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9-2012

# The Politics of Pastoralism: Navajos, Churras and the Challenges of Sustainability in a Globalizing World

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M'Closkey, Kathy A., "The Politics of Pastoralism: Navajos, Churras and the Challenges of Sustainability in a Globalizing World" (2012). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 715.

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## The Politics of Pastoralism: Navajos, Churras and the Challenges of Sustainability in a Globalizing World

Kathy M'Closkey ©  
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### Historical Context

Over 200,000 Navajo or Diné currently occupy an 8000 hectare reservation in the southwestern United States, straddling northeast Arizona, northwest New Mexico, and southeast Utah. Prior to the Civil War, Navajos were christened “Lords of the Desert” by the U.S. cavalry. Eye-witness reports described their vast herds of sheep and horses, abundant gardens, corn fields, peach orchards and finely woven blankets. As pastoralists since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, livestock and wool production, weaving and horticulture provided a major portion of their subsistence (Bailey and Bailey 1986, White 1983). By 1800 the Navajo wearing blanket had become the most valuable trade item in an extensive inter-tribal network made up of many Indigenous Peoples. Van Valkenburgh and McPhee (1974:42) referred to the wearing blanket as “the mother from which all external Navajo trade developed.” After formation of the Reservation in 1868, Diné self-sufficiency was undermined in part because government-licensed traders fostered a dependence on expendable commodities (Aberle 1983, Adams 1963). Wool production increased 200% between 1890 and 1910, yet weaving escalated more than 800%, and served to offset the increase in the cost of living. Although Witherspoon (1987) estimates that 100,000 women have woven *one million textiles* over the past two centuries, and government bureaucrats confirmed that textile production by Diné was the most profitable of the native industries, they dismissed its economic importance, claiming that women wove in their “spare time.” Analyses of the Diné economy have failed to adequately take account of weavers' production because women wove at home and not in workshops. Scholars have noted how blankets and rugs provided *an alternative means to market wool* (Bailey & Bailey 1986:152). My research problematizes such statements, through investigating the linkages between regional geopolitics and fluctuations in the global market wool prices. It also reveals the *gender* politics involved by probing how the image of domesticity prevalent at the time, complemented patriarchal values and shaped the perceptions of bureaucrats who dealt with Diné (M'Closkey 2002:65-71).

Much of the evidence revealing the importance of women's textile production to regional business interests lies buried in underresearched trading post records. Don Lorenzo Hubbell, deemed the “czar” of Navajo trade and the “father” of the Navajo rug, and his family actively influenced the growth and development of reservation commerce from 1883-1950 (Blue 2000:284, Lorenzo Hubbell Papers). The original trading post located in Ganado, Arizona, is now a national historic site operated by the U. S. Park Service and visited by thousands of tourists annually. Scrutiny of the Hubbells' ledger books reveals that textiles were treated like renewable resources since they were acquired from weavers by weight. Although the Hubbells shipped more than 400,000 pounds of handspun, handwoven blankets and rugs from their trading posts between 1893 and 1909, “the more Navajo wove, the poorer they became” (M'Closkey 2002:76).

My analysis of underutilized archival information overturns several assumptions dominating the literature: 1) traders “saved” weaving by expanding new markets (Amsden 1975); 2) traders often provided rug designs (Boles 1977, Rodee 1981); 3) “pound” blankets declined after 1900 (Kent 1985, Rodee 1981); 4) commercial trade blankets were far cheaper than their hand-woven counterparts (James

1974, Kapoun 1992); 5) the increase in textile production was driven by tourism and the Arts and Crafts Movement (Batkin 1999). All of these assumptions are suspect. Because the Hubbells controlled a significant portion of Navajo trade, their two tons of business records and correspondence provide a barometer of the regional economy. In doing this kind of research, one readily perceives how the construction of “History” occurs through continued emphasis and recycling of particular forms of information.

## Sheep Troubles

The livestock issued to Diné after Bosque Redondo (1868-9), were *churras*.<sup>1</sup> The resilient *churra* was lightweight in both meat and fleece, yet it was well adapted to the Diné range, and produced an ideal wool for blanket and rug weaving. An increasing number of Anglo traders, licensed by the federal government, procured the annual clip which was sold by regional merchants to wool brokers located back east. Although Indian agents intermittently infused 'new blood' into Diné flocks after 1880, up-breeding was unpredictable. According to livestock experts, successful cross-breeding requires scientific management. It often takes a decade for sought-after traits to become “fixed” during which time flocks must be carefully monitored, otherwise genetic “drift” may occur (M’Closkey forthcoming). The variable quality of Diné herds resulted in a less than ideal wool for the national market and reduced the value of their wools relative to imports.<sup>2</sup> Although traders' financial success hinged on marketing Diné wool as textiles rather than fleece, macro-level evidence concerning fluctuating wool values globally is crucial to historicize this topic. Remarkably, the terms wool tariff and free trade remain absent from the vast literature on Diné.

