Postcolonial Cultural Affiliation: Essentialism, Hybridity, and NAGPRA

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One of the fundamental contributions of postcolonial studies to the humanities and social sciences over the past quarter-century has been the critique of essentialism in discussions of cultural difference. The identification and rejection of essentialist discourses—wherein social groups or categories are presumed to possess universal features exclusive to all members—have become central to postcolonial notions of identity and cultural difference. Essentialist discourses reduce complex heterogeneous structures to a supposed inner truth or essence and function within colonial regimes to reinforce hegemonic control over colonized peoples, inscribing inferiority upon them by controlling the dominant modes of representation. The postcolonial denunciation of essentialism hinges on a rejection of the simplistic binary oppositions upon which much of colonialist and neocolonialist discourse is predicated, such as civilized/savage, center/margin, First World/Third World, and the colonial Self/the colonized Other. The anti-essentialist position espoused by many postcolonial theorists has informed contemporary anthropological studies of identity, which stress its contingent, flexible, and discursively constructed nature. These fluid notions of identity, termed “constructivist,” emphasize the central role of social interaction in the negotiation of identity (Barth 1969; Hall 1996:3-4; Borgstede 2004:38) and challenge essentialist conceptions of static, unitary, and homogenous essences in the construction of cultural difference. Constructivist notions of identity have had a particularly significant impact on the field of archaeology in recent years, both in the interpretation of past societies and in an increasing recognition of the political implications of the archaeological past in the construction of modern identities (Meskell 2002:279).
Roughly coinciding with this shift away from essentialist notions of identity, American archaeology was forced to take some of the first tentative steps toward the decolonization of the discipline in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the adoption of state and federal repatriation legislation in the United States, embodied most prominently in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)\(^1\) (Trope and Echo-Hawk 2000). NAGPRA provides the federal legal means for Native Americans to exercise a modicum of control over human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony held by federally funded institutions throughout the United States, as well as control over objects excavated from or discovered on federal or tribal lands after 1990. In recent years, however, NAGPRA has been criticized for promoting an essentialist model of identity (Bray and Grant 1994; Bray 1996:443; Naftziger and Dobkins 1999:86–87; Clark 2001a; Gosden 2001) inconsistent and incompatible with the growing body of contemporary scholarship supporting constructivist notions of cultural difference. In short, these critiques maintain that NAGPRA utilizes an untenable concept of identity that contradicts contemporary social theory and, as a result, is difficult, if not impossible, to implement in an intellectually honest manner.

While I, too, endorse a discursive approach to the investigation of identity, I do not think that postcolonial theory is unavoidably in conflict with NAGPRA. In fact, constructivist notions of identity need not undermine Native American attempts to assert control over their cultural heritage. Rather, a critical application of postcolonial theory in concert with a close reading of NAGPRA can be used to support repatriation and advance the crucial decolonization of archaeology in the United States. In the process, archaeologists stand uniquely positioned to make significant contributions to the development of postcolonial theory as well (Gosden 2001:248–49), emphasizing the importance of history and material culture in the constitution of postcolonial identities.

Before discussing these issues in detail, I first offer a caveat. In Orientalism, one of the foundational texts of postcolonial studies, Edward Said writes of the importance of "strategic location, which is a way of describing the author's position in a text with regard to the . . . material he writes about" (Said 1978:20, emphasis original). My strategic location relative to the archaeology of Native Americans is that of a non-Native archaeologist who has worked as NAGPRA coordinator for a federally recognized Native American tribe (the Pueblo of Jemez). I support repatriation and see it as a small but important step in redressing the inequities that have heretofore characterized the relationships among settler societies and indigenous peoples, particularly that of archaeologists in relation to Native Americans. I also find aspects of postcolonial theories to be compelling, including the general critique of essentialism (Said 1978, 1993) and the emphasis on the role of hybridity in the constitution of cultural difference (Bhabha 1994:34). Thus, I have a vested interest in the convergence and integration of postcolonial theory with NAGPRA—not as a means to undermine repatriation, but in support of it. In my work as NAGPRA coordinator, I heard repeated criticisms of U.S. cultural resource legislation (most commonly NAGPRA) by tribal members who suggested that these laws do not go far enough in affording Native Americans a degree of control over their ancestral human remains and objects of cultural heritage. (Alternatively, others have made the argument that these laws go too far in granting control to Native Americans, e.g., Meighan 2000). However, flawed this legislation may be, NAGPRA currently provides the best opportunity to continue the decolonization of archaeology in the United States, a process I believe to be constructive and vital to the future of archaeological research (see also Ferguson 2004:36). For this reason, I present the following analysis as a scholarly rejoinder to the argument that the application of NAGPRA is not intellectually viable in a postcolonial world. While NAGPRA is certainly not perfect (recall the old analogy regarding laws and sausages: it is better not to see them being made), it does not necessitate the propagation of essentialist discourses, either.

