UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title
Patterns of Exchange: Navajo Weavers and Traders. By Teresa J. Wilkins.

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0zf710jz

Journal
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 38(3)

ISSN
0161-6463

Author
Zolbrod, Paul G.

Publication Date
2014-06-01

DOI
10.17953

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

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Patterns of Exchange: Navajo Weavers and Traders. By Teresa J. Wilkins. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. 231 pages. $34.95 cloth; $19.95 paper.

> *"Weaving was sacred back then," she said. She remembered the old prayers, and she knew all the old stories—the quarrel between the men and the women, the greedy gambler, the mighty giants, the Warrior Twins who defeated them. She grew up on those old tales and on the Coyote stories, too. Stories were important, especially in wintertime. Everybody would go into a special stone hogan, with no lamp, no lantern; light came only from a fire somebody would start with an old spindle-like device. When the fire began to blaze, elders would tell of the ancient times while the younger people listened in wild-eyed wonder until they fell asleep. Then the grown-ups' stories would begin. Eventually those stories found their way into the rugs, even if some of the weavers were reluctant to talk about them with outsiders.*

Christine Morgan from Mariano Lake, New Mexico, recalled these memories in the mid-1990s, when she was in her nineties. They appear in *Weaving a World: Textiles and the Navajo Way of Seeing,* which I coauthored with Roseann Willink, a Navajo from a noteworthy weaving family. In that volume we sought to explore what was personally expressed in rugs by the weavers in the context of a myth-based storytelling tradition applied at the loom consciously or indirectly. We purposely selected elderly, Native speakers who were not practicing Christians and remembered firelit gatherings during long winter nights of storytelling. Our aim was to get to know weavers not merely as producers, but as thinking individuals steeped in a tradition little known. Somewhat similarly to the weavers Teresa Wilkins interviews in *Patterns of Exchange: Navajo Weavers and Traders*, Christine Morgan's commentary typifies how the loom was central to an essentially Navajo identity, although hers more narrowly specifies the defining influence of creation mythology.

Hence what I most admire about Wilkins' fine volume is how fully the author broadens that context. With her detailed story of the trade from its beginning in the aftermath of the Long Walk, and her understanding of the complex relationship between those whose art it was and the traders who promoted a market for it, she adds substantially to what we were able to record. A veteran of years of formal study, patient, detailed research, and open-minded fieldwork, bolstering her book with carefully chosen photographs, Wilkins helps confirm what few practiced scholars of Navajo weaving, museum officials, front line traders, and above all, enthusiastic buyers, have failed to realize. The Navajo loom is a place where an elaborate worldview materializes with deliberate thought and reflection. Its products manifest a sense of self in full harmony with a shared tradition far richer than outsiders have managed to grasp, and one that can be observed in many a Navajo textile.

As her narrative progresses, Wilkins places Navajo selfhood in a tightly reciprocal culture where an individual's worth is measured by what she contributes to the larger collective kinship unit, whereas for traders, personal worth is tabulated in ledgers marking individual profit and loss in a capitalistic framework. To be sure, traders were eager to work with their client weavers and often did so generously. For them, however, it was ultimately a matter of self-interest, whereas for the tribally oriented yet stubbornly individualistic weavers, their earnings were freely shared, for only with collective well-being could they survive and flourish singularly. That reciprocal principle underlies a surviving ceremonial system of scrupulously maintained social balance identified in a network of mythic stories amounting to nothing less than a comprehensive way of life. The author surveys that relationship across the span of seven well-integrated, clearly written chapters, from its early inception following an infamous four years of captivity, to the post-millennium present. Working from an unprecedented Navajo perspective, she recognizes key differences between contrasting views of individualism in a market economy and a tribal community.

In her introductory chapter she establishes the historic Hubbell trading post as the appropriate venue for initiating her study. Thereafter she provides in chapter 2 a detailed history of the trader-weaver marketing alliance begun in the aftermath of the Long Walk. The heart of the volume resides in chapters 3 and 4, titled respectively "The Creation of a Usable Past," and "We Weave What We Want," wherein Wilkins asserts that indigenous worldview as she describes what began as a trader-dominated relationship. Chapter 3 describes how sometimes-unsteady relationship forged a "usable past" that worked to the mutual benefit of traders and weavers alike as a market developed for an authentic "primitive" craftsmanship. With the growth of industrialization in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, amid economic devastation both nationwide and at home on a newly established reservation, Hubbell and his fellow early traders promoted a mail order, tourist-oriented market. The resulting demand, however, reflected not tradition-driven Native aesthetic values, but expectations based on a past that buyers were induced to define. Traders even commissioned painters to produce copies of what became a "classic" style they themselves devised for weavers to follow. In other words, they knew best what made the product "authentic." She then demonstrates in chapter 4 how the weavers overcame contrasting views of what was authentic to maintain their artistic integrity in the face of advantages built into the trading post system for dealers. While the weavers appeared to comply, they managed to insinuate their own culture-driven individuality with subtly woven-in expressions of selfhood that are largely overlooked to this day.

