

Hidden in Plain Sight: Facilitating Discovery in Material Culture Resource Collections [Session]
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Provenance, Pedigree and Poverty:

Challenging Museumologists' Discourses on Navajo Textile History

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[..with thanks to Kathy Edwards, Clemson University, for serving as proxy]

Abstract: In 1996, the Heard Museum (Phoenix, AZ), sponsored the symposium and exhibition "Inventing the Southwest: The Fred Harvey Company and Native American Art." Founded in 1876, the Company managed the restaurants and dining cars for the Santa Fe Railroad. A publication featuring essays from twenty contributors accompanied the show. Although sixty percent of the papers dealt with important stakeholders involved with marketing Native American collectibles, none of the authors accessed information from the Company's Indian Department ledger books containing thousands of entries related to the purchase and disposition of Native American creations acquired after 1900. Yet these primary documents were housed *directly above* the symposium's location--in the Museum's library. I use this anecdote as a springboard to critique the profound disconnect between the high value accorded Native American antiquities and the low value attached to their politico-economic context of production.

For generations ethnologists were primary contributors to publications on Native American art. The effort to balance an object-based aesthetics and cultural contextualization expunged the politics of appropriation. Today, books featuring 'shock and awe' collections housed in southwest museums have spawned a diaspora of antique Native American art *and* production of knock-offs of historic designs. These phenomena have triggered a decline in the number of retailers and collectors acquiring contemporary creations, and contributed to increasing impoverishment of thousands of artisans. Recent critiques mounted by archaeologists surrounding the ethics of collecting antiquities provide a convincing platform for analyzing differences in response to appropriation vis à vis local museums support of commercialization.

Brief Biography: Kathy M'Closkey is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology at the University of Windsor, Ontario. Awarded her PhD in Anthropology in 1996, by York University, Toronto, her research has received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

since 1998. She is also a research affiliate with the Southwest Center, University of Arizona, Tucson, the sponsor of *Swept Under the Rug: A Hidden History of Navajo Weaving* (UNM Press, 2002, 2008, ranked Essential by *Choice*). Her forthcoming book *Why the Navajo Blanket Became a Rug: Excavating the Lost Heritage of Globalization*, repositions weavers and woolgrowers within a globalization framework. A weaver for twenty years, and curator of five textile exhibitions, she served as research director for the PBS documentary *Weaving Worlds* (2008), directed by Navajo Bennie Klain (www.visionmakermedia.org). Kathy was recently nominated for the prestigious Weaver-Tremblay Award in Applied Anthropology, conferred annually by the Canadian Anthropology Society.

“We can’t make any choices unless we connect the past with the present. The thing that horrifies me is the forgetfulness.” Studs Terkel

Historical context: Over 200,000 Navajos, or Diné, currently occupy an 8000 hectare reservation in the southwest US. Historically they managed a broad subsistence base that included farming, raiding and trading, but gained a major portion of their subsistence from herding and weaving. Upon formation of the reservation in 1868, the government licensed traders to buy and sell Navajo products (Bailey and Bailey 1986). Although one of the most studied Indigenous Peoples on earth, an enormous amount of evidence languishes in archives which manifests how the inimical effects of free trade over a century ago, triggered Navajo impoverishment in a manner not revealed in other analyses. 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 into saddle blankets and rugs. Women weaving fleece into textiles provided a more secure means of diversification for dozens of reservation traders faced with continual 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) [**NAWM Bulletin 1922**]. Thus Navajos underwent a unique kind of “structural adjustment” not experienced by other American growers subject to tariff protection for clothing wools after 1898. To illustrate: in 1890, \$24,000 worth of weaving was shipped from the Reservation and increased forty-fold by 1930. Ganado, Arizona trader Lorenzo Hubbell and his sons shipped over 200 tons of hand-spun woven textiles between 1893 and 1909 [**blanket shipments**]. Until the 1960s, nearly all textiles were acquired from weavers by weight. Women received credit, not cash, and their saddle blankets and rugs were used by traders to pay down their monthly accounts with regional wholesalers (M’Closkey 2002). Today such “pound blankets” fetch record prices at auctions.

In 1987, anthropologist Gary Witherspoon conservatively estimated that over 100,000 Navajo women had woven more than one million blankets and rugs over the past two centuries. Although women’s textile production was valued at \$1 million year by 1930, providing one-third of the reservation income, women were never integrated into development planning within the Navajo Nation. Economic self-sufficiency was to be achieved through extraction of non-renewable resources. And non-renewable resource development has had unintended

environmental and health consequences, generating two thousand uranium dumps, acres of strip mined land, polluted aquifers, and increased cancer rates. Not only have weavers' economic contributions been airbrushed from the historical record, but until very recently many scholars (Witherspoon is an exception) failed to recognize the crucial role that weaving played in relation to *cultural* survival (Willink and Zolbrod 1996). Dozens of weavers substantiate its importance, revealing the centrality of weaving to Diné lifeways, as they interleave cosmology and history during personal interviews [**Navajo relations**]. Indeed, it was comments made during a series of interviews I had with weavers during the 1990s that drove me to reassess much of the literature because what I was hearing from them was absent from the published record until quite recently. This work was subsequently published in 2002 by the University of New Mexico Press, and titled *Swept Under the Rug: a Hidden History of Navajo Weaving*.

