Chapter 6

Metaphoric Enrichment and Material Poverty: The Making of “Colonias”

Sarah Hill

Shortly after I moved to El Paso in the spring of 1994, I encountered a dark side of the U.S.–Mexico border’s celebrated porosity: colonias. One county official after another described colonias to me as “Mexico north of the border,” impoverished settlements thickly concentrated just beyond the city limits, where poor people—“Mexicans”—lived without water, sewage disposal, electricity, and paved roads. Colonia residents demonstrated “typical” Mexican ingenuity. They reportedly cobbled together “substandard housing” from anything they could find: cheap, discarded, and recycled building materials, dilapidated trailer homes, and old school buses. But their ingenuity revealed their ignorance of basic hygiene. County health authorities complained that diseases common to Mexico ran rampant in colonias because residents drew water from shallow, hand-dug wells, contaminated by nearby outhouses, faulty septic systems, and cesspools. Not infrequently, the local newspapers reported on colonias’ alarming sanitary conditions, as evidenced by local health officials’ regular public assertions that colonia residents “literally drink their own excrement.”

For an anthropologist drawn to El Paso at the dawn of the free-trade era by the excitement of poststructuralists’ recent discovery of the U.S.–Mexico border as the most promising metaphorical and actual site of cultural hybridity, indeterminacy, and translocality, colonias were sobering. I expected to find a vibrant social life that teased and defied the political boundary, emerging, as Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa (1987)
promised, like a "lifeblood" flowing from the wounds of the First World and the Third World scraping against each other. Instead, I found, in the views of many El Paso city residents, unpleasant reminders of El Paso's inability to keep Mexico safely across the international border. In place of the nourishing lifeblood of Anzaldúa's "third culture," I found a predominantly Mexican American city fearful of the poisonous fecal-laden effluent flowing unchecked from colonias populated by Mexicans who had transgressed the political boundary without leaving behind their putatively self-soiling Mexican ways.

To many currently living in El Paso and other Texas border cities, colonias are an unwelcomed but taken-for-granted feature of the suburban terrain.1 In El Paso, the term "colonia" requires no definition; its invocation conjures up images on the near horizon of shanties and outhouses, overflowing septic systems and poor Mexican immigrants. But this now commonplace feature of the border landscape is far from timeless. Colonias, as I will demonstrate, came to public attention during a few heightened months of intensive press coverage in early 1987. Before that, the settlements that eventually came to be called colonias were invisible to most city residents, so invisible that the country's highest-ranking elected official observed in 1988: "The word colonias is just in the last 12 to 14 months become part of the political dialog" (U.S. House 1988, 122). Underserviced, low-income suburbs full of self-built homesteads had quietly been accumulating along the city boundary since just after World War II (Towers J991). Nonetheless there was little public interest in them until the label "colonia" unleashed a flood of phobic antipathy toward those areas said to be populated by poor, unhygienic Mexicans. And lest colonias should slip from anyone's mind, a steady supply of fresh images in the local media continually feeds the social imaginary with irrefutable, persistent evidence of colonias' Mexican characteristics and their existence just beyond the social and physical boundaries of civility.

It is not for want of government effort that colonias have sustained themselves as sites of border transgression on the edges of U.S. border cities. Since colonias first came to prominence in the late 1960s, hundreds of millions of dollars have poured into border counties to halt the growth of colonias and to provide the public works infrastructure necessary to keep colonia residents from living mired in their own wastes. Nonetheless, even as the colonia problem comes under control, colonias remain, in the local imaginary of El Paso City residents, highly visible sites of uniform disgust, disdain, distaste, or disregard. Long after the characteristics initially said to make up a colonia—principally the lack of sanitary infrastructure—have disappeared, colonias still remain marked, in the local normative imaginary, as colonias, that is, as sites of failed hygiene.

Colonias are thus more than just material things. They are also, as I will argue in this chapter, ideological spatial constructs predicated on images of "dirty" Mexicans that are both fueled by, and further productive of, the material processes that shape the conditions in which many of El Paso's poor live. Rather than seeing colonias as simply a descriptive shorthand for suburbs that conform to a particular set of negatively constituted criteria, I will argue that the idea of colonias contributes to their material constitution, and to the material constitution of the border itself. Colonias—as ideas made real—contribute to the border's historical patterns of wealth accumulation and the ongoing formulations for determining social and political legitimacy among a population, which like Anzaldúa's (1987) famous "nueva mestizas" or Guillermo Gómez-Peña's (1996) "warrior of gringostrúika" bleed back and forth across the political boundary, ever threatening the stability of a securely defined nation-state and national citizenship. Colonias are determined by, and determinative of, the physical and metaphoric efforts to impose internal borders on the otherwise increasingly vague borderlands.

