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INTRODUCTION

The Absence of a Master Narrative: 100 Years of Storytelling at the “Ruins” of Monte Albán

“All history is, like saga, basically a narrative of events in which human thought and action play a predominant part.”

W. B. Gallie, 1968¹

“My account [of Mexico before the arrival of Hernán Cortés] might have been very different, for one may draw varying interpretations, perhaps equally valid, for almost every archaeological or historical fact.”

Ignacio Bernal, 1963²

“Rather than giving truthful answers to specific questions, the task demanded from the archaeologist is in fact to tell some stories.”

Cornelius Holtorf, 2010³

As noted, I began my researches into Monte Albán as an outsider and historian of religions with three areas of special interest and concern: (1) clarity and self-

* Note that I have managed the footnotes in ways that respect “the first citation” (which is thus a full bibliographical citation) *in this Introduction*, regardless of whether it was previously cited. Also, to avoid confusion in this typescript, I have retained the quotation marks on all quotes, including those that are formatted as block quotations.

¹ W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*, second edition (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 69. Gallie’s ideas comments about the necessarily narrative character of history are quoted and discussed by Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 155-61.

² Ignacio Bernal, *Mexico before Cortez: Art, History, Legend* (Garden City, New Jersey: Dolphin Books, 1963), v; translation by Willis Bamstone of Ignacio Bernal, *Tenochtitlán en Una Isla* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1959).

³ Cornelius Holtorf, “Meta-stories of Archaeology,” *World Archaeology*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2010): 381.

consciousness with respect to the conceptualization of the much-contested category of “religion,” (2) heightened appreciation of the complex processes whereby monumental architecture participates in the making and transaction of meanings, foremost in the context of ritual, and (3) due skepticism about the equally complex problematics of archaeological historiography, which invariably, for better or worse, exemplifies the creative dynamics of “narrativization” or story-crafting. Nonetheless, along with those nuanced, perhaps idiosyncratic, academic concerns, I also commenced my studies of Monte Albán with the very same entirely prosaic questions about the history of the marvelous ruins that every casual vacationist brings to the site. I too, like all visitors, wanted to know: *What happened here? What pre-Columbian peoples, circumstances and motives were responsible for the capital’s spectacular mountaintop siting? What sequence of events accounted for the stupendously ambitious creation of the Great Plaza and for the capital’s ascent to regional dominance? And what circumstances led to the city’s eventual decline and abandonment?*

Getting a handle, so to speak, on the replies to those basic queries seemed to me, as to so many others, the obvious first step toward “making sense” of this marvelous place. Surely—and wrongly—I assumed that archaeologists have reached some general consensus on these ostensibly straightforward matters. And thus mastering that fundamental historical background seemed the obvious and essential starting point for the more venturesome interpretive journey on which I hoped to embark.

Be that as it may, pursuit of replies to those inevitable journalist questions exposed a kind of illusion in the ample scholarship on the Zapotec capital. Encountering in the pertinent literature the same Oaxacanist scholars’ names again and again, and observing them constantly acknowledging and quoting one another’s work, first evoked the image of, if not a large orchestra, at least a mid-sized jazz ensemble in which all of the main archaeological players have their individual specializations and styles, but they listen and respond to their colleagues’ improvisations in ways that contribute to a collective sound. Looking and listening more closely, however, I encountered less harmonious collaboration than cacophony—solo acts, duets and perhaps occasional trios

and quartets of collaborative investigators, but little that qualifies as field-wide consensus even on the most basic forces and factors that account for the city's ascent, florescence and decline. Direct disagreements, to phrase it mildly, abound.

That is to say, the historical (re)construction of Monte Albán—still just 15% of which has been carefully excavated—is only partly cumulative. Newer versions, while informed by more and better “data,” tend to present not simply refining adjustments to their predecessors, but rather wholesale alternatives based on very different theoretical frameworks, and thus profoundly different presuppositions and points of departure. Though there is, I discovered, no shortage of opinions, some offered with great confidence—and though major elements of lots of older accounts can now be flatly ruled out as historically inaccurate—there is arguably no thoroughgoing account of Monte Albán's history that enjoys overwhelming support, and assuredly none that can be considered definitive.

Consequently, my original expectations of drafting a relatively brief inventory of earlier and mistaken versions of the Zapotec capital's history, which were proposed and rejected en route to the composition of a more secure story of Monte Albán's past, were dashed. Rehearsing a consensual view as to the history of the city is simply not an option; there is, in that sense, no “master narrative” of Monte Albán. Alternatively, as we'll see, even for most basic questions about the disposition of the pre-Columbian protagonists and plotlines, one encounters at least a half dozen viable but very different replies. Therefore, just as when I had in a previous research project been confronted with the untidy opus of very different renditions and stories of Chichén Itzá's history, the naïve expectation of latching onto the presently prevailing state-of-the-art concerning Monte Albán's past, and then devoting my energies to an interpretation of the “religious dimensions” of that pre-Columbian Oaxacan history, vanished. And a presumably short introduction to a so-termed “ritual-architectural reception history” of the ancient city ballooned into this book.

Not just the scale of the discussion, but also the agenda changed. Instead of arriving at a cultivated opinion as to “what really happened” at Monte Albán—an onerous goal to which I, among many, continue to aspire—the objective morphed into to a critical appreciation of the most prominent narrative syntheses of the region: namely, those proposed successively by Alfonso Caso, Ignacio Bernal, John Paddock, Richard Blanton, co-authors Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery and, most recently, Arthur Joyce. Engaging each of those seminal accounts one after the next, this book, perhaps counter to expectations, does not, then, endeavor to decide which version is correct. It does not ask or aim to resolve the question *what actually happened at Monte Albán?* Rather it focuses on *what stories have been told about the history of the great Zapotec capital? And what, besides the ancient capital of Monte Albán, are those stories really about?*

Certainly there are scholarly alternatives to these seven renditions; and if one counts the much less thoroughgoing and rigorous narrations of guides, journalists and variously informed and misinformed travelers, then the range of alternative iterations of Monte Albán’s history and meaning is immense. Moreover, as both abundant new evidence and new ways of deciphering the extant materials continue to emerge, it is certain that new entries to the oeuvre of Monte Albán narratives will to be forthcoming; indeed lots of fresher, better-informed ideas and corrections have already been proposed. The present project, however, makes no attempt to summarize cutting-edge debates on these important historical matters. Instead, by undertaking critical readings of the preeminent (older) historiographical options I hope to provide both scholars and more general audiences a clearer sense of what it is they are hearing when they are treated to a historical (re)construction of Monte Albán. Yes, all “re-constructions” definitely are “constructions.”⁴ And for me personally, this inventory of the past 100 years of storytelling about Monte Albán is imagined as necessary preparation to the more fully

⁴ In order to hold in the foreground the important sense in which all historical “re-constructions” of the ancient Oaxacan past are actually “constructions” that reflect the contingent presuppositions on which they are based, I use throughout this book the term “historical (re)construction.”

original and vigorously theorized work on religion, ritual and architecture at Monte Albán that I continue to pursue.

I. SIX WORKING PROPOSITIONS:

THE REWARDS AND RAMIFICATIONS OF STORYTELLING ABOUT MONTE ALBÁN

In a book that pays great attention to the presuppositions that inform the writings of others, it is suitable to enumerate at the outset a series of six fundamental and linked propositions that underlie this volume. Some (like the first one) are patently obvious, while others (like two and three) may seem counterintuitive and perhaps especially unpalatable to practitioners of archaeology. None, I think, is remotely radical. But clarity about the agenda—that is to say, what this project aims to accomplish and what it declines to address—is, of course, crucial to its fair assessment. I labor on these points because I anticipate continued resistance, at least in some quarters, to the not-daring premise that there are many viable ways to narrate the history of one and same place.

In any case, several of these propositions mark very heavily worked theoretical ground. All six bear on apparently pan-human preoccupations with composing, recounting and listening to stories, especially stories about the past. And thus all of them impinge on large topics that have been subject to extensive scholarly exposition. In that respect, I find especially helpful the profound and extended reflections on the extent to which historiography invariably resembles (and contrasts with) narrative fiction that hermeneutical theorist Paul Ricoeur provides in *Time and Narrative*.⁵ Frequently, though similar insights could be adduced from numerous works, I return to that landmark text for guidance on these very basic questions. Additionally, other scholars have been even more direct in exploring how the immense literature on storytelling bears on “the use and status of narrative and narrative types within archaeology and particularly prehistory;”⁶

⁵ Volume 1 of Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* focuses on historiography and historical narrative; volume 2 of that work focuses on narrative fiction.

