

# Situated Flow: A Few Thoughts on Reweaving Meaning in the Navajo Spirit Pathway<sup>\*</sup>

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*This article examines the Navajo weaver's pathway, or the ch'ihónít'i, a purposeful line woven into many Navajo textiles. Pathways, also called spiritlines, contain layers of significance and meaning in contemporary Navajo life. Drawing upon several years of ethnographic fieldwork, I explore how weavers and Navajo community members use and interpret pathways in various ways. The ch'ihónít'i can enhance and diminish subjective connections between the weaver, her work, and wider worlds, and this particular case study contributes to wider discussions about materiality and the circulation of indigenous aesthetic objects in different social contexts.*

If you look closely at the upper right hand corner of a Navajo textile, you may notice a small but visible strand of contrasting colored yarn (Figures 1-2). This line, intentionally placed by the weaver, usually extends from the inner design field to the outer border. In English, this line is often called the spiritline, the Navajo weaver's pathway, or the spirit pathway.<sup>1</sup> Spiritlines immediately fascinate textile buyers and weaving enthusiasts, who often consider the pathway as a potential entrance *into* the symbolic world of Navajo weaving. The term for the pathway in the Navajo language is alternatively *ch'ihónít'i* or *'atiin*, which translate as a 'way out', or 'road' respectively. This break in the design pathway is meant to allow weavers to separate themselves from the woven product created to sell.<sup>2</sup>

Whether understood more as a way in or out of the textile, the pathway is now filled with a range of social meanings, making it a dynamic and vital part of contemporary Navajo weaving deserving careful ethnographic study. Taking a closer look at why weavers might want to include the weaver's pathway and why many textile buyers desire weavings with spiritlines in them presents an opportunity to examine the circulation of specific indigenous aesthetic practices and knowledge and the materiality of the pathway itself. For some purchasers, a single strand of yarn, purposely woven into the textile by a weaver, materializes and then releases the weavers' intentions and thoughts as she weaves. For others, the pathway can offer the material proof of a symbolic world within the woven objects that they acquire. And as these ideas about connections to inner worlds circulate, brand new layers of significance are continually being added and affirmed to the spiritline, reshaping the way people think about and relate to Navajo weaving more broadly.

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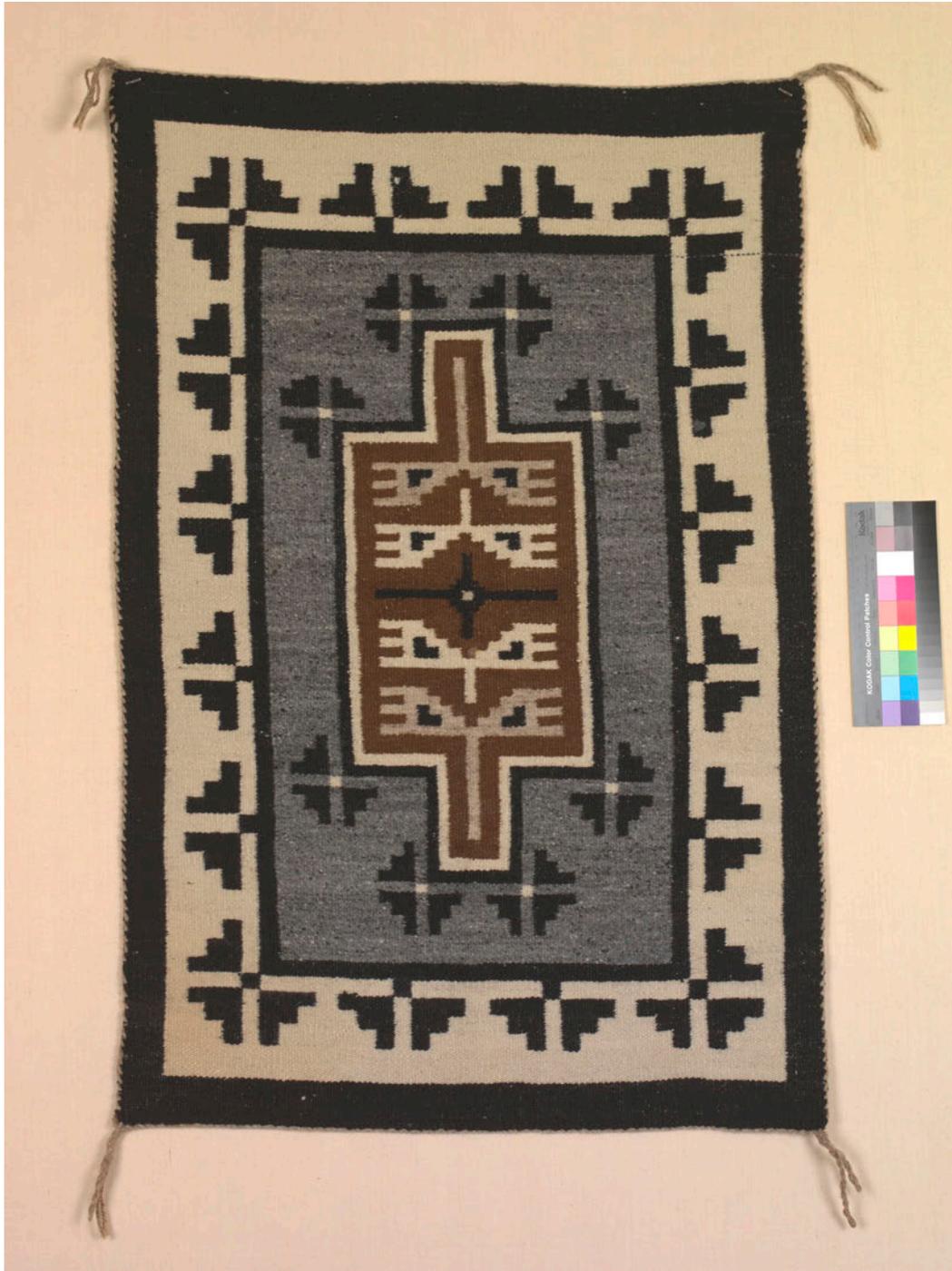


