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## Navajo (Diné) Weavers and Globalization: Critiquing the Silences

Kathy M'Closkey

My paper unsettles dominant narratives of Navajo (Diné) weaving history and critiques scholars' lack of engagement with long-standing issues of appropriation. As a principal source of outside knowledge, scholars consistently portrayed Navajos as the great borrowers—sheep from the Spanish, the loom from the Pueblos, and designs from traders licensed by the federal government after the formation of the reservation in 1868 (Bsumek 2004, Denetdale 2007). Regrettably, the trope of Diné as “borrowers” has sanctioned the appropriation of Navajo patterns by entrepreneurs who claim “pan-Indian” origins for their designs (Chelsea Goin Papers 1996). Such appropriations are not examples of cultural intermingling, but a forced marriage brokered by entrepreneurs (Wood 2008). The assumptions held by most authors who scripted “the history of Navajo weaving” reflect the asymmetry of gender relations as constituted historically in the Euro-American West. Weaving is typically described as women’s domestic activity engaged in for functional purposes, non-sacred because materials were borrowed from non-Navajo sources, and dominated by a handful of male traders who influenced designs in response to consumer preferences. This script neglects the politico-economic domain *and* omits weavers’ narratives.

Weaver and Plenary speaker Bonnie Benally Yazzie, lives in the Crownpoint area of the Navajo Nation. Bonnie’s mother Loretta was one of three weavers, along with Lavone Palmer, wife of the local trader, who started the monthly rug auction during the 1960s because weavers averaged \$6 to \$8 per rug. During its heyday over one thousand rugs would be auctioned in one evening. Attendance has dropped dramatically since the 1990s, a casualty of knock-off sales, and sales of old textiles including on internet sites like eBay.



Crownpoint NM Rug Auction 2006

The tsunami of ‘knock-offs’ imported into the US from twenty countries is perfectly legal according to the Indian Arts and Crafts Board Act, as long as they are not labelled “Indian made.” The US government does not recognize communal property rights, thus historic designs reside in the “public domain” (Henson and Henson. 2001). Because many Diné endure third

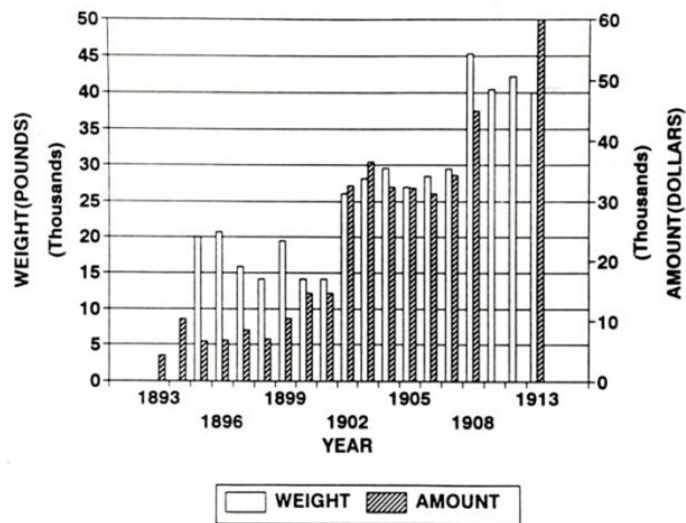
world living conditions, my critique challenges feminist political economists' overt support for the unauthorized reproduction of Navajo designs by Zapotec weavers in Mexico over the past three decades (Stephen 1993, 2005; Wood 2008). The production of knock-offs is also well publicized in high profile anthropology journals. Yet no response acknowledging the economic and cultural consequences of appropriation is forthcoming from the academy. Anthropologists' support for such activity exerts and even greater threat to Diné weavers, because it 'neutralizes' copying through the prism of scholarly engagement. The failure of scholars on both sides of the border to engage with this issue ultimately delegitimizes Navajos' claims to an essential component of their cultural heritage.