The Essentialist Critique of NAGPRA

At the center of many repatriation debates is the determination of cultural affiliation, a process that has been called "the cornerstone of NAGPRA" (Lovis et al. 2004:177). Cultural affiliation is the term coined to describe the connections that must be made between federally recognized tribes and the artifacts and/or human remains they wish to repatriate. NAGPRA states:

"Cultural affiliation" means that there is a relationship of shared group identity which can be reasonably traced historically or prehistorically between a present-day Indian tribe or Native Hawaiian organization and an identifiable earlier group. Cultural affiliation is established when the preponderance of the evidence—based on geographical, kinship, biological, archaeological, linguistic, folklore, oral tradition, historical evidence, or other information or expert opinion—reasonably leads to such a conclusion. (25 U.S.C. §§ 3001, Section 2[2]; 43 C.F.R. 10.2[E])

This definition thus entails three clearly discernable components: 1) a present-day tribe, 2) an identifiable earlier group, and 3) a relationship of shared
group identity. The first of these categories is relatively straightforward, in that the law applies to federally recognized tribes (25 U.S.C. §§ 3001, Section 2[7, 11]; Lovis et al. 2004:177). NAGPRA is unambiguous on this point (but see Gosden 2001:252). While I do not deny that contemporary Native American identity (that is, who is and is not Native American) is a complex, often contested, and highly negotiated issue, for the purposes of this discussion the point is moot. Only members of federally recognized Native groups (and lineal descendants) can claim human remains and funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony under NAGPRA.

Problems arise when attempting to apply the latter two components of the definition of cultural affiliation, however. The recognition of “identifiable earlier groups” has been a point of contention. While museums often rely upon the culture-historical tradition of “archaeological cultures” defined by complexes of material traits in an attempt to establish an identifiable earlier group (Lovis et al. 2004:177), this practice has been increasingly questioned in recent years (Dongoske et al. 1997; Ferguson 2003:140, 2004:28). The problem stems in part from the fact that museums typically establish cultural affiliation working from the past (as represented by their collections) to the present, while tribes tend to work from their present to their past (Ayon and Thornton 2002:192; Ferguson 2003:140). In any case, the establishment of an identifiable earlier group must be carried out on a case-by-case basis and is extremely context dependent.

It is the third component of the definition of cultural affiliation, “a relationship of shared group identity,” upon which the most vociferous debate has focused. Critics of NAGPRA assert that the notion of cultural affiliation is fundamentally flawed because it employs an essentialist model of identity, forcing tribes (and museums) to adopt the untenable position that Native American identities have not changed through time (Bray and Grant 1994:154; Bray 1996:443; Nafziger and Dobkins 1999:86–87; Gosden 2001:241), at least in certain fundamental categories that are assumed to define them as authentic Indians. There is a long history behind this type of essentialist discourse; non-Indians have often portrayed Native Americans in opposition to Euro-American society as simple, primitive, technologically immature, and (maybe most damaging of all) static in contrast to the complex, modern, technologically advanced, and dynamic West. According to this view, Native American authenticity is rooted in an unchanging pre-Columbian essence, presuming that the only “real Indians” alive today are those who look, speak, and act like the indigenous populations first encountered by Europeans in the New World. Popular portrayals of these fictionalized Native Americans in the mass media have lent credence to the romantic fantasy that these so-called “real Indians” still exist somewhere, unaffected by colonization. These imaginary Indians ultimately prove more desirable to mainstream society than modern Native Americans, who suffer by comparison and are often ignored or marginalized when they attempt to explain their differences through complex histories of dynamic adaptation (McMullen 2004:270). This situation is typical of colonial conditions the world over: as a measure of control, colonizers often attempt to fix the identity of the colonized, employing essentialism in order to assert a perceived superiority.