⁶ Mark Pluciennik, “Archaeological Narratives and Other Ways of Telling,” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. 5 (December 1999): 654.

and thus the topics of “archaeological narrative” and “the meta-stories of archaeology” have likewise generated considerable debate.⁷ For my present purposes, however, rather than plumbing the seemingly bottomless depths of narrative theory, a worthy task for someone else, I simply pose a half dozen important but by no means revelatory observations, and then get quickly to—and hold focus on—the ongoing efforts of Oaxacanist archaeologist-authors to compose a narrative that matches majestic material remains of Monte Albán. For this book, it is seven specific archaeologically-based narratives rather than any general theory of narrative that matter most.

**A. “EMPLOTMENT,” “FOLLOWABILITY” AND UNDERSTANDING: INVARIABLY
NARRATIVE SOLUTIONS TO THE ENIGMA OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RUINS**

Regarding the first proposition, I will contend that when encountering any major archaeological “ruin”—a place where the glories of a bygone era are unmistakable but also elusive—the most frequent response among all sorts of audiences is storytelling.⁸ Ruins evoke stories. The main precincts of Monte Albán, abandoned as a working city for well over 1000 years, are, in this respect, no exception. Though their narrations are only sporadically recorded, we can be certain that indigenous Oaxacans have been telling stories about this overgrown metropolis throughout all of that millennium. The nearby ruins of Mitla, a site that, unlike Monte Albán, was a living Zapotec town when Spaniards arrived, attracted lots more attention during most of the colonial era; but, by the nineteenth century, we have increasingly ample reports of Mexican, European and North American visitors to Monte Albán, all of whom propose stories about its builders and its captivating mountaintop site selection.⁹ And with Alfonso Caso’s 19 seasons of

⁷ See, for example, Holtorf, “Meta-stories of Archaeology,” 381-93.

⁸ Regarding the proposition that the most frequent response to architectural ruins is storytelling, see Lindsay Jones, “Narrating Chichén Itzá: Storytelling, Disagreement and Second Naïveté at the ‘City of the Sacred Well’;” in *Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality*, eds. Thomas Barrie, Julio Bermudez, and Phillip James Tabb (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 123-36.

⁹ A short list of the most prominent nineteenth-century visitors to Monte Albán, a time during which those overgrown ruins attracted far less attention than the well preserved

exploration and (re)construction, beginning in 1931, the twentieth-century transformation of the long-neglected architectural remains into a top-tier archaeological-tourist destination, and eventually an UNESCO World Heritage Site, the number and diversity of visitors—and thus the number and diversity of alternate stories—increased in colossal ways.

Readers of *Time and Narrative* are not surprised that large-scaled ruins, even more than other cultural artifacts, are such prolific generators of stories. That human beings have always been, and remain, “storytelling creatures” has been a persistent and persuasive claim; and according to the basic hypothesis that links the two terms in the title of his masterwork, Ricoeur contends that “between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human existence there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity.”¹⁰ For Ricoeur, simply to exist in time, as all humans do, prompts one to tell stories: “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of narrative.”¹¹

So-termed ruins, then, which give people pause to reflect on enormous stretches of time, and on the disconcerting juxtaposition of stupendous success and total failure, are supreme evocators of narrative. Paradoxical by nature, ruins have the combined attraction of museums and cemeteries, marvelous works of art and train wrecks. They

ruins of Mitla, usually includes Belgian explorer Guillermo Dupaix and Mexican illustrator Luciano Castañeda (1806), German miner Eduard Mühlenpfordt (1830s), Mexican historian Juan Bautista Carriedo (1830s), German naturalist Johann W. von Müller (1857), French archaeologist and photographer Désiré Charnay (1857), German philologist and archaeologist, Eduard Seler (1880s), American archaeologists Adolph Bandelier (1881), American archaeologist, geologist and museum director William Henry Holmes (1885), Mexican doctor and collector Fernando Sologuren and Mexican philologist Francisco Belmar (1895), American archaeologist and museum curator Marshall H. Saville (1898) and first Mexican General Inspector of Monuments Leopoldo Batres (1890s). But as I will demonstrate in my third book on Monte Albán, that list could be far longer.

¹⁰ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 52.

¹¹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 3.

stand as irresistible puzzles in the landscape, at once inspiring and deeply unsettling; and as such, ruins scream for explanations, and for the sort of storylines that can account for both the rise and demise of their long-ago residents. Accordingly, even if one were able to deliver perfectly accurate reporting on the pertinent dates of construction, the identity of the builders and the primary uses of the main built features at Monte Albán, the enumeration of that sort of empirical information—without positing some overarching logic and processes that account for the birth, life and death of the city—does not a rewarding narrative make. People need sequentially unfolding stories.

What is required, in other words, again in Ricoeur's term, is skillful "emplotment," that is to say, the composition of a plotline or scenario in which a chronological sequence of events begins and then proceeds according to some coherent logic, which thus leads to a believable, if not altogether expected, conclusion. A satisfying story, he says, requires a congruous beginning, middle and end:

"[that is] the way in which the story receives overall coherence, the way in which it unfolds so that the end result or situation can be understood as the logical or at least plausible consequence of previously described situations or conditions."¹²

While the enumeration of disconnected facts is informing, it is, according to Ricoeur, a well-wrought narrative alone—a sequence of linked events that is characterized by "followability"—that rewards audiences with "the pleasure of recognition," and thereby enables the sense that they have, in some significant way, begun to solve the mystery of the long-abandoned site.¹³ Narrating is an essential prerequisite to understanding.

In sum on point one, then, even more evocative after the extensive restoration efforts of the mid-twentieth century, the remains of Monte Albán present enigmas,

¹² Pluciennik, "Archaeological Narratives and Other Ways of Telling," 654, provides this summary of Ricoeur's position.

¹³ On the "followability" of narrative, see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 152; on "the pleasure of recognition," see *ibid.*, 49. And on the essential role of story-crafting or emplotment, he writes, "This highlighting of the dynamic of emplotment is to me the key to the problem of the relation between time and narrative." *Ibid.* 53.

puzzles the solution to which invariably resides in a compelling and believable story. Almost without exception, the hundreds of visitors who wander through the ancient city on any day of the year—Mexican and foreign nationals, casual and serious students, spiritually inclined and simply recreational travelers—ask, just as I have, questions that beg for a narrative reply. *Who built these huge structures? When? Why? Why here? What went on in this grand plaza? How, why and when was the city abandoned?* And then those visitors make their own variously educated or uniformed decisions about which of the alternative stories that they read or hear provide them the most credible replies. In short, the primary means of “making sense” of these endlessly suggestive pre-Columbian buildings invariably entails embracing or proposing a plotline about them.

B. ARCHAEOLOGICAL STORYTELLING: THE NON-EXEMPTION OF SCHOLARLY ACCOUNTS OF MONTE ALBÁN HISTORY

Second, among the widely diverse audiences to Mesoamerican ruins, scholars—most notably, professional archaeologists—represent a uniquely disciplined engagement with the remains of ancient cities such as Monte Albán, but not one that exempts them from the widespread tendency to respond to the puzzlements that ruins present with stories. Academics’ efforts too reinforce “the primacy of narrative understanding.”¹⁴ Since the archaeological data, even of systematic excavations, emerge in drips and drabs, as largely isolated factoids, it falls to scholars to undertake the narrativization or “emplotment” wherein discrete cues and clues are arranged into a meaningful sequence of logically linked events. Archaeologists’ transformation of raw data into a sustained narrative accomplishes “a victory over simple chronology and makes possible the distinction between history and chronicle.”¹⁵ In fact, if among the most standard definitions of an adept story is “an essentially sequential narrative, having a beginning, a middle, and an end,”¹⁶ then the raft of tripartite archaeological accounts that recount

¹⁴ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 33.

¹⁵ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 178.