The resolution of "The Quilt Flap" serves as a dramatic contrast. In 1991, the National Museum of American History out-sourced cherished quilt patterns housed in their collections, for reproduction in China. There was such an uproar not only did vice-presidential candidate Al Gore become involved, the House of Ways and Means Committee threatened to cut the Smithsonian's budget! Thousands of quilt activists picketed and the museum ultimately cancelled the contract and now sponsors a quilt legacy program (M'Closkey 2012:130-32). However, in opposition to the ire roused by "the quilt flap," post-modernist readings of the events described above and the inimical effects on Diné livelihood preclude critique. Art historian Janet Berlo writes:

American and European textile designers freely take from native (sic) sources, proclaiming as their own those designs drawn from Navajo...originals...this is part of a long artistic tradition in the West...the contemporary indigenous textile aesthetic is, in many regions, an aesthetic of appropriation and accumulation. [Berlo 1991:452-3]

The Museum of New Mexico Foundation has recently licensed several manufacturer/retailers whose designers draw on classic Native American patterns contained in their collections (Kelly and Thompson 2013). The Museum of Indian Arts and Culture is now promoting rugs with Navajo motifs sold by West Elm/Williams-Sonoma. Part of an "Aid to Artisans" program, spinners and weavers in India now have their products certified by a "Craftmark" label ([http://www.westelm.com/shop/collaborations/craftmark/?cm\\_type=lnav](http://www.westelm.com/shop/collaborations/craftmark/?cm_type=lnav)). This project is part of a \$35 million handcraft purchasing plan funded by the Clinton Global Initiative ([clintonglobalinitiative.org/commitments](http://clintonglobalinitiative.org/commitments)). MIAC's collaboration will augment funding for programming at the expense of Navajo weavers who have seen their market evaporate. How does this square with the museum's mission?: "to inspire appreciation for and knowledge of the diverse native arts, histories, languages and cultures of the Greater Southwest."

The other half of "double jeopardy" for thousands of weavers concerns the vigorous collectors' market for pre-1960s rugs. The old textiles receive far more exposure in the media, for example, on TV series like "Antiques Roadshow." Indian antiquities' dealers report robust sales relative to the diminished market for contemporary rugs. An object-based aesthetics grounded in Euro-western epistemology fuels connoisseurship, while ignoring the politico-economic relations of long term cross-cultural asymmetrical trade (M'Closkey 2002, 2010, 2012).



Annual Blanket Shipments from Ganado Trading Post 1893-1913

From *Swept Under the Rug...* M'Closkey 2008

Articles published in *American Indian Art* typically depict weavers as “cultural performers” who labor in a virtual economic vacuum (McLerran 2011, Valette 2012). Yet an enormous amount of evidence languishes in a dozen archives which manifest how the inimical effects of free trade over a century ago, triggered Navajo impoverishment. The ideology of weavers as “domesticated housewives” masked the relations that link their non-waged labor to tariff revisions legislated by Congress. After 1890, thousands of women wove 30% of the annual coarse wool clip sheared from *churra* sheep. Women weaving fleece into textiles provided a more secure means of diversification for dozens of reservation traders coping with the rapid oscillations in the global wool market due to the duty-free importation of over one hundred million pounds of carpet-grade wool annually, much of it shipped from China (M'Closkey forthcoming). This “alternative means to market wool” resulted in the survival of the nascent trading post system during the 1890s, a decade when one-third of domestic wool growers went bankrupt because President Grover Cleveland had placed all classes of wool on the duty-free list. Since coarse Navajo wools sold for far less than fine wools grown on Anglo-owned flocks, Navajos were encouraged to weave it up to acquire more trading post credit (M'Closkey 2002:72-75). In 1898, a high tariff was reinstated on clothing wools, protecting Anglo growers, but carpet wools remained on the free list. Thus Diné underwent a unique kind of “structural adjustment” not experienced by other American growers subject to tariff protection for clothing wools after 1898. In other words, this was “NAFTA for Navajos.” By 1902, Bigelow Carpet Co. was importing \$3.5 million worth of duty-free carpet wool, most of it from China (M'Closkey 2010). That equals nearly \$100 million in today's dollars (Measuringworth.com).

