



# THIS PRESENT MOMENT

## CRAFTING A BETTER WORLD

**MARY SAVIG**  
with *Nora Atkinson* and *Anya Montiel*  
Foreword by *Stephanie Stebich*  
and contributions by several artists

Renwick Gallery of the  
Smithsonian American Art Museum  
Washington, DC  
in association with D Giles Limited

## THIS PRESENT MOMENT: CRAFTING A BETTER WORLD

Published to accompany the Renwick Gallery's fiftieth anniversary program and in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, on view at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, from May 13, 2022, to April 2, 2023.

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Produced by the Publications Office, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, [AmericanArt.si.edu](http://AmericanArt.si.edu)

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Published by the  
Smithsonian American Art Museum  
in association with

GILES  
An imprint of D Giles Limited  
66 High Street  
Lewes BN7 1XG  
UK  
[gilesltd.com](http://gilesltd.com)

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The Renwick Gallery became the home of the museum's American craft and decorative arts program in 1972. The gallery is located in a historic architectural landmark on Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street, NW, in Washington, DC.

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Washington, DC 20013-7012  
[AmericanArt.si.edu/books](http://AmericanArt.si.edu/books)

Typeset in Unit and Unit Slab Pro, Microbrew Soft One, and P22 Sneaky Pro. Printed in Italy by Conti Tipocolor on Condat Matt Périgord 170 gsm paper.

Front cover: Renwick Gallery façade, 2019  
Back cover: Alicia Eggert, *This Present Moment* (see CAT. 37)

All artworks are in the collection of the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum unless otherwise noted.

A note about the cover:

To honor the Renwick Gallery's fiftieth anniversary, Antonio Alcalá of Studio A created fifty different color variations for the image of the Renwick Gallery's façade. Each variation was digitally printed in a limited edition of sixty. The color combinations were inspired by nature; special thanks to Carol and Basil Brown for access to their glorious gardens.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names:  
Stebich, Stephanie A., writer of foreword.  
| Savig, Mary. This present moment. |  
Atkinson, Nora. Foundation for the future.  
| Montiel, Anya. Respect, reciprocity,  
responsibility. | Renwick Gallery, orga-  
nizer, host institution.

Title:  
This present moment: crafting a better  
world / Mary Savig with Nora Atkinson  
and Anya Montiel; foreword by Stephanie  
Stebich and contributions by several  
artists.

Description:  
Washington, DC: Renwick Gallery of the  
Smithsonian American Art Museum;  
London: in association with D Giles  
Limited, [2022] | Includes bibliographical  
references and index.

Identifiers:  
LCCN 2021055588 | ISBN 9781913875268  
(hardcover)

Subjects:  
LCSH: Decorative arts — United States —  
History — 21st century — Exhibitions. |  
Artists and community — United States —  
Exhibitions.

Classification:  
LCC NK808.2 .T49 2022 | DDC  
745.0973/074753—dc23/eng/20220106

LC record available at  
<https://lccn.loc.gov/2021055588>

# CONTENTS

- 9 Donors to the Campaign**
- 13 Director's Foreword** Stephanie Stebich
- 18 Acknowledgments**
- 24 A Foundation for the Future: The Renwick at 50** Nora Atkinson
- 42 This Present Moment** Mary Savig
- 97 Artists Reflect** David Chatt  
Kelly Church  
Sonya Clark  
Alicia Eggert  
Steven Young Lee  
Wendy Maruyama  
Myra Mimlitsch-Gray  
Connie Mississippi  
Judith Schaechter
- 137 The Bernstein–Chernoff Collection of Sculptural Wood Art** Mary Savig
- 170 Respect, Reciprocity, and Responsibility: A Way Forward** Anya Montiel
- 182 Selected Acquisitions from the Renwick Gallery's 50th Anniversary Campaign**
- 228 50th Anniversary Campaign Checklist**
- 241 Index**
- 245 Image and Quotation Credits**