## Global Wool Markets

The following information, initially unearthed at the Newberry Library, Chicago, and the Baker Business Library, Harvard provides the context to reposition Diné weavers and wool growers within an international context of commercial competitiveness. The Bulletins of the National Association of Wool Manufacturers (BNAWM) provide an instructive context to understand the workings of the domestic market in relation to fluctuations in quantities and values of wool internationally. The production and processing of wool and cotton for textile manufacturing became the third most significant industry after the Civil War, following agriculture and steel. Next to Great Britain, the U.S. was the largest consumer of wool globally, and although growers sheared 150,000 tons annually, textile manufacturers required over 250,000 tons. Unwilling to rely on distant sources for a vital and militarily strategic resource, Congress levied protective duties to shield domestic growers from low-cost imports. Schedule K, as the wool tariff was known, was deemed “the keystone of the arch of protection,” a model tariff that protected domestic producers without greatly increasing the cost of manufacturing wool garments, blankets and carpets. During post-1880 election years, the tariff was intensely debated in Congress: Democrats agitated for free trade whereas Republicans supported protection. By 1890, growers had up-bred their flocks to clothing quality (Class I) and cross-bred combing wools (Class II). Both classes of wools were subject to much higher duties and *ad valorem*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> During 1863, in an attempt to ‘civilize’ Diné, and open up their homeland for settlement, the government forced over 8000 to relocate to Bosque Redondo in eastern New Mexico territory. Attempts to farm the alkaline soil failed, and a treaty was signed, allowing Diné to return their homeland reduced by 70%.

<sup>2</sup> Although .003 % of US population, Navajos owned 2% of the sheep (Aberle 1983).

<sup>3</sup> See M’Closkey TSA 2010 for additional information on the global wool market, domestic carpet manufacturing and regional wool buyers.

The power looms invented by Erastus Bigelow prior to the Civil War had transformed carpet manufacturing, and the country shifted from importing carpets to becoming the largest carpet manufacturer in the world. Prior to 1900, three-quarters of the wool imported into the U.S. was carpet-quality.<sup>4</sup> Sheep bearing Class III carpet wools were raised by nomadic peoples in twenty countries including Argentina, Russia, Turkey, India and China. The only domestic wool that was classified carpet-grade (Class III- lowest/coarsest category) was produced by *churras*. But Diné flocks produced less than 2% of the more than 50,000 tons required annually by the carpet industry. By 1890, manufacturers lobbied Congress to permit entry of Class III wools duty free, or with a small *ad valorem*. In 1894, while Democrat Grover Cleveland was president, he removed tariff protection from *all* classes of wool. Over a four year period, 250,000 tons of carpet-quality wool was imported duty-free. During that decade the Navajo blanket was transformed into a rug and weavers' productivity quadrupled.

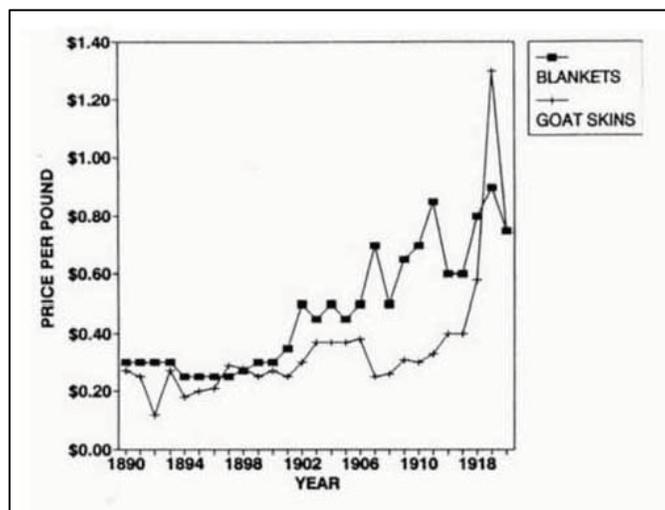


Figure 1. Goatskin/Patterned Saddle Blanket Wholesale Cost, Hubbell Trading Post Records, 1890-1920. From M'Closkey 2002:36

