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Review Essay

LANE COULTER, ED., *NAVAJO SADDLE BLANKETS: TEXTILES TO RIDE IN THE AMERICAN WEST* AND KATHY M'CLOSKEY, *SWEPT UNDER THE RUG: A HIDDEN HISTORY OF NAVAJO WEAVING*

Jennifer Nez Denetdale

Navajo-made textiles have enjoyed recognition in Western Europe and the United States for several centuries. Textiles that were initially woven for everyday wear by Navajo women quickly became coveted trade items known for their fine craftsmanship and waterproof qualities. By the end of the nineteenth century, these textiles were no longer made for Navajo use but were popularized as rugs and wall hangings for two primary audiences: collectors and tourists. Recent publications on Navajo textiles reflect the continuing interest in and the enduring popularity of these textiles. *Navajo Saddle Blankets: Textiles to Ride in the American West* edited by Lane Coulter and *Swept Under the Rug: A Hidden History of Navajo Weaving* by Kathy M'Closkey are two current examinations of Navajo-made textiles.

These works provide considerably different perspectives on the meaning and significance of Navajo-made textiles. Featuring Navajo saddle blankets

Lane Coulter, ed., *Navajo Saddle Blankets: Textiles to Ride in the American West*. (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2002. 144 pp. 85 color tones, 30 halftones, map, table, notes, bibliography, index. \$50.00 cloth, ISBN 0-89013-406-5, \$29.95 paper, ISBN 0-89013-407-3), and Kathy M'Closkey, *Swept Under the Rug: A Hidden History of Navajo Weaving*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002, xiii + 322 pp. Halftones, line drawings, maps, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.95 cloth, ISBN 0-8263-2831-8). Dr. Jennifer Nez Denetdale (Diné) is Assistant Professor of History at the University of New Mexico. Dr. Denetdale was the 2002–2003 Katrin H. Lamon Fellow at the School of American Research in Santa Fe. She is currently researching Navajo history and examining the legacies of the Navajo leader Manuelito and his wife Juanita.

from the textile collection of the Museum of Indian Arts and Crafts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Coulter's edited collection reflects standard scholarship in Navajo textile studies and aims to garner public interest in and appreciation for these blankets. The contributors, including Bruce Shackleford, Susan Brown McGreevy, Marian E. Rodee, and Coulter, echo popular interpretations of Navajos and the textiles created by Navajo women. Their perspectives place textiles within accepted frameworks for writing about Navajo culture and history: that Navajos are adept at cultural exchange, that outside influences have created much of what is now considered Navajo, and that the process of understanding and appreciating Navajo perspectives is merely an exercise in extrapolating Navajo traditional and cultural values.

Kathy M'Closkey's *Swept Under the Rug* expands the scope of Navajo textile studies by raising questions about the continued impoverishment of Navajos even though Navajo weavers have produced over a million blankets and rugs over two centuries. Although the market in old Navajo textiles brings in thousands of dollars for collectors and contemporary weaving generates profits for Indian traders and businessmen, few Navajo weavers make enough income from their products to provide an adequate standard of living for their families. M'Closkey seeks to understand the creation of Navajo dependency on outside markets and how the labor of Navajo weavers has largely been ignored in studies on the economics, material culture, and art of Navajo textiles.

Setting the theme for the rest of the essays, the introduction to *Navajo Saddle Blankets* considers how saddle blankets served as major points of contact in exchanges between Navajo and White cultures. Following a chronology established for Navajo history, the textiles are categorized and classified into three periods. The internment of Navajos in Bosque Redondo at Fort Sumner, New Mexico Territory, from 1864 to 1868, acts as a watershed.¹ The Diné have been noted for their abilities to resist the colonization efforts of Spaniards and then Mexicans. In 1846 Americans claimed the Southwest for the United States and met fierce resistance from both Navajos and Apaches. In 1863 the United States declared war on the Navajos and, through a "scorch and burn" campaign, laid waste to Navajo land. Over twelve thousand Navajos surrendered and were forcibly relocated to Bosque Redondo. Compelled to rely on the U.S. government for their most basic needs, Navajos endured starvation, disease, poverty, and violence. Over twenty-five hundred Navajos died as a result.

The first period, called the "Classic," refers to Navajo textiles created before 1865. Coulter describes the few weavings from the eighteenth century and earlier as simple in design and largely utilitarian. These early textiles

show evidence of trade with the Spaniards; Navajo weavers incorporated colors and patterns associated with Spanish culture. For example, weavers added indigo blue and adopted designs such as terraced stepped right angles, or triangles to their repertoire. In his essay, Bruce Shackelford describes how Navajos integrated horses into their society and how Spanish riding styles and horse tack influenced the Navajos' equitation and horse accoutrements.