Thus it is no coincidence that the Navajo blanket was transformed into a rug during the free trade era. To illustrate: in 1890, \$24,000 worth of weaving, equivalent to \$634,000 today, was shipped from the Reservation and increased forty-fold by 1930. Due to the high volume of production,

Diné textiles were placed under the “jobbers” classification, a category cheaper than wholesale. Government-licensed traders, nearly all of whom were Anglo men, ‘jobbed’ Navajo textiles as a more lucrative means to market the unstandardized wool clip subject to intense competition from imports. The statistical portions of annual Indian agents’ reports to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs include the quantity and value of weaving; the information is embedded in the livestock and wool production figures, demonstrating how bureaucrats perceived weaving as an extension of the livestock industry (U. S. Government Superintendents’ Annual Narrative and Statistical Reports). Thus, as livestock owners *and* weavers, Diné women were doubly disadvantaged by changes in the domestic wool tariff coupled with patriarchal assumptions that trivialized their labor. For example, in 1922, the superintendent of the San Juan jurisdiction, one of six reservation jurisdictions, reported that 3000 “self-employed” women wove up \$320,000 of rugs, in contrast to 205 men employed by private parties whose wages totaled \$48,000. Women earned seven times the “income,” worth \$4.4 million today (men = \$667,000 in 2014). The maintenance and propagation of the housewife ideology concealed how many weavers were the principal breadwinners for their families, especially since they owned so many of the sheep and all of the goats.

Weavers are typically depicted as “cultural performers” in the extant literature, thus conceptually separated from the politico-economic sphere. Such historic silencing perpetuates the false idealism that distorts the conditions under which they labored and their connections to global capitalism. Government reports confirmed that textile production by Diné was “the most profitable of the native industries...and is done by women in their spare time” (Sells 1913). In other words, ‘part-time for pin money.’ By 1930, women’s textile production equal to \$1 million annually, provided one-third of reservation residents’ income (\$14 million in today’s dollars). The Lorenzo Hubbell family of Ganado, AZ controlled a significant portion of Navajo trade for decades, and the 4000 pounds of Hubbell papers located at the University of Arizona Special Collections library, provide a barometer of the regional economy. By the time his sole catalogue was published in 1902, textile sales comprised over 90% of Hubbell’s off-reservation business. And 80% of his ledger accounts were in women’s names. However they were identified in relation to their closest male kin, i.e., “wife of Jimmy Mustache.” Available for study since 1977, these rich archival resources have been woefully underutilized in substantively assessing the importance of textile production to traders’ financial success. Hubbell and his sons shipped over 200 tons of hand-spun woven textiles between 1893 and 1913 (M’Closkey 2002:76). Nearly all textiles were acquired from weavers by weight until 1970. Women received credit, not cash, and their saddle blankets and rugs were jobbed by traders to pay down their monthly accounts with regional wholesalers (LHP 1885-1950, M’Closkey 2002). Anthropologist Gary Witherspoon (1987) conservatively estimated that 100,000 women had woven more than one million blankets and rugs over the past two centuries.

Thus thousands of “Navajo housewives” effectively subsidized the trading post system on the Reservation for decades, since Diné wools were in competition with duty-free carpet wool imports. Weavers’ participation in the seemingly “informal” economy translated into invisibility. For seventy years, weavers’ productivity served as a crucial source of revenue for hundreds of traders. For example, between July 1915 and Dec. 1916, traders Crum & Cotton at Round Rock, AZ acquired over \$28,000 worth of Navajo products, equivalent to \$673,000 today (Measuringworth.com). Women’s portion, \$17,456, was 62% of the total, compared to men’s at

