A Memorial to Those Who Mourn: 
Marie Watt’s *Untitled (Mother, Mother)* and Correlating Sewing Circle

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Marie Watt’s *Untitled (Mother, Mother)* and the corresponding sewing circle operate within the artist’s established practice rooted in materiality, narrative, memory, collective creation, and both Anglo-European and North American Indigenous crafting traditions. What differentiates *Untitled (Mother, Mother)* from the artist’s previous works is the project’s alignment to grief caused by social and racial oppression. Forget-me-not: Mothers and Sons, a 2008 project by Watt presents similar themes of maternal grief, mourning, and memory, though it’s context is specific to war and humanizing those lost.1 *Untitled (Mother, Mother)*, made in 2020 during a moment of intense collective grief and organizing around police brutality, speaks to a grief felt by mothers who lost their children to racialized violence. Watt’s new quilt honors mourning mothers, placing emphasis on collective and living grief by flipping traditions of memorial quilts that honor the deceased.2

Collective experience is integral to the creation of meaning in Watt’s practice. For Watt, collective experiences mostly take the form of Sewing Circles, which she organizes to facilitate the production of hand embroidered quilt patches. The Sewing Circles offer much more than the physical objects made by participants; they are a vehicle for narrative, connecting strangers and friends through handiwork.3 I attended one of Watt’s Sewing Circles in February of 2020 at the University of New Mexico Art Museum to aid in the creation of *Untitled (Mother, Mother)*. Upon entering the Remix room at the UNM Art Museum I was met with a very long table placed diagonally in the room with about 25-30 people seated. At the start of the event, Watt welcomed the group and gave a brief presentation about the project we would all be contributing to and encouraged everyone to enjoy the snacks if they were hungry, peruse binders with additional reading material and images, and take a hand-printed paper plate as a parting gift (Figure 1). The overall atmosphere was warm, and the artist worked to make the Sewing Circle an inclusive environment.

Figure 1: Sewing Circle Invitation display. 
Image by the author.
Watt provided threaded needles and pre-cut wool pieces (sourced from second-hand wool blankets) with a variety of templates of the word ‘Mother’ in multiple languages to choose from (Figure 2). Once everyone selected their piece of blanket and thread, the room settled and conversations began to flow. Watt helped to facilitate some of these conversations as she moved throughout the room engaging with participants. To one group I heard her ask, “How did you learn to sew?” The answers were varied, but these pointed questions helped to guide conversations in the direction of shared experience and memory. Watt draws on rich sources of knowledge from the practice of sewing circles in both Indigenous and Anglo-European cultures to BIPOC poetry and song to expand binary notions around mothers and motherhood at the UNM Sewing Circle.

Watt wrote the following statement on her website regarding mothers: “The Iroquois concept of ‘mother’ is broad, extending from one’s mother through a long line of women: ak’sote (grandmothers), ak’sote-kowah (great-grandmothers), aunties, sisters, Sky Woman, mentors, friends, leaders.” In 2020, when so many mothers of color are mourning their children lost to police violence and racial disparity, Untitled (Mother, Mother) can be seen as a memorial to those grieving mothers. Further, ‘mother’ in Seneca terms extends exponentially, making the grief of these lost children a collective concern. Watt expands beyond the function of the memorial quilt to memorialize a lost individual to encompass and honor the collective grief of the living.
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Watt, a member of the Seneca nation, integrates various traditions from Seneca, Iroquois, and other Indigenous North American cultures in addition to Anglo-European traditions and worldviews into her practice. Sewing is often a collective practice as well as an art form in many Indigenous traditions and is valued just as highly any other medium, whereas in Anglo-European culture, craft has often been referred to diminutively as women’s work.\(^5\) Watt studied painting at Yale and turned to sewing after her MFA in a large part because of it’s ties to gendered traditions, which in the artist’s matrilineal cultural identity is one of empowerment. Yet many of Watt’s works refer to traditions associated with nineteenth-century white women in the North Eastern United States. Cynthia Fowler writes about a group of works made by Watt in 2004 called “Samplers,” which clearly reference to a practice situated in white upper class and upper-middle class nineteenth-century culture, where young women and girls would demonstrate their sewing skill by embroidering a sampling of phrases and motifs on a single cloth surface.\(^6\) These samplers functioned on multiple levels, as a reproduction of knowledge that perpetuated oppressive gender norms in settler colonial culture and reinforcing craft as a gendered activity. Watts finds synergy in the notion of samplers and sewing circles as a format to generate and reproduce knowledge, but moves beyond their gendered confines to create inclusion and germinate expansive ideas around motherhood.

