

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF NAVAJO AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of Navajo rugs as 'collectibles' for Anglos (Anglo-Americans) has diminished our understanding of Navajo aesthetics. Navajo weavers' feeling for *hózhó* (beauty/harmony/local order) encompasses far more than the Western concept of 'classical aesthetics' which locates 'beauty' in the isomorphic object. Based on extensive interviews with weavers, I argue that weaving is a form of metacommunication which imparts information that cannot be transmitted discursively. Drawing on Gregory Bateson's concept of aesthetics, and adapting topological illustrations from Wilden, I demonstrate that weaving serves as an example of a recursive-hierarchical system, that is a system whose patterns of interconnection are recursive and in which weaving is a 'signifying event' that signals movement, mapping and transformation.. Utilizing this communicational perspective enables an understanding of why Navajo women would continue to weave under persistent, difficult conditions, and gives a counter-perspective to the split between Navajo conception of pattern in a rug and rug as commodity. The Anglo insistence on dividing pattern from commodity threatens Navajo life ways.

1. INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Navajos are internationally known for their beautiful hand-made textiles woven of wool from their flocks. About 250,000 Diné (as many prefer to be called), currently occupy an 8000 hectare reservation that straddles parts of western New Mexico, eastern Arizona and southern Utah. Of Athabaskan linguistic stock, they are the largest population of Native Americans north of Mexico. Anthropologists and archaeologists are in general agreement that Diné borrowed loom weaving from the Pueblo people after migrating into the region approximately 800 years BP [Before Present]. As pastoralists for more than four centuries, weaving, wool production, livestock, and horticulture provided a major portion of their subsistence until WWII (Iverson 2002). By 1800 the Navajo blanket had become the

most valuable trade item among southwest tribes (van Valkenburgh and McPhee 1974). After formation of the Reservation in 1868, Diné self-sufficiency was undermined in part because government-licensed traders fostered a dependence on expendable commodities (Aberle 1983). Wool production more than doubled between 1890 and 1910, yet textile production escalated more than 800% (M'Closkey 1994, 2002). Government reports confirmed that textile production by Navajos was 'the most profitable of the native industries...and is done by women in their spare time' (Sells 1913). Nevertheless weavers lost control of the market as commercial trade blanket manufacturers appropriated the form, materials and designs (Kapoun 1992), and sold thousands of manufactured blankets through traders to Native Americans formerly provisioned by Navajo weavers.

Today non-renewable resource extraction provides most of the Navajo Nation's revenue. Over 25,000 weavers face increasing difficulties finding buyers for their rugs. Their market has been decimated by the volatile investment in historic textiles (pre-1950), combined with the dramatic rise in 'knock-offs' woven in over fifteen different countries and sold via the Internet. For decades, Navajos' per capita income has remained at 20% of the national average of the United States (Downer 1990). Unlike artisan production in Australia and Nunavut, cooperatives are rare, and private enterprise continues to dominate marketing and sales (Myers 2002, Graburn 1976). The U S government does not recognize communal property rights, thus historic Navajo designs reside in the 'public domain.'

The concern of this article will be on Navajo aesthetics rather than the Navajo economy but there is a strong relationship. The aesthetics currently embraced in most texts on Navajo weaving are variants familiar to individuals versed in classical art history. They concern the philosophy of taste and standards of beauty, referenced in terms of the individual. Presumed to be disinterested and value-free, grounded in Kantian idealism, classical aesthetics espouses a type of universalized 'atomism.' Although at first glance, aesthetics appears to be qualitative and value-free, it is frequently translated into quantified form. The most blatant example occurred in 1989, when Sotheby's auctioned a 19th century Navajo blanket, originally appraised at \$150,000, for over one-half million dollars.

Most publications view Navajo textiles as commodities. Anglo-American concepts concerning the commodity functions of textiles has shaped perceptions of what a blanket or rug 'means' The popularity of the Navajo rug as a 'collectible' for Anglos has obscured the importance of weaving for Diné and has also diminished our understanding of Navajo aesthetics, including the process of weaving. With few exceptions non-Navajos fail to see it as part of a circuit of relationships in which Navajo are themselves embedded. Yet textile experts and museologists subject individual textiles to

detailed, even microscopic analyses, and have developed an elaborate typology as an aid to classification. These methodologies are reported to facilitate the discovery of ‘the elusive Navajo aesthetic’ (Hedlund 1989, Kent 1985, Wheat 1989, 1990). In a recent publication documenting the struggles of First Nations women, Anna Lee Walters (1993:12) explains why scholars have experienced difficulty understanding native lifeworlds:

Modern American society for the most part has passed through a western education system that breaks down lifestyles and the cycles of the cultures and lifestyles exposed to it into the smallest units for study and examination, habitually separating politics from social life, medicine from education...in much the same way academic disciplines or areas of specialization are now separated or viewed in our everyday life, and this fragmentation will prevent anyone from perceiving tribal lifestyles on this continent as they were a century or a millennium ago. In more traditional tribal lifestyles these cultural aspects have been fully integrated with each other.

The argument I will present displays Navajo weavers' feeling for *hózhó* (beauty/harmony/local order) that encompasses far more than the Western concept of ‘classical aesthetics.’ Classical aesthetics condenses and locates ‘beauty’ in an isomorphic object (Ingold 1996, 2000; Witherspoon 1977, 1987). The classical perspective privileges the object in the external world isomorphic to the form or image which current aesthetic taste represents as ‘beautiful’ or containing quality. In contrast, Navajo aesthetics places emphasis on patterns of relations. Rather than privileging typology, an understanding of Navajo aesthetics requires an understanding of a topology whose patterns of interconnections are recursive, and whose primary significance for Navajo emerges through weaving. In their own statements, weavers express, maintain and perpetuate *hózhó* through their weaving, and such activities relate to their cosmology. As I shall argue, weaving is a form of metacommunication.

