Theory is one of the most hotly debated topics in the field of archaeology. Peruse the journals and major publishing concerns since the mid-1960s and you will find that some of the most cited papers and books are statements or reviews of archaeological theory. Yet major advances in archaeological theory have been made by remarkably few people. When one thinks of names that might be included this book, such notables as Childe, Taylor, Binford, Flannery, Watson (this volume), and Schiffer come to mind. A younger generation certainly includes Hodder, Shanks (this volume), Conkey, O’Brien, Tilley, Ames (this volume), Hegmon, Shennan, Crumley, and a number of others who have made a large impact on specific aspects of archaeology ranging from gender to rock art. These names, and the others represented in this volume, are a tiny percentage of those who consider themselves archaeologists. The rest of the field looks to these writers to help explain data, to understand and present the past, and to make it interesting and useful.

Ironically, the competition among the creators of archaeological theories for followers to apply them (Bintliff, chapter 10; O’Brien et al. 2005:chap. 9) makes the theories less applicable, as the debate itself becomes the topic, even to a debate over what the current theoretical disagreements actually are (Hegmon 2003, 2005; Moss 2005). This induces the dialogue to become fashion rather than true theory, which is the dictionary defines as a “set of statements or principles devised to explain a group of facts or phenomena, especially one that has been repeatedly tested or is widely accepted and can be used to make predictions about natural phenomena” or a “plausible or scientifically acceptable general principle or body of principles offered to explain natural phenomena.”

The constant advance of fashionable change is one reason why earlier efforts to build true scientific theory in archaeology (Watson, LeBlanc, and Redmond 1974; Schiffer 1976) have already been discarded in many quarters. Instead, nearly all archaeological theory can be best defined as methods of interpretation, explanation, or critique, but not as theory. Equally interesting, much of the literature since the early 1980s arguing for archaeological theories based on reflexivity, critique, interpretation, and post-processualism is written as antithereory in its avoidance of prediction, generalizing principles, and testability. While these approaches may be theoretical, the only theories we have in archaeology that actually fit the definition of theory are Darwinism, Marxism, and certain aspects of processualism because they describe a set of propositions and expectations about how the world should work that are testable against the archaeological record. This is the reason why the Marxist explanations of Childe often identify him as one of the first theoretical archaeologists, while all those who went before are seen as placing archaeological data in the explanatory framework of their times, such as biblical explanations for an ancient past.

Whereas archaeological theory should fit the explicit model of scientific inquiry, theoretical discussion of archaeology opens up the field to comment, revisionism, and critique from sources ranging from philosophy to feminism to cultural studies. Taking theory and theoretical critique together, almost anything becomes possible with archaeology. Consider other topics or disciplines, like law, agricultural science, photography, chemistry, medicine, or industrial relations; how many of them can be defined simultaneously as science, art, social study, tactical landscape work, mindless manual labor, abstract theory, objective data collection, and vehicle for personal introspection? Archaeology attracts scholars from an endless range of backgrounds, and they all have a different reason for pursuing it. One of us (Bentley) entered archaeology after earning an undergraduate degree in physics, with a research assistantship doing neutron activation analysis on Etruscan pottery (“blasting pots,” as friends called it). The other (Maschner) once considered a scholarship in opera before deciding on archaeology instead. Despite the countless ways of getting involved, the practice of archaeology (the subject of Maschner and Chippindale’s [2005] Methods volume) is fairly coherent, since it aims at answering archaeological
questions through gathering and analyzing evidence. Without evidence we could not discuss theory at all. Without the work of culture historians since the eighteenth century (Webster, chapter 2), we might still view stone hand axes as the creation of lightning bolts (Trigger 1989:47). Without the ongoing work of cultural resource management archaeologists (Green, chapter 22), our base of evidence would be a small fraction of what it is. Those who recorded Upper Paleolithic art gave us what may be the earliest evidence of the developed modern mind (Gabora, chapter 17), and later rock art is often our only road into the ideology of past nonwriting societies (Whitley, chapter 31). Classical archaeologists, some of whom openly steer clear of archaeological theory, have given us the most comprehensive archaeological record we have (Gill, chapter 5). These and all the other sources of archaeological evidence (Maschner and Chippindale 2005) are the building blocks of archaeology. However, make one mention of archaeological theory or theoretical archaeology, and the coherence dissipates into individual pursuits. (Think of the effect dishwashing detergent has on a floating film of grease.) Many who expound on archaeological theory seem to be more interested in another subject. The post-processualists (Shanks, chapter 9), for example, delve into literary theory and philosophy (Koerner and Price, chapter 21), whereas the processualists (Watson, chapter 3) were originally inspired by ecology, physics, and cultural anthropology. Evolutionary or Darwinian archaeologists (Bentley et al., chapter 8) have borrowed largely from evolutionary biology (Collard et al., chapter 13). Classical (Gill, chapter 5) and other archaeologists (Bellwood, chapter 14) have developed an expertise in linguistics through their work. Marxist archaeologists (McGuire, chapter 6) cross into economics and sociology (Barker, chapter 29; Dillahay, chapter 11), whereas cultural resource management archaeologists (Green, chapter 22), among the most adept and efficient of field archaeologists, must also take on the unpredictable challenge of presenting and debating archaeology with the public (Wallace, chapter 23; Fowler et al., chapter 24).