# RESPECT, RECIPROCALITY, AND RESPONSIBILITY

BY ANYA MONTIEL

*It's such an uncertain time right now. But what are people creating? What are we going to see out of the women even now? I guarantee you it's going to be nothing but beauty.*

— Carla Hemlock

Artist Carla Hemlock offered this premonition of the art being created during the COVID-19 pandemic — especially art by Indigenous women — in October 2020 during a curator and artist conversation organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum for the *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* exhibition, then on view at the Renwick Gallery.<sup>1</sup> Hemlock, a textile and multimedia artist from the Kahnawake Mohawk territory along the St. Lawrence River, explained that many artworks in the exhibition were created during terrible hardships, such as forced removal from homelands, massacres, denial of religious freedoms, and catastrophic

epidemics. Despite repeated widespread trauma, Indigenous artists made works of beauty with absolute care, resolve, and fearlessness. Now, as I write this essay in the spring of 2021, the coronavirus pandemic continues to bring sickness and death, while nationwide protests have reignited calls for social justice and equity as systemic racism and structural violence have been made more and more apparent. How will artists move forward in this current difficult moment and shape the future?

Living in a melancholic and unpredictable time makes the future seem almost impossible to imagine. One aspiration is for people to emerge from this present moment creating spaces and

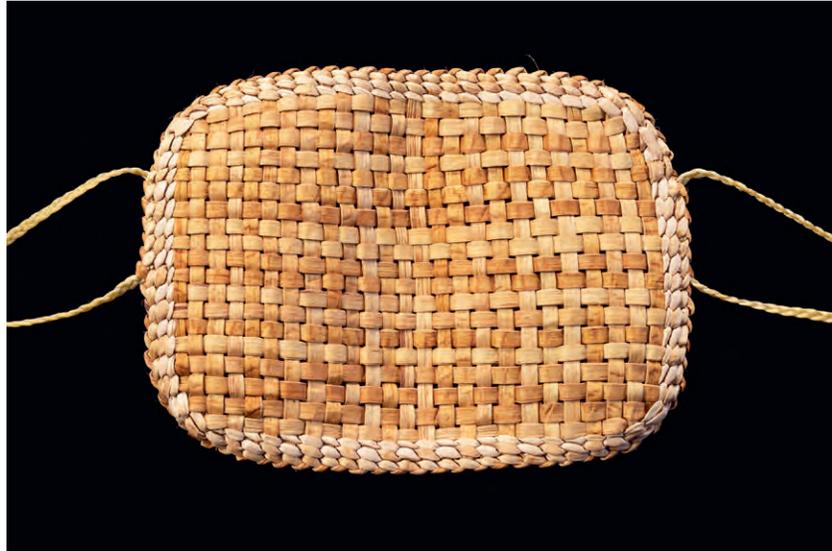
## A WAY FORWARD

works that are therapeutic and synergistic and kinder. If so, what will American craft look like in the future? More importantly, what *should* guide the future of craft? American craft and art have their origin stories and locales, but *this land has memory*, and this continent holds ancient, interconnected knowledge systems from Indigenous observations of the flora, fauna, and cosmos.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous scholars have articulated Indigenous knowledges, worldviews, and methodologies to counter dominant “Western” paradigms and advance other ways of knowing. Scholars Cora Weber-Pillwax (Métis/Woodland Cree) and Shawn Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree), in particular, have proposed three principles essential to Indigenous research and learning: Respect, Reciprocity, and Responsibility.<sup>3</sup> Known as the three R’s, they “are key features of any healthy relationship,” Wilson notes, and are valuable for non-Indigenous people as well.<sup>4</sup> Respect, reciprocity, and responsibility

are principles that will provide a restorative framework for American craft moving forward.