The views, values and assumptions of the dominant society are reflected in the construction of Navajo textile history. This is why I shall argue that the perspective adopted by Anglo anthropologists and museologists provides an inappropriate context of explanation undergirding most texts on Navajo weaving. Museologists working with Navajo textiles are not concerned with ontology, either their own, or that of Diné. We might describe the museologists' model of what constitutes a rug as ‘Cartesian.’ That is, one gains information about the rug by breaking it into its simplest measurable components, and constructing a story about provenance based on the results of scientific analyses. Individual weavings are categorized and classified as to type, style, and age (Hedlund 1990, 2003; Rodee 1981; Whittaker 2002). Privileging this empirical and quantifiable knowledge fills up the field. Although mathematically precise in terms of measurements, textiles have been excised from their proper context. Thus practitioners of standard museological methods have fallen heir to White-

head's 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness.' As empiricists, museologists are caught in a proverbial bind: the manner in which they structure their research determines the way they perceive the results. Their methodology becomes their epistemology.

In addition, most information related to Navajo textile production is discursive. This digital information is verbal, rational, abstract, and incomplete. It is a way of thinking that posits the traders' influence as obliterating the wisdom of Navajo weavers. Since Navajo weaving is about relationships and because these textiles are a primary form of metacommunication they impart information that cannot be transmitted discursively. Navajo society has its distinctive wisdom: it recognizes that the 'unit of survival' is itself and the non-human world. The recursiveness, redundancy and patterning that occur in weaving over the past century is a means of revealing how Navajo perpetuated their relationships in the face of disruptions from government personnel, traders and educators intruding on their world. Though current explanations, based on a plethora of empirical studies related to the persistence of weaving appear to be logical, they are limited, and because they pay no regard to the formal aspect of weaving as metacommunication, ultimately distort the perspectives of the weavers, and of Navajo society in general.

2. THE AESTHETICS OF NAVAJO WEAVING:

2.1. Anthropologists' Perspectives

Weaving plays a pivotal role in the origin and maintenance of the Navajo People. In their Creation story weaving defines meaningful social relationships among members of the community and between the community and the entire cosmos. Such relations are still very real and very important to many Navajo (Willink and Zolbrod 1996). Navajo cosmology also provides a charter for proper social behaviour, yet few publications on Navajo weaving acknowledge the links between social relations and cosmology.

When individuals from one culture start looking at the patterns of another culture, they will often see what their culture has trained them to see. When one complex culture comes into contact with another, the tendency is to oversimplify. The themes of the other culture are actually complex patterns, yet they are simplified, or reified, and the mode of interaction tends to become quantitative (money, trade) (Berman 1989:196). This process aptly describes what has happened to Diné weavers and their textiles in most extant literature. The most important aspects of textiles are seen to revolve around their function as a commodity. This is the case for the detailed descriptions that anthropolo-

gists provided on the role of weaving in Navajo society. The well-known ethnographer, Gladys Reichard, frames the copious information she provides on all aspects of weaving much as it is framed in modernist Euroamerican societies: that is, as women's activity associated with the domestic sphere engaged in for practical purposes. Historically, anthropologists categorized weaving as a secular, functional activity vis-à-vis the sacred sphere of Navajo ceremonials. Reichard, among the very first to report on the Navajo, repeatedly used terms such as 'religion,' 'sacred,' 'ceremony,' and 'ritual' to describe practices engaged in by medicine men. The use of such terms, however, connotes a division between sacred and secular spheres that is alien to many Navajo (Kelley and Francis 1994:9; Ortiz 1999). In contrast, Navajo weavers do not categorize weaving as secular, but they do express reluctance in discussing matters relating to the sacred. Thus it is important to focus on these differences in perception about the 'Navajo aesthetic.'

Gladys Reichard was one of the few anthropologists to undertake long term studies of a craft. Reichard was a master of poetic description, and a keen observer who produced three books during the 1930s specifically on Navajo weaving. In these texts she weaves the story of her frustrating apprenticeship into the daily activities, religious ceremonials, excursions and festivities that make up the annual cycle of Navajo life. The rich detail in her texts appears to provide the reader with a holistic, insightful view into another lifeworld. She comments upon the unceasing cooperation and reciprocity among Navajos. When she spoke of weavers' feelings about their work, Reichard couched them in terms of Western aesthetics associated with decorative design. That is, a certain percentage of weavers in the tribe were 'real artists...who would experiment with colors for hours' (Reichard 1936:27). Although Reichard (1934) excerpts a portion of the Creation Story, she seldom refers back to Navajo cosmology in her account of the trials and tribulations of learning to spin and weave. One of the striking aspects of her texts on the subject concerns the ease with which weaving is incorporated into daily domestic life, unlike the sacred time when the *hogan* is purified and male chanters create the elaborate sand paintings in preparation for a ceremony. Navajo medicine men perpetuate religion and culture in the spiritual realm while Navajo women provide material sustenance by weaving commodities. Both are functional activities in their respective spheres. Therefore, a balance appears to be created. Such a perceived demarcation appears to support Mircea Eliade's contrast between mythical time and religion (the sacred past), with the profane, historical present.

Reichard notes that silverwork and weaving were borrowed fairly recently from Mexican and Pueblo sources, adopted for primarily economic reasons. Thus weaving and silversmithing never became thoroughly integrated into the spiritual life of the tribe:

the Navajo have kept the symbolic designs of their religion apart, in a separate compartment of their minds, from their ordinary blanket and silverwork patterns. The form occasionally overlaps; the emotions are kept distinct (Reichard 1936:183).

Her research is considered definitive in its depth and breadth, and anthropologists currently working in the field continue to quote her. Texts on Navajo weaving frequently begin with the following paragraph describing the mythological origins of the loom and weaving tools excerpted from the Creation Story:

Spider Woman instructed the Navajo women how to weave on a loom which Spider Man told them how to make. The crosspoles were made of sky and earth cords, the warp sticks of sun rays, the healds of rock crystal and sheet lightning. The batten was a sun halo, white shell made the comb. There were four spindles: one a stick of zigzag lightning with a whorl of cannel coal; one a stick of flash lightning with a whorl of turquoise; a third had a stick of sheet lightning with a whorl of abalone; a rain streamer formed the stick of the fourth, and its whorl was white shell (Reichard 1934).

