In *The Sociologist’s Position*, Pierre Bourdieu states that reality is the sum of its relations and that banishing the idea of its transparency is indispensable to the study of the social realm (Bourdieu, Chamboderon, and Passeron 1975:37–38). Preconceptions are barriers, and false constructions are unconscious and uncontrollable pre-constructions to the essence of sociological discourse. These preconceptions incite one to believe that facts should correspond with certain images arising from language, the primary instrument in the construction of the world. If not subjected to methodical criticism, they fall victim to our tendency to accept such pre-constructed ideas as facts of common language. This rigorous definition is useless, and possibly even deceptive, if the principal unifier has not been critiqued. For this reason, epistemological vigilance is needed to avoid the corruption of ideas stemming from these preconceptions.

Why have I begun in this manner? Because certain names and terms that have been applied and are still utilized in the study of the spatial-cultural reality of northern Mexico have yet to be subjected to epistemological critique. They are defined as preconceptions because they have yet to be assessed in terms of how their reality is perceived, an ontological view tied strongly to epistemology and the construction of
knowledge. My present objective is not to enter into a critique of the terminological and conceptual construction of concepts such as Arid America (Aridoamérica), Oasis America (Oasisamérica), Northwest (Noroeste), La Gran Chichimeca, and northern Mexico but to focus on elements that justify the need to carry out fundamental theoretical and epistemological reflections on the distinctive names these places have received within anthropological and historical discourse, especially archaeology.

The borders are understood and managed as the sum of interactions in equilibrium or dispute between terminological and conceptual spaces that relate to the physical territories between what is known today as the southwestern United States (the Southwest) and northern Mexico. Arid America, Oasis America, the Northwest, and La Gran Chichimeca are understood to be territories within these two bordering nations. As archaeologists, we move in an imaginary frontier that conforms to the imaginary borders produced by each of the names and terms used to designate the territories of this great region north of Mesoamerica and south of the United States. These are invented and artificial borders in terms of the profound border that encompasses the diverse real borders. They are also ethnocentric and neocolonial elements of the political and ideological environment. These borders, together with the imaginary ones, generate ambiguity and constrict the region—the archaeological northern Mexico located between Mesoamerica and the Southwest. Elements of these profound borders do not appear in the discourse of archaeology because it is generally a given that “archaeology should not be political or ideological but purely scientific.” This positivist vision prevails as an inherent and essential part of contemporary archaeology, a position that accepts preconceptions as spontaneous, revealed between the imaginary borders. The data and justification needed to sustain and develop these preconceptions academically and politically, economically and ideologically, can be found within archaeology’s own positivist discourse.

THE TERMINOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL CONTEXT OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION IN NORTHERN MEXICO

To approach the precontact period in ancient northern Mexico, it is necessary to understand the historiography of the terms and concepts that have been used in archaeological investigation. It is with this aim that I explore some general trends from the end of the nineteenth century to the present and examine some of the theoretical and methodological pressures, on the one hand, and ideologically political and institutional pressures, on the other. This task does not require a culture-historical division of Mesoamerica, the Southwest, and northern Mexico; that would be irrelevant. The challenge for future investigations is to understand the north not only from the Mesoamerican perspective but also from its own northern viewpoint, at the same time considering its own northern dynamics from a solid terminological and conceptual base.

The pre-Hispanic past of the great region known as northern Mexico and the southwestern United States is shared by both nations, now divided by a river. This
is the same region that bore past witness to a series of sociocultural processes by groups that existed prior to the arrival of the Europeans and the conquest. Cultural aspects were shared, and material evidence of relations and interactions between these groups has been substantiated along the breadth and length of the territory. Following the conquest, the northern frontier of New Spain was, for 300 years, a vast territory that proved difficult to conquer and colonize. In 1810 this part of northern Mexico became independent, and in 1848 the territories of Texas and New Mexico were lost and became part of the southern United States.

According to Beatriz Braniff (2001a), by the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, North American ethnologists and archaeologists had begun calling this region the Southwest, a term that initially centered exclusively on those areas inhabited by the ancestors of the Pueblo Indians (Zuni, Hopi, and others). Later, Alfred Kroeber (1928), faced with the existence of diverse sedentary and nomadic groups from areas beyond what was then termed the Southwest, expanded the concept of what is now called the Greater Southwest and extended the region southward to the Tropic of Cancer in Mexico. It is here that the term “Greater Southwest” becomes interesting because, according to Braniff (1997:74), as Kroeber’s particularist diffusionism indicates, our North American neighbors found “similar cultures north of present-day Mexico City . . . and territorially extended the term, calling it the ‘Greater Southwest.’ Following this, Paquimé and a large part of the region also came to form part of the ‘Southwest,’ even though we in Mexico consider it to lie within the northern part of Mexico.”