There are artists and craftspeople who already follow these ways of knowing throughout their practice and with others, and by examining the principles along with examples of their work, each principle’s purpose becomes clear. The first principle, respect, extends beyond humans to all living beings and life-forms. Weber-Pillwax explains, “All forms of living things are to be respected as being related and interconnected. . . . It means believing and living that relationship with all forms of life and conducting all interactions in a spirit of kindness and honesty.”<sup>5</sup> Respect acknowledges this connectedness between all beings and life-forms. Artists Kevin and Valerie Pourier (Oglala Lakota) live and work on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and create works of art from buffalo horn, a material used by their Lakota ancestors for countless

**CAT. 82** Vicki Lee Soboleff, *Yellow Cedar Face Mask*, 2020, yellow cedar and sinew, overall: 4 × 5 5/8 × 3/4 in.



**CAT. 83** Marlana Thompson, *Ononkwashon:a (Medicine Plants)*, 2020, black velveteen with red flannel, Czech seed beads, sweetgrass, sage, and leather, overall: 5 × 51 3/4 × 1 7/8 in.



**CAT. 84** Kevin and Valerie Pourier, *Monarch Nation*, 2019, carved bison horn with inlaid orange sandstone and white mother of pearl, 3 3/4 × 3 × 11 3/4 in.

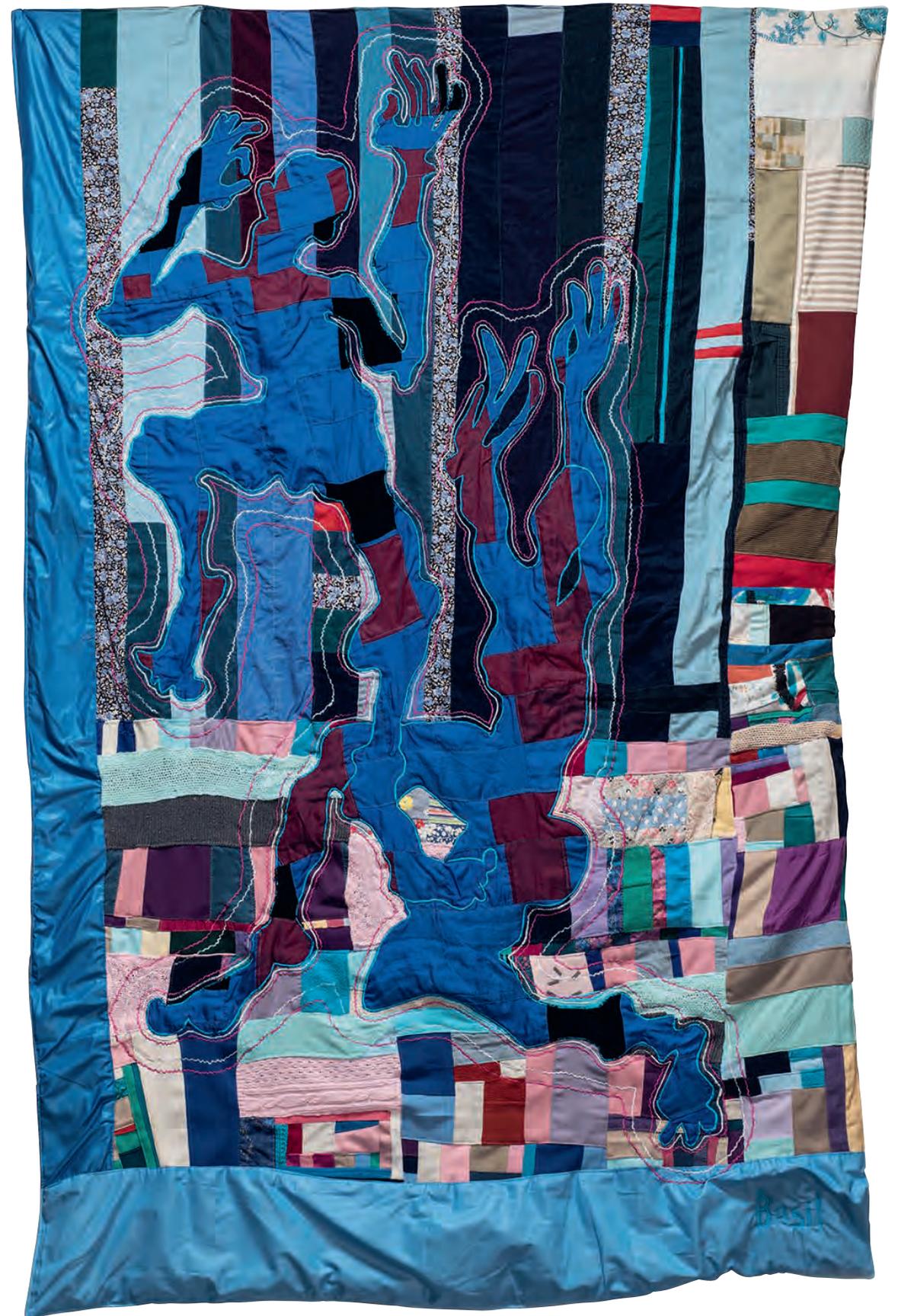
generations.<sup>6</sup> The Lakota name for themselves, Pte Oyate, translates as “buffalo people,” and the buffalo is a respected relative integrated into everyday and ceremonial life. *Monarch Nation* (CAT. 84), the Pouriers’ buffalo-horn spoon with inlaid orange sandstone and mother of pearl, continues a long-ago artform and ensures that little of the buffalo is wasted. Likewise, the overlapping pattern of monarch butterflies on the spoon’s surface pays tribute to the “small ones” (the insects) and to the annual migration of monarch butterflies from Canada to Mexico. All forms of connection are acknowledged with respect and care.

