

Knowing, Making, Naming

Hadley Jensen



Roselyn Washburn (Diné), dye chart, 2019. Dried plants, wool, ink, and paper. Bard Graduate Center Study Collection, Gift of John McCulloch, Teec Nos Pos Trading Post. Photo: Bruce M. White.

The tradition of Navajo weaving lies in the process of weaving. That has not changed much from the time the first blankets were made. The materials may change, the designs may change, the colors may change, but our techniques, values, and weaving customs remain the same.

– D.Y. Begay, Kalley Keams, and Wesley Thomas

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All knowing is inherently embodied, fragmented, and incomplete. We come to know something – a rock, a river, a painting – only by advancing and retreating through repeated encounters, approaching the focus of our attention from multiple angles over time.¹ The curatorial path of this project has likewise been one of advance and retreat; from New York to New Mexico, from museum storage to the hands of artists and makers, from gallery walls to digital space, from the classroom to the Zoomscape. Uniting these experiences and scales of inquiry is an effort to “know” Diné culture, cosmologies, communities, and practices of making.² In trying to constellate these complexities, there has also been a recognition of what remains just out of reach.



Russel Albert Daniels, *Looking north up the Colorado River from Navajo Bridge on the Navajo Nation, Arizona*, 2013. Photograph. Courtesy the photographer.

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Shaped by the Loom is grounded in the geographic, ecological, and cultural specificity of the North American Southwest, evoked by Russel Albert Daniels's photograph of the Colorado River, taken from Navajo Bridge in Arizona. Daniels's work as a photojournalist and documentary photographer "stands in the currents of art, reportage, and decolonization." Informed by his Native American (Ho-Chunk and Diné), Mormon settler, and European heritage, the photographer's projects explore identity, sense of place, and history.³ Pursuing the questions and concerns raised by Daniels, I write from the position of a non-Native museum anthropologist, curator, and teacher with the intention that this exhibition provides scaffolding for conversations around knowledge production and display, and around constructions of curatorial authority and hierarchies in ways of knowing. My aim is to foster greater cultural awareness and understanding of dah'iist'ó (Navajo weaving) by centering the perspectives of its practitioners, cultural producers, and communities. This art form has traversed temporal boundaries and encompassed many styles and practices, including vibrant contemporary expressions that are highlighted alongside historic examples from the American Museum of Natural History's collection. In bridging different cultures and systems of knowledge production, I reveal how these textiles have been – and continue to be – made, used, exchanged, altered, and valued over time.

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Left: Darby Raymond-Overstreet (Diné), *The Passage*, 2019. Scanned Navajo textiles, canvas print, pine, and wool. Courtesy the artist. **Right:** Diné artist, woman's "Chief" blanket, Second Phase, ca. 1880. Dyed and undyed wool, tapestry weave. Courtesy the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, New York, Collected by Uriah S. Hollister, before 1910, 50.1 / 4419.

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George H. Pepper (photographer), *Wife of Haastin Tsó cleaning wool*, 1896–97.

National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, George Hubbard Pepper Photograph Collection, 1895–1918, NMAI-Photo, P01661; Identification from the Hyde Exploring Expedition Photograph Log (1900), NMAI-Arch, MAI Papers, Box 188, Folder 10, p. 133–35.

This project began as a thought experiment in 2018: What might an exhibition about Navajo weaving look like if it did not include a single textile? Diné weavers and knowledge keepers have often mentioned that most of the work of weaving happens before one even sits down at the loom. I began to wonder how to translate the relationship between *thinking* and *making* that guides the practice of Navajo weaving, and how to locate the material traces of these processes in historical

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museum collections. As an expression of animate landscapes, kinship networks, cosmological values, tacit expertise, and lived experience, how could we make this expansive “process” explicit within the context of an exhibition? How could we visualize these components of making within the gallery, whether in person or virtual? And how might we reveal what happens in the space between conception and labor, or between idea and action, to bring dah’iist’ó to life? Diné weaver Wesley Thomas offers a point of entry into these questions:

Dah’iist’ó is the appropriate term for weaving in the abstract. In Navajo discourse, dah’iist’ó is a verb referring to the process of integrating the warp and weft in the art of weaving on a set-up loom. The word does not change even when the weaving is completed and removed from the loom. The term applies during the full life of the dah’iist’ó.⁴

Diné scholar Rechanda Lee expands upon the intimate connections between weaver, loom, tool, and textile: “We recognize that weaving is a sacred practice because everything in the weaving process (e.g. the loom, weaving tools, and textile) has a life and a breath.”⁵ Navajo weavers often refer to their weavings as their children that can “see, feel, move, and grow just like all creation.”⁶ Throughout the entire process, from making tools to warping a loom and finishing a textile, “this interconnected relationship allows the weaving to take on life as it moves through

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the world to enrich other people's lives with *Hozhó* (living as a whole in beauty and harmony).⁷ This digital exhibition is thus an exploration of the deeper structures of process through the connections among mind, body, and material. These connections are made visible in the parallel acts of making a weaving and creating a dye chart. Together, they reveal common aspects of making that relate to Diné ways of thinking about, articulating, and performing craft process.⁸



Howard Rowe (photographer), Marie Begay at her loom, Burnham, New Mexico, 2020. Courtesy the photographer.

