

# The skewing of history in Mexico

## ABSTRACT

In this article, I consider the attempt by a group of activists in west Mexico to uncover the history of their town. Attention focuses on how group members understood the genre of history and why they believed that mastering the genre would help to revitalize their community. I also look at the difficulties faced by the group in living up to its own understandings of that genre and particularly in obtaining the right kinds of evidence to substantiate history. I show that the genre of history in this instance was skewed such that the town's history could only be known by persons in more central places, and I conclude by arguing that this linking of knowledge, place, and authority is typical of modern society. [*history, genre, knowledge, place, authority, Mexico, modernity*]

**“W**e’ve seen that history isn’t good business.” Federico Bárcena, an unassuming builder in west Mexico, had begun to lose faith in the power of history to help his hometown, Atacco, recover from years of decline. That had been his hope when he and I talked in Atacco for the first time in 1992. Federico, together with others from his group of volunteers, had begun to tape-record the talk of Atacco’s old people, keeping the tapes in a little library together with a few photocopied documents. By 1995, Federico had decided that their quest for Atacco’s history was not paying the expected dividends.

Federico’s faith in the power of history is held by many others in Mexico and beyond. The distinguished novelist Juan Rulfo, for example, born in a town near Atacco, declared that history is part of “what roots man to his land, it’s what makes man remain and have love for the place where he lives” (Rulfo 1986:15, my translation). Indeed, anthropologists are also used to making and citing claims such as “history is a way of making identity” (Friedlander 1975:837; see also Frye 1996:54). Another commonplace, both in anthropology departments and in Mexican towns, is that history is made by the victors and not by the vanquished (e.g., Klor de Alva 1992:xi). Anthropologists celebrate the struggle of subjects to tell their own history, but add, knowingly, that people often “create” history rather than reporting “what actually happened” (e.g., Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

In this article, I take a more careful look at the power of history, focusing on what was called “historia” (history) in west Mexico. History was, for Federico’s group and for others, a particular kind of knowledge. It was a kind of knowledge that was expected to bring authority to those who mastered it. By mastering history, Federico’s group hoped to restore some confidence and pride in Atacco’s residents. I show, however, that harnessing that power was not easy—group members could not simply “create” a history to make authority for themselves. They understood history as a genre that was to be mastered; they measured their attempts at history against the criteria of that genre and found it wanting. One must ask, then, what

authority is created in the knowing of history, but one must also ask who is able to know that history in the first place.

I argue that a focus on genre can enrich understanding of the power of history.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have often lumped narratives of collective pasts together under the rubric of “history,” “memory,” or “tradition” (e.g., Halbwachs 1980; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Shils 1981). Many have identified specific “versions” of these narratives and linked them to the interests of particular social groups (e.g., Gershoni and Jankowski 1986; Herzfeld 1982; Nugent and Alonso 1994; Verdery 1993). For example, Yael Zerubavel (1995) has linked the versions of Israeli historiography to the struggle of particular Zionist groups. This is a valuable approach, but I argue that the power of history is also written into the conventions of particular genres. Such conventions prescribe, for example, what sort of person has the authority to narrate in a particular genre. Israeli historians are people who narrate in a way that satisfies the criteria of the genre of history. This is critical not just because they can shape what gets told as history and, thus, further certain interests, but also because the authority to narrate is often linked to other kinds of authority. Zerubavel says little about the social status of Israeli historians, but I show that history in Atacco promised to give public standing to Federico’s group (see also Briggs 1988, 1992).

To have authority to narrate, one must be able to satisfy the canons of evidence of a particular genre. Arjun Appadurai has argued that the past is not an infinitely plastic resource. He insists that the past is everywhere debatable, but only within culture-specific “norms of debatability.” Those norms are often visible at moments of dispute. For example, Appadurai (1981) elicited the norms of debate about the past among three groups vying for control of worship in a south Indian temple. In this article, rather than analyze a dispute, I focus on the difficulties experienced by Federico’s group in its history project. I regard the norms of debatability as specific to genre—in this case, the genre of history—rather than merely culture specific. I also pay particular attention to the canons of evidence that are specific to each genre.<sup>2</sup> They are linked to authority in ways that Appadurai does not make explicit. Not everyone has access to the kinds of evidence that are stipulated within each genre; neither does everyone have the know-how to make something of that evidence. This limits the ability of people to “adapt to the expectations and canons of acceptability of other agents” and so to “make themselves as speakers examples of valued types of persons” (Hanks 1996:244).

The history sought by Federico’s group was a history of place, of the group’s town, Atacco. A vast scholarly literature on place has appeared in recent decades; one focus has been on the knowledge of place (Feld and Basso 1996; Malkki 1992; Slyomovics 1994). The knowledge of place comes in different forms: For example, I use Keith Basso’s (1996) careful description of the knowledge of place among Western Apache to set in relief the knowledge of history in Atacco.

What I emphasize is the special nature of place as an object of knowledge: Places can be objects both of which and in which something can be known. One implication is that something can be known of one place but not in that place. This can happen when the evidence for what is said of one place is lodged in other places, such as in distant archives, and when the resources to make something of that evidence are lodged elsewhere (see Trouillot 1995). Canons of evidence—and genre itself—are embedded in a “complex of associations among ideas of person, people, place, and history” (Thomas 2002:372). Hence, the title of this article—the genre of history can be skewed toward other people in other places.

I suggest that the genre of history in Atacco is closely related to what is often called “history” elsewhere (e.g., Blommaert 2004; Fabian 1990; Handler and Gable 1997). History has, indeed, become a “sign of the modern” and is linked to other modern ways in which some places and people are subordinated to others (Dirks 1990:25). Some of these ways—some of the most powerful—are epistemological (Mignolo 2000).

But I do not think, pace Benedict Anderson (1991) and others, that the genre of history was just created by the modern nation-state (see also Chakrabarty 1992). I argue that history has also been linked to towns and cities—it has been part of the modern urban tradition, at least in parts of Latin America (Kagan 2000; Rama 1984). There is more to history than nation-states.

### Atacco was the town

I first went to Atacco (usually pronounced *A-tau-ko*) in 1992 after living several months in the neighboring town of Tapalpa, just two miles from Atacco. Tapalpa was itself a small town of about 6,000 inhabitants, and Atacco had a population of around 2,500. Tapalpa was the seat of the municipal district, or county, in which Atacco was situated. The district was set in the Sierra de Tapalpa, a highland area south of Guadalajara in the state of Jalisco.

I had originally gone to Tapalpa as a recently graduated historian interested in writing a history of that town. Tapalpans suggested that I also talk to elderly residents of Atacco because, as people kept saying, Atacco was older than Tapalpa. Indeed, the one piece of history that most Tapalpans would volunteer was that Atacco used to be the *pueblo* (town) when Tapalpa was just an *hacienda* (estate). But, they would continue, people from Atacco began to work on that hacienda, building their shacks around its great house, which used to stand on the corner of what is now Tapalpa’s plaza. So it was that Tapalpa became the town, they would conclude, even though Atacco was older. Because I was writing Tapalpa’s history, however, I should pay a visit to Atacco. Perhaps its elderly residents might know something of relevance.