Respect also centers on being a good relative *and* descendant. Ancestors struggled and endured so that the succeeding kin might thrive. Saint Louis-based artist Basil Kincaid comes from seven generations of quilters and creates quilted paintings that reflect ancestral connections, collective memory, and healing. He feels his art is “a way to honor my predecessors while addressing the questions and concerns of where I am – we are – today. It’s a way towards restoring and reconstructing with the resourcefulness born within us.”<sup>7</sup> For *Riverside Revival: Lift Every Voice and Sing* (CAT. 85), Kincaid collected old choir robes from local Black churches to construct the central figures with arms extending upward in praise. He then assembled the multichromatic background from pieces of vintage quilts, donated clothing, and Ghanaian fabric and embroidery. The work offers both personal and collective connections. Kincaid’s

**CAT. 85** Basil Kincaid, *Riverside Revival: Lift Every Voice and Sing*, 2020, machine-pieced and hand-stitched clothes from the artist, donated clothes and corduroy, old choir robes from Black churches in St. Louis, fragments of vintage quilts, and Ghanaian fabric and embroidery, 77 1/2 × 52 7/8 in. (irreg.)

paternal grandparents met at a church revival, and the power of spirituality and song was ever-present in their lives. The subtitle, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, pays tribute to the poem-turned-song by brothers James Weldon Johnson and John Rosamond Johnson that became the canonical song of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and is often referred to as the Black national anthem. Written more than 120 years ago, *Lift Every Voice and Sing* contains lyrics of hope and strength in the face of injustice. Kincaid’s work, likewise, provides another story of ancestral resilience and respect carried forward.

The second principle to guide American craft is reciprocity. Michael Anthony Hart (Fisher River Cree), whose work focuses on Indigenous knowledges and social work, defines reciprocity as “the belief that as we receive from others, we must also offer to others,” and further states that, “Since all life is considered equal, albeit different, all life must be respected as we are in reciprocal relations with them.”<sup>8</sup> Reciprocity centers around a mutually beneficial exchange while incorporating the first principle of respect. Aram Han Sifuentes is a Chicago-based artist who practices reciprocity through her art and social action. She learned to sew at a young age to assist her mother’s work as a seamstress. Through sewing, Sifuentes, who identifies as an immigrant of color, challenges notions of “identity politics, immigration and immigrant labor, possession and dispossession, citizenship and belonging,



**CAT. 86** Aram Han Sifuentes, *Otro Mundo*  
*Es Posible*, 2017, felt and fusible web on cotton; checkout card, banner: 42 7/8 × 42 1/2 in., card: 4 × 6 in.



