictating who counts as human. From the refusal of the midwives to enact the necropolitics of Pharaoh to the dialogue between Miriam, the slave girl, and the Egyptian princess, the created space accords to the baby's life the status of the human subject.

The network of care also defies the patriarchal family structure and creates an alternative kinship, offering a post-Oedipal alternative. Connecting the biological mother as a wet nurse, the sister, and Pharaoh's daughter, this network introduces the possibility of kinship beyond the Oedipal heteronormative presuppositions that marginalize alternative forms of kinship (Butler 2000, 23). It offers a model kinship, resisting what Shelley Park calls "the ideology of monomaternalism" (Park 2013, 256), which is part of the Oedipal model. As the birth mother is forced to give up her infant, the adoption cannot be considered a willful collaboration; nonetheless, it is a cooperation that affirms the value of the life of the child and the ethical commitment that follows from witnessing this life. It also affirms the women's agency facing institutionalized violence. In this

alternative model, biological motherhood loses its role as a normative standard; instead, the ethical commitment to the life of the child becomes the leading affective mobilizing force for action.

Thus, as the story reveals, although performing maternal affects and care work can be a manifestation of the most traditional role of women, it might also be radical and political when it is mobilized against normative and political structures, aiming to limit the performance of the maternal as a supporting role in phallocentric and patriarchal society. Indeed, one could argue that eventually, the women's actions only helped sustain the life of a leader who plays a crucial role in shaping the modes of the patriarchal Jewish code. This is true in the cases of many women who resist and transform social institutions while not abolishing them altogether. Our reading aims to emphasize the alternative cultural logic that is manifested in the margins of the story of Moses, which might inspire contemporary political imaginations.[3]

Radical Maternal Politics and Nonmatricidal Relations

Our analysis of the political aspects of nonmatricidal spaces supports the political potential of maternal politics as a form of radical care, with the potential to transform the position of the Maternal and negotiate the precarity of marginalized populations.

Over the past forty years, feminists have highlighted how mothers mobilize their ethical commitment as a motivation for political activism. Although it may have different goals and forms, maternal politics refers to "discourses, policies, and actions by or for women predicated on values or interest associated with motherhood" (Carreon and Moghadam 2015, 20). Across societies, motherhood has served as a public and political lever with which women have worked to improve the lives of populations in need and to promote matters such as human rights, peacemaking, social-welfare policies, an egalitarian labor market, and environmental issues (Koven and Michel 1990; Carreon and Moghadam 2015). In many cases, political maternal activism arises from social and political neglect, criminalization, and civilian death (Orozco Mendoza 2019, 214).

Sara Ruddick's book *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* is one of the most elaborate defenses of the political potential of motherhood. Theorizing maternal practices as a source of knowledge and moral agency, Ruddick argues that prevention of violence is an integral part of maternal thinking. Although Ruddick acknowledges that violence can be part of maternal performance, she associates maternal practices with the constitutive commitment to nonviolence (Ruddick 1989, 57). As such, maternal commitment to the child's well-being can be extended to social conflicts by identifying with the commitment of other mothers to protect life, as well as through solidarity with those who suffer from oppression (231–33).

Although she acknowledges that the category of "mother" does not designate any single set of emotions, attitudes, experiences, or practices, Ruddick defends the association between the maternal and nonviolence by arguing that "maternal identification can be transformed into a commitment to protect the lives of 'other' children, to resist on behalf of *children* assaults on body or spirit that violate the promise of birth" (57).

In the phrase "the promise of birth," Ruddick seems to gesture toward the core affective emotional bond that yields maternal commitment to the child's well-being. However, she is aware that her construction of motherhood as being immanently linked to nonviolence is not an ontological truth about some necessary core of motherhood. She writes:

> Maternal peacefulness is a myth. At its center is the promise of birth. To threaten bodies—to starve, terrorize, mutilate, or deliberately injure them—is to violate the promise. Every body counts, every body is a testament to hope. The hope of the world—of birthing woman, mothers, friends, and kin—rests in the newborn infant. (217)

Affirming the myth as an actual possibility, Ruddick opens a way to reframe maternal affects as sources for maternal ethical and political subjectivity. Such maternal political agency is not a natural and necessary inclination, but a continual *struggle* toward non-violence (57).