But much more than a way of pursuing other subjects, modern archaeological theory is personal (see O’Brien et al. 2005 for a colorful history of the personalities in American archaeology). Like psychology, it is about our own past, and many of us seek in it what we look for in ourselves; Sigmund Freud’s passion for archaeology (Barker 1996) is no coincidence. Instead of delving into their own childhoods, however, archaeological theorists often explore identities in the past of our species (Gabora, chapter 17) or of our society (Bernbeck, chapter 30). As the post-processual archaeologists rightly point out (Tilley 1989), archaeological theory involves a personal agenda. There is no way to escape the fact that, given some archaeological evidence, how we narrate the past and what we think is important about it depends on us. This is as it should be, since research seeks what it means to be human, and what our being human has meant to other people and the natural world. Some positions are more overt than others. Gender archaeology (Hays-Gilpin, chapter 20), for example, is explored mostly by women, not through an imposed monopoly of the subject but out of a natural, sustained interest in one of the most basic human relations, and a frequent power imbalance that matters most to those who directly experience it. Personal experience is critical to the validity of the argument, as, for example, when Joe Watkins (2003) provides an American Indian perspective on theory, power, and research prerogatives in archaeology. Each theoretical position, even if presented in an objective fashion, ultimately reflects the prerogatives of the researcher, with everything from those who discuss the physical-chemical qualities of artifacts (Gill, chapter 5; Taylor, chapter 18) to those whose main interest is cultural anthropology (Earle, chapter 12) and ethnography, especially regarding indigenous groups worldwide (Jones, chapter 19; Jordan, chapter 26; McNiven and Russell, chapter 25).

The variety of perspectives (and the reason the title of this volume uses “theories” in the plural) is the strength of archaeological theory as a whole. It is a human topic. What archaeology offers us on such personal topics as ethnicity (Jones, chapter 19), status (Ames, chapter 28; Barker, chapter 29), inequality (McGuire, chapter 6), our own significance in society (Gardner, chapter 7), cultural differences (McNiven and Russell, chapter 25), and shared resources (Fowler et al., chapter 24), is perspective. This perspective is a natural result of our distance from societies that are literally dead and buried. Asking why these societies changed, and perhaps how and why ours is changing too, was part of the original processual goal (Watson, chapter 3), the same goal that has now been taken up by evolutionists (Bentley et al., chapter 8; Collard et al., chapter 13) and computer simulation experts (Costopolous, chapter 16).

