

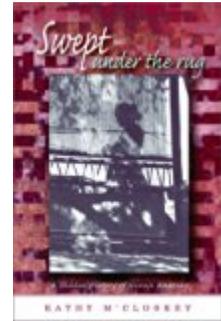
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kathy M'Closkey. *Swept under the Rug: A Hidden History of Navajo Weaving*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002. 336 pp. \$32.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-2831-1.

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The More They Weave the Poorer They Become

Navajo teachings contain descriptions of Navajo weaving whose thrust is that weaving was a skill the Navajo learned from Spider Woman while still in the underworld. By contrast, the majority of ethnographic, historic, and aesthetic studies propose that weaving is a skill the Navajo acquired after they arrived in the American Southwest. Much of these latter studies are inundated with recycled romantic stereotypes about Navajo weaving and weavers, and the relations between weavers and traders. Still, since such studies received broad circulation they inevitably influenced the formation of ideas and standards about Navajo weaving and culture. With few exceptions, these ideas have been Euro-American-centered. Kathy M'Closkey's *Swept under the Rug* sets out to deconstruct the cultural history of Navajo weaving; provide a more emic information about the aesthetic and cultural context of Navajo weaving; and critique the art world that functions within confines that span between trading posts, auction houses, museums, art dealers, ethnographers, and historians, but overlooks the weavers and their cultural milieu.

Following the introduction, chapters 2 through 5 examine the effects of the imposed economic relations on Navajos. M'Closkey describes how, since the formation of the Navajo reservation, Navajo resources and labor were exploited by non-Navajos that, in so doing, turned the reservation into an internal colony, a satellite, vis-à-vis the centers of regional and national political and economic powers. Chapter 6 scrutinizes the transformation of historic Navajo weavings from craft to art. This chap-

ter examines the profits the lucrative art market offered those who collect and invest in Navajo rugs at the expense of the Navajo people who weave them. As market demand for historic Navajo rugs augmented their value, it simultaneously deprived Navajo people of their own cultural heritage because historic weavings were rendered out of reach for the Navajo Nation's own museum. Chapter 7 re-examines Navajo weaving and aesthetics from a Navajo perspective, and chapter 8 provides a fresh look at Navajo weaving as an art form and explores its meaning to Navajos weavers.

M'Closkey rooted *Swept under the Rug* in rich archival documents, including the records of traders, government offices, and other primary sources, which she intertwines with ethnographic interviews of Navajo weavers she conducted during 1992. Placing her study in the context of neo-Marxian, feminist, and postmodern analyses, provided the foundations for placing the non-capitalist Navajo weaving and culture in the context of a Southwest and national consumerist socio-economy. The book subsequently provides a fresh look at previously uncontested, and often recycled, idealistic stereotypes of the relation between weavers and traders that have dominated the literature. M'Closkey also breaks away from the mold by providing a voice to Navajo weavers, whose views on weaving and its cultural meanings have gone almost unnoticed by scholars (and thus unknown in the general public). *Swept under the Rug* writes weavers into the pages of history and gives them a forum, albeit limited, to influence readers' views on weaving and its place

in Navajo cultural context.

M'Closkey argues time and again that close examination of archival data refutes most of the romantic generalizations that dominate anthropological, historical, and popular literature on Navajo weaving. Her archival analysis discloses that almost all Navajo weavings were wholesaled by weight (rather than artistic value) until the 1960s. Her analysis further reveals that interaction between traders, art dealers, and museum curators facilitated and exploited demand for older historic rugs. Such demand ultimately resulted in a sharp increase in the market value of historic rugs on one hand, but also in a reduction in the value of more contemporary Navajo rugs. The marketing of Mexican knockoffs of Navajo rugs further diminishes the demands for contemporary Navajo rugs, and thus the income of weavers. M'Closkey's analysis dispels the myth that Navajo weavers prefer bartering to cash, and shows that an incredible increase in Navajo weavers' labor coincided with impoverishment rather than higher profits.

Much of the exploitation of Navajo weavers that M'Closkey alludes to has been justified by academic publications that furthered the view that Navajo rugs are secular craft products, not religious art. Academic scholars tend to use the prevailing Euro-American standards of cultural history. Subsequently, the majority of the literature on Navajo weaving does not reflect Navajo cultural history and values, but rather history through the eyes of members of the dominant society that also control the marketing of Navajo rugs and culture. With few exceptions, ethnographies and other publications have

not addressed the weavers' perspective at all. M'Closkey, based on interviews with Navajo weavers, suggests that the weaving of rugs goes beyond regional and national economics and Euro-American aesthetic concepts. For many Navajo weavers the feeling of *hó? ó*—the concept of beauty, harmony, goodness, and happiness that is central to Navajo culture—and the “process” of weaving are central. These ideals are different and encompass more than the Euro-American aesthetic concepts. M'Closkey further suggests that Navajo weaving is marginalized because its true meaning is overlooked and its commoditization as a collectable craft further detaches it from its cultural context. Furthermore, the low prices weavers have received for their rugs combined with shortage in alternative sources of income have resulted in increased weaving production and, subsequently, further lowering of rug prices.

Swept under the Rug provides a much-needed and fresh cultural history of Navajo weaving. M'Closkey's insight and sensitivity to Navajo culture combined with the solid archival research that she intertwined with original ethnographic interview materials sheds light on Navajo weavers' thoughts, beliefs, sensibilities, and attitudes toward the rugs they create. The book also provides a voice to the weavers' interpretation of the creative process, its cultural context, and the economic framework in which they operate. *Swept under the Rug* provides academic and non-academic readers with a fresh insight into the distinct qualities of Navajo weaving, the economics of weaving, and beauty in the world of weavers-artists who happen to be Navajos.

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