On Medicine Women and White Shame-ans: New Age Native Americanism and Commodity Fetishism as Pop Culture Feminism

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Scene One: "The last notes of an Indian love song were heard when Chief White Cloud and White Swan Woman said 'I do.' Chief White Cloud (alias Bob Engledow) and White Swan Woman (Lynn Hood) share a love of native American Indians, so naturally they donned Indian dress for their wedding at the North Walsham Registry Office in Norfolk England, UK... All the outfits, made from polyester suede, the nearest to buckskin, had been painstakingly decorated with beads and feathers by Lynn" ("sleeping in a tepee" 1994, 16).

Scene Two: An Introduction to Women's Studies class in which I had just presented a documentary film raising questions about the non-Native borrowing of Native spiritual practices. During the ensuing discussion, a young white woman stated that she did not understand why Indian people held "grudges": "Why does imitation bother you, anyway? I'm flattered when people want to imitate me." "But what are you leaving out?" I asked. The student looked puzzled. "How about five hundred years of colonialism? Your parallel of I'm flattered/they should be flattered leaves out the entire history of Euramericans taking everything that we as Indian people have: lands, resources, and, now, even our cultures." She refused to make eye contact with me for the rest of the class.

These two scenes vividly illustrate only some of the volatile and complex issues surrounding a movement that I call "New Age Native Americanism"—hereafter referred to as NANA—or the misappropriation of American Indian traditions as alternative sources of knowledge and spirituality. This term is not one that adherents of NANA themselves use; I coined it in order to distinguish those who are inspired largely by Native American sources from the much broader range of the New Age movement. NANA exists as a distinct subgenre of New Ageism and shares the larger movement's search for alternative lifestyles and spiritualities. Although the United States is one important source of NANA, the movement is now international in scope. From the Ger-
man Indian clubs and "Indianerfilme" inspired by the nineteenth-century "Winnetou" novels of Karl May to Japanese tourists experiencing Hopi sacred dances, Lakota vision quests, and Ojibway sweat lodges (usually within several days of each other). NANA has become so widely disseminated that it contributes significantly to what Arjun Appadurai describes as the "global cultural flows" so intrinsic to late capitalism (1996, 30). For example, Chief White Cloud and his bride (both of whom are decidedly British) have announced the formation of the Oldowan ("Old One") tribe and have optically printed over five thousand certificates of membership to bestow on interested parties worldwide—for the proper fee, of course ("sleeping in a teepee" 1994, 16).

Many of those joining Bob and Lynn as "Old Ones" will, almost certainly, be women. Indeed, NANA has emerged as a powerful catalyst for feminist transformation as non-Native women increasingly employ Indian traditions to escape the patriarchal biases of monotheistic religions and to become empowered, as well as individuated. In many towns and cities across the United States, drumming circles, shield-making workshops, and "touch-the-earth" ceremonies are common occurrences, and one regularly hears of non-Native women adopting such names as White Hawk and Buffalo Dreaming. As Cherokee activist and scholar Andrea Smith notes:

Sometimes it seems that I can’t open a feminist periodical without seeing ads promoting white "feminists" practices with little medicine wheel designs. I can’t seem to go to a feminist conference without the woman who begins the conference with a ceremony being the only Indian presenter. Participants then feel so "spiritual" after this opening that they fail to notice the absence of Indian women in the rest of the conference or Native American issues in the discussion. And I certainly can’t go to a feminist bookstore without seeing books by Lynn Andrews and other people who exploit Indian spirituality all over the place. (1994, 71)

This uneasy alliance between some strands of feminism and NANA has its roots not only in the proliferation of self-help strategies—that staple of American popular culture—but also in a conception of women’s development as individual and therapeutic rather than social and political.

In her preface to Jaguar Woman, for example, Andrews remarks, "I sometimes see women who have been cheated out of their spiritual heritage just as they have been cheated out of their minds and bodies. I, for one, struggle against that theft" (1985, xiv). Through an alleged discovery of her own vocabulary as "the spirit woman of words" (23) and "the warrioress of the rainbow of black, white, red, and yellow peoples" (xi), she professes to have "stolen back" the ancient way of woman and consequently recovered "my original female nature—the real woman within" (xiv). Her use of American Indian and First Nations traditions, Jungian psychology, and the rhetoric of feminism has exerted a powerful appeal and inspired many of her female readers to do likewise. A similar combination of Nativism, Jungianism, and a therapeutic rhetoric of feminism characterizes another extraordinarily popular work—Clarissa Pinkola Estés’s Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype (1992). Women Who Run with the Wolves is nothing short of a spectacular cultural phenomenon, as evidenced by years on the New York Times best-seller list and the untold numbers of women who proclaim that their lives have been changed by recovering "the wild woman within."