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“Sheep Are Good to Think With”

My grandmothers raised me with their ideology that when you take care of the sheep, they’ll take care of you.⁹

In 1962 the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced an idea that has shaped the trajectory of modern social science. He suggested that specific plants, animals, and other objects are selected by people to be clan totems not because they are good to eat but because they are “bonnes à penser” – good to think [with]. Lévi-Strauss insightfully argued that humans come to know the world around them as a rich, complex, multivalent world of symbolic meanings that exist only in relationship with one another, rather than as isolated or detached parts.¹⁰ “Human subjects are not the center of the world,” art historian Jessica Horton suggests. “They are but one component of a complex web of relations that include animate land and other beings.”¹¹ Since different people in different times and places have such varied conceptions of our relationships with things (rocks, rivers, trees), “environmental histories of these things must also be cultural histories of the changing ideas and relationships human beings have woven around them.”¹² For the Diné, sheep are fundamental to understanding family life, social life, and the larger ecosystem of textile production on a local and regional scale. From the seventeenth century to the present, sheep have transformed the Navajo culture and economy –

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from pastoral lifeways and wool production practices to the devastating livestock reduction program of the 1930s, implemented by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.¹³

While local Churro sheep populations are recovering through the ongoing conservation efforts of herders and dedicated organizations like Diné Be'liná, the impact of these events is still evident in settlement patterns, land stewardship practices, and resource management. In his ethnoarchaeological study of historic pastoralism on the Navajo Nation, historical archaeologist Wade Campbell argues that change has continued over the past fifty years:

In 1973, the anthropologist Gary Witherspoon wrote an article describing the *Diné* (or Navajo) as a “sheep-minded” people for whom said animals provided many forms of security – economic, social, even psychological. Five decades later, sheep and “sheepmindedness” remain celebrated aspects of contemporary Diné culture, beacons of “traditional life” amid the hubbub of the twenty-first century Navajo Nation. It is undeniable, however, that the context, practice, and intensity of modern Navajo sheepherding have changed dramatically since Witherspoon’s article. Indeed, the relationship between Diné people and their livestock has continually adapted and grown since Navajos first acquired sheep and goats in the seventeenth century.¹⁴

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As both a material and symbolic resource, sheep have become integral to enacting, maintaining, and reviving Diné lifeways, as well as to forging a connection to homeland. As a result, the Lévi-Straussian insight that “sheep are good to think [with]” provides a point of entry to consider the biotic communities of the American Southwest, the relationships between nature and culture, and the differences in ways of knowing and narrating our environments.



Howard Rowe (photographer), Marie and Matthew Begay's sheep ranch, Burnham, New Mexico, 2018. Courtesy the photographer.

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World, Land, Place

What we call the landscape is generally considered to be something “out there.” But, while some aspects of the landscape are clearly external to both our bodies and our minds, what each of us actually experiences is selected, shaped, and colored by what we know.¹⁵

In Diné Bizaad (the Navajo language), nahasdzáán refers to the world, the earth.¹⁶ There are several related terms, including ní'(nih) (the surface of the earth, the ground, “downward” – a spiritual term used mostly in Western Navajo) and nihosdzáán (on mother earth, on the ground, in the world, the earth world).¹⁷ Thomas defines knowledge in the Navajo world as “constructed of a combination of thought and speech. . . . Sacredness begins at the tip of our tongues and we are to be careful when speaking. We are told, we create our world around ourselves with our words.”¹⁸ The cultural and linguistic anthropologist Keith Basso, whose work is fundamental to this project, draws the connection between knowledge and place:

In native discourse, the local landscape falls neatly and repeatedly into *places* – and places . . . are social constructions par excellence. . . . For whenever the members of a community speak about their landscape – whenever they name it, or classify it, or tell stories about it – they

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unthinkingly represent it in ways that are compatible with shared understandings of how, in the fullest sense, they know themselves to occupy it.”¹⁹

As concepts, beliefs, and stories find tangible anchors on specific features of the local topography, the entire landscape takes on meanings through named sites and reference points, each shaped by a set of physical attributes and cultural associations that mark it as unique.²⁰ The meanings ascribed to landscapes through particular geographical features and patterns of speech are necessarily varied from community to community, influenced by the subjective experiences of those who make them. However, their modes of expression often articulate a shared perspective, acquiring “value and significance by virtue of the ideational systems with which they are apprehended and construed.” Basso notes that such systems are “symbolically constituted, socially transmitted, and individually applied,” operating to convey how the physical environment can be known by its inhabitants, and delineating “a distinctive way of being-in-the-world . . . an informal logic for engaging the world and thinking about the engagement . . . an array of conceptual frameworks for organizing experience and rendering it intelligible.”²¹ This way of “being-in-the-world” is integrated with one’s natural surroundings and performed by observing, using, and communicating about the landscape.

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Rapheal Begay (Diné), *Window Rock (Window Rock, AZ)*, 2018. Digital photograph.

Courtesy the artist.

“Its name is like a picture”

I think of that mountain called Tséé Łigai Dah Sidilé (White Rocks Lie Above In A Compact Cluster) as if it were my maternal grandmother. I recall stories of how it [I?] once was at that mountain. The stories told to me were like arrows. Elsewhere, hearing that mountain’s name, I see it. Its name is like a picture. Stories go to work on you like arrows. Stories make you live right.²²

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The world that we create around ourselves is informed by the languages that we speak, the stories that we learn, and the lands on which we live. In turn, they perform some kind of “work” on us. In many Indigenous communities in the American Southwest, this culturally constituted and geographically specific process is ordered by a deep knowledge of place-names that corresponds to creation narratives, historical and cosmological events, and ancestral connections. The testimonial of Benson Lewis, a Western Apache community member from Cibecue, that a name can be “like a picture” demonstrates that place-names are more than “vehicles of reference.”²³ While they do refer to geographic features and describe topographic characteristics of the landscape, place-names are also imbued with a spatial and temporal depth and a relational capacity – they are used and valued for reasons that go beyond mapping and knowing vast areas of territory. In his discussion of place-names used by Western Apache (who, like Navajo, are Athabaskan speakers), Basso notes that “portions of a world view are constructed and made available, and a Western Apache version of the landscape is deepened, amplified, and tacitly affirmed. With words, a massive physical presence is fashioned into a meaningful human universe.”²⁴ Having mapped and studied place-names in and around the community of Cibecue (from Deeschii’ Bikoh, Valley With Long Red Bluffs), on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, he also notes that descriptions of locations tend to focus on the nature and consequences of events as well as where they occurred. This is a common practice in other Apachean groups, including the