**Figure 1.** View of Atacco (2005) from ruined chapel across churchyard toward church in use, with bandstand on left and central block of houses in distance. Photo by T. Stack.

Atacco was otherwise described as the most backward place on earth. In Tapalpa, the people of Atacco were known as *indios*, meaning poor, stubborn, and ignorant, or even as *indiorantes*, a mocking amalgam of *indio* and *ignorante*. This view was picked up with remarkable speed by outsiders who came to stay or live in Tapalpa. I talked to a young teacher from Guadalajara who was living in Tapalpa but teaching in the primary school in Atacco. She had originally thought of living with her husband in Atacco but had ruled it out, listing a series of complaints about the place, including alcoholic parents, children working in the fields during school hours, and the lack of family planning, hygiene, and toilets. These deficiencies she summed up in terms of “cultural backwardness.” She found conditions in Atacco particularly shocking given its closeness to Tapalpa and to the high-class tourist establishments in the vicinity.

Several months after I arrived in Tapalpa in 1992, a friend took me to visit his grandmother, Doña Julia, in Atacco. It was a short although bumpy ride along the two-mile dirt road to

Atacco—the tarmac road ends in Tapalpa—and there was little traffic other than donkeys and bicycles. A series of small, red-brick houses lined the entrance to Atacco, followed by a tree-lined and walled churchyard on the left-hand side. Across the dirt ground of the churchyard the small adobe church faced the ruins of a smaller chapel (see Figure 1). Opposite this were the primary school and a crumbling central block of larger adobe houses (see Figure 2). Doña Julia lived around the back of the primary school, next to a large stone-cased pool of water, in a small adobe house with an orchard. She talked about the Cristero rebels of the 1920s, in whom I was interested at the time, and about her work for the wealthy Manzano family, who had later moved from Atacco to Tapalpa, leaving their crumbling houses behind.

While I was in Atacco, I was also taken to visit Federico, who was said to be interested in history, in his house two blocks behind the churchyard. He explained that he had founded a civic group five years earlier. The group had undertaken various projects, including the restoration of the pool



**Figure 2.** View of Atacco (2005) from churchyard toward primary school and central block of houses (renovated since 1999). Photo by T. Stack.

by Doña Julia's house as well as literacy and hygiene campaigns. Another project was to cultivate among townspeople the knowledge of Atacco's history. That project was the focus of my first conversation with Federico. In fact, Federico began with what I had already heard in Tapalpa: Atacco used to be the town when Tapalpa was just an hacienda. Federico spoke more vividly than Tapalpans, however, of the Atacco that used to be the town. He had learned from his father, for example, that people used to come to Atacco from all over the region and that a royal highway used to pass through Atacco. "We've always had that idea," he insisted. The challenge, as I discuss below, was to turn that "idea" into proper history, worthy of a proper town.

Over the following years, my interest in Atacco went through various permutations, until I ended up writing, as an anthropologist, about what townspeople themselves made of history. I continued to make regular visits to Atacco, particularly from 1997 to 1999, and became friends with Federico and his brother Andrés and with others in his group and in

the town. I also learned more about Atacco itself and about the broader social fields or arenas within which its residents lived their lives. In particular, I found that Federico's group was looking to establish itself in a broader field that was not dominated by the state.

### Atacco in context

Beginning an article on the genre of history with a section on historical context might seem odd. Indeed, I draw on accounts given by the same people whose understanding of genre I analyze. I believe that, just as the genre of ethnography can yield truth about events during fieldwork, so the genre of history can yield truth about events in other times and places (see Appleby et al. 1994:241–270; Davis 1989:118; Handler and Gable 1997:223). This also applies to Federico's group's understanding of the genre, which had much in common with my own. I do not simply replicate group members' accounts, however, because I had more evidence than they

did and better access to archives, and I could also triangulate my findings with those of other historians and anthropologists. Neither do I contest their argument that Atacco was an important place in the past. This is partly because I lack the evidence to show that this was or was not the case, and partly because I believe that the group's actions can be explained largely in terms of 20th-century events.

At the beginning of the 20th century, most residents of Atacco were landless laborers because the community's lands had been lost during the previous century. There were, at least, no community lands when residents applied in 1921 for a land grant under the postrevolutionary agrarian reform. That is clear from the Agrarian Reform archive (Archivo de la Reforma Agraria 1921). Most of the information presented below, by contrast, I gleaned from conversations with members of Federico's group and other residents of Atacco and Tapalpa, crossed with a few academic sources. Many residents worked in the early 1900s on the lands of three families who lived in the center of Atacco: One of these was the Manzano family to whom Doña Julia referred. Most other families lived on the surrounding hillside in houses of timber and thatch. An *ejido* (agrarian collective) was established in Atacco in the 1920s as part of the agrarian reform pursued by postrevolutionary federal governments. More than half the families in Atacco became members of the *ejido*, receiving use rights to lands expropriated from the hacienda that was based in Tapalpa. The authorities in the town were the *ejido* committee, elected by the *ejidatarios* (*ejido* members) every three years, and the municipal delegate, who was appointed by the municipal government in Tapalpa but who was always, until 1998, an *ejidatario*.

The *ejido* did not prosper because *ejidatarios* lacked technical support and credit, often becoming indebted to the landowning families. Neither did the *ejido* have much influence on the municipal government in Tapalpa, which was controlled by the same landowning families. These included the Manzano family, who moved to Tapalpa by midcentury to participate in municipal politics. No significant investment occurred in Atacco until the 1970s, when a primary school was built, although it was placed, apparently without consultation, directly on top of Atacco's plaza (see Figure 1). Very few pupils went on to secondary school in Tapalpa, but a small secondary school was later built in the center of Atacco. An area of land was also bought and divided into lots by a former municipal president—the red-brick houses that lined the entrance road were built on these lots. Streets and public facilities, however, were still in poor condition in the 1990s, and several households lacked electricity and drainage.

The *ejido* was further weakened by a 1992 reform to the Mexican Constitution that permitted *ejidatarios* to sell their use rights to *ejido* land (see Cornelius and Myrhe 1998). Some *ejidatarios* enjoyed a moment of prosperity when they sold their rights, usually to people from Tapalpa or from Guadalajara. Most then joined the ranks of those working

outside Atacco because there was little work in Atacco and few opportunities for commerce, which was limited to a small brickworks, two or three food stands, and some tiny grocery stores. Few from Atacco had sufficient schooling to apply for clerical jobs in Tapalpa or elsewhere. Many worked for wealthier Tapalpan families who had developed businesses, including a sawmill and several hotels that catered to large numbers of weekenders from Guadalajara. Others worked for several larger companies that operated in the Sierra, both tourist operators such as the Tapalpa Country Club, owned by a wealthy Guadalaran family, and agroindustrial companies, mainly potato growers. Many young women also worked as domestic servants in Tapalpa or in Guadalajara. Men and women often migrated to Guadalajara, and some migrated to California, but there was still little evidence in the 1990s of returning dollars in Atacco (see Serrano 2002).