Yet the way both of these writers present themselves as advocates for women raises very troubling issues for the academic feminist community and, indeed, for all feminists committed to antiracist and anticolonialist work. To ignore or summarily dismiss the work of such writers as Andrews and Estés as pop culture not worthy of serious critique means that their misappropriation of Native cultures and skewed interpretations of feminism go unchallenged. Neither Andrews and Estés nor their followers have sought to learn from American Indian cultures with respect and with an attentiveness to the ethics of context. This failure has justifiably angered many in the Native community and has produced criticisms that have focused largely on the ilicit behavior of certain individuals and their relationships to specific tribes. Plastic medicine men (and women) such as Sun Bear, Wallace Black Elk, Brooke Medicine Eagle, Jamie Sands, Jamake Highwater, Hyemehosts Storm, and Ed McGaa have generated great controversy in Indian country. While it is important to expose those who have exploited American Indian traditions, NANA also demands a more systematic analysis—one that accounts for its continuing and, as far as I can judge, unabated success.

In Derrick Bell’s short story "The Space Traders" (produced as a movie of the week by Home Box Office), Gleason Golightly, a conservative African-American economics professor who is also an unofficial advisor to the U.S. President, offers an interesting explanation for this popularity. The space traders offer gold to bail out bankrupt governments, chemicals to pollute the environment, and a safe energy source to replace fossil fuels; in exchange, they ask all of the African Americans who live in the United States to journey with them to their extraterrestrial homeland. Golightly urges African Americans to reject this offer. They should resist, he argues, by circulating the rumor that the aliens are transporting their guests to a terrible promised land, a paradise flowing with milk and honey. This will motivate whites to prevent blacks from going because "a major, perhaps the principal, motivation for racism in this country is the deeply held belief that black people should not have anything that white people don’t have. Not only do whites insist on better jobs, higher incomes, better schools and neighborhoods, better everything, but they also usurp aspects of our culture. They have ‘taken our blues and gone,’ to quote Langston Hughes—songs that sprang from our very subordination" (Bell 1992, 175–76). One could argue that NANA is but the Indian version of whites having taken our blues (or drums) and gone. In their relentless search for alternative spiritual models, non-Natives participate in an ideological structure of white supremacy.

Others have attributed economic motives to this racist behavior. According to Mohawk poet Beth Brant, for example, "the new-age is merely the old-
woman learns the power of his medicine and retrieves the basket, thereby restoring wholeness of herself and, vicariously, to all women.

For those readers possessing any knowledge of Native cultures, Medicine Woman’s characterization of Agnes Whistling Elk serves as a warning of things to come: heyoka (one who has seen the Thunder Beings) designates a type of spiritual leader that is unique to the Lakota, and Agne’s last name originates with Plains cultures rather than the Western Cree. It seems fitting that Andrews initially confesses her obsession in a soliloquy inspired by her living room, since its pronounced pastiche binds the search for the basket to Western systems of symbolic and economic capital. “I looked around my living room. It was like sitting in the center of a combination African village and Native American museum. Over the years I had relentlessly gathered a priceless collection of Congolese ancestral figures, magical fetishes and war gods, Navajo blankets, and baskets from all over North America and Guatemala. The room was magical, full of the poetry and power of ancient primitive traditions. The baskets, symmetrical and perfect, that lined the walls were my favorites. And that marriage basket, imbued with magic—never had I felt so compelled to acquire an object” (1981, 8). According to Fredric Jameson, pastiche, a style of incongruous parts produced by borrowing fragments or motifs from various sources, constitutes the preeminent mode of postmodernism under late capitalism (1991, 17). The manner in which Andrews’s living room juxtaposes African figurines, Mayan fertility sashes, American Indian baskets, and Navajo blankets on a one-dimensional wall surface dramatically conjures the flatness or depthlessness that constitutes perhaps the most important formal quality of pastiche (Jameson 1991, 9). That is, all of these artifacts represent very different social and cultural realities, yet their careful arrangement on Andrews’s wall strips them of any historical specificity or contextual depth and interprets them within a colonial logic of cultural commensurability.