Figure 1. A Navajo textile illustrating the ch'ihónít'i or spirit pathway, which is visible in the upper right corner of the piece. This early 20th century example, for which the weaver and specific community of origin is unknown, is from the collections of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History (Catalog Number 50.2/6854). Additional information on this object is available via the Division's online collection database. Image courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History.



Figure 2. Detail of the textile presented in Figure 1 showing the ch'ihónít'i more closely. It is the horizontal line (appearing here as a dashed black line) running from the inner figure to the textile's boarder. As noted in the caption to Figure 1, this photograph of a textile in the collections of the American Museum of Natural History (Catalog Number 50.2/6854) is presented courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History.

In order to understand the various meanings and uses of the pathway today, this work draws upon a particular body of anthropological work that is examining specific transformations of value and meaning of indigenous art forms as they circulate in different regional, national, and international arenas. This kind of analysis reveals how diverse regimes of value, market-driven economies, projects of the nation-state, and consumer's tastes and desires all help frame how people experience and think about indigenous aesthetic material objects and knowledge as they move through various social landscapes (see for example Myers 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Marcus and Myers, eds. 1995; Phillips and Steiner 1999; Price 1989; Sleeper-Smith 2009; Steiner 1994; Thomas 1999). Many studies concerned with these (re)valuations situate consumers, enthusiasts of indigenous art, and larger social institutions associated with aesthetic forms—museums and art worlds, for example—as prime areas of study. The main focus of this article is to present a range of meanings and values of the spiritline used by individual Navajo weavers, community members, and buyers of Navajo weavings (see also Glass 2008; Isaac 2007; Kramer 2007; Morphy 1992; Myers 2002). Drawing upon several years of ethnographic research on contemporary weaving practices within a Navajo community and through interactions with Navajo textile buyers, I describe how the circulation of Navajo textiles and ideas associated with the pathway are often situations that are bursting with social activity and meaning, where ideas

about the spiritline are simultaneously informed by local forms of knowledge, national and international-level discourses about indigenous art, *and* by their mutual entanglements with each other.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to examining the *ch'ihónít'i* in terms of its circulation, this work also explores the materiality of the spiritline itself. The pathway provides an illuminating example of the particular kinds of connections that are being made between persons, aesthetic objects and ideas, the shifting valuations of these objects and knowledge as they circulate, and how the act of circulation itself shapes the materiality of indigenous art more generally. Studies of materiality over the last several years have produced a range of theoretical and ethnographically-rich accounts that detail the situated nature of distinguishing, categorizing, and experiencing material forms (see for instance Keane 2001, 2006; Miller 2001, 2005; Tilley et al. 2006). These and other kinds of studies have revealed that indigenous theories of materiality, for instance, often recognize connections between people and things that exist beyond Western ontology, and which explicitly articulate the co-constitutive roles of persons and material culture (see for example Glass 2008; Miller, ed. 2005; Myers 2002, Santos-Granero, ed. 2009). And in contexts of circulation, different ways of thinking about materiality often meet and influence the other in unexpected, and in some cases, in seemingly incompatible or contradictory ways. This is certainly the case with the weaver's pathway, where ideas about the spiritline have become associated with personal connections and intersubjectivity, even as weavers simultaneously use the pathway to purposely detach themselves from objects they wish to sell.