Authors then launch into a description of the historical origins of Navajo weaving stressing that everything connected with weaving was borrowed: sheep from the Spanish, the upright loom from the Pueblos, dyes from the Anglos, and so forth. Because none of the ‘ingredients’ was indigenous, most authors disclaim any symbolism or sacred associations attached to the woven textiles. Scant attention is paid to the role of weaving in the Navajo Creation Story; it is relegated to a footnote, a charming bit of myth. Production for external markets, foreign influences and materials are perceived as submerging any sacred associations that weaving may have held for Navajos (Amsden 1934, Kent 1985, Reichard 1936, Wheat 1988).

2.2. Gary Witherspoon And Semiotic Geometry

In contrast to such interpretations, Gary Witherspoon (1987) claims that Navajo women have woven (and continue to weave) archetypal symbols of Navajo cosmology. The omnipresent hourglass motif he identifies as ‘Changing Woman’ can be found also in petroglyphs, adult hair styles and ritual paraphernalia, and rug patterns. Forms and patterns have changed over time, but the underlying motifs remain distinctly Navajo. Witherspoon (1987:99) claims that every culture has two sets of symbols by which it codifies and communicates its concepts and meanings. The first is language, and the second is found in material forms and actions which are imbued with symbolic meanings. Navajo weaving has not lost its identity or its creative autonomy even though it underwent a period of Pueblo absorption and Spanish influence prior to the appearance of Anglo traders and markets.

Witherspoon states that Diné were neither diminished nor destroyed by more numerous, more powerful and technologically superior societies. Instead, they have endured and flourished due to:

[their] ability to synthesize aesthetics with pragmatics, internal culture expression with external market influence, individual creativity with universal cultural theme, is at the very heart of their vigour, vitality and adaptability as a human society. Their transformations were culturally inspired and facilitated, not materially determined (Witherspoon 1987:4).

Thus Witherspoon links techniques, symbols and process together with cosmology. However, he goes on to construct his argument, a 'semiotic geometry' as he calls it, through models grounded in structural linguistics. He claims the primary metaphysical assumption upon which the Navajo worldview is built is the opposition between static and active phases of phenomena. Thus energy, activity and motion constantly recur in Navajo sandpaintings, ritual music and weaving, and these forms appear in both 'static' and 'active' phases pervading all Navajo material culture. Witherspoon (1977:48-49) estimates there are several hundred thousand permutations of the word 'to go' in the Navajo language. If all the verbs relating 'to move' as well as 'to go' were included, the number of possible conjugations would be astronomical: 'movement is the basis of life...life is exemplified by movement' (Witherspoon 1977:53). The universe is a place of motion and process; no state of being is permanently fixed. Beauty, balance and orderliness are conditions that must be continuously recreated. He proposes a binary opposition or dualism, between the passive male principle and the active female principle that is expressed through the maintenance of *hózhó* through rigid adherence to formulaic ritual and the more fluid productive/reproductive activities. *Hózhó* encompasses balance, harmony, health, peace, and blessing. Both ritual activity and weavers' artistic compositions express, accentuate and celebrate the inherent beauty and magnificence of the universe (Witherspoon 1987:103).

Anthropologists frequently look to linguists for models which can help them analyse non-verbal modes of communication. Edmund Leach (1976:93), is typical of this genre. Non-verbal dimensions of culture are organized in patterned sets so as to incorporate 'coded information' in a manner analogous to the sounds, words and sentences in language. Art forms are treated as if they had features comparable to the rules of syntax in language. They are perceived as containing a 'visual grammar' which may be 'read.' Modes of communication such as dance and dress are also subject to analyses suited to and developed for linguistic models since they are seen to be inter-changeable isomorphic units (Turner 1967, 1975; Leach 1976; Levi-Strauss 1963). Below, I will propose a very different model of communication, one that includes the notion of metacommunication, recursive contexts

and redundancy, all very different notions to Witherspoon's semiotic geometry or to structural linguistics.

2.3. Navajo Weaving: Museologists' Perspectives

Reichard's perspective on Navajo aesthetics has been adopted by most museologists. Kate Peck Kent (1985:111) maintains that:

rugs woven in this century will not tell us anything about Navajo personality or values because Anglo traders and markets have influenced Navajo weavers so much that any meanings or aesthetic styles which may have existed in early weavings were extinguished....The search for a distinctive Navajo aesthetic ends with the onset of the Rug period. When weavers ceased to manufacture blankets for their own use and turned to the production of rugs for sale to whites, they accepted Anglo American standards of taste.

Kent's research spanning three decades, was based on empirical descriptions of textiles in various public and private collections, in conjunction with analyses of archival and published documents on the subject. These were her primary sources as she did no ethnographic fieldwork. After examining hundreds of textiles, Kent found that 'Navajo weavers struck a balance between eclecticism and originality' and (1985: 109, 111) perceived the 'Navajo aesthetic' as 'a set of formal stylistic principles, associated with characteristics of style and standards of taste.' Although Kent does not deny that Navajo designs may be based on a set of unconscious, culturally defined principles, like Reichard, she notes that weavers have proven particularly adept at incorporating diverse materials, techniques and designs influenced by Pueblo, Spanish and Anglo sources:

Navajo weaving has no deep historical roots in cultural tradition. Essentially, it has always been a commercial link with other Indians, Spanish, and Anglo-Americans. As such, it has thrived on innovation, change, and outside contacts (Kent 1976:101).

The driving factors behind the continued production by Navajo weavers are both economic necessity and internal creativity. As a result weavers' aesthetic judgements rest upon technical skills as much as visual designs. Technique, in particular, becomes the common denominator that links the diversity of Navajo textile production for several centuries:

Harmony in color and balance in design structure are consistently named by Navajo critics themselves as the most important aesthetic imperatives of textile design. In addition, the Navajo judge the aesthetic value of a rug on the basis of the weavers' technical skill. Evaluating an art object in terms of the technical skill with which it was made, rather than as a personal expression is a widespread

practice in nonwestern societies. This is because technical skills are variable and can be objectively assessed and compared (Kent 1985:114).

Kent notes how harmony and balance are related to the aesthetics of colour and design in individual textiles. However, she fails to perceive how these factors are vital aspects of Navajo culture in general.