Critics of NAGPRA contend that the law continues this legacy of essentializing Native Americans by ignoring postcolonial theories of identity. Chris Gosden (2001:241–42) asserts that:

the legal basis for claims [under NAGPRA] is some form of cultural integrity and continuity with the prehistoric cultures which produced the remains. In order to claim ancestral bones and objects, indigenous peoples around the world have to prove that they are not creolized or hybrid cultures, but have maintained some essential identity through time and into the present. Postcolonial theory, which is in tune with broader trends of western academic thought moving away from any essentialized notion of culture, runs in direct contradiction to ideas of culture which need to be developed by indigenous people as the basis for their political strategies in the present.

Scholars of a more positivist bent have offered a similar critique. G. A. Clark (2001:3) argues against NAGPRA on the basis that:

Ethnicity, or identity-consciousness, is a fleeting, transient thing—constantly changing, constantly being renegotiated, written on the wind. Anthropologists have known for decades that discrete ethnic groups, rigidly bounded in space and time, have no existence beyond a few centuries (and even that is arguable). Too bad this little nugget eluded most American archaeologists! ... In various publications, and in other public fora, I’ve tried to make the case that, because it is anti-materialist, NAGPRA is also fundamentally anti-science; that it is grounded in ... simplistic, essentialist, typological notions of human variation. ... by arguing that repatriation be restricted to “federally recognized tribes” [NAGPRA] assumes “tribes” are “forever,” that they are bounded and discrete, that they persist as recognizable entities over space and time.

Both Gosden and Clark focus on what they see as a central flaw of NAGPRA: the promotion of an essentialist concept of identity. However,
although they share a common criticism of the law, these critiques arise from two very different intellectual perspectives. Gosden’s argument is made in the context of a discussion of postcolonialism in archaeology in which he expresses his support for constructivist models of identity; his criticism of NAGPRA is not an attempt to undermine Native American access to control over human remains and artifacts, but is better seen as a disinterested assessment of the law from an outsider’s perspective (that of British academe). Clark, on the other hand, is an American scientist utilizing constructivist theories of identity for reasons of intellectual politics, seeking unrestricted access to human remains for academic study (Meskell 2002:290). In so doing, he seeks to delegitimize the marginalized persons who currently access power through NAGPRA. The appropriation of constructivist notions of identity by historically dominant colonial elites for the continued subjugation of subalterns has unfortunately become increasingly common in recent years (Hale 1997, 1999; Fischer 1999). This is an ironic and unintended consequence for postcolonialists, whose explicitly stated political aspirations frequently seek to promote indigenous access to power.

Caught between Scylla and Charybdis:
Strategic Essentialism versus Radical Constructivism

In practice, most tribes and museums have avoided the thorny theoretical thicket of modern identity studies altogether in the implementation of NAGPRA. In my experience, repatriation frequently proceeds through the application of an implicitly essentialist notion of cultural affiliation. Whether conscious of the logical inconsistencies that inhere in concepts of unchanging cultural essences or not, many museums and tribes have chosen to simply maintain the status quo and assume a relatively straightforward link between modern tribes and the “identifiable earlier groups” in question.

This approach parallels a tactic for enabling subaltern access to power that has previously been endorsed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the luminaries of postcolonial studies. Spivak has advocated the accession of power by marginalized groups through what she terms strategic essentialism (Spivak 1987:205), the utilization of (knowingly flawed) categories rooted in natural and collective homogeneity for political gains. The use of the concept of unchanging Native American identities to establish cultural affiliation is an example of strategic essentialism, and, indeed, this tactic has been frequently employed by tribes and museums in the implementation of NAGPRA over the past two decades.