## **Exiting Textiles**

In Navajo terms, weaver's pathways are designed to materialize and then release weavers from the objects they create. Intentionally weaving a *ch'ihónít'i* into a textile is a preventative measure that disentangles weavers from the finished product created to sell in the wider marketplace. The necessity for the *ch'ihónít'i*—understood as both an object and a process—relates to Navajo theories of cause and effect and is directly associated with the integral connections that exist between persons and things in the Navajo world. These ties exemplify co-constitutive links between particular subjects and objects, and how relationships between people and things help define and shape aspects of Navajo personhood and individual subjectivity.

In her study of Navajo personhood, Maureen Schwarz (1997:4-14, 239-241) uses the concept of synecdoche to help explain association and effect in Navajo philosophy. Synecdoche, similar to James Frazer's "laws of contagion" (1959 [1890]) and to Marcel Mauss' (1990 [1925]) insights on effect, is based on the notion that contact between things, persons, and the immaterial world can create potentially lasting connections and effects on persons and on the objects themselves. In certain situations, subjects and objects can be infused with "parts of" the other, and material objects can become linked to the subject through both intentional and unintentional acts of attachment.

In a Navajo context, these types of connections can occur between people and a variety of things, including ceremonial material, personal items, and handmade products. The attachments between subjects and objects can be enhanced, as in the case of textiles created for personal use, where weavers can intentionally put objects and immaterial items—thoughts, prized personal qualities,

prayers, blessings—into the weaving that can imbue it with power. In their study with weavers who reside on the Eastern side of the Navajo Nation, Roseann Willink and Paul Zolbrod report that the addition of horse tendons from an especially strong horse have been woven into a saddle blanket to imbue the object with the power of the animal (1996). In other cases, families may request a *biil*, or the woven two-piece dress worn for the *kinaaldá*, the puberty ceremony or at other important occasions, from a weaver whom the family feels will impart blessings and skills to the young girl through the dress.

In addition to being able to enhance attachments between persons and things, Navajo people also have effective strategies like the weaver's pathway to diminish subjective connections to objects as well. Individuals can actively detach themselves from objects that may enter wider circulation, decreasing the chance of negative effects that may occur from the object coming into contact with undesirable elements or forces. In the case of Navajo textiles, disengagement occurs in a variety of ways, including through certain ceremonies and songs as well as through the weaver's pathway. The *ch'ihónít'i* becomes a mechanism to release aspects of the weaver's self—primarily the weaver's thinking and thoughts—that helped create the woven textile. “You think good thoughts, and those are, those become part of the product,” explained a Navajo educator from Tsaile, Arizona, articulating a point of view also shared by many weavers whom I interviewed over the course of my stay.<sup>4</sup> A person's thoughts and thinking are understood as being both animate and powerful in Navajo philosophy. All of the thoughts that go into making the rug can be said to reside within the object itself. As a result, therefore “part of” the maker and her thoughts can reside within the objects she or he creates. The pathway provides an exit for a weaver's thinking, what weavers call “a way out” that allows weavers the chance to actively disconnect from their woven work that is intended to be sold, thus avoiding any potential negative or harmful effects that may occur as the weaving circulates more widely.

Weaving a *ch'ihónít'i* not only safeguards weavers from external influences, but it also provides a range of personal benefits to the weaver's subjective experiences. Sandy, a weaver and educator in her early thirties, points to some of these positive qualities. “It is good for your thinking, you know. It helps your thinking. You know with those borders (textiles with borders), you have to have that line for your thinking (spiritline)... it is good for stress... you know, you do a lot of thinking when you weave. And it can really clear your mind, clear your thinking.”<sup>5</sup> Pathways can improve concentration, as it releases the weaver from previous thinking and the thoughts that once resided in completed textiles. The weaver can then remain present and focused on current and future weaving projects, and not be “stuck on” or “tied to” earlier woven work. One weaver also describes the connection between thinking, the woven object, and the *ch'ihónít'i* by stating, “with the line [the pathway], it has an exit and an opening, you don't completely encircle yourself, don't confine yourself to that weaving forever.”<sup>6</sup>