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Navajo: “Even the most minute occurrences are described by Navajos in close conjunction with their physical settings, suggesting that unless narrated events are spatially anchored their significance is somehow reduced and cannot be properly assessed.”²⁵ By focusing on elements of language and acts of speech in relation to the natural landscape, particularly the cultural importance of named locations within it, Apachean groups come to know and narrate their environments. Through a model of storytelling that traverses the past, present, and future in ways that are spatially conceived and constructed (rather than just temporally based), oral narratives carry the power to create connections between individuals, communities, and features of the local landscape. Ultimately, this mode of storytelling is one of place-making in which two symbolic resources – language and land – are mobilized to render a sense of place, to shape one’s identity, and to know one’s position in relation to an ancestral past.²⁶ Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) describes the central importance of places, place-names, and their symbolism in the “spatial conceptions of history” embraced by many Native North American tribes:

For Indian men and women, the past lies embedded in the features of the earth – in canyons and lakes, mountains and arroyos, rocks and vacant fields – which together endow their lands with multiple forms of significance that reach into their lives and shape the ways they think.

Knowledge of places is therefore closely linked to knowledge of the

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self, to grasping one's position in the larger scheme of things, including one's own community, and to securing a confident sense of who one is as a person.²⁷

In thinking about how many Indigenous people talk about and “know” the natural landscape, Deloria's passage brings one particular concept into relief:

understandings of the land are inextricably linked with the historical events – or happenings – that have occurred at specific points upon it, as revealed, for example, by Rapheal Begay's photograph of Shiprock Pinnacle. Known in Diné Bizaad as Tsé Bit'a'í, which translates as “rock with wings,” or “winged rock,” it is a geological formation located in San Juan County, New Mexico, near the Diné settlement of Shiprock. This distinctive landmark was formed by the hardened remains of lava once contained within a larger volcanic land structure and exposed by erosion over millions of years. Rising 1,583 feet above the surrounding high-desert plain, Tsé Bit'a'í also features two walls of volcanic rock, which radiate out from the pinnacle to form its distinctive “wings.” In Diné stories, the site was the scene of an epic battle between Nayenezgani (Slayer of the Enemy Gods) and the Tse'nahale (a pair of creatures resembling gigantic eagles), who lived atop the pinnacle and terrorized the local population. The material remnants of this story are made visible in the geological features of this site, suggesting its Diné place name. Knowing one's

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surroundings, then, becomes a journey of plotting one's own coordinates within larger cultural, spatial, and temporal contexts.



Left: Rapheal Begay (Diné), *Spider Rock (Tséyi' - Canyon de Chelly, Chinle, AZ)*, 2021.

Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist. **Right:** Rapheal Begay (Diné), *Shiprock*

Pinnacle (Shiprock, NM), 2021. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist.

Place-Making

How we make things and what things we make are an important acknowledgment of marking our place and moment in the world. . . . As our hands have learned new skills by working with a variety of materials and tools, the making remains part of how we engage in the world, actively becoming the cultural people our ancestors prayed for in the process.²⁸

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Human understanding of art and craftwork also extends far beyond the written and spoken word, stretching through the hands of the maker and out into the material world. In reflecting on Native feminine aesthetics, art historian and curator Heather Ahtone writes about beginnings – the sequence of being born into a world that is ordered by relationships, “creating the community within which we become cultural people.” As she notes, “Those relationships are guided by ‘kincentricity’ – the recognition that our being, our ontological foundation, is tied to all other types of life forms: animals, plants, seasons, the winds, the rain, and the Holy Ones.”²⁹ Recent work across philosophy, anthropology, and critical theory has similarly focused on the entanglements that humans have with other animated, nonhuman agents – from materials to animals, landscapes, and beyond. Key concepts and terms, like lifeways, ecologies, and worlds (or “worlding”) reveal current trends in scholarship, providing a theoretical language for thinking about processes and practices of world-making.³⁰ In contrast, the work of Diné thinkers and scholars foregrounds *specific* ways of being, knowing, and doing that reimagine relations between humans and nonhumans (or more-than-humans) to explore the connections between materials and landscapes. While anthropologists have long studied the relationships between Indigenous communities and their ecological settings, these relationships have often been described and analyzed in materialist terms, devoid of the cultural meanings and values that individuals and communities attach to their environments. In advancing a new cultural ecology, more closely aligned with

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Indigenous ways of knowing, Basso advocates “a broader and more flexible approach to the study of man-land relationships in which the symbolic properties of environmental phenomena receive the same kind of attention that has traditionally been given to their material counterparts.”³¹ Such work necessitates analysis at a local level in which conceptions of the land work in tandem with conceptions of the self, and vice versa – together influencing patterns of world-building.



Left: Rapheal Begay (Diné), detail of *Weaving Room* (*Teec Nos Pos Trading Post, Teec Nos Pos, AZ*), 2021. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist. **Right:** Rapheal Begay (Diné), *Raplee Ridge monocline* (*San Juan County, UT*), 2021. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist.

