

# 'Post-Colonial' North American Indigeneity: Approaches to Heritage and Identity in Archaeological Frameworks

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## Abstract

Archaeology and Heritage have both contributed to the erasure of Indigenous histories. Heritage—specifically what Smith (2006) refers to as the 'Authorised Heritage Discourse'—has had lasting detrimental impacts on Indigenous communities, overemphasising tangible materiality and granting archaeologists and curators excessive interpretive authority over Indigenous pasts. Similarly, archaeological frameworks like acculturation and hybridity have problematically positioned changes and continuities in Indigenous material cultures as proxies of cultural identity, together perpetuating 'Vanishing Indian' narratives that further dispossess contemporary Indigenous peoples of their lands and histories. The concept of survivance, however, counters these narratives, rejecting simple change-continuity dichotomies and the use of material culture as a proxy for identity, foregrounding Indigenous perspectives, and reframing heritage as intangible and active. This paper explores how survivance can bridge heritage and archaeological discourse towards a more decolonised study of the past, exemplified by recent representations of Mashantucket Pequot survivance histories in museum and archaeological spaces.

## Introduction

Archaeology and Heritage—Western disciplines whose establishment in North America is inexorably tied to colonialism—have both contributed to the erasure of Indigenous histories, historically granting archaeologists and curators excessive interpretive authority over Indigenous pasts and engendering Eurocentric narratives with lasting ramifications for contemporary Indigenous peoples. In archaeological discourse, much attention has historically been given to interpreting changes and continuities in Indigenous material cultures, often problematically used as proxies for quantifying the degree to which Indigenous identities changed in reaction to—or resistance against—colonial encounters. Archaeological frameworks built from these assumptions of identity, including acculturation and hybridity, dispossess contemporary Indigenous peoples of their histories while perpetuating misconceptions that paint them as less authentically Indigenous than their ancestors. While early frameworks, such as acculturation, explicitly fed into colonialist ‘Vanishing Indian’ narratives, the emphasis on material change and continuity that has remained embedded in more recent frameworks, like hybridity, has cemented these narratives into the popular consciousness, significantly impacting politics of Indigenous representation and self-determination (Allard 2018; Panich 2013).

Heritage, too, has contributed to ‘Vanishing Indian’ narratives, historically having positioned archaeologists and curators as “stewards for” or “arbitrators of” the past and prioritising tangible material forms (Smith 2006: 51). Though the meaning of ‘heritage’ is widely debated, it has frequently been defined as a passive and primarily “physical substance” (Sørensen and Carman 2009: 11), something that can be “passed from one generation to the next” and “conserved or inherited” (Harrison 2010: 9). In addition to overemphasising tangible materiality, this characterisation often implies a degree of impartiality that masks the inherently political ways in which heritage discourse plays out. Heritage studies in North America have been historically dominated by what Smith (2006) calls the Authorised Heritage Discourse, which restricts heritage to tangible, aesthetically pleasing, and sufficiently ‘old’ objects, places, and landscapes, neglects intangible forms of heritage—such as cultural practices,

language, music, dance, and oral traditions—and privileges the perspective of the Western ‘expert’ over that of Indigenous communities. For much of the last century, this discourse has positioned archaeologists, curators, and other scholars as gatekeepers to Indigenous histories, built from the presupposition that “only scholars have the credentials to define and explain American Indians and that their word should be regarded as definitive and conclusive” (Deloria 1992: 595).

Heritage thus cannot be regarded as apolitical, as it is interpretively constructed: what elements are chosen, who is doing the interpreting and how, create specific narratives about the meaning of heritage sites, objects, and the histories they represent (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1996; Smith 2006). These narratives often conflict, leading to a dissonance that can be “disabling” for Indigenous communities, as the way narratives are shaped, who is permitted to weigh in, and who ultimately acts as the arbiter, has significant political consequences in legitimising or delegitimising Indigenous claims to sovereignty, land, and resources (Smith 2006: 80). To move past the deeply colonialist implications of past heritage discourse, I argue, following Smith (2006: 44, 74), for a reformulation of heritage as an active cultural process of “meaning and memory making and remaking” that “engages with acts of remembering [...] to create ways to understand and engage with the present”, working through—rather than depending on—tangible forms, and not only passing on cultural values and meanings but also recreating them for new generations.