Pathways are also conceptualized as productive outlets to release any negative effects that may be caused by excessive weaving, and can prevent certain kinds of sickness and imbalance. One cultural educator working in the Window Rock area describes the process of weaving a spiritline as a way for the weaver to honor and respect the sacred and powerful aspects the weaving tradition.<sup>7</sup> Weaving a spiritline is one of several practices locally associated with “weaving taboos” or the “do's and don'ts of weaving,” a set of regulations and restrictions that guide weavers toward respectful and proper behavior.<sup>8</sup> By following these guidelines weavers can maintain balance and prevent sickness. “The do's and don'ts have to do with respect, and the

sacredness of weaving,” this educator relates. “They are there [pathways exist] so the respect and sacredness for it remains, otherwise, people would not know the power within it. With the spirit line, it will keep you sane, and if you don’t [include the pathway] it will cause blindness and deafness.” One elder named Dottie stated that the spiritline was a necessary step for the weavers in her family to follow. For her, the spiritline is “done, because, you lose your mind, if you don’t leave a way out, out of that weaving.”<sup>9</sup> Another weaver in her 40s suggested that weavings with borders and without spiritlines ‘will keep your mind circling, making you crazy.’<sup>10</sup> Many weavers and community members made similar comments about the relationship between the spiritline and physical and mental health. For them, weaving the ch’ihónít’i prevents the weaver from unnecessary suffering and disease, and is an effective practice releases the weaver’s thoughts and spirit from the textile and further protects individual and family health and harmony.

Others within the community conceptualized the ch’ihónít’i as being a purposeful mistake in two ways. In the first case, the spiritline is woven into the textile as an intentional “flaw,” a symbolic path for the survival of the weaving tradition to continue into the future. The second interpretation is that the spiritline is a deliberate design element incorporated by the weaver as a valued expression of modesty. Because nothing in life is perfect, some say, the weaver adds the spirit line to materialize the positive attributes of human imperfection and humility. Both interpretations became a part of a conversation one day during an interview with two elder community members, sisters originally from the Church Rock area. In our discussion, one sister raised the issue of the spiritline when she said:

I remember one big thing is they have a mistake, a small mistake in every rug they make. And that, I used to wonder “now why do they do that?” But then my grandmother told us that that’s to keep the weaving art going, you don’t stop with that one rug, but with the opening you go from one generation to the next. And you know, that means a lot when you think about it. They have to keep that in mind, or else they just weave.

Then her sister replied, “Well too, I heard, that it also showed a sign that people aren’t perfect, so nothing is really perfect. So a rug has an imperfection because um, because not one of us are really perfect... we’d like to think but we’re not [all laugh].<sup>11</sup> The idea that the spiritline was intentional mistake, and an outlet to account for human imperfection is an opinion held by many.<sup>12</sup> Each of the examples above demonstrate not only the variety of functions and interpretations of the ch’ihónít’i, but also the relationships between wider webs of causation and affect, personal experience, subjectivity, and the woven objects themselves.<sup>13</sup>

## **Enter New Pathways**

The increasing awareness of the pathway by the wider non-Navajo public over the last several decades has ushered in a new set of subjective engagements with the ch’ihónít’i, bringing new systems of knowledge and sensibilities to the interpretation of its meaning and function. Various descriptions and explanations of the pathway exist in places like museum exhibit interpretations and within an ever-increasing body of literature—books, articles, and Internet sites—dedicated

to the sale and study of textiles.<sup>14</sup> Buyers are also having more direct contact with traders, gallery owners, and weavers, providing additional ways to learn about the ch'ihónít'i. Pathways are appealing to many because they satisfy a widely shared desire for acquiring the symbolic meanings of weaving. Nearly a century ago, the anthropologist Gladys Reichard (1968:178) asserted that American buyers often expect that textiles—particularly design elements and motifs—are representative of a deeper symbolic code. She writes:

A question most frequently asked of those interested in the Navajo blanket is, “But what does it *mean*?” ...we [non-Native people] have little [symbolic culture] of our own, what we have is frequently puerile; nevertheless, we insist on it in our Indian products... The answer to the question, “What does it mean?” is simply, “Nothing.”

