

CHALLENGING REGIONAL STEREOTYPES: THE CASE OF NORTHERN MEXICO

William E. Doolittle

Geographic illiteracy permeates society just as it does our schools. Its solution involves more than teachers simply disseminating second-hand information about the earth's surface in the classroom. It also involves educators, and the general public, acquiring correct information and translating it into knowledge. This article uses the example of northern Mexico to illustrate that much of what we think we know, and hence teach, can be wrong. Analysis involves popular and professional sources of information. A call is made for more caution in geographic inquiry and exposition. *Key Words:* regional geography, geographic education, Mexico.

A common complaint heard among educators today is that of geographic illiteracy (National Research Council 1997). This is a sad state of affairs to be sure, and it applies to so-called "educated" adults as well as to students currently in school or college. Geographic illiteracy on the part of the general public is seen by many as stemming from the lack of geographic education in schools. If the problem is ever to be corrected, an important place for doing so is doubtless the classroom (Geography Education Standards Project 1994). As important as it might be, however, the classroom is not the only place to begin correcting this problem. Another place for conquering geographic illiteracy is with the people who are educating the educators and playing a direct role in the continuing education of the general populace.

Given that knowledge is obtained constantly during a lifetime, it is unfair to place blame entirely on our educational system for the current state of geographic

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illiteracy. At least some of the blame for the problem can be placed directly on the shoulders of the media, the popular press, and even the writers of textbooks. After all, it is these people, above all others, who are entrusted with presenting accurate information about the world in which we live. Educators, of course, need constant educating. Much of what is professed or taught is based on scholarly research. Like it or not, however, a great deal of pedagogy involves less-than-scholarly sources. What teacher, for instance, has not brought a newspaper clipping to class at one time or another? Probably none. It seems that education is locked in a vicious cycle of sorts. Geographic illiteracy begets geographic illiteracy. Try as we might, our sources of information are often geographically illiterate, thereby not only perpetuating the problem but actually making it worse.

The vicious cycle of geographic illiteracy affects the general public as well as those involved in formal education. Americans love to read. This fact is no more evident than in our high level of literacy, and book publication and sales rates. But, what do we read? Clearly it is not geography, or at least not enough *good* geography. Some of our geographic knowledge, or lack of it, can therefore be attributed to writers who should be geographically knowledgeable, but all too often they are as geographically illiterate as the general public whom they purport to inform.

Being large, complex, and constantly changing, the world is a difficult place to know geographically. As a result, regional specialists play an especially important role in obtaining and disseminating information. Some regions are better known than others, in part because of the number of specialists, and in part because of proximity. For example, the Latin American Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) has more members than any other regionally oriented specialty group, and of all the places represented in the AAG's list of area proficiencies, more members are interested in Mexico than any other single country outside the United States (Bradshaw 1998).

On the basis of regional specialization, it would seem that students, educators, and the general public of the United States would have a good understanding of the geography of Mexico. Taken one step further, people in the southwestern United States should be expected to have a very good knowledge of northern Mexico. Unfortunately, this is not the case. But, alas, it is to be expected of a

culture in which no one even knows their next-door neighbor (another commonly heard complaint). Were geographic illiteracy of northern Mexico not bad enough, much of what we think we know is wrong. Counterintuitively, proximity seems to promote delusion rather than understanding.

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, it is intended to help set the record straight, correcting some long-maintained but incorrect notions about northern Mexico. Second, it is intended to demonstrate that authors, including professional geographic researchers, should be much more careful than they have been with what they write. Third, readers, especially teachers, should be extremely cautious of what they read. Just because it is in print, just because it was written by an "authority," and just because "everyone knows it," does not necessarily mean that it is correct.

This article reviews some of the generalizations that pervade thinking on northern Mexico. Current misperceptions are revealed through an assessment of four works: two popular trade books, one professional article aimed at geographic educators, and one "classic" college textbook. The publications used in this study are: Alan Riding's *Distant Neighbors* (1984); Dick J. Reavis's *Conversations with Moctezuma* (1990); Louis B. Casagrande's "The Five Nations of Mexico" (1987), which appeared in the American Geographical Society's magazine *Focus*; and Robert C. West's and John P. Augelli's *Middle America: Its Lands and Peoples* (1966, 1976, 1989).

Although the western, northern, and eastern boundaries of northern Mexico are clearly defined—by the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Cortes (to use the Mexican name for the body of water known to people in the United States as the Gulf of California), the border with the United States, and the Gulf of Mexico, respectively—the southern boundary remains elusive. Various writers have long delimited the region's southern extent differently (Figure 1). In contrast to the disagreement over spatial extent, there is surprising agreement on what characterizes the region as a whole. Northern Mexico traditionally has been discussed in terms of a few factors that are presented as uniform and diagnostic. Factors commonly presented by others as being characteristic of northern Mexico, and challenged here, are climate and its expression, crops, cuisine, race, culture, and politics.

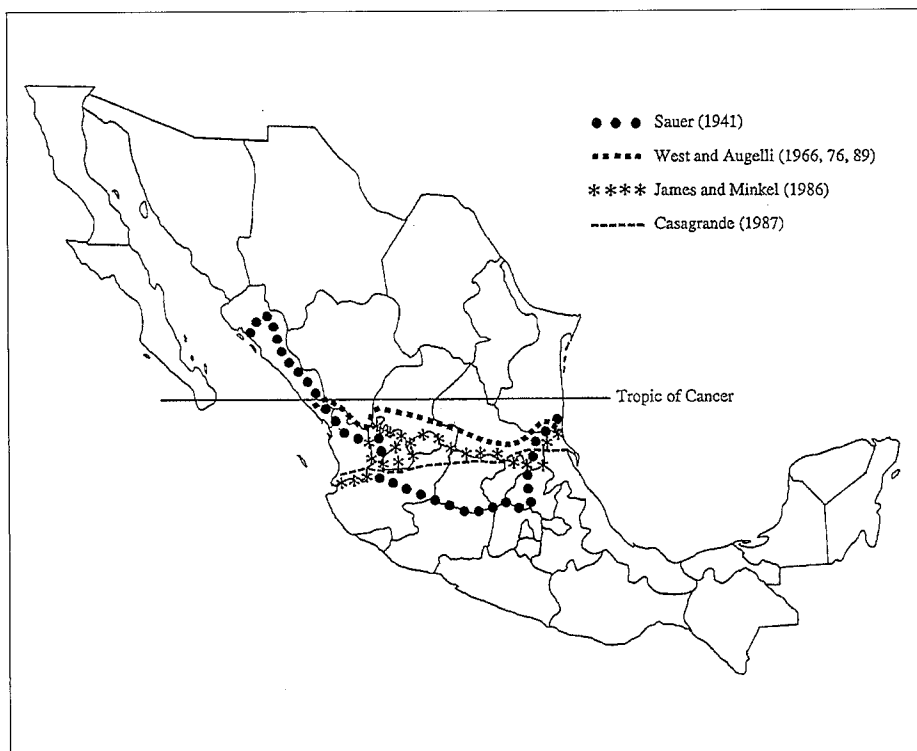


Figure 1. The southern limits of northern Mexico according to various sources.