In the following pages, I will explore the making of colonias as an entwined historical process that has emerged from the competing interests of real estate developers, politicians, health officials, and the residents of areas said to be dominated by colonias. Colonias are not static but contested. They have been continually remade and challenged over the past decade and a half by tensions among both those who have enriched themselves by colonias' existence and those who actively seek to eliminate them and to eradicate the distinctions between them and the surrounding social and built environment. In the first section of this chapter, I consider the rise of colonias in El Paso, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, as a particular artifact of the kind of capitalist accumulation that geographer Neil Smith (1984) calls "uneven development." In the second, I examine the shift in debates over the consequences of that development that fueled the labeling of "colonias" in 1987. In the third, I turn to the material and representational processes that continue to make colonias real things and spatial categories marking the border within El Paso.

This essay draws upon archival research and my four years of living in El Paso, from 1994 to 1998.2 I conducted the bulk of the ethnographic
fieldwork reported here over six months in the summer and fall in 1996. Interviews with county officials took place over the course of my residency in the county.

Uneven Development in the Borderlands

El Paso's 10,000: "Third World" lurks on outskirts of sun city.

In El Paso County you need not cross the U.S.-Mexico border to find the Third World. From the floodplains near the Rio Grande to the sandy hills north of Interstate 10, city-county health officials say some 10,000 people are living in impoverished housing developments known as colonias.

—El Paso Herald Post, 7 April 1987

El Paso city residents probably first encountered colonias, named as such, on 3 January 1987, when the city's afternoon newspaper, the El Paso Herald Post, published three stories on "Third World" conditions just outside the city limits. The stories provided the first detailed accounts of vast areas of the county where people who lacked piped drinking water and sewerage drilled wells from which they drank water contaminated by their "cesspools," described as "green," "foul smelling," and full of "human waste," according to the City-County Health Department. Health Department officials called these areas "colonias." They pointed to dozens of them across the county where an estimated ten thousand "Mexicans" or "Hispanics" lived. In a more extensive report published three months later, public health officials noted that "colonia" simply meant "subdivision" in Spanish, but they also stressed that the City-County Health District used the term specifically to refer to those subdivisions where "pervasive" poverty "means unsanitary conditions."³ Large maps showed readers the colonias' locations-scattered around the edges of the city and up to the county line, thirty miles from downtown El Paso. Photographs documented the colonias' poverty and their unsanitary conditions; one large photo on the title page showed a colonia resident digging a homemade septic reservoir, and deeper in the article, photos showed outhouses, shanties, broken-down trailer homes, and small children playing in yards filled with garbage. Health officials did not pull any punches; they asserted that colonia residents "do not fully understand . . . hygiene." Here, in early 1987, for the first time, newspaper readers encountered a graphic truth: "These people down here are drinking their waste and they don't understand it," reported one official.

The report closed with one reporter's firsthand experience of the filth of colonia life. Reporter Thaddeus Herrick spent twenty-four hours with a colonia family—seventeen people crammed into a trailer and adjacent shack where the air was "thick with the odor of people, their bodies, worn clothes, leftover food and ripe trash." Herrick confessed how dirty he felt, with his "matted hair" and his unwashed mouth thick with "the lingering taste of last night's meal." He could not escape the sense that he was "entangled in the house's filth, aware of every particle of dirt, every germ I breathed," graphically illustrated in anecdotes like the following: "I did use the tank outhouse, holding my sweatshirt over my nostrils to fend off the powerful stench . . . Occasionally Felipe, who suffers from a hacking cough, spits his phlegm on the floor. Tattoo . . . one of four dogs . . . pees on it. And the children, most of whom have chronic coughs, play in it" (El Paso Herald Post, 7 April 1987, t0).