This period coincided with increasing competition in municipal politics, linked partly to competition in state and federal politics (see Zárate Hernández 1997). Several groups emerged to compete within and between political parties, whereas other groups appeared on the fringes of municipal politics. The latter included the human-rights group of which I was a member in Tapalpa, which grew out of the pastoral groups encouraged by the liberation-theology diocese of Ciudad Guzmán.

Federico's group had also emerged out of these pastoral groups, and its members were involved in catechism and in the organization of religious festivals, including the dances performed in those festivals. Federico and his brother Andrés had grown up in Ciudad Guzmán in the 1970s, although their parents were born in Atacco. Most group members were between 25 and 50 years old in 1997, but none had more than secondary-level schooling. Federico, like many in the group, had worked as an *albañil* (skilled worker in the construction and maintenance of buildings and streets). Several, including Federico, had also worked during the 1980s for a German-funded nongovernmental organization (NGO) that carried out projects in several communities of the Sierra, including Atacco. The group applied for and received the status of civil association in 1995, but it remained a largely informal group. Meetings were usually specific to a particular project and attended by whoever felt motivated.

The group sometimes came into conflict with other groups in Atacco. One of them, run by Jorge Vázquez, had sought since the 1980s to "reclaim" lands in the vicinity in the name of an "indigenous community of Atacco." Federico complained that Vázquez's group was wasting people's time and money: Atacco's "colonial land title" was no longer valid because it had been issued by a previous government. He also complained about the *ejido* and, in fact, few members of his group were *ejidatarios*. For example, Andrés reported that the group had received funding to install garden areas in the churchyard (see Figure 1), but the *ejido* had insisted the

group seek its permission for the work and the project lapsed. The group also criticized ejidatarios for their dependence on state handouts. The group received some funding for other projects, including some state funding, but group members still supplied the labor. Some of the group's projects, including a small bridge built on one of the entrance roads, were funded entirely by local contributions of material, money, and labor.

### Making *cultura* at home

Civic groups often emphasize their independence from the state, but they do so for different reasons and in different ways (Alvarez et al. 1998:16–17; Delcore 2003:65; Rubin 1998:159–160; Stack and Zárate 2000). Indeed, I found that individual group members also differed in this respect. Federico sometimes took the neoliberal view that people should have a personal stake in projects rather than relying on state handouts. Others cited the community tradition, familiar to Mesoamericanists, by which cargo holders sponsored festivals and people took part in communal labor. The group distanced itself from the state in more obvious ways, too. For example, it decided to name Atacco's streets after trees of the Sierra rather than after nationalist heroes, unlike every other Mexican town.

I focus here on one other way in which group members, particularly Federico's brother Andrés, pitched their activities. Andrés, who was 36 years old in 1997, worked as an albañil. On one occasion in 1998, he argued that the activities of the group were all about *cultura* (culture) rather than about *política* (politics). Andrés was proud of his participation over several years in two or three political parties, but those years of hard work had borne few fruits. Andrés and others had often been sidelined because they were not members of the ejido. They also found that, once elected to public office, individuals pursued their own agendas and interests or contented themselves with the salary and other pickings of office. This was what Andrés appeared to mean by "política"; by contrast, "cultura" was the far-sighted pursuit of the public good. In branding Federico's group's projects "cultura," Andrés drew attention to the group's lofty motives. Members denied ambitions of financial rewards or political office; there were no strings, such as votes, attached to their projects; they chose projects of obvious benefit to the community, such as the sponsoring of festivals; they also chose projects of enduring significance, such as the building of a bandstand in the churchyard.

This was no localist rejection of the nation-state. The group played a part in organizing nationalist events such as the Independence Day celebrations and the festival of the Virgen de Guadalupe. It was also keen to continue to make demands on the nation-state, pushing for better schooling in Atacco, for example. Moreover, the state itself had a claim on the value of cultura, having undertaken decades of "cul-

tural missions" to emancipate Mexico's rural masses living in far-flung parts of its national territory. Federico's group shared the concern of the Guadalajara teacher about hygiene, alcoholism, and school attendance (although Andrés, with nine children by 2001, was less impressed by family planning). Group members taught basic literacy and the secondary-level curriculum through the National Institute for Adult Education program and installed a small library, mainly with books donated by the Tapalpa municipal library. Writing was particularly closely linked to the value of cultura.

But Andrés did not see himself as receiving cultura from the state—he felt that there was already some cultura in Atacco. Indeed, he used cultura as a sign that Atacco was no mere rural locality on the fringes of a nation but a proper town in which cultura was at home. By the same token, the group members were no mere rural denizens awaiting emancipation at the hands of the state but good citizens of a proper town.<sup>3</sup> Cultura was one of several criteria—including population, size, and services—by which people distinguished pueblos (towns) from ranchos (hamlets or villages; Stack 2004). When members of the group first petitioned for a rise in Atacco's civic status from municipal agency to municipal delegation in 1998, they were told that no one in Atacco could perform the civic duties. The Tapalpa municipal secretary was said to have complained that the people of Atacco lacked sufficient cultura to govern themselves. Not surprisingly, Federico's group was keen to make Atacco look more like a proper town. Key in this regard was an attempt to turn the churchyard into a civic plaza, replacing the plaza on which the primary school had been built. This explains the group's role in the building of a bandstand and the attempt to create garden areas in the churchyard (see Figures 1 and 2).

Andrés felt that cultura gave the group room for maneuver beyond the política of the state. I have said that the group was still able to make demands through política and that it was also open to collaborating with government agencies as well as nongovernment agencies. But it wanted to do so on its own terms. On the one hand, the group had worked reasonably well with a Tapalpa-based ecological NGO in restoring the pool in Atacco's center. On the other hand, Andrés told me in 1997, federal government workers had come to Atacco nine years earlier, drawn by reports of poverty and drunkenness. He proposed that the workers live among and get to know the people of Atacco, but he said that they never returned to the town.

How successful was the group's attempt to make cultura at home in Atacco? Not everyone felt that the group itself displayed cultura. Some criticized it for being too political, particularly for opposing the ejido and for supporting rival parties. The work of the group seemed to count for something, however: One member in his twenties, Beto, was elected municipal delegate in 1998, with Federico's brother Andrés as his deputy. This was the first time that a non-ejidatario had

been elected.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the municipal government raised the town in 1998 to the status of municipal delegation, despite the misgivings of the municipal secretary. This was followed by other hints that the people of Atacco, or at least a few of them, were no longer considered entirely bereft of cultura. Federico was appointed to the Municipal Electoral Commission in 2000, a position of some responsibility. His wife, Juana, was subsequently appointed councilor of the municipal government, and Federico himself was appointed civil registrar of the municipality in 2000.