Climate and its Expression

Lying at the very heart of our understanding of northern Mexico is the fact that it is an arid land. Casagrande (1987: 5) says that “[t]he interior of Mexamerica [the name he applies to northern Mexico and the southwestern part of the United States, and borrows from Garreau (1981)] features little water and great desert expanses.” Reavis (1990: 90) is more specific. In discussing rainfall, he notes “that most of the area receives less than twenty inches a year.”

Certainly most of northern Mexico is arid; there can be no doubt of that. It is, however, not entirely arid. Furthermore, southern Mexico is not entirely humid, as is implied (if not explicitly stated) in regionalizations of the country. Indeed, one study (Marroquín *et al.* 1981) found that approximately 36 percent of the area north of the Tropic of Cancer is actually humid and that almost 25 per-

cent of the area south of the line can be described as arid (Figure 2). The arid-versus-humid generalization, if one is to be made, should, with the exception of the Sonoran Desert in the northwest, be one of arid interior plateaus versus humid coastal lowlands and mountains, not one of north and south.

Confounding the issue of aridity are differences in how it is conceptualized. Some researchers have used various amounts of precipitation, whereas others have relied on various evaporation and transpiration rates in their determinations. Robert H. Schmidt, Jr. (1979, 1989), for example, identified twelve conceptualizations each of the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts based on climatic factors alone.

Were variations in the manner in which aridity is determined not problem enough, in and of itself, there is a bewildering array of biological zones that can be correlated with variations in it—and, depending on scale, a vertiable plethora of conceptualizations. To illustrate, one interdisciplinary study found seventeen areal designations of the Chihuahuan Desert (Morafka 1989). These conceptualizations varied in extent from as few as 140,000 square kilometers to as many as 600,000 square kilometers (Figure 2). In contrast to this detailed study of one part of the region are studies that looked at northern Mexico as a whole. Gary Paul Nabhan (1985) identified six general vegetation zones within the Mexican portion of what he called "Aridoamerica."

Another assessment revealed no fewer than twelve biotic communities south of the Mexico-United States border, north of 27°N latitude, west of the Río Bravo del Norte (to use the Mexican name for the river known to people in the United States as the Rio Grande), and east of the Sea of Cortes. These communities include not only species typically identified with deserts, but also some of the most luxurient coniferous and broadleaf forests in North America (Brown and Lowe 1980; Rzedowski 1986), and some of the most biologically diverse habitats on earth (Ramamoorthy *et al.* 1993). In stark contrast to their desert image, Chihuahua and Durango have been, far and away, the leading states in terms of timber production in Mexico (Bassols Batalla 1987).

In sum, one must be extremely cautious when speaking of climate and its manifestations in reference to regionalizations of Mexico, particularly the north-

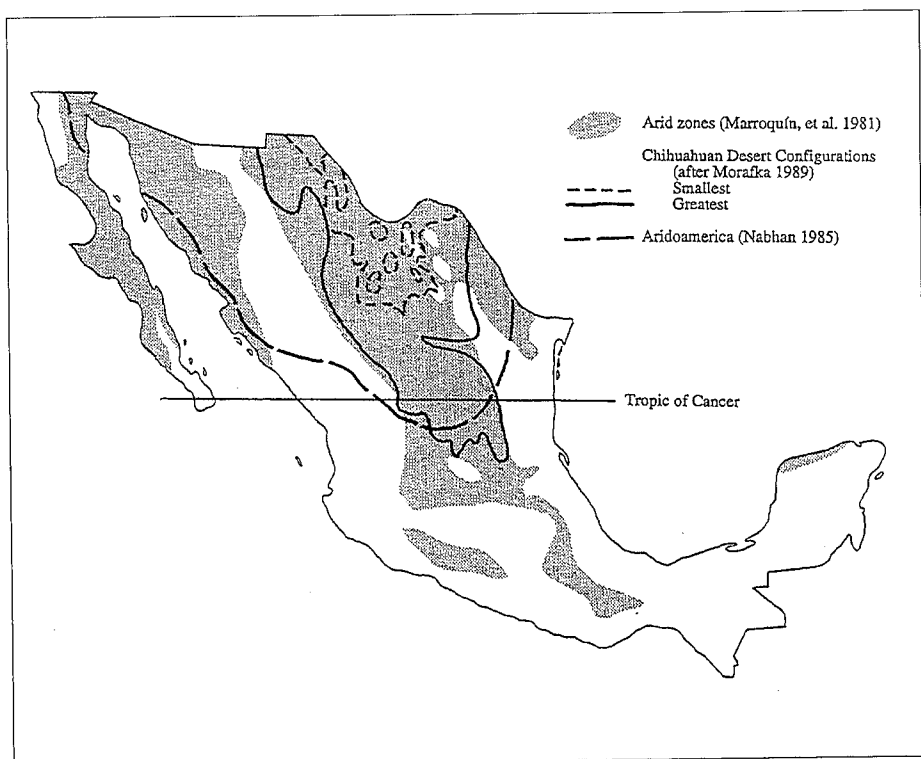


Figure 2. Arid zones of Mexico according to various sources.

ern portion of the country. Much of northern Mexico is not arid, and much of southern Mexico is. There are also great differences and regional variations in aridity throughout the north (Hernández Cerda and García 1997). The Sonoran Desert is one of the driest places on earth (Dunbier 1968). It might well be, therefore, that this localized extreme condition has colored people's impression of northern Mexico as a whole. Indeed, it is also probable that the use of the term "deserts" contributes to the image. Although the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts are climatically deserts, their relatively tall and dense vegetation—albeit xerophytic—is anomalously luxuriant in comparison to deserts in other parts of the world (Heathcote 1983). Moreover, the mountainous areas are covered with verdant, economically important forests, the existence of which is a function of abundant precipitation.