The post-processual critique (Shanks, chapter 9) should convince us that openness about theoretical perspectives is better than false objectivity. In order
to appear objectively scientific, social scientists and postmodern theorists often invent important-sounding jargon for simple or ambiguous concepts, even to the point of using words like "operationalize" instead of "do," for example. Oxley and Morton's archaeological buzzword generator (www.york.ac.uk/depts/arch/ yccweb/aids/buzz.htm) and Michael Bryson's post-modern title generator (www.brysons.net/generator) appropriately ridicule the proliferation of academic jargon. This tendency toward word creation is counterproductive, as its proliferation becomes irreversible. For example, we are now stuck with the ridiculous pseudoscientific terms "processualism" and "post-processualism." Using these words with friends outside archaeology would elicit laughter; is there any topic on earth that does not involve a process? The ways in which novelists create plots, chemicals react, gossip spreads news, rocks form and change, and philosophers criticize other philosophers are all processes. This is not to disparage either of these fields (Watson, chapter 3; Shanks, chapter 9). Each has brought archaeology to greater sophistication and relevance in the real world. The point is that the terms given to these rich bodies of ideas and used within them, through pressure to appear scientific or to sound like a French philosopher, alienates the public and even our peers through the muddled thinking that jargon promotes (Service 1969; Bentley 2006).

Even worse, there are plenty of examples of the potentially calamitous consequences of false objectivity in archaeology, such as the twisting of the work of Herbert Spencer, who was deeply critical of imperialism and sought solutions to social problems (McGee and Warms 2004:25), which led infamously to the Social Darwinism of the past century (Sumner 1914). Phony intellectualism is an injustice to the public, since archaeology is a shared resource that must be accessible; otherwise it becomes an irrelevant hobby or privileged intellectual luxury. How archaeology is presented to the public is therefore just as important as what there is to present (Wallace, chapter 23).

Academic theory can become obscure and jargon laden as scholars compete for prestige and intellectual dominance (O'Brien et al. 2005, chapter 9). Academics, while striving to be or at least appear to be objective, seek status and prestige as much as anyone else, if not more so. This is not surprising given that domination is intrinsic to human relationships, whether implicitly or explicitly. An awareness of how ideas from archaeology might be used against the less powerful, including the direct impact of archaeology on native societies as well as looting and rights of property, is central to archaeological ethics (Fowler et al., chapter 25). Recognizing that, since colonial times, Western archaeologists have done much of their research in poorer areas (Dillahay, chapter 11), cultural domination is a pervasive interest in archaeological theory. Certain approaches, like Marxism (McGuire, chapter 6), are centered on how inequality is almost inevitable and how the have-nots. Even without private property, however, people still compete for prestige and status (Ames, chapter 28). This, as much as material possessions, is the currency that defines the hierarchies of the chiefdom (Barker, chapter 29) or even state societies (Bernbeck, chapter 30).

One archaeological issue that revolves around cultural domination is the prehistoric spread of agriculture around the world during the Holocene (Pluciennik and Zvelebil, chapter 28). From Europe, to Southeast Asia, to sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific, the ancient ancestry of the majority of modern people lies at least partly in the first colonizing farmers. Furthermore, the languages spoken by the majority of people in the world today may be descended from the languages spoken by the earliest farmers (Bellwood, chapter 14). This is a debated issue, however, with expert archaeologists, geneticists, and linguists on either side of the debate, some favoring more indigenous hunter-gatherer cultural and genetic ancestry for a particular area, some more colonization (Bellwood, chapter 14; Pluciennik and Zvelebil, chapter 27). As a necessary if perhaps not sufficient condition, agriculture enabled the rise of state societies (Bernbeck, chapter 30), and, as Diamond (1997) accessibly described, descendants of those earliest states were the basis for European colonialism (McNiven and Russell, chapter 25).

Rather than mire themselves in the countless ways some people dominate others, other archaeological theorists prefer to focus on how people have been dominated by nature, or else how people dominate nature through niche construction. This is perhaps most common in the study of hunter-gatherers (Jordan, chapter 26), which has traditionally focused on ecological adaptation (Yesner, chapter 4), owing largely to the influence of Julian Steward and later formalized as human behavioral ecology (Bentley et al., chapter 8). This was an outgrowth of the New Archaeology (Watson, chapter 3), which applied a kind of natural mechanics to larger-scale human societies. The promotion of the natural sciences in archaeology, for which the New Archaeologists deserve much credit.
(and why the limp term “processualism” does them such a disservice), led others into an exploration of biology, specifically evolutionary theory, rather than ecology. This resulted in many productive hypotheses on how culture changes (Bentley et al., chapter 8), as well as new quantitative methods of testing the difference between, for example, cultural behaviors learned through the generations versus behaviors passed between contemporaries in a society (Collard et al., chapter 13).