### Genealogies of cultura

I found this notion of “cultura” quite familiar. It has a long and complex genealogy that stretches far beyond Latin America—and of course one branch leads to the “culture” of anthropology (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). I note below that it resonates with other notions of “culture” as far away as Siberia.

To begin closer to Atacco, “cultura” is obviously related to the concept of “civic culture” in Guadalajara, which is “visually evident in the architecture, urban design, art, and the places of worship and learning as to form the major and stereotypical impression of the city’s high-brow ‘culture’ . . . [and] is founded on classically conservative ideas about paternalistic good government, reformism, and church and state participation in good works that serve and educate the masses” (Walton 1984:89). Given the influence of Guadalajara on the Sierra during the 20th century, it is not surprising that Andrés was similarly concerned with civic architecture, the church, and good works. Others also linked cultura to good government: Don Lupe Nava, an elderly resident of Tapalpa, was often said to have cultura, and many also remembered him as the most public-spirited municipal president. José Eduardo Zárate Hernández (1997:181) hints at the quality, too, when he writes of the “supposed refinement” of townspeople in the neighboring Llano Grande region in 1991–92.

Beyond west Mexico, Robert Redfield explained in similar terms the authority of Don Eustaquio Ceme in Chan Kom, Yucatán, in 1948. Don Eus was one of “the few people who think about the condition of their community, those who look beyond their private problems to those of the entire village” (Redfield 1950:171). Redfield clearly admired Don Eus for the quality of “civilization” that moved him to choose progress for his peers. Indeed, whether Redfield’s account is more revealing of Don Eus’s values or of his own is hard to tell (Castañeda 1996:35–65). Judith Friedlander was less inclined to take cultura for granted in her study of Hueyapan in central Mexico in 1969–70. She focused on the way in which cultura was ethnicized in Hueyapan, suggesting that to be indio in Hueyapan was simply to lack cultura (Friedlander 1975:74, 80–81). I have focused on the quality itself rather than on how it is ethnicized (or gendered), but, as I

note above, the people of Atacco were sometimes dismissed as indiorantes (see also Stack 2004:56, 62).

Some of these notions hark back to the colonial period. Angel Rama (1984:25) has written of the *letrados* (lit. lettered persons) who formed a kind of priestly caste of distinguished administrators in the Spanish colonies. This lettered caste governed from the city over the countryside—Rama describes them as living in the “lettered city” (1984:32). Indeed, Richard L. Kagan (2000:135) has argued that Creole *letrados*, in particular, usually regarded their town or city as their *patria* (fatherland), and he links this allegiance to the tradition of municipal self-governance. Only later did Creoles begin to form alliances with their counterparts in other towns, seeking common cause against the native Spaniards favored by 18th-century Bourbon monarchs (Pagden 1987:92–93). *Letrados*, however, were not just found in large cities. Kagan (2000:28–29) has argued that Crown and missionaries strove to resettle the entire population of Rama’s “countryside” into towns, small and large. Scholars have studied the vast corpus of documents produced by the lettered residents of those towns (Abercrombie 1998:129–314; Hanks 1987; Lockhart 1968:68–76, 1992:326–418; Miller 1991). As I show below, these documents included histories of one kind or another.

States tried, in a sense, to nationalize the lettered city. They did so, first, by creating not only a national bureaucracy but also a distinctively national branch of Creole learning (Anderson 1991:47–65; Pagden 1987:87–88). They also had to do business with, and if possible subordinate, the scribes, or secretaries, of provincial towns, who often developed a pivotal role in government (Lomnitz-Adler 1992:24–25; Mallon 1995:74, 285–286; Rus 1994). States saw themselves, too, as bearers of cultura. Mass schooling was the dream of 19th-century liberals, and, as noted, the 20th-century Mexican state undertook “cultural missions” into remote rural areas (Lainé 1992; Monroy 1956). Friedlander observed that, as a result, “[from] Christ to Zapata . . . the villagers [of Hueyapan] have been taught to feel indebted to outsiders for almost every ‘improvement’ they have acquired throughout their history, be it religion, land or what is referred to in general as ‘culture’ ” (1975:158).

I argue, however, that the lettered city was never fully nationalized. The fate of the *letrados* has been more complex. Scholars have written of indigenous literati, such as those linked to the Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students of the Isthmus (COCEI) in Juchitán (Rubin 1998:159–160). Luis González y González (1986b) includes the small-town chronicler among those moved by *matriotismo* (love for the local “motherland”), which Roger Bartra (2002:116) has linked to the new conservatism in Mexico. Many in 20th-century Atacco did turn to the Mexican state and to its literate ambassadors, from agrarian officials to schoolteachers. I suggest that Federico’s group, in reacting against this trend, reclaimed an older tradition of urban citizenship that was never entirely subsumed by national citizenship (Stack



2003:202). Group members saw their town as having its place not just in the nation but in a (transnational) world of towns and cities. This gave them some distance from a state with less and less to offer those on the margins (Lomnitz 2001:78).

Again, this scenario is not exclusive to Latin America. To give just one example, Alex King (2004) notes that people on the Siberian peninsula of Kamchatka spoke of ethnic dances as being part of native culture, but also spoke of transcending the local in the pursuit of a universal Culture of art, music, and so on. He observes that both concepts were reflected in the work of the state "house of culture" in Kamchatka (King 2004:52–53). Of course, the notion of "culture" has developed in ways inflected by context: Cosmopolitan Culture in Kamchatka appears to have been linked more closely to the state than was the case in west Mexico. This may reflect the absence or near absence of an urban tradition in Siberia before the Soviet period.

### Knowing history, having cultura

I explain in this section the critical link between Federico's group's understanding of cultura and its understanding of the genre of history.

One usually thinks of place in spatial terms, but people always set places in time as well (Stack 2004; see also Basso 1996; Herzfeld 1997; Rumsey and Weiner 2001; Slyomovics 1994). In Atacco, some of the ways this occurred were kinesthetic, such as through the folkloric dances salvaged by the group (see also Abercrombie 1998; Connerton 1989). Others were narrative: For example, I was told several times that an eagle had once landed on a rock above Atacco, meaning that Mexico City was supposed to be situated there, but that the people of Atacco drove it away. I was also told of the murder of a couple of missionaries and their burial in Atacco's church, after which the town was cursed and fell into decline. As noted, people said, too, both in Atacco and in Tapalpa, that Atacco was once the town and Tapalpa just the hacienda. This simple formula was interpreted in several ways, however, and I focus here on what Andrés and others made of it (see also Stack 2004).

After their election as municipal delegate and deputy, Beto and Andrés summoned representatives of each barrio, many of them members of Federico's group, to a meeting to discuss their plans for the town. Beto gave as an example the need to maintain the pool that the group had restored, but he was interrupted by an older member of the group, Don Alfredo.