One concept that can bridge this reformulation of heritage with archaeological interpretation is survivance, shifting away from simple change-continuity dichotomies and towards archaeological discourse that allows for “continuity through change” (Panich 2013: 106), decoupling changing Indigenous material culture from notions of ‘Vanishing Indians’, acknowledging the role of intangible heritage, and prioritising Indigenous perspectives (Allard 2018; Silliman 2009, 2014). This paper will explore the damaging effects of the Authorised Heritage Discourse and archaeological frameworks like acculturation and hybridity on contemporary Indigenous peoples, as well as recent strides in Indigenous archaeology and heritage

discourse, ultimately arguing that survivance can be implemented as a bridge between the two to foster discussion of how material cultures serve as tools of agency through which Indigenous peoples construct their surroundings, make and remake heritage, and reassert their identity in changing historic and contemporary circumstances.

### **Acculturation and the Myth of the ‘Vanishing Indian’**

One of the earliest archaeological frameworks in the study of post-contact Indigenous societies—now thankfully abandoned—is acculturation, characterised by notions of “emerging ‘Europeanization’ and disappearing ‘Indianness’” (Rubertone 2014: 4), as Indigenous peoples were purportedly “swept along” by the tide of European cultural influence (DiPaolo Loren and Beaudry 2006: 251). The premise of acculturation was that the “donor” cultures—those of the European colonising powers—transformed Indigenous “recipient” cultures, causing a “loss and eventual disappearance of traditional lifeways, materialities, and even entire cultures” (Keehnen et al. 2019: 5). In this framework, material change was viewed as wholly unidirectional, leading to ‘Vanishing Indian’ narratives that framed colonisation as an irrevocably transformative point of inflection pivoting the trajectories of Indigenous societies (Allard 2018; Keehnen et al. 2019; Panich 2013; Silliman 2012).

In addition to denying Indigenous peoples the ability to change, as all change was framed as a loss of indigeneity, acculturation also propagated social evolutionist thought, using alleged instances of Indigenous adoption of European material culture to bolster narratives of cultural and technological ‘progress’ and perpetuate stereotypes of “Indian rationality and motivation” (Keehnen et al. 2019; Miller and Hamell 1986: 312). Acculturalists constructed narratives of Indigenous peoples, particularly in North-Eastern North America, “irrationally” trading valuable items—furs and skins—to Europeans in exchange for “baubles and trinkets” (Jordan 2014: 107), downplaying the cultural significance of these so-called ‘baubles and trinkets’, which in fact often fit into longstanding cultural and ideological systems (Miller and Hamell 1986; Rubertone 2014). This is instantiated by Miller and Hamell’s (1986: 315–316) illustration of the “highly charged ideological

value” of ‘European’ copper and glass goods within North-Eastern North America, Turgeon’s (2004) demonstration of the ideologically, socially, and politically significant uses of beads in Indigenous communities, and examples of European-manufactured items altered, redefined and integrated into Indigenous cultural frameworks, such as the brass kettle ornaments and glass beads string into belts and necklaces found in the 17th century Narragansett burial ground RI-1000 (Rubertone 2001, 2014). These examples attest to the complexity of Indigenous adoption of ‘European’ materials, evidencing not “emerging ‘Europeanization’” and “disappearing ‘Indianness’” but rather tools of reasserting Indigenous identity in changing political and economic circumstances (Rubertone 2014: 4).

At the root of acculturation models is an emphasis on past change and continuity, leading to severe political ramifications in the present (Allard 2018). The idea that any change in Indigenous material culture was akin to ‘Europeanization’ and loss of indigeneity has fed into tropes of inauthenticity, weaponised as “tools of further conquest” to delegitimise contemporary Indigenous peoples’ aspirations for land rights and self-determination (Cipolla 2013: 12). These tropes cemented the position of non-Indigenous people—archaeologists, curators, government officials—as arbiters of “what constitutes ‘real’ American Indians” (Smith 2006: 295), preventing Indigenous practices and identities outside of these colonial definitions from being recognised as legitimate (Cipolla 2013). Acculturation models also placed excessive emphasis on tangible materiality—along with the Authorised Heritage Discourse—ignoring the significant intangible manifestations of heritage, like beliefs, oral histories, and rituals, that have enabled Indigenous peoples to maintain and renegotiate their identities in the face of colonialism, forced movement, structural oppression, and societal upheaval (Smith 2006).