37%. Such compelling archival evidence challenges extant narratives continually recycled in the literature: that weavers' productivity rose because of consumer demand ostensibly driven by the popularity of the Arts and Crafts movement and increasing tourism, facilitated by the railroad. These assertions collapse upon analysis of pertinent archival documents. Both factors drove consumption to some extent, but free trade in carpet wool drove production for decades. Thus analysis of traders' business records and correspondence ruptures the master narrative – that traders 'saved' weaving by developing off-reservation markets. Enormous shipments historically reveal the magnitude of gendered injustice as weavers and their families became increasingly impoverished. This story, embedded in the archives, serves as a classic example of the functioning of a commodity chain, "a network of labor and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity." Cherokee sociologist Wilma Dunaway (2001) notes that every node in the chain represents a specific production process. In order to engender a commodity chain, one must begin with the household, where women are found working longer hours than men to contribute surpluses that do not appear in account books of capitalists or government measurements of GNP. A commodity chain structures the maximal exploitation of under-paid and unpaid labor, thereby permitting the endless accumulation of capital as textiles are sold and resold.

The example that follows demonstrates how evidence concerning the gendered politics of appropriation is contained in popular books such as trader Gilbert Maxwell's *Navajo Rugs: Past, Present, Future*. During the early 1960s, a dealer friend of Maxwell's hired a weaver at the minimum wage of \$1 per hour to weave a twill double-saddle blanket, and a 3' x 5' rug. The dealer supplied the yarns. The weaver earned \$140 for the twill, and \$238 for the rug. If she had spun the yarn for either textile, she would have earned an additional \$200. Yet, the typical *retail* price of the two textiles was \$35 and \$65, respectively. Maxwell admits:

Weaving a rug can be a lot of work. From time to time we hear reports that a Navajo weaver is poorly paid, maybe an average of five cents or so an hour, for her labor. Unfortunately there is much truth to this, but it should be pointed out that rug weaving is a spare-time avocation....Which brings up a very important point. Although weaving is *an essential part of the reservation economy* it is not exercised as a full-time occupation. Hence there can be no wage scale. A Navajo woman will do most of her weaving in her spare time, as some of our non-Indian ladies will knit a wool dress in their spare time (1963:19-20).

His comments clearly demonstrate how only waged labor outside the home counts as 'work.'

Pauperization continues as these historic "pound blankets" are recycled in the antiquities markets, depressing the demand for contemporary rugs woven by thousands of weavers. I developed a figure based on an article entitled "What does that \$14 shirt really cost?" published in Maclean's magazine after the horrific collapse of the building housing over one thousand Bangladeshi garment workers last year (Westwood 2013). The garment workers earned \$.12 per shirt. The retailer paid \$5.67 and the consumer paid \$14. The values incorporated in my comparison were averaged from hundreds of Hubbell ledger book entries spanning the 1930s. Unlike the impoverished garment workers, Diné supplied all the inputs – the fleece for spinning into yarn, the dyes, and the labor to spin the wool. Weaver Pearl Sunrise confirmed my estimate



of weavers' compensation averaging \$.01/hour in book credit. A penny an hour in 1935 is equivalent to \$.17 an hour today (Measuringworth.com). To put this in perspective, if a service worker currently earns \$8.00/hour (\$64/day), or \$320 per week, in today's figures at \$.17/hour, a weaver would receive \$1.36 per day, or \$350 in credit *annually* at the trading post- 50 times *less* the income of a service worker living below the current poverty line. These compelling examples extracted from archives and publications, demonstrate how events far distant from weavers' over-the-counter exchange at local trading posts shaped the history of Navajo weaving. They also illustrate the concealed potential for enormous profits when substantial archival evidence is ignored because authors place emphasis on Navajo weaving as 'art' divorced from its politico-economic context.

### How past productivity harms contemporary weavers

Many of the "pound" blankets and rugs woven under circumstances just described, and "jobbed" by weight currently fetch very high prices in the volatile art market. Sales increased exponentially after the first exhibit of historic Navajo weaving was culled from the collections of twenty famous artists in the early 1970s (Berlant and Kahlenberg 1977). Over \$100 million worth of historic weaving has changed hands since that time. Emphasis on the old weaving focuses upon individual textiles, their provenance and pedigree, while ignoring deplorable economic conditions (Satchell and Bowermaster 1994). Crucial information located in government and university archives provides evidence of the conditions endured by weavers in order to provision their households historically. This evidence is ignored while scholars "order, dissect and classify" by determining the kinds of dyes, yarns, number of warps and wefts, and types of fleece incorporated in historic textiles. Such "boilerplate" discourse occupies center stage and neglects the politico-economic domain entirely. The stories of the makers of historic textiles that now bring so much money have literally been 'swept under the rug.' Instead, the quixotic relationships between traders and weavers continue to be valorized in extant literature.



