

# Musings on the Southwest as a region, by a southwestern Southwesterner

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Defining the Southwest is intuitively simple but practically difficult. Inevitably, regional disagreements about inclusion or exclusion erupt, cultural divergences complicate, physiographic boundaries interfere, and political boundaries deceive. Generous definitions include either all of New Mexico or only that portion west of its eastern plains, the *Llano Estacado*. How much, if any, of California, Colorado, Nevada, Texas, and Utah to include gives rise to xenophobic sentiments. Chihuahua and Sonora, Mexico have strong affinities for the *American* Southwest, culturally, economically, and physiographically, but just where to draw the southern line is an elusive problem. Arizona alone lies unequivocally and uncontestedly within the Southwest. The definition is complicated by a century or so of shameless promotion of a region championed by hucksters, developers, and investors eager to capitalize on regional images they connived to create. But at the same time, it is a region that most Americans would view as our most exotic and, perhaps, romantic.

For purposes of this essay, I will adopt the definition offered and argued by James W. Byrkit in his profound and lengthy 1992 essay *The Southwest Defined*, published in the *Journal of the Southwest*. Byrkit, after a sustained and nuanced discussion, proposed the boundaries as the area encompassed by 29° to 39° Latitude North and 104° to 117° Longitude West. It stretches from the east slope of the mountains of eastern New Mexico to slightly beyond the western edge of the deserts of Southern California. It includes portions of Mexico's northern Baja California, Chihuahua, and Sonora to the northern limits of the Mojave Desert, much of southern Nevada, the Slickrock Country of Utah, and a representative slice of southern Colorado. This definition is satisfying to many scholars of the Southwest, for it includes virtually all the cultures, contemporary and pre-Columbian, that comprise the more popular conception of the Southwest and the most notable physiographic features, the most prominent landmarks, those basic definitions of place, and the loci of native peoples who provide the history and content to Southwestern heritage, are included. Even Texans are afforded their appropriate inclusion—El Paso, historically prominent, is retained, and the Guadalupe Mountains sneak through the eastern boundary. The California inclusion does justice to the Salton Sink and Death Valley, the grandest, hottest, and lowest of drylands. The 39° North and 104° West coordinates extend well into Colorado. For better for worse, Las Vegas, Nevada is in.

Byrkit's definition is marginally arbitrary—the limits could be adjusted a few global minutes in any direction without doing violence to the idea of the Southwest. I would advocate setting the western limit at 116.5° West Longitude rather than at 117°, since 117° just barely excludes San Diego and Tijuana and includes too much of Southern California's urban mass for my liking. But his boundaries seem to satisfy the intuitions of those who study the region in detail. For example, the Anza-Borrego Desert is justifiably Southwestern and the Mojave National Preserve clearly belongs to the Southwest, but the Great Basin and the Sierra Nevada do not. And Byrkit's Southwest offers an enormity of topics to the scholar and the essayists, an unending gradient of objects of fascination and complexity, in a background of traditional southwestern imagery. The Southwest is home to the most celebrated geological phenomena, the most prototypical deserts, the greatest concentration of present indigenous peoples of any region, and offers unmatched heat, drought, and biological diversity. Included, quite logically, are the entirety of the north-south reach of the Río Grande with its gathering of Puebloan peoples and its rift-related lavas and mountain ranges, including the San Luis Basin in Colorado, the river's headwaters. The Grand Canyon and its associated Colorado Plateau tableau of geological spectacles and revelations lie inside; the massive San Juan and Sangre de Cristo ranges of southwest Colorado are in as well, as are much of the four great American Deserts: the Chihuahuan, Great Basin, Mojave, and Sonoran. The boundaries enclose the most spectacular American archaeological sites. By the inclusion of Sonora and Chihuahua north of the 29<sup>th</sup> parallel, the northern Sierra Madre Occidental, the land of the Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries and missions, and the northern Gulf of California as well as a chunk of adjacent Baja California's endemic flora join the mix. The southern limit also brings in that most enigmatic of indigenous peoples, the Seri or Comcáac and the volcanic landscape of the Sierra Pinacate.

The Southwest is also the quintessential land of aridity in North America, a region of little water and great imperial thirst. Its two rivers of substance, the Colorado and Grande, though minor on an absolute scale, are themselves and their waters the subject of countless lawsuits and treatises on water use, misuse, supply, lack of supply, allocation and over allocation, and interstate and international intrigue. The cross-border controversies about water allocations/deliveries from these rivers to Mexico and to upstream vs. downstream users and consumers occupy entire volumes. When we include the headwaters and principal tributaries of the Río Yaqui, northwestern Mexico's most important source of surface water, the realm of scholarship takes on a more international aspect. Conflicts related to dominion over water from the Yaqui form the most important dynamic in Sonoran history. Ojinaga, Chihuahua, at the mouth of the Río Conchos, Mexico's contribution to the Río Grande (Río Bravo in Mexico) adds to the water equation.