For a subset of practitioners, Navajo weaving can thus be understood as a place-based practice that derives from and in turn comes to represent particular localities and landscapes that evoke meaning within a Diné worldview. Many of the design elements and color combinations visible in Navajo textiles become

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suggestive topographical representations, recording the sandy, reddish-orange, and sage-green hues of this terrain, situated alongside its exposed strata and surface outcrops. In Rapheal Begay's photograph taken during our 2021 field documentation project on the Navajo Nation, the San Juan River cuts through Raplee Ridge monocline, located a few miles upstream from Mexican Hat, Utah.³² The angular shapes, undulating curves, and earth-colored palettes found in some Navajo weavings seem to evoke the geometry of this unusual geologic formation. This "sensing of place," as described by Basso, "is a form of cultural activity," and suggested by N. Scott Momaday to be "a kind of imaginative experience, a species of involvement with the natural and social environment, a way of *appropriating* portions of the earth."³³ Albert Camus similarly understood that, "Sense of place is not just something that people know and feel, it is something people do."³⁴ Basso explains that, "this type of retrospective world-building – let us call it *place-making* – does not require special sensibilities or cultivated skills. It is a common response to common curiosities – what happened here? who was involved? what was it like? why should it matter?" Furthermore, he suggests that:

Place-making involves multiple acts of remembering and imagining which inform each other in complex ways. It is clear, however, that remembering often provides a basis for imagining. . . . Essentially, then, instances of place-making consist in an adventitious fleshing out of historical material that

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culminates in . . . a particular universe of objects and events – in short, a *place-world* – wherein portions of the past are brought into being.³⁵

Here, the place-world brought into being by remembering and imagining takes the form of weaving – as a cultural activity that both evokes and constitutes a Diné place-world. Basso's concept of place-making as world-building is explored in this project through the multivalent web of relations that guides Navajo weaving as both product and process, including spiritual geographies, cosmological values, spoken languages, lived experiences, and remembered stories, as well as material objects and social practices that build, enact, and sustain it. Throughout this exhibition, objects take on significance as an archive (of knowledge systems, lifeways, materials), as a mode of storytelling, and as an index of place.³⁶ In returning to the idea that “sheep are good to think with,” we might consider the ecology of relationships that animate the land-based and relational practices of Navajo weaving, particularly how we live with, speak to, and activate the landscape. As expressed by Begay's photograph of a plant commonly used to make a natural dye, found along the road near his home in Hunter's Point, Arizona, what *is* the relationship between people and place?

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Rapheal Begay (Diné), *Plant used for natural dye (Hunter's Point, AZ)*, 2021. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist.

Locating Dinétah

Men and women learn to *appropriate* their landscapes, to think and act “with” them as well as about and upon them, and to weave them with spoken words into the very foundations of social life. And in these ways, too, as every

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ethnographer eventually comes to appreciate, geographical landscapes are never culturally vacant. The ethnographic challenge is to fathom what it is that a particular landscape, filled to brimming with past and present significance, can be called upon to “say,” and what, through the saying, it can be called upon to “do.”³⁷

Four sacred mountains delineate Diné Bikéyah (“land beneath the people’s feet”), the ancestral and present homeland of the Diné: Sisnaajiní (Blanca Peak) in the east, Tsoodzil (Mount Taylor) in the south, Dook’o’oslíid (San Francisco Peaks) in the west, and Dibé Nitsaa (Hesperus Mountain) in the north. According to creation narratives, the Diné passed through three different worlds before emerging into the present one – the Fourth World or Glittering World. In this region, known as Dinétah (“among the people”), Nihokáá Diné (Earth Surface People) first interacted with Diyin Diné (Holy People). Together they established hózhó, a relationship of harmony, balance, and local order that sustains Navajo life and guides the practice of weaving.³⁸ Beginning with the period of Spanish colonization in the late sixteenth century, Diné communities experienced violent displacements from their homelands, including forced migration, enslavement, residential schools, and resettlement. Over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Diné regained a significant portion of their ancestral territory, which now includes a land base of over 27,000 square miles in present-day Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. This connection to

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homeland is an enduring source of strength that sustains Diné culture, cosmology, and creativity.

The art historian Jessica Horton, whose work is central to the conceptual framework of this essay, broadly defines this region as composed of a set of geographical, historical, and cosmological convergences that harbor specific temporalities, localities, ecologies, and social struggles. However, as she notes, “locating” is not a simple act, as there is no fixed beginning or end to the process, and within it “lie worldly constants of movement and change.”³⁹ The philosopher Viola Cordova (Jicarilla Apache) writes, “What exists has motion. What has no motion does not continue to exist. . . . Thus, for the Hopi at least, there are not ‘things’ but rather . . . ‘events’: *being, peopleing, mountaining*, and so on.”⁴⁰ The agency suggested by such events, and in the act of *locating*, also emphasizes the human actors engaged in these processes. As Horton writes:

This sense of a perceptual landscape continuously sculpted by human and nonhuman forces was present in the imaginative cartographic practices of Native Americans prior to European contact. . . . Maps were not created as permanent documents in Native North America. The features of geography were part of a much larger interconnected mental map that existed in the oral traditions.⁴¹

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Indigenous systems for organizing time and space, often expressed in “mental maps” of named localities and topographic features, reveal alternative categories for orienting human subjects within animate landscapes. This interconnected and complex geographic knowledge often differed from standard European cartography, relying instead on “qualities of relationality and adaptability.”⁴² As one Western Apache man observed, “White men have paper maps. We have maps in our minds.”⁴³

As a region with contested boundaries transformed by the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism, ecological flux, resource extraction, and cultural resilience, the area defined as the American Southwest is marked by “multiple geographies of contact.”⁴⁴ The project of westward expansion was largely centered on resource extraction and the appropriation of Indigenous homelands, which functioned alongside efforts to define and enforce borders in the natural landscape – to date and sequence historical events as a linear progression – all of which were detached from Indigenous conceptions of space and time that give a place-world its meaning.⁴⁵ Removed from spatial anchors, the place-world is distant and unfamiliar, unspoken and unanimated, it is “history without voices to thrust it into the present,” and, as such, “is history loosely situated, geographically adrift.”⁴⁶ As Basso explains, “If place-making is a way of constructing the past, a venerable means of *doing* human history, it is also a way of constructing social traditions and, in the process,

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personal and social identities. We *are*, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine.⁴⁷ In remembering the past and imagining the future, a project of place-making is continuously unfolding, offering a new framework for understanding Native art making as an all-encompassing product of its time and place, grounded in community, philosophy, identity, language, and environment.