**Traders and regional wholesalers:** With wool under free trade, Lorenzo Hubbell, Sr., wrote hundreds of letters to potential customers referring to himself as a blanket dealer, and not as an Indian trader (LHP Box 94). He was only partially successful in negotiating 'exclusive' arrangements with curio dealers and retailers across the country. That is, he would guarantee high quality textiles to dealers who carried his stock exclusively. In return, he promised not to provision their local competitors. However, due to the glut of weaving, he was unable to sustain that arrangement because at least a dozen other traders were also networking with friends, relatives, and curio dealers in those regions. By 1898, over 90% of Hubbell's two hundred business accounts were for weaving, a demonstration of how crucial textile production was to his financial success during the free trade era. After 1898, tariff protection was reinstated, exempting Class III wools valued less than 13 cents per pound. Although the cost of living quadrupled for Diné between 1900 and the Depression, the value of their textiles stalled at 1902 levels, suggesting that the price of weaving was pegged to the price of duty free carpet wool. By 1903, three hundred weavers traded with Hubbell at Ganado, and he owned several other posts. The spring wool clip and fall lamb sales were seasonal, but textiles, pelts and skins were weighed, baled and shipped weekly to regional wholesalers to pay down traders' debits. Thousands of weavers subsidized the traders for

<sup>4</sup> The Bigelow Carpet Company records and the E.P. Graves papers held at the Baker Business Library at Harvard reveal the complexities and competitiveness of the global wool market. Bigelow was the largest carpet manufacturer in North America, and Graves was Bigelow's wool buyer based in Argentina from 1896 to 1912 (M'Closkey 2010).

decades. Although some traders competed for market share, their efforts were disorganized and the product “unstandardized” since women wove at home and not under factory-like supervision. Due to the glut of weaving on the market, Navajo saddle blankets frequently sold for pennies more per pound than unprocessed Navajo goatskins (M’Closkey 2002:36).

By the mid-1920s, woolgrowers from Arizona and other western states began to market their wool cooperatively. These state-wide organizations held annual conventions attended by government officials, meat packers, bankers, land commissioners, animal inspectors and executives from other growers' associations. These organizations lobbied Congress to reduce taxes, increase grazing in national forests, maintain tariff protection, and negotiate favorable freight rates (Arizona Wool Growers Association). Although Diné flocks sheared over four million pounds of wool annually after WWI, no reservation-based agencies existed to cooperatively sell the wool. Thus shipments from individual posts increased traders' expenses (M’Closkey 2002).

The AWGA claimed that Diné sheep were infected with scabbies, a contagious disease. Members of the organization denounced the extension of reservation lands and resented Diné living at taxpayers' expense. In the eyes of the livestock “experts,” Navajo sheep husbandry left a lot to be desired: it was considered primitive because rams were allowed to run with ewes, thus lambs could be born during inclement weather, and Navajos preferred churras to the finer-woolled, heavier fleeced breeds. Wool quality was affected by drought, loss of best grazing land to Anglo and Hispanic ranchers, and shortage of water. Navajo lambs were much smaller and churra fleeces weighed less (LHP Boxes 75, 76, 103, 104, 522, 523).

### **The 'domestication' of Diné weavers**

My research challenges the nostalgic narratives about weavers and traders, and reveals the manner in which weavers' output was marginalized by various authorities. Acknowledging woman's economic contributions would directly have challenged the dominant ideology in Western society concerning woman's role as domestic helpmate and mother (Cahill 2011). The published government reports that do exist list Diné women as weavers under the category of occupation. The production of hand-spun, dyed, and woven textiles was so widespread it was referred to as an industry and because women were weaving for an external market, it was designated as commercialization (Reports to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs). Yet when this prodigious production was mentioned, authors consigned it to the domestic sphere, and concurred that women wove because it was their “favorite past-time,” or “for their beloved pin-money.” By the Depression, the output of this reputed 'leisure time' activity was valued at one million dollars annually and had outperformed waged labor between 1890 and 1930 (M’Closkey 2002: Chapter 4).