While the use of strategic essentialism by Native Americans may be effective in attaining short-term goals such as the repatriation of particular individuals or objects, this tactic is ultimately problematic because of the dangerous legal precedent it establishes. If tribes assert that their modern cultural formations do not differ from those of their ancestors, they risk perpetuating Western notions of Native American culture as unchanging and fixed in the past. That is, by maintaining the static nature of their identity when establishing cultural affiliation, Native Americans risk reinforcing the expectation that Indian-ness (and all attendant rights and privileges) inheres in the past in other realms as well. This could cause real legal problems if applied in other areas of tribal politics, for example, in attaining federal recognition or enacting previously established treaty rights. If Native Americans are required to maintain an unchanging, static identity, then any innovations or transformations that have occurred since 1492 make them somehow less Indian. Essentialisms promoted strategically in the implementation of NAGPRA carry the danger of backfiring in other contexts and proving detrimental to future legal causes.

The case of Anishinaabe spearfishing in northern Wisconsin provides a useful example (Nespor 2002, 2004). Treaties signed in 1837 and 1842 granted Anishinaabe people (also known as Chippewa or Ojibwe) the right to fish at night using torches and spears (local species of fish have highly reflective eyes, and the use of an external source of light aids in locating and spearing them). Throughout the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, flaming torches were replaced first by lanterns, then by flashlights, and finally by automobile headlamps taped to construction helmets. Similarly, birch bark canoes were superseded by rowboats, which were then supplanted by crafts with motorized outboard engines, all of which aided in increasing the yield of fish harvested annually (Nespor 2004:230). Local non-Indians protested that the use of these technological advances granted an unfair advantage and that Anishinaabe fishing under the protection of treaty rights should utilize only the technologies available to the nineteenth-century signatories of the treaties. Of course, Anishinaabe supporters correctly pointed out the inconsistency inherent in these arguments: why should Native Americans be bound to static, unchanging forms of material culture while non-Indians are not? Anishinaabe writer Jim Northrup sums up the paradox succinctly: “Some people opposed to spear- ing say we should do it like it was done in treaty signing times. Go back to the birch bark canoe and flaming torch. Why should we be stuck in the last
century?... I’ll go back to a birch bark canoe when you go back to a horse and buggy” (Northrup 1997:141).

Anishinaabe treaty rights could thus be undermined by essentialist conceptions of “traditional” (i.e., unchanging) culture. This case illustrates the importance of taking constructivist critiques of identity seriously. As Said (1993) notes, any use of static essentialism—strategic or otherwise—eventually condemns subjugated peoples to continued marginality and oppression. Were the Anishinaabe to maintain that they had not changed in essence over the past two centuries for the purposes of NAGPRA, this could be turned against them in their battle over treaty rights. Hence, the continued use of essentialist models of Native American identity by museums and tribes in the implementation of NAGPRA is not only intellectually impractical but also legally precarious.

The alternative to these essentialist conceptions that is typically put forth by anthropologists today is the embracing of postmodern/postcolonial models of identity, emphasizing its fluid, flexible, and situationally contingent nature. However, recent assessments of postcolonial theory, both pro- (Gosden 2001:258) and con- (Dirlik 1999), have noted that this emphasis on the socially constructed nature of identity could ultimately prove detrimental to Native American interests. Clearly, the adoption of a radical constructivist stance wherein “traditions are invented,” subjectivities are slippery (if they exist at all), and cultural identities are myths (Dirlik 1999:73) would prove detrimental to tribes claiming rights based on cultural affiliation. Rather than strengthening native claims to control over cultural heritage, postcolonial concepts of identity appear to provide the means by which hegemonic powers are able to continue to repress subaltern peoples. By stressing the problems of essentialism and the fluid and flexible aspects of identity, postcolonialism has been (mis)used to assert the impossibility of establishing shared group identity between modern tribes and social groups in the past, turning NAGPRA into a cruel intellectualist trick that pulls the rug out from under the feet of the Native Americans. From the perspective of modern tribes, this appears to be one more instance in a long line of broken treaties by the U.S. government. Once again Indians were promised a modicum of control, only to have that right snatched away a few years later, this time through an academic sleight-of-hand that claims that it is impossible to prove that they share a common identity with their ancestors. Of course, this is in direct opposition to the explicitly stated political goals of many postcolonialists who endorse subaltern access to power.