Thus, as the author's account unfolds, thanks to her alert use of the archival record, an astute analytical skill in examining rugs, and above all an open-minded willingness to listen, we learn how Navajo weavers eventually took control of a market that continues to become increasingly their own. Chapter 5 follows a deepening awareness of selfhood among weavers as trade relationships shifted with changing market conditions. In chapter 6 readers then learn firsthand from Navajo weavers how the old trading system has given way to new marketing practices. And in chapter 7 we see Navajo weavers gain greater autonomy as they learn to control the market and reach out globally with greater self-assurance. Accordingly, her narrative becomes one of eventual triumph, much the way Navajos ultimately triumphed in appearing to acquiesce to a treaty put in writing by their ostensible Long Walk captors, one that allowed them to return to their homeland while other tribes were removed to reservations elsewhere.

Much of the hitherto-unrecognized story of Navajo weaving emerges here, but in my estimation a final dimension goes unnoticed, absent full awareness of the storytelling foundation underlying what elders relate. To be sure, Wilkins reinforces what we learned from so many venerable old weavers and cannot be faulted for ignoring that mythic past; her concern is with the implications of weaver participation in trade, whereas our study focused more directly on the link between work at the loom and actual narrative. Yet her story remains incomplete as long as an underlying rich oral tradition is neglected, with its capacity to say more about what underlies the appeal of a truly native art form.

Providing a case in point, the book's full-page photos appear in black and white, whereas Wilkins evidently intended them to be in color. That lapse matters, since her argument evokes the deep aesthetics of Navajo weaving, which in turn draws much from creation mythology. For example, shown in black and white as "classic style" samples, plates two, three, and four lack the vibrant central brightness customarily characteristic of that pattern. Nor can slight shifts in color and hue register in a black-white image. Yet each rug is like a day, weavers repeatedly told us, progressing from female sunrise start to male sunset finish and often indicated by a subtle measure of brightness at its bottom and a darker one at the top, sometimes clearly evident, sometimes merely suggested.

Resonant with the creation story is how such pairing matches the cycle's central theme of male-female harmony embodied by Asdzáá nádleelhé, the goddess Changing Woman, and Jóhonaa'éi the Sun god, whose consort she agrees to become. Their union, which restores lost order in a triumphant outcome, places the newly fashioned world in harmony so that humans can now be created. While the story itself is an intricate one and exists in a number of versions characteristic of an oral tradition, that harmonious male-female

relationship is its manifest theme, central to the identity that the weavers managed to maintain as they plied their art in a market that progressed from trader-led to their own. This, of course, is not the place for further exploration of how Wilkins invites readers to place more fully what that means in its proper cultural context according to a storied legacy yet to be fully discovered. But what she writes here paves the way.

Paul G. Zolbrod
Diné College-Crownpoint, New Mexico

Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights. By Dian Million. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013. 240 pages. $50.00 cloth; $26.95 paper; $60.00 ebook.

In our current age of human rights and neoliberalism, where trauma becomes the primary ethos through which violence is understood, what does healing look like? Athabascan scholar Dian Million explores this question within the context of indigenous self-determination in Canada. Employing an indigenous feminist methodology and making critical interventions into the fields of indigenous studies, human rights political theory, and affect studies, Million examines the sociopolitical ramifications of the trauma and human rights frameworks within First Nations communities. Focusing in particular on healing projects that ask victims to narrate and witness their truth, Million seeks alternative notions of self-determination that go beyond the self-managing projects of neoliberalism, powerfully illustrating that these alternatives can be found within indigenous women's activisms, narratives, and community work.

Million begins by stating that the space of human rights is neither neutral nor objective, but rather a volatile site that must be contextualized within the current moment of neoliberal multicultural biopolitics. She tracks how the advocacy revolution of therapeutic humanitarianism works through naming and shaming human rights abuses, thus operationalizing shame through an international economy to invoke political pressure. Million insightfully argues that this framework suggests a shift from empowering political agency to victimology, thus posing a dangerous predicament for indigenous peoples, who must define the terms of self-determination even as they witness and identify as trauma victims of state violence.

The healing projects that have come out of indigenous peoples' narratives of trauma often emphasize self-management over self-determination, which Million argues is indicative of a neoliberal ethopolitics that capitalizes