This report firmly established the indelible imagery that has come to be associated with colonias.³ Many in El Paso, including elected and appointed officials, continue to complain that colonias are "Third World." Colonias' lack of sanitary infrastructure and colonia residents' reported failure "to understand the hygiene issues" show to county officials how out of place colonias are in the otherwise modern, First World city of El Paso. Presumably those who comment on colonias in this way have in mind a notion of modernity and development as something distinctly spatial rather than merely temporal. The First World is not only developed and modern, with the Third World lagging behind (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990); the First and Third Worlds occupy different, discrete geographic domains that are isomorphic with the edges of nation-states. But where the Third World appears within the border of the First World, as it does in the colonias of El Paso (at least according to one strain of thinking among some county residents and officials), the very categories of "First" and "Third" World are called into question both temporally and spatially. Colonias seem to threaten anachronism—a return to an earlier developmental stage—or a geographic impossibility. In this way, what people imagine about colonias contributes to a condition Patricia Price has termed "spatial schizophrenia" in her expansion of Fredric Jameson's and Jacques Lacan's work on the rupture of temporal signs in late modernity. For Price (2000), in the border region, both space
and time have come unhinged from the reliable fictions of mappable nation-states and from the linearity of history. When county officials, the media, and city residents call colonias "the Third World," they signal their schizophrenia—their anxieties over the collapse, contortions, and confusion of time and space. In colonias, it is feared, the border between the United States and Mexico melts away, and history moves backwards. To Neil Smith (1984), however, capitalist "development" is everywhere and inherently uneven. What appears to be a temporal upset of landscape is simply the detritus of capitalism unfolding across time and space, transforming nature and continually creating and destroying a heterogeneous built environment through which diverse investments flow and from which profits are taken. Uneven development, more so than "underdevelopment," attunes us to understanding capitalism's dynamic production of, and dependency on, differences not simply at the level of the nation-state, or between the "developed" "First World" of the "North" and the "underdeveloped" "Third World" of the "South." Uneven development, Smith contends, carries on at various scales simultaneously, within and between neighborhoods, regions, and nation-states, as well as geopolitical blocks. In fact, it is uneven development that creates the spatial categories (e.g., nations and "First" and "Third World") that we attempt to fix in our minds as the structures undergirding the temporal frame of capitalist form. Seen in this light, colonias are the name given to an investment strategy in El Paso County that takes advantage of differences constituted at multiple scales, including those stemming from policies enacted at the federal level in both Mexico and the United States.

Poverty on the Outskirts
The most significant of the policies at the scale of the nation that contributed to the material production of what eventually came to be called colonias took place in the 1960s. According to George Towers (1991), several coincident factors yielded colonias as a vital element in the portfolio of a rising class of El Paso real estate entrepreneurs. Initially, the end of the Bracero Program (an agricultural guest worker agreement that allowed Mexican citizens to work seasonally in the United States) coincided in the mid-1960s with the gradual exhaustion of farmland fertility in the county's lower valley area, along the Rio Grande floodplain. Farmers, seeking to convert their worn-out cotton fields to some profitable use, found a population in need of low-income housing, after federally funded programs for tenement eradication and highway construction had wiped out hundreds of rental units in downtown El Paso. Farmers-turned-real estate developers exploited the county’s almost nonexistent zoning laws and its lax enforcement of subdivision regulation by simply surveying their land, bulldozing dirt roads, and selling quarter- and half-acre lots without any further infrastructure development. The developments grew in size and number, according to Towers, as more low-wage workers faced a steady decline in purchasing power when the city's economy, caught in the larger vortex of changes that stimulated industrial growth across the border in Ciudad Juárez, shifted away from metals processing and chemical manufacturing and toward light industries such as apparel and electronics assembly (Towers 1991, 58–102).

Faced with few viable housing options, El Paso's burgeoning ranks of low-wage workers canvassed low-cost real estate just beyond the city limits. Despite the lack of infrastructure provided by developers, and the presence of agricultural chemical residues in the soil, the small properties held appeal; they offered the promise of home ownership. Moreover, many buyers regarded the absence of piped water, sewerage, and other typical urban amenities as only temporary burdens because developers frequently promised that the city would annex the subdivisions and soon thereafter supply city services. In what county and state officials came to regard as grotesquely usurious contracts, developers sold their land under "contracts for deed," arrangements that allowed sellers to retain title to the lots until all payments (usually spread over fifteen years) had been made. Failure of even one payment entitled developers not only to repossess the lot but also to take ownership of any improvements made to the property (Ward 1999, 91–94). In this arrangement, developers’ minimal investments were further protected by buyers' fears of losing their very significant investments.