“Our designs are our thinking.”

As Native women make things, they work from memories of the past, they work to remember their relationship to place and to one another, and they work to remember the history they are, simultaneously, making. As each participates in the continuum of making, she is fulfilling her purpose within her own community and contributing to the vitality of our shared Native community.⁴⁸

For many Diné textile artists, “the language of weaving expresses the significance of homeland more adequately than geopolitical descriptors,” often serving as a metaphor for place.⁴⁹ “The Navajo worldview is built upon the primacy of place,” explains art historian Janet Berlo. “The universe itself is imagined as a *hogan* (the traditional Navajo dwelling, the doorway of which faces east, toward the rising sun).

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Within this vast cosmological home exist many sub-sets of home. *Diné'tah*, the area circumscribed by the four sacred mountains, is conceptualized as a hogan, too.”⁵⁰

This active connection to homeland is maintained and enacted through the visual language of weaving; it is an important medium through which particular locations are known and materialized, reflecting culturally specific understandings of place.⁵¹

Navajo weavings, like the landscapes from which they are often derived, are considered to have a life force of their own and are imbued with *be'iina* (life force) through the process of their creation. They are in an intimate reciprocal relationship to human thought and action, as translated and enacted through the bodily rhythms of the weaver, and they require the same kind of love and respect that one gives a relative.⁵² Weavings simultaneously embody the intergenerational transmission of environmental knowledge (framed here as Traditional Ecological Knowledge), a uniquely Indigenous approach to understanding and managing relationships between living beings and the environment. Shepherding practices, wool processing, and plant harvesting for natural dyes all require specialized knowledge that has been accumulated through generations of systematic observations of and interactions with the local landscape. As a visitor moves through *Shaped by the Loom* (online and in the gallery), encountering samples of carded wool and handspun yarn, a Navajo dye chart, and wood chosen for weaving tools, these examples of Traditional Ecological Knowledge are materialized through the hands of individual makers. Each item tells a different story about how this knowledge is

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implemented to connect land with practice. In the Diné worldview, mental and physical worlds converge through the forces of creation and labor; as Diné weaver Irene Clark explains, “Our designs are our thinking.”⁵³



Howard Rowe (photographer), Marie Begay at her loom, Burnham, New Mexico, 2014.

Courtesy the photographer.

Similarly, a Navajo dye chart is a material rendering of localized knowledge systems related to the Southwestern landscape. It also references and describes the evolving body of knowledge that many Indigenous communities learn and pass down regarding the plants, animals, humans, and other-than-human beings that

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maintain relations with each other. A Navajo dye chart is a framed composition that often features a miniature textile mounted on a vertical loom. A weblike constellation of colored yarn extends outward from the textile, each strand connecting it to a sample of the dried plant used to make its dye. The number of plant specimens included varies with the size of the chart. The botanicals are arranged in rows with their identifications listed below, sometimes in both Diné Bizaad and English.

First created in the 1950s by Mabel Burnside Myers (1922–1987), a Diné weaver and herbalist from Pine Springs, Arizona, dye charts were originally conceived as a guide to natural dye sources for students of weaving. Myers and other artists later began producing them for the tourist market. Dye charts have since been reproduced as posters and commodified as works of art alongside Navajo weavings. Several Diné weavers continue to make them today, including Isabel Myers Deschinny (the daughter of Mabel Burnside Myers) and Roselyn Washburn.⁵⁴ As a key component of this exhibition’s conceptual framework and the architecture for the site’s homepage, dye charts are now recognized as repositories of Traditional Ecological Knowledge and facilitators of its intergenerational transmission. While there is no universal definition for this classification of knowledge, the environmental scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi) describes such knowledge structures as decentering humans and making nature a subject, not an object.⁵⁵

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Left: Homegrown cotton in Kevin Aspaas's garden, Shiprock, New Mexico, 2021.

Photo: Hadley Jensen. **Right:** Kevin Aspaas holding a sample of his homegrown cotton, Shiprock, New Mexico, 2021. Photo: Hadley Jensen.

Navajo relations with plants also play an important role in weaving processes. Natural dye practitioners are careful to only harvest the plants that they need; for example, a weaver does not pick dye plants if they are not plentiful enough in certain locations or during certain seasons (typically April through October) in order to preserve a sustainable relationship with the land.⁵⁶ Many weavers also talk to plants to ask their permission before collecting them and provide offerings in return. These reciprocal relationships in material gathering practices demonstrate the co-constructed nature of Navajo weaving, made visible by the ways that some Diné

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weavers communicate with and move through their environments. Just as many Athapaskan identities are shaped by movement in a landscape, these processes reveal the construction of “particular social identities through particular ways of moving.”⁵⁷ As Fowles and Eiselt note, “Rather than thinking ‘about’ the landscape, many Athapaskans refer to the way their thoughts dwell ‘in’ storied places.”⁵⁸ As a result, “To move through such a landscape . . . was to revisit, rehearse, and reaffirm the stories that grounded one’s identity.”⁵⁹ The harvesting and preparation of dye plants represent an important act of process, shaped by personal and communal rhythms of life and ways of knowing; it is not necessarily limited to specific economic or subsistence strategies, but is rather a way of moving through the world, articulating important patterns of Navajo social life, cultural identity, and belonging.⁶⁰ Diné weaver and textile artist D.Y. Begay describes Navajo relational identity as “k’é,” explaining, “K’é gives you a sense of who you are and how you relate to your family, friends, and community. To a Navajo, k’é is extremely important.”⁶¹ The framework of Traditional Ecological Knowledge highlights how kincentric relationships between humans and their environment provide conceptual and material manifestations of Navajo lifeways. By examining the aesthetic relationships that are shaped by Dinétah, we become aware that ecology is not simply about material resources. It is also interwoven with cultural, cosmological, historical, and political relations that order particular ways of being and knowing—none of these individual parts can be understood without the whole.