Figure 1. Handspun 3'x5' rug purchased in 1966 at Don Watson's trading post near Mesa Verde CO. Image by author.

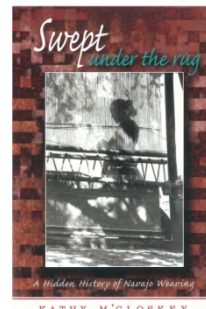


Figure 2. Book cover. Photo of "unknown weaver" by Milton Snow 1942. Image by author

The following information highlights two vignettes from the most recent collectors' activity. The September 2013 issue of *Architectural Digest* features Ralph Lauren at his huge Colorado ranch (Goldfarb 2013). His ranch buildings are festooned with dozens of historic Navajo pound blankets and rugs. *Forbes* estimates his net worth at \$6.5 billion. Lauren's brand defines a lifestyle and for decades he's mined Navajo designs to create his "Beacon Print" line. Crooner Andy Williams passed away in 2012. His collection (Hedlund 1997), valued at over \$1 million

was auctioned by Sotheby's last spring (Wikicollecting). One 'chief's blanket sold for \$221,000. Sotheby's evaluated a double saddle blanket at \$1500-2000. It sold for \$13,000. Hubbell had jobbed similar textiles for \$4.00 each (LHP). In his 1902 catalogue, Hubbell advertised a large Moki-style blanket at \$25-35.00, and his ledgers reveal that weavers earned \$12-16.00 in credit for household goods. Sotheby's estimated #31 from \$12-18,000 and it sold for \$18,750. These examples confirm how old textiles sell avidly in galleries and at auctions, and internet sales have escalated exponentially (M'Closkey 2002, Chapter 6). Currently over 20,000 weavers within the vast Navajo Nation lack an infrastructure to market their rugs since the trading post system has collapsed. Only a handful of weavers make an adequate living. Unemployment hovers around 60%. There are no reservation-wide co-ops, micro-finance programs or fair-trade organizations to assist weavers with marketing. Attendance at the Crownpoint auction has plummeted along with rug values, and now its future is in jeopardy. The number of dealers who retail contemporary rugs exclusively has declined dramatically. Thus thousands of weavers are pushed to the periphery as their ancestors' creations are either endlessly replicated or sold at auction.

The Hubbell Trading Post Papers became available for research in the 1970s, about the time these twin threats emerged. Would Latin Americanists have supported the production of knock-offs by Zapotec if the significant archival evidence historicizing the genesis of the Navajo rug had been adequately researched? (Stephen 1993, 2005; Wood 2008). Much of the evidence is over a century old. How can scholars justify ignoring the effects of appropriation, especially since the importance of Zapotec women's labor in textile production and household maintenance comprises a central tenet of their research? This remains one of the most vexing contradictions in their support of knock-off production.

Scholars who ignore the context of production unwittingly engage in historical amnesia through their refusal to acknowledge 'the elephant in the room', i.e., the escalation in poverty in tandem with escalating production. Contemporary publications about Native American art skirt the manner in which artisans are now enmeshed in globalization (Gilster 1996, Hoerig 2003). Pueblo fetish carver Andy Abeita (2006) has acknowledged, "the world renowned recognition of southwest arts and crafts does not reflect what goes on within impoverished makers' homes." This is an astonishing statement given the numerous publications authored by generations of scholars. As elite stakeholders, collectors and dealers continue to benefit to the detriment of the descendants of the original creators. In fact, the beautifully illustrated coffee-table books authored by scholars and featuring historic textiles, are frequently shipped abroad and used as templates for future production of knock-offs (fieldnotes 2011).