Beto: I was explaining this to the [municipal] president that here in Atacco, they say that, well, I don't know, but they say that Atacco means place where there is water, so all the tourists who come to Tapalpa, there's a Green Guide, I don't know if anyone has seen it, it names the town of Atacco as the place in which water is born, and says that it is the only place where there is a public pool

where they can swim, and they arrive seeing the pigsty, they leave laughing, when the tourist comes there is an economic boost for the town too.

Alfredo: I have always seen that this town is the oldest, to say it that way so that you understand me, the oldest of Tapalpa and of all these towns nearest here, it is the most founded town, but when we went there and made Tapalpa bigger and just abandoning this one, and our governments that have been are always leaving it behind, behind, behind, and always it remains in misery, it has no future when it is the furthest ahead of all.

B: So there are things here that are so important, that perhaps you will not have noticed them. There's one important thing, which is the public restrooms . . .

Don Alfredo's little speech was laced with irony: The residents of Atacco were to blame for the eclipse of their town by Tapalpa—his implication was clearly that the group must not make the same mistake. But Don Alfredo also seemed to take inspiration from his belief that Atacco had once been a place with civic status. Other group members shared his pride. On this occasion, Beto was keen to get back to the list of things to be done, but on other occasions, members made much of their belief that Atacco had been an important place.

Some group members, including Federico, felt that the genre of history could help to substantiate the claim that Atacco had not always been a place of misery. Don Alfredo's speech, however, was itself no more history than the narratives of eagles and of curses. History was something more specific: Knowing history was much harder than merely evoking a possible past.

This difficulty is illustrated by the following conversation: an attempt by Andrés to interview a man named Toni from a nearby village that was close to an area of grassy mounds known as Pueblo Viejo (lit. Old Town). Andrés and I approached Toni during a religious festival in Atacco in 1997. He was known as a drunk and asked for drink repeatedly during the conversation.

Andrés: What do you think of life in this little town?

Toni: That is Soyatlán de los Reyes [Atacco], of the real *agrарistas* [agrarian activists who became ejidatarios], isn't it?

A: Of the agrарistas?

T: Of the ejido, isn't it?

A: But is it just of the ejido or also of the rest? Because there are also people here that aren't of the ejido, that are separate from it.

T: But I'm also going to tell you that don't think I'm from the (inaudible). I was a worker of Federal Highways and Bridges . . .

[. . .]



A: Here is older than there [Pueblo Viejo]?

T: Of course it is.

A: But there are no remains here, and there are there.

T: Show them to me so you see.

A: Here I can't show you anything because we went once with the INAH [National Institute of Anthropology and History], who are in charge of patrimonies, then I said to them, look, that wall, I assure you that I can get people together and I make a thousand meters of that in a day. But not that of you people of Pueblo Viejo, because Pueblo Viejo is still older.

T: Look, I'll tell you what is true, just beyond where we live, they took out some, right? That is what you're saying, right? We took out some figures as big as this. That's what you mean, right?

A: What is there? Is it a legend or a history or something? What is there of truth in that?

T: It was when the world fell, came to an end, right? If you want, let's go to find some.

A: Did you parents tell you that? Or have you learned it from life? ...

[...]

A: No, ask me about here, I'm going to tell you everything, am I not? But I asked you about there, Pueblo Viejo, where you were born and lived, it's your life, your history.

T: I was a worker in Guadalajara.

A: Let's see if we can make a light history of Pueblo Viejo.

T: Well, if you want us to do it, we can do it. No, I'm not disinterested in it either ...

Note that Andrés referred to the "remains" in and around Atacco. He did not seem too impressed by the "figures" that Toni mentioned, although the group had collected several clay figures found buried around Atacco and had displayed them in the library. His attention focused, instead, on the mounds of Pueblo Viejo, which were said to be ancient. He contrasted these mounds with the ruins of the chapel opposite Atacco's church, which the group had wanted to demolish to expand the civic plaza. Andrés had argued that the chapel's simple adobe construction was not worth preserving, but INAH had refused to give permission for its demolition. On other occasions, Andrés, like Federico, mentioned the remains of the royal highway that had passed through Atacco, which he seemed to consider a better index than the chapel of the civic status of the place.

Andrés was also asking for a verbal account of the area's past. The group had already interviewed some elderly people on this subject and Federico, Andrés, and I had carried out two interviews together. Federico, however, complained

in 1994 that the elderly people knew only *fábulas* (fables); Andrés asked whether Toni's account was *leyenda* (legend), a similar term. Federico and Andrés seem to have been looking for something more authoritative. Toni, drunk and indigent, was hardly a worthy source. In any case, Andrés seemed little interested in accounts that did not portray an urban Atacco. He did not respond, for example, to Toni's image of the world coming to an end. Neither was he impressed, on other occasions, by stories of an Atacco being cursed or people chasing eagles away.

Andrés did not refer in this conversation to written documents, but the group had collected some documents in the library and often asked about documents in other libraries. In a sense, towns were expected to leave a paper trail across time and space. The paper trail was another index, just as the royal highway, of Atacco's civic status. But not everyone was in a position to follow the paper trail, as discussed below.

Critically, Andrés was keen that the group should make a history out of such traces. Note that Andrés began with the remains of a civic past and then proposed that they should "make a light history." History was composed, then, of two tiers: a tier of traces and one of histories made of those traces. Federico lamented in 1994 that the group "did not have sufficient bases" to make a proper history, although he added that members had written some "brief essays."

Andrés was eager that the group do better, partly because he feared what others might make of Atacco's history. He shared this concern with others in Atacco. I found, for example, that Vázquez's group had complained in a letter to the National Archive in 1995 that "persons alien to our community have for X motive changed our history in a way that far from helping us is marginalizing us" (Archivo General de la Nación 1995). I also heard Andrés agree with Vázquez's son that Atacco was hardly mentioned in the history that was shelved in Tapalpa's library, authored by Don Lupe (Nava López et al. 1985). Who might challenge Atacco's history and for what reason was not always clear: Vázquez's group left the "motive" open in its letter, and I heard that his group also suspected me of rewriting Atacco's history.<sup>5</sup> But both Vázquez's and Federico's groups anticipated some kind of challenge—hence, the need for "sufficient bases" to defend their history.

I argue that Andrés also wanted to make history because, like the bandstand and other projects, it could make Atacco look like a proper town—one in which cultura was at home. After distinguishing between culture and política in the conversation that I cited above, Andrés turned to talk about his interest in history. I argue that his understanding of history was linked intimately to his understanding of cultura and of towns. History was, to begin with, a record of cultura, evidence that cultura was no stranger to Atacco. The traces of history—pyramids, churches, and so on—were archetypal urban remains. They also showed that the townspeople's ancestors had been connected—through the royal

highway as well as the paper trail—to a wider world of towns and cities. I have noted elsewhere that people in the region usually gave the history of towns rather than villages. When I asked for the history of ranchos, people tried to answer the question, but they generally found little to say—few villagers had heard others talk of such history. Toni was from a rancho, for example, and seemed more comfortable telling his own life history than talking about the rancho. Towns, more obviously than ranchos, were places that had history: A town was, among other things, a place of which history could be known (Stack 2004).