The coalescence of ecological anthropology and the New Archaeology was similar to the rise of quantitative ecology, quantitative geography, and processual geomorphology in the 1960s. While the New Archaeology paid lip service to the importance of the neo-Darwinian synthesis in biology and ecology, the role of evolutionary theory in archaeology was limited until the late 1970s with the rise of sociobiology and human evolutionary ecology. Binford argued that he was a Darwinist at heart, but in reality he was interested in how cultures adapted and how environments drove those adaptations, not in anything specifically Darwinian (Binford 1983).

The application of evolutionary theory in archaeology has divided into several competing schools (Maschner 1996), and is discussed in its different forms in various chapters of this volume (Webster, chapter 2; Yesner, chapter 4; Bentley et al. chapter 8; Collard et al., chapter 13; Gabara, chapter 17; Jordan, chapter 26). The irony is that the subdivision of academic topics into competing specialties is itself an evolutionary process. In order to succeed as scholars in archaeology, young academics feel they must break through with a brand-new theory that overturns everything that came before it (Bintliff, chapter 10). Even Lewis Binford, with all due credit for his immense body of work, became well-known with his own “table-turner” publication (Binford 1962). Once Binford had become the most prominent leader in archaeological theory, other scholars became famous by waging well-publicized theoretical battles with him.

Nonetheless, debate is a prime means of advancing archaeological theory. A classic debate, for example, took place between Binford and François Bordes in the 1960s and 1970s on the topic of ethnicity in archaeology (Jones, chapter 19). Bordes (1953) had developed a classification scheme for Mousterian (125,000–30,000 B.P.) lithic assemblages of northwestern Europe. Bordes argued that these assemblages were distinctly localized and often long-lived (Mellars 1970), and that they represented distinct, coexisting cultures that had continuity in time, repeating in places as they moved about a region. Binford (1973) contested this, arguing that similar artifact patterns represent similar activities, not variable cultural repertoires with ethnic significance. Binford (1973) argued that different tool classes covaried across Bordes’s assemblage categories but in correlation with environmental change, all of which indicated that the variation was determined by adaptive needs (Yesner, chapter 4), not social or ethnic identities. This was the crux of the New Archaeology and perhaps its type example. Are artifacts representations of cultures and cultural identity? Or are patterns in artifact assemblages simply a product of a group’s adaptation to the environment, so that variation in artifact assemblages must mean that different sites represent functional variation in activities?

Later, Binford (1978, 1983) used his ethnoarchaeological observations of the Nunamiat Eskimo as a means of investigating the one key enduring question of the New Archaeology: if the archaeological record is static but the behavior that produced it is dynamic, how does the archaeologist move from statics to dynamics? Binford argued that ethnoarchaeology and other middle-range approaches were key to making this intellectual leap. Recognizing that culture might determine some patterns, he concentrated on the functional anatomy of caribou, arguing that caribou have been basically the same since the Pleistocene and that any forager would recognize, for example, which parts had the most fat in the spring, and which parts would be best for storage in the fall. Once the archaeologist understood this, all patterning in faunal remains, and by extension, any artifactual variation that co-occurred with the faunal remains, could be functionally explained. This is still considered one of Binford’s greatest contributions, and as Maschner and Chippindale reported in the Handbook of Archaeological Method (Maschner 2005), his functional investigations have contributed more to the generation of archaeological method than archaeological theory.

Extending on from the famous Binford-Bordes debate, substantial developments in the archaeological concept of ethnicity (Jones, chapter 19) have been made by post-processual theory (Shanks, chapter 9), agency theory (Gardner, chapter 7), and even evolutionary approaches (Bentley et al., chapter 8). Much of the theoretical debate since the early 1980s was generated by the recognition that cultures and individuals influence the nature of assemblage variation and that it cannot be explained away through terms such as “adaptation” or “function.” Few today would
regard ethnicity as static through time, or even well-delineated by material culture. Ethnicity is better seen as active choices made to ally oneself with perceived cultural categories in certain situations, with multiple identities possible (Jones, chapter 19). Although this makes it much more difficult to identify ethnic identities from the archaeological record, it also leads to exciting new questions about when and how group identities were created, maintained, adjusted, or even sometimes suppressed by people in the past.