¹⁶ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 163.

hypotheses concerning the successive origin, climax and collapse of pre-Columbian cities, Monte Albán included, provide the very quintessence of story-crafting.¹⁷

Of the archaeologist-authors assayed in this book, Ignacio Bernal, John Paddock and Arthur Joyce, along with Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery, all of whom imagine popular as well as strictly academic readers of their archaeologically-based writing, embrace the role of storyteller in ways that give their accounts an obviously narrative quality.¹⁸ But also Richard Blanton's highly technical treatment of settlement patterns in the Monte Albán region, a work replete with methodological digressions and augmented with 200 pages of charts and maps that are challenging even for specialists to decipher, furnishes, with some selective reading, a sustained storyline and a fascinating (if generalized) cast of pre-Hispanic characters.¹⁹ And even Marcus Winter's summary overview in *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, which adopts the least obviously narrative presentation among the seven alternatives, is conceived as a book that "tells the story of human life in Oaxaca from the time of those first arrivals to the coming of the Spaniards."²⁰ In brief, archaeologists too assume that understanding, appreciating and

¹⁷ Pluciennik, "Archaeological Narratives and Other Ways of Telling," 653, notes, on the one hand, that "with few exceptions, archaeologists have been far less concerned with the form of their texts of problems of authorship than have ethnographers;" and yet, be that as it may, "Typically, archaeologies are presented in the form of narratives understood as sequential stories." Likewise providing a description that could be aptly applied to any of the seven renditions of Monte Albán's past addressed in this book, Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 151, contends that, "in spite of their critical relation to traditional narrative, histories that deal with the unification of the disintegration of an empire, with the rise or fall of a class, a social movement, a religious sect, or a literary style are narratives."

¹⁸ Regarding the storytelling prowess of one of these archaeologist-authors, see, for instance, Kent V. Flannery, "The Golden Marshalltown: A Parable for the Archeology of the 1980s," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, vol. 84, no. 2 (June 1982): 265-78.

¹⁹ Richard E. Blanton, *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (New York: Academic Press, 1978) [Percheron reprint, 2004].

²⁰ Marcus Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record* (Oaxaca de Juárez: Carteles editores, P.G.O., 1989, 1992), 4.

disseminating information about pre-Columbian monuments invariably requires a compelling and credible narrative.

Be that as it may, to be described as a wonderful storyteller—someone adept at “the poetic act of emplotment”²¹—is, to venture another large understatement, not the sort of appellation to which many archaeologists aspire. Irrespective of how often and sincerely I will remind readers that narrative prowess is intended here as a very high compliment—indeed, if we are persuaded by Ricoeur, story-crafting is a fundamental requirement for intelligibility—archaeologists are liable to cringe at a descriptor that may seem more condescending than congratulatory. Especially for archaeologists determined to model their efforts after the natural sciences, spinning yarns about the past is anathema, a near opposite of what they understand themselves to be providing. Other archaeologists opt for a middle ground wherein storytelling is seen as a necessary concession for the presentation of excavationary results to the general public, but something that can and ought to be avoided in the more exacting exchange of information among professionals.²² And yet, while “making up stories” may strike many as the very antithesis of the rigorous recovery of the past that motivates their research, I contend that archaeologically-grounded explanations that cannot be fashioned into plausible plotlines, complete with relatively well-developed protagonists, are seldom persuasive either to lay or academic audiences. Archaeologists, not unlike historians, are, of necessity, even when talking among themselves, scriptwriters.

Furthermore, appreciating the essentially narrative quality of these major syntheses of Oaxacan archaeology, while in no way diminishing such reports, does open the way to a determinedly critical reading of those accounts; archaeological writing too is

²¹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 21-22.

²² Brian Fagan, Epilogue in *Public Benefits of Archaeology*, ed. Barbara J. Little (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 254, for instance, contends that professional archaeologists have indeed become “performers on a public stage” who work as “sophisticated storytellers.” On the role of storytelling in public archaeology, also see, for instance, Holtorf, “Meta-stories of Archaeology,” 381.

subject to the sort “discourse analysis” that has been the stock and trade of so many literary scholars ever since the “linguistic turn” took hold in the 1960s.²³ Just as historian Hayden White famously demonstrated the presence of abundant narrative strategies in nineteenth-century historiography—scholarly accounts of the past that are replete, for example, with foreshadowing, cultivated climaxes and dénouement; hyperbole, irony, satire and stereotypes; strategic character development and conflict resolution; metaphors and similes, along with numerous other sorts of literary tropes and devices—the same applies to archaeologically-based writing on ancient Oaxaca.²⁴ In White’s own words (and italics), historical narratives, which would include the most rigorous archaeological accounts of Monte Albán, are “verbal fictions the contents of which are as much *invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.*”²⁵

Note, however, that my initiative in pointing out scholars’ reliance on literary devices and forms is by not undertaken as a means of debunking or disparaging archaeological accounts; rather, it is a strategy for cultivating fuller appreciation of them. On the one hand, the sort of “hermeneutic of suspicion” I recommend, which scrutinizes the composition of writings on ancient Mesoamerica in order to ascertain an archaeologist-author’s frequently-unspoken ideological biases and investments, thereby

²³ Though there are many earlier precedents, the widespread embrace of “the linguistic turn” is frequently linked to *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. Richard Rorty (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

²⁴ As Monika Fludernik, “Histories of Narrative Theory (II): From Structuralism to the Present,” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, eds. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 2008), 43, explains: “The extension of narrative analysis to historiography and generally to nonfictional narrative occurred in the wake of the ‘narrative turn’ in historical studies which is centrally linked to the name of Hayden White...” See especially Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1973).

²⁵ Hayden White, *The Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 82, italics his; cited and discussed by Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 162ff.

resists the manipulations and distortions of the text; this is an important first step. But that healthy skepticism ought, on the other hand, be utilized in tandem with a more generous “hermeneutic of restoration,” which encourages serious consideration of explanations of the Oaxacan past that may not at first comport with one’s own views and expectations.²⁶ That is to say, I want also to read each account as the sort of provocative story of ancient peoples and faraway places that appeals to general as well as expert audiences. Exercising that sort of complementarity between two “protocols of reading,” the critical discourse analysis I have in mind requires not simply contextualizing the author’s motives and means of operating (i.e., undertaking a suspicious reading), but also engaging and enjoying the content and narrative flow of all seven splendid recountings of Monte Albán’s history (i.e., undertaking a restorative and empathetic reading).

That said, I will subject each of these fact-based archeological syntheses of Oaxaca, not unlike the critical reading of much more fully fictional accounts, to analyses (1) that direct attention to the explicit and implicit presuppositions on which the storyline and its main characters are based, (2) that ascertain the prevailing, often covert narrative themes that provide continuity by reappearing throughout the chronologic treatment, and (3) that mine the specific plotlines for more general “life lessons,” insights and provocations, including, as I’ll note momentarily, many uses and purposes that their academic authors had no intention of conjuring. In each case, that sort of critical analysis exposes problems, but also reaffirms the skill and ingenuity required to fashion tediously technical archaeological data into variously suspenseful, swashbuckling, tragic, inspiring and/or cautionary tales of Monte Albán’s past.

²⁶ The term “hermeneutics of suspicion” is usually traced to Paul Ricoeur; see, for example, his *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. D. Savage (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 32-36. For a helpfully concise account of the differences but also complementarity between “the hermeneutics of recovery” and “the hermeneutics of suspicion,” see Giles Gunn, *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 194ff.

C. RESPECTING THE HISTORICAL RECORD: EMPIRICAL ACCURACY AS ONE AMONG MANY MEASURES OF STORIOLOGICAL SUCCESS

As a third and even touchier proposition, I observe that stories of Monte Albán, again professional archaeological accounts included, have a very wide range of different relations to historical veracity, which is, nonetheless, only one measure of their success, appeal and utility—and frequently *not* the most important criterion. Though certain to annoy especially those archaeologists who imagine their enterprise as “a science based on positivistic philosophy with the goal of developing general, even universal, theories of the past,”²⁷ underscoring the storiological quality of archaeological writing—and now expressing a kind of seeming indifference as to departures from historical accuracy—is by no means an expression of dismissiveness or disrespect. But it may be the sort of inobvious qualification that requires some clarification.

On the one hand, historical accuracy provides the customary gauge of the “truth” of narratives about ruins and is, therefore, obviously of supreme importance. To have a rewarding experience of Monte Albán, even casual tourists require a confidence (usually undeserved) that the stories to which they are being treated correspond to actual past events; guides who present anecdotes about the monuments that are perceived as simply their own imaginative inventions have little appeal.²⁸ And of all stories of the Zapotec capital, those academic versions that are inventoried in this book represent the strictest attentiveness to the historical record. All were composed by frontline Oaxacanian investigators, most of whom imagine their writerly activities as secondary to their primary accumulation of “raw data” and accurate information about the respective histories of the sites where they work; nothing, as will become apparent, has occupied

²⁷ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 18, presents this as a conception of archaeology to which he is presenting an alternative.