Inherent to uneven development is the exploitation of one class by another through the manipulation of the built environment: one class prospers by passing the costs of the built environment's transformation onto others. Subdivision developers initially profited from the labor of homestead purchasers whose self-built housing improved the value of real estate outside the city limits. More importantly, however, developers' steady accumulation of profits over two decades turned them into a powerful economic block that effectively pressured the city into assuming the expensive burdens of infrastructure installments that further raised the value of their exhausted farmland. Developers who sold land within
five miles of the city limits, in a zone called the extraterritorial jurisdiction (ET), easily obtained city annexation of their developments, and with that the extension of services such as water, sewerage, and paved roadways to the homestead purchasers (Bath et al. 1994). Nonetheless, city officials were not happy with the retroactive public works construction in areas where some residents had no public roadway access, where soils had poor drainage, where densities were low, or where space had not been set aside for sewer and water lines (El Paso Herald Post, 21 February 1984). Because many developers deliberately avoided filing plats (planning maps) or securing subdivision approval (El Paso Times, 2 July 1983; El Paso Herald Post, 2 July 1983), city officials began calling the settlements “illegal subdivisions” in order to generate public antipathy toward developers and nudge them toward planning and zoning compliance.

Uneven development both creates and exploits differences among people. During the 1970s and 1980s, both developers and some city officials, while they dickered over who should bear the costs of suburban development, cast subdivision residents as distinctly different from city residents, effectively making them and the spaces in which they lived different. For example, in countering developers’ insistence that the city should provide water for their subdivisions, the long-term general manager of the El Paso Water Utilities, John Hickerson, routinely drew a line in the sand between the city and whatever lay outside it. “We’re a city of El Paso department,” he insisted, “and [our] total responsibility is within the city limits” (El Paso Times, 23 December 1986). By not extending city services beyond the ET), subdivision residents were forced to rely on themselves to provide drinking water and sewage disposal, pushing their bodies beyond the limits tolerated by city residents and making themselves “abnormal” when measured against the norm of city residents, as Silva (1998) has observed. This constitution of categoric alterity went beyond the numerous remarks that “when those folks bought those lots outside of the city, they knew there was no water there” (El Paso Herald Post, 15 March 1984), or that the “people who go there make a conscious decision” to live without water and sewerage (3 January 1987).

And they went beyond simple differences of desire, as in the arguments put forward by one developer in his angry reaction to a court-ordered injunction to bring his subdivision up to city standards: “Curb and sidewalks, people out there don’t want that stuff” (El Paso Times, 22 July 1982; italics mine). These assertions began to rest on fantasies of somatic evidence that subdivision residents’ bodies differed, by virtue of their long residence in the subdivisions. John Hickerson, the water utilities general manager, publicly doubted subdivisions’ residents’ claims that their well water was poisonous: after a heated meeting with subdivision residents, Hickerson told a reporter, “I hey [subdivision residents] say there’s no water. That’s a fallacy. The families that have moved there are living in areas where people have lived for many, many years without a public water supply. They had wells, and they drank the same water that these people today are saying they can’t drink” (El Paso Herald Post, 20 December 1983). The insistence that uneven development had made subdivision residents different (as if they had acclimatized to a hostile environment) served to deny, as Lopez and Reich (1997) point out, the necessity of providing subdivision residents with the same basic vital services that city residents took for granted. This “agenda denial” helped to etch onto the landscape a particularly resource-poor built environment through which could be continually read the subdivision residents’ essential difference from their city neighbors.

**Bordering on Dangerous**

From 1979 through 1986, most news coverage of the troubling subdivisions focused on the character of the developers and their exploitation of hamstrung bureaucracies. The actors in these stories were the developers; the problem was the subdivisions themselves. Little mention was made of subdivision residents.5 But by the early 1980s, a shift in national policy helped turn attention away from the illegal developers and toward the “illegal” activities of the subdivision residents. A movement at the national level again came to shape the course of El Paso’s uneven development, this time by contributing ideologically as well as materially to the areas of the county where growing numbers of poor lived.