A town should also be a place *in* which history could be known. History was itself considered a sign of cultura—to know history was to have cultura. It was something for which there was no immediate return; there was little talk of making money or political advantage out of history. History and cultura were also associated with writing, both of documents and of histories—hence, the “brief essays” of which Federico spoke. More broadly, to “make a history” was to exchange truth with others in the world of cultura, such as myself. Crucially, Andrés felt that the people of Atacco should not have to get their history secondhand from others. He was happy for others to take an interest in Atacco’s history, just as he might inquire into the history of other towns. Indeed, he played the part in the interview with Toni of an outsider asking about the history of Pueblo Viejo, although he sometimes linked the mounds of Pueblo Viejo to Atacco’s history. He was also happy to collaborate with others, such as myself, in producing Atacco’s history. But he did not want to play a supporting role—he wanted the group itself to produce a history that might pass in the world of cultura. In Hanks’s (1996:244) terms, history was one way in which group members could make themselves, as speakers, examples of enlightened citizens of towns and cities.

### Genealogies of history

I found Andrés’s understanding of history as familiar as his understanding of cultura. It was closely related to the history that I had learned at school and university in Britain, albeit through another long and complex genealogy. I compare it below to German “hometown history” and to the history written by a Zairian intellectual.

Andrés took history more seriously than most residents of Atacco, but he understood the genre in a similar way to others in the region. This understanding included the link between history and cultura. I have mentioned that Don Lupe in Tapalpa was held to have cultura and was remembered fondly as municipal president—he was an authority on Tapalpa’s history, too. In nearby Sayula, the historian Federico Munguía Cárdenas was also regarded as a person with cultura—and in his published history, he made much of the cultura displayed by former citizens of his town (e.g., Munguía Cárdenas 1998:216–227).

Tracking these notions with precision is difficult because ethnographers have been quicker to provide their own “historical context” than to consider their subjects’ understandings of the genre of history. For example, Zárate Hernández describes towns in the Llano Grande as having a “certain historical profundity” (1997:183), but he does not reflect on what that might entail. Similarly, Redfield (1950:1–21) and Friedlander (1975:53–70) both begin their ethnographies with histories based on what they were told by townspeople, but neither says much about their subjects’ understandings of that history. Florencia Mallon examines the history produced by a historian, Donna Rivera, of the town of Xochipualco, Puebla. She focuses, however, on the way in which Rivera placed her town within Mexican history, and she makes less of Rivera’s understanding of the genre and of its link to values such as cultura (Mallon 1995:276–285; see also Appelbaum 2003).

Some of these notions, like those pertaining to cultura, go back to the colonial period. Kagan (1995:88) has linked the Spanish genre of civic history to the 16th-century Comuneros movement that defended the privileges of Spanish towns and cities (see also Caro Baroja 1963). Elements of this genre found their way to the New World. For example, Hanks has argued that the Spanish genre of “history” provided “one way in which “[Maya elite in 16th-century Yucatán] locate themselves atop and at the end of a historical process, which reinforces their claims to being ‘truly from here,’ and to having the right to speak for the collectivity” (1987:685). This legalistic kind of “history” was related to the “notarial” kind of history produced by the conquistadors and missionaries (González Echeverría 1990:55–84). Kagan has noted that many of these histories focused on the New World cities, and he gives the example of the Augustinian chronicler Antonio de la Calancha, who apologized that “his ‘love’ for his *patria*, the city of La Plata or Sucre, had led him to devote more pages to its history than that of other New World towns” (2000:130).

States tried to nationalize the genre of history just as they did the value of cultura (Anderson 1991:194–199). Mass schooling included the teaching of national history, which was also tied to a rich pageant of nationalist festivals (Lomnitz 2001:155–157; Pérez Siller and Radkau García 1998). Many historians of towns have also been concerned, like Rivera, to set their town within national history (Mallon 1995; see also Little-Siebold 1998). I argue, however, that the history of towns was not simply absorbed by the history of nations. It has thrived in channels beyond those of the state, including conversation, manuscripts circulated privately, public talks, local publications, history workshops, tourism brochures, and Internet discussion threads and websites (e.g., Norkunas 1992; Paley 2001:29–37; Stack 2004). I have suggested elsewhere that Mexicans do not often link their talk of Mexican history with their talk of their town’s history, and I note that Tapalpans only rarely connected their talk about the revolutions in the Sierra with their talk about

the Mexican Revolution (Stack 2003:202; see also González y González 1986a). Andrés seldom referred to the importance of Atacco in Mexico, emphasizing, instead, its importance in the Sierra and in relation to Guadalajara and Colima.<sup>6</sup>

Again, this genealogy goes far beyond Latin America, although there are few ethnographies of the genre of history. John Eidson (2005:558) stresses in a recent article in this journal that “hometown history” in Germany was not just a provincial strain of national academic history, although he only traces it back to the 19th century. He also notes that it is “restricted in production to members of the educated bourgeoisie” who strive to link themselves into a wider world of scholarship (Eidson 2005:561). Jan Blommaert makes a similar point about a national history handwritten by the Zairian intellectual Tshibumba, entitled *Histoire du Zaïre*: Tshibumba orients his text “towards an imagined (or distant) genre of historiography” and presents himself, through his use of sources such as Belgian colonial history, as “someone who is part of large, systemic trajectories of information” (2004:18).<sup>7</sup> Blommaert also argues that Tshibumba’s attempt to produce history “establishes him as an intellectual” (2004:19), although he says little about the authority that Tshibumba obtains from this (see also Fabian 1996). All this is clearly resonant with the Atacco case, although the contexts are, of course, different. To begin with, the meeting of urban and national traditions has played out differently in Germany, Zaire, and Latin America. History-making was also clearly more competitive in Germany than in Zaire—or in Atacco, where someone like Andrés, with few if any bourgeois trappings, could aspire to produce history.

### Not good business

Blommaert argues that Tshibumba produced his history from “a place marked by inaccessible resources to accomplish this generic goal” (2004:20). Specifically, Tshibumba lacked the command of writing required to produce a history that would pass in the wider world (Blommaert 2004:9–11). I argue in this section that members of Federico’s group did not even get that far—they could not find the evidence on which to base a history of Atacco. Whereas Tshibumba’s history was still good enough to pass in the Katanga region, Federico’s group could not produce history even to their own satisfaction (Blommaert 2004:19).

