

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Swept Under the Rug: A Hidden History of Navajo Weaving. By Kathy M'Closkey

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/60g0w15v>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 27(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

McLerran, Jennifer

Publication Date

2003

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Swept Under the Rug: A Hidden History of Navajo Weaving. By Kathy M'Closkey. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002. 336 pages. \$32.95 cloth.

M'Closkey's stated purpose is to uncover the extent of impoverishment of the Navajo that has existed for over a century and continues today; to reveal the relationships of the import and investment markets in textiles that have contributed to this impoverishment; and, finally, to offer a new way of looking at weaving that finds its base in "communications theory." She offers her story of the development of Navajo weaving in the twentieth century as an alternative to that found in the extant literature. She asserts that to understand Navajo weaving adequately we must understand Navajo kinship systems, Navajo cosmology, and Navajo language, thereby reconfiguring weaving as "a cosmological performance."

M'Closkey focuses on the economic exploitation of Navajo weavers. She contends that, due to the combined effects of the high investment potential of historic Navajo textiles and the production of inexpensive copies of Navajo weavings in Mexico and abroad, the demand for contemporary Navajo textiles has seriously diminished. The author combines archival research with a review of extant literature in the field and reservation fieldwork. Using the Lorenzo Hubbell papers housed at University of Arizona Special Collections, she claims that she has produced "the first study to extract detailed financial information from records directly related to Navajo trade before 1950" (p. 6). Although it was consulted, she explains that most extant published literature on Navajo weaving has not been useful to her because it is either too general or too ambiguous. Her fieldwork included interviews with more than thirty weavers and follow-up interviews with several of their families. M'Closkey used information garnered from interviews with weavers carried out by Clarendia Begay, curator at Ganado 1985–86 and now curator of the Navajo Nation Museum at Window Rock, and National Park Service oral history interviews with elderly Navajo informants conducted in the early 1970s.

Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of Navajo weaving realizes by now that exploitation of weavers has occurred. However, if we intend to move on from this point armed with the knowledge and tools necessary to attempt to resist future exploitation, we must gain a more complete understanding of the social, historical, and political circumstances that contributed to this oppression. Simply accumulating more evidence of the exploitation gets us nowhere. M'Closkey does not seem to concern herself with locating points of resistance that have enabled cultural survival. Instead, she favors an approach that limits itself to an unveiling of the exploitation. Might it not be more revealing and useful for future strategy to attempt to locate the points of resistance and the social factors that have worked to enable resistance? M'Closkey complains that, while the weavers remain invisible, dealers, traders, and so forth are given too much attention in the literature on Navajo textiles. The irony is that she perpetuates this focus herself.

For example, M'Closkey offers development and use of trademarks as a possible remedy to the proliferating market in "knockoffs." As she explains,

the Navajo Nation Council explored the possible effectiveness of such a trademark as recently as 1998. The author does not seem to be aware of the fact that this strategy was attempted in the past but did not prove to be a workable solution. She makes no mention of such past efforts, most notably omitting the concerted efforts by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board to institute trademarks in the 1930s.

M'Closkey's survey of extant literature on Navajo weaving leads her to conclude that little attention has been given to aspects of Navajo weaving that regard it as anything other than a commodity or that analyze its visual aspects as anything other than mere decorative design. The one exception she finds is structuralist anthropologist Gary Witherspoon who, she reports, asserts that weaving has been a major factor in the perpetuation of Navajo lifeways. She contends that the only alternative to Witherspoon's approach is that of museologists who purportedly regard Navajo weaving as "art" rather than craft. She finds this approach, grounded in Western aesthetics, unacceptable.

