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978-1-107-05333-5 - Social Theory in Archaeology and Ancient History: The Present and Future of Counternarratives

Edited by Geoff Emberling

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SOCIAL THEORY IN ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANCIENT HISTORY

At a time when archaeology has turned away from questions of the long term and large scale, this collection of essays reflects on some of the big questions in archaeology and ancient history: how and why societies have grown in scale and complexity; how they have maintained and discarded aspects of their own cultural heritage; and how they have collapsed. In addressing these long-standing questions of broad interest and importance, the authors develop counternarratives – new ways of understanding what used to be termed *cultural evolution*. In essays that encompass the Middle East and Egypt, India, Southeast Asia, Australia, the American Southwest, and Mesoamerica, the fourteen essays offer perspectives on long-term cultural trajectories; on cities, states, and empires; on collapse; and on the relationship between archaeology and history. The book concludes with a commentary by one of the major voices in archaeological theory: Norman Yoffee.

Geoff Emberling is Assistant Research Scientist at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology at the University of Michigan. He has held positions as Museum Director and Chief Curator at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago and as Assistant Curator in the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He has directed archaeological fieldwork at Tell Brak in northeastern Syria and in the Fourth Cataract region of northern Sudan and is currently excavating at El Kurru, also in northern Sudan.

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Preface

Geoff Emberling

There is no hiding the origin of this volume: It grew out of papers given at a session of the American Anthropological Association's annual meeting in New Orleans in 2010. The session, entitled "Counternarratives of State, Civilization, and History: Papers in Honor of Norman Yoffee," was co-organized by Lori Khatchadourian, Adam Smith, and me in the year of Norm's retirement from the University of Michigan.¹ And the session itself grew out of Norm's inspiring teaching and admirable breadth of intellectual interests, drawing on his former students and current colleagues working in regions around the world. A session including all of Norm's former students and colleagues would have taken days, and we organizers hope that other former students, colleagues, and friends of Norm's will not be disconcerted for not being asked to write and that they will derive some pleasure from the essays.

At the same time, we did not want to write a Festschrift in the usual sense of short articles that present a small aspect of a question of interest to the honoree. Rather, we wanted to engage with the future of Norm's scholarship in more extended ways: How has his work stimulated our thinking and how will it continue to do so? Thus, we forego the biographical sketch and list of all his publications here (for the latter, one can consult <https://sites.google.com/a/umich.edu/norman-yoffee>).

The title and methodological connection of the essays come from a telling observation by Sev Fowles, who pointed out that much of Norm's work has been devoted to building "counternarratives" (and, of course, continues to be; few scholars have been more active *after* retirement!). Sev put it well:

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I think I'm most impressed by Norm's distinctive engagement with the grand narrative, which never took the easy route of naive rejection that has led so many into inane specificity or bland truisms about identity, embodiment, power, agency, etc. Even though he taught on these latter themes at Michigan, he was always most brilliant when he was building counternarratives. He loved talking about collapse rather than rise. He loved discussing *negara* and the inversion of pomp and power in historical trajectories. And he loved going on and on about the evolutionary implications of Jones's article on why the Tasmanians didn't eat fish.

Thus, this volume represents our collective efforts to follow Norm's lead and to build on his many insights.

It is a pleasure to thank all the contributors to the volume. I've learned a great deal from reading and thinking about their chapters, and I hope other readers will too.

Note

- 1 The title of this book was originally intended to be *Counternarratives and Macrohistories: New Agendas in Archaeology and Ancient History*. My introduction and several of the chapters respond to this title. The "new agendas" part of the title was meant to recall the book edited by Norman Yoffee and Andrew Sherratt: *Archaeological Theory: Who Sets the Agenda?* (Cambridge University Press, 1993). Alas, the original title was altered in the production process by the press. The cover of the book, showing the historic minaret at Samarra, was meant to be juxtaposed with a line drawing of an Assyrian ziggurat, connecting two cultures widely separated in time yet rarely connected in scholarship or popular thought.