2.4. Contemporary Navajo Weaving As 'Art'

In more recent exhibitions a shift has occurred from descriptions of the 'loom centered' rug to the weaver herself. This recent shift in perception emphasizes the weaver as individual artist, who may in fact be providing for her family through selling her work, but wishes to be seen as an artist and not as a craftsperson (Hedlund 1992). Given the attitudes and perceptions concerning the creation of 'fine' art, and the status that artists hold in North American society, implies that weaving is a fruitful way to ensure an increased financial return to a select number of weavers. An example of this type of weaver-centred analysis occurs in the catalogue essay accompanying the exhibition 'Reflections of the Weaver's World.' The exhibition title implies a static representation vis à vis my interpretation proposed below (Neuman, this vol). An aesthetic of modernism informs the curator's perspective:

the rugs and tapestries are personal statements in themselves, if we can only learn to view them as such, instead of as a collectively and anonymously produced native craft items...the exhibition draws from the past while looking to the future...Navajo rugs are works of art, valuable to the weavers and other viewers for their visual impact... recognizing and acknowledging the Navajo artists as any mainstream artists might be, becomes important in order to get beyond biases toward Navajo weaving as craft, as trader-driven, as economically imperative, rather than as art and as individual visual statements of self...(Hedlund 1994:32, 35).

This exhibition includes a set of flash cards with different Navajo designs. The written material accompanying the display defines ethnoaesthetics as 'how different societies decide what makes a design look good or bad.' Each textile is perceived as an aesthetic product of an individual self-conscious artist, the weaver as cultural trend setter. This current perspective tethers contemporary Navajo weaving to gallery aesthetics. The construction of the history, display and preservation of textiles reveals the views, values and assumptions of the caretakers. Together with Reichard, Vogt's (1961) acculturation model continues to influence museologists' publications.

3. THE RUG IS A WAY OF LIFE FOR THE DINÉ:

The following section excerpts comments from weavers I interviewed over a seven week period after moving to the Reservation in the fall of 1992. Weavers' commentary reverberates with statements about relationships. References are made linking cosmology, kinship solidarity, harmony, and process. Weavers' statements contrast sharply with most published literature on the subject of Navajo textiles. As I have suggested, with the exception of Witherspoon, most ethnography on Navajo weaving lacks commentary relevant to these circuits of relations and is therefore, deficient for appropriate interpretation of informants' statements.

Several weavers remarked that weaving is a very emotional skill, that is difficult to talk about. Sometimes weavers make direct reference to the landscape. One may see a 'rug' of many shades when she looks out of her *hogan* because of the beautiful colours. One weaver said:

life grow out of the land, woman grows out of the earth.. the Beautyway...women change the world..rear sheep, shear... all the movements and tensions into a rug...

Another woman remarked that weaving provides a chance to experience

hózhó ...beauty, harmony, there's a song, story and prayer behind each rug...' Another weaver repeated the phrase, and added '...and they are all from the spider.'

Grace Joe, a weaver in her eighties, told me the following story (through a translator) that her mother had told her:

long ago a woman named Mary got frustrated with her weaving--just couldn't weave, so she cut up her weaving and threw it toward the east. A few days later she heard singing...she travelled toward the sounds and found her rug singing. She brought it back and started weaving towards all directions. The song came from her weaving, and the loom frame and tools were making the music...

Several other weavers and other Diné also knew this story, with variations. One woman said that the weaver's tools began to cry when she threw them away. When she picked them up again, they began to sing. Another weaver remarked that the weaver's frustration was 'a lesson in itself.' In a follow-up interview with a weaver who spoke no English, I told this story and her sister-in-law translated. Suddenly the woman became very excited and she began to speak very quickly in Navajo ...'there's a song for everything...[she picked up her spindle]...for spinning...for weaving...and they're all from the spider....' She admitted she prays all the time too. She is Christian, but she also goes to the medicine man when necessary. Both women emphasized how important it is to keep animals and

to weave...’we don't know what is going to happen in the future...we must raise animals, grow food, and provide for our families....’

My richest interview lasted six hours and involved a mother, her daughter and her daughter's husband. A weaver in her sixties, Susie raised her eleven children on her weaving. She was told not to tell the weaving stories that her grandfather related during the wintertime in the evening: ‘if you tell others, it diminishes the value of your work...they take it away from you.’ Susie told her daughter (who translated) that she cannot talk about this to non-Navajo. ‘All of it begins at creation with Spider Woman. The rug is sacred--enfolded...there is wealth in it...our hearts are in it.’ Susie had a sacred ceremony done for her, thus it was easier for her to weave. A wise weaver is chosen to press weaving tools on the young girl during her *Kinaaldá*. ‘this will be her life...bless her/pray for her.’ Susie no longer goes to medicine men now as she is Christian..but ‘the weaving part is in her heart.’ She said ‘traders don't care about sacred songs.’ Her daughter continued:

when you weave you don't go by the hour, by time...you weave your rug in your mind...even to feel the touch of the rug is sacred...there's a song to go over the weaving after it's finished, but one cannot talk about it... the thoughts and ideas of the original weaver are in the rug...it must not be touched (i.e., repaired), nor should one copy another's pattern.

Several weavers mentioned that they prayed and asked for help when first starting a rug. When you want an intricate design, it is difficult to think it through. Few weavers I spoke with draw out their designs. Several weavers mentioned it is not good to think bad thoughts, or speak negatively near a loom, especially with a rug up. A few others said they feel like they are ‘selling their minds’ when they sell their rugs. I was also told that ‘any pattern in a Navajo rug is ‘Navajo.’

“Navajo Weaving Since the Sixties,” hosted by the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, in March 1994, and held in conjunction with an exhibition, was attended by more than forty Navajo weavers and their families. For the first time an audience heard nearly two dozen weavers speak about how they felt about their life's work. Most of these women had textiles in the exhibition. Two Diné women translated presentations by monolingual speakers into the other language.

Conference organizer Hedlund had prepared a series of questions for the Navajo weaver/presenters. Each weaver was asked to define the parts of their weaving that they consider ‘traditional’: ‘Is it the techniques, colors, finished products or designs?’ This was deemed important as weavers appear to be ‘actively re-defining their weaving...today it is simultaneously sacred and sold...does the term “authentic” apply?’ Navajo weaver/respondents had diverse reactions to this request.