Traders' ledger books also reveal that nearly all textiles were acquired from weavers by weight until the 1960s. Women received credit, (three to eight times the concurrent value of Navajo fleece), not cash, and their textiles were shipped weekly or monthly to pay down traders' accounts with regional wholesalers. Today, these “pound blankets” fetch record prices at international auctions and galleries. The Indian agents' annual reports to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs included the quantity and value of weaving: they embedded the information in the livestock and wool production statistics, confirming how bureaucrats perceived weaving as a “by-product” of the livestock industry. Between 1900 and WWII, both the Navajo population and the number of trading posts doubled, (from 79 to 170) (Weiss 1984:151), while the quantity of textiles shipped from the reservation escalated dramatically (M’Closkey 2002). Diné weavers were never integrated into ‘modernization and development’ planning

within the Navajo Nation. The entire weaving complex represented “tradition” – i.e., ‘primitive’ churra sheep, the non-mechanical upright loom, and women supporting their families; “tradition” was deemed “the enemy of progress.” Government bureaucrats pushed farming and wage work for men, unpaid housework for women (Cahill 2011). Recall that this was the Progressive era, when scientific management served to standardize and streamline agriculture and manufacturing, thus facilitating mass production and consumption by American consumers (M’Closkey forthcoming).

During the Depression, Navajos were further devastated by a Reservation-wide livestock reduction that cut their herds by half (Weisiger 2009). In retrospect, it is clear that haphazard attempts to up-breed Navajo flocks parallel misdirected “development” schemes endured by many Indigenous Peoples today.

### **The Infamous Stock Reduction**

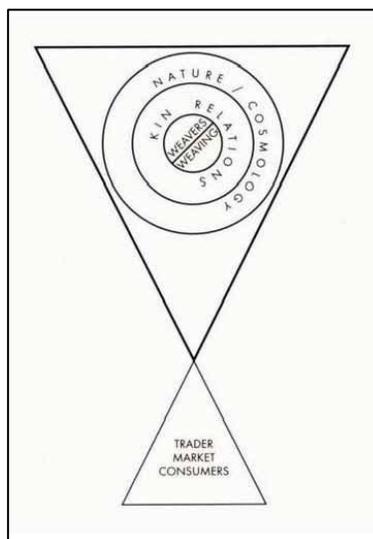
By 1901, although the reservation had tripled in size due to additions facilitated by executive orders, the expansion did not restore the size of their pre-reservation homeland. By that date much of the land utilized by off-reservation Diné was “legally” held by the railroad and white ranchers. The latter had homesteaded on property designated as public domain, and leased additional grazing land from the railroads to access scarce water sources. By 1930, attempts to consolidate large sections of the “checkerboard” to ensure sufficient grazing for Navajo flocks succeeded in Arizona, but failed in New Mexico. For decades, the Bureau of Indian Affairs forbade sales of breeding stock, thus ensuring that Diné sustained their self-support (Bailey & Bailey 1986). As stock numbers increased, Diné flocks grazed far beyond the official reservation boundaries. The lack of funds available for water development aggravated the problem. Although Diné owned one-third of the livestock grazed by all Native Americans, the BIA spent less than 5% of funds allocated annually for stock water development on the Navajo reservation (M’Closkey forthcoming). The only factors that severely reduced herds were blizzards or extreme drought. Typically, flocks recovered quickly and by 1920, observers frequently commented on the overgrazed condition of the range (Weisiger 2009).

Several archives contain compelling evidence that reasons other than overgrazing triggered the disastrous stock reduction ordered by Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier in 1933. The government’s random trials to “upgrade” flocks by experimenting with at least ten breeds ranging from Romney and Cotwold cross-breeds to the fine-wooled Merino and Rambouillet after 1900, compromised the gene pool, jeopardizing wool quality for weavers *and* textile manufacturers (M’Closkey forthcoming). Ethnographer Gladys Reichard (1974:7) confirms the variability in Navajo flocks. In her book *Weaving a Navajo Blanket* initially published in 1936, she wrote: “there are white sheep with long hair, white sheep with wavy hair, black sheep, brown sheep, brown with black spots, black with brown spots and brownish gray.... The flocks will differ, too, according to the part of the Reservation where they roam, for the various districts have been influenced by as many theories of “improvement” as there are white men interested in them. [The] Navajo sheep owes its survival to its smallness, and its resistance to hunger, thirst and sudden changes in the weather, particularly temperature.” Diné clips weighed an average of three pounds relative to the six to sixteen pounds of other breeds. Such extreme variations in color posed no problem for hand spinners and weavers, but were anathema to textile manufacturers (M’Closkey forthcoming).