²⁸ On the (Leszek Kolakowski-informed) notion that tourists, in order to have a rewarding experience of archaeological ruins, require “*a sense of trust*” that they are hearing a more or less historically accurate story, which very often that are not, see Jones, “Narrating Chichén Itzá,” 132-34.

more of these scholars' energies than securing a reliable chronology for the region. Getting the dates right is a constant preoccupation. All are committed to evidence-based precision; all are loathe to imagine themselves as tale-telling fiction writers. Constantly these archaeologists present their views as "corrections" of the "mistakes" of the predecessors in the sense that newer accounts conform more completely to the ever-emerging evidence than do older ones.

I concur, then, that even if the full and detailed sequence of events at Monte Albán remains very imperfectly known, many accounts can be ruled out as plain wrong. Facts matter. Not all pre-Columbian circumstances are mysterious and nor are they simply a matter of opinion. To the extent historical veracity is the principal criterion, some stories of the Zapotec capital definitely are "truer" than others.

On the other hand, for my present purposes, the inescapable question of *what actually happened at Monte Albán?* is not the foremost nor final concern. Instead, in the spirit of composing an architectural reception history, this project is driven by the alternate queries: *What narratives have the ruins of Monte Albán evoked? And what can we learn via a critical reading of those alternate stories of the Zapotec capital?* Indeed, frequently—and to the great vexation of many archaeologists—I will recommend that, for now, we set aside the important question of historical accuracy and consider the narratives as narratives, "followable" historical fiction if you will, without making a ruling concerning their empirical correctness or lack thereof.

In my experience, as I've shared this manuscript with archaeologists, most prove unwilling to undertake the sort of "suspension of disbelief" that allows them to take seriously Monte Albán narratives that, in their assessment, do not comport with the historical evidence. For them, keeping the facts straight is too near the heart of the matter to abstain on that, even for a moment. But to act as though the history of Oaxaca were some sort of algebraic equation for which there is one and only one correct answer, misses entirely the intent of this project. Just as there can be no uniquely definitive historical account of, for instance, complex episodes like the Industrial Revolution or the

Vietnam War, even the best informed renditions of circumstances that are vastly better documented than the history of Monte Albán are composed, Ricoeur reminds us, on the basis of partial and fragmentary information: “One makes a plot with what one knows, and a plot is by nature ‘mutilated knowledge.’”²⁹ As students of hermeneutics teach us, every historical account of a complex situation is limited; all are “mutilated knowledge;” each awakens audiences to alternate, not necessarily incompatible insights and observations. No account of the past is fully objective, and none can win the day in ways that vanquish all competing versions.

Accordingly, and by contrast to so many Mesoamericanists who take for granted that “what really happened” at Monte Albán is the cardinal question that trumps all others, I will not be passing judgment on the historical correctness of any of these stories; and nor am I willing to imagine that storylines that are exposed as significantly at odds with the ever-richer historical record—a charge to which all of these narratives are vulnerable—ought immediately be consigned to the trash bin. None is judged “invalid” or useless. State-of-the-art stories of Monte Albán do not preclude us from learning a great deal from the creative narrativizations of Caso, Bernal and Paddock. While tour guides, for instance, have learned that a pretense of historical veracity is required to make their commentaries compelling, they have also discovered that older, more venturesome and less empirically rigorous stories often better serve their purposes of enriching the experiences of tourists (and thus winning the favor of paying clients) than do more empirically careful cutting-edge explanations.

And at least some leading Oaxacanist scholars, irrespectively of their far higher standards of rigor, also endorse the view that when it comes composing the history of Monte Albán and other sites, “‘truth’ is just the best current hypothesis, that whatever [archaeologists] believe will ultimately be proven wrong, either within their lifetime or

²⁹ Relying at this point on the work of French archeologist and historian Paul Veyne, Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 170, writes: “Furthermore, historians [and even more, one suspects, archaeologists] do not despair of having to work with only mutilated fragments. One makes a plot with what one knows, and a plot is by nature ‘mutilated knowledge.’”

afterward.”³⁰ Nearly all Mesoamerican archaeologists, including the most rigorous among them, operate with historical hypotheses that are subsequently proven wrong. Efforts at empirical accuracy are an archaeologist’s disciplinary requirement, but frustrations in that respect are likewise an inescapable occupational hazard. Consequently, newer and better informed archaeological accounts supplement, but do not simply replace, older renditions. Both the so-termed mistakes of past scholarship and more currently fashionable hypotheses—still-unmasked errors, if you will—constitute valuable resources not only for thinking about Oaxacan history, but for all of those present and future initiatives I’ve just mentioned.

In sum on point three, then, I respect and benefit enormously from archaeologists’ relentless preoccupations with “getting it right,” and I plan in future works to take a stronger stand on what pre-Columbian peoples and events actually were responsible for Monte Albán. But the present project advocates for an appreciation of the various stories of the Zapotec capital that is conditioned on their narrative qualities and not on their historical exactitude. This project asks *what stories have been told?* Not *which story is correct?* In other words, this portion of my query belongs more to the history of ideas about Oaxaca than to the history of ancient Oaxaca per se. And, as I hope to demonstrate, the insights and “truths” in these richly textured Monte Albán narratives are not confined to their inevitably debatable historical verity.

³⁰ Kent V. Flannery, “Culture History v. Cultural Process: A Debate in American Archaeology,” *Scientific American* 217 (1967): 122. Flannery, *ibid.*, considers this view—wherein because “[archaeologists’] ‘theories’ are not like children to them, they suffer less trauma when the theories are proven ‘wrong’”—to be among the advantages of “processual archaeology relative to earlier cultural historical approaches.” Arthur A. Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xiv, quotes Flannery and, though himself skeptical about the presuppositions of processual archaeology, on this point notes that, “I heartily agree with Flannery’s insights here and it is sage advice for archaeologists of any theoretical persuasion.”

**D. ACCENTUATING THE DIFFERENCES: SEVEN UNIQUE AND VIABLE
(RE)CONSTRUCTIONS OF MONTE ALBÁN HISTORY**

The fourth informing proposition is more straightforward: I contend that, though all seven versions were composed as evidence-based accounts of the history of the very same region and ancient city, frequently relying on precisely the same data—and thus they have a great deal in common—it is the *differences* among the alternate renditions that are invariably most revealing and interesting. It is, therefore, distressing that popular accounts and textbooks so often work to homogenize storytelling about Monte Albán by accentuating the common ground and *similarities* among various versions, presumably in hopeful anticipation of eventually arriving at the definitive version that would allow us to abandon the previous rough and wrong drafts. The search for a Monte Albán “master narrative” is persistent but ill-conceived. Alternately, rather than dumping seven exquisite wines into a single decanter, as it were, I maintain that, as in nearly all comparative endeavors, it is the *differences* among the alternate (re)constructions, which emerge via closer and more critical readings, that excite and teach us most.

Frequently, for instance, Bernal and his student-turned-collaborator Paddock are depicted as holding a shared view of the five-stage storyline and religiously-inclined protagonists that account for Monte Albán; but the closer readings presented in chapters 2 and 3 should make apparent that Paddock proposes a narrative of ancient Oaxaca and Monte Albán that is, in its guiding narrative themes concerning the interactions between different Mesoamerican cultures, almost opposite to that of his teacher. And while the Marcus-Flannery version relies constantly on their colleague Blanton’s settlement data and population estimates, which at first gives the impression of thoroughgoing agreement in their evaluations of the exploits of more politically inclined pre-Columbian protagonists, we will see in chapters 4 and 6 that their respective plotlines, and even more their characterizations of the ancient Oaxacan actors, are strikingly and thus fascinatingly different. So disparate, for example, are their depictions of Period II—which Blanton sees an era of “retrenchment” but that Marcus and Flannery contend was the time of a flourishing Monte Albán-based Zapotec empire’s maximal territorial control—that it can

be difficult to believe they are describing the same era, let alone relying on the very same settlement data.

Throughout, then, and increasingly in each subsequent chapter, I accentuate those oft-smoothed-over differences that really do set the respective accounts apart from one another. The seven iterations of the capital's history present profoundly, not slightly, different pre-Columbian scenarios. As noted, I have no stake whatever in declaring a victor among the seven competing versions, and even less interest in blending and melding the alternatives into one grandly synthetic narrative of Monte Albán. To the contrary, for me, perhaps the greatest wonder of these ruins lies in their evocation of so many viable accounts that are nonetheless so drastically different even from their closest counterparts. The hermeneutical principle that enduring monuments are autonomous and superabundant, and thus available to endless "revalorization" and reinterpretation, could scarcely find more clear and poignant demonstration!³¹

E. THE PRIORITY OF PRESUPPOSITIONS: THE CONDITIONAL QUALITY OF EVERY MONTE ALBÁN NARRATIVE (RE)CONSTRUCTION

A fifth and absolutely imperative working premise concerns careful attention to the respective presuppositions that underlie each of these very different (re)constructions of Monte Albán's history. Storytelling about Monte Albán is, on the one hand, additive and progressive to the extent that each of the seven chronologically ordered narratives draws on archaeological data that were not available to the previous renditions; and each is presented by its author(s) as a correction or improvement on previous versions.