When, in 1982, the Reagan administration took up the charge of “securing our borders” against the threat of unregulated immigration, Mexican immigrants suddenly became a “threat to national security” (Dunn 1996, 2–5). In this climate, the country focused on border cities such as El Paso and how they were seemingly indistinguishable from their Mexican neighbors (Hill 2000, 144–60). At the very moment that Anzaldúa and other Chicana/o poets celebrated the border’s vague definition, major media outlets denigrated it with hyperbolic imagery of unstoppable immigrants storming the borders and streaming into the United States. In a return to historical patterns of tensions between Mexican Americans and Mexicans (Gutiérrez 1995), Mexican Americans in El Paso asserted
greater efforts to distinguish themselves from Mexicans, lest they be mistaken for the unwanted alien intruders then making national headlines and provoking congressional hearings (see also Vila 2000). As one prominent El Pasoan put it: “Our skin color and hair is associated with the poor illegal alien who wades across the Rio Grande,” provoking Hispanics, as another described, to “discriminate against illegal aliens” (El Paso Herald Post, summer 1983, 24).

Although health officials in El Paso County had sought to provoke public concern over the illegal subdivisions for some years, their efforts finally succeeded when they struck a chord that echoed this rising national xenophobia. It is not incidental that at the very moment when Mexicans were cast as a threat to the national body politic, health officials cast them locally as threats to the actual bodies of city residents. While health officials’ characterizations of the subdivisions did not directly engage the highly charged immigration debate, they were surely not antithetical to it.

In December 1986, the City-County Health District made its first formal appeal to the County Commissioners Court for establishment of “better monitoring” of on-site waste disposal. While health department officials expressed concern over the public health consequences of subdivision lot size and the lack of sewerage services, both acknowledged to stem from developers’ violation of planning regulations, they also advocated scrutiny of residents’ resolutions—that celebrated Mexican resourcefulness—to problems generated by developers. Developers may have set up the conditions for poor sanitation, but the problem then became one of contending with residents: health officials claimed that residents’ homemade, unreliable excreta disposal systems polluted groundwater. In histrionic tones, health officials warned that “improper sewage disposal is turning groundwater into a cesspool and rural El Pasoans literally are poisoning themselves by drinking from it” (El Paso Times, 23 December 1986).

In this way, the illegal origins of the subdivisions began to recede in the wake of the pathological character of residents’ waste disposal practices. Whereas earlier accounts of “illegal subdivisions” had focused on developers, newer accounts took developers out of the story and zeroed in on residents. Before the Herald Post’s 1987 special report, when county health officials tried to drum up support for controlling the behavior of subdivision residents, county elected officials shrugged their shoulders, stating, “You can’t do anything with them” (i.e., subdivision residents), revealing an unapologetic lack of interest in residents (El Paso Times, 23 December 1986). After the report, however, in the charged national anti-immigrant climate, residents’ sanitary violations became the primary concern, and developers faded into the background: “Some of the colonias are not platted according to state law, making them illegal subdivisions. But the most serious danger of colonias is that the health hazard of unapproved sewage systems that many residents install” (El Paso Herald Post, 10 October 1987). Likewise, in another example, the developers have vanished, since the relevance is no longer what developers have done but what residents do; they build faulty excreta disposal systems: “Unregulated building outside the city limits has resulted in sewage disposal—septic tanks and illegal cesspools—spilling into groundwater” (3 January 1987). Rather than the subdivisions themselves being unregulated (as they had been described in the past), now the activities of subdivision residents were unregulated (such as in their housing construction) and illegal and pathological (as in their cesspools). Subdivision residents, in these accounts, “do not fully understand hygiene issues.” They were “poor and uneducated,” “naive,” “first generation immigrants,” who lacked what was presumed to be basic awareness of the dangers of human wastes: “All of the waste that those people are generating is in the groundwater—all of it. Those people there all have septic systems. These people down here are drinking their own waste,” a health official stated (3 January 1987). They don’t have “enough sense not to put in an unsafe system,” said one developer (10 October 1987).