In 1943 the German ethnologist Paul Kirchhoff proposed and developed the term and concept “Mesoamerica” to describe the period of Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century. This work was driven by a need to classify the cultural traits distributed and shared among distinct cultures over a large area, or cultural super-area (Kirchhoff 1960). The introduction of the term “Mesoamerica” in the mid-twentieth century solved, to a degree, the cultural complexity of historic central and southern Mexico. Nevertheless, in this same article Kirchhoff used certain ethnocentric and schematic terms to characterize groups of “inferior” cultivators from North America in his discussion of the “basic unity of inferior cultivators within the hunter-gatherer culture of northern Mexico” (italics added; Braniff 2001a:1). These groups had, in the words of Kirchhoff (1960:2), a “culture not only superficially but basically similar” to that found in the “super-areas” of the Greater Southwest established by Kroeber, referred to by Kirchhoff as Arid North America. Following a series of linguistic discussions of these Mesoamerican groups by Kirchhoff (1960:6–7), an important issue arose from his study: not the definition or concept of Mesoamerica but the formulation of questions regarding what had taken place to the north of Mesoamerica. This adjoining territory was occupied by hunter-gatherers, the so-called inferior cultivator groups, whose greater mobility had generated insecurity in Mesoamerica through their invasions from the north.

Kirchhoff (1954) also tried to answer questions regarding events that had occurred to the north of Mesoamerica. Kirchhoff intended to repeat his ordering
model, this time focusing on the area located to the north of the Mesoamerican cultural super-area. He underscored the existence of two groups, hunter-gatherers and cultivators, noting that this region was not a single culture area. He proposed the terms Arid America for the former and Oasis America, tied to Mesoamerica, for the latter, abandoning the terms “Southwest” and “Greater Southwest.” Henceforth, he used these terms only in a geographical sense (Kirchhoff 1954:550). Distinguishing between hunter-gatherer and agricultural groups was not a simple thing for Kirchhoff because, as noted by Braniff (2001a:2), “neither were clearly nomadic, nor clearly sedentary,” a situation Kirchhoff recognized as a problem of classification. The view of the north originated from Mesoamerica, through the colored lenses of Oasis America and Arid America and also La Gran Chichimeca, a term I discuss later.

Charles Di Peso (1974) was the first to use the term “La Gran Chichimeca” in archaeological studies. He considered this territory to encompass all that had developed in the north in the area beyond Mesoamerica and north of the Tropic of Cancer to the 38° N parallel. This area is characterized by a generalized aridity, one of the most important characteristics of its natural environment. Within this great area were the Chichimeca groups, understood to be hunter-gatherers, barbarian agriculturalists, and civilized agriculturalists.

Braniff, drawing from Di Peso’s important work, has encouraged reflection on and an elaboration of the term “La Gran Chichimeca.” This has resulted in a large number of studies that have analyzed and interpreted the term using direct and indirect archaeological evidence and colonial sources. Braniff has brought the basic elements for understanding this large region within reach of students, at the same time questioning some of the aforementioned terminology, such as Southwest and northern Mexico, which she views as limited and subjective in scope (Braniff 2001a:2–3).² Braniff has proposed a return to terminology that combines an indigenous conception of the world (Chichimecatlali, land of the Chichimecas, also known as Teotlalpan Tlacochalco Mictlampa, northern lands and their inhabitants of northern origin) and Spanish thought (such as the conquered territory remaining in northern New Spain that was inhabited by northern indigenous people, not Mesoamericans), worlds of thought that clearly recognize a Gran Chichimeca (Braniff 2001a:4–5; 2001b:7). It is also recognized, however, that the center of New Spain was the same as Mesoamerica. As such, the term “La Gran Chichimeca” also possesses undeniable ethnocentric connotations and, in this sense, exists at the same level of terminological and conceptual elaboration as Mesoamerica, Oasis America, and Arid America.