The latter portion of my paper critiques how some Southwest museums support commercialization. Anthropologist Suzanne Baizerman (1989) wrote about the escalating interest and shift in type of publication on historic Diné weaving: "...some museum curators and anthropologists became dealers, and some dealers received training in anthropology... it is evident that the museum is the center of publishing on historic textiles and the trend is getting stronger." She remarked on the recent surge in value of historic weaving, noting that dealers and collectors serve on museum boards:



Publications are important, to establish authority and expertise and to provide the publicity necessary to help sustain the value of the product. ...the rise in the number of publications on Navajo textiles correlates with the rise in their monetary value.

Several years ago the Maxwell Museum, University of New Mexico, featured “I Can See by Your Outfit: Wearing Apparel and Native Heritage.” The exhibit was curated by local and regional *dealers* in Indian antiquities. In 2005, Santa Fe, the “city different,” reputedly the third largest art market in the world, was designated a UNESCO City of Design, Crafts and Folk Arts. As the scope and number of events become increasingly international, it has the potential to marginalize all but a handful of the most well-known Native American artists.

The Maxwell also hosted an arts and crafts appraisal day and several dealers gave seminars on material culture in their respective areas of collecting. The Arizona State Museum in Tucson also features annual fund-raising events that bring prominent dealers, collectors and curators together. Modeled after *Antiques Roadshow*, the occasion draws hundreds of participants (Nichols 2005). However, due to the potential conflict of interest such events might entail, the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia cancelled a similar program. Librarian Ann Stevenson e-mailed me:

Before the Antiques Roadshow was on TV, we had a regular clinic where the public brought in their objects and curators tried to identify them, conservators gave advice, etc. We also gave out names of local appraisers but never gave values or “authenticated” pieces per se. After the Road show began it was clear that expectations for definitive authentications and value were expected so we have not continued (Ann Stevenson, e-mail message to author, 12/19/05).

In this paper I reveal the profound disconnect between the high value attached to historic textiles, and the low value attached to their context of production. Although we are accustomed to thinking of art as a significant complement of civilization, ethnographers and museum scholars concerned with cultural preservation are not accustomed to thinking of art collections as potential vehicles of cultural fragmentation. Yet, as Andy Abeita (2006) remarked, “due to massive appropriation, craft production, a crucial aspect of cultural preservation, is being driven to oblivion.” Thus it behooves us to “mind the gap” and work to resolve the contradiction whereby research emphasizing historic artisanal creations trumps cultural survival.

Native American scholar Deward Walker (1993) has critiqued how anthropologists remain mute on important contemporary issues in Native American life, while they continue to mine the past for information, demonstrating that “Native Americans are not as important for what they are as for what they were” and, I might add, for what they *created in the past*. Obviously enormous profits can be realized in marketing either knock-offs or historic textiles.

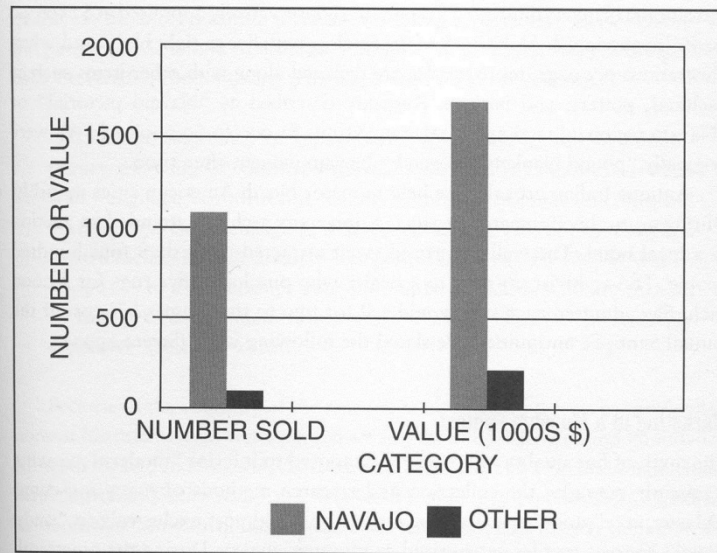


Figure 15. Textiles Sold at International Auctions, collated from Smith 1989.