While this extreme view presented by Reichard discounts the multiplicity of ways in which symbols and design elements can be interpreted, purchasers are disappointed when they learn that design motifs are not necessarily symbolic in and of themselves, but are viewed by many weavers and community members as representations of personal and family traditions and aesthetic sensibilities.

In contrast to general design elements, pathways can fulfill expectations for deeper meanings as buyers learn that intentional lines woven into textiles can release personal connectivity and activate valued personal characteristics. Some gallery owners and traders now highlight the symbolic significance of the pathway for buyers, and promote to weavers the incorporation of the spiritline within their woven work to increase its symbolic and material value. A local trader and his wife suggested that they “encourage weavers to put in the pathway, because they [textiles] will sell at better prices and quicker [time], and because [the pathway] is something that the public wants.”<sup>15</sup> It also offers buyers an entirely different way of thinking about the relationship between subjects and objects that they may typically have—not as bounded or in wholly distinctive categories, but rather as entities which are interconnected and permeable, and where, in certain cases, objects can hold subjectivity and subjects can travel within and through the objects they create. As an owner of several Navajo textiles and admirer of the weaving tradition a purchaser describes the importance of the pathway for her own self. She says, “the weaver’s pathway shows that the weaver puts her spirit into the piece, and there is a part of that spirit in the weaving, that connection. Then the spiritline also shows that the pathway creates a way for the weaver’s spirit free, allowing her to go on. And it shows you have both things, the connection with the weaver and the freedom for the weaver’s spirit.”<sup>16</sup>

Beyond offering consumers a different way of understanding the nature of persons and things, the circulation of Navajo ideas about the pathway has also created some unexpected changes to the spiritline’s purpose and meaning. The primary intention the ch'ihónít'i for most weavers—to materialize and then detach weavers from the woven object—has now become a source for generating new subjective connections between buyers and weaver’s worlds, materializing cultural meaning and symbolism within the woven object.

Many Navajo weavers I know are keenly aware of the tastes and desires of their consumers, and recognize that buyers often want to forge connections with weavers and their ways of being. Many weavers also understand that including things like a ch'ihónít'i within their textiles can

enhance the symbolic and, therefore also the likely accumulating market value, and the cultural authenticity of woven objects in the eyes of buyers. In one interview a weaver said that the weaver should “always have that positive thinking, that spiritual mind with you, because who ever buys it, will have the same thinking and the same thoughts as your weaving, you always have those positive thoughts in there to create a good weaving, a good design.” Therefore, designs like pathways initially woven into the textile to release weaver’s thoughts and subjectivity *out* of weavings can now provide a way for both consumers *and* weavers to instill and enhance different types of meanings and value *into* their textiles for consumers.

Julie, a weaver in her twenties who participates in presentations of Navajo culture within the community and beyond, expresses the importance of these lasting connections between the maker and the work of art.<sup>17</sup> Remembering one presentation that she gave when speaking to buyers at a rug show in Park City Utah about the spiritline and the significance of weaving more generally, she recalls:

I said each weaving has a story behind it, there’s a spirit in there, and, so I said its really important that you realize that... and it has little parts of it have little stories to it, and if, if a buyer can see that, then, they really have the talent and the soul to, take care of your rug. So that’s the one thing that I always like to share to a lot of the buyers—that you have to know the story behind it, you have to appreciate the story behind it.<sup>18</sup>

The idea that each woven work contains individual and cultural stories and can remain connected to the individual weaver is a view held by many weavers in the community. In this instance, Julie communicates to the non-Navajo buying public the lasting ties that exist between the maker and the woven work. In doing so, she conveys to others important cultural and personal meaning and creates additional subjective connections between the weaver and the wider public.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this process is the role that weavers play. Weavers do not watch as passive players as larger economic forces or their consumers resignify meanings of the pathway, but are fully engaged in the process of creating new kinds of meanings, connections, and value to the objects they create. What this all suggests is that the materiality of the weaver’s pathway is not something that is fixed or singular, but something that is both dynamic and plural. The ability for the *ch’ihónít’i* to signify connectivity and contain many meanings is one of the reasons that it also plays a prominent role within certain contexts in Navajo communities as well, where the pathway can materialize culturally-valuable knowledge and key aspects of Navajo identity in particular ways. An example of this includes pathways residing in historic textiles and circulating locally—in museums exhibits, school presentations, and in community-focused displays—that have become powerful threads linking the present with the past, strengthening and authenticating community identities across time and space.

