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Navajo Saddle Blankets: Textiles to Ride in the American West. Edited by Lane Coulter. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2002. 144 pages. \$50.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

No blanket style known to Navajo weaving is less embraced or more misunderstood than the saddle blanket; nonetheless, these small blankets speak to many aspects of Navajo life. In the telling there is a religious foundation involving the horse, a military history that often spelled out long, difficult struggles to create and maintain a viable identity, and, most important, a unique comradeship among the weavers. Navajo woven fabrics are part of an artistic expression that has agency; that is, they carry the power to serve human beings. In them resides a diversity of values, meaning, and subjectivity as they move from culture to culture and epoch to epoch.

Functions of the Navajo blanket can be viewed as gestures of cultural redistribution; an honoring of religious, social, and economic values; and a method of passing on traditional skills and a specific design vocabulary through the generations. After 1800, Navajo social organization was changing, and families possessing greater wealth were beginning to measure their status by the number of sheep and horses they acquired. That the horse became very important to these highly mobile people is evidenced by its appearance not only on petroglyphs but also in horse songs, prayers, and origin stories that began seeping into the eschatology of Navajo culture at this early period. Saddle blankets were used as single- and double-style pads to protect the horse or as a "fancy" decoration of social status to be draped over the back of a saddle's cannel. They also provided a means to establish and maintain socio-economic bonds and exchanges. Other small blankets, sometimes characterized as double saddle blankets, were woven as curios for sale or trade to military personnel, missionaries, and adventurers in the Southwest. In all this one thing is clear: the woven textile provided economic support, and its intended use was not always a concern for the weaver. Use designation was often left to the buyer. For many the utility of the small blanket is confusing and sometimes will be left to historical and educated speculation. It should, nonetheless, be given its due and viewed as a form of ethnographic art with an infusion of intellectual and emotional content. Because of the saddle blanket's virtual anonymity in the general literature, historians and other scholars hoped this new research would help fill a void.

Known for its ability to convey good cultural information and for its skills in design and layout, the Museum of New Mexico Press seemed a likely source to publish a volume on Navajo saddle blankets. Most particularly the press editors have consistently ensured that the mental conceptions of each author (when there is more than one) are situated in a well-thought-out publication sequence so that they excite as well as stimulate further idea development and interest. The press's partner, the Museum of New Mexico, must likewise make certain that contributors to their exhibits and catalogs convey an intellectual understanding for the materials under review. Contributors to these volumes, moreover, are expected to draw from their perspectives as anthropologists or museum and art professionals to offer a multiplicity of ideas and voices. So

what happened? *Navajo Saddle Blankets: Textiles to Ride in the American West* has failed to meet the demands of a well-developed publication.

It was disturbing to see a woven Navajo woman's single dress panel as a backdrop on the book's front cover and again as the representative "saddle blanket" inset on the title page. The designers and others at the press clearly did a disservice to their readership and possibly to the contributors. The faux pas speaks to a clear lack of attention to title and focus. But more than this, such a mistake undermines the credibility of the text within. Unbelievably, the unlikely dress panel appears for a third time on page 39, where it is clearly and correctly identified as "half of a woman's dress." One wonders what the organizers and designers were thinking, or if the editors even read the text.

The disappointing, if not misleading, visuals from cover to title page are not redeemed in the publication's introduction, which should have paved the way for an essential understanding of a carefully addressed material culture theme, and outlined the integrated, multidisciplinary paths taken by individual authors to explore and tell their stories. It does not. As a result, the sequencing of and reasoning for the inclusion of some of the contributions remain as perplexing as the image on the cover and title page.

What drove this publication, as is told in the foreword, was the desire to create a traveling exhibition, a goal that never materialized. The accompanying publication was to be a "freestanding" (8) volume. Perhaps the exhibit's organizers failed to produce a carefully conceived contextual framework for the presentation of the saddle blanket as cultural material. This is certainly reflected in the publication and may account for the essay's lack of integration and cohesiveness despite the occasional, but inconsistent, cross-referencing.

However, in the seven essays—Spanish contact to the twentieth century—chronological sequencing seems to guide their placement. In addition, the preface, written by an accomplished Navajo weaver, discusses familial influences and the experience of turning down a commercial opportunity to weave "three hundred saddle blankets within a limited time frame" (11) because the proposed task was monotonous and lacked creativity. Fortunately, the Navajo voice was not forgotten, and it is this continued cultural sensitivity emanating from the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture that helps to redeem some of the many unfortunate aspects of this publication.