³¹ On the concept of "revalorization," that is, the creative and interested reinterpretation of architectural monuments, texts or ideas, see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 12, "Multifarious Revalorization: The Composition of Ritual-Architectural Reception Histories;" or Lindsay Jones, "Revalorizing Mircea Eliade's Notion of Revalorization: Reflections on the Present-day Reuses of Mesoamerica's Pre-Columbian Sites and Architectures;" in *Remembering/ Reimagining/Revalorizing Mircea Eliade*, eds. Norman Girardot and Bryan Rennie; a Special Issue of *Archaevs: Studies in the History of Religions* XV (Bucharest: Romanian Association for the History of Religions, 2011), 119-59.

Nonetheless, it is, perhaps surprisingly, not new information but rather the alternate theoretical frames and assumptions on which each story of the Zapotec capital relies that most of all account for their profound differences. In that respect, each version is a more a brand new narrative than a contribution to a cumulative plotline that is being honed, whittled, augmented and fine-tuned.

It is, in other words, the exercise of a basic hermeneutical principle concerning the limits of objectivity to observe that each narrative option stands somewhere between plain reporting on “the facts” and imaginative fiction—and thus participates in both. Fashioning the fragmentary excavationary data into a “followable” narrative sequence requires a major creative initiative and a kind of “pattern recognition,”³² which perhaps explains why, of the legion of archaeologists working in Oaxaca, only a handful attempt the sort of broad syntheses on which I am concentrating here. Indeed, every author’s “emplotment” or plot construction is heavily influenced by prejudices or “distortions” of two sorts.

One set of determinative biases depends upon their chosen theoretical model (for instance, cultural evolution, ecological functionalism, action theory or poststructuralism); and, in most cases, especially since the 1970s, archaeological-authors are highly self-conscious and explicit in explaining their choice of one methodological approach over others. But hermeneutical theorists likewise caution us that even the most self-critical narrators rely on operative presuppositions, what Hans-Georg Gadamer terms “pre-understandings,”³³ of which those authors are less than fully aware (for instance, biases

³² Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 149-55, bases his insistence on the “followability” and “pattern-quality” of historical narratives on W. B. Gallie’s *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (1968) use of those terms. Similarly contending that “pattern recognition of the sort historians engage in is the chef d’oeuvre of human intelligence” (p. 5), William H. McNeill, “Mythistory, of Truth, Myth, History, and Historians,” in his *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), comments on “the elastic, inexact character of truth” (p. 7) and thus the inevitability that historians present “an appropriately idealized version of the past” (p. 14).

³³ Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. W. Glen-Doepel (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 245ff.; or Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I., 8ff.

that reflect national origins, socio-economic status and gender). And because this set of influences, while invariably decisive for the way in which the storyline comes together, remain implicit and thus largely hidden, it falls to critical readers to shine light on the means by which those sorts of pre-understandings are intruding on each of the Monte Albán narratives.

It is, then, imperative to appreciate that, instead of simply recounting past events, the composition of each of these stories—each of these “narrative (re)constructions”—is actually grounded on a conditional proposition, an “if-then” formulation. Caso’s, Bernal’s and Paddock’s narrative interpretations, for instance, are predicated on the corrective and affirming proposition that *if* we appreciate ancient Oaxacans not as barbarous or “primitive” but instead as highly sophisticated and culturally nuanced, only *then* we can understand their capital as one that comported with the Zapotecs’ decidedly non-Western religio-artistic inclinations. Blanton, for example, departs from the alternate assumption that *if* we avoid such romanticized depictions of “deeply religious” ancient Oaxacans, only *then* we can ascertain the more militaristic and politicized priorities that actually account for the great capital. Winter, by contrast, maintains that *if* we concede the most important factors in social evolution are the strategic management of natural resources, *then* Monte Albán’s location, ascent and fall emerge as altogether predictable rather than startling or aberrant phenomena. Marcus and Flannery’s entire synthesis has the character of a kind of “thought experiment” wherein, *if* we imagine that the course of ancient Oaxacan social evolution was frequently redirected by the self-interested choices of entrepreneurial and rational-minded charismatic leaders, *then* we are led to the version of events they propose. And Joyce’s presentation likewise is explicitly framed on the contingency that *if* we adopt the alternate starting point provided by poststructuralist and subaltern theory, *then* we will be led to a story of ancient Oaxacan social history that affords a far larger share to “the agency of commoners.”

Accordingly, given those very different points of departure, what might at first appear to be disagreements about specific peoples and events in ancient Oaxaca, more often than not, turn out actually to be divergent opinions on much more general matters

concerning human nature and the respective roles of religion, war, trade, class and ecology in the processes of social history.³⁴ Marcus and Flannery, for example, offer the refreshingly candid admission that, while the historical scenario they present in *Zapotec Civilization* is contingent of the presuppositions of “action theory” (as opposed, for instance, to those of ecological functionalism), a different theoretical point of departure would almost certainly issue in a very different version of the events and motivations that gave rise to the great city of Monte Albán.³⁵ Yet even for those scholar-narrators who are much less self-conscious about their working assumptions it is, I will contend, that choice of one’s theoretical framework—not new data—that gives these alternative accounts their distinctive tenor and tone. In that sense, the ruins of Monte Albán act as a kind Rorschach-like resource that, happily enough, enable reflection on all sorts of poignant and provocative issues whose relevance is by no means confined pre-Columbian southern Mexico. But because so often what are presented as the over-arching conclusions of one’s study of Monte Albán history are actually the very ideas and propositions with which these respective researchers began, clarifying those presuppositions becomes a matter of first importance.³⁶

³⁴ Holtorf, “Metastories of Archaeology,” 384ff., describes these sorts of subtexts about (1) what it means to be human, (2) what is at issue in belonging to a particular human group, and (3) how we might fare living in very different cultural circumstances as the “meta-stories of archaeology,” which actually provide the field’s greatest contributions to contemporary public audiences.

³⁵ For instance, Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 171, in their summary paragraph on Monte Albán I, make explicit that reliance on an ecological functionalist perspective *could* lead to one set of conclusions about Monte Albán’s earliest phase while reliance on action theory *could* lead to an alternative set of conclusions.

³⁶ I would contend, in fact, that for non-archeologists (like myself) reading the large syntheses of Mesoamerican archaeologists, the first and foremost challenge is to determine the (frequently unstated) guiding narrative presuppositions; after that, in virtually every case, one can see those presuppositions at work over and over throughout the account. For instance, Alfred Tozzer’s posthumously published *Chichén Itzá and Its Cenote of Sacrifice: A Comparative Study of Contemporaneous Maya and Toltec*, memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, volumes XI and XII (Cambridge: Peabody Museum, 1957) is a mammoth work that seems at first more like a kind of working file into which he tossed essentially everything that was known about the site by the 1950s than any sort of sustained interpretive argument. But once a reader ascertains Tozzer’s guiding presupposition that Maya and

**F. RECEPTION AND INDETERMINACY: INTENDED, UNINTENDED AND NOT-YET-
REALIZED UTILIZATIONS OF MONTE ALBÁN (RE)CONSTRUCTIONS**

The sixth and final proposition, which draws heavily on “reception theory” or “reader-response criticism,”³⁷ concerns the diverse readership and socio-political uses of the respective Monte Albán narratives, including some recommendations for ways in which various audiences might capitalize on these wonderfully fecund stories in the future. Here we risk the ire of archeologists in one more way by suggesting that their historical (re)constructions of Monte Albán, ostensibly written for expressly academic purposes, are almost certain to be (mis)interpreted and put to service of all sorts of socially constructive agendas their authors never intended. In that sense, all of these (re)construction narratives are “indeterminate,”³⁸ and thus subject to ongoing “revalorization.”³⁹

Toltec peoples are drastically *and irreconcilably* different, that basic assumption—dubious as it is!—leaps out from nearly every page of the tome.

³⁷ Regarding “reception theory” or “reader-response criticism,” see, for example, Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); and *Reader-Response: From Formalism to Post-Structural Criticism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). For a more direct application of reception theory to the interpretation of Mesoamerican ruins, see Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 12.