From M'Closkey 2008, *Swept Under the Rug...* page 177

This sad tale evokes Kenneth Hudson's (1991:458) critique: "Ethnographical museums may collect widely, but they do not dig deeply. The political consequences of doing so would be too serious, or so it is felt." His quip brings to mind a comment that Faith Hagenhofer, librarian for Nisqually in Washington state made at a previous TSA meeting. She said "it's just amazing that conscientious consumers visiting tourist destinations like Santa Fe, know where to buy fair trade coffee, but they haven't a clue about the adverse consequences of knock-offs, or sales of old textile for Navajo weavers."

The patterns of relations that brought rugs into existence are fractured through adherence to dualisms. Cultural theft has been sanctioned in multiple ways. Currently a way of life is sold to the highest bidder as the old textiles fetch record prices. Through dating and sourcing textiles for auction houses, and authoring books on historic collections, scholars inadvertently sustain this growing investment market. Such activities are midwifed by the binary between the sacred world of religion and the secular or profane world of commodity production as conceived by scholars such as anthropologist Gladys Reichard, whose books published during the 1930s, provided much of the foundation for the construction of "Navajo weaving history." Adherence to such a research regime informed by an epistemology that splits cultural pattern from commodity has had devastating consequences. The contexts of interpretation deployed in the past to describe weavers' production privileges settler history. Subsequent publications have emphasized the evolution of various styles and traders' influences on their development (Amsden 1934, Boles 1981, Kaufman and Selser 1985, Kent 1985, Maxwell 1963, Rodee 1981, 1987; Wilkins 2008). My analysis of the "hidden history" as revealed in underutilized archives begs the question: "Is the history of style really history?" Extant interpretations have blocked a deeper understanding of the values of weaving for Diné. Research for the sake of research perpetuates narratives of nostalgia, demonstrating how provenance and pedigree take precedence over poverty, appropriation and survivance (Lee 2014).

Complex patterns of relations were occluded through the epistemological lens of the colonizers, including the ethnographers. The binary of sacred and profane as constructed by anthropologists historically has thrust Navajo weaving into an alien field. Although scholars acknowledged the importance of kinship relations (k'e'), they failed to recognize that the process and products of weaving serve as recursive enactments of the Diné Creation Story thereby linking cosmology, kinship solidarity, harmony *and* provisioning (M'Closkey 2004, Willink and Zolbrod 1996).



Mary John and Darcy, Shiprock Navajo Nation, 1992

Weavers' productivity served as the commensal nexus spanning culture, economics and the environment. These relational ontologies were threatened as generations of traders and bureaucrats parsed Diné livestock 'products' through the logic of ledger book profit and loss, reinforced by patriarchal conventions. The story I relate today serves as a textbook case of how the legacy of settler colonialism, and the indentured poverty it engendered, is sustained. I'll end with a quote from Amy Lonetree (2012), Ho-chunk author of *Decolonizing Museums*:

Objects in museums are living entities. They embody layers of meaning, and they are deeply connected to the past, present, and future of Indigenous communities. Every engagement with objects in museum cases or in collections rooms should begin with this core recognition. We are not just looking at interesting pieces. In the presence of objects from the past, we are privileged to stand as witnesses to living entities that remain intimately and inextricably tied to their descendant communities.

Amy's critique invokes Wilma Dunaway's (2001:23) apropos comment: "As we descend down the nodes of the commodity chain, with every link we should call *Her* name, not the brand name of a product." Navajo designs have indeed become "brand" names, linked to designers like Ralph Lauren, retailers such as Urban Outfitters, antiquities' dealers, movie stars and other wealthy collectors, trade blanket manufacturers, museums "shock and awe" collections, and hundreds of retailers including NOVICA, the fair trade organization associated with National Geographic, which continues to market Navajo knock-offs (M'Closkey 2010). Given the extensive appropriation that is over a century old, one wonders how thousands of Navajos can possibly survive as weavers in the future in an increasingly globalized, hyper-competitive world.

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