"First Contact," the essay following the introduction, primarily addresses the roots and development of two basic forms of riding styles in the Spanish and Mexican cultures. The Spanish contact period riding style called *a la jineta* and its influence on the Navajo occupy the greater discussion. Comparisons of equine tack such as riding saddles, bridles, ropes and halters, saddle pads, stirrups, hobbles, "and anything else used with horses" (27) also advance the suggested theory of a Spanish-to-Navajo causal relationship. Eventually the author connects with the weaving theme by illustrating the importance of the Spanish woven *jerga* cloth along with later developed saddle pads.

This is a good, albeit brief, descriptive essay (amounting to two full pages of text, with illustrations) but lends very little to the reader's understanding of Navajo horse tack other than to characterize the indigenous fabricators as copycats. Black-and-white historic and two color photos illustrate both a

Spanish-style packsaddle used on a mule and a Navajo man and woman's saddle. The appropriation theory offered by the author would have been better served by using photos illustrating the Spanish riding-saddle style and then comparing these with ones that feature the style adopted by the Navajo.

The essays "Early Navajo Weaving: 1650–1868 and Beyond," "Looking Backward, Looking Forward: The Transitional Fulcrum, 1868–1910," and "Twentieth-Century Navajo Saddle Blankets" adhere to a generic historical chronology of Navajo weaving, with allusions to the manufacture of saddle blankets. "Early Navajo Weaving" provides a brief overview of the first 250 years of the craft's development. The approximately three pages of text are inadequate for the task. Some ideas are so broadly sketched that they beg for clarification, while others require a greater citation of primary or secondary sources (e.g., "There is some evidence that both the Navajos and other tribes who traded for Navajo blankets occasionally used folded serapes or wearing blankets as saddle pads" [32]). Ideally, the minimal text should have carried the evolving theme in "First Contact" by reinforcing ideas of Spanish-Navajo-Mexican exchange patterns and the cross-cultural influences that existed during this early stage of Navajo weaving. Instead, it moves in the opposite direction, overlapping with, and often contradicting, ideas examined in the "Looking Backward, Looking Forward" essay. The date of the Navajo forced march to Bosque Redondo is offered in this essay as 1863 (31); in the other it begins in 1864 (41). Where's the editor?

Ideas are also introduced that skew our understanding of saddle blankets and take up precious limited space with other styles of textiles that were best left unexplored. What critical purpose is served by the discussion about a small Late-Classic serape and a woman's dress half (37)? By the author's own admission these textiles have nothing to do with saddle blankets. In the case of the serape, "It is very finely woven and would offer little protective padding for the horse" (37). Worse is the unsubstantiated statement that the woman's dress half "(the cover and title page) might occasionally be confused with, or even used in a pinch as a saddle blanket" (37). One can only hope this suggestion was not attributed to Navajo use. The Navajo valued the symbolic meaning of the woman's dress, particularly at the girl's *kinaalda* or puberty ceremony.

"Looking Backward, Looking Forward" is clearly among the best-written and most informative essays in the publication. It is grounded in good scholarship with the appropriate references. A portion of the subtitle, "The Transitional Fulcrum," evokes one of the most accurate visualizations of the swinging, yin-and-yang changes Navajo weavers experienced during the 1868–1910 period. Likewise, "Twentieth-Century Navajo Blankets" holds many visual examples of these woven commodities up to public exposure, sealing the knowledge that Navajo saddle blanket weavers have given the world a clear understanding of the aesthetic range of their genius, along with the assurance that their work is culture rich but not culture bound. On each page of this essay one has only to look at the inward harmony of the work. The purity of spirit, charm, elegance, and pride that are inherent in each saddle blanket is revealed. The information conveyed is based on what the Navajo think outsiders need to know and what they have deemed appropriate for

sharing. These three essays clearly indicate that the Navajo saddle blanket has long been anonymous as a significant contributor to our understanding of weaving, yet it clearly offers a connection to the maker and those who used it.

What is not connected is the seemingly out-of-place technical essay "Saddle Blanket Analysis," which focuses on dye and fiber analysis. This essay attempts to point out the fallacies of historical textile dating techniques and calls for a more scientific method. The author's characterization of his work as "forensic examinations of the details that remain in woven artifacts" (93) is perhaps suitable for a court of law, where the theoretical practicalities and fallacies of high performance liquid chromatography, optical microscopy, and other analytical determinants might enlighten those who wish to resolve a crime; but it does not seem to be compatible with or suitable to the suggested purpose of this volume. Technical analysis, moreover, through any method proposed, is not exclusive to the study of Navajo saddle blankets. This essay does, however, offer the only critical discourse in the volume, despite the need for greater accuracy regarding the history and use of imported fibers and less subjective reasoning regarding the textiles that were tested. Thus, one has to search for a common denominator that links this essay to the rest of the publication.