Although heavier fleeces and carcasses were desirable from a national marketing standpoint, the larger breeds faced challenges because the weight and oiliness of heavier fleeces retarded animals’ movement when they were driven to feed. Extensive unpublished correspondence between Indian agents and the CIA confirms the frequent failure of purebred stock to survive (Unpublished correspondence from

Superintendents to CIA). Moreover, the extended recession in the livestock industry throughout the 1920s (Wilson 1977), indicated that unsold stock multiplied on the range. Traders were unwilling to purchase livestock in a depressed market because wholesalers refused to buy any. One need only compare Diné stock sales with that of Anglo growers. The latter typically sold most of their lambs every fall. Due to the unstandardized nature of Navajo herds, stock buyers refused to purchase “peeweese,” or underweight animals. Perusal of the sheep contracts during this period confirms the conditions that traders had to meet in order to sell Navajo stock (LHP Boxes 16, 17, 522, 523(2)). This factor, coupled with a depressed market, contributed to an increasing number of animals remaining on the range. By 1930, overgrazing had reached a crisis. Government authorities warned that escalating erosion threatened the newly constructed Boulder Dam. Forced reduction of Navajo herds at the height of the Depression protected economic development and investments in the west (Weisiger 2009, White 1983). Had a purchasing plan been operationalized after WWI, overgrazing could have been avoided. Although the government assisted Anglo ranchers and farmers during that period by encouraging wool pooling and loan programs (Kunze 1990), no equivalent programs materialized for Diné growers and traders. Textile values also declined dramatically, as reflected in traders’ ledgers and retailers’ advertisements (LHP Boxes 91, 142). Thousands of Diné pastoralists were devastated by enforced reduction (Roessel 1974, Weisiger 2009). Sheep specialist Lyle McNeal recently confirmed that authorities had targeted churras for destruction. As this research demonstrates, the fleece was too unstandardized for domestic manufacturers, and because it lacked tariff protection, eradicating the churras was the solution.

### Weavers' Voices



*Figure 2. Navajo Relations. From M'Closkey 2002:18*

Interviews with weavers reveal aspects central to Navajo livelihood that revolves around the concept of *k'e*. Acknowledging the centrality of this concept in relation to Navajo culture may provide the key to understanding the escalation in textile production sustained by thousands of women under difficult circumstance. Weavers confirm how *k'e*, or kin relations are sustained through working with wool. Sheep are the foundation; they teach you how to live a Diné way of life. The word *shima* suffices for both sheep and mother. Happiness in the home is attributed to weaving. The loom comes to life through hours and hours of work. To weave a rug is to re-enact the process of creation because weaving calls the rain. Human reciprocity or *k'e* may only occur within the context of human/environment reciprocation.

Weavers often mention the non-human world, the land, their kin and the importance of provisioning, thereby revealing relationships marginalized in texts featuring the “aesthetics” embedded in gallery-displayed textiles (Denetdale 2007, M’Closkey 2004). Drawing on models emerging from traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) demonstrates how associations that brought rugs into existence are fractured when cultural patterns are severed from “commodity” production (Willink and Zolbrod 1996).

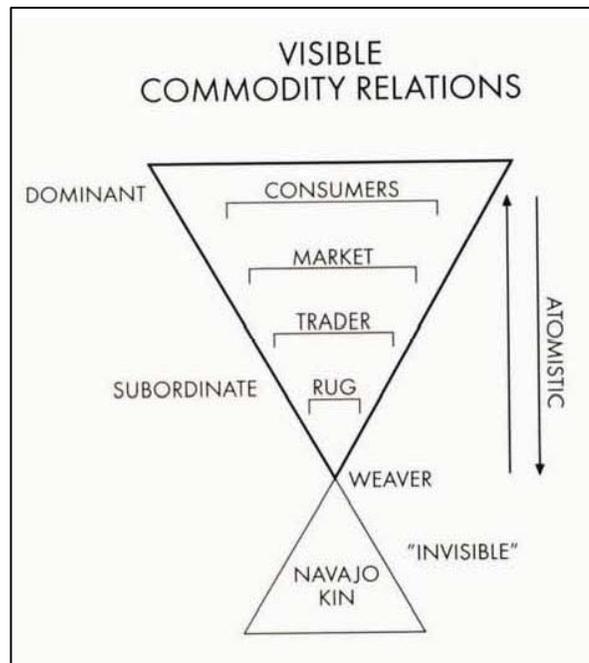


Figure 3. Visible Commodity Relations. M’Closkey 2002:10

Although the Indian Arts and Crafts Board mandates stringent fines for retailers falsely advertising “Indian-made” goods, communal property rights remain unprotected in the United States. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990) allows repatriation of funerary goods and sacred artifacts from museums that receive federal funding. Government regulations provide stringent fines against looters of archaeological sites. But because patterned rugs were designated non-sacred commodities by previous generations of scholars, they remain vulnerable to various forms of appropriation (Henson and Henson 2001).