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Rapheal Begay (Diné), *Rabbitbrush/Chamisa (Rain God Mesa, Tsé Bii' Ndzisgaii - Monument Valley, UT)*, 2021. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist.

“Storytelling as a way of knowing”

Like the woven textile at the center of a dye chart, *Shaped by the Loom* occupies a nexus of thought about place, process, ecology, and storytelling. Collectively, we have been learning and telling stories for a long time – to remember, recalibrate the past, and participate in building the future. Stories are an embodied way of knowing, carried in and communicated through the minds and hands of each maker, shifting

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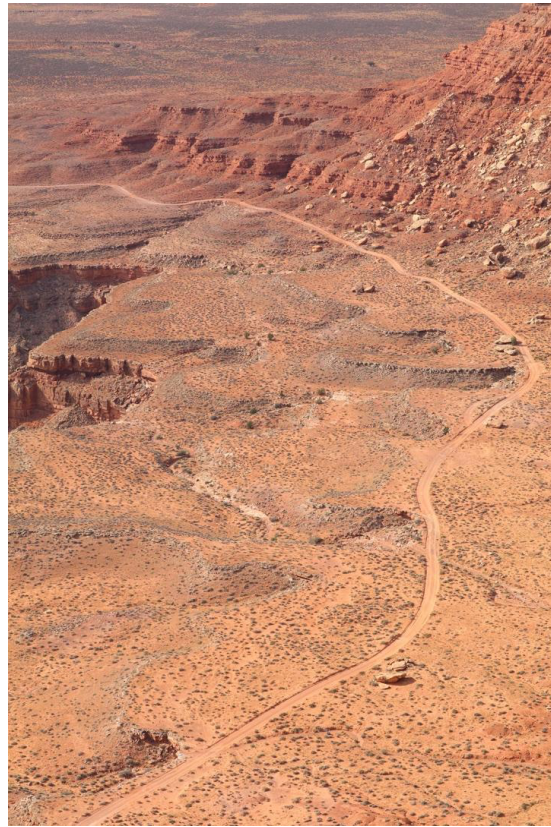
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with each telling in form, technique, and imagery.⁶² Indigenous archaeologist Nicholas Laluk (White Mountain Apache) invokes the notion of “storytelling as a way of knowing,” particularly in thinking about how “[Apache] views of place are based on the inseparable land-mind bond.”⁶³ As writer and conservationist Terry Tempest Williams observes, “A story grows from the inside out. . . . A story allows us to envision the possibility of things. It draws on the powers of memory and imagination. It awakens us to our surroundings.”⁶⁴ *Shaped by the Loom* shares these characteristics, both through the process by which it has come to life and in its aims for the visitor. Through its physical location in the gallery and its presence in the digital realm, the exhibition is an invitation to engage with Indigenous aesthetics and languages of making related to Navajo weaving. Rather than emphasizing chronology or a progression of periods, designs, and styles, it foregrounds Diné knowledges and lifeways related to textile production. In reframing key concepts and categories to be more reflective of Diné ways of thinking about weaving – as an art form, a cultural practice, and a lived experience – this project also enacts a linguistic and narrative process, just as the exhibition itself is about process. By connecting ecological and cosmological threads to the aesthetic, material, technological, and economic aspects of Navajo weaving, this constellation of art forms illuminates Diné ways of being in and knowing the world. *Shaped by the Loom* immerses the visitor in the interconnected and reciprocal relationships between

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people, land, and culture that activate Navajo weaving – seen as both process and product.



Rapheal Begay (Diné), *Aerial trail (Rain God Mesa, Tsé Bii' Ndzisgaii - Monument Valley, UT)*, 2021. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist.

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D.Y. Begay, Kalley Keams, and Wesley Thomas, "Prologue," in *Woven by the Grandmothers: Nineteenth-Century Navajo Textiles from the National Museum of the American Indian*, ed. Eulalie Bonar, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), n.p.

¹ I am indebted to MK Smaby for formulating this idea, which we further developed in a proposal for Bard Graduate Center. MK Smaby and Hadley Jensen, Project Proposal, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Plant: A Six-Part Series Exploring the Plant as a Design(ed) Object," Bard Graduate Center, Spring 2021.

² "Diné," meaning "the people," is the name that Navajo use to refer to themselves and their culture in their own language (according to photographer and curator Rapheal Begay, "Diné" has more agency in reference to culture, language, and the people). I use the terms "Navajo" and "Diné" interchangeably in my work, following local usage; see also Jennifer Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007).

³ "About," Russel Albert Daniels (website), accessed February 14, 2023, <http://www.russeldaniels.com/about>.

⁴ Wesley Thomas, "Shił Yóólt'ooł [it is weaving me with it]: Personification of Navajo Weaving," in Bonar, *Woven by the Grandmothers*, 33–34.

⁵ Rechanda Lee, "A Search for Continuity in the Transmission of Technological Styles in Navajo Weaving Traditions," *Kiva* 87, no. 3 (2021): 318.

⁶ Wilson Aronilth, "Foundations of Navajo Culture" (unpublished manuscript, 1985), Diné College Library, Tsailé, Arizona, 198; cited in Lee, "A Search for Continuity," 318.

⁷ Lee, "A Search for Continuity," 318.

⁸ Regarding terminology here and throughout the essay, I often refer to "weaving" rather than "textiles" in favor of foregrounding the active process behind the product.

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⁹ Nikyle Begay (navahoshepherd), “Social distancing is easy when you have sheep! My grandmothers raised me with their ideology that when you take care of the sheep, they’ll take care of you,”

Instagram photo, March 22, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B-CwagthDA_/?igshid=1dc62jmh807w0.