## Hybridity

Following post-processual and postcolonial shifts in archaeological discourse, acculturation was abandoned for its Eurocentricity and unidirectionality, and archaeologists turned to new frameworks, like hybridity (Keehnen et al. 2019). Hybridity studies often focus on “double objects”

(Jones 2007: 12), which represent a blending of different cultural influences, their combination a continuously “unresolved and ongoing” process (Liebmann 2015: 323) that emphasises relocations and negotiations in power structures, highlights cultural creativity, and subverts colonial narratives of cultural domination (Bhabha 1994; DiPaolo Loren 2015; Liebmann 2015; Silliman 2020). According to Bhabha (1994), hybridity can function as a tool to challenge simplified narratives of colonisation, assimilation, and acculturation while highlighting materials that do not subscribe neatly to classifications. Liebmann (2015: 323) similarly argues that these materials can be empowering in their defiance of “binary categories” like Native American/European or traditional/modern.

Hybridity, however, has a problematic history, and its modern incarnation has not shed its Eurocentric implications. The etymological origins of ‘hybridity’ can be found in the Latin *hibrida*, “denoting the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar” and applied in the Roman Empire to the children of freemen and slaves, thus from its inception conjuring “visions of domesticated civilisation uniting with wild savagery” (Liebmann 2013, 2015: 325). In the nineteenth century, hybridity was weaponised by eugenicists to bolster white supremacist claims of “pure racial types” (Liebmann 2013, 2015: 325; Young 1995). While Liebmann (2015) argues that hybridity has been reinvented, Silliman (2015) suggests that significant elements of Eurocentrism remain, primarily in its unidirectional application: archaeologists are quick to apply it when Indigenous peoples adopted European materials, viewed as evidence of increasing foreign influence, yet the Indigenous crops adopted in Europe, such as tomatoes and potatoes in Italy and Ireland, respectively, are viewed as cultural additions, not losses, that augmented rather than diminished cultural identity. Moreover, when hybridity is understood as an ongoing process, he argues that classifying Indigenous societies as hybrids makes it unclear when they stopped being so or if they are *still* hybrids, “adrift” since culture-contact (Silliman 2015: 286). This is significantly marginalising, perpetuating the same tropes of inauthenticity embedded in earlier acculturalist narratives and similarly using material culture as a measure of identity. As Silliman (2015: 286) argues, archaeologists must allow Indigenous people to escape the “binds [...] impose[d] on them with our ontological vice-grip of hybridity”, or they

will be trapped in frameworks that render them “forever less than they started and not quite whole again.”

Hybridity is further problematised by the fact that classifying cultural elements as either ‘Native American’ or ‘European’ and certain objects as hybrids of the two says more about who is classifying them than about the objects themselves. This can result in conclusions about Indigenous cultural identity detached from meaningful discourse on who has the authority or right to make such judgements. Indeed, the classification of objects as hybrid often stands in opposition to the way that their makers view them. This is exemplified by Mickey Mouse kachina dolls, which are Hopi statues carved from cottonwood and interpreted by some as double objects fusing Hopi and corporate Euro-American culture (Liebmann 2015). Such interpretation, however, favours the Euro-American perspective and focuses on tangible form over the elements of intangible Hopi heritage—oral history, beliefs, and ritual practices—that situate the purportedly ‘hybrid’ dolls deeply within Hopi cultural systems (Liebmann 2015). After Mickey Mouse’s debut, Hopi communities associated him with the Hopi legendary protective mouse figure Tusan Homichi, and he was integrated into Hopi events, dancing as a Mudhead kachina (a clown that entertains crowds during ceremonies) from the 1930s to the 1950s (Green 1991; Kennard et al. 1944; Liebmann 2015). The interpretation of the Mickey Mouse kachina as a hybrid thus privileges the Western perspective and obscures its role in Hopi communities as a manifestation of Hopi cultural practices actively in the process of being renegotiated and remade for new generations—in Smith’s (2006: 74) words, in the process of heritage “meaning and memory making and remaking.” Hybridity, then, like acculturation and the Authorised Heritage Discourse, functions as a tool by which archaeologists and curators, treated as “stewards for, and arbitrators of, debates over the past” (Smith 2006: 51), can dictate Indigenous histories.