Crops and Cuisine

As incorrect (and therefore, inappropriate) as it may be, the distinction between northern arid lands and southern humid lands has been used as a basis upon which to explain differences in agricultural practices and even food. Stated rather simply, wheat has long been considered the characteristic staple crop of the north, while maize is considered the principal cultivar of the south. This dichotomy is undoubtedly the result of two separate factors. First, maize was domesticated in southern Mexico, and it continues to be the dominant crop grown there (Riding 1984). Second, wheat was domesticated in the arid Fertile Crescent of the Old World and is not well suited to humid environments.

According to Reavis (1990), tortillas made of flour (wheat) are characteristic of the north, while in the south, tortillas are almost always made from corn meal. To a certain extent, this is true. Corn tortillas, however, are not unknown in the north, and they are even the more popular and common of the two types in the state of Chihuahua. Indeed, corn cultivation itself is more widespread in the north than most people realize. In his book, Reavis (1990: 90) goes on to say that "in the north there's not enough rain for corn to grow . . . about ten inches too little for dependable corn cultivation." Where, one wonders, did he get the data on which to base this claim? Agricultural data from 1990-91 indicate that nearly three times as many hectares of corn as wheat were cultivated in the eleven northernmost states (Table 1). Furthermore, nearly all of these crops are grown without benefit of irrigation.

Contrary to popular belief, *temporal* or rain-fed agriculture dominates the north just as it does the south (Soto Mora and Soto Mora 1988). Only in the major cotton-, vegetable-, and wheat-producing localities is irrigation important. These include the Laguna district of Coahuila, the coastal valleys of Sinaloa and Sonora, and lands near the mouths of the *ríos* Colorado and Bravo del Norte. In these places, irrigation became widespread and economically important only since 1940, and it was developed part-and-parcel with high-yielding varieties of wheat during the Green Revolution (Henderson 1965). Finally, it should be remembered that regardless of what they are made from, tortillas are a native, not a Spanish-introduced, food.

Race and Culture

The concentration of wheat production in locales that only recently benefited from irrigation technology and the dominance of corn in the north raises questions about long-held notions concerning racial make-up and cultural characteristics of people in the north as compared to people in the south. It has been maintained that the north is home to people who, although technically *mestizos*, are racially more Spanish than indigenous; they are seen to be responsible for the introduction of wheat from the Old World. The south, in contrast, has typically been viewed as inhabited largely by indigenous people or *mestizos* who are more native than Spanish—people whose ancestors domesticated corn. For example, Riding (1984: 410) says that people of the north are “taller and whiter than most

Table 1. Hectares of grain planted in northern Mexico, 1990-91, by state, crop, and cultivation period.

State	Corn			Wheat		
	Fall-Winter	Spring-Summer	Total	Fall-Winter	Spring-Summer	Total
Baja California	30	3,662	3,692	62,948	30	62,978
Baja California Sur	732	21,598	22,330	15,004	0	15,004
Coahuila	0	42,757	42,757	11,078	0	11,078
Chihuahua	0	362,846	362,846	46,892	9,174	56,066
Durango	0	200,895	200,895	6,239	7,741	13,980
Nuevo Leon	0	74,992	74,992	13,099	15	13,214
San Luis Potosi	4,867	191,903	196,770	0	3,676	3,676
Sinaloa	100,656	126,882	227,538	147,980	747	148,727
Sonora	84,443	19,508	103,951	248,812	0	248,812
Tamaulipas	13,198	87,992	201,120	20,662	0	20,662
Zacatecas	0	264,310	264,310	271	13,707	13,978
Total	303,926	1,397,275	1,701,201	572,985	35,190	608,175

Sources: SARH 1991, 1992.

Mexicans,” and Reavis (1990: 91) reports that “*norteños* are whiter and more Europeanized.” Even the most naïve of tourists would certainly not fail to recognize the physiological differences between people from northern Mexico and those from the southern part of the republic. Historically, there were fewer natives in the north than in the south, and hence, the availability of indigenous wives for Spanish men was greatly limited. During the course of four centuries, northerners, although still mestizos, might have become racially more European than their southern counterparts. But, to what extent? And, to what extent are they culturally more European? Answering these questions requires scrutinizing notions put forth by two leading cultural/regional geographers.

West and Augelli (1966: 370, 1976: 366) noted that “in the north, the bands of primitive nomads . . . have long since disappeared, leaving few traces of their culture.” This passage was dropped from the most recent (1989) edition of their book, in no small way because large numbers of indigenous people continue to live in the region (Pennington 1963), and because later archaeological work revealed the existence of prehistoric cultures that were anything but primitive and nomadic (DiPeso 1974). However, West and Augelli state in all three editions that “more so than in the Indian-Mestizo south, the landscape of northern Mexico reflects, in settlement forms, house types, and economic activities, the impact of Hispanic culture” (1989: 355). Given that the latter of these factors, economic activities (especially the regional dichotomization of wheat and corn production), appears to be an oversimplification at best, and incorrect at worst, the cultural influence as reflected in house types and settlements is brought into question.

House Types

Essentially, two types of vernacular architecture are common in northern Mexico: the flat-roofed adobe of the west (Figure 3), and the gable-roofed, wattle-and-daub *jacal* typical of the east (Figure 4). West (1974) argued that the former type was unknown in northern Mexico prior to the arrival of the Spaniards but was found in the Aztec region of central Mexico and in arid lands in the Old World, including Spain. He maintained that the flat-roofed adobe style was not used in the north until Spanish miners carried the tradition out of central Mexico in the

sixteenth century.

Two problems exist with this explanation. First, archaeological evidence of prehistoric flat-roofed adobe structures exists in the north. West, himself, noted that puddled adobe was used in the construction of large, multiple-room, multiple-story, flat-roofed structures at Casas Grandes in Chihuahua. What he was not aware of at the time, however (and therefore cannot be faulted), is that foundations of numerous detached houses predating the Spanish era are reused today in the (re)construction of flat-roofed adobe brick houses (Doolittle 1988: 26). Presumably, if these ancient foundations support adobe brick houses today, then they did so in times past, as well. Although this line of reasoning is less than conclusive, there is even more recent and better evidence of pre-Spanish adobe brick usage in the region. Adobe bricks, some apparently made in forms or molds, have been found at several sites near Homolovi Pueblo, Arizona, and date as early as the fourteenth century (Johnson 1990: 18; Powers 1990: 841).