Further, the name “Sewing Circle” references nineteenth-century sewing circles, which functioned as a safe place for women to gather and talk about daily affairs and socio-political issues, paralleling sewing gatherings in Watt’s Seneca traditions.\(^7\) Many of the nineteenth-century groups evolved to include charitable or activist activities and have been tied to the development of the Women’s Rights movement of the 1850’s and for advocating the end of slavery, all during a time of elevated oppression of women.\(^8\) I must mention that though many of these groups were formed in the cause of charity, they often reinforced the racial privileges experienced by white women in part through the exclusivity of their groups, a problem that Watt counters in her interpretation of the sewing circle.\(^9\) Watt’s Sewing Circles are inclusive which means that they produce a variety of skilled work and the possibility for expanding knowledge across social, racial, and cultural groups.\(^10\) Watt describes the heritage of the Seneca Nation as ‘protofeminist’, with expansive concepts of womanhood and motherhood that reach beyond gender and genealogy. She situates her contemporary practice of facilitating sewing circles and collective creation within these terms, thus shifting an Anglo-European paradigm around sewing craft to one of contemporary and Indigenous feminism.\(^11\)

There are several contemporary Indigenous artists and artists of color who work with similar themes to Watt, such as Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, and Lakota) and Sonya Y. Clark. They disrupt Western art and craft hierarchies, contributing to the dialogue around racial oppression in the United States through a collaborative making process. Sonya Y. Clark is known for her work with craft and textiles that relate to Black traditions such as hair braiding and a symbolic use of craft and social practice. Her 2015 *Unravelling/Unravelled* is an ongoing social practice project that brings participants together to unravel the threads of a Confederate battle flag.\(^12\) A finished project was displayed as a dismantled flag with threads hanging in heaps below the flag fragment. The act of unraveling a Confederate flag is a
symbolic and metaphorical gesture for dismantling racism that also contributes to a societal dialogue around fighting racism. Like Watt, the interactive and collective process of creation (or destruction) facilitates humanized engagement with its participants, and the finished object (flag and blanket, respectively) functions symbolically.

Luger’s 2018 Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Queer and Trans People BEAD PROJECT (EVERY ONE) (MMIWQT Bead Project) (Figure 3), facilitated the creation of thousands of 2” handmade clay beads throughout communities in the United States and Canada which were collected, stained, and assembled using the logic of pixels to reference the photograph Sister (2016) by First Nations photographer Kali Spitzer.¹³ The finished work honors and brings awareness to over 4,000 missing Indigenous women, girls, queer and trans people in North America. The materiality in Luger’s work generally references, North American Indigenous textile traditions and specifically beadwork as a form of skill and knowledge generation to underscore racialized violence. Luger’s project memorializes those lost to violence while Watt honors those living with grief.

Another example of textile craft bringing awareness to oppression and violence can be seen in the Arpilleras created in Chile during the Pinochet regime. In the 1970’s, when the Pinochet regime brought widespread poverty to Chile, and many were left unemployed and impoverished for years and as a result, women in Chile began to gather in groups to sew to earn income.¹⁴ Further, the regime censored public opinion and art, making public criticism of the new government nearly impossible. The women’s sewing groups began to make illustrative textiles called Arpilleras using an appliqué technique and were intended to be circulated through a tourist market.¹⁵ These textiles communicated the daily horrors of the regime such as food insecurity, the Disappeared, and violence through figurative imagery. Scholars
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agree that these artworks evaded censorship because of their folk, textile nature and because they were created primarily by impoverished women who were often overlooked as a source of activism.\textsuperscript{16} Watt’s quilts, which generally do not utilize figuration, operate on a subversive level rather than with an overt political agenda, unlike the Arpilleras. Her return to issues of maternal grief, memory, North American Indigenous traditions and narratives, and community connection in her quilts and Sewing Circles subvert divisive politics, redirecting viewers and participants towards shared experiences.

\textit{Figure 4:} Example of what the ‘Mother’ quilt will resemble when finished. Marie Watt, \textit{Companion Species (Notice),} 2019, reclaimed blanket, thread, embroidery floss, \(34.875 \times 40.25\) inches. Photograph by Kevin McConnell.

