

• VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE •

Weaving Worlds



Navajo weaver Edith Simonson prepares to shear a sheep in her corral in Hardrock, Arizona.
Image courtesy of TricksterFilms, LLC & Nancy Schiesari.

“Our people have always had sheep so we’ve always woven. My paternal grandmother learned from her maternal grandmother. Now it’s my turn. When my older brother has kids, hopefully they’ll weave and carry it forward. So in the future they’ll be self-sufficient.” — Gilbert Begay, Navajo weaver



Weaving Worlds highlights the personal stories of Navajo weavers, their complex relationship with Reservation traders, and the impacts of increasing globalization. Through interviews and family oral histories, the film gives an intimate look at current dilemmas facing Navajo weavers, as well as the relationship between weaving, family and cultural vitality.

Weaving Worlds shows how weaving reflects Navajo culture and worldview of interconnectedness with nature and each other—from the sheep, to the weavers, to the traders, to weather, to mining and beyond—and how each affects the other in a never-ending cycle. The film brings to life the delicate balance between cultural continuity, increased globalization, and the strong determination to continue this traditional art in a changing world.

This viewer discussion guide is designed to encourage deeper exploration and conversations about the film, to promote understanding and respect for Native people and their cultural traditions, and to encourage support and protection of their values, traditions and natural resources. We want to engage multiple audiences and create active dialogue on contemporary indigenous cultures, globalization and cultural vitality by providing the personal stories and hidden histories of underrepresented Navajo artisans.

PRODUCER'S NOTES



Bennie Klain (Navajo), Director, *Weaving Worlds*

Bennie Klain (Navajo), Director

Both of my grandmothers were weavers, and this story is very personal for me. The projects I undertake demonstrate my willingness to engage the challenging task of bridging Indigenous concerns and social commentary with broader artistic and audience considerations, highlighting universal themes and cultural inequities that deserve a human voice. My goal is to bring new voices and hidden histories to broader audiences, allowing them to engage my stories on their own terms by presenting unflinching portrayals of Native and non-Native characters and institutions from an Indigenous perspective.



Navajo weaver Zonnie Gilmore constructs a sandpainting rug at home on her loom.
Image courtesy of TricksterFilms, LLC & Nancy Schiesari.

BY THE NUMBERS

260,000	Estimated Navajo population in 2009
25,000	Estimated number of active Navajo weavers, including full and part-time weavers
15%	Percentage of the Navajo Reservation economy dependent on weaving in 1900
35%	Percentage of the Navajo Reservation economy dependent on weaving in 1930
\$10.00	Amount of money paid to Helen Bedonie's grandmother for her weaving
\$500,000.00	A top appraisal for an 1860's striped Chief's blanket on <i>Antiques Roadshow</i>
160	Number of trading posts in the Navajo Reservation in 1950
12	Number of trading posts in the Navajo Nation today
3-4 million pounds	Amount of carpet wool produced by Navajo sheep annually in the U.S. at the height of the production circa 1920-1933
40 million pounds	Amount of wool produced in the U.S. today (including Navajo wool) due to the increasing use of synthetic fibers

DELVE DEEPER

1. Navajo weaver Zonnie Gilmore says in the movie, "I don't have a job. My income comes from weaving." On the other hand, weaver Lorraine Herder says that "I work for the Navajo Nation. Sometimes, I wish I had more time to do the wool work that I do. I need more time." Note, both women take care of their own flocks of sheep as well.

How has the practice of weaving changed in the Navajo culture with the advent of money and wage labor? What do you think contributed to this change? Can you think of cultural traditions—from crafts to food—that have changed over your lifetime? Consider the positive and negative impacts of those changes.

2. Nicole Horseherder earned a master's degree in linguistics, then returned home to the Navajo Nation to be a farmer and rancher, to raise sheep, spin and weave, and spend time with her family. "People think about things in terms of the economy, how to make money with something," she said, "but what I've discovered, is you also need something with which you can find peace."

How do you create a balance in your life between making money and finding peace? Have you carried on traditions that your parents or grandparents practiced? What traditions from your family or ancestors would help bring balance to your life?