Layers of significance and meaning are continually added to the pathway as it circulates. The *ch’ihónít’i* detaches subjective ties while it creates new ones, diminishes or enhances relationships between people and objects, and increases the economic and symbolic value of the woven object itself. Examining the materiality of the *ch’ihónít’i* reveals that various factors—consumer desires, weaver’s sensibilities and entrepreneurial spirit, market economies, indigenous and non-indigenous systems of knowledge and practice, and ideas about materiality itself—all inform and shape the other.

## **Keywords**

*Belief Systems, Commerce, Indigenous Art, Market—Art, Material Culture, Materiality, Navajo, North America, Symbolism, United States, Weaving.* Keywords in italics are derived from the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, a standard nomenclature for the ethnographic disciplines.

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## **Notes**

1. Sometimes the line is woven across the entire textile, and while most spirit lines are visible, others are hidden from view. It is important to note that pathways can differ in both technique and form slightly between weavers, and the decision to include the *ch'ihónít'i* is based on individual and family preferences and style, and, as I suggest in this paper, on the variety of social ties and opportunities pathways can bring. See also Bennett 1974, Hedlund 1984, 1994, W. Thomas 1996, Walters 1996 for other ethnographic insight into the weaver's pathway.
2. In this article, I purposely use the various names given to the *ch'ihónít'i*—spiritline, pathway, the spirit pathway—interchangeably to highlight how the meaning and materiality of the *ch'ihónít'i* changes as it circulates.
3. This article is based on my dissertation fieldwork undertaken from 2003-2007 in the Window Rock area of the Navajo Nation. I was given the opportunity to live and work in a community for

four years, conducting ethnographic fieldwork with Navajo weavers and community members. Fieldwork included participation in daily activities and special events and conducting formal and informal interviews. I received permission to conduct this fieldwork through a Chapter Resolution and by obtaining a Navajo Nation Cultural Resource Investigation Permit, C0404-E.

4. In all interviews drawn upon here, a pseudonym is used for participants to maintain their anonymity. Interview with author, January 19, 2006.

5. Interview with author, October 25, 2004.

6. Interview with author, September 21, 2006.

7. I have purposely chosen not to include additional information about the pathway that is often considered sacred and powerful. Interviews with author, including March 19, 2005, October 25, 2005, and April 17, 2007.

8. For more detailed description and analysis of Navajo weaving taboos see, for example: Bennett 1987, Bulow 1991, Hedlund 1984, and Ahlberg Yohe in press.

9. Interview with author, September 22, 2005.

10. Interview with author, December 15, 2005.

11. Interview with author, October 7, 2005.

12. Fieldnotes, also interview with author March 20, 2007.

13. It is important to note the variability of Navajo weavers practicing today, that there are many weavers who do not include the spiritline within their textiles. There are a variety of reasons why weavers choose to not include this feature. Some weavers state that they do not “believe” in the significance of the spiritline, that it is a “superstition”, while others suggest it is just a decorative feature. Some weavers never learned to include the pathway as a part of their families’ weaving tradition. This article focuses on weavers who do include the ch’ihónít’i within their textiles.

14. See for example McLerran, ed. 2006, Bonar, ed. 1996, and Hedlund, 1994. Websites include [www.weavinginbeauty.com](http://www.weavinginbeauty.com), accessed March 27, 2012, [www.navajorug.com](http://www.navajorug.com), accessed March 19, 2012, and <http://www.navajorugsblankets.com/care.html>, accessed March 27, 2012.

15. Interviews with author, Fall 2005, April 21, 2006.

16. Interview with author, January 2012.

17. Interview with author, November 2005.

18. Interview with author, January 24, 2006.

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*Editor's Note: Studies of Native North America societies presented in past issues of Museum Anthropology Review include Ann McMullen's (2008) "The Currency of Consultation and Collaboration" and Elizabeth A. Kallenbach's (2009) "The California Indian Basketweavers Association: Advocates for the Use of Museum Collections by Contemporary Weavers." Daniel*

*C. Swan's (2010) "Objects of Purpose—Objects of Prayer: Peyote Boxes of the Native American Church" specifically addresses another art form practiced among the Navajo people. Material expressions of religiously important ideas is a topic was previously taken up in Jin Feng's (2008) "The Murals of a Village Temple: Heaven, Earth, and People" and in Samuel K. Parker's (2009) "Renovation, Disposal, and Conservation of Hindu Temples and Images: The Institutionalization of Creativity in South Indian and American Art Worlds." The later work also explicitly addresses the impact of transcultural art worlds on such beliefs and on associated practices.*