One young weaver said tradition is the process of weaving... 'tradition comes from within.' Gloria Begay said 'there is a story behind every weaving tool, it's very emotional. The finished product itself is traditional part of artistic piece, and there's a traditional story behind it.' Much emphasis was placed on providing for families. Irene Clark spoke eloquently:

weaving goes with prayers, songs. Thank Mother Earth for plants, for sky, the air, good feeling to dye...it's all in the weaving..in your hands, tools, in your mind. Design and coloring, how you think of yourself is how you weave..good thoughts, prayers, songs. When you start to weave, design comes in your mind, in your hands.

Nanaba Midge Aragon has made recordings of Navajo songs. She began weaving again as

an adult after years away from her loom. She said that 'it's like going home...weaving is beauty...I learned my way back to my culture...' Another weaver remarked on how her mother told her 'do both your weaving and your cooking with feeling.' A young mother, she commented that 'school is hard, because talk (in English) is from in the head. The feeling isn't there...it's all intellectual.'

A young male weaver, Wesley Thomas, gave a long and very eloquent presentation. He commented on how tradition and traditionalism are defined differently in 'Navajo cultural space.' His maternal grandmother saw he was fit after ten years to take over her weaving tools. He learned the weaving songs from his grandfather. After many years of weaving, he is just beginning to understand its importance:

Spiderman and Woman constructed the loom to the other world [as] metaphorical teaching tools. Through weaving [one] learns a form of Navajo spirituality. Negative language is never used around the loom, or when someone is weaving. Nurturing tools--power of earth and sky embodied in the loom...there's ambiguity, esoteric knowledge...secretiveness. Navajo techniques of learning: song, stories and prayers. In Western aesthetics, emphasis is on finished product. [Diné] experience beauty in creating and expressing, not in preserving and possessing. The construction of Navajo culture is learned through interaction. Power and strength of Spider Woman [is] in the loom. Weaving while in college connects me to home...soothing, the beating of the batten is like a heartbeat of earth, that's my mother...rugs are an embodied part of me in the culture..

Several songs were sung in celebration of weaving. Ruth Roessel, Navajo weaver and educator, spoke eloquently and at length. She said:

the spindle represents the turning of the values..with the soft goods, with the jewels...you have five fingers...all the values go through your fingers to your family. My mother always wove, and raised

her children through her weaving. It makes you a person, it makes you who you are... this is art, this is life. The warps are like a curtain of black clouds...a hope for rain...weaving is to call the rain...all tools have spiritual names, even the loom.

Ruth told the story related to me by Grace Joe and elaborated:

the tools cried out 'you must always love and care for us...have beautiful buckskin bag to keep us..without us, nothing, no life, no song in your heart.' Can't weave while it's raining because of the lightening...Mother Earth has design...it's all out there, clouds, rainbow, sunrays...the art, the four seasons, our mother changes colors...[her] beautiful colored dress...in the spring it is green, in the fall it changes.

4. MAPPING DIFFERING CONTEXTS

Language bears a relationship to the objects it denotes comparable to that which a map bears to a territory (Bateson 1972:180). There is a 'field of relations' we construct between ourselves and the 'territory,' or the 'objective world.' What we map is that relationship in which we participate, and not a direct representation of the things 'out there.' The values of any social network partly determine the network of perception. In other words, there is no such thing as unmediated perception or objectivity, because epistemology always shapes one's perception of the world. Thus, if we think about the differing values a rug has for a young Navajo learning to weave, and a trader, the rug for Navajos is a 'message' about a relation. But the 'message' is very different for the two parties when they meet.

Traders' relations to weavers involved a body of habituated assumptions or premises implicit in how they viewed weaving. The context for the trader lies in the sphere of economics. Weavers may know little of the commercial context. Thus the weavers' context overlaps very little with the traders. However, when one reads the literature on the subject, there appears to be a great deal of overlap, as traders are seen to wield great influence on weavers' designs. In any event, it is more appropriate to see weavers making multiple mappings of the context. The context has altered somewhat and varies for each weaver. For example, labels on flour sacks and canned goods may provide inspiration for a weaver, in addition to patterns she already knows. The maps or forms and patterns of relating created by non-Navajo in their descriptions of weaving are not complex enough for the territory. Weavers' mappings are not acknowledged by non-Navajo because they are not recognized for what they represent to the Navajo people. This is probably one of the reasons weavers enjoy looking at photo-

graphs of Navajo rugs, but bilingual weavers seldom read texts on the subject. The words have very little meaning for them, because weaving is not about words. It is about relationships.

Testimony from Navajo informants and selected publications reveal other patterns that have been masked by conceptual blinkers imposed by the emphasis on empirical description dominating southwestern textile studies. Words simply cannot describe the entire pattern of relations. Patterns are not about words or typologies of words in any substantive sense; patterns are about relationships. There are gaps in our knowledge because the machinery of description (signification) is always digital and discontinuous. Because a word stands for a condensed version of a pattern, no word can ever describe the entire pattern. Thus it should become apparent that linguistic approaches to meaning miss the scale of the world in which meaning operates. Yet this is the perspective typically embraced by non-Navajo in their dealings with weavers.

In order to perceive the patterns, it is necessary to broaden our perception concerning different forms of communication and differences between forms of coding information, each of which plays a significant role in the creation of radically different contexts. Distinguishing between different forms of coding information provides in turn the basis for understanding how the emphasis on the written word is deficient for an appropriate understanding of Navajo weaving. It will become apparent that differences in understanding are separated not so much by the intentions of the speaker and listener as by the contexts of communication.

4.1. Analog and Digital Coding

Western societies privilege discursive digitalized forms of coding information (writing and text). Because of the dominance of literacy in Euroamerican societies, we forget that not all meaning can be communicated solely by language and texts. Thus Roland Barthes' dictum: 'there is no meaning which is not named' represents a drastic form of reductionism similar to Descartes' 'I think therefore I am.' Communications theorist Wilden (1980:106) describes the differences between digital and analogic coding as follows:

the former has a highly complex and powerful logical syntax, but lacks adequate semantics in the field of relationship, while analogic (continuous) forms of communication possess the semantics but have no adequate syntax for the unambiguous definition of the nature of relationships.