¹⁰ William Cronon, “Foreword: Sheep Are Good to Think With,” in Marsha Weisiger, *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), ix.

¹¹ Jessica L. Horton, “Rebalancing the Cold War: Diné Sandpainting and Earth Diplomacy,” *Art Bulletin* 104, no. 3 (September 2022): 103.

¹² Cronon, “Foreword,” ix.

¹³ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, livestock had become a form of economic prosperity for the Diné. Their abundance eventually led to perceived overgrazing and soil erosion across the Navajo reservation, causing the United States government to implement and enforce a livestock reduction program during the New Deal era. For a detailed analysis of this program, the important role of women as livestock owners, and the gendered politics of conservation, see Marsha Weisiger, “Gendered Injustice: Navajo Livestock Reduction in the New Deal Era,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2007): 437–55.

¹⁴ Wade Campbell, “*Na’nilkad bee na’niltin*—Learning from Herding: An Ethnoarchaeological Study of Historic Pastoralism on the Navajo Nation,” *Kiva* 87, no. 3 (2021): 296.

¹⁵ Barrie B. Greenbie, *Spaces: Dimensions of the Human Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); quoted in Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 71.

¹⁶ “World” appears in the title of several other works related to Navajo weaving; see *Weaving Worlds*, written and directed by Bennie Klain (TricksterFilms, 2008), an insightful film written and directed by Bennie Klain, which documents stories of economic and cultural survival through the art of Navajo weaving. See also Roseann S. Willink and Paul G. Zolbrod, *Weaving a World: Textiles and the Navajo* Hadley Jensen, “Knowing, Making, Naming,” *Shaped by the Loom: Weaving Worlds in the American Southwest* (2023), Bard Graduate Center, <https://exhibitions.bgc.bard.edu/shapedbytheloom/>.

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Way of Seeing (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1996). This controversial volume is based on extensive interviews with Navajo weavers, conducted in the 1990s with more than sixty elders from the eastern part of the Navajo Nation (in and around Crownpoint, New Mexico). Arguing that Navajo poetics and stories are intimately intertwined with daily life, the authors connect relations among community members to the cosmos.

¹⁷ Since Navajo is a living language, changing with time and the lived experience of its speakers, translations are not exact and are only suggested by English words with similar meanings. David M. Mark, David Stea, and Carmelita Topaha, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Navajo Landscape Terms* (New York: Peter Lang, 2019), 61–62. This book provides an illustrated vocabulary of landscape terms that allows speakers to communicate about their environment. Rather than being arranged alphabetically by terms, it is organized by material and form categories (water-related features; elongated depressions; open spaces, gaps, and holes; elevations and rock formations; world, land, place, vegetation; earth materials).

¹⁸ Thomas, “Shił Yóólt’oot,” 33–34.

¹⁹ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 73–74. Emphasis in the original. Basso cites Franz Boas *Geographical Names of the Kwakiutl Indians*, Columbia University Contributions in Anthropology, no. 20 (New York: Columbia University Press 1934). In building upon Basso’s foundational work on conceptions of place, see also Nicholas C. Laluk, “The Indivisibility of Land and Mind: Indigenous Knowledge and Collaborative Archaeology within Apache Contexts,” *Journal of Social Archaeology* 17, no. 1 (2017): 92–112. Laluk’s work explores contemporary collaborative archaeological-anthropological projects with Apache communities, with the aim of centering Apache ontologies and tribally derived knowledge in research methodologies and outcomes.

²⁰ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 73.

²¹ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 72. Basso cites Paul Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William Hadley Jensen, “Knowing, Making, Naming,” *Shaped by the Loom: Weaving Worlds in the American Southwest* (2023), Bard Graduate Center, <https://exhibitions.bgc.bard.edu/shapedbytheloom/>.

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M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 92–123; Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 3–30; and Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay in the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

²² Benson Lewis, quoted in Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 38.

²³ Lewis, quoted in Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 44.

²⁴ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 40. The Navajo are Athabascan speakers, closely related to the Apache and more distantly to other Athabascan-speaking peoples in Alaska and Canada. While Navajo and Apache communities are culturally distinct tribal groups, they share a geographic proximity and a language family. For additional information, see the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology’s website: <https://www.indianartsandculture.org/communities/>.

²⁵ Harry Hoijer, quoted in Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 45.

²⁶ According to Basso, “A native model of how stories work to shape Apaches’ conceptions of the landscape . . . is also a model of how stories work to shape Apaches’ conceptions of themselves.” Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 40–41.

²⁷ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 34, 155n10. Basso cites Deloria’s formulation of “spatial conceptions of history,” which he opposes to more temporally based conceptions of the past; see Vine Deloria Jr., *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1992).

²⁸ heather ahtone, “Making Our World: Thoughts of Native Feminine Aesthetics,” in *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*, eds. Jill Ahlberg Yohe, Teri Greeves, and Laura Silver, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Art, in association with the University of Washington Press, 2019), 37.

²⁹ ahtone, “Making Our World,” 37.

³⁰ For an insightful explanation of “worlding” as a theoretical and conceptual framework, see Helen Palmer and Vicky Hunter, “Worlding,” *Almanac, New Materialism: How Matter Comes to Matter*, Hadley Jensen, “Knowing, Making, Naming,” *Shaped by the Loom: Weaving Worlds in the American Southwest* (2023), Bard Graduate Center, <https://exhibitions.bgc.bard.edu/shapedbytheloom/>.

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March 16, 2018, <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/w/worlding.html>; see also Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, *Experimental Futures: Technological Lives, Scientific Arts, Anthropological Voices* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); and Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, eds., *A World of Many Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

³¹ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 67–68.

³² Monoclines are kinks or bends in rock layers (Raplee Ridge is known as both a monocline and an anticline, or arch-shaped bend).

³³ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 143; see also N. Scott Momaday, *The Names* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1976); and Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, eds., *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996).