DELVE DEEPER, continued

- 3. Nicole Horseherder returned from the city to learn to raise sheep and weave rugs and advocates for the traditional Navajo way of life. In describing herself, Nicole says, “My first clan is the Chiricahua Apache Clan. My father is from the French Clan. My maternal grandmother’s clan is Towering House. My paternal grandfather is French Clan also. This makes me the woman I am.”**

Nicole’s sense of self and her worldview are derived from her family identity and ancestors’ clans of origin. Where do you derive your sense of identity and how does that shape your worldview?

- 4. In a 2002 edition of *Antiques Roadshow*, a Navajo striped blanket circa 1860 was said to be worth “\$350,000 on a bad day, and \$500,000 on a good day.” The owner of the rug was told he has a “national treasure.”**

What did the rug appraiser mean when he said the blanket is a national treasure? How did this blanket come to be worth so much today, when the weaver was most likely paid a tiny fraction of the value? Is it fair that today’s weavers make far less money for more complicated designs than on this old blanket?

- 5. Nicole Horseherder says, “This is a third world country, and we have people coming into this little country and setting up and doing business with us, like the way any other third world country is treated around the globe. Right here in the United States. Change is important. And change, when it happens the right way, is good change. What people on the outside are doing to us is they’re forcing us to change in ways that we don’t want to change. They’re forcing us to abandon that with which we’re making a very basic living.”**

What does Nicole mean when she says the Navajo reservation is like a third world country? What does it mean to have people from the outside forcing Navajo communities to change?

- 6. In the past, Navajos wove rugs with wool from the Navajo-churro sheep they raised. They spun and dyed the wool using local plants. Now, some weavers are using acrylic yarn. Rug trader Elijah Blair, known as “Little Ears,” says, “The finished product is much better made out of the commercial yarn.” Another trader, Perry Null, says, “It’s just like anything else. It just took a couple of the steps out and made it a little easier. No different than going from a horse and wagon to come to Gallup and buying a Ford pick-up...”**

How does the choice of material, going from locally produced wool to acrylic yarn, affect a handmade craft? How does substituting commercial yarn for the Navajo-churro wool impact the Navajo cultural traditions of weaving, and the raising of sheep for food and income? Do you think that “taking a couple of steps out” is a good thing for the weavers? Are there negative trade-offs?

- 7. Helen Bedonie, a Navajo weaver, says that years ago rugs were purchased by white traders for ten dollars. Then, they went up to thirty, forty, even fifty dollars. Now there aren’t that many trading posts for weavers to sell to. Also, cheap knock-offs from places like Mexico, Pakistan, Romania and Thailand are raising the competition, making it hard once again for the Navajo weavers to receive a fair price.**

When you shop for an item that is handmade, how can you tell if it is authentic, or an imitation? How can you find out how much of your purchase will support the craftsperson, and how much goes to an exporter, trader or corporation?

Australia has copyright laws that apply to Aboriginal design and craft. If Navajo rug designs could be copyrighted, as some suggest in the film, do you think that would change the value of Navajo rugs? If so, would weavers be protected from the knock-offs that are produced in places like Mexico, Pakistan, Romania and Thailand?

DELVE DEEPER, continued

8. **Trader Perry Null describes his relationship with the Navajo as integral. “You know,” he says, “I look at it that I’m an important part of the Navajo culture, being a trader, because a lot of people depend on me to buy these rugs.” Fellow trader, Elijah Blair is seen talking in Navajo and making jokes with elders in the community. “I will always be an Indian trader.”**

Now that you’ve seen the film, what do you think about the two traders and their approach to business and to their customers? What would you change if you were a trader? Where do these traders fit in to Navajo communities and families? To the Navajo economy? Are there both positive and negative aspects of these relationships?