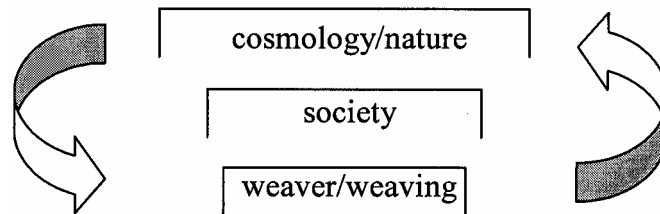
Analog and digital modes of coding information are not mutually translatable; rather, they nourish and complement one another. Analog coding evokes an interrelation of levels in a whole, while digital coding packs streams of information, separating 'this' from 'that.' Trying to reduce every-

thing to empirical conscious terms destroys the analogic mode of 'thinking' which is holistic (Harries-Jones 1995). A semantics tethered only to linguistics refers only to abstract logic, and thus is far too reductionist. It presumes a digitalization of feeling, which is impossible (Harries-Jones 1995; Langer 1974).

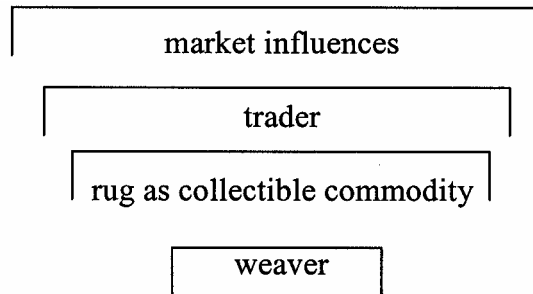
Wilden's statement illuminates why communicative forms must be examined in a communicative way, and not reduced to analyses suitable only for linguistics. Although most relationships are analogic, most symbolic analyses fracture analogic relationships by relying upon models grounded in linguistics. When verbal taxonomies are created to categorize 'things', an important part of the aesthetic dimension is destroyed or placed in an isolated category (i.e. the 'aesthetic' in art). If symbolism is to be understood, the relational (analogical) information must be correctly coded. Authors writing about such matters need to distinguish these differences, otherwise the multi-levelled complexities of communication are misunderstood. The information just surveyed provides the basis for a critique of ethnographer Gladys Reichard's explanation of Navajo 'religion.' By breaking everything into linguistic bits under the umbrella of 'the sacred', she severed weaving from its appropriate context.

4.2. A Topology Of Recursive Contexts

Acknowledging the above distinctions is fundamental to understanding that the way an object is coded frames what is known about it. Thus emphasis on the empirical, descriptive aspects of the rug and the application of technique severs the rug from its origins and surrounding relations. In contrast, by acknowledging how information that is digitally coded is nested within analogic coding, one can perceive that a Navajo rug is part of a much larger pattern. The problem is how to represent the notion of 'context' and folding of the 'name' of the context into the pattern of the context in which it occurs. I will proceed by depicting a contrast. The following diagrams adapted from Wilden (1981), are two-dimensional topological illustrations depicting different contexts. The first is in accord with weavers' comments cited above, that is, a Navajo rug evokes a set of relations because it signals:



In ascending order, each level is dependent upon the one above it. The upper levels provide constraints. That is, weavers and their textiles cannot exist without Navajo society, and Navajo society in turn, does not exist without the non-human world. These relationships, because they are non-dualistic and non-linear, serve as an example of a recursive-hierarchical system operating through feedback loops. Drawing from Neuman (this volume), ‘the units of the system constitute the whole, and the whole constitutes the units in a recursive process.’ Reflexivity is a constitutive principle. Weaving emerges as a ‘signifying event’ that signals movement, mapping and transformation. In contrast, publications by many scholars and dealers evoke the hierarchy displayed below:



In the second diagram Anglos' unconscious epistemological frames are projected onto the relational. Patterns are doubly fractured when rugs become isolated from their context and the focus is shifted to the rug as a commodity and isomorphic art work. When objects become fetishized, the relationships that brought them into being vanish. The rug as a weaving emerged from a context. The larger pattern of relations is the context for the rug. Through adherence to the dualism of sacred/profane it is impossible to perceive the complexities of the patterns. Museologists' detailed *descriptions* of Navajo textiles provide no *explanations* of the phenomena. Neuman's discussion of *mirroring* (this volume) as a sense, as dynamics of in-between, provides a perceptive model to reflexively contextualize Navajo weaving.

4.3. The Question Of The ' Sacred' And Navajo Cosmology

Diné have expressed reluctance to speak openly on matters concerning sacred affairs (Kelley and Francis 1994, Ortiz 1999, Willink and Zolbrod 1996). Information can be easily exploited and misused. Stories must be told only at certain times in appropriate settings. Stories are like verbal maps, and knowledge of them can only be gained with the consent of the teller. Researchers have encountered resistance to writing down narratives. Indiscriminate spread of sacred knowledge lessens its 'power.' Making what is intimate public is in violation of proper conduct. One is not to make matters relating to the sacred explicit. Secrecy is the first line of defence. Several weavers have remarked to me on the inappropriateness of scholars identifying specific motifs as isomorphic sym-

bols. Weavers may know more than they are willing to reveal. By not sharing stories with outsiders, it is possible that weavers may be choosing to maintain their integrity over their existence (Bateson 1988:72). Perhaps if the world knew how sacred weaving was to Diné, it could be 'saved.' But in revealing stories to save it, one compromises relationships that are not to be described.

Navajo cosmology remains a topic irrelevant to most museologists. Nor is it a topic of central concern to textile collectors and dealers. However, it is of primary importance in developing a reconceptualization of Navajo weaving as it provides the appropriate context. This information makes it possible to reconfigure weaving as cosmological performance and as an aspect of metacommunication. Such a reconceptualization provides the context to understand weavers' statements cited above.