Indeed, maternalism can be mobilized as a resource for nationalistic politics, which activates the lasting association between maternal role and loyalty to the social order (Carreon and Moghadam 2015, 28). However, we argue that this should not lead feminist theory to abandon the Maternal category as a basis for radical politics. Such a theoretical preference could join the long-lasting marginalization of the maternal in an androcentric culture. Moreover, under-theorizing the maternal as a basis for political subjectivity can lead to overlooking meaningful affective resources for emerging forms of political struggle. Instead, we contend that viewing maternal politics through the category of *radical care* can help distinguish between conservative and radical forms of maternal politics.

A growing body of radical care literature depicts practices of care performed in precarious situations as radical practices resisting institutional neglect and marginalization (Tyler 2009; Bassel and Emejulu 2018; Dyck 2018; Erel and Reynolds 2018; Orozco Mendoza 2019; Hobart and Kneese 2020).

The category of "radical care" aims to highlight practices of care, an important site in which marginalized populations negotiate their political subjectivity and agency. Furthermore, it aims to better distinguish between "care" as a trendy buzzword that conceals conservative neoliberal policies and a radical political vision that stresses universal interdependence (Chatzidakis et al. 2020). The theorization of "radical care" stems from the observation that, in contemporary times, self-care as well as care for others can be a radical struggle against systematic injustice, power structures, and neoliberal biopower (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 1–2). These practices demonstrate solidarity with others based on commitment to others who suffer in these precarious realities and rely on collective cooperation, mutual aid, and nonpaternalistic forms of action (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 10).

Within a neoliberal context, practices of radical care aim to achieve the bodily moralized ideal of self-management as a condition for citizenship (4). In the context of immigration, the category of radical care highlights how care practices negotiate the boundaries of citizenship while facing xenophobic public opinion and policies (Bassel and Emejulu 2018). As some empirical examples demonstrate, maternal practices can be creative forms of care, intending to negotiate their precarity in relation to prominent normative orders (Dyck 2018; Erel and Reynolds 2018; Savloff 2020).

The notion of radical care emphasizes that care relations are supported by concrete social conditions. In cases in which power formations do not support these relations, care becomes a struggle for life, which *ipso facto* resists neglectful power structures. The category of maternal radical care will indicate toward these cases of maternal politics, which challenge neglecting and abusive normative and institutional structures.

Integrating the notion of radical care with the theorization of nonmatricidal relations might contribute to the understanding of the psychosocial aspects of maternal radical

care practices. Such integration can illuminate what may be the affective resources that are mobilized through radical care practices. Moreover, integrating the theorization of maternal radical care practices with the discussion on nonmatricidal relations might highlight additional political effects of these practices. Radical care practices as well as nonmatricidal spaces are created as a reaction to situations of precarity or immediate threat, which involves women situating themselves in relation to social norms, searching for new ways of continuing their commitment and reinterpreting their situation. Maternal radical care is entangled with the transformative process of the subjectivization of mothers. These practices that challenge normative power structures have the potential to sustain relational spaces in which the maternal becomes a principle for ethical and political action.

Finally, by looking at cases of radical care with the theorization of nonmatricidal possibilities, the practical and social aspects of nonmatricidal relational spaces can be further developed. Facing the political reality of these uncertain times, in which many people are dealing with dispossession and homelessness, in addition to the neoliberal marginalization of care work, it is important to acknowledge the different forms of radical care performed by mothers and others to create spaces that preserve and protect the lives of children and others in need. We argue that these spaces might have a radical political effect on both matricidal psychosocial structures and neoliberal nationalistic and xenophobic policies and laws. Juxtaposing these discussions might also contribute to the understanding of the radical political potential of nonmatricidal relational spaces in maternal, intensive, affective, ethical, and political commitments, thereby becoming a resource for maternal subjectivity as a space of freedom and knowledge.

Notes

1 The diegetic historical setting of Moses's story precedes Greek culture. However, our interpretation aims to locate the political and ethical aspects of Jochebed's gaze in relation to the contemporary imaginary, which is highly influenced by Western traditions.

2 Among those who hold that the Israelites' enslavement and exodus is a myth is Ze'ev Herzog, who argues that the study of ancient Egyptian documents reveals that there is no mention of the Israelites' stay in Egypt or the departure of an entire population from Egypt (Herzog 2008; see also Boer 2009).

3 Although Moses plays a key role in establishing a monotheistic patriarchal religion, he also has special gendered traits. Lisa Guenther argues that Moses's actions and reactions as a leader resonate with the maternal responsibility for the Other's needs and vulnerability, without assimilating the Other into oneself (Guenther 2006, 123).

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