### **Survivance: A Bridging Paradigm**

A more recent paradigm integrated into archaeological and heritage discourse is survivance, introduced by Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald

Vizenor (1994, 1998, 2008) in order to challenge two dimensional ‘victim’ narratives that dominate the way Indigenous peoples are often represented in museums, art, literature, cinema, and history (Acebo and Martinez 2018). Vizenor (1998: 15) defines survivance as “more than survival, more than endurance or mere response” and an “active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” narratives in favour of highlighting the creativity and determination of Indigenous responses to the circumstances imposed by colonialism. Stories of survivance—themselves “active form[s] of literary resistance” (Acebo and Martinez 2018: 147)—challenge ‘Vanishing Indian’ tropes, deconstruct stereotypes, and inspire a reimagining of contemporary Indigenous peoples by illustrating the struggles and persistent creativity of their ancestors against the “subjugations, distortions, and erasures of white colonisation and hegemony” (Hart 2012: 102). Moreover, survivance stories challenge narratives that portray Indigenous survival as a “passive outcome in apologetic histories of colonialism, void of agency or struggle” as well as those that paint Indigenous communities solely as “victimised remnants of an oppressed people” (Silliman 2014: 58–59). To Atalay (2006a: 609, 615), survivance is about highlighting Indigenous agency, creativity, resistance, and survival in the face of the “unimaginable turmoil” brought about by European colonisation and dispensing with representations of Indigenous people as “two-dimensional cut-outs of victimry or triumph.”

Survivance thus bolsters narratives of Indigenous “survival with attitude”, wherein Indigenous peoples flourished—not just stayed alive—through “reinventing who they are, finding new identities through telling traditional stories, and inventing new ones” (Velie 2008: 147). When applied to archaeological interpretation, then, survivance provides a paradigm by which archaeologists can reject the change-continuity dichotomies that were overly emphasised in earlier frameworks, dispense with the use of material forms as proxies for cultural identity, and acknowledge the ability of Indigenous communities to “change in order to stay the same”, or following Clifford’s (2001) concept of (re)articulation, persist through “making, unmaking, and remaking” (Silliman 2014: 60–61). This parallels Smith’s (2006: 74) reformulation of heritage as a cultural process of “meaning and memory making and remaking”, in which acts of remembering and performance



serve as tools in connecting to the past and engaging in the present, passing down while also reinventing cultural values, enabling them to persist through changing contexts and manifestations. This new heritage thinking and recent archaeological interpretations are increasingly bridged by survivance paradigms, both acknowledging how Indigenous people in the past and the present—through remembering, performing, creating, and re-creating both the tangible and intangible aspects of heritage—can construct their surroundings and reassert their identities in changing social, political, and economic circumstances.

Additionally, a significant characteristic of survivance is acknowledging that it is not up to the archaeologist or the public to decide whether Indigenous cultures have changed to the extent of becoming new ones or ‘inauthentic’ versions of themselves (Silliman 2014). Rather, survivance foregrounds the intangible identities of Indigenous communities, giving them the power to define themselves and their narratives within academic and heritage spaces rather than continuing to suffer the characterisations imposed by past academics, the public, or the federal government. This has increasingly become one of the tenets of Indigenous archaeology, a broad approach featuring an “array of archaeological practices undertaken by, for, and with Indigenous communities” (Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010: 229), to challenge and deconstruct archaeology’s colonialist underpinnings, redress the inequalities in past archaeological practice, foreground Indigenous perspectives, and thus make archaeology more “representative of, relevant for, and responsible to Indigenous communities” (Nicholas 2008: 1660). In the words of Atalay (2006b: 294), Indigenous archaeology is about “finding ways to create counter-discourse that speaks back to the power of colonialist and imperialist interpretations of the past.”