The second problem with West's interpretation involves the significance of native influence. Specifically, it does not make much difference if Spaniards did introduce an Aztec house type because the Aztecs were themselves natives. As for jacales, there are no such houses on the Iberian peninsula; at least none were found during the course of a two-month, 11,644-kilometer landscape survey of Spain. There are, however, numerous early Spanish explorer accounts (*e.g.*, Winship 1904: 116) and sufficient ethnographic evidence (*e.g.*, Briscoe 1994: 224; Hinton 1983: 326) to infer that it has been a common house type among indigenous people of northern Mexico for centuries.

Settlements

The grid-pattern town (Figure 5) so typical throughout Mexico has long been accepted as a Spanish introduction (Stanislawski 1947). Although the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, was also built on a grid, it appears to have been one of only a few ancient Mexican towns so laid out. There seems to be no reason, therefore, to question the Spanish influence in grid-pattern towns. What can be questioned is the origin of towns *not* laid out on a grid, and there are literally thousands of such places throughout northern as well as southern Mexico. As an example, consider

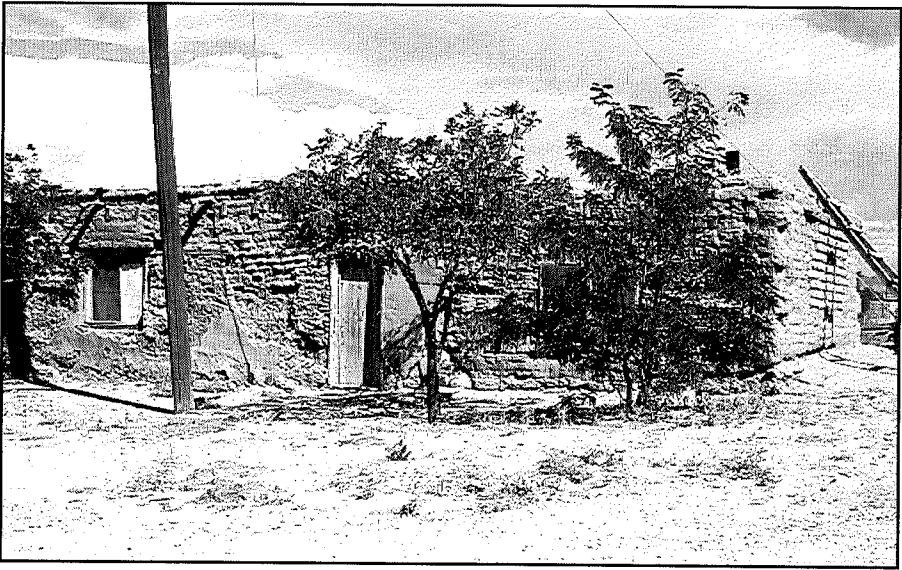


Figure 3. A flat-roofed adobe house in the former presidio town of Janos, Chihuahua. Photograph by author, 1993.

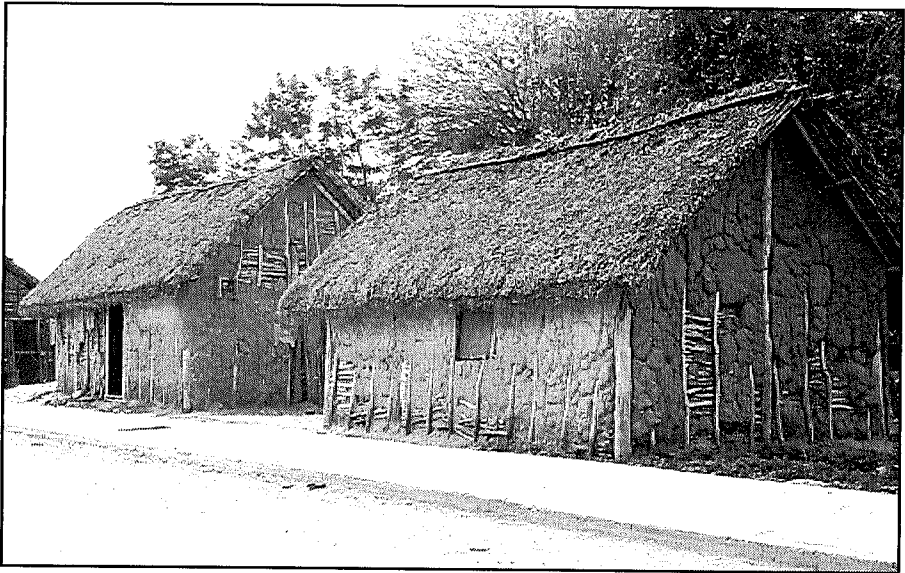


Figure 4. Wattle-and-daub jacales in the town of Sota la Marina, Tamaulipas, a town founded by Spaniards in the mid-1700s. Photograph by author, 1984.

one non-grid-pattern town in eastern Sonora.

The town of Fronteras was founded in 1645—well into the Spanish era—and redesignated as a *presidio*, or fort, in 1690. A comparison of a present-day map (Figure 6) with one drawn in the late 1700s (Figure 7) reveals that today's houses at the foot of the *mesa*, or ridge, on which the presidio was located are situated in exactly the same fashion as the houses of eighteenth-century soldiers. Some currently occupied houses may be built on earlier foundations, as discussed previously, and some of them may even be the very same houses, having been lived in continuously for more than two centuries. At the very least, it is clear that this settlement was not laid out on a grid pattern. The issue of its cultural origin being Spanish, therefore, is called into question.

