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978-0-521-73366-3 - Questioning Collapse: Human Resilience, Ecological Vulnerability,  
and the Aftermath of Empire

Edited by Patricia A. McAnany and Norman Yoffee

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## Questioning Collapse

*Human Resilience, Ecological Vulnerability,  
and the Aftermath of Empire*

*Questioning Collapse* challenges scholars and popular writers who advance the thesis that societies – past and present – collapse because of behavior that destroyed their environments or because of overpopulation. In a series of highly accessible and closely argued essays, a team of internationally recognized scholars brings history and context to bear in their radically different analyses of iconic events, such as the deforestation of Easter Island, the cessation of the Norse colony in Greenland, the faltering of nineteenth-century China, the migration of ancestral peoples away from Chaco Canyon in the American Southwest, the crisis of Lowland Maya kingship, and other societies that purportedly “collapsed.” Collectively, these essays demonstrate that resilience in the face of societal crises, rather than collapse, is the leitmotif of the human story from the earliest civilizations to the present. Scrutinizing the notion that Euro-American colonial triumphs were an accident of geography, *Questioning Collapse* also critically examines the complex historical relationship between race and political labels of societal “success” and “failure.”

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Edited by

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

The intellectual stimulus and rationale for this book are presented in some detail within the pages of Chapter 1 and need not be repeated here. The niche within which the contributions of this book fit comfortably is one overlooked by many contemporary scientists and historians but not laypersons or students. This book came about in response to the hunger within the latter two audiences for readable and accessible narratives that deal with the manner in which people across space and time have sustained themselves and reproduced or transformed their societies, particularly in reference to environmental circumstances. We hope that the collective wisdom assembled within the pages of this book will help to inform and guide the thinking of those who contemplate where we have been and where we are heading.

Many people provided encouragement and shared their expertise in ways that helped to bring this book to completion. First came the members and audience of the symposium held at the 2006 meetings of the American Anthropological Association in San Jose, California. We were surprised by the intensity of the audience and their desire to see the papers published in a manner that would be accessible to students and laypersons – to break the cycle of purely internal dialogue and critique within the discipline of anthropology. Next, John Ware and his able staff at the Amerind Foundation in Dragoon, Arizona, hosted a week-long seminar in October 2007 for those of us engaged with this project. This opportunity allowed participants not only to

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*Preface and Acknowledgments*

exchange views but also to reinforce our commitment to write a book in which primary data about human resilience, ecological vulnerability, social regeneration, and the long-term repercussions of colonialism would be presented in plain language. Present at the Amerind seminar was Beatrice Rehl, Publishing Director for Humanities and Archaeology at Cambridge University Press. Her support and enthusiasm for this project have never wavered. Her assistant Tracy Steel and production editor Holly Johnson provided technical support at many stages of the publication production process, as did David Anderson at the technical editing stage. Satoru Murata and Pablo Robles made time to work on the many images that serve as illustrative materials and teaching aids in this book. We extend a special thank you to Adam Kaeding for compiling the index.

Our global society has now reached the point at which we can change – perhaps irrevocably – the face of the planet on which we live. As a social species, we never before have been so powerful, but we also never before have been so aware of what came before, of challenges faced, and of crises averted. The chapters of this book provide perspective and richly textured information about both the past and present. By doing so, we hope to shed light on the way forward.

Patricia A. McAnany  
Norman Yoffee  
Summer 2008