"The Cowboy Market for Navajo Saddle Blankets" provides a cross-cultural peek into how a Navajo-manufactured commodity became part of the American cowboy culture, where "top hands lavished much of their meager wages on quality gear that could, in cowboy parlance, 'stand the gaff'" (103). The writing offers ideas about the quality and agency a saddle blanket carries and validates the financial sacrifices some cowboys made in its behalf. This is a well-thought-out, well-documented overview of the Navajo saddle blanket in the early American West, tracing its acquisition from the 1880s to present-day production for pleasure riding. A two-page chart on retail prices from 1886 through 1960 provides a summary for the greater portion of the text.

The final essay, "Weaving Processes and Techniques," should likely be a companion essay to "Saddle Blanket Analysis" in a volume better suited to their purpose. Graphics of looms, pictures of weaving sheds and tools, and the like have become typical fare in books on Navajo weaving. Such material is redundant. What is particularly disheartening is that the author seems cheated in her effort to include a Navajo voice in the text. The interesting, if not provocative, quotes from Navajo people (for example, "In earlier times, saddle blankets were considered like protective shields" [121]) serve a real purpose in this publication and could have provided complementary collaboration with the non-Native contributors. Unfortunately this alliance never evolves.

At the end of the essays there seems to be a one-page afterthought about felted saddle blankets. This "phantom essay" is actually quite interesting and deserves some recognition in the table of contents. A short, commercial epilogue citing the merits of recent Santa Fe gallery saddle blanket shows rounds out the text, and a good index provides some reference to ideas in the preceding pages. What is desperately needed is a glossary and an editor who can explain generic expressions like "Classic Period" and "Late-Classic Period."

Navajo Saddle Blankets: Textiles to Ride in the American West could have provided a unique opportunity to bring into sharper focus the creative historical

dynamics of one style of Navajo weaving. More than this, it should have brought into balance a broader, cross-cultural dynamic that helps the reader accurately learn about the material culture under discussion. Unfortunately, it does not.

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Ndakinna (Our Land): New and Selected Poems. By Joseph Bruchac. Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 2003. 88 pages. \$11.95 paper.

It was a busman's holiday like any other. I was a creative writing workshop leader at a summer conference center in Maine. The arrangement was simple: from 9:00 a.m. to noon we circled up for an intense, passionate exchange of writing and ideas, and from noon to 9:00 a.m. my family and I were at large by the ocean, a 21/7 free ride by the sea. At 9:01 on the first day a bearded man arrived, sat down at my left hand, and asked me what he should read. I began to list off the books I liked, but before I got very far, he stopped me.

"No, you don't understand. I'm dying of prostate cancer. I don't want to just pass the time reading. I want to ride forever into a book. I want to live a hundred lives."

For a moment the ocean waves froze at crest and trough. Birds hung in midair. I realized later that there was now a new world order of the book list, a new literary Maslowian hierarchy of need.

I told the man that I'd get back to him, and I did by the end of the week, but it wasn't easy: the imagination takes over, and soon I could hear the hushed conversation of doctors outside the dark bedroom door, the grieving of family, and I saw a stack of books by the nightstand that no longer belonged—novels with failed endings written by famous people, uneven Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry.

The week in Maine went well. We had excellent weather, and the workshop delivered a stellar reading to the community, but I have to admit, I'll never be the same. Now, when asked to recommend a book, I shutter, so I'm shuttering now when I say that everyone needs to read *Ndakinna (Our Land)* by Joseph Bruchac.

Ndakinna is a collection of new and selected poems written over twelve years. The poems reflect on the natural world of New England and elsewhere and how we two-leggeds get along in it. Some are travel poems; some are reportage of encounter, emotional history if you will. All of the collection, however, reflects Bruchac's limitless capacity to allow his experience to become ours. It's the great storyteller's transfer of power. Why live one life if we can shape-shift into multiple existences? In essence, throughout this collection Bruchac becomes a Native American godfather of sorts: he gives us an offer we can't refuse. In a certain sense he's giving us twelve more years of life, and all we have to do is read.