The next phase of Navajo weaving, the "Late Classic," dates from 1868 to 1880. The Bosque Redondo "experiment" to turn Navajos into civilized, christianized farmers was a failure, and in 1868 Navajos and the U.S. government signed a peace treaty that allowed the Diné to return to their homeland, a portion of which had been turned into a reservation. Although women found it more difficult to weave during those years at Bosque Redondo because wool was not readily available, they continued to do so by unraveling and respinning red bayeta cloth, which Indian agents distributed along with commercial yarns. This period also marks the introduction of Navajos into the larger American market economy. Coulter notes that, during this period, some tribal peoples may have used Navajo textiles as saddle blankets while American soldiers and cowboys used American-manufactured saddle blankets.

In her contribution, Susan McGreevy describes the integration of Navajos into the market economy. Traders opened posts on or near Navajo land and began dealing in hides, pelts, livestock, and rugs. They also encouraged weavers to trade their textiles for sale in outside markets and supplied weavers with brilliantly colored Germantown yarn. For a time, weavers used cotton string, instead of wool, for warps. Cotton string allowed for a finer weave and facilitated the creation of technically perfect textiles. Weavers experimented with vertically placed, outlined serrated diamonds, which historians consider an influence of the Fort Sumner experience. Some weavers produced step-terraced designs that were reminiscent of earlier "chief" style and serape designs, and dynamic visual and spatial designs that soon became known as "eye-dazzlers." During this period, smaller textiles that could be used as saddle blankets appeared with frequency and Navajo narratives make note of Navajo use of these weavings. Weavers also occasionally made few saddle blankets for decorative purposes, embellishing sections that would be visible under the saddle.

Interestingly, although Coulter and McGreevy touch on the influence of the Bosque Redondo years on Navajo weaving, they fail to refer to Roseann Willink's and Paul Zolbrod's discovery that textiles not only embodied "mythic" time but recorded historical time as well. For some Navajo weavers, the textiles from the Classic period both evoked memories associated

with historical events such as the Long Walk and incorporated a sacred dimension. McGreevy features a rug woven between 1860 and 1880 as an illustration of a double-tapestry-weave saddle blanket and one made of handspun and commercial wool (p. 46), but Willink and Zolbrod realize that, for some weavers, this same rug recalled ceremonies and their accompanying stories, illustrating that Navajo weavers were knowledgeable about sacred stories and rituals, and shared them in their weavings.²

With the arrival of the transcontinental railroad in the Southwest and the proliferation of trading posts near and on Navajo land after 1880, textiles took on yet other meanings. Traders, with the aid of entrepreneurs, travelers, photographers, and writers, created a national market for Indian arts and crafts. This phase, “the Transitional period,” reflects the emergence of a national interest in southwestern Indian life and culture. As Coulter notes, this fascination with Indian arts and crafts, including Navajo textiles, reflected White middle-class anxieties about changes—particularly industrialization and urbanization in their own society, including those regarding proper gender roles.³ The promotion of Indian arts and crafts paid off for many businesses as consumers began purchasing Navajo textiles for use as throw rugs. Smaller pieces sold as souvenirs reminded tourists of their travels to the “exotic” Southwest. A select number of weavers like Elle of Ganado were able to make a living from weaving, although most were poorly paid.⁴

Well into the early twentieth century, as Marian E. Rodee narrates in her essay, textiles showed the influence of traders, especially those who became associated with regions on and near the Navajo reservation. Traders such as John B. Moore at Crystal, Arizona, and John L. Hubbell at Ganado, Arizona, exercised extraordinary influence over weavers partly by printing sale catalogs with specific rug designs and sizes catering to outside market tastes. These traders oversaw the wool-cleaning process, supervised the spinning and dyeing of wool, and presented weavers with sample patterns. While weavers churned out textiles for an outside market, they also continued to create saddle blankets for Navajo use. Saddle blankets, although popular with Navajos and to some degree with White consumers, did not bring in much money for weavers.