Together, Arizona, New Mexico, northern Sonora, and southern Utah contain the greatest variety of extant indigenous cultures in North America. The list of language families alone is impressive—Algonquin, Athabaskan, Indo-European, Keres, Tewa, Tiwa, Uto-Aztecan, and Yuman, plus two linguistic

isolates— Seri and Zuni.<sup>1</sup> The largest indigenous nation of the region—the Diné or Navajo—also possesses the largest reservation in the United States, with territory in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah and the largest indigenous population north of central Mexico. The youngest indigenous landholding—the Yaqui land in Arizona—occupies a tiny area, but Yaquis bring with them a deep tradition of resistance to conquest and cultural perseverance in the midst of prolonged persecution. Pueblo Indians and their forebears, the Anasazi or Ancestral Puebloans, had trading and cultural ties southwest through the Hohokam into southern Arizona and with peoples of the Mogollon Culture deep into Chihuahua. Superimposing their overlapping regions of influence yields a map surprisingly congruent with the heart of the Southwest.

The proliferation of pre-Columbian peoples is a setting for contrasting treatment of natives by Europeans. Anglo settlers, yeomen pushing westward from the East Coast, adopted a policy of expelling or eliminating indigenous peoples, while Spaniards, arriving from the Veracruz on the Gulf Coast were more inclined to convert and exploit them. Spaniards, always hopeful of higher ranking and disdainful of labor, were inclined to mingle with Indians, both of them subjects of the King. Anglos were more inclined to plow and ranch using their own hands, hoping to escape the reach of any king.

The results of these contrasting approaches to conquest are still present. Ironically, that same pre-Columbian Southwest already contained the most intensive agriculture north of Mexico. When Europeans arrived, irrigation systems had been engineered, laid out, and administered by agricultural communities already ancient in their tenure of the land.

The Southwest dominates the list of celebrated archaeological sites within the U. S. The bulk of pre-Columbian sites preserved in the National Park System are located in the region. Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon are unrivaled for size and sophistication, while Paquimé in Chihuahua links to the south with central Mexico and to the north with Pueblo cultures. The Hohokam tradition of southern Arizona probably represents the earliest agriculture in the United States, extending back at least 4,000 years. The aridity of the region, especially in habitats where desert varnish forms, preserves the endemic and sophisticated pre-Columbian rock art widespread in the Southwest.

The Southwest dominates the national park system. National parks--Arches, Black Canyon of the Gunnison, Bryce Canyon, Carlsbad Caverns, Canyonlands, Capital Reef, Death Valley, Grand Canyon, Great Basin, Great Sand Dunes, Guadalupe Mountains, Joshua Tree, Mesa Verde, Petrified Forest, Saguaro, and Zion—are as varied as the terrain. Southwesterners *expect* to live in proximity to such natural monuments.

In non-indigenous circles, especially those with a high proportion of Easterners, exotic peoples symbolize the Southwest. To enhance investments, commercial interests used photographic portrayals of

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<sup>1</sup> Pre-Columbian California had a far greater linguistic diversity and a population of at least 200,000.

Native American cultures and traditions—especially dances---and what outsiders consider desirable artifacts for acquisition, especially, arts and crafts—Pueblo pottery, Navajo rugs, Apache and Papago (O’odham) baskets, Hopi, Navajo, and Zuni silver, and ceremonial dolls. Though promoted initially by railroads and later by chambers of commerce and bureaus of tourism, when marketed by Indians with long hair wearing quaint clothing, they prove irresistible to tourists. Any number of popular symbols project what their promoters hope will build a lasting a Southwest Image: the saguaro cactus; the Grand Canyon; a pueblo pot; a stylized sun; Monument Valley; Taos Pueblo, a Navajo blanket, strings of dried chiles, Yaqui deer dancers; a mountain’s silhouette. With the advent of passenger railroads and commercial promoters of the Southwest, traditional ceremonies and dances proved irresistible to outsiders, who have now succumbed to the lure of Indian casinos as well. More than any other region, the Southwest possesses a marketable gradient of endemic images. Saguaros grow only in the Sonoran Desert region; there is only one Grand Canyon; only one Slickrock Country, only one collection of pre-Columbian pueblos, only one people producing Kachina dolls. Nowhere else in the United States must diners express a preference for red or green chile.