Few if any architectural remains in Atacco made for historical evidence. The dusty churchyard, where kids propped up tombstones to play soccer, stood in contrast to Tapalpa’s paved, well-conserved plaza. Whereas Tapalpa’s old church was built of solid, permanent stone, Atacco’s church was built of all-too-ephemeral adobe and had wooden timbers (see Figure 1). It offered little in the way of civic status, past or present. Neither were there oral accounts that might help to convert the church into defensible history. What was sometimes said—that two missionaries had been killed and

buried under the floorboards—was neither reliable nor a source of civic pride. The group had found no written documents that might help make history of the church.

A similar fate was met by the attempt to extract history from the mounds of Pueblo Viejo. Linking those mounds to Atacco was hard because Pueblo Viejo was two or three miles away. In any case, there were few if any verbal accounts that might help to make history out of those mounds—Toni’s account was hardly helpful. Neither was there any reference to the mounds in the written documents that the group had read. The group sometimes called the mounds “yácatas,” alluding to the pyramids found in the neighboring state of Michoacán that were associated with the ancient Tarascan empire. Sustaining the comparison between grassy mounds and those magnificent excavated ruins, however, was not easy. The mounds provided just the glimmer of antiquity and no defensible history.

The group had recorded interviews with a few elderly people in Atacco. Few of those interviewed felt confident enough to say much when asked about history, perhaps because of their lack of schooling. Several, like Doña Julia, pointed to the central block of collapsing houses as remnants of the Atacco of their youth. The houses were in ruins but had clearly been more impressive than other houses in the town. Elderly people also described an Atacco that still had its plaza and that was visited on Sundays by families from Tapalpa (see Figure 2). That was a promising start. It was not clear to the group, however, that the Atacco so described was the one that used to be the town. Andrés, at least, argued in 1998 that this was not the case. The Atacco of the old people’s youth had been dominated by the wealthy families who had lived in the central block, whereas most other families had lived up the hillside in wooden shacks. The wealthy families were not usually considered native to Atacco—some said that they had come from elsewhere and pointed to their light skin color as evidence of this. They had shown little commitment to Atacco, abandoning it for Tapalpa around midcentury, leaving their houses to crumble away. Moreover, their relationship to the rest of the population had been that of wealthy, land-owning employers, much like the wealthy Tapalpan families for whom many of the group worked.

Group members had neither the time nor the money to travel and browse in archives, even if they could have gotten access. They found little imprint of the Atacco that was the town in the few archives to which they did have access, but they could only respond that they had always heard that Atacco had been the town. They remained optimistic that documents existed in other archives and libraries, and Federico often asked about the documents that I had found in other places. When I shared documents with them, group members made sure to photocopy them and keep the copies safe. Yet they found it difficult to make much of those documents, which never quite fit the bill as evidence of history.

One document recorded a legal dispute for which the indigenous community of Atacco was seeking 100 pesos. Andrés quipped that the people of that time were as broke as the people now. He could make little else of that document.

I have also mentioned the “colonial land title” that was in the possession of Vázquez. The group had made a photocopy of the document and placed it in its library. Group members found themselves unable to make much of the document, however—or at least to say anything authoritative about it. It was not an easy read: The script was obscure and the photocopy was out of sequence and fragmentary. Andrés mentioned that it contained stellar lists of names and titles, including Charles V and the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado. It also referred to some familiar places: Guadalajara, Mexico City, Castile, and some places in the vicinity of Atacco. Andrés also mentioned some of the dates in the document: 1530, 1710, 1867, and 1923. The familiar references were tantalizing: Had Pedro de Alvarado come to Atacco? The legal narrative itself—the “founding” of Atacco by Spanish officials, conquistadors, and missionaries—was unfamiliar to the group. This was not how Andrés and others understood the origins of their town. The group continued to make occasional reference to the document, but it did not make for any better history than the crumbling houses and the talk of the elderly.

### Consequences

The group was not defeated by these difficulties—I do not want to exaggerate the power of history. Federico claimed in 1995 that “we’ve seen that history is not good business,” but Andrés continued to ask questions about Atacco’s history. The group had not made ambitious promises, like publishing a book, so there was little sense of outright failure. Meanwhile, members did gain some recognition for themselves. In 2002, Federico, although only middle-aged, was interviewed for an article in a Tapalpan magazine on Atacco’s history (*Un Rincón en la Sierra Tapalpa* 2002). But this article stood in contrast to a second article in the same issue, based on an interview with Don Lupe in Tapalpa (Nava López 2002). Don Lupe was cited as an author of this second article, whereas Federico was mentioned only as an informant in the first one, and his account was cross-referenced with the arguments of “residents and researchers” (*Un Rincón en la Sierra Tapalpa* 2002:11).

Moreover, history was only one of the group’s projects, and it was not the only one that ran into difficulties. For example, the group had attempted to resurrect a Nativity play but had given up after a year or two. Federico sounded confident that the group could pursue other projects, instead. It had other narratives at its disposal, too: Group members sometimes took pride in listing their achievements, such as the restoration of the pool and their role in the building of the bandstand. Others in Atacco echoed an old man who

quipped that the “past has passed, it has gone,” and Beto made light of the irony that others cared more about Atacco’s history than those who lived there.

But some were still anxious about their ignorance of Atacco’s history. Group members were worried that others might deny that Atacco had been the town. They were also anxious that others might ask them about Atacco’s history. Others in Atacco might ask them because they were known to have been researching history. Tapalpans might also ask—after all, I had been sent by Tapalpans to ask about history. School pupils might ask for help in writing their local history projects. Weekenders were also expected to ask questions: Beto said that several weekenders had come to ask him about Atacco’s history while he was municipal delegate. His rather shamefaced solution was to learn by heart the two paragraphs on Atacco in the one-page “History of Tapalpa” that I had written for weekenders. Not surprisingly, Andrés was more frustrated than others by these difficulties. One night in 1999, after drinking, he reeled off an anguished string of questions about Atacco’s history that he had been unable to answer.

### Knowledge, place, and authority

I emphasized at the outset of this article that knowledge can be known both of and in places, but I also noted that the knowledge of place comes in different forms. In this section, I use Basso’s account of Apache knowledge of place to set in relief the knowing of history in Atacco. I then conclude by asking what has made this kind of knowledge so widely compelling.

Western Apache elders “stalk” Apache youths with stories, often of their ancestors’ mistakes, that hint at the error of the youths’ ways. For example, an old lady told the story of an Apache policeman who acted too much like a white man. Her granddaughter, wearing plastic rollers in her hair, felt that her grandmother was “stalking” her with that story. The stories are set in and linked to certain places in the Apache landscape. The ancestors’ actions, including their mistakes, leave traces in those places, and the moral of the story is read out of those traces. For example, many place-names are considered word-pictures made by the ancestors of the places bearing those names. The elders compare the present-day appearance of the place to the ancestor’s word-picture and then they draw conclusions about the ancestor’s experience in that place. There is no water at the place called “Snakes’ Water,” so an elder tells a story about how Apache abused the water at that place, and so, Snakes’ Water dried up (Basso 1996:13–17, 54–57).