Museologists, M'Closkey contends, are wedded to an empiricist view that privileges description, measurement, and classification over cultural context. However, what she fails to realize is that facts regarding a weaving's physical composition are not gathered so as to remove the textile from its context. Rather, they are used to construct and flesh out context. This kind of research ultimately works to render the individual weaver *more* visible. Details of yarn and dye usage and of a piece's provenance are tools used to attribute works to particular artists. Determining by whom and when a piece was made allows us to geographically and historically situate it. M'Closkey seems to have little awareness of the nature of art historical methodologies and how they can be useful in achieving the goals she espouses. Without establishing this context, we cannot adequately perform the kind of analysis she advocates. You cannot get to the significant and more interesting aspects of such cultural production until you have completed this initial foundational study. If you forgo it, you sacrifice accuracy and thus risk misattribution and misrepresentation of the context of a work's production.

M'Closkey is right in contending that the individual Navajo women who wove these textiles have been inadequately represented in the historical record. A recuperative project in which they are written back into the record via archival and ethnographic research is imperative. However, to contend that they have been invisible—"swept under the rug"—is a misrepresentation. There are a significant number of twentieth century and contemporary Navajo weavers with considerable name recognition whose lives and work have been well documented. These include Daisy Taugelchee, Gladys and Ruby Manuelito, Suzy Black, Despah Nez, Anna Mae Tanner, Alberta Thomas, Sadie Curtis, Virginia Deal, Kalley Keams, and D. Y. Begay.

Another problem with this book is the choice of authoritative sources. M'Closkey's use of numerous exhibition catalog essays written by gallery owners as the basis for her assertion that nineteenth-century Navajo weavings were crucial to the development of American abstract art in general and color field painting in particular is perhaps the most blatant example of the kind of misinformation that can result from the use of such sources. Such catalog essays,

especially those issued by commercial galleries, are often unreliable sources of scholarship. Written as public relations for galleries (and sometimes museums), they are not subject to the rigors of the scholarly referee process and may, thus, express ideas that are not commonly accepted by scholars in the field.

Although there is very little scholarship on Navajo textiles that is informed by recent theoretical discourse, there is a wealth of general literature on Navajo weaving. The literature on the trading post system is much less extensive. The classic source is Frank McNitt's *The Indian Traders* (1962). Willow Roberts Powers' *Navajo Trading: The End of an Era* (2001) is a more recent source on the topic. Powers presents a viewpoint quite different from M'Closkey's. Funded by the United Indian Traders Association (UITA), a non-profit organization originally formed in 1931 to assist traders in legal disputes and marketing matters, Powers' study serves as an argument in defense of the trading post system. Despite its funding source, it does retain a degree of objectivity and thoroughness that M'Closkey's study lacks. Powers gives a detailed accounting of the rationale and actions of the DNA (Navajo) People's Legal Services, the legal defense association that was instrumental in outlawing questionable trading practices on the Navajo Reservation. M'Closkey, on the other hand, does not seem to feel obligated to present the opposing views that would result in a more balanced scholarly study.

M'Closkey claims that her approach is different because, as "a communications perspective," it is based on the premise that "a phenomenon can be known only in context" (p. 17). She contends that we cannot separate a Navajo weaving from its context if we are to discern its full meaning and significance. This is undoubtedly the case. A fuller explication of her methodology—what she describes as "a communications perspective"—would be helpful. It would allow the reader to more easily discern the theoretical foundations of her argument. In the end, the fundamental problem with this study is that it focuses on "evidence" of exploitation. Rather than analyzing the complex social and cultural interactions and contexts—both Native and non-Native—that have worked to produce such exploitation, M'Closkey focuses on the *effects* of such exploitation. As a result, her analysis lacks depth, coherence, and relevance.

Jennifer McLerran

Curator, Kennedy Museum of Art, Ohio University

Take My Land, Take My Life: The Story of Congress's Historic Settlement of Alaska Native Land Claims, 1960–1971. By Donald Craig Mitchell. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2001. 679 pages. \$29.95 paper.

Don Mitchell's *Take My Land, Take My Life* is the second part of a two-volume history of relations between Alaska Natives and American "visitors" from the Treaty of Cession in 1867 to the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971. The first volume, *Sold American: The Story of Alaska Natives and Their Land, 1867–1959*, is a history of Native life in the territory of