The original town of Fronteras was settled and the presidio was manned by people born and raised on the frontier of New Spain. In other words, they were born in what is now Mexico and not in Spain. Furthermore, these people were third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation descendants of Spanish immigrants who took

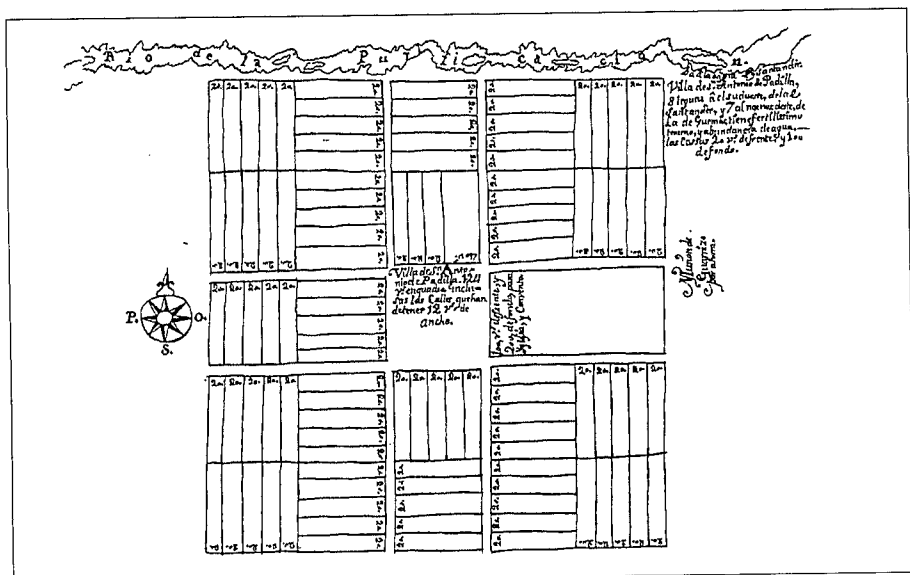


Figure 5. Plan of the villa of San Antonio de Padilla, province of Nuevo Santander (now Tamaulipas). The town was laid out on a grid pattern in the mid-1700s. Published with permission of the Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

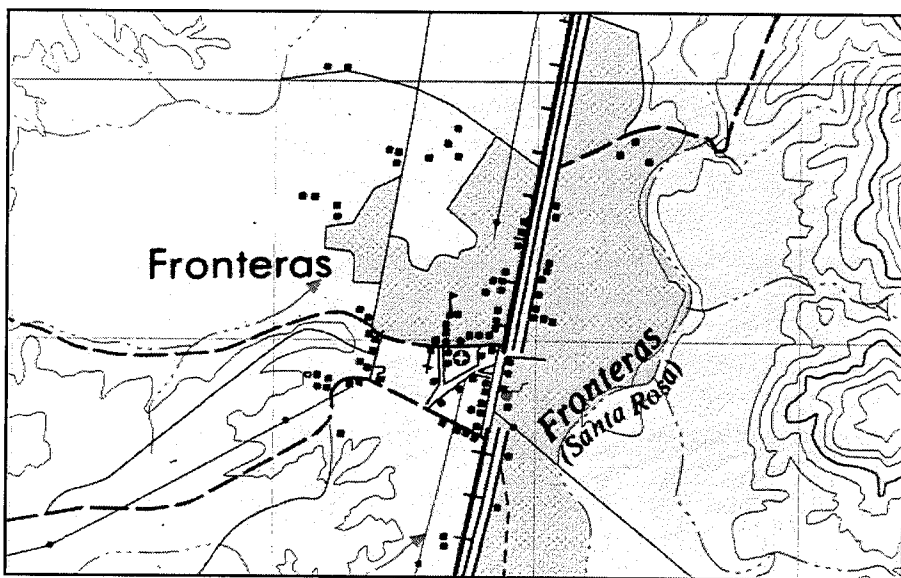


Figure 6. A portion of a topographical map (INEGI, H12B55), showing the town of Fronteras, Sonora, ca. 1973. Note the location of the houses around the foot of the mesa.

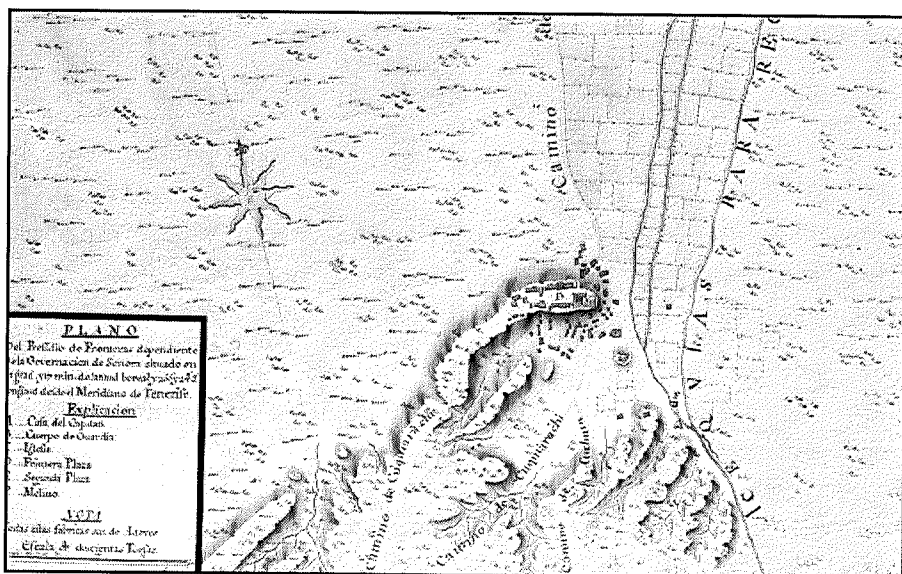


Figure 7. Map of Fronteras drawn by Joseph de Urrutia in 1766. Note the similarities to Figure 6, especially the relative locations of landforms, houses, and fields. Note also the location of irrigation canals. Published with permission of the British Library.

indigenous wives (Jones 1979: 177-180). With each generation, these mestizos became racially less Spanish and more native.

Although these northerners never became as racially native as their counterparts in the south, they were far from being European. Also, because of their remoteness from the major centers of Spanish activity (Sheridan 1992), these people had to provide for their own subsistence and livelihood. In doing so, they adopted a frontier lifestyle that was strongly influenced by native people, probably women—settlers' wives. This is strikingly apparent in similarities between Fronteras (Figure 8) and certain indigenous pueblos, especially that of Ojo Caliente, west of Zuni in northern New Mexico (Figure 9). It is also reflected in agricultural land-use patterns. Valleys of eastern Sonora, of which that of the Río Fronteras is one, were reported by Spanish explorers early in the 1500s as having been irrigated by indigenous people (Winship 1904: 224). The valleys remain irrigated today by canals that were used in the 1700s (compare canal locations in Figures 7 and 8) and, in all probability, were in use prior to the arrival of the Spaniards (Doolittle 1988: 46).

In sum, and in contrast to popular and professional thinking, there is significantly more native influence on the cultural landscape of northern Mexico than previously thought. To call the north "European" (West and Augelli 1989: 18) is to dismiss or at least greatly discount, the contribution of indigenous people.

