

We Are Because She Was/Is

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

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"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.”¹

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-

¹ 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 Iipay 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 Iipay 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.

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