One problem Indigenous archaeology seeks to redress is the historical positioning of archaeologists as gatekeepers of Indigenous pasts, wherein they claimed authority over Indigenous artefacts, human remains, and histories (Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010). The enduring influence of this legacy is evident in recent reactions against the democratising aims of Indigenous archaeology, such as McGhee’s (2008: 580–581) contention that they are

tantamount to an essentialising “Aboriginalism” that gives Indigenous people “special” rights to heritage. As Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. (2010: 233) argues, McGhee’s argument rests on a belief—stemming from the privileged position archaeologists have historically held—in the “unreserved” right of archaeologists to practice archaeology free from influence from the Indigenous peoples impacted by their work. Contrary to McGhee’s “caricature” (Silliman 2010: 218) of Indigenous archaeology as a form of ‘Aboriginalism’, it is instead an approach that acknowledges the historical inequalities embedded in archaeological discourse and the inherently political nature of any archaeological inquiry to find ways to counter the “history of academic appropriation of indigenous pasts” (Silliman 2010: 218; Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010). Similar pushback against decolonising efforts has occurred in the heritage sphere, with protests against the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act erupting on the grounds of “science”, Indigenous peoples subsequently “made to appear as if they were looting the scientific heritage instead of receiving back the remains of loved ones who had been illegally and immorally taken from them a century or more ago” (Deloria 1992: 596). Evident from these reactions is the deep rootedness of the historical prioritisation of Western perspectives. To this end, survivance—itself an Indigenous concept—can do much to foreground Indigenous voices in the construction and representation of native histories in both archaeological and heritage discourse, thereby bridging the two.

### **Survivance in Action: Mashantucket Pequot Representation in Heritage and Archaeology**

In practice, survivance can be implemented in both museum spaces and archaeological projects through a shift in temporal focus, a more nuanced approach to Indigenous struggle and agency, and a reformulation of the way material culture is discussed, not as a proxy for cultural identity but as tools of agency by which Indigenous peoples meaningfully construct their surroundings, make and remake their heritage, and reassert their identity amid societal upheaval. In the case of museums, the prioritisation of survivance histories is, according to Kasper and Handsman (2015), still not widespread. One element of this—observed by Atalay (2006a) at the National Museum of

the American Indian—is a minimisation in museum spaces of the struggles and horrors endured by Indigenous peoples under colonisation, which she argues are necessary context for appreciating the creativity and agency they exercised in response. Temporal focus is another issue, as many museums—and archaeological investigations—do not explore tribal histories after the late seventeenth century and into the present, focusing on culture-contact and colonial settlements in the sixteenth to the eighteenth century and subsequently leaving a gap in public and academic discourse about nineteenth and twentieth century Indigenous histories and the intangible forms of heritage practised by contemporary Indigenous communities (Gonzalez et al. 2018; Kasper and Handsman 2015). This gap is particularly damaging in museums and other heritage spaces that, due to their public-facing roles, have the potential to widely disseminate detrimental narratives of Indigenous “discontinuity, decline, and assimilation” (Gonzalez et al. 2018: 97), and leave the public with the impression that “there are no real Indians” around today (Kasper and Handsman 2015: 201).

One museum focused on survivance is the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Centre (MPMRC) in Connecticut, owned and operated by the Mashantucket Pequot tribal nation (De Uriarte 2007; Kasper and Handsman 2015). The fact that the MPMRC is Pequot-owned is significant: native-owned museums enable Indigenous peoples to convey their own perspectives, counter-histories, and narratives, and engage in self-representation—in and of themselves manifestations of survivance (De Uriarte 2007). The potential of the MPMRC to foreground survivance histories and deconstruct assumptions about “Indian-ness and authenticity” (Kasper and Handsman 2015: 199) was realised over the course of the museum’s history: initial exhibits were designed by an outside firm with a team of anthropologists and tribal members, not yet embodying a collaboration with “jointly developed goals and full stakeholder participation” (Kasper and Handsman 2015: 200; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008). Over the course of a decade, the tribal community became increasingly active in the museum. In 2008, prompted by new leadership, tribal concerns, and ongoing research, a team of Mashantucket Pequot staff, tribal representatives, and non-Native staff and consultants, led by tribe member Kimberly Hatcher, began developing

fully collaborative projects focused on conveying Pequot survivance, seeking to illuminate “its complexly layered histories of resistant accommodations, persistent traditions, and creative adaptations” (Kasper and Handsman 2015: 205).