Detail of checkout card for Sifuentes's *Otro Mundo*  
*Es Posible*

dissent and protest, and race politics in the United States.”<sup>9</sup> Discontent with the 2016 US presidential election results, Sifuentes used her medium to protest and build community. She established the Protest Banner Lending Library as a space for people to meet in a sewing circle, make their own banners, and “check out” banners to borrow (CAT. 86). The banners, carrying different messages and phrases—some elaborate, others purely textual—are taken to

OUT	IN	EMAIL ID	PROTEST
4/1/17	9/16/17	Patricia Sifuentes	theater production
9/17/17	9/7/17	Sifuentes	take action (companion)
10/20/17	10/28/17	Jane Sifuentes	JA LOMAZOOMI
2/16/18	28/2/18	Sifuentes	BRITAIN PARADE
9/14/18	9/25/18	Sifuentes	JUSTICE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERS
9/2/18	4/14/19	Sifuentes	HUSTON CENTER OF ARTS & CRAFT
6/2020	6/2020	Sifuentes	living outside home
10/7/2020	2/4/2021	Sifuentes	Never again is now

made by: US (Aram + Vera)      EMPOWERED ON: April 2017

protests, returned, and then used by someone else. The library allows the works to circulate and travel, thereby offering their messages far and wide. By prioritizing reciprocity, Sifuentes’s artistic practice is a generative offering, benefiting everyone.

Quilt artist Carolyn Mazloomi also manifests reciprocity with socially engaged practices and community building. In 1985, she founded the Women of Color Quilters Network to support and preserve quilting among women of color. Mazloomi, with a career spanning forty years, explained her purpose as an artist: “to

create work, to educate people, and to take the viewer to another place in the hope that they’ll be educated and learn.”<sup>10</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, many quilt and textile artists, like Mazloomi and her Quilters Network members, shifted to making face masks to protect family, friends, and health care workers from the virus. Mazloomi then sponsored an “Unmask Your Creativity Contest” so quilters could create artful masks as creative expressions for fun and reprieve. Entries came in from around the world, including from Houston-based artist Carolyn Crump, who submitted several masks, like *BLM-4* (CAT. 87). Crump, who is known for her three-dimensional quilts, made this figurative mask, stitched of multiple pieces of fabrics, with a Black woman emerging from it. The woman wears a BLM (Black Lives Matter) mask and holds several signs, including “STOP Killing Us” and “I Can’t Breathe.” Crump uses quilts to tell stories that often speak to current events. While the Quilters Network educates others about the history and traditions of quilt making, another essential feature of the organization is the socio-economic empowerment of its members through workshops on marketing, pricing, and selling. It is not surprising then, that when Mazloomi received a United States Artists Fellowship in early 2021 with a \$50,000 cash prize, she donated the award money to the Quilters Network to expand their work and outreach.<sup>11</sup>

The final principle, responsibility, works in concert with respect and reciprocity. Scholar

**CAT. 87** Carolyn Crump,  
*BLM-4*, 2020, machine-  
 quilted cotton with  
 cotton thread and paint,  
 12 × 7 × 6 ½ in.



Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) best explains how the three intertwine:

**Our nationhood is based on the idea that the earth gives and sustains all life, that “natural resources” are not “natural resources” at all, but gifts from Aki, the land. Our nationhood is based on the foundational concept that we should give up what we can to support the integrity of our homelands for the coming generations. We should give more than we take. It is a nationhood based on a series of radiating responsibilities.<sup>12</sup>**

Simpson adds that the radiating responsibilities reach inward as well as outward. A person cannot practice respect and reciprocity without a healthy body, spirit, and mind. Responsibility is a reminder that all principles are equally important in building and sustaining relationships.