Presented as a major point of cultural exchange between Navajos and Whites, saddle blankets have taken on a meaning and significance that emphasizes the perspectives of non-Navajo collectors, tourists, traders, and scholars to the detriment of Navajo views. Perhaps as a corrective, contributors Pearl Sunrise and Joyce Begay-Foss share their insights on weaving. In

the book's introduction, Sunrise explains that weaving, rooted in traditional Navajo thought and emphasizing kin relationships, creates continuity with the past. A company once approached Sunrise to order three hundred saddle blankets within a limited time frame, but she refused because she eschews values associated with mass production. Begay-Foss's essay touches upon Navajo weavers' deeply rooted connections to weaving and then dissects the textile into its parts. Although Begay-Foss's approach to weaving can be seen as yet another echoing of standard textile scholarship, her references to weavers' tools and methods, and the changes that weavers incorporated provide some additional insights from a Navajo perspective.

In the tradition of feminist scholarship, Kathy M'Closkey scrutinizes the perspectives presented in Lane Coulter's *Navajo Saddle Blankets*, firmly rejecting accepted scholarship as having little or no relevance to Navajo society and particularly to the lives of the weavers.⁵ Views such as those expressed in Coulter's volume have been instrumental in perpetuating Navajo impoverishment by refusing to acknowledge the historic connections between colonialism and the appropriation of colonized people's resources, labor, knowledge, and traditions for the colonizers' use and benefit. Further, categorizations of women's weaving within Western paradigms has rendered Navajo women's labor invisible, and their knowledge has been pigeonholed as domestic and therefore inconsequential.

Swept Under the Rug strives to demythologize Navajo textile scholarship by raising questions about the nature of economic relationships between traders who bought and marketed Navajo-woven textiles and the Navajo women who tirelessly wove for a pittance. In her book M'Closkey makes visible the ongoing devaluation of Navajo weavers' labor and knowledge. She examines current dialogues between textile scholars, curators, and art dealers, who have failed to make connections between the systemic poverty that Navajos experience and their own research and writing on and display of Navajo textiles, particularly historic pieces. Further, scholars' categorization of weaving within Western paradigms not only has veiled the links between political economy and the world of arts and crafts, but also has served to reaffirm the characterization of Navajos as primarily cultural borrowers who arrived late in the Southwest, claims that contradict Navajo understanding of their own past and origins.

Historically, Navajo-woven textiles were highly prized as trade items associated with wealth and prestige. Nevertheless, by the end of the nineteenth century, Navajo weavers saw little return for their efforts although

over half of all Navajo women wove textiles. In 1890 the annual production of textiles was valued at twenty-five thousand dollars, and in 1930 annual production had risen to one million dollars. On average a weaver could produce approximately fifteen to eighteen single saddle blankets per year, or eight to ten double saddle blankets, or four to ten rugs per year, depending on the size. Even as the value of these textiles remained high on the retail market, Navajo women received less and less for the value of their labor, and their families became more impoverished.

After 1864, during their imprisonment at Bosque Redondo and continuing into the reservation period, Navajos lost control of the textile trade even though women still produced the textiles at prereservation levels. By detailing the place of these textiles in the Navajo economy and the important role of women, M'Closkey uncovers the systemic impoverishment of Navajos, which began with their surrender to the United States in 1864, metastasized during their imprisonment at Bosque Redondo, and has persisted through the reservation era to the present. Although scholars such as Richard White note that Navajos recovered some measure of their former self-sufficiency in the early reservation period, M'Closkey argues that Navajo impoverishment has been an ongoing process whose roots lay in the Fort Sumner experience.⁶

Appearing in the early reservation era, traders quickly came to dominate the Navajo economy through several avenues, including credit saturation, the use of *seco* (tin money) in place of money, and taking pawn and charging exorbitant interest rates. For many decades traders assessed textiles by the pound, even beyond the era that scholars associate with "pound blankets." M'Closkey demonstrates a correlation between wool prices and the prices traders quoted weavers for their textiles. Because wool prices were low throughout the nineteenth century, traders found another way to market wool—as woven textiles. M'Closkey's statistics and graphs demonstrate that textiles were the major source of profit for traders such as Hubbell of Ganado and make a compelling case for the magnitude of women's labor in the Navajo textile industry.

After tracing the historic processes that moved control of textiles from Navajos to traders and how these traders came to dominate the textile trade, M'Closkey examines how Navajo studies scholars, museologists, curators, and collectors have worked hand-in-glove with traders and other businessmen to perpetuate the impoverishment of Navajo weavers and their families. Present-day attitudes and practices sustain colonial practices. For

example, museums, curators, and collectors still endorse and oversee a market for historic Navajo textiles. Such valuing of “classic” textiles brings authority and prestige to a select audience that collects Native American artifacts to the disadvantage of Navajo weavers, who cannot sell their textiles or must sell them for very little return. M’Closkey also examines the effect of trade blankets on Navajo use of their own textiles and the place of “knock-offs” in the market for Navajo-made textiles.