According to Faris (1986:136), Diné have an extraordinarily rich, extensive and incredibly complex belief system which evolved in association with older Athapascan and more recent Pueblo sources. The origin stories collectively embody one of the most exhaustive examples of North American poetry ever recorded (Wyman 1970, Zolbrod 1984). No single text is capable of rendering the rich narrative of Diné Bahané, the Navajo Creation Story. The order and character of the world and the place of people including their relationships with one another and with all living creatures is defined in the Creation story. Navajos trace the beginning of their world from a point beneath the present earth surface, prior to the dawn of time. Stories passed down from generation to generation form the foundation of Navajo life and thought. Navajos believe strongly in the power of thought, which cannot exist without speech. Navajo oral tradition is still living as it is intimately tied to Navajo ritual processes. The order inherent in the cosmos was meant to serve as a pattern for proper behaviour in both general and specific ways (Griffin-Pierce 1992:87). Such harmony epitomizes the pattern of *hózhó* manifest everywhere in the universe. It governs male-female relationships, and cosmic relationships such as earth and sky, night and day, mortals and supernaturals, summer and winter (Zolbrod 1984:11). Major mythical figures set examples for the personal growth and maturation of Navajo females and males.

The ideal pattern for the relationship between husband and wife is summed up in the word *k'e*. The pattern for *k'e*, which translates as right and respectful relations with others and the non-human world, is not an abstract ideal, but provides a model for concrete human behaviours encompassing kindness, helpfulness, peace, cooperation, and generosity (McCarty 1983:3; Zolbrod 1984:170). Because harmony with kin and the non-human world is the ideal relation for Navajo, it is perpetuated through acknowledgement and fulfilment of reciprocal responsibilities. These responsibilities are

fulfilled by chanters and weavers who together through their respective practices perpetuate *hózhó*. Grace McNeley (1987:163-64) writes:

The Navajo term *ket'ool*--derived from *ke*, meaning 'feet', and *tl'ool* meaning 'root system' -- expresses the concept of having a foundation for one's life in the earth, much as a plant is rooted in the earth...Let us visualize the central root as extending all the way back to Asdzáán Nádleehi, 'Changing Woman'--who is Earth Mother herself. Developing from this main root is the complex web of kinship relations extending back even to ancestors and including clan relations, the extended family and the immediate family. Tied to this system are material goods, familiar surroundings and livestock. This webbing of earth, of ancestors, of clan and familiar surroundings all constitute a Navajo home, enabling those within it to flourish, to thrive.

Changing Woman gave birth to twins, and later to the first four Navajo clans. Her name refers to her ability to age as time passes, and on reaching old age, she rejuvenates and becomes young again. During six months of summer the Earth is at work with the reproduction and growth of plants. In the winter months she rests and becomes old. Thus there is a recursive cycle of senescence and rejuvenation.

McNeley's statement reveals why many Navajos look upon all the land as sacred. They see themselves as caretakers who, through the daily activities of stockraising and farming, turn the land into food which becomes their flesh. Ceremonial performances bond Navajos by engulfing them with the diversity of the land's natural products. The social relations between mortals and immortals, between Navajos and the Holy People are continually invoked through songs, stories and prayers. Weaving is an integral part of this cycle as materials from the living environment are used to create the loom, weaving tools and the textiles. The importance of relationships was confirmed in a conversation I had in 1992, with Harry Walters, Director of the Ned Hatahli Gallery at Navajo Community College, Tsaile, who said:

what the women weave is part of the environment--it's in their hearts. If you take something from the environment, you must give something back. Navajo weaving is all about relationships...we are like children in our relation to Mother Earth...that's why shoes are important, and must be made right...the foot touches the ground, the Earth our Mother. The weaver has a relationships with the sheep...she must respect them, and she uses the wool in her weaving...and she must respect it too, because all are related...

4.4. Redundancy In The Patterns

In utilizing a perspective informed by communications, one searches for formal sequences recurring in various activities. Instead of separating weaving from the perceived sacred sphere, it is necessary to look for similarities in patterned activities. For example, both weavers and medicine men gather plants to be used in their respective activities. Similar images and outlining of images occur in textiles and in sandpaintings. Weavers strive for harmony in colour and balance in design:

Navajo art in general--including poetry, prayers, songs, textiles, and silverwork, as well as sand paintings and other visual forms--are masterpieces of balance spatially, compositionally, and in terms of color use, sound play, contrast, rhythm, repetition, symmetry and sexual and directional symbolism. ...Although balance requires control, aesthetic products need not be static--indeed visual art can be very dynamic, making it all the more compelling (Faris 1986:139).

Reichard (1944, 1950) comments on how crucial it is for Navajo chanters to learn prayers as a whole. So also does a weaver perceive the whole pattern in her mind before weaving her rug. As weavers' commentary reveals, both prayers and weavings celebrate the beauty of the landscape and reverence for order and form. Prolific and rhythmic repetition occur in chanting and weaving.

Redundancy is a vital clue to patterning; it involves convention, habit, repetition and practice. Rather than combing meaning from a universe of symbols, as is reflected in the work of one of today's best known anthropologists, Victor Turner, redundancy implies an ordering process. Turner selects a matrix of symbols which he then 'reads' as if culture is 'text'. Redundancy expresses order in practice, and that which Turner and others express as 'text' arises only when communicators have a common understanding of their premises at several levels of significance. This suggests that learning is *patterned in different levels*:

...patterns of redundancy of information (the external context) become overlaid with patterns formed in contexts of learning, and the whole yields a three-dimensional pattern. It is the interleaving of the two patterns of redundancy which yields a sense of creativity and beauty (Harries-Jones 1995:202-3).