Contemporary Politics

In addition to environmental, agricultural, architectural, and settlement factors, all of which are visible on the landscape, there exists one other factor involving northern Mexico that is not materially evident, but which has pervaded life and thinking since the Revolution of 1910-17 and continues to be regionally oversimplified: politics. Riding (1984: 415) reports that in the north there is much disenchantment with the established and ruling Independent Revolutionary Party (PRI). He goes on to note that few northerners are attracted to careers in that party (p. 411). Instead, he argues, and Casagrande (1987: 5) agrees, that they tend to align themselves with the National Action Party (PAN). Patrick Oster (1989: 110-119), another popular writer on Mexican politics, maintains a more moderate stance. According to him, PAN's strength is in the north, but it is only a regional party,

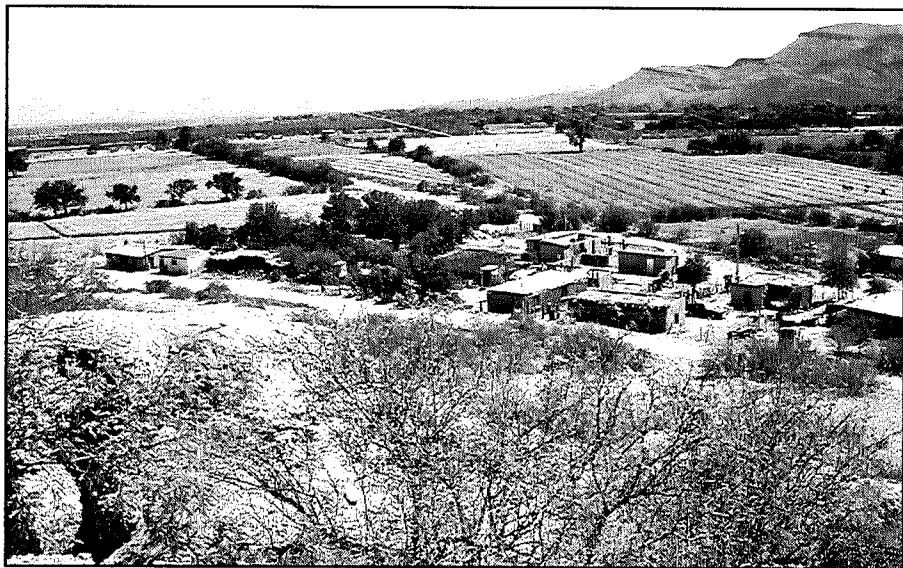


Figure 8. A view north of the Río Fronteras Valley from the mesa on which the presidio (see Figure 7) was located. Note the farm lands in the distance, the tree lines that parallel irrigation canals, and the clustering of detached, flat-roofed adobe houses at the foot of the mesa. Photograph by author, 1990.

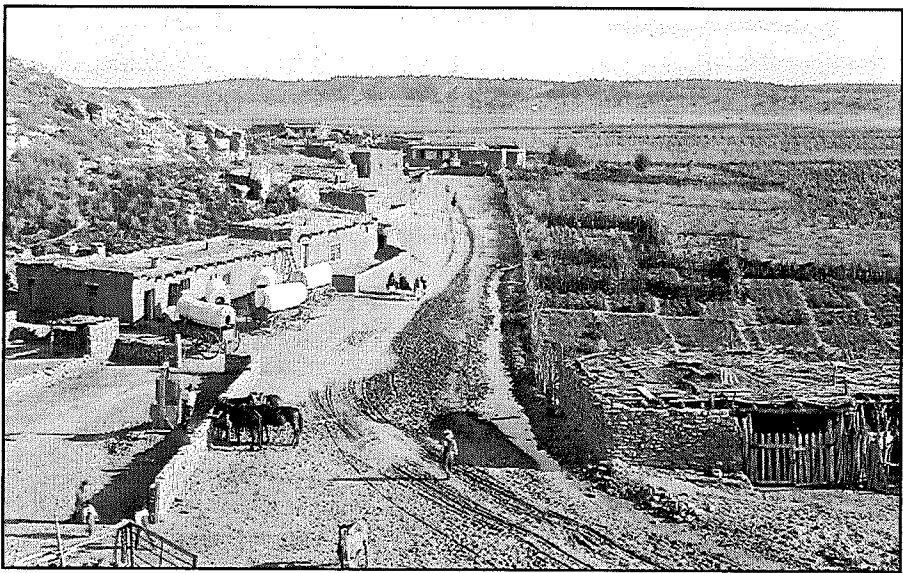


Figure 9. A photograph of Ojo Caliente pueblo west of Zuni, New Mexico, taken *ca.* 1920 by Jesse Nusbaum. Note the similarities to Fronteras (Figure 8), especially the relative locations of landforms, flat-roofed adobe houses, fields, and irrigation canals. Published with permission of the Denver Public Library, Western History Department.

and hardly dominant on the national scale (see also Smith 1998: 26).

In order to test Riding's claim that northerners are not supportive of PRI, Casagrande's supposition that they support PAN, and Oster's argument that PAN has regional strength in the north, data from the 1994 presidential election were analyzed. This analysis should put to rest previous notions that were based principally on personal impressions.

Mexican elections have long been thought to be fraudulent, with the 1988 presidential election being considered the all-time worst in this respect. In response to deep and widespread ill feelings, the current government went to exceptional lengths to ensure that the 1994 election would be the cleanest ever. This election involved photo-identification voter registration cards, marking with indelible ink the thumbs of those who voted, clear plastic ballot boxes, and independent international observers. By all accounts, there were some minor reporting errors, but no major irregularities (Ward 1994). The results, therefore, can be considered a reasonably accurate representation of Mexican people's political attitudes.

During past presidential, senatorial, congressional, gubernatorial, and mayoral elections, PAN candidates won outright in only a few states and locales. These few victories occurred principally in the north and, as a result, were probably the basis on which previous claims about regional political attitudes were made. For example, during the 1988 national elections, the PAN presidential candidate carried the northern cities of San Luis Potosí, Culiacan, and Ciudad Juárez outright, even overriding possible fraud (Electoral College of the Chamber of Deputies 1988). In 1990, both Chihuahua and Baja California elected PAN governors, and Ciudad Juárez continued its tradition of electing a member of the PAN party as its mayor. PAN candidates at virtually every level are thought to have won several positions legally, but many allege that fraud perpetrated by the ruling PRI party resulted in the duly elected persons not taking office. Indeed, outbreaks of violence due to suspected election improprieties have occurred in several northern cities over the years as PAN candidates claimed that they were cheated out of victories. No such violent outbreaks followed the 1994 election (González Oropeza 1994), thereby lending credibility to its accuracy.