In the nineteenth century, Navajos increasingly replaced their own textiles with textiles mass-produced by companies such as Pendleton, thus extinguishing an important place for Navajo-woven blankets in their society. Today, Navajos treasure Pendleton blankets, often using them in ceremonies and giving them as gifts at graduations, birthdays, and holidays. Knock-offs, relatively inexpensive imitations of Navajo blankets manufactured in other countries, are flooding the market and make it difficult, if not impossible, for Navajo weavers to sell their textiles.

M’Closkey also devotes chapters to Navajo weavers’ own understanding of and appreciation for their textiles. Navajo artists consider their weavings a vital connection between oral tradition, daily life, and the continuity of Navajo traditions and culture. While textile scholars have acknowledged that many weavers place their work within a context of Navajo tradition, they have made only cursory references to creation narratives that explain how weaving came to be a part of Navajo tradition. As M’Closkey notes, the cultural-adaptor and -innovator paradigm still causes scholars to doubt the veracity of Navajo claims that weaving is a genuine Navajo creation.

In 1999 Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith published *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, which Native scholars have reviewed favorably. Smith argues that research on indigenous peoples is linked to imperialism and Western systems of knowledge and that, by veiling these connections, Western scholars have been complicit in the ongoing exploitation and destruction of indigenous communities. All research must be ethical and useful to indigenous communities undergoing study.⁷ A blend of several theoretical frameworks including feminist Marxism, postmodernism, and postcolonial studies, M’Closkey’s timely study is indicative of the direction of contemporary scholarship, a direction that brings together Native and non-Native researchers to work toward the recovery and survival of indigenous communities.

A recent issue of the *Navajo Times* reprinted a *New York Times* article on the “Indian Capital of the world—Gallup.” The article addresses Gallup’s

historic trading relationship to Navajos who travel there every weekend to spend their money and the changes in trading with the appearance of Arabs who are gaining control of the Indian trade.⁸ Since their appearance in Navajo land after 1868, Anglo merchants have profited enormously from trade with Navajos and other Native peoples, who suffer from some of the highest poverty rates in the United States. Today, most Navajo artists and craftspeople cannot live off the production and sale of their arts and crafts, for imitations of Navajo products imported from China and the Philippines have flooded the marketplace and driven down prices. We (Navajos) have not prospered from our relationship with the predominately White traders, who control the Navajo art trade. This article reiterates questions about the creation of Navajo dependency on outside markets and the historic relationship between traders and Navajos—so often presented as benign. Who has benefited from the Indian trade? M'Closkey's study certainly provides some provocative answers to questions about the Navajo trade and particularly about the significance of Navajo women in the political economy of the West.

Notes

1. See also Ann Lane Hedlund, "More Survival Than an Art': Comparing Late Nineteenth- and Late Twentieth-Century Lifeways and Weaving," in *Woven by the Grandmothers: Nineteenth-Century Navajo Textiles from the National Museum of the American Indian*, ed. Eulalie H. Bonar (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 47–67.
2. Roseann S. Willink and Paul G. Zolbrod, *Weaving a World: Textiles and the Navajo Way of Seeing* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1996), 38. See especially plate 2.
3. For an analysis of White America's interest in the Indian Southwest during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Leah Dilworth, *Imagining Indians in the Southwest: Persistent Visions of a Primitive Past* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).
4. Kathleen L. Howard, "Weaving a Legend: Elle of Ganado Promotes the Indian Southwest," *New Mexico Historical Review* 74 (April 1999): 130–31; and Laura Jane Moore, "Elle Meets the President: Weaving Navajo Culture and Commerce in the Southwestern Tourist Industry," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 22:1 (2001): 21–44.
5. See, for example, Louise Lamphere, "Gladys Reichard Among the Navajo," in *Hidden Scholars: Women Anthropologists and the Native American Southwest*, ed. Nancy J. Parezo (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 157–88; William H. Lyon, "Gladys Reichard at the Frontiers of Navajo Culture," *American Indian Quarterly* 8 (Spring 1989): 137–63; and Lessie Jo Frazier, "Genre, Methodology and Feminist Practice," *Critique of Anthropology* 13:4 (1993): 363–78.

6. Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).
7. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, 1999).
8. Charlie LeDuff, "Tensions Over Who Prospers in Indian Capital," *Navajo Times*, 24 July 2003, A5.