FRONTIER IMAGERY: TERMINOLOGICAL AND CONTEXTUAL AMBIGUITY AND RESTRICTION OF THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF NORTHERN MEXICO

In 1990, I pointed out that the Mexican state of Sinaloa is not just a northern territory but also a Mesoamerican one (Mendiola Galván 1990). This situation had been recognized but not completely defined by the spatial-cultural thinking of the
1930s, when contacts and interactions between the cultures of the southwestern United States and Mesoamerica were being considered. I hesitate to ask about the limits of this interaction between the desert cultures and those of Mesoamerica and at what point this interaction disrupted the cultural ambiguity of historical and anthropological investigation of the archaeology of Sinaloa. This situation epitomizes at a regional level the phenomenon of “sandwich,” which can be presented schematically as “between and within Mesoamerica” or “between and within the southwestern United States and/or the Sonoran Desert.” In this case, a sandwich can be viewed as a “phenomenon that paralyzes Sinaloa in its anthropological investigation and therefore confines it to constant ambiguity and to an outdated history and archaeology” (Mendiola Galván 1990:2, 4, 9–10).

For years it has been thought that this same situation applied at a macro level to the archaeology of northern Mexico and its terminological and conceptual realm. This is complicated not only by the large size of the area, within which archaeological investigation has not been a constant (in contrast to the southwestern United States and Mesoamerica), but also by the high degree of theoretical and epistemological complexity implied by the terminological and conceptual analysis of the region. The ambiguity of these concepts in the archaeology of northern Mexico, with its imaginary borders of Oasis America and Arid America, should place it beyond negative connotations, a challenge for archaeological investigation. As noted by Carlos González Herrera (2003), absolute, airtight explanations, those lacking cracks or doubts, are riskier than ambiguity because they are part of observable behavior within the scientific field of archaeology. Ambiguity itself is not a desirable element, however. The terminological and conceptual restriction of northern Mexican archaeology can be likened to a force shield shaped by the Southwest and Mesoamerica, one constrained by archaeological investigations of the north without considering relations not just between the Southwest and Mesoamerica but also between the southern United States and central and southern Mexico. For this, greater investigation and reflection are required to recognize the existence of these imaginary and profound borders.

Braniff (2001c) has brought to the table a discussion of terms that preceded La Gran Chichimeca. In spite of the academic push to discard the terms “Southwest” and “northern Mexico,” “Oasis America” and “Arid America,” these terms continue to be used in archaeological and ethnohistorical investigations in northern Mexico. At the heart of this methodological critique and epistemological reflection are two lines of analysis and discussion that in principle agree with the idea of a historical dimension of space in archaeological investigation. First, one must recognize that the north is not a unified entity and has been defined more by what is absent than by its particularities (Hers and Soto 2001:38–39). Second, one must be aware of the influence of the concepts of Mesoamerica and the Southwest or Greater Southwest on archaeological interpretations of northern Mexico.

The first line of analysis and discussion relates to whether the general inertia of archaeological investigation in northern Mexico and Mesoamerica has prevented,
until now, the dismantling of the concept that northern Mexico is a unified area. The fact that northern Mexico represents more than half of the national territory and its spatial immensity encompasses great cultural and natural diversity should make it anything but a unit. Nevertheless, the north is so strongly considered a unit of central Mesoamerica that it is granted barely part of a room in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City. The north is also defined more for what it lacks than for its inherent elements. It is viewed as a “timeless Chichimec universe,” with little understanding of its non-agricultural heritage. Defined not only by its lack of Mesoamerican monumentality, the north is also a testament to the novo-Hispanic notion of the desert. This was the end of the world for the Jesuits in the seventeenth century, an eternal desert space that inhibited civilized life (Rozat 1992:30). For archaeological studies, the paradigm of the novo-Hispanic notion of the desert must be countered with a view that strips away the idea of the desert as an empty and wanting place and incorporates into its definition the concept of general aridity (Cordell 1984, cited by Mendiola Galván in press). The unity of this region is imaginary. It is the concept of Mesoamerica that permeates all interpretations of this region: its space, territory, culture, academic structure, and scientific tradition.