The official results of the 1994 presidential election indicate that the PAN candidate won a plurality in only seventeen of the republic's 300 voting districts (Dirección Ejecutiva de Organización Electoral 1994). Only five of these districts are located in the north; the other twelve are on the Mesa Central, specifically in the Bajío (Figure 10). However, even this distribution needs qualification. All of the districts in which the PAN candidate won can be characterized as overwhelmingly urban. Two of the districts in the Bajío encompass the manufacturing city of Leon and its suburbs. Ten are within the confines of Guadalajara, Mexico's second-largest city in terms of population, and two are in Monterrey, Mexico's second-most important industrial center. Three of the seven election districts in Sonora were carried by PAN. In terms of land area involved, this looks like an impressive victory. However, one of these districts is totally within the capital city of Hermosillo, and a second is dominated by people living on the outskirts of this urban center. The third district, as was also the case with the one just discussed, is one of the largest in terms of area and one of the most sparsely populated ones in the country, owing to its desert environment. It is also dominated by people who live in the border cities of San Luis Río Colorado and Nogales. PAN carried these three Sonoran districts with a total of only 175,366 votes.

Although PAN won only a tiny fraction of the election districts, it did have a respectable showing over much of the country. Of the total 35,545,831 votes cast for president, the PAN candidate received 9,221,474, or 25.94 percent (Dirección Ejecutiva de Organización Electoral 1994). One hundred sixty-five, or slightly more than half of the election districts from across the nation, are characterized by the PAN candidate having received at least twenty-five percent of the votes (Figure 11). At first glance, these districts might appear to be largely in the north. A closer inspection, however, and a look at the numbers themselves, reveals that initial impressions are wrong. Only fifty-three of the election districts recording a minimum of twenty-five percent of its votes for the PAN presidential candidate are in the eleven northern states. The other 112 election districts are principally on the Mesa Central, including the Bajío and Mexico City, and on the Yucatan Peninsula.

The states of Guanajuato, Jalisco, Mexico, and the Distrito Federal account

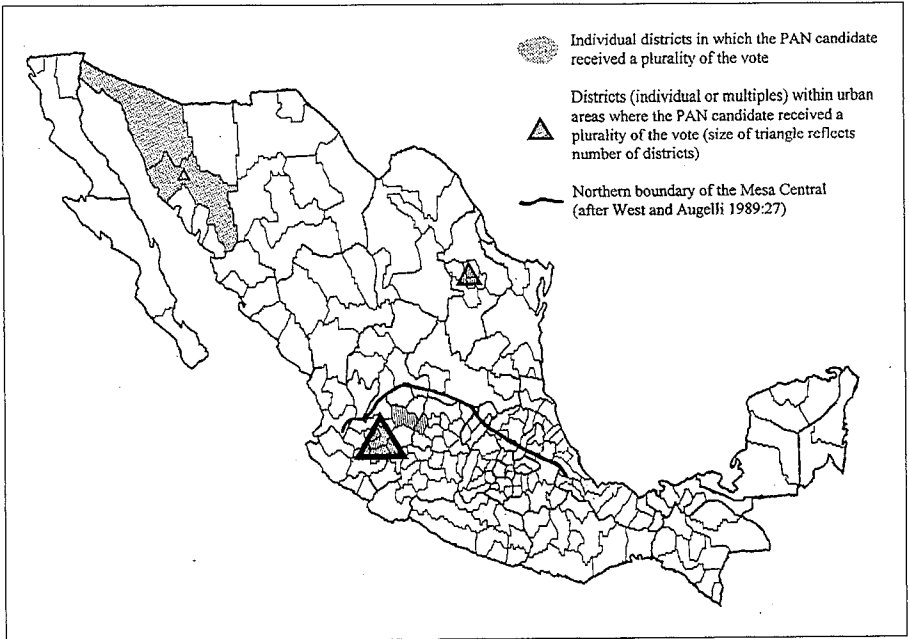


Figure 10. Districts in which PAN won in the 1994 presidential election.

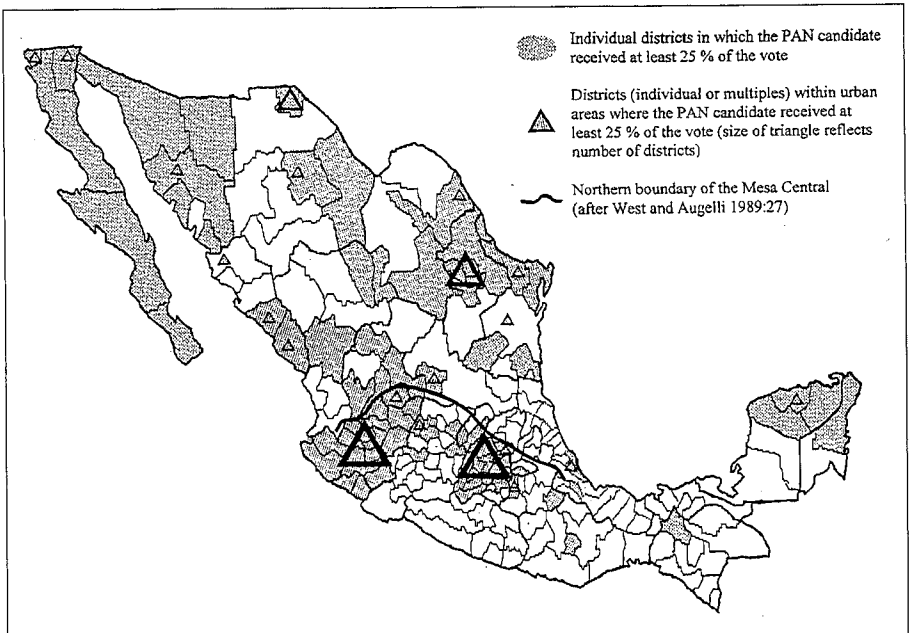


Figure 11. Districts in which PAN showed well in the 1994 presidential election.

for 3,893,449, or 42.22 percent, of the votes received by the PAN candidate. Together, the eleven northern states are home to only 2,829,778, or 30.69 percent, of the voters who cast ballots for the PAN candidate. Furthermore, the vast majority of the people who voted for PAN live in urban areas. Mexico City and Guadalajara, of course, account for most of these, but even throughout the north, wherever PAN won twenty-five percent or more of the vote, urban dwellers who work principally in industry or commerce were responsible. In sum, PAN is not the party of the north. If anything, it has its strength in the Bajío (Klesner 1994; Pacheco Méndez 1994) and in urban areas (Márquez 1987). Only seven of the election districts that backed PAN with at least twenty-five percent of its votes in the northern states are truly rural.