The debate over ethnicity in archaeology has been largely productive over the past several decades. As noted above, however, archaeological theory is personal, and sometimes the battles just rage hotter and the competing camps get smaller and more isolated. This is what we want to avoid, as it becomes a bit like the scene in Monty Python’s Life of Brian, where John Cleese says, “We’re not the Judean People’s Front! We’re the People’s Front of Judea! We hate the Judean People’s Front!” Such fragmentation occurred in the debate of the past twenty years over what evolution should mean in archaeology (Lake 1997). Perhaps the biggest sticking point in the battle was the use of the term “extended phenotype,” which the proponents of evolutionary archaeology had borrowed from biology, where it applies to things like bird’s nests, beaver dams, and spider webs, which a creature makes instinctively. The concept is an interesting and useful one, in that human material culture is often passed from one generation to the next, so a hand ax that every hominid learns to make and is essential to his survival is very much like how every beaver makes a dam (O’Brien 1996). However, many outside readers understood the argument to be that artifacts were phenotypic exactly as spider webs and bird’s nests are (i.e., genetically encoded) and objected accordingly (Boone and Smith 1998). Recently Eerkens and Lipo (2005) have outlined the paradigm of cultural transmission theory, which, though incorporating much of the basic ideas of evolutionary archaeology, appears to have been renamed to prevent alienating potential readers. Yet Eerkens and Lipo (2005) clear up the old miscommunication by noting that the information (genetic and cultural) that is transmitted includes all of the aspects of ourselves including our bodies, behavior and artifacts. In other words, artifacts are not exactly like the biological phenotype (Bentley et al., chapter 8; Gabora, chapter 17).

The lesson from these decades of miscommunication is that language is terribly important. As long as archaeologists use terms that other scientists (e.g., biologists) claimed long ago for themselves, they will struggle to gain credit for their own understanding of the borrowed terminology. In the case of the wasted battle over evolutionary theory in archaeology, in our opinion it would have helped immensely if the analogous use of terms such as gene, genotype, and phenotype had been banned altogether in archaeology, and allowed only for use with their literal, biological meanings. Population biologists tend to roll their eyes when they hear of artifacts as the extended phenotype, because they assume (stereotypically) that social scientists are dumb enough to actually think pottery designs are literally encoded in human genes.

In this case, as in many others, it is often easy for the outside reader to see the merits of both sides of a debate in archaeological theory. Some of the best debates in high-visibility publications have been over processual versus post-processual archaeology (Hodder 1985, 1987; Earle and Preucel 1987), middle range theory and site formation processes (Raab and Goodyear 1984; Binford 1981; Schiffer 1985), law-like explanations (Morgan 1973, 1974, 1978; Read and LeBlanc 1978; Watson et al. 1973), the use of ethnographic analogy (Binford 1967; Freeman 1968; Wylie 1985), empiricism (Binford 1985; Gould 1985), and even such topics generating a vehemence that would baffle the nonarchaeologist, such as the laboratory methods used to determine the mineral/chemical composition of potsherds (Neff et al. 1996; Burton and Simon 1996; recently rekindled by Stoltman et al. 2005; Flannery et al. 2005, in response to Blomster et al. 2005), or the nature of sickle gloss on the edges of chert blades (Newcomer et al. 1986; Moss 1987; Hurcombe 1988). All of these debates, many of which remain fresh and interesting (and occasionally entertaining) when revisited today, built archaeological theory. They were productive and drew attention largely because the proponents took their positions boldly and vigorously, instead of obsequiously or pseudo-objectively. The fact that Lewis Binford was in the middle of so many of these debates is a credit to his long-running influence.