## Conclusion

Severing Diné weavers’ production from the livestock and wool markets was a major blunder—a prodigious amount of archival evidence confirms the crucial importance of women’s non-waged labor in subsidizing the reservation economy between 1880 and 1960 (LHP, M’Closkey 2002 and forthcoming). Situating traders and wholesalers within the economic history of the southwest which incorporates price oscillations in the international wool market, reveals an important problem that has not been investigated to date. Recontextualizing weavers within this context differs substantially from publications highlighting how weavers and other Indian artisans became exotic pawns in the escalating southwest tourism market in tandem with the development of the Arts and Crafts Movement around 1900 (Batkin 1999, Dilworth 1996). Textile scholars focus on how the introduction of some commercial yarns and aniline dyes diminished the quality of post-reservation textiles, yet fail to emphasize that the key component of their textiles is comprised of fleece from their sheep (Rodee 1987). By eclipsing the

“wool story,” it’s difficult to grasp the significant contributions made by thousands of women weaving under challenging circumstances. Mammoth shipments impoverished Diné, and pauperization is sustained as the old textiles are resold within the collectors' circuits, decreasing the market for contemporary textiles woven by over 20,000 Diné weavers. Pre-1950 textiles are choice commodities—an estimated \$100 million have sold through worldwide auctions and dealers over the last four decades (M’Closkey 2002: Chapter 6). Weavers also face threats from 'knock-offs' imported from Mexico and abroad. Currently, well over \$1 billion in Indian arts and crafts is sold annually, yet less than 20% of it is made by Native American artisans. The themes highlighted in *Why the Navajo Blanket Became a Rug...* resonate with growing concerns related to the survival of Indigenous Peoples faced with accelerating globalization. A partial explanation for neglecting the reams of evidence historicizing weavers’ contributions to the regional economy is likely due to “American exceptionalism,” an ideology based on liberty, individualism, populism and laissez-faire capitalism (Limerick 2001). Traders served as icons of rugged individualism, and most literature depicts trade relations on the reservation as more benign than those operative in other parts of the globe (Wilkins 2008).

As Patricia Cox Crews demonstrates in her 2010 TSA paper, the protective tariff played a crucial role in propelling the democratization of silk over a century ago, due to rapid mechanization in domestic manufacturing. My research demonstrates how removal of tariff protection not only accelerated the transformation of the Navajo blanket into a rug, it likely served to justify the destruction of churras, the breed best adapted to the region. According to Dr. Lyle McNeal of the Navajo Sheep Project, the USDA is considering re-opening the Sheep Breeding Lab at Fort Wingate. Although the Lab operated between the mid-1930s to 1960s, it failed to develop a breed whose wool was satisfactory for both hand processing and commercial purposes. Weavers’ on-going struggles are highlighted in the PBS documentary *Weaving Worlds*, directed by Navajo Bennie Klain. This award-winning film puts a human face on the consequences of long-term challenges faced by thousands of Diné weavers.

### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank TSA conference co-organizers Sumru Belger Krody and Cecilia Anderson. This research was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada grants 2002-2006, 2007-11, and a NEH post-doctoral stipend awarded by the Newberry Library, Chicago. The Social Justice and Globalization Data Archive at the University of Windsor offered invaluable assistance by providing office space and technical support. I am indebted to former Director Suzan Ilcan, data archivist Stephen Richter, copy editor Samantha Lord, and Jamie Coll, for assistance with formatting. I also wish to thank numerous Navajo weavers for sharing their stories, in particular Bonnie Benally Yazzie who has served as translator and cultural consultant on numerous occasions. Archivists at the following libraries were unstinting in their assistance: the National Archives, Washington, D.C., the Newberry, Chicago; Special Collections, University of Arizona, Tucson and Cline Library, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff; the Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, and the Baker Business Library, Harvard University. Dr. Rahim Akbarzadeh provided exceptional assistance with locating pertinent material at the Cline.

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