³⁴ Albert Camus, *Noces suivi de l'été* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1959), 88; quoted in Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 143.

³⁵ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 5–6.

³⁶ In relation to objects as vessels for stories and storytelling, see “Grounded in Clay: The Spirit of Pueblo Pottery” (web page), School for Advanced Research, accessed February 14, 2023, <https://sarweb.org/iarc/grounded-in-clay/>.

³⁷ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 75; also see N. Scott Momaday, “Native American Attitudes to the Environment,” in *Seeing with a Native Eye: Essays on Native American Religion*, ed. Walter Holden Capps (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 79–85.

³⁸ Diné Bikéyah, Dinétah, and Navajo Nation are three terms used to describe the ancestral and present homeland of the Diné. Diné Bikéyah is most commonly used to refer to the territory delineated by the four sacred mountains. Dinétah invokes the community associated with this geographical or cultural-political territory, and names a specific, spiritually significant place within it.

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Navajo Nation refers to the land base currently inhabited and governed by the Diné, extending into the states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah.

³⁹ Jessica L. Horton, "A Shore without a Horizon: Locating by Looking Anew," in *Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art*, ed. Karen Kramer Russell, exh. cat. (Salem, MA: Peabody Essex Museum, 2012), 51. Archaeologists Severin Fowles and B. Sunday Eiselt expand upon this idea of mobility regarding ethnic shifting in the American Southwest, particularly the connection between movement, identity, and life; see Severin Fowles and B. Sunday Eiselt, "Apache, Tiwa, and Back Again: Ethnic Shifting in the American Southwest," in *The Continuous Path: Pueblo Movement and the Archaeology of Becoming*, ed. Samuel Duwe and Robert W. Preucel (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 188.

⁴⁰ Viola Cordova, *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V. F. Cordova*, ed. Kathleen Dean Moore et al. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007), 117; quoted in Fowles and Eiselt, "Apache, Tiwa, and Back Again," 188.

⁴¹ Horton, "A Shore Without a Horizon," 51; see also Mark Warhus, *Another America: Native American Maps and the History of Our Land* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 3.

⁴² Horton, "A Shore Without a Horizon," 51.

⁴³ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 43.

⁴⁴ Horton, "A Shore Without a Horizon," 50.

⁴⁵ For an insightful exploration of Indigenous conceptions of space, see Horton, "A Shore Without a Horizon."

⁴⁶ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 33.

⁴⁷ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 7.

⁴⁸ ahtone, "Making Our World," 42.

⁴⁹ Horton, "A Shore Without a Horizon," 56.

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⁵⁰ Janet Catherine Berlo, “It’s up to you –’: Individuality, Community and Cosmopolitanism in Navajo Weaving,” in *Weaving is Life: Navajo Weavings from the Edwin L. & Ruth E. Kennedy Southwest Native American Collection*, ed. Jennifer McLerran, exh. cat. (Athens, OH: Kennedy Museum of Art, Ohio University, 2006), 40. Emphasis in the original.

⁵¹ Berlo summarizes points made by Jennifer McLerran: “Navajo weaving is a transcultural process; meaning is produced on both sides of the loom,” an important concept that is addressed throughout this exhibition (regarding Navajo cultural producers and non-Native consumers). Berlo, “It’s up to you –,’” 34, 40.

⁵² Berlo, “It’s up to you –,’” 34, 40. Also see McLerran, *Weaving is Life*; Thomas, “Shił Yóólt’ool,” 33.

⁵³ Jennifer McLerran, “Textile as Cultural Text: Contemporary Navajo Weaving as Autoethnographic Practice,” in *Weaving is Life: Navajo Weavings from the Edwin L. & Ruth E. Kennedy Southwest Native American Collection*, ed. Jennifer McLerran, exh. cat. (Athens, OH: Kennedy Museum of Art, Ohio University, 2006), 10; also appears in Berlo, “It’s up to you –,’” 45.

⁵⁴ *Shaped by the Loom* features a dye chart made by Roselyn Washburn (Diné).

⁵⁵ Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Weaving Traditional Ecological Knowledge into Biological Education: A Call to Action,” *BioScience* 52, no. 5 (2022): 434.

⁵⁶ Molly Bigknife Antonio, “‘Sitting to My Loom’: Weaving Sustainability Through Navajo Kincentric Wisdom” (PhD diss., Prescott College, 2019), 109.

⁵⁷ Fowles and Eiselt, “Apache, Tiwa, and Back Again,” 188.

⁵⁸ Fowles and Eiselt, “Apache, Tiwa, and Back Again,” 188; the authors also cite Basso (1996) and Nelson (1993).

⁵⁹ Fowles and Eiselt, “Apache, Tiwa, and Back Again,” 188.

⁶⁰ For an in-depth analysis of the cultural significance of material gathering and its dynamic relationship to art production, see Emily Buhrow Rogers, “Creation and Community: Making

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Mississippi Choctaw Arts” (paper, presented for the virtual Material Culture Lecture Series, Indiana University, May 21, 2020).

⁶¹ D.Y. Begay, “*Weaving is Life: A Navajo Weaver’s Perspective*,” in *Weaving is Life: Navajo Weavings from the Edwin L. & Ruth E. Kennedy Southwest Native American Collection*, ed. Jennifer McLerran, exh. cat. (Athens, OH: Kennedy Museum of Art, Ohio University, 2006), 50.

⁶² Ocean Vuong and Krista Tippett, “A Life Worthy of Our Breath,” *On Being with Krista Tippett*, April 30, 2020, last updated June 16, 2022, podcast, <https://onbeing.org/programs/ocean-vuong-a-life-worthy-of-our-breath-2022/>.

⁶³ Laluk, “The Indivisibility of Land and Mind,” 102.

⁶⁴ Terry Tempest Williams, *Pieces of White Shell: A Journey to Navajoland* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 3–4.

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