For this reason, one of the most fruitful ways forward in archaeological theory is to recognize that all the approaches are useful and they all have something relevant to contribute. We must not fall into the trap where our theory is more important than what we learn from using it. In a recent American Antiquity article, Michelle Hegmon (2003, 2005) argues for common theoretical ground, making a good statement about the quality aspects of many approaches. Yet in a rejoinder, Moss (2005) argues that encompassing so
many different approaches under a single common theme trivializes the uniqueness of her Marxist-feminist critique. It is a difficult question, because (as mentioned above) theoretical archaeologists are faced with a desire to unify the theories of others on one hand, but on other hand to distinguish themselves by proposing “groundbreaking” new theories of their own (potentially by unifying previous theories of others!). In any case, common theoretical understanding, if never complete agreement, should always be the goal. Complexity theory (Bentley and Maschner, chapter 15), for example, combines a sense of the many possible outcomes, like post-processualism, with a processual deterministic approach borrowed from physics and computer simulation (Costopolous, chapter 16). Furthermore, many of our “new” ideas in archaeological theory were laid out previously by authors from another era who are no longer read widely, or by scholars writing in other languages (Yesner, chapter 4; Binfliff, chapter 10; Trigger 1989). In fact, several of the concepts of complexity theory, such as the idea that human society is an emergent phenomenon, different from the sum of its human parts, were made by Emile Durkheim (1895) over a century ago, and the related comparison of the specialized human society to a functionally integrated biological organism was made by Herbert Spencer (1860). The post-processual concept of multiple possible narrations of the past (Shanks and Hodder 1995) is not much different from the good scientific practice of entertaining multiple competing hypotheses (Chamberlin 1890). For this reason philosophy should be a welcome influence for archaeological theory (Koerner and Price, chapter 21; Saitta 1983). A lot of what we say now was said, often more clearly, by philosophers, decades, hundreds, or even thousands of years ago. In fact it was Aristotle who gave us the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Metaphysica 7.10). With that in mind, we can take pride in the fact that archaeological theory is so rich and varied, and as a body so much greater than the sum of our own individual theories.

Given the richness, this handbook could have been divided and sorted in a number of ways, and perhaps every archaeologist would do it somewhat differently. We have no real agenda with the organization of the book, but the following sections appeared useful in organizing a rather disparate set of chapters. You are currently at the end of the introductory section and no more elaboration is necessary. In the next section we present some of the major themes in the history of archaeological theory such as Marxism, Darwinism, culture history, and post-processualism. Most of these perspectives are the groundwork for nearly everything archaeologists write about today. This is followed by a broad section on ideas from neighboring disciplines, which covers everything from Latin American and European approaches to linguistics and chaos-complexity theories. These chapters demonstrate how archaeology is a discipline that requires both intercultural knowledge and interdisciplinary attention. This is followed by a section on research concerns. Here broad topics of theoretical interest are discussed from a number of different theoretical domains and even philosophies. The section on contexts of archaeology study presents theoretical reflections on the engagement of archaeology with cultural resource management (CRM), the general public, indigenous peoples, and the greater world. The last section, on theory and practice, looks at some of the big questions in archaeology, such as the origins of the state, the rise of chiefdoms, the archaeological of hunter-gatherers, and the archaeology of religion. This section covers several of the critical transitions in the history of humanity.

The reader will notice areas that are missing or subsumed under other chapters. There is no history of theory chapter, as every author put each individual chapter in historical context. Feminism is included within the gender chapter, but is also touched on throughout the book in chapters ranging from Marxism to philosophy. The reader will similarly find no chapter on middle-range theory, yet it is discussed in a number of chapters here, as with ethnoarchaeology, which was included in the Handbook of Archaeological Method (Maschner and Chippindale 2005). Everyone will have a favorite theory or perspective that perhaps should have been included, and we are aware of the problems associated with trying to be inclusive without being overly redundant. But overall, the major themes of archaeology are well represented here and while subdividing some sections might have been useful for some, this volume is such a length already that adding more chapters would have made it only marginally more useful.

In conclusion, we hope that these contributions, some written by archaeologists at the start of their careers and others by senior and well-established scholars, find an audience with those seeking to contextualize and analyze their archaeological data. We hope that the student reader will come away from this volume with a sense of the immense power that theory has for building interpretations of the past, while recognizing the wonderful archaeological traditions that
created it. Finally, we give our immense appreciation to the contributors to this volume who worked so hard to make their ideas accessible to the greater archaeological community.

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