All in all, common perceptions about the political orientation of northerners, as exemplified by statements made by Riding, Casagrande, and Oster are erroneous. Following in the footsteps of Madera, Villa, Calles, and Obregón (revolutionaries from the north who established the ruling party), most northerners continue to be PRI supporters, not unlike Mexicans everywhere (Rubin 1997: 244-253). Indeed, Ernesto Zedillo, the president elected in 1994, is from Baja California, and Luis Donaldo Colosio, who was the PRI presidential candidate until he was assassinated only a few months before the election, was from Sonora. Parenthetically, in the summer of 1998, the state of Chihuahua elected a PRI governor. In so doing, it reversed a recent trend toward supporting the PAN party and, contradicting popular perceptions, provided evidence in support of the argument proffered here.

What Constitutes Northern Mexico?

Debunking factors long held to be stereotypical of northern Mexico begs at least two very important questions concerning its regionalization. Is northern Mexico not distinct from southern, or other parts of, Mexico? If it is distinct, what makes it so?

The idea of northern Mexico not having special characteristics is troubling from a geographic point of view. Such a notion flies in the face of the long accepted idea that there are "many Mexicos" (Simpson 1941), and it is one that no

student of Latin America, especially a geographer, would accept. Northern Mexico does exist as a region, and it is one based on something more than cardinal direction. There exists, then, two possible approaches to answering the question concerning northern Mexico's composition. The first involves relativity rather than absoluteness; the second involves factors other than those scrutinized here.

Although a number of stereotypes concerning northern Mexico have been challenged in this paper, none have been rejected categorically. Much of the region is arid. Wheat is cultivated; flour tortillas are eaten. Most people do have light complexions. They also tend to live in adobe houses, which are located in grid-patterned towns, and many do vote for PAN political candidates. If northern Mexico is to be characterized in relative terms, then one would have to say things such as:

- The north has a greater proportion of arid to humid lands than does southern Mexico, but its overall environment is every bit as complex as that of the south.
- Wheat and corn are both cultivated in the north, but corn is overwhelmingly dominant, and wheat cultivation is scarce in the south where corn is the principal crop.
- Flour and corn tortillas are both consumed in northern Mexico, but flour tortillas are rarely consumed in the south where corn tortillas are the staple.
- Nearly all Mexicans are mestizos, but those in the north are racially more European than native, whereas those in the south are racially more native than European.
- Cultural differences between northern and southern Mexico are minimal, if existent at all, in a historical sense.
- The PAN political party may have slightly more support in the north than in the south, but its regional strength is actually in central Mexico, and the PRI party is overwhelmingly dominant in the north, just as it is nearly everywhere in the republic.

Previous stereotypes of northern Mexico misinform because they are gross oversimplifications. Their weakness lies in attempting to be absolute. In no small way, this is a function of the use of *a priori* or deductive criteria (Liverman and Cravey 1992: 40), as well as the number of factors involved, problems of factor significance, factor weighting, and factorial interaction (McDonald 1966). Relying on relative rather than absolute conditions may be a better approach for regional understanding. It is not unlike adopting the notion of a general region—a conceptualization in which an area is seen to be distinctive in its own right, defined more on qualitative than quantitative criteria, and appropriate for pedagogic purposes (Kostbade 1968).

The second alternative approach to regionalizing northern Mexico involves a set of factors not addressed, or even identified, in this article. Such factors were not dealt with earlier and will not be dealt with now for two reasons. First, this article was never intended to be a regional geography of northern Mexico; its purpose is to illustrate the repetition of fallacies regarding the region, and, accordingly to caution writers and readers, students and teachers. Second, there are no other factors that nearly every author agrees are characteristic of the region, or which have been popularized as regionally diagnostic. This is not to say that there are no factors that characterize northern Mexico, but only that there is neither widespread agreement as to what they are, nor have they gained popular recognition as have the factors discussed here. Stated another way, *accurate* stereotypes of northern Mexico do not exist, at least for now (see also Arreola 1996).

Much work remains to be done before this condition changes. Some research has been done on the regionalization of Mexico. Most of it, however, is devoid of maps and spatial analysis, and contributions by geographers are preciously few in number (see, for example, Van Young 1992). These facts alone say a great deal, and what they say is not encouraging.

Conclusions

Three inferences should be drawn from the evidence presented and discussed here. The first is that northern Mexico is not what many people think it is. In terms of its physical landscape and cultural history, including politics, it is both a complex and a misunderstood region. It is nowhere nearly as simple and as monolithic as many writers would have us believe.

The second inference to be drawn from these findings is that in making generalizations, writers often simplify things to the point of being misleading. As Daniel D. Arreola (1987: 37) argued, "[b]y generalizing large regional units . . . there is no need to know . . . nor comprehend . . . 'topography, climate, economy, and ethnic groups.' Whole traditions and environments are lumped into convenient . . . packages—a sort of fast-food regionalism." To be sure, there is always an element of intellectual license that has to be extended to, and exercised by, authors. This liberty, however, should never be abused. Some of the examples used here are the

most egregious. Others are not so outlandish, but they nevertheless illustrate that even good scholars can be less than accurate in their representations. The problem here is not so much with how authors are interpreted or understood by the readers. The problem is not even with what the authors actually mean. It is, instead, with what they say, literally. Writers need to exercise much more caution with their claims than they have in the past. Readers tend to believe them, and those who are educators pass information on to their students. As a result, geographic illiteracy is not rectified. Instead, it is perpetuated and actually made worse.

The third inference to be drawn from this assessment is that readers, especially those who are educators, need to be extremely cautious, perhaps even exercising skepticism about what they see in print. Authors, even the most prudent and guarded ones, can be wrong. They can also be correct, but misunderstood. Bright readers and good teachers can use this caution/skepticism to their intellectual and pedagogical advantage. Rather than simply accepting as fact anything on a printed page, they can use such (mis)information as a springboard for exploring topics further. Given that popular perceptions of northern Mexico are far less accurate than previously thought, one can only conclude that the same holds true for other regions.

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