To make the colonia problems relevant to city residents, health officials tried to erase the distinction—that imaginary line in the sand—between city and county. They did so by pointing out that contagious were unbounded. Newly elected county judge Luther Jones agreed: “This is one community here. It’s not the city and everything else. If people are sick because of the water they drink, they could be transmitting diseases to people throughout the county.” Those people, he insisted, “don’t live in the county in isolation but in the urban community of El Paso” (El Paso Herald Post, 3 January 1987). At the same time, the new name, “colonias,” given to the subdivisions also imposed a difference between county and city residents while linking them intimately through excrement. Spanish-language terms and Spanish in general have provided staple means for asserting class distinctions in El Paso, as Pablo Vila (2000) has shown. Here the use of a Spanish-language term implies not simply poverty but also violations of norms of health and hygiene that secured
the spatial-temporal distinction between the First and Third Worlds, and the United States and Mexico. Continual assertion that homesteaders “are coming from Ciudad Juárez” (El Paso Herald Post, 31 December 1987), and more subtle suggestions that colonia residents were more Mexican than American by returning to Juárez for medical treatment (7 April 1987), or by listening to Juárez radio stations (7 April 1987), facilitated the imagining that “colonias” were the “Third World” whose contents threatened to spill over to the rest of the county (31 December 1987). As leaky Third Worlders in a Third World space north of the border, both colonia residents and colonias themselves could be the vectors of illness: colonia wastes “seep unfiltered into the soil and eventually reach the underground water table, little by little contaminating the water that everyone drinks” (El Paso Herald Post, 10 October 1987). Fears of diseased colonia residents entering the workplace raised the specter of a threat to the literal health of the county’s economy (3 January 1987).

In his testimony to Congress in 1988, Judge Luther Jones expressed his desire that “the community that does not live near colonias, that lives in the city and has all the services,” recognize that “there is a consequence [to] those peoples that live inside the city. Their quality of life is affected by the colonias” (U.S. House 1988, 124). In fact, judging by the way the use of the term “colonias” changed in newspaper coverage from its introduction in 1987, Jones and city-county health officials did indeed stimulate noncolonia residents to take an almost obsessive interest in the colonias. By 1989, the term “colonia” no longer appeared in quotes or accompanied by a definition. The newspapers no longer provided maps for readers to visualize the location of townships such as San Elizario, Socorro, Moon City, and Montana Vista, purportedly dominated by colonias. Colonias stories no longer carried helpful orientation guides that located colonias “in the southeast corner of the county” or “north of I-10 off Montana Avenue.” By 1991 colonias appeared in news coverage of El Paso’s two daily papers two to three times a month (Lopez and Reich 1997, 162–63). When colonias found a place on the mental map of the residents of the city of El Paso, they moved in from the remote reaches of the county.

Colonias Unmade and Remade

County health officials’ efforts to correct the material consequences of uneven development in El Paso County have achieved notable successes. By 1999 state legislation severely restrained future colonia development both by enabling much more powerful county zoning laws and by raising significant state and federal monies for infrastructure construction and residential connections in colonias all along the Texas-Mexico border (Ward 1999, 90–94). Numerous governmental and nongovernmental agencies have undertaken concerted efforts to eradicate cesspools and institute behavioral changes to improve household hygiene in colonias. While figures are notoriously fluid, by one estimate, within the next half decade, the number of colonias lacking water and sewerage can be reduced to 5 percent of El Paso’s 214 colonias; as of July 2000, more than half (125) had received connections (Office of the Secretary of State, personal communication, April 2001). The Texas Water Development Board’s most recent figures (April 2001) for El Paso County indicate that close to three-quarters of the county’s estimated 74,600 colonia residents now have city water (www.TWDB.gov), thanks in part to more than $250 million in federal money appropriated for infrastructure construction. An additional $4.5 million has been allotted to provide grant assistance for 4,000 to 6,000 households (totaling 20,000 to 30,000 residents) to link to water and sewerage infrastructure (Center for Environmental Resource Management, personal communication, April 2001). And hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent on education campaigns for the improvement of colonia residents’ health. Public health officials’ energetic and tireless efforts to bring public attention to the colonias problem has changed—for the better—the material conditions of many colonias.

Nonetheless this fixing of the colonias problem has also “fixed” colonias in another sense; it has made descriptions of uneven development accomplices to more general patterns of class dynamics in the United States that disadvantage large sectors of the laboring population. Colonia residents are “fixed” to their class position by being fused to the landscape that is said to determine who they are, and their rights to political and social legitimacy. Colonias are now far more than just the real estate that warehouses the country’s poor. They serve in the delineating, demarcating of space and subjects as the pincers of the free trade/neoliberal era grip, ever more tightly, the social imaginary of border cities. As U.S. firms continue to erode the boundaries of national capital with their accelerated manufacturing relocation to Ciudad Juárez—which has grown to be Mexico’s largest export processor—low-wage labor in both cities has been ever more fixed in place by increasingly restrictive U.S. immigration enforcement. In an acute display of the paradox