A history of commodification: During the last quarter of the 19th century, the diversity of Indian societies in the Southwest provided the most enticing ethnographic area of North America (Hinsley 1981). As a result, the government financed large-scale collecting. Museums became directly involved in commercializing the region under the auspices of salvaging the material culture of what were assumed to be soon extinct populations, prompting a frenzied removal of artifacts (Berlo 1992, Hardin 1989, Hinsley 1989, Krech and Hail 1999, Parezo 1985, Thompson and Parezo 1989, Wade 1985). Ethnology curators served influential roles as cultural translators and adjudicators of the authenticity and artistic merit of artifacts. William H. Holmes critiqued the “debasement of Pueblo art” published in *American Anthropologist* in 1889. The following information reveals the manner in which this ‘neo-colonial nostalgia’ emerged from a distinguished milieu (Rosaldo 1989).

Scholar/entrepreneur Edgar Hewitt was a tireless advocate of archaeology, anthropology, southwest art and tourism (Fowler 2003, Mullin 2001). He authored the 1906 Antiquities Act, landmark legislation that forbade looting of protected sites and sales of artifacts found within them. Looting of ruins posed a serious threat to the integrity of the archaeological record (Lee 2000). In 1925, Santa Fe intelligentsia founded the Indian Arts Fund, a private organization affiliated with the School of American Research (SAR). This organization sought to preserve the fine antique examples of Indian art from corruption associated with the growing tourist market for cheaper goods (Meyer 2001, Mullin 2001, Phillips 1995, 2002; Thompson & Parezo 1989, Whitaker and Parker 2007). The presence of artists and other partisans of high culture in Santa Fe and Taos underscored the need for vigilance to uphold the qualities manifested in earlier forms (Snead 2002). Prominent ethnologist Oliver LaFarge (1959) opposed government support of cooperatives on Reservations during the Depression. As purists, LaFarge and his ilk felt that escalating production of arts and crafts via co-ops had the potential to gravely compromise quality. For generations, ethnologists' publications on Native American art depicted artisans as “cultural performers” and downplayed the labor involved (Amsden 1934, Blomberg 1988, Hecht 1991, Hedlund 1990, 1997, Reichard 1934, 1936, 1939, Tanner 1968, Wheat 2003, Whitaker 2002).

The following example reveals how museums continue to elide the relationship between historic works and the realities of contemporary life for thousands of artisans. In 1996, the Heard Museum in Phoenix, AZ, sponsored a symposium in conjunction with a major exhibit

“Inventing the Southwest: The Fred Harvey Company and Native American Art.” [The Company, founded in 1876, managed the restaurants and dining cars for the Santa Fe Railroad]. A publication with essays from twenty contributors accompanied the show (Weigle and Babcock 1996). Although over sixty percent of the papers dealt with important stakeholders involved in the marketing of “Indian curios”, none of the authors accessed information from the Company’s Indian Department ledger books that contain thousands of entries related to the purchase and disposition of Native American creations acquired between 1900 and 1940 [FHC/HTP graph]. Yet this significant body of primary documents is housed *directly above* the symposium’s location--in the Museum’s library. I use this anecdote as a springboard to critique the profound disconnect between the high value accorded Native American antiquities and the low value attached to the politico-economic context of production.

How past productivity harms contemporary weavers

Many of the textiles wholesaled by weight until the 1960s currently fetch very high prices in the volatile art market. Sales increased exponentially after the first exhibition of historic Navajo weaving was culled from the collections of twenty famous contemporary artists in the early 1970s (Kahlenberg and Berlant 1972). An estimated \$80 to \$100 million worth of historic weaving has changed hands since that time. Emphasis on historic weaving focuses upon individual textiles, their provenance and pedigree, while ignoring the systemic economic problems, both past and present, which are severe. 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 receives scant attention while museumologists continue to “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. For example, this belonged to crooner Andy Williams (Hedlund 1997). It sold for \$221,000 a year ago (wikicollecting). The stories of the makers of these historic textiles that now bring so much money have literally been “swept under the rug.” The overheated investment market, in tandem with the imported knockoffs, has undermined the market for contemporary weaving. To date there is no response from the academy concerning these threats (M’Closkey 2012).

The object-based aesthetics that continues to dominate southwestern museumology substantiate how the reality of the collection and the collector’s world ultimately defines the object (McLoughlin 1999). 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 [**weaver’s hogan**]. Publications about contemporary Native American art skirt the manner in which artisans are now enmeshed in globalization (Gilster 1996, Hoerig 2003, Tedlock 1992). The topic of pawn is highly romanticized in the popular literature (*Arizona Highways Magazine*) and although Powers (2001) provides the most detailed coverage of the subject, it lacks a critical analysis as an important component of the fringe economy in the region (Jurik 1997, Karger 2005). More recently, dozens of payday loan stores have sprung up in reservation border towns, especially Gallup, NM, with a ratio of one to every six hundred residents (Mack 2007). Pueblo fetish carver Andy Abeita (2006) recently 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.