The widespread dissemination of pastiche as a form of postmodern consciousness has certainly underwritten the prosperity of NANA, since it creates the enabling conditions not only for the eclectic “borrowing” of Native traditions but also for a generic “Indianness” ripe for consumption by non-Natives. In her essay “The Great Pretenders: Further Reflections on Whiteshamanism,” anthropologist/poet Wendy Rose (Hopi/Miwok) exposes this dynamic when she describes how, during performances, non-Native writers such as Gary Snyder “typically don a bastardized composite of pseudo-Indian ‘style’ buckskins, beadwork, headbands, moccasins, and sometimes paper masks intended to portray native spiritual beings such as Coyote or Raven. . . . One may be hard pressed to identify a particular indigenous culture being portrayed, but the obviously intended effect is American Indian” (1992, 405). This generic Indian identity is achieved through the same sort of commensurability that can be glimpsed in Andrews’s living room and reveals one of the most important innovations of contemporary commodity consumption: the rummaging through of imagined histories—in this case, of American Indians—to envision a different life for oneself. For Snyder, this might mean creating a more “authentic” and “natural” identity immune to the corrupting influences of

Commodity Feminism

we watch our bones auctioned
with our careful quilwork,
beaded medicine bundles, even the bridles
of our shot-down horses.
You who have priced us,
you who have removed us—at what cost?
(Rose 1994, 21)

In Medicine Woman—the first book in Andrews’s trilogy of the same name—readers meet Lynn, white, upper-class, and collector of tribal art, who drives around Beverly Hills in a Jaguar, carries “old” Gucci handbags, and receives her necessary “dose of reality” by going to the Elizabeth Arden Studios for a pedicure (1981, 14). At an exhibition of Steiglitz photographs, she becomes haunted by an anomalous print of an American Indian marriage basket. Her subsequent search for the actual basket in this photograph sets into motion the following plot: the white woman sees an image of the marriage basket and is told (by Hyemehost Storm, a so-called medicine man and novelist with a questionable claim to be Northern Cheyenne) to visit the “heyoka shaman,” Agnes Whistling Elk, in western Canada (the home of the Cree people); there, she learns that the basket represents the ancient knowledge of Native women, which has been stolen by Red Dog, a white priest turned sorcerer; the white

age—capitalism cloaked in mystic terminology, dressed in robes and skins of ancient and Indigenous beliefs” (1994, 27). However, these undoubtedly accurate characterizations of the racist and capitalist motives for cultural theft eventually fall short because they do not recognize how movements such as NANA utilize notably new forms of symbolic and economic oppression. I use the term postmodern neocolonialism to describe these configurations: postmodern because they deterritorialize and consume aboriginal spiritual traditions in particular ways and neocolonial because they reproduce historical spiritual traditions in particular ways and because they reproduce historical imperialism in “flexible combinations of the economic, the political . . . and the ideological” (Williams and Chrisman 1994, 3). The former emphasizes the particular modes associated with late capitalism, while the latter signifies the West’s continuing economic control of American Indian societies even after granting them the status of self-determining “nations.” It is this nexus of the postmodern and the neocolonial that supports women’s participation in NANA.

My hope is that this article will both contribute to a more sophisticated discussion about cultural misappropriation and lay the groundwork for more responsible forms of crosscultural relationships. I also hope to begin a more extended debate about the impact of popular feminisms and how the academic feminist community might respond to the increasing influence of celebrity advocates such as Andrews and Estés.
Western society; for Andrews, it means acquiring the psychospiritual power that she discerns in both the coveted marriage basket and aboriginal traditions more generally.

I borrow the concept of consumption as the rummaging through of imagined histories from Arjun Appadurai, whose reformulations of the commodity are important for understanding not only the appeal of someone like Andrews but also the larger movement of NANA. In The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective, Appadurai argues that the commodity does not denote one kind of thing instead of another but rather one phase in the life of some things (1986, 17). Under this rubric, Andrews’s textual artifacts—no to mention her real-life books, tapes, and workshops—would certainly qualify as commodities. The fictional objects are “relentlessly gathered” in exchange for their “priceless” emotional value, while the panoply of marketed materials are bought by those who crave a close encounter of the same psychological kind. Appadurai articulates several features of commodities in the wake of mass media that deserve particular attention in this context, particularly their status as imagined nostalgia and consumption as the social practice through which persons are drawn into the work of fantasy (1996, 82).