Thus, the combination of postcolonial theory and NAGPRA would seem to place Native Americans in a no-win situation. On the one hand, the use of essentialist categories (no matter how strategic) condemns Native Americans to roles of static otherness in which legal claims are undermined by any variation from the cultural formations of their pre-1492 ancestors. On the other hand, the adoption of radical constructivism weakens any notion of cultural integrity. Thus, Indians are caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of identity studies: charting a course that errs on the side of strategic essentialism results in accusations that cultural affiliation is intellectually untenable, while steering too close to radical constructivism condemns even the mere existence of tribal entities to nothing more than contemporary political fabrications.

Routes Rather than Roots: Closer Readings

The reduction of cultural affiliation to either essentialism or radical constructivism is a false dichotomy, however. In my reading of the law, NAGPRA does not, in fact, obligate tribes or museums to adopt essentialist models of identity. Furthermore, equating postcolonial notions of identity with radical constructivism misinterprets the arguments of many postcolonial theorists; by “flattening” postcolonial notions of identity into a one-size-fits-all model of extreme constructivism, critics (e.g., Dirlik 1994) gloss over critical elements of postcolonialism and the process of identity construction. Tribes should neither be forced to maintain that they have remained exactly the same over the course of the past 500 years nor be required to promote a notion of identity as “a fleeting, transient thing—constantly changing, constantly being renegotiated, written on the wind” (Clark 2001:3).

Much of the intellectual hand-wringing surrounding the difficulties inherent in the application of NAGPRA neglects to pay sufficient attention to the actual text of the law. A close examination of the regulation and its legislative history reveals that the legal definition of cultural affiliation utilized by NAGPRA does not necessitate a static notion of straightforward cultural continuity (contra Gosden 2001:241). Rather, NAGPRA defines cultural affiliation as “a relationship of shared group identity” (25 U.S.C. §§ 3001, [2]; emphasis mine). As with many legal discourses, the inclusion of a single word—in this case, “relationship”—makes all the difference.

In an early draft of NAGPRA legislation, a stricter definition of cultural affiliation was proposed, one that would have required that “a continuity of group identity from the earlier to the present day group” be reasonably established (Trope and Echo-Hawk 2000:162 n. 50; emphasis added). However, the authors of this legislation ultimately recognized that the continuity definition would prove problematic. The requirement of unchanging and
unbroken cultural identity has repeatedly proven detrimental to Native American groups attempting to attain federal recognition (Clifford 1988:336–44), a fact of which the drafters of this legislation were well aware. In an attempt to avoid the pitfalls that have plagued tribal groups in the past, the necessity of "continuity" was changed to the less stringent "relationship" requirement. As Gerstenblith (2002:176) notes, "both the wording of NAGPRA and much of its legislative history seem intended to change the way cultural continuity was defined." Introducing the concept of a relationship of shared group identity thus makes space for a slightly more fluid, flexible, and socially constructed notion of identity to be employed in the implementation of NAGPRA, one closer to that endorsed by contemporary anthropologists and postcolonial theorists.

Furthermore, a closer reading of postcolonial scholarship reveals that some of its most prominent proponents do not, in fact, endorse a notion of cultural identity cut from whole cloth. Stuart Hall (1989:29), for example, explicitly acknowledges "the place of history, language, and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity." Likewise, Bhabha notes that cultural identity "is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed" (Bhabha 1994:2). Modern identities are neither simple continuations of past identities nor created out of thin air; rather, identities draw on history for their legitimacy, restaging the past in the creation of the present. Identity construction is always in process and never complete (Hall 1990:222; Bhabha 1994:1–2); this does not mean that traditional practices are forgotten or dismissed, but are reinscribed and given new meanings. In other words, modern identities may not represent a straightforward, one-to-one correlation with the past, but there is a relationship between the past and modern groups. Furthermore, the acknowledgment of the social construction of identity should not be taken as a negation of its importance. It is true that cultural identity, like race, does not exist as an independent entity in the world. Identity is discursively constructed. But this does not make identity any less socially significant. Cultural identities create salient social distinctions and, thus, must not be discounted as mere epiphenomena or, worse, inconsequential.