In contrast, with the implementation of the UNESCO convention on illicit trade in antiquities in 1970 and passage of NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in 1990, archaeologists have become increasingly aware of how their work has serious ramifications in the world of the living (Brodie and Renfrew 2001). After NAGPRA archaeology began to change, to acknowledge and respond to concerns expressed by Native Americans (Biolsi and Zimmerman 1997, Messenger 1999). The *NY Times* featured a series of articles on the entangled relationships between major museums and the international antiquities trade. Illicit trade in cultural property is widely recognized as one of the most prevalent types of organized crime. On March 6, 2006, the New School sponsored a panel discussion called “Who Owns Art.” Participants included two directors of major museums, a philosopher, archaeologist and the *Times* art critic. Discussion highlighted the controversy surrounding antiquities and their provenance. SUNY, Stoney Brook archaeologist Elizabeth Stone spoke out in criticism of scholarly involvement in authentication: “the problem is when you publish it what you’re doing as a scholar is you’re authenticating it. And when you authenticate it its value goes up. You’re participating in the trade” (www.nytimes.com..). Thus critiques mounted by archaeologists surrounding the ethics of collecting provide a convincing platform for analyzing differences in response to appropriation vis à vis museums’ support of commercialization (Fort 2005). Scholars, collectors and dealers, all elite stakeholders, have benefited to the detriment of the descendants of the original creators.

The vigorous and growing market for pre-1950 “collectibles” has greatly undermined the market for contemporary works. Utilizing pertinent information gleaned from archives, publications, and interviews reveals how the sustained ‘culture of connoisseurship’ inadvertently contributes to artisans’ impoverishment. Enormous numbers – in the millions – of textiles, pottery, jewelry, baskets, and carvings housed in museums in North America and Europe, or circulating globally in the volatile antiquities’ market are classified “non-sacred” under NAGPRA and *are not subject to repatriation* (Fine-Dare 2002). Hence U.S. museums and antiquities dealers share a common interest in thwarting Native Americans’ repatriation requests. In their Winter 1998 newsletter, The Antique Tribal Art Dealers’ Association, noted that as collectors, both museums and dealers “share mutual concerns and interests” (1998 #8(1):30).

Yet archaeologists’ resistance and critique of engagement with the Native American antiquities market (post-NAGPRA) contrasts markedly with local ethnologists sustained support of its commercialization (Merrill, Ladd and Ferguson 1993). The object-based aesthetics of southwestern ethnologists unintentionally sustain parallel worlds: the up-scale Santa Fe and Taos scenes populated with antiquities’ dealers, galleries, collectors and museums housing historic ‘shock and awe’ collections, in contrast to the seedy side of contemporary production reflected in the “Gallup grind,” where hundreds of Native Americans labor in sweat shops owned by local or foreign companies. Thus the latter portion of my paper critiques how some museums ‘participate in the trade.’

In 1989 anthropologist Suzanne Baizerman wrote about the escalating interest and shift in type of publication on historic Navajo 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 **[graph of auction sales** (from M'Closkey 2002].

Websites such as "Antiques and the Arts On-line" <http://www.antiquesandthearts.com> review exhibits of historic material culture curated by ethnologists. Dating and sourcing of individual art works are key ingredients, whereas the historic economic transactions between makers and traders lay buried.

Several years ago the Maxwell Museum at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, featured "I Can See by Your Outfit, Wearing Apparel and Native Heritage." The exhibit was curated by local and regional *dealers* in Indian antiquities. Several dealers were featured in the Summer 2005 issue of *Native Peoples'* magazine (Vol XVIII(4): 26-36). Five large Indian antiquities sales operate for weeks prior to the annual contemporary Native American art market held in Santa Fe during the third weekend in August. In 2005, 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 Museum 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 museum curators together. Modeled after *Antiques Roadshow*, the event draws hundreds of participants anxious to discover the value of their treasures (Nichols 2005).

However, due to the potential conflict of interest such events might entail, the University of British Columbia in Vancouver cancelled a similar program:

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 12/19/05 e-mail to author).

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 preservation of material objects trumps cultural survival [Grace Joe].

Native American scholar Deward Walker (1993) has critiqued how scholars 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, for what I might add, for what they *created in the past*. With this critique in mind in tandem with surveying the coffee-table books on "collectibles" evokes consideration that not much has changed in over a century because that's precisely how the first generation of ethnologists behaved in relation to the material culture created by the ancestors of thousands of impoverished Native American artisans. 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." My analysis of the hidden history as revealed in underutilized archives coupled with weavers' stories, begs the question: "Is the history of style really history?" Extant interpretations block a deeper understanding of the value of weaving for Navajos, since provenance and pedigree continue to take precedence over concern for poverty and appropriation (Smith 1999). Thank you.

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