For instance, Appadurai documents Madison Avenue’s effort to inculcate nostalgia—for past lifestyles, life stages such as childhood, and certain landscapes—as a central feature of its selling strategy (1996, 76–77). One example of this process I have examined emerges in fashion entrepreneur Ralph Lauren’s marketing of nostalgia for the British Raj. Lauren’s Polo Home Furnishings store in Beverly Hills constructed its advertising and decorating schemes specifically to convince potential consumers that purchasing the replicated interior of a colonial family dwelling (gazed on by millions in such films as Out of Africa [USA 1985], A Passage to India [UK 1984], and the television miniseries The Jewel in the Crown [UK 1984]) would also buy them its allegedly idyllic lifestyle (Donaldson 1992, 88). However, as Appadurai notes, such nostalgia does not evoke a sentiment corresponding to something that consumers have actually lost. On the contrary, mass marketing teaches people to miss things they have never lost: “That is, they [advertisements] create experiences of duration, passage, and loss that rewrite the lived histories of individuals, families, ethnic groups, and classes. In thus creating experiences of losses that never took place, these advertisements create what might be called ‘imagined nostalgia’, nostalgia for things that never were” (Appadurai 1996, 77). A nostalgia for the Native That Never Was motivates NANA and its feminist adherents. This figment of the non-Native imagination readily exposes the direct link between one of the earliest colonial discourses about Indians and its current manifestation: like its ancestor, the Noble Savage, the New Age Indian is an innately spiritual being who lives in perfect egalitarian harmony with all of life and, in so doing, redresses the wrongs of patriarchal capitalism. Neither the old nor the new image, however, bears any resemblance to members of real tribal communities.

The second part of Appadurai’s reformulation—that is, consumption as the social discipline linking nostalgia to the desire for new bundles of commodi-
objects across Europe galvanized the modernists’ presentation of an artistic movement modeled on radically different and “unrealistic” principles.

In her own completion of this parallel between modernist imperialism and postmodern neocolonialism, Andrews “remembers that Picasso was influenced by magical carvings from Africa” and even cites him on the importance of this sculpture for his work (1981, 73). Not surprisingly, the words that she quotes also foreground her own conception of fetishism: “But all the fetishes did the same thing. They were weapons—to keep people from being ruled by spirits, to help them free themselves. Tools. Les Demoiselles d’Avignon must have come that day, not because of the forms, but because it was my first canvas of exorcism!” (73). Here, both Picasso and Andrews popularize the traditional ethnological view of fetishes—that is, that objects possess magical or spiritual power that can be used to help or harm their handlers. From the Latin facticis (derived from a form of the verb facere, to make, do), the term fetish was coined by the Portuguese to mean both “artificial” and “sorcery” as well as “magical arts.” A more contemporary meaning of fetish evolved through the development of historical imperialism and a nascent global capitalism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: Portuguese explorers trading along the coast of West Africa used the term to describe the mysterious amulets and ritual objects favored by the African peoples they encountered on their voyages (McClintock 1995, 186).

William Pietz argues that it was in the geopolitical space along Africa’s coast that fetishism first emerged as an intercultural problem: for both Africans and Europeans, the fetish became a symbolic site that negotiated and contested the riddle of its value (cited in McClintock 1995, 187). The notion of fetishism as both an intercultural problem and a colonial legacy has largely disappeared in its three most important articulations—in Marxism, in psychoanalytic thought, and in anthropology. The growing movement of NANA necessitates both a restoration of these contexts and a definition of fetishism that transcends any single disciplinary boundary. From Marxism, one learns to attend to the circulation of commodities and their modes of consumption; from psychoanalysis, the presence of desire within these consumptive behaviors; and from anthropology, the structures of collecting, whether ethnographies or Native artifacts. In her essay “Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting,” literary and feminist critic Mieke Bal (1994) provides a description of fetishization that connects these various dimensions.

For Bal, collecting begins in a social struggle, or a confrontation between acquiring subject and acquired objects, which the acquiring subject usually wins. Collecting is actualized “precisely when a series of haphazard purchases or gifts suddenly becomes a meaningful sequence. That is the moment when a self-conscious narrator begins to tell its story, bringing about a... narrative of identity, history, and situation” (1994, 101). In Medicine Woman, for example, Andrews’s artificial hodgepodge becomes a “collection” at the moment it metamorphoses into a restorative source of “primitive” power and poetry and a haven into which she retreats when besieged by the outside world. The social process facilitating this transformation is fetishization: "The 'not-other' objects-to-be must first be made to become 'absolute other' so as to be possible to all. This is done by cutting objects off from their context. It is relevant to note that the desire to extend the limits of the self—to appropriate, through 'de-othering'—is already entwined with a need to dominate, which in turn depends on a further 'alterization' of alterity. This paradoxical move... is precisely the defining feature of fetishism in all senses of the term’ (Bal 1994, 105).