The second line of analysis, closely tied to the first, relates to an understanding of the conceptual preeminence of the U.S. Southwest (Greater Southwest) and Mesoamerica over northern Mexico, the latter restricted in its terms and concepts and, in this sense, open to future interpretation. To guide this analysis, I propose three lines of discussion:

1. Until now, Mesoamerica has been the usual point of departure for referring to, describing, analyzing, explaining, and conceptualizing northern Mexico, which has always been obscured by the former. This is what we might call “the Mesoamerican conscious and unconscious.” The archaeology of northern Mexico is what it is because it is consistently referred to, consciously or unconsciously, in terms of Mesoamerica. Consider two examples. A study of Mesoamerican influences at Paquimé is an example of the conscious approach, something real, true, and indisputable, whereas the study of a seasonal camp of hunter-gatherers in the desert is often discussed, unconsciously, in relation to the abundance and monumentality of Mesoamerica. These biases are largely a result of the fact that the vast majority of archaeologists working in the northern desert of Mexico were trained both academically and professionally in Mesoamerica. (This question relates to scientific tradition, specifically to archaeological tradition, as proposed by Vázquez León [1996:9].) A similar situation has influenced the perspective of archaeologists from the southwestern United States toward northern Mexico as a result of the fact that a voluminous body of archaeological data has been generated in the U.S. Southwest over decades of investigation, compared to northern Mexico, where far less work has been done.

2. We must consider how Kirchhoff’s idea of the “high cultures” of Mesoamerica and his notion of the “poverty” of archaeological contexts in northern Mexico, divided and fractured into Arid America and Oasis America, have contributed
3. We should also consider how the terminological and conceptual restriction that has characterized interpretations of northern Mexico is related to the historical, political, and ideological environment stemming from Mexico’s loss of New Mexico and Texas in 1848, when border tensions began. In this case, “scientific” vision translates as “neocolonial forms of civilizing classification” in academic planning, as expressed by González Herrera (see note 3). Something similar occurred as a result of the pressure Mesoamerica exerted on northern Mexico. As Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1990:223) has noted, “The only possible exit, arduous and difficult without a doubt, but the only one, is for Mexico to develop the historical will to formulate and undertake our own project of civilization.” It is this civilizing character of Mesoamerica, affirmed in the pure sense by Kirchhoff, that is understood in northern Mexico and managed as a homogeneous unit, subjected and manipulated in a uniform manner to this same process of civilization. Mesoamerica imposes itself in a certain sense as a neocolonial form in the classification of civilization. Braniff (2001b:9), in La Gran Chichimeca: El Lugar de las Rocas Secas, has applied the term “Northwest” as a reaction against the term “Southwest,” noting that the latter term is only 150 years old. This does not solve the problem of the ambiguity, narrowness, and emptiness of the terminology and concepts of northern Mexican archaeology, however. Instead, a deeper epistemological reflection is needed, one that abstains from a war between terms and concepts, as clearly the road does not lie there.

**FINAL COMMENTS**

Archaeological investigations in northern Mexico should be developed parallel to epistemological and ontological reflections that nurture an equilibrium between what is studied in Mesoamerica and in the southwestern United States. This should be done without integrating in the historiographical sense that which has occurred in specific archaeological regions and sites in northern Mexico. First, we need to recognize that a thorough investigation of most of this area is lacking. Today as never before, there is a growing and clear interest among national and international institutions in archaeological investigations of cultural origins and developments and in the interactions, transformations, and permanency of various groups. These synchronic and diachronic visions can interrelate well with other disciplines. Nevertheless, future studies must ensure that interpretations of northern Mexico as an object of historical analysis and discussion, together with its anthropology and especially its archaeology, are approached with epistemological vigilance. It is possible to banish the preconceptions and transparency of the sociocultural reality of the region and to eradicate the empty terminology and concepts that have prevented this remarkable area from being systematically studied. This could mark the end of imaginary borders and allow us to reach an equilibrium between existing and new knowledge.
NOTES

1. Generalized aridity refers to the types of climate, vegetation, and fauna and does not necessarily mean a sandy desert. Federico Mancera-Valencia (2002:17) indicated that aridity is scientifically defined in Mexico by the dry characteristics found in those climates and is understood to be both arid and semiarid.

2. Marie-Areti Hers and Dolores Soto (2001:39) noted that Beatriz Braniff “supports the accepted concept of the Gran Chichimeca . . . ahead of other, more central, concepts such as Kirchhoff’s Arid America and Oasis America.”

3. Noted by Maestro Carlos González Herrera in one of the preliminary versions of the project of investigation by Francisco Mendiola (October 11, 2003).

4. Linda Cordell (1984) identified aridity as the common denominator of various ecosystems that comprise La Gran Chichimeca.

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