The aesthetics of Navajo weaving incorporates the aesthetics of redundancy in systemic holism rather than isolated in the individual textiles and favoured by museologists. Rigidly focussing on any single set of relata destroys the more profound significance of the cultural aspect of the work. This important theme is discussed in Bateson's concept of aesthetics. In his writing - unique in modern scholarship - aesthetic unity, incorporating a sense of the sacred, lies at the interface between the named (the maps) and the unnamed (territory). Aesthetics is the unifying glimpse that makes us aware of the unity not able to be described in prose or prosaic consciousness. The sacred is the 'inte-

grated fabric of mental processes that envelops all our lives' (Bateson 1988:2) The sacred implies tacit recognition that there are gaps; that the maps that we create will never provide a complete description of the territory. The essence of communication lies in the relationship between perceptual redundancy (which creates pattern {s}), metaphor, which cognitively links levels, and the sacred which lies at the interface of map and territory. Thus the sacred implies tacit recognition of an immanent aesthetic unity derived through current practices which embody patterns of relations. This notion of aesthetics differs greatly from that stipulated by the German tradition of idealism represented by Kant and Hegel. Thus it is necessary to distinguish between idealism (which is how many textile scholars perceive aesthetics) and holism. Aesthetic wholes derive from 'the pattern which connects' (Bateson 1988). An aesthetics appropriate to understanding Navajo spinning and weaving is embedded in the activities associated with them.

For Diné, values unfold as the patterns evolve (Roessel 1981). The bifurcation between sacred and profane has obfuscated an understanding of weaving, and weaving as a metaphor. Metaphor is a means of uniting the experience of individuals with the system of order or knowledge of which that individual is a part (Harries-Jones 1995:142). Metaphors are analogies of juxtaposition in which a reflexive form of recognition about a meaning of an 'event' cannot be interpreted unless juxtaposed with meanings 'about' another set of wider relationships or events. As a metaphor of Navajo cultural relations a rug evokes recognition of important cultural patterns of balance, repetition, rhythm and reciprocity. In creating it, the weaver perpetuates order and harmony of the system. Thus textiles are far more than objects isomorphic with a 'textual' typology of culture; they become manifestations of relationships in material form. The activities, the rugs, the culture, and Navajo perceptions of nature: all are patterns in motion. But the motion is not linear, it is cyclical and recursive.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The woven rug is the result of a long complex process which entails interaction between the sheep and the human herder, the shearer, the spinner of the yarn and the weaver (Roessel 1983, Toelken 1976, Witherspoon 1987). In addition, a number of plants are gathered during specific growing seasons. Hence there is interaction between the weaver, the animals, plants and the annual cycle of seasons that is repeated over the lifetime of the weaver herself. Thus repetition and redundancy of patterns occurs. A weaver is involved in ordered activity embedded in a context. The ordered activity is patterned (much of it grounded in habit). Patterns of relationships are maintained over time. These patterns of relations continue long after the rug is sold. In fact weavers' patterns of relations are per-

petuated *because* the rug is sold. Thus aesthetic patterns cannot be objectively distinguished, isomorphic with individual textiles, and autonomous, as in museologists' models.

The contexts of interpretation developed by ethnographers and museologists to describe weavers' production privileges a particular history. These interpretations have blocked a deeper understanding of the value of weaving to Navajo people. The recent escalation in the investment market for old textiles coupled with emphasis on their economic value, ensures that the extraordinary production of thousands of weavers historically threatens to bury contemporary producers. The shift in emphasis from the mechanics of weaving in the past (Amsden 1934) to the ideational realm reflected in the recent application of theories grounded in classical aesthetics. (Berlant and Kahlenberg 1977), replicates the bifurcation discussed earlier.

The approach I have adopted is a reflexive one. It acknowledges that our categories of analysis and styles of writing our work are deeply influenced by our own history, and our relation to the 'anthropological Other.' As ample evidence attests, weaving is generally situated within the arena of 'collectibles.' This positioning is aided and abetted by museologists (Hedlund 1997, 2003; Kent 1985; Rodee 1981, Wheat 1977, 1984, 1989; Whittaker 2002), and provides support for the volatile investment market. I would claim that this approach has had devastating consequences for Navajo people.

Native voices protest the separation of art from life, as they perceive all life as sacred (Kelley and Francis 1994, Walters 1989). My interviews with Navajo weavers and their public presentations suggests a communicational perspective provides a more holistic approach to understanding textile production, one that is more in keeping with Navajo philosophies and world views. Navajo weavers' feeling for *hózhó* encompasses far more than Western aesthetics which condenses and locates 'beauty' in the autonomous object. In order to demonstrate this I have used a recursive topological model which accounts well for these aspects of Navajo aesthetics. The repetition and redundancy of recurring patterns suggest a commonality of form in which Navajo textiles map expressions of fundamental formal relationships. My perspective has the potential to demonstrate that Navajo textiles are a primary form of meta-communication which imparts information that cannot be transmitted discursively.

Recent publications by Downer (1990), Kelley and Francis (1994) Griffin-Pierce (1992) and Ortiz (1999), Tabaha (1999), Willink and Zolbrod (1996) provide additional support for the perspective I adopt. One important area I have not been able to discuss in this article but which I have discussed extensively in my own book is that with few exceptions, researchers have overlooked evi-

dence concerning the importance of women's textile production in perpetuating Navajo lifeways and livelihood. Here I have concentrated on the contrast between perceptions of values. In the West, values are defined as 'conceptions of the desirable' and are frequently quantified, whereas, for Navajo, the value of weaving is integrative.

The information I have unveiled and analyzed here addresses significant issues that remain absent from current discussions on the subject of Navajo weaving. Utilizing a communicational perspective provides a means to understand why Navajo women would continue to weave under persistent, difficult conditions. Such a perspective provides a path to heal the division that splits pattern from commodity. To divide pattern from commodity threatens Navajo life ways:

In perceiving pattern and quality [we] encounter the aesthetic. Our attention to quantity rather than pattern leads us to ignore aesthetic necessities: in child rearing and family, in architecture and diet, in philosophy and religion...even in art--poetry. *IN EVERY ONE OF THESE FIELDS OF HUMAN ACTIVITY...THERE ARE PROBLEMS OF PATTERN ABOUT WHICH VERY LITTLE FORMAL THOUGHT HAS BEEN DONE.* The result is a splitting of discourse between the pragmatic and the aesthetic, the structural and the functional, the eternal and the secular...the truth which is important is not a truth of preference, it is a truth of complexity...of a total eco-interactive on-going web...in which we dance, which is the dance of Shiva...which includes all cybernetic complementarities...good/evil, health/pathology, aesthetics/pragmatics, family/individual (Bateson in Keeney (1983:123)

Can this understanding which Diné so well demonstrate heal our own fractured aesthetics?

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