Clearly, then, the concept of cultural affiliation is not quite as rigidly essentialist as critics have made it out to be. In addition, not all postcolonialists endorse an extreme constructivist position on identity, qualifying the fluidity of ethnic consciousness as mediated and constructed out of historical realities. In both cultural affiliation and postcolonial theory, it seems more useful to conceive of identity in terms of *more* rather than *more* (Clifford 1997; Friedman 2002). With this established, it becomes possible to chart a "third way" for the implementation of NAGPRA in the postcolonial era, one that is neither rigidly essentialist nor radically constructivist. One postcolonial concept that may prove useful in establishing strategies that are both effective for tribes and academically viable in the contemporary intellectual climate is that of cultural hybridity (Hall 1990; Bhabha 1994; Young 1995).

**Between Either/Or: Postcolonial Hybridity**

The corollary to postcolonialism's rejection of essentialism is recognition of the central role of hybridity in the constitution of culture (Bhabha 1994:38). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines hybrid as "anything derived from heterogeneous sources, or composed of different or incongruous elements." In postcolonial theory, hybridity commonly refers to the complex transcultural forms produced through colonization that cannot be neatly classified into a single cultural or ethnic category. It challenges the traditional view of colonialism as a meeting between discrete entities, colonizer and colonized, who maintain separate cultural formations through time. Instead, the concept of hybridity posits that the interaction of social groups produces new cultural forms that are neither wholly immigrant nor wholly indigenous but are instead interdependent and mutually constituting. This term does not connote benign and innocuous combinations, however; as used by many postcolonialists, hybridity can imply disruption and a forcing together of unlike things (Young 1995:26), calling attention to disjunctions as well as conjunctions (Kapchan and Strong 1999:249). Hybridity foregrounds the issues of power and inequality inherent in colonial societies, highlighting the empowering nature of hybrid forms that often make space for anticolonial resistance through the challenging of binary categories. This emphasis on power can be traced back to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981:358–61), whose foundational use of the term hybridity in linguistics stressed the unsettling and transfiguring capacity of these new cultural formations.

A clear example of hybridity can be found in the tradition of quilting among the contemporary Lakota (Sioux) of the northern U.S. Plains. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Lakota women adapted the techniques and styles of quilt production that were forced upon them through contact with Euro-American missionaries and educators to produce a new, hybrid class of material culture (Albers and Medicine 1983:127–28). They quickly established innovative designs, with the majority of quilts incorporating variations on a single central star pattern, known logically enough
as “star quilts” (Fig. 5.1). Today their production and exchange are an important sign of contemporary Lakota identity. They are frequently used to mark significant occasions and important rituals, including graduations, funerals, weddings, traditional redistributive ceremonies, and Native basketball tournaments, among many other occasions (Albers and Medicine 1983:129–34). As one contemporary Lakota author notes, “In the twentieth century, quilts—especially those in the star pattern—have become one of the definitive cultural symbols of the Sioux people” (Anderson 1997:101). The star quilt, then, has become a new sign of identity for Lakota people, created out of the “in-between spaces” created by colonialism (Bhabha 1994:1–2)—in this case, out of the boarding schools and missions that mediated the Indian and Euro-American worlds.