The museum’s initial Reservation-period galleries featured Mashantucket Pequot histories from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, with a gap, however, between the 1850s and the 1950s, a “Lost Century” which became the focus of a community-based research effort, drawing on oral histories, archives, and family-owned letters, objects, photographs, and newspapers (Kasper and Handsman 2015: 201). As this research illuminated the tribe’s late nineteenth and early twentieth century history, the museum developed two exhibits about Pequot survivance, *RACE Matters in Indian New England* and *Pequot Lives in the Lost Century*. This led eventually to the 2011 exhibit *Almost Vanished*, which featured a re-created reservation home with a sound-and-light display about Pequot life between 1900 and 1950, and a set of graphic panels focusing on Pequot resistance to the land sale in 1855–1856, their everyday life in the late nineteenth century, and the names and histories of individual tribal members from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century (Kasper and Handsman 2015: 201). This exhibit functioned to highlight survivance narratives as it emphasised the continuing presence of Mashantucket Pequot individuals—and their resistance and persistence—throughout the ‘Lost Century’, countered ‘Vanishing Indian’ narratives that would otherwise erase them, and foregrounding both the struggles they faced and their persisting agency and creativity. Survivance is similarly highlighted in the museum’s farmhouse exhibit, featuring a reconstructed 1770s farmhouse meant to “unsettle hegemonic notions of Indianness” (de Uriarte 2007: 151), by “locating Pequot families in historic spaces where ordinarily the public do not expect to find them” (Kasper and Handsman 2015: 202), thereby emphasising the creativity with which they constructed their surroundings and persisted through societal upheaval.

The refocusing of archaeological investigation on survivance histories can also work to counter damaging public perceptions about the ‘authenticity’ of contemporary Indigenous peoples. In the case of Mashantucket Pequot,

archaeologists have begun studying more closely “labour, exchange, and household assemblages and spaces” in reservation contexts from the eighteenth century onward (Handsman 2018: 57). Acculturation and hybridity frameworks would interpret the materials uncovered—including wrought nails, window glass and imported British and American-made pottery—as the Pequot undergoing significant cultural change and becoming “less and less Pequot” (Handsman 2018: 62). Survivance scholarship, however, acknowledges the legitimacy of contemporary Pequot identity and would view it instead as a “carefully constructed materiality that turned the colonists’ idea of an ‘English Manner’ on its head” (Handsman 2018: 62), through purposeful material appropriation. In the words of Bhabha (1994: 141), it represents a “native refusal to satisfy the coloniser’s narrative demand”, as Mashantucket Pequot families constructed “another kind of Indian-ness” (Handsman 2018: 62), reasserting and renegotiating their identity amid social upheaval and within hostile colonial systems. The paradigm of survivance, in this case, can serve to link the Mashantucket Pequot archaeological record—material evidence of creativity and persistence in changing historic circumstances—with the continuing creativity and agency of contemporary Mashantucket Pequot individuals as they maintain, reinvent, and pass down their heritage and identity.

## **Conclusion**

While archaeologists have abandoned acculturation frameworks in the study of post-contact Indigenous North America, more recent frameworks like hybridity internalise many of the same problems embedded in acculturalist thought, including an emphasis on change-continuity dichotomies, the use of material culture as a proxy for cultural identity, and the prioritisation of Western ‘expert’ perspectives, together functioning to perpetuate ‘Vanishing Indian’ narratives. However, the introduction and proliferation of Indigenous archaeology is challenging these facets of archaeological discourse, deconstructing past positioning of archaeologists as gatekeepers of Indigenous pasts and conducting archaeology with and for Indigenous communities. Emerging in parallel with this is an increasing movement away from the Authorised Heritage Discourse and towards an understanding of heritage as

active cultural processes, incorporating both tangible and intangible elements. Survivance, with its more nuanced emphasis on ‘continuity through change’ and foregrounding of Indigenous perspectives, has the potential to bridge heritage and archaeological discourse, fostering discussion about the ways material culture was—and continues to be—actively utilised by Indigenous peoples to construct their surroundings, make and remake their heritage, and reassert their identity amid changing economic, political, and social circumstances.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my profound gratitude to Gonzalo Linares Matás (St. Hugh’s College, University of Oxford) for his encouragement, guidance, and feedback throughout the writing process. I would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers and the editors of this volume for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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