\textit{Untitled (Mother, Mother),} still a work in progress at the time of this writing, is intended to closely resemble a quilt made in 2019 called \textit{Companion Species (Notice)} (Figure 4). The 2019 quilt is made from scraps of red wool blankets embroidered in black thread and arranged in a vaguely shooting-star shape. Many of the words embroidered on the scraps appear to be sourced from the Marvin Gaye song, “What’s Going On,” which Watt shared at the UNM Sewing Circle. Words such as ‘crying,’ ‘dying,’ ‘c’mon,’ ‘lovin’,' and ‘picket’ appear on the quilt, in addition to words that reference the expansive network of motherhood in the Seneca Nation such as ‘ancestor’ and ‘aunt’ as described by Watt. “Mother, Mother,” is embroidered in large letters over the entire piece and is another reference to the lyrics in “What’s Going On.” \textit{Untitled (Mother, Mother),} an extension and perhaps refinement of this 2019 quilt, focuses on the word ‘Mother’ through repetition and eliminates the direct reference to the Marvin Gaye song wording, instead alluding to the song in the title of the piece. Both quilts synthesize an indigenous understanding of motherhood within the cultural framework of Marvin Gaye’s iconic protest song based in Black culture. In Watt’s new
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quilt, the word ‘mother’ repeated in so many languages captures the same synthesis of Black and Indigenous experiences while illuminating and calling attention to mothers and the burden they carry in oppression.

In addition to the lyrics to Gaye’s “What’s Going on,” Watt included Joy Harjo’s poem “She Had Some Horses,” which provided context to the artist’s thinking around this particular quilt. The texts are key to differentiating Untitled (Mother, Mother) from Watt’s earlier quilts. Harjo’s poem is one of the most iconic contemporary Native American poems. It speaks to the complexity of a Native American experience and worldview; alluding to historical trauma, domestic violence, land relations, cultural pride, womanhood, and motherhood. All these things are mixed up, differentiated, and the same in the poem, illustrating that many contradictory ideas may be contained within a singular vessel. The word ‘mother,’ holds a similar power in Untitled (Mother, Mother), as it refers to both painful and comfortable notions of the term, reflected by the soft material of wool blankets and the difficult cultural context provided by “What’s Going On,” as related to racial violence in 2020.

Quilts are made for special occasions such as birth, death, and marriage and signify memory, a semiotic tool utilized by Watt in her choice of material. Perhaps because of the symbolic value of blankets, there are many notable memorial quilts and quilting traditions that honor those who have passed, such as the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, funeral ribbon quilts of the American South, quilts honoring soldiers lost in wartime, and frontier quilts honoring friends and family with whom communication had been lost or become too difficult to maintain. Memorial quilts are especially powerful because of their material comfort and warmth; one can figuratively wrap themselves in the memory of their lost loved one. In Watt’s Untitled (Mother, Mother), comfort and warmth extend to the subject of mothers, who are often associated with those sensations. The materiality of wool blankets and unique stitch work of many individuals illustrate the diverse understanding and yet relatable experience of mothers. This shared relation to mothers — comfort and warmth — transends and subverts divisive politics and rhetoric, making racial suffering a cross-cultural concern.

In conclusion, Marie Watt’s Untitled (Mother, Mother) and correlating Sewing Circle at the University of New Mexico Art Museum in February of 2020 work within the artist’s established practice of synthesizing Anglo-European and Indigenous North American crafting traditions and worldviews to memorialize the grief of the living. The artist’s references to Marvin Gaye’s song “What’s Going on,” and Joy Harjo’s Poem “She Had Some Horses” provide context and differentiate this quilt and Sewing Circle from previous projects, which deal with similar themes. Untitled (Mother, Mother) presents an expansive, Iroquois understanding of the concept of ‘mother’, thus providing an opportunity to consider those suffering and killed by racial violence to be understood as a collective loss. Watt’s quilt provides comfort for all who grieve by honoring the broad network that extends far beyond the personal families impacted by these losses.
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NOTES

2 Betsy Greer, Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014), 19–25. Greer looks at several contemporary examples of memorial quilts, examining the role of memorial quilts in contemporary culture.
3 Cynthia Fowler, "Materiality and Collective Experience: Sewing as Artistic Practice in Works by Marie Watt, Nadia Myre, and Bonnie Devine," American Indian Quarterly 34 (2010): 362. Cynthia Fowler argues that the collective experience created in Watt’s Sewing Circles is an "agent for social change" in her essay.
5 Fowler, 345
6 Fowler, 346–348.
8 Lawes, "Missionaries and More," 45.
11 Fowler, 346–348
16 Ibid.