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The Archaeology of Hybrid Material Culture

*Edited by
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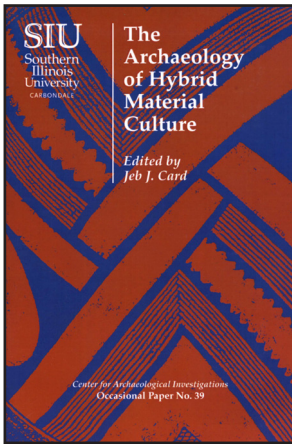
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The volume, *The Archaeology of Hybrid Material Culture*, derived from the 26th annual Visiting Scholar Conference at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, presents 21 chapters with a variety of approaches aimed at better understanding particular situations where hybrid material culture is produced. As Card notes in his introduction (p. 1), the word hybrid can be a difficult place to start. The word is troubling particularly to anthropologists given its (1) history in the previous two centuries as an expression of fears about racial purity based in racism and pseudo-science, (2) association with topics such as eugenics, and (3) related use as a pejorative. The word as used today by archaeologists may also trouble some, but for very different reasons. It is not always clear (and this is the case in this volume) whether a particular analyst references hybridization or hybridity, two very different takes on a process of mixing. As is recognized by Stephen W. Silliman, Jeb J. Card, Matthew Liebmann and others, this is in part due to the ambiguity of what is meant by hybrid. A hybrid, at its most basic, is a mix of different parts that don't usually go together. At the more complex end of the spectrum a hybrid is the product of hybridity, a spatialized process of cultural mixing defined by Homi K. Bhabha (1994).

Definitional issues are at times a weakness in the volume, despite efforts by Card, Liebmann and Silliman, and a few others to address definitions and terminology. As noted by Silliman (p. 488), "to be useful, the notion of hybridity should be a theoretical construct, not simply an empirical restatement of a series of cultural events of sharing, accommodation, exchange, modification and experimentation. We already have words for these outcomes (e.g. diffusion, transculturation, ethnogenesis)...." Even among those who engage ideas of hybridity, there is clearly an effort to better grasp the concept and its repercussions. For example, Catherine Hays asks in her chapter (p. 427), "Is hybridity process or product? If it is process as Bhabha suggests, where does it begin and end? If it is product, meaning the intermixture of two stable forms, what are those stable form founded on?" This tension undergirds much of the discussion in the volume, and finds no easy answer.

As defined by Bhabha, who most credit as the foundational thinker, hybridity is a spatialized process engendered by the interactions of persons with differences. According to Bhabha, these encounters open a "thirdspace" (See Lefebvre 1991; Soja 2000), which is a place of liminality that exists outside of the normal rules of engagement. It is where cultural authority is altered; sign, symbol and significance are disassociated; new meanings are negotiated. It is during the liminal moments of negotiating meaning that innovation is possible. Creation of the new is less explicit in concepts such as creolization, syncretization

or assimilation. These imply a mixing of discrete traits and the compartmentalization of difference as well as static identities, rather than a blurring of boundaries that results in the creation of new cultural forms (Alt 2006, 2008). Hybridity is, in effect, culture making. Encounters with difference can subvert power relationships, and destabilize notions of cultural authenticity. Hybridity de-essentializes culture, and reiterates the performative nature of being and thought. This does not discount as, Hallam and Ingold (2007) have reminded us, that all life is innovation. But then perhaps Bhabha (1994), would agree as he noted that “all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity” (Bhabha 1994:211).

This sense of hybridity, promoted by Bhabha and utilized in culture contact and colonial studies, is not utilized wholesale by anyone in the present volume, although various pieces are found scattered throughout some chapters. For example, Card and Liebmann are interested in the effects of power differentials. What is more often referenced is the hybrid, which misses the sense that Bhabha provides, that there is no authentic, wholly original, un-hybridized starting point, that it is always, as Harrison Buck et al. call it, “hybridization without crisp social boundaries.” More commonly, authors identify a moment of hybridization, a particular situation of interaction and change. That moment exists, but I would suggest that moment is actually an extreme on a continuum, a process not a happening that begins and ends. Thus, hybridity is especially salient for the consideration of colonial situations, but I would suggest it is also salient for any occasion of interactions between persons, groups of people, non-human persons, and things. This is similar to Gosden’s (2005, 2008) sense that people and things are enchaind in meaningful ways and that things have an effect and are integral to persons and their identities. Such a sense is not a major theme in the present volume.

The volume is organized by material category. Part One is called Ceramic Change in Colonial Latin America and the Caribbean. Parts Two and Three are entitled Ethnicity and Material Culture in Latin America, and Culture Contact and Transformation in Technological Style. The papers within those sections (two of these are discussant pieces by Kathleen Deagan and Stephan Silliman) provide coverage of widely ranging times and places from Neanderthals in Europe (C. Tomie) to historic New England (C. Hayes) to Mesopotamia (S. Turpin), Hawaii (J. Flexner and C. Morgan), the American Southwest (M. Liebmann, J. Clark et al), the Caribbean (M. Hauser) American Southeast (A. Cordell) and Midwest (J. Griffiths, K. Ehrhardt), South America (J. Card, M. Chatfield, J. Hill, E. Harrison Buck et al, H. Klaus, C. Brezine) and Europe (C. Frieman, C. Roberts). Most of the chapters are colonial cases, but a few, such as those by Clark, Harrison-Buck, Tomie, Roberts and Turpin, are not.

The volume authors do not all directly engage notions of the hybrid, or hybridity, but provide a range of interpretations and ideas about culture contact, ethnogenesis, cultural mixing, hybridization, hybridity, syncretization, acculturation, creolization and more, as well as how these are evident in the material culture of each case study. Silliman, in his review chapter does a fine job of sorting authors into various types of intellectual engagements with hybrid material culture and I need not replicate that here. What the volume does achieve is to represent how a variety of analysts are currently

identifying, analyzing and explaining encounters, change and the ensuing material culture. The volume is not a call for a particular methodology or theoretical viewpoint. It does highlight what is becoming a dominant theme in archaeology today, that we realize that no one existed in a bubble, and that we must better theorize both how interactions affected identities and how we use material culture to understand this. This volume is a good place to begin to look at how some archaeologists are doing just this.

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