³⁸ On the “indeterminacy” of narrative, see, for instance, Chris Baldick, “Indeterminacy,” in *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Also on the social productivity that is occasioned by “the indeterminacy of narrative,” see Laurie L. Patton, “Cosmic Men and Fluid Exchanges: Myths of Arya, Varna, and Jati in the Hindu Tradition,” in *Myth and Ethnecity: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Craig Prentiss (New York: New York University, 2003), 194.

³⁹ On the concept of “revalorization,” that is, the creative and interested reinterpretation of architectural monuments, texts or ideas, see, as noted, Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, vol. I, chap. 12; or Jones, “Revalorizing Mircea Eliade’s Notion of Revalorization: Reflections on the Present-day Reuses of Mesoamerica’s Pre-Columbian Sites and Architectures;” 119-59.

That is to say, while several of these archaeologist-authors, as we'll see, have recurrent (not unwarranted) complaints that their hypotheses concerning ancient Oaxaca have been misrepresented and misunderstood by other scholars, an appreciation of the “indeterminacy of narrative”—that is, an acknowledgement that all substantial stories are subject to a multiplicity of possible interpretations—requires those researchers to accept the disconcerting inevitability that they are by no means in full command of the “reception” and use of their carefully conceived accounts. Intrepid readers, often to the chagrin of authors, frequently “discover” meanings that were never intended. Accordingly, Oaxacanist archaeologists may be surprised, even horrified, to see their meticulous Monte Albán narratives deployed as resources for such controversial and timely topics as constructions of nationalist identity, “racial purity” and/or “interracial mixing;” as grist for indigenous rights campaigns and native claims for special access and entitlement to “sacred sites;” or as the warrant for environmental activism, for supporting or rejecting religious tolerance, and for populist protests on all manner of contemporary concern.⁴⁰ Richard Blanton, for instance, arguably the most reticent to issue any sort of praises (or condemnations) for the cultural accomplishments of the ancient Zapotecs, may find variously puzzling or distressing the suggestion that his highly technical account of regional diplomacy and strategic religious neutrality is, ironically enough, the version of pre-Columbian events that would serve best to underwrite present-day Guelaguetza celebrations, which are explicitly designed to showcase and promote the paired cultural diversity and statewide unity of Oaxaca. But such creative and politicized “revalorizations” are largely beyond the scholarly authors’ control.

To be sure, particularly among public audiences, who tend to be much more concerned with contemporary matters than historical accuracy, biased and manipulative readings of Monte Albán narratives are the rule rather than the exception. If it is, as I maintain, investments in some set of generalized propositions about human nature and the leading factors in social history that provide the frame for each story, it is likewise

⁴⁰ All of these possible “revalorizations” or contemporary re-utilizations of archaeologically-based (re)constructions of Monte Albán will be addressed the various “closing thoughts” at the end of each chapter.

those sorts of broad investments that invariably determine general readers' preference for one version over another. Only a very small scholarly minority is equipped with the knowledge of archeological particulars that enables the empirical facts about Monte Albán to determine which of these renditions seems truest; and thus most readers' evaluations, even more than those of scholar-authors, are overwhelmingly based on personal opinions about larger and more pressingly relevant matters. Consequently, opting for one narrative over another is almost never an evidence-based decision. As I've noted, distressing as it may sound, the appeal of archaeological narratives, especially when delivered to non-professionals, depends far more on skilled "emplotment" and compelling "followability" than empirical accuracy.

Those lay audiences who are committed to upbeat, perhaps romanticized, imaginings that the lives of ancient peoples were guided largely by religio-aesthetic priorities are, for instance, likely to be drawn to Paddock's and Joyce's accounts. By contrast, skeptics who believe that it is inevitably self-interested political motives and authoritarian leadership decisions that determine the course of events are likely to find the Blanton and Marcus-Flannery renditions more plausible. And those who champion the virtues of multicultural interactions are, for example, liable to find Bernal's embrace of "cultural fusion" and even Blanton's notion of Monte Albán's savvy policy of religio-cultural tolerance more compelling than Paddock's commendations of the Zapotecs for their uncompromising maintenance of a distinct and ostensibly untainted cultural-ethnic identity. In fact, those readers in search of a story about the supposed virtues of "ethnic purity," and the thus dangers of "race mixing," could, ironically enough, find a useful resource in Paddock's seemingly scrupulous (re)construction.

But in a project that owes a great deal to "reception theory," it is important to appreciate that, in precisely the same way that the architectural monuments of Monte Albán are "superabundant and autonomous," and thus subject to ever-unfolding interpretations, so too, each of the Monte Albán narratives, once crafted and published, stands as a kind of autonomous resource, which audiences may, for better or worse, utilize in whatever way they wish. Archaeologist-authors may or may not configure their

respective renditions of Monte Albán history with ulterior motives of illustrating larger truths about life and social evolution; but, either way, after completing their accounts and then releasing them into the public domain, so to speak, those scholars cannot control the reception of their stories, which will likely embark on “reception careers” of their own.⁴¹ Novelists, like architects, are not the final arbiters of their work; and the same indeterminacy, albeit at times deeply disconcerting to authors, applies also to the writings of historiographers and archaeologists.⁴²

The indeterminate quality of narrative is the ground, then, of another crucial qualification about the limits of this book. While it is always revealing to contextualize these historical accounts of Monte Albán in relation to the particular academic perspectives and social milieus from which they emerged—and while these Oaxacanists are almost certain to rue some readings of their painstakingly wrought work (perhaps mine included) as *misreadings*—in no case are the significance and potential utility of these storiological scenarios exhausted in the biographies, personal motivations or political commitments of their academic authors. I may no claim to psychoanalyze archaeologist-authors. The inherent multivalence of narrative—again, its “superabundance and autonomy”—frequently opens up large gaps between the lessons *taught* by scriptwriters and the lessons *learned* by readers; and thus I will direct attention in several cases to interpretations and constructive uses of these Monte Albán (re)constructions that are neither intended by their authors nor, it seems, widely

⁴¹ As literary reception theorists routinely point out, a heavily textured narrative like *Moby-Dick*, for instance, has had an complex and unpredicted history of reception insofar as it was initially praised by critics but largely ignored by popular audiences, before eventually being embraced for its insights into everything from revenge to race, romance and all sorts of topics that Herman Melville had never intended.

⁴² In other words, Erwin Panofsky’s cautionary insistence that the ever-unfolding succession usages and meanings evoked by enduring architectural configurations like those at Monte Albán—the site’s “architectural reception career,” if you will—is “tortuous, fortuitous, full of uncertainty, past echoes, and unexpected turns... It does not possess a logic; it has no constant direction, no goal,” an insight that I cited in the Preface, applies also to unpredictable reception careers of the seven stories about Monte Albán discussed in this book.

appreciated—*but they could be*. Indeed, every one of these stories has the combination of depth, detail, ambiguity, sometimes internal contradictions—and thus indeterminacy—to evoke suggestions about political, professional and personal utilizations that they very well could support in the future were the important differences among renditions better known.

Therefore, in sum on this sixth and last point—and to provide a final, trans-academic and more constructive rationale for this book—the well-stocked oeuvre of Monte Albán (re)constructions provides not only numerous different ways of explaining the pre-Hispanic Oaxacan past but also, at least potentially, a whole array of exceptionally rich and polysemic narrative resources for any number of contemporary socio-political agendas. Elected officials, educators, political activists, champions of indigenous rights, artists, environmentalists and cultural preservationists, along with both present-day advocates and critics of religion, could all benefit by drawing in strategic ways on various strains within this body of stories for support and guidance in their respective initiatives. One need not be an aficionado of ancient Mesoamerica to find these (re)constructions both fascinating and eminently useful.

When, however, as is too often the case, the profoundly different ways of conceptualizing the history of the ancient capital are blurred and conflated into one generalized ostensibly historical account—some supposed “master narrative,” which does not actually exist—their potency as effective resources is seriously diminished. But when readers, as I aim to in this analysis, appreciate that there are numerous deeply different ways of “narrating Monte Albán,” each of those interested parties is afforded versions that can serve their particular purposes. And thus I will, usually at the end of chapters, direct attention to some more specific contemporary utilizations of those sorts—including ways in which each of these seven stories *could be* utilized, but thus far have not.