9. **Lorraine’s sister, Edith Simonson, says in the movie that “If you want something to be done, don’t just sit there and think that somebody else is going to do it for you. It’s got to be you. That’s self-sufficiency.” Her niece Nicole Horseherder says that “We’re rediscovering wool and the processing. We’re relearning, reeducating ourselves and finding new meaning in this place that we live using the old knowledge, the old wisdom from my grandmother’s day.”**

How are the weavers in the film “reweaving their worlds” using the old cultural knowledge? How are they finding new meanings and self sufficiency by revitalizing the traditional arts of raising sheep, spinning, dyeing and weaving?

IDEAS FOR ACTION**Supporting Artists and Cultural Traditions**

How can you help support artists who continue important cultural arts and traditions? Think about the purchases you make, and what opportunities you have to buy art or crafts directly from an artist. Many communities offer fair trade craft stores, or arts fairs and festivals. What can you do to educate and inspire others to buy directly from craftspeople? Check the online resources below for web sites that offer direct sales of Navajo arts.

Make Your Voice and Others’ Voices Heard

Do you know of a project in your community or region that may adversely impact people who live there? Do you know of artists’ work that is being unfairly copied or sold, or co-opted without their knowledge? Often the people most impacted are those who don’t have a voice through the usual sources of media. When there is such a project, what can you do to help give the people impacted a voice? There are lots of avenues through social networking, from organizing groups on Facebook, to posting on Twitter, to blogs, to letters to the editors of your local paper. Find a way to get involved that works for you, and make a difference.



Director Bennie Klain and Sound Recordist Mike Mann assist with shearing the sheep.

Image courtesy of Trickster Films, LLC & Nancy Schiesari.

RESOURCES

BOOKS

Woven by the Grandmothers: Nineteenth-Century Navajo Textiles from the National Museum of the American Indians

Elizabeth H. Bonar

Washington, DC: NMAI and Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996

A New Plateau: Sustaining the Lands and Peoples of Canyon Country

Peter Friederici and Rose Houk, editors

Flagstaff, AZ: The Center for Sustainable Environments at Northern Arizona University with the Museum of Northern Arizona and Renewing the Countryside, 2004

Swept under the Rug: A Hidden History of Navajo Weaving

Kathy M'Closkey

Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002

Weaving a World: Textiles and the Navajo Way of Seeing

Willink, Roseann Sandoval and Paul G. Zolbrod

Santa Fe: University of New Mexico Press, 1996

RADIO

The Real Sheep.

Arizona Public Radio for Living on Earth, 10/29/2005

Narrated by Daniel Kraker

<http://www.livingonearth.org/shows/segments.htm?programID=05-P13-00043&segmentID=5>

Navajo weaver Gilbert Begay constructs a rug at his family's summer sheep camp in Lukachakai, Arizona.

Image courtesy of TricksterFilms, LLC & Nancy Schiesari.

SOURCES FOR DIRECT PURCHASE OF WOOL AND NAVAJO CRAFTS**Diné be' liná—The Navajo Life Way**www.navajolifeway.org

Diné be' liná's goals are to restore status to sheep herding, wool processing and fiber arts, and to promote the education that is necessary for their pursuit in the modern world.

Black Mesa Weavers for Life and Landwww.migrations.com/blackmesa/blackmesa.html

A non-profit, fair trade web site.

Navajo Nation Museumwww.navajonationmuseum.org

Official web site of the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, Arizona.

Weaving in Beautywww.weavinginbeauty.com

Web site, resources and blogs for all things related to Navajo rugs.

ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS**Black Mesa Indigenous Support**<http://blackmesais.org>

BMIS is a volunteer run collective dedicated to working with and supporting the indigenous peoples of Black Mesa. Their web site provides information on the effects of mining and relocation in the Black Mesa area.

Black Mesa Water Coalitionwww.blackmesawatercoalition.org/index.html

Web site providing additional information on the effects of mining and relocation in the Black Mesa area.

Navajo Nationwww.Navajo.org

The official web site of the Navajo Nation.

Navajo Green Jobswww.navajogreenjobs.com/index.html

Advocacy group made up of Navajo citizens and supporters who want to help transition and diversify the Navajo economy to one that is long-lasting, sustainable and healthy.

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