Scholars and observers reap the harvest of the abundances of the Southwest as new research tools and findings emerge. After only a half-century of the understanding of plate tectonics comes an explosion of explanations of the previously incomprehensible. Volcanism has been rationalized and tied to migrations and famines. From satellite photos and advances in dating of rock samples come the discovery of colossal calderas of the Jémez, the Black Range of New Mexico and the Chiricahua Mountains in Arizona. From precise measurements of tectonic movement and intimate study of both terrestrial and oceanic deposits, the deep history of the upper Gulf of California and its connection to the San Andreas Fault via the Salton Sea and the origin of the Grand Canyon are emerging. Basin and Range extension created human habitats and immense pools of water. Tree ring research originated in the Southwest, but applies to large parts of the world. The rings from Ponderosa pines, Douglas firs, and bristlecone pines, dwarf trees of the highest elevations, tell of past climates and clarify the role of regional droughts in human conflicts and migrations and suggest that they will continue to emerge. Linguists’ ability to date the evolution of languages from a common proto-language also sheds light on cultural history, migration, and conflict.

The major cities, Albuquerque, El Paso, Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Tucson all demonstrate the explosive growth in the Sun Belt during the last five decades, but each in its own fashion, each with the Southwest as an underlying theme. Albuquerque and Tucson rose as sites of native peoples and emerging conflicts with settlers. El Paso grew over four centuries as a vital cog in north-south transportation, an international trade link. Phoenix is by far the largest city of the Southwest, and, despite its name, it is hardly a site of rebirth. It has expanded in one century from nearly nothing, promoted alternately as a haven from punishing winters or as an agrarian desert enclave with ample water resources (or so it proclaimed),

ballooning in size only after the general availability of air conditioning. Las Vegas, hardly an ancient site and equally dependent on refrigeration, shed its Mormon origins and derived its glitz and popularity not merely from vice and easy self-indulgence, but from the sunshine and aridity of, yes, the Southwest. The so-called Imperial Valley, much of it below sea level and stifflingly hot, was originally the Colorado Desert, a name dirt peddler from the east feared would dampen the prospects for land sales, and hence the elegant but misleading revised label. Finally, it is difficult to imagine a city like Santa Fe existing in any other region, now self-represented on a tenuous premise and prospering on cultural fraud, exhibiting itself as the symbol of the exotic Southwest while clinging desperately to a history based on violence and imperial conquest.

Each of the seven states involved is different from the others in a degree ranging from subtle to palpable. New Mexico has a Hispanic tradition wholly different from that of its neighbors. Its food is distinctive, as are its evident cultural idiosyncrasies, the pervasive remnants of a somewhat isolated Hispanic heritage. Arizona's culture lies closer to traditional Anglo, a reflection of Eastern-financed extraction industries, with pockets of indigenous persistence removed from the urban centers and contrasting with the settled ways of the more eastern Pueblo cultures. Older New Mexico towns feature a Catholic church fronting a plaza, often faced with city hall. Towns elsewhere usually have a variety of churches of a host of denominations, but no plaza, and, probably, a randomly located city hall. Even Tucson, with Hispanic roots, has no central plaza. Compared with Las Cruces, an emerging vibrant college city, El Paso seems but an adjunct to sprawling Ciudad Juárez. It is more a border city without political connections, a confusing and somewhat dreary entrepôt, rather than a metropolis representing the largest state of the contiguous forty-eight. To the east, beyond El Paso's influence, broad Texas confidence slowly overwhelms, and the Texans' cowboy ethos views New Mexico as a quaint outpost of *otherness*, a useful colony of Abilene, Amarillo, or even Dallas. To the west of Arizona, the few Californian towns and cities that exist--Needles, Blythe, El Centro, Indio--connect to Los Angeles, not to Phoenix. Utah's Southwest towns are heavily Mormon--uniformly so--with Mormon church(es) the dominant structures, the population uniformly white, and the bulk of inter-community relations politically and socially gravitating towards the north and Salt Lake City. The land, though, is everywhere tinged with Triassic Red, from Zion to Moab, from Panguitch to Kanab, which connects the landmass with the south and the Colorado Plateau—the essence of the Southwest.

During recent decades, suburbanization of the cities of the Southwest has diluted any remaining urban symbols of exotic Southwesternism and yielded a uniformity of appearance and, apparently, political ideology, that seem at odds with the particularity of the Southwest. Culturally, this invasion of Anglo-inspired urban blandness has diluted the sense of regionalism and the influence of indigenous and Hispanic cultures. Indians now represent less than 5% of Arizona's population, just fewer than 10% in New Mexico.

Yet, as the Southwest inevitably loses its cultural distinctiveness, the physical landmarks remain as deep symbols of place, as long as we cherish them and remind ourselves and our compatriots of their singular significance.

### **Recommended readings**

Byrkit, James 1992. "The Southwest defined." *Journal of the Southwest* 34: 257-387.

Coyle, Edwin 1941. *Desert country*. New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce

Lummis, Charles 1921. *Land of poco tiempo*. New York: Charles Scribner and Sons.

Nichols, John 1978. *The magic journey: a novel*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Wilder, Joseph C. and Karen Segar, editors 1990. "Inventing the Southwest." *Journal of the Southwest*, 383-606.