II. SEVEN SUPERABUNDANT STORIES:

ALTERNATIVE VERSIONS OF “WHAT REALLY HAPPENED” AT MONTE ALBÁN

The seven versions of Monte Albán’s history are, with a couple qualifications, arranged in the order in which they emerged. Each chapter is organized according to a roughly parallel format that includes: (a) comments on the archeologist-author’s stated and unstated presuppositions and methods, (b) an enumeration of the principal guiding narrative themes, (c) a fairly detailed summary of the actual storyline and (d) so-termed closing thoughts on some of the more general ideas, ramifications and “take-aways” or life lessons that have or might emerge from that (re)construction.

Though largely attempts at summation, my remarks are selective and narrowly focused insofar as I extract from each scholar’s wider work those elements that bear directly on the history of Monte Albán, a telescoping agenda that is, in several cases, directly at odds with concerted efforts to tell a story ancient Oaxaca that is *not* so fully preoccupied with the grand capital. Moreover, undertaking a study of scholarly stories rather than of scholars per se, I do not address (except in rare instances) later works in which these same Oaxacanists refine and nuance the broad syntheses on which this work is primarily trained. Note that this is a very large qualification! It means that, in some cases, perhaps most egregiously those of Paddock and Winter, both of whom wrote their broadest overviews of Oaxacan history quite early in highly prolific careers, the treatments addressed here are a very imperfect representations of their mature and more nuanced perspectives. But this is a book foremost about seven wonderful stories and not, I have to insist, about the storytellers per se. Apologies to those scholars for that distortion of their eventual outlooks, but the fair treatment of full careers is the objective of a different study.

In all cases, the actual storylines—broadly speaking, seven versions of the same pre-Columbian Oaxaca history—are presented with reference to the five (in)famous stages that Alfonso Caso enumerated in the 1930s and that continue, with ample permutations and qualifications, to permeate the literature. Given the seven parallel presentations, a structure that is referenced by exhaustive subtitles in the Table of

Contents, it is plausible (though not recommended as the initial reading order) to undertake a kind of “horizontal reading” across chapters of the relevant sub-sections that treat, for instance, seven different versions of the eras in advance of Monte Albán, seven versions of the founding of the city and Period I, seven versions of Period II, seven versions of the Classic-era Periods IIIA and IIIB, and seven versions of the Periods IV and V decline, collapse and aftermath of the capital. Additionally, those detailed subtitles could enable horizontal readings on numerous key topics such as alternate interpretations of the inimitable Danzante carvings, of Monte Albán’s respective involvements with Olmecs and with Teotihuacan, or of the much-debated relations between Zapotecs and Mixtecs, all topics that are treated in variously extensive or brief ways by nearly every author.

The reiteration of the particulars of each story, fascinating to some readers, may at times seem tedious to others. Often however, I contend, it is in those details that the most salient, frequently smoothed-over differences and disagreements emerge; and thus I provide fairly detailed plot summaries in each case. Nonetheless (though again not recommended as an initial reading protocol), less invested audiences of this book could ascertain the gist of the differences among the seven (re)constructions by a horizontal reading of the “closing thoughts” sections with which each chapter ends.

A. THE UNFOLDING OF ALFONSO CASO’S STORY OF MONTE ALBÁN: FROM TALES OF DISCOVERY TO A FIVE-STAGE HISTORY OF THE ZAPOTEC CAPITAL

Be that as it may, I depart predictably with the seminal work of Alfonso Caso who occupies a uniquely important place with respect to the study of Monte Albán and, indeed, all of Mexican archaeology. Consequently, chapter 1 is the least parallel with the others. Instead of simply rehearsing his final version of events, I work to recreate the path-breaking progression from complete confusion prior to the mid-1920s even as to whether Monte Albán was a Zapotec or Mixtec site through to Caso’s *Culturas mixteca y zapoteca* (1936), which both constitutes the very first archaeological synthesis of Oaxaca

and lays out for the first time the subsequently ineluctable notion of a five-stage history of the city.

Reticent to overstep the emergent data, Caso, even in his mature versions, leaves unresolved very basic questions concerning the origin of the city, the extent of the capital's territorial control, the role of Mixtecs in the history of the Zapotec capital, and the most decisive factors in the city's decline and collapse; and, to that extent, his is, ironically, the least complete, "followable" and polished plotline. And yet he provides the foundation on which every ensuing version builds. Closing remarks that place his prototypic narrations of Monte Albán within three different sorts of contexts, show how Caso's interpretation of the Oaxaca capital was the cornerstone of a fabulous personal career, a microcosm of the methodological advances in a young and developing field of Mesoamerican studies and, moreover, within in the context of early and mid-twentieth century Mexican political history, a purposeful resource for the creation and solidification of a national identity that affirmed its pre-Columbian roots.

B. IGNACIO BERNAL'S AFFIRMATION OF INTERCULTURAL ADMIXING: MONTE ALBÁN AS A MICROCOSM OF MESOAMERICA AND MODEL FOR MODERN MEXICO

Second, Mexican archaeologist Ignacio Bernal, Caso's successor as the leading authority on ancient Oaxaca, capitalizes on the basis his teacher provides to compose a far more complete and thematically consistent narrative history of Monte Albán. Bernal's is a fully "followable" story. Concerned like Caso to present stories of ancient Mesoamerica that resonant with the concerns of twentieth-century Mexicans, Bernal's rendition provides the sort of pre-Columbian protagonists who stand as compelling progenitors from whom modern-day Mexicans can proudly claim descent; and it provides, moreover, the sort of ambivalent view of religion's mixed role first in Monte Albán's successes but then later in the capital's largely self-imposed collapse that can engender, among other insights, reflection on the similarly conflicted role of the Catholic Church in Mexico's history. And even more conspicuously, Bernal depicts Monte Albán as the quintessential exemplar of a pan-Mesoamerican pattern wherein the greatest

cultural florescences invariably derive from the meeting and “cultural fusion” of two or more very different peoples.

Thus, according to Bernal’s artful script, the foremost accomplishments of ancient Oaxacans’ owe largely to their successive interactions with Olmecs, Mayas and, later, Teotihuacanos; and the collapse of their great capital is a consequence of Zapotecs’ shortsighted overconfidence that they could persist without the replenishing involvements of other cultures. Though one needs to draw on numerous of his works, most notably “Archaeological Synthesis of Oaxaca” (1965), to extract a full beginning-to-end Monte Albán story, Bernal’s (re)construction thereby affirms the virtually certain rewards of intercultural admixing in ways that provide a perfect analogue for a Mexican mestizo identity.

C. JOHN PADDOCK ON MONTE ALBÁN AS AN URBAN WORK OF ART: A STORY OF THE EMERGENCE AND PERSEVERANCE OF ZAPOTEC CULTURAL-ETHNIC IDENTITY

Chapter 3 engages the work of American archaeologist John Paddock, an allegiant student of Caso and Bernal who nonetheless provides a very different, in some respects antithetical, account of Oaxacan and Monte Albán history. For him, in order to avoid ethnocentric distortions, it is crucial to appreciate ancient Mesoamericans as “strikingly impractical,” possessed of an “indifference to (or contempt for) technology and [an] extraordinary devotion to esthetic principles,”⁴³ qualities that stand in stark contrast to the hyper-individuality and materialism of post-World War II Americans. Clearly admiring of his deep-thinking protagonists, Paddock contends ancient Oaxacans conceived Monte Albán as “an enormous work of art,” which was made even more rewarding by the huge expenditure of labor that was required to create an enormous city atop a remote mountain.

⁴³ Paddock, “Oaxaca in Ancient Mesoamerica,” 152.

Nevertheless, by my reading of his account, the greatest accomplishment of the lofty capital comes not in its large buildings and acclaimed art, all of which eventually fell into ruin, but rather its facilitation of the “crystallization” of a distinctive Zapotec cultural-ethnic identity that proved sufficiently resilient to survive the collapse of the city and the subsequent intrusions of Mixtecs, Aztecs and Spaniards. In this script, Oaxacans thrive not by melding with other cultures but by holding fast to their unique religio-artistic identity. Even the modern Mexican nation-state proves insufficient to compromise an inimitable outlook that, therefore, remained intact in the Zapotec villages of the 1960s and 1970s with which Paddock was so enamored. In short, then, his (re)construction is far less serviceable as a resource for the solidification of a mestizo Mexican national identity, but much more useful as, among other things, a means of critiquing the individualist, consumerist, technology-fixated, efficiency-driven and violent trends in modern American society that Paddock found so troubling.