Stories are also told in Atacco to illustrate the values that should guide one’s life. Many are linked to the mistakes of ancestors and some are also linked to places. Don Alfredo’s speech, recounted above, was a story about how the ancestors made the mistake of abandoning Atacco. The lesson to

be learned was that one should not abandon one's town but, instead, cherish it. Place was, then, a cradle of values both in Atacco and among Apache. Wisdom—the knowledge of values—could be read out of the precipitates left by the experience of ancestors in a particular place. Moreover, the ability to read wisdom out of such traces created some kind of authority among Apache as well as in Atacco. The elder Nick Thompson's ability to tell stories about places seems to have given him authority among Western Apache. He was called to testify in court on behalf of Apache, for example, telling a story about a place that was involved in a land dispute (Basso 1996:70).

Basso emphasizes that “the idea of compiling ‘definitive accounts’ is rejected out of hand” by Western Apache (1996:32). The point of the stories was the lesson drawn from the traces, not the events that yielded such a lesson. Storytellers might be challenged on the grounds of their reading of Apache values, not on the grounds of their reading of past events. Federico's group, by contrast, was concerned precisely with achieving a “definitive account.” History should ideally be the last word on the events that were narrated, not just on the values being conveyed. Don Alfredo's speech was not good history in that sense. On the one hand, his speech was unlikely to be challenged by others on the grounds of its moral. By invoking the mistakes of Atacco's ancestors, he was able to speak as persuasively as the Apache elder Nick Thompson. On the other hand, Don Alfredo did not give a persuasive “historical” account. It conveyed the values of cultura, but it was not a “definitive account” of the events themselves. That would not have been a problem for Western Apache: They simply made fun of the “definitive accounts” of Anglo-American historians (Basso 1996:33–34). Neither was it always a problem in Atacco: Don Alfredo could make his moral argument in the meeting. But it was a problem for the group, whose concern was to make history in ways that would not easily be challenged.

Who could pose such a challenge? Who might have the last word? Those who had better access to the evidence and the know-how to make something of that evidence. Apache knowledge was encrusted in the places of the Apache hills. The knowledge of history was lodged partly in places that were further removed, such as archives and academies. History was compelling and yet elusive. In theory, anyone could know history, just as anyone could have cultura. In practice, good history was understood in such a way as to leave the people of Atacco hedging.

### **Compelling yet elusive**

I have argued that Atacco's history was far from *sui generis*. History has traveled far and wide, even though it takes on guises and plays out in ways that are specific to context. It has much in common with other modern kinds of knowledge.

Walter Mignolo has cited Paulin J. Hountondji's account of the difficulties faced by scientists in Africa who struggle for access to the technologies of the North, including those of publication. Hountondji proposes applying the sociology of science to scientific knowledge in the Third World, although Mignolo responds that “it is [also] a trap to pretend and aim, in Third World countries . . . at practicing *social sciences* in the same way as in Germany or in US” (Mignolo 2000:209–210, emphasis added).

In the case of history, people find ways of avoiding the trap. Apache elders laugh at the pretensions of Anglo-American historians (Basso 1996:33–34); Federico seemed content to wash his hands of history; Beto and others turned the predicament into a gentle irony, whereas Vázquez once bitterly dismissed the genre in an enigmatic phrase: “History is a guide to enlist the people” (Stack 2002:17).

So why would anyone fall into such a trap? Briefly, I suggest three reasons for the allure of history. First, history looks easier than it really is, and so people assume that they can at least produce the history of the place where they live. This assumption accounts for some of Andrés's frustration—he knew Atacco intimately and yet could not uncover its history.

Second, the skewing of history has become naturalized. Hanks argues that Maya elites in 16th-century Yucatán were being pragmatic in subscribing to Spanish norms for writing documents, but he also writes that “through routine use, genres become natural themselves, that is, they become so familiar as to be taken for granted” (1996:246). History ceased to be considered a “Spanish genre” of which the colonized might make strategic use. It ceased eventually to be regarded as a genre at all—past events seemed to come in the form of historical narrative (White 1987). Despite this, the genre of history did not lose its “orientation,” in Hanks's (1996:245–246) terms, toward people in other places.<sup>8</sup> Andrés set out to uncover the past of his town, but he found himself looking elsewhere, turned by the insidious power of genre.

Third, the genre of history is embedded in an intricate “complex of associations” of person, people, and place (Thomas 2002). Other scholars have shown how history is embedded in the national imaginary, whereas I have argued that it was also bound up, at least in west Mexico, with the idea of towns and cities. Here, history was written into cultura, cultura built into towns, and towns turned back into history again (see also Stack 2004). History was hard to isolate and challenge because it was not just knowledge that was skewed but place and personhood, too. Indeed, people looked to other places not just for knowledge and authority, but for their very understandings of knowledge and authority. The genealogies that I have traced, those of cultura and of history, both lead away from the Sierra.

## Notes

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1. William Hanks has opposed the formalist definition of genre as “regular groupings of thematic, stylistic, and compositional elements” to a pragmatic definition of genre as “historically specific conventions and ideals according to which authors compose discourse and audiences receive it” (1987:670; see also Bakhtin 1986). I am following his pragmatic definition of genre.

2. Indeed, evidentials—from morphemes to footnotes—are critical to those generic norms of debatability (Blommaert 2004; Chafe 1986; Hanks 1987; Hill 2000).

3. For a fuller discussion of this, see Stack 2005.

4. They were helped, it should be said, by the weakening of the ejido during this period.

5. The motives of the two groups were also different. Vázquez's group was petitioning the National Archive for help with finding colonial titles that would enable it to restore the “indigenous community” of Atacco, which the group claimed had been robbed of its birthright by land-grabbing settlers in Tapalpa. Federico's group did not support this campaign—for this group, the idea that Atacco had been the town was, instead, a source of civic pride.

6. Just as local historians have set their towns in national history, national historians have sometimes also chosen to focus on a particular town or region within the nation. The classic example in Mexico is González y González, who wrote in 1968 the history of his hometown in the nearby Sierra del Tigre. González y González and others have incorporated the history of towns and regions into national history, but González y González (1968) writes his academic microhistory in a style that still contrasts with (or leaves a generic distance from) his national history.

7. Together with Tshibumba's historical paintings and oral commentary, Johannes Fabian (1990, 1996) has presented and discussed the anonymous *Vocabulaire de Ville de Elisabethville*, written in the 1960s by domestic servants of that town. Strangely, Fabian gives little consideration to the fact that it is a history of a town. Some aspects of that history are resonant, including the prominence given to the construction of public buildings and streets in this colonial town.

8. In Mignolo's (2000:22) terms, the genre of history did not lose its “coloniality” (see also Chakrabarty 1992).

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Trevor Stack

Hispanic Studies

University of Aberdeen

Aberdeen AB24 3UB

United Kingdom

t.stack@abdn.ac.uk

<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/spanish/staff/stack.shtml>