Conventional anthropological interpretations of this Lakota appropriation of quilting might view this phenomenon as a relatively straightforward example of acculturation (Redfield et al. 1935), syncretism (Herskovits 1966; Stewart 1999), or bricolage (Levi-Strauss 1971), in which a class of foreign material culture is appropriated by colonized peoples. A postcolonial interpretation emphasizes the fact that these quilts are not simply replicas or imitations of a Euro-American craft; rather, they are a new, hybrid class of material culture resulting from a fusion of Western technology with Lakota aesthetics. Hybridity differs from acculturation, syncretism, and bricolage not only in the centrality it places on power relations but also in that it resists representing cultures as bounded wholes (Stewart 1999:40–41). The postcolonial concept of hybridity reemphasizes the fact that all cultural forms participating in colonization are hybrids and rejects the idea that any “pure” or essential cultures have ever existed (Said 1993:xxvi). Furthermore, hybridity stresses the interdependence and mutual construction of colonizer and colonized, acknowledging the multidirectional ebb and flow of cultural influences in colonial contexts and encouraging a focus not on synchronic structures but on diachronic practices (Kapchan and Strong 1999:250).

Hybridity is thus an appealing concept for the realm of contemporary Native American legal concerns, as it offers a “Third Space” (Bhabha 1994:37) in the articulation of identity that does not force modern Indians to choose between either essentialism or radical constructivism (Young 1995:26). However, anthropologists utilizing this term must be careful not to confuse this interpretive framework with an external reality. Hybridity is not an ethnographic object in and of itself but, rather, a theoretical lens that can prove useful for viewing familiar ethnographic objects in a new light. As Gregory Bateson (1972:454–55) notes, we have to be careful here not to confuse the anthropological map with the territory.

Hybridity is not a panacea, however, and it is not without its critics (see Ahmad 1995; Friedman 1997). Some of this criticism stems from its checkered political history; in the nineteenth century, hybrid forms were thought to be weak and sterile, providing evidence that pure racial types were superior and should not be mixed (Young 1995:6–19). Over the course of the past century, however, genetic studies demonstrated hybrid species to be particularly fruitful and resilient, imbuing the term with more positive connotations (Stewart 1999:45). However, to many, the concept of hybridity
presumes a preexisting purity in the social formations that are later combined (as does acculturation, syncretism, and bricolage). While postcolonialists typically answer these critics by rejecting any notion that "pure" or essential cultures have ever existed, conceptualizing hybridity as the historical result of two previously separate cultures colliding seems somewhat less troubling when focusing on the cultural formations that resulted from the encounter of Native Americans and the peoples of the Old World.

Others object to the ambiguity of the term, perceiving a threat that will dissolve cultural differences into a pool of indistinguishable homogeneity, decentering culture to the point of uselessness (Kapchan and Strong 1999:240). According to this line of thinking, hybridity undermines the rights of subaltern groups in the same ways that critiques of the biological concept of race have been used against traditionally marginalized ethnic groups. (If race doesn’t exist, the argument goes, then no group should receive distinctive treatment.) In other words, because hybridity dissolves the rigid boundaries between groups, critics of this concept believe it makes everyone the same—we are all hybrid citizens of one transnational world. Again, this critique seems unfounded; postcolonialists such as Bhabha stress the need for “forms of dialectical thinking that do not disavow or sublate the otherness (alterity) that constitutes the symbolic domain of psychic and social identifications” (Bhabha 1994:173). We need not conceive of cultural identity as either bounded and essential “cultures” or an undifferentiated hybrid mass; rather, a more useful notion might be to conceive of hybridity as a suite of distinctive cultural formations somewhere between the two. To paraphrase the words of Bhabha, we should focus not on the exoticism or the diversity of cultures but on the inscription and articulation of cultural hybridity (Bhabha 1994:38).

The rising popularity of hybridity in anthropological theory has resulted in claims that NAGPRA requires tribes “to prove that they are not creolized or hybrid cultures” (Gosden 2001:242) in order to establish cultural affiliation. I disagree with this assertion, arguing that, in fact, tribes do not have to prove that they maintain “pure” cultures; on the contrary, with a more nuanced understanding of hybridity (and a recognition of the importance of the word relationship) it becomes possible for tribes to demonstrate that their contemporary cultural formations are, in fact, hybrids, forged out of past cultural practices melding with those of succeeding time periods and other social groups.