D. RICHARD BLANTON ON MONTE ALBÁN AS A “DISEMBEDDED CAPITAL”: A STORY OF MILITARISM, REGIONAL COOPERATION AND RELIGIOUS NEUTRALITY

Fourth, American archaeologist Richard Blanton’s *Monte Albán: Settlement Patterns at the Ancient Zapotec Capital* (1978) presents protagonists who, by stark contrast to Paddock’s impractical and artistically inclined ancient Oaxacans, are militaristic and political pragmatists. Absenting religion any significant role, Blanton asserts that the appeal of the mountain site was based entirely on its central location and natural fortress-like configuration. According to this highly engaging script—the narrative flow of which is frequently obscured by a wealth of technical information—Monte Albán’s foreboding ecology and waterless inconvenience actually made it the ideal neutral location for a “disembedded capital,” which was created by a “regional military alliance” as part of an ingenious strategy to unite and forestall an “external threat.”⁴⁴ During eras in which external pressures on the Valley of Oaxaca loomed large, the capital thrived; but once, in Period III, the supreme outside threat of Teotihuacan

⁴⁴ Blanton, *Monte Albán*, chap. 2.

collapsed, Monte Albán lost its reason for being as the decision-making center of this “regional confederacy” and simply reverted to obscurity.

Contrary to the laudatory tone of his predecessors, Blanton expressly assures academic readers that “it is not our intention to promote the greatness of one particular society or people.”⁴⁵ And nevertheless, with respect to my sixth point about unintended and not-yet-realized utilizations of Monte Albán (re)constructions, he crafts a story that could be have great utility for contemporary Oaxacan politicians and activists insofar as the pragmatic and insightful ancient leaders of his account exemplify the forward-thinking possibility that Oaxaca’s collective good is best advanced by a policy of religious and ethnic toleration. Though the creation of a resource for such constructive utilizations is entirely inadvertent, Blanton, by contrast to Bernal’s notion of “cultural fusion” wherein different groups meld into a unified entity, a “melting pot” of sorts, presents an arguably more progressive picture wherein the region’s various constituencies find ways to coexist together and even celebrate their permanent differences as a religio-cultural mosaic or, what some would term, a “salad bowl.”

E. MARCUS WINTER’S STORY OF STRATEGIC RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: MONTE ALBÁN AS PART AND PARCEL OF A PAN-OAXACAN SOCIAL EVOLUTION

Fifth, American archaeologist Marcus Winter’s much more popular and less narrative synthesis, *Oaxaca: The Archeological Record* (1989, 1992), adopts the strategic use of natural resources as the prime factor in social evolution. Also opining that religion is “an elusive area of archaeological inquiry,”⁴⁶ he focuses on generalized ecological processes; and thus instead of either lofty spiritual aspirations or ruthless political ambitions, Winter’s somewhat bland protagonists are concerned primarily with the acquisition of the material necessities of life. In this story, nutritional and housing needs

⁴⁵ Richard E. Blanton, Gary M. Feinman, Stephen A. Kowalewski and Linda M. Nicholas, *Ancient Oaxaca: The Monte Albán State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.

⁴⁶ Winter, *Oaxaca: The Archaeological Record*, 59.

supersede either more ethereal or more Machiavellian passions. Moreover, discontent that histories of ancient Oaxaca have so often concentrated almost exclusively on the accomplishments of Zapotecs and the glamorous site of Monte Albán, he offers a more encompassing corrective based on two irrefutable but not very exciting themes: First, Oaxaca's enduring cultural continuity, wherein the great Zapotec capital is reconfigured as just one prominent chapter in the region's much longer history; and, second, the interplay between Oaxaca's wide cultural diversity but also unity, wherein Monte Albán is demoted to the status of just one of numerous "sub-areas" within the region.

In brief, Winter's unsensationalizing story, which neither congratulates nor condemns the main actors, in a sense, "regularizes" the often rave-inducing capital. This rendition, more than any other version, makes the case that Monte Albán, irrespective of its privileged place in nearly all accounts of Oaxaca, is by no mean the spectacular anomaly that it is frequently considered to be.

F. KENT FLANNERY AND JOYCE MARCUS'S "ACTOR-CENTERED" STORY OF OAXACAN SOCIAL EVOLUTION: CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP AND AN ILLUSION OF CONTROL

Sixth, Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery's *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley* (1996), though opting not to address the city's decline and aftermath, provides arguably the most thoroughgoing Monte Albán narrative. Sharing much with Blanton and frequently at loggerheads with Winter, these co-authors, as noted, adopt a version of "action theory" that leaves them unwilling to explain Oaxaca social evolution strictly in terms of systemic environmental and socio-cultural processes. Thus, by contrast to the highly generalized protagonists of all previous accounts, they assign a starring role to aggressively entrepreneurial, rational-minded and charismatic individual leaders who, though still impossible to identify, make the thoughtful and self-interested decisions that account for many of the otherwise unexplainable developments in the region. Based on their own excavations at the nearby but previous unappreciated site of San José Mogote, they discover a crucial precedent for Monte Albán, but are nonetheless persuaded that the founding of the mountain capital—

via processes of “synoikism” that are better documented in ancient Greece—was “the least predictable event in the history of the Valley of Oaxaca,” which therefore provides quintessential exemplification of the unpredictability of Oaxacan social evolution.⁴⁷

In short, Marcus and Flannery’s “actor-centered” account presents by far the most manipulative and selfish protagonists of any rendition. Yet, even so, by accentuating a recurrently ironic pattern in which the strategic decisions of these ruthlessly self-serving rulers inevitably result in “unintended consequences,” sometimes fortuitous and sometimes disastrous, their narrative presents the poignant and humbling realization that neither these controlling leaders nor any other human beings are, after all, in control of the world in which they live.

**G. ARTHUR JOYCE’S POSTSTRUCTURAL REREADING OF OAXACAN SOCIAL HISTORY:
A STORY OF SACRED SPACES, RITUALS AND THE AGENCY OF COMMONERS**

Seventh and finally, Arthur Joyce’s *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos: Ancient Peoples of Southern Mexico* (2010) draws on two very different intellectual traditions to offer the most recent sweeping synthesis of the region. First, he is direct and explicit in acknowledging his debt to “a poststructuralist perspective,” subaltern studies and a version of “practice theory” that leads him to complement Marcus and Flannery’s emphasis on the deliberative decisions of ancient Oaxacan leaders with similar attentiveness to the heretofore neglected “agency of commoners.”⁴⁸ Emphatically rejecting “top-down perspectives” in which “rulers are seen as the sole decision-makers who drive social change,” his story of Monte Albán features perpetually contested and renegotiated “social contracts” between Oaxacan elites and non-elites.⁴⁹ Additionally, though unacknowledged (and perhaps unwittingly), Joyce draws also on the tradition of phenomenological religious studies to make the case that Monte Albán’s preeminent

⁴⁷ Marcus and Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization*, 241.

⁴⁸ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 28-31.

⁴⁹ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 285.

appeal was as a “cosmic mountain” and “axis mundi,” and that its Main Plaza was conceived less as a theatre of political intimidation than as a grand ritual space designed to cultivate “an on-going relationship with the divine,”⁵⁰ an incentive that explains the site’s continuing allure long past its prime as a political capital.

By that somewhat unlikely pairing of theoretical investments, Joyce’s script provides an especially telling demonstration of the way in which narratives ostensibly about Oaxaca’s ancient past—and assuredly grounded in careful attention to the historical particulars—also offer richly promising resources for all sorts of larger and ongoing initiatives. Though again in apparently unintentional ways, his story of Monte Albán provides, for instance, an encouraging analogue and perhaps a set of exemplary models for those political activists who advocate for versions of populism wherein the egalitarian principles of commoner heroes repeatedly and inevitably triumph over the pretensions of self-important elite anti-heroes. If Joyce is correct, commoner interests have always guided the course of Oaxaca history. And his story, moreover, again inadvertently, provides highly suggestive support for those increasingly vocal constituencies who want, for whatever motive, to assert that Monte Albán was—and thus remains—not simply an archaeological site nor a tourist destination, but indeed a privileged “sacred space.”

To reiterate a final time, then, each of these historical (re)constructions of the same place over essentially the same span of time is profoundly and provocatively different. No two renditions are redundant; and all are open to interpretations that exceed their archaeological-authors’ express goals and intentions. It is, therefore, only the most superficial readers of these seven narrative accounts of Monte Albán who will be primarily impressed by the similarities among them, and only the least imaginative readers who will be content to assess them as storiological compositions that deal strictly with the unfolding of events in the great pre-Columbian capital city of the Zapotecs. These stories are, unquestionably and fortuitously, revealing of far more than long-disappeared practices, peoples and circumstances.

⁵⁰ Joyce, *Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chatinos*, 63.