Fetishization abducts objects from their original contexts and denudes them of any social identity so that they may become signs for the collector who, like Andrews, is usually attempting to counteract her own psychic alienation or spiritual ennui. In other words, the aboriginal objects on Andrews’s wall must themselves become other in order for her and her readers to become “de-othered,” or restored to wholeness. The description of fetishization in terms of abduction and denuding ironically recalls some of the most oppressive social processes deployed against women by a masculinist society: their reduction to sexual objects, for instance, or their decontextualization as a group without history. This in itself ought to give NANA’s female followers significant pause. The sinister consequence of this fetishizing process both for men’s attitudes toward women and, indeed, for all human relationships, is dramatically illustrated in Andrews’s trip to find Agnes Whistling Elk and her first encounter with the Native people of that region.

On this journey she flies to Winnipeg, Manitoba, and then rents a car to travel further inland. Her car blows a tire, however, and with no help in sight, Andrews decides to change the flat herself.

As I was leaning forward on my knees to insert the lever, I caught sight of two silhouetted figures, tall, thin, walking down the highway toward me. I jumped up to wave and yell, then caught myself. They were two young Indian men, and I became a little frightened. As they drew nearer, I could hear them talking together in a language I presumed was Cree. One of them was wearing a brown plaid mackinaw, the other a tattered army field jacket. They came up to the car, and the one in the mackinaw bent to look at the tire. Then he rose up, and he and the other man broke out laughing. They stared at me with toothy grins and spoke together in Cree. I was angry now. (1981, 30-31, emphasis added)

The abrupt shift of feelings recorded in this passage exposes an astonishingly vulnerable moment within Andrews’s psychic and social imaginary. The realization that the figures walking toward her are both masculine and Indian triggers a profound experience of dread, which quickly transforms itself into anger. While I do not wish to minimize women’s genuine fear of rape, I would also argue that the context of Medicine Woman suggests a very different origin for Andrews’s strong emotional response: the stereotype of Native men as either hypersexual, violent, and terrifyingly other, or docile colonial servants (similar to the Sambo characterization of African Americans). After initially experiencing the former, she becomes outraged when they resist the latter. They not only stand by and watch her change the tire but also exclude her...
from their discourse by laughing at her and speaking another language. Medicine Woman justifies Andrews's complex of dread and anger by almost immediately revealing the two men as the helpers of Red Dog, the white sorcerer-priest.

However, a more plausible explanation is found in the cultural and psychic work of fetishism, since, according to Homi Bhabha, stereotyping represents an "arrested, fetishistic mode of representation" that vacillates between the affirmation and disavowal of racial and sexual difference (1994, 75-76). According to Bhabha, fetishism is always a negotiation between an archaic affirmation of wholeness/similarity—"all men [sic] have the same skin/race/culture"—and the anxiety associated with difference—"some do not have the same skin/race/culture" (1994, 74). As a stereotype, fetishism simultaneously reactivates the original phantasy (the anxiety of sexual and racial difference) and quells that anxiety by fixing the representation of the other in a kind of ontological freeze frame. This is what lies behind the argument that a stereotype falsely predicts that members of a certain group will act in certain ways. Stereotypes not only flatten diversity within particular groups but also irrationally defy logic as well as empirical evidence. And, I would argue, people cling to these fantasies precisely because their fetishizing dynamic so ingeniously resolves the experience of this deep-seated social and psychological contradiction.

Andrews's activation of such negatively coded and decontextualizing stereotypes resolves as well as controls the moment of contact with the Cree men. Her living room performs a similar function: its fetishized space permits her to construct a position of mastery over aboriginal artifacts while seeming to value and affirm them. The psychic and cultural work of fetishism also raises the question of how aboriginal traditions and, indeed, the People themselves can escape from its vicious cycle—a question that I have framed in terms of antifetishism as decolonization.

Antifetishism as Decolonization

Before the ego cogito there is an ego conguiro; "I conquer" is the practical foundation of "I think." The center has imposed itself on the periphery for more than five centuries. But for how much longer? Will the geopolitical preponderance of the center come to an end? Can we glimpse a process of liberation growing from the peoples of the periphery? (Dussel 1985, 3)

In his Philosophy of Liberation, Enrique Dussel, a political refugee from Argentina who now teaches in Mexico, declares that in order to hear the voices of all those who are silenced, it is necessary to expose the fetishism of the dominant system (1985, 59) and to engage actively in the decolonizing project of antifetishism, or "knowing how to return things in a practical way to their rightful places" (97). While antifetishism occupies only a small place in Dussel's work, it assumes a central importance in my own. An example from Anna Lee Walters's (Pawnee/Otoe) provocative novel Ghost Singer (1988)

explains why. At the Northern Navajo Fair, one of its teenaged "princesses," Nasbah Navajo, is accosted by an Anglo woman, "middle-age with graying hair," who announces herself as a collector based in Sedona, Arizona. The object she currently wishes to collect is Nasbah's dress, "a black woven dress, an ancient dress that was faded in places to a spotty brown" (Walters 1988, 11). Although the woman offers her a healthy sum, Nasbah refuses. In recounting this episode to her father, she comments: "The dress. It's the same every time I wear it. The white people want to buy the dress. 'How much?' the old man asked. 'One thousand dollars,' Nasbah said in Navajo. The old man shook his head from side to side. 'They are offering more now. Whatever is offered will never be enough.' " (13). Readers later discover that Nasbah's dress belonged to her great-great-grandmother, Red Lady, who was wearing it the day Mexican raiders attacked her camp, capturing her and her twin daughters to be sold as slaves. The day Red Lady put on white people's clothes, "she took off her dress, folded it, and set it aside, thinking that she would never wear it again. It was the only thing she carried back to Beautiful Mountain when Tall Navajo brought her back" (58). Nasbah's dress thus is much more than what collectors would call an heirloom or artifact: it embodies the material link between a daughter and her mother/grandmothers, and also, through its fraying fibers, the living texts and texture of the Diné.

The dress's woven status embodies the "good way" of Navajo women. Ever since Spider-Woman's gift of weaving to the Diné (in acknowledgment of which the People have traditionally woven a spider hole into the center of each blanket), the creation of Navajo textiles has existed as a predominantly female practice. In her capacity as a sacred being, Spider-Woman embodies creativity, intellect, cunning, and survival (she regularly helps humans and animals out of dangerous situations). Whether the rugs and blankets she bequeathed were for household or sacred use, each one embodied the concept of hóshó, which is often translated as "beauty" but more accurately implies the active process of walking "the blessing way" or "the good way" (Farella 1984, 158). Nasbah's dress consequently carries within its ancient threads the well-being of the Navajo people, and selling it would constitute nothing less than selling the unique spiritual values and material skills that maintain the beauty of a balanced world.

For the white woman collector, however, the dress represents a fetish—an object abducted from its original context and social identity so that it may become available as a sign for her own purposes. This deterritorialization unyokes imagination from place (Appadurai 1996, 58) and inflicts a kind of symbolic violence on American Indians. Indeed, I would argue, the Anglo woman from Sedona individually reenacts the historical tragedies of Removal, since taking the dress from its proper context reiterates not only Red Lady's kidnapping but also the enforced diaspora of Native peoples—or, for the Navajo, yet another Long Walk. These acts of abduction cannot be taken lightly. In Ghost Singer, for example, Navajo artifacts resist collection by unleashing their spirits on would-be collectors, ultimately driving them to commit suicide (Walters 1988, 1). And through Nasbah, Walters presents a
character who likewise refuses the colonizing process of fetishization. The story of Nasbah Navajo and her grandmother’s dress also raises troubling questions about Estés’s *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (1992).

**Antifetishism as Repatriation**

Historically museums have viewed themselves, under existing legal theory and practice, as holding collections for the benefit of the broader public rather than of specific constituent groups. The NMAIA [National Museum of the American Indian Act] and NAGPRA [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act] represent an acknowledgement that cultural institutions holding the patrimony of living peoples have an obligation, as yet not perfectly defined, of support, collaboration, and interaction with respect to those particular constituents. (West 1996, 545)

Since the publication of *Women Who Run with the Wolves* in 1992, countless women have responded to Estés’s call to engage in “extensive ‘psychic-archaeological’ digs into the ruins of the female underworld” and to build “a psychic motherworld, coexisting and coequal with all other worlds” (459). However, like *Medicine Woman*, Estés’s book raises the issue of doing things in the right way or, in this case, running with the right companions. The analogy between recovering the wild woman within and conducting an archaeological dig demands inquiry because, as the struggle over repatriation attests, many sacred objects as well as human remains have been stolen from Native peoples through this exact means: few amateurs or professionals have consulted with tribes about the meaning of their finds, not to mention whether they should be digging at all.

In her self-described vocation as a *cantadora* storyteller and psychological “archaeologist,” Estés—who claims Mexican-Spanish and Hungarian ancestry—attempts to uncover women’s “wildish” natures. She insists that she does not use the word “wild” in a pejorative sense but rather in its “original” sense of having a natural life with inherent integrity and healthy boundaries. During her search for cultural locations of this wildness, Estés notes that she spent an extensive amount of time with many aboriginal peoples across North and South America. From the cultures of the Southwest, she excavates a figure she calls *Na’adji’i Ede’zq* the Navajo figure of Spider Woman—the same sacred being who figured so prominently in the preceding section of this article. In Estés’s version, Spider Woman “weaves the fate of humans and animals and plants and rocks” (1992, 9) and exists as an “alpha matrilineal being” revealing to all women the true nature of wildness: “From the viewpoint of archetypal psychology as well as from the storytelling tradition, she is the female soul. Yet she is more; she is the source of the feminine. She is all that is instinct of, the worlds both seen and hidden—she is the basis. We each receive from her a glowing cell which contains all the instincts and knowing needed for our lives” (13). More specifically, Estés defines Spider Woman in terms of the “nonrational” demands of women’s “fifth task,” which teaches them to acknowledge the wildish powers of the feminine psyche (94). Here, Spider Woman is a “Life/Death/Life Mother” who inculcates knowledge of what must die and what will live, “with what shall be cared out, to what shall be woven in” (95). Unfortunately, in presenting the figure of Spider Woman in this way, Estés also commits an act of cognitive imperialism.

For example, the Navajo name cited by Estés literally means “weaving woman,” with *Na’adji’i* connoting the general adjective for “weaving” and *Ede’zq*, the noun for “woman.” In the Navajo language, however, the noun always comes before the adjective, so either through ignorance or lack of concern, Estés anglicizes the grammatical structure of Spider Woman’s name. Even more important, she calls her by the wrong name. *Na’adji’i* exists as a general descriptor of weaving and is not the expression that evokes the specific figure of Spider Woman; in fact, using *Na’adji’i* would be considered offensive to the very spiritual being with whom she is urging women to commmunicate. The traditional name of Spider Woman, *Ahs-zah Na’ałoo*, translates as “how the spiders weave” and is the term used in the sacred stories that tell the Diné of her ancient deeds. Further, by positioning *Ahs-zah Na’ałoo* within the preeminently Western discourses of the nonrational and the wild, Estés both distorts her meaning and obscures her strong intellectual function in Navajo cosmology. According to Paula Gunn Allen, Spider Woman brought to the People material resources and intellectual practices such as corn, agriculture, potting, weaving, social systems, religion, ceremony, memory, intuition, and human-to-animal relationships—thus enabling them to sustain their families (1986, 15). Although Allen is describing a Pueblo context in this passage, a similar dynamic exists in Navajo creation stories, which articulate how Spider Woman brings to the Diné not only weaving but also much of their material culture. Inserting such a complex being into a discourse of the wildly irrational consequently seems at best a thin description and at worst an all-too-familiar example of the “colonizing process of story changing” (240).

Estés’s incantatory evocation of wisdom has enchanted many women seeking individuation and psychospiritual development. A case in point is Lisa Bowleg, a Bahamian lesbian from the “next feminist generation” who recalls one afternoon when her father called her from Nassau: “The purpose of his call: He had been reading and enjoying Clarissa Pinkola Estés’ book *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* and wanted to discuss the book with me. I smiled as I listened to him excitedly recount his attempts to translate what he was reading from his male point of view to a woman’s perspective. Estés’s masterpiece had prompted him to, if only briefly, consider the world from a woman’s point of view—a small but not insignificant victory” (1995, 52). If this is a victory, it is a Pyrrhic one with small triumphs offset by the betrayal of Native women. Just as museums have historically held collections for the benefit of the broader public, *Wolves* ostensibly collects “wild” archetypes for the greater benefit of all women, and just as many museums have disregarded the tribal communities from which their collections originate, Estés disregards the very aboriginal traditions she purports to embrace. By exhuming Spider Woman from her Native ground, Estés trans-
forms her into a universal sign and collects her as an intuition illustrating a larger feminine point. To Bowleg and all other women with visions of running, if not dancing, with wolves I would reply that Estés’s book exists as a cautionary rather than a liberating tale, since it emulates not only the museum’s fetishization of Native artifacts (fixing their meanings and turning them into objects for display) but also Andrews’s problematic abduction and reappropriation of aboriginal spiritual practices.

“The belief that the traditions of others may be appropriated to serve the needs of the self is a peculiarly Western notion that relies on a belief that knowledge is disembodied rather than embedded in relationships, intimately tied to place, and entails responsibilities to others and a commitment and discipline in learning,” observes Apache scholar Ines Talamantez (1995, 386). The transformation of sacred stories into psychological tropes robs the indigenous peoples for whom they were intended of their power. For example, Sharon Venne, an enrolled member of the Cree First Nation, recounts her experience of attempting to refute Andrews’s false assertions, and how she was shouted down by a predominantly white female audience for not knowing the inner meaning of Native culture and for internalizing the sexism by which Indian men prevent women from knowing the truth (Rose 1994, 415). Because it facilitates such reinterpretations, Women Who Run with the Wolves fails to respect the intellectual and religious frameworks of Native cultures and, even more seriously, contributes to the process of cultural genocide. Here, the decolonizing work of antifetishism demands nothing less than complete repatriation: the returning of Spider Woman and all her counterparts to their rightful places within Native cultures.

In conclusion, both Andrews and Estés turn psychospiritual collecting into a tale of social struggle and construct a narrative of women’s growth that does not come about “in the right way.” Their immensely popular work shows how the production of feminist belief through New Age Native Americanism stands at the intersection of symbolic, psychological, and commodity fetishism. As preeminent practitioners of what I have called postmodern neo-colonialism, Andrews and Estés reveal the close association between some constructions of women’s empowerment and such emerging forms of consumption as the rummaging through of imagined histories and the social practice of imagined nostalgia. They also demonstrate the dangers of conceiving feminism in the narcissistic terms of psychological individuation rather than as a political movement that attends to the ethics of context. I would hope that once readers of Medicine Woman and Women Who Run with the Wolves recognize the oppressive origins of the “freedom” contained in these works, they will search for more responsible ways to achieve wholeness and well-being. A more responsible attitude acknowledges that spiritual growth requires life-long discipline and commitment as well as a mutual relationship with one’s resource traditions. In her forthcoming book Who’s the Real Indian? Identity and the Survival of Native America, Eva Garoute (Cherokee) suggests a conception of Indian identity that rests on the recognition and articulation of the sacred responsibilities given to each People in their specific oral traditions. For example, she argues that Cherokee responsibilities would include strict reciprocity between an individual and his or her community, the duties of kinship, and a notion of community extending from the human into the natural world. This implies at least one model for an ethical “learning from” American Indian cultures: rather than borrowing spiritual practices, the followers of Andrews and Estés might instead try to embody some of these responsibilities in their own lives. I can hardly think of more “Indian” values than concern for one’s community, caring for one’s extended family and friends, and believing that humans are intimately connected to other forms of life on this planet (and because of that, have the same obligations toward them as toward the human community).

The misappropriation of American Indian religious traditions possesses undeniable links with other global assaults on indigenous cultures, particularly the theft of Native knowledge systems and biological resources by transnational corporations and other bioprospectors. This theft, which activists such as Vandana Shiva have identified as “biopiracy” and “intellectual piracy,” markets commodities that use local indigenous knowledges and traditions but fail to embody “the ethical, epistemological, or ecological organization of that knowledge system” (Shiva 1997, 78; see also Shiva 1993, 1996). This statement could also describe NANA, which markets Native spiritual traditions that do not manifest their original ethical, epistemological, or ecological values. While indigenous peoples are contesting corporate biopiracy in the world’s courts with some success, no such recourse is available for Native peoples betrayed by the contemporary confluence of pop–culture feminism and NANA. The only remedy, it seems, is a demystification of this movement and an exposure of its roots in the legacies of historical and neo–colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchal capitalism. As a person of Cherokee descent, I can only say that women persisting in a quest fulfilled at the expense of American Indians risk becoming nothing less than kidnappers who falsely claim feminist ideology and who join the rest of those benefiting from the plunders of imperialism in a New—that is, postmodern neocolonial—Age.

Notes

1. From 1965 to 1983, East Germany’s state-sponsored film industry produced at least a dozen “Indian movies” that were extensively researched and based largely on May’s novels (see Steed 1996). May, of course, had no firsthand knowledge of Native cultures and relied on the work of James Fenimore Cooper and the literature of the Noble Savage for most of his information.

2. Storm has been condemned by the legitimate elders as well as by the governing council of the Northern Cheyenne, the tribe to which he claims affiliation.

3. That this distorted image possesses a long history is without doubt. In 1511, an anonymous Dutch pamphleteer wrote of the peoples encountered in America, “These folk lyven lyke bestes without any reasonableness. . . . And the wemen
be very hoote and disposed to lecherousnes" (as cited in Berkhof the 1970s). An equal-opportunity stereotype, it was applied to both men and women and used as a justification for colonization.

4. I am grateful to Shirl Snyder-Folgerarthead (Navajo) and her mother for these insights.

Works Cited