**Hybridity and History**

Hybridity is not predicated on the idea of the disappearance of previous cultural formations but, rather, on their continual and mutual develop-
quilting flourished among northern Plains tribes in the late nineteenth century over other Euro-American crafts. A major factor in the adoption of this new, hybrid class of material culture in Lakota life was that its introduction roughly coincided with the elimination of wild bison herds (Medicine 1997:111). Bison hide robes had played an integral role in the initiation rites, honoring ceremonies, funerary rituals, and ceremonial gifting characteristic of indigenous Plains groups prior to the hunting of the bison to near extinction. These robes were known as *wihapí shina*, or star robes (Fig. 5.2), after the star or sunburst designs with which they were frequently adorned (Medicine 1997:113). As bison hides became increasingly difficult to attain through the course of the nineteenth century, Lakota women began to produce quilts to take the place of the star robes in ritual activities, a practice that continues to the present day. Thus, the adoption of the star or sunburst pattern among Lakota quilters is not a random accident, but the direct result of historical circumstances, and their importance in Lakota identity formation continues today because of the relationship it maintains with previous design traditions (Feest 1992:152). It is a remembering of the past and a continuation of the practice of buffalo hide painting through modern hybrid forms. However, it is also important to note the crucial role of power relations in this change in technology as well. Quilting was not a benign adoption of the tools of the colonizer by the Lakota, but was forced upon them through the multi-pronged attack of confining tribes to reservations, “civilizing” the Indian (by teaching them Euro-American crafts in boarding schools and missions), and the elimination of wild buffalo herds.

Thus, through the production of hybridized star quilts, the modern Lakota maintain a cultural affiliation with their ancestors. This example demonstrates the importance of the historical contextualization of hybridity, an essential step in the application of postcolonial theory to material culture. It also illustrates that an acknowledgment of hybridity does not necessarily undermine indigenous claims to an affiliation with the past. In fact, when critically applied, postcolonial theories of hybridity can strengthen Native American claims to cultural affiliation.

**Conclusion**

Critics of NAGPRA have drawn upon postcolonial theory to suggest that this law requires an impractical and unviable concept of Native American identity to implement the repatriation of human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. These critiques are not entirely without merit. However, they stem largely from two peripheral issues that have previously been underexamined: 1) the importance of the term *relationship* in the definition of cultural affiliation, which allows contemporary Native Americans and museums to acknowledge the fluid and flexible nature of identity formation, particularly the hybrid cultural forms.
of postcolonial societies; and 2) the crucial roles of history and power in the formation of hybrid cultural forms.

Bhabha notes that hybridity often subverts the narratives of colonial power. It can be used to critique the series of inclusions and exclusions on which dominant cultural formations are premised (Bhabha 1994:112–20). Thus, rather than seeing hybridity as antithetical to the establishment of cultural affiliation, we should view NAGPRA as an opportunity to continue dismantling the essentialist notions of indigenous culture that have contributed to the subjugation of Native Americans for so long. Too often, indigenous peoples have been characterized as static and unchanging, with cultures fixed “from time immemorial,” contributing to their continued exoticism and marginalization. By embracing hybridity—albeit hybridity grounded in historical specificities—the dynamic nature of Indian identities can be emphasized. Also, as I've attempted to demonstrate here, this concept of historicized hybridity can be used to establish the relationships of shared group identity necessitated by NAGPRA to implement repatriation. Archaeologists stand poised to play a crucial role in this process, documenting hybridity not only in recent cultural formations but also in the distant past. By emphasizing the ubiquity of hybridity in all phases of Native American history—precontact, colonial, and contemporary contexts—archaeology can help to deconstruct the concept of a pure, unchanging Native essence. In the process, we have the opportunity to forge a new understanding of cultural hybridity—a contribution that will benefit not only postcolonial theory but also the subjugated Others who have long suffered under the assumption that the real Indians disappeared when the white people arrived.

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Note
1. Repatriation legislation preceding NAGPRA includes the National Museum of the American Indian Act and state repatriation statutes passed in California, Hawai'i, Kansas, Nebraska, and Arizona (Trope and Echo-Hawk 2000:135–37).