Hemlock, the artist who provided a premonition for artmaking during the current moment, created a work that exposes a deterioration in responsibility. Entitled *Our Destruction* (CAT. 88), the textile work is a hand-appliqué quilt on black and red wool. On the left, top, and right sides of the border are the words, “Our Heart—Our Home—Our Soul.” Inside the border is a vibrant scene of beaded flowers, vines, birds, and dragonflies in the raised Mohawk beadwork style. The very center holds a pair of sequined ruby-red slippers identical to the ones worn

by Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*. The toe of one slipper reads “tic” and the other “toc.” The “tic toc” warning repeats, echoing in each corner of the quilt. Despite its outward beauty, *Our Destruction* speaks to the current state of the planet and global climate change. On the reverse of the quilt, Hemlock writes, “Our Destruction. Our Natural world is an environmental ticking time bomb on the eve of destruction. Time is running out. Our inaction will soon redefine those Ruby Red Slippers to symbolize ‘No Place to Call Home.’” The quilt is a shrouded harbinger of what humans cannot lose—Our Heart, Our Home, Our Soul. But we can look toward a daily practice that engages body, spirit, and mind to acknowledge the interconnectedness of all beings (respect), create mutually beneficial offerings (reciprocity), and be accountable to these intertwining relationships (responsibility).

By centering and prioritizing these Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing, American craft has a framework to imagine a future that benefits the artist, the community, and every being—one with respect, reciprocity, and responsibility joined together in a network that sustains and nurtures at each step. Simpson proposes that, “to survive and flourish the next four hundred years, we need to join together in a rebellion of love, persistence, commitment, and profound caring and create constellations of coresistance.”<sup>13</sup> Such a path ahead connects all beings and holds up the world. ✨

**CAT. 88** Carla Hemlock,  
*Our Destruction*, 2019, wool  
stroud cloth with wool,  
glass beads, Swarovski  
crystals, and sequins,  
34 1/8 × 30 5/8 × 7/8 in.



## NOTES

1. Carla Hemlock, "Hearts of Our People Curator and Artist Conversation," Smithsonian American Art Museum, YouTube video 48:28, October 1, 2020, [https://youtu.be/D2drTA\\_6u6Q](https://youtu.be/D2drTA_6u6Q).
2. Phrase taken from Duane Blue Spruce and Tanya Thrasher, eds., *The Land Has Memory: Indigenous Knowledge, Native Landscapes, and the National Museum of the American Indian* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).
3. Cora Weber-Pillwax, "Identity Formation and Consciousness with Reference to Northern Alberta Cree and Metis Indigenous Peoples" (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2003), 42; Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 77.
4. Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 77, 59.
5. Cora Weber-Pillwax, "Indigenous Research Methodology: Exploratory Discussion of an Elusive Subject," *Journal of Educational Thought (JET)/Revue de la Pensée Éducative* 33, no. 1 (April 1999): 41.
6. While *bison* is the scientific term used for the animal found in North America, *buffalo* is the colloquial usage and best translation in this context.
7. Basil Kincaid, "Artist Statement," *Basil Kincaid*, accessed October 2021, <https://basilkincaid.art/about>.
8. Michael Anthony Hart, "Indigenous Worldviews, Knowledge, and Research: The Development of an Indigenous Research Paradigm," *Journal of Indigenous Voices in Social Work* 1, no. 1 (February 2010): 7–8.
9. Aram Han Sifuentes, "Artist Statement," *Aram Han Sifuentes*, accessed spring 2021, <https://www.aramhansifuentes.com/artist-s-statement>.
10. Emily Buhrow Rogers, "Stories to Tell: Carolyn Mazloomi and the Women of Color Quilters Network in 2020," *Folklife*, January 15, 2021, <https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/crisis-carolyn-mazloomi-women-of-color-quilters-network-2020>.
11. Janelle Gelfand, "Quilting Artist Mazloomi Wins \$50,000, Gives It Away," *Cincinnati Business Courier*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.bizjournals.com/cincinnati/news/2021/02/18/mazloomi-wins-50-000-gives-it-away.html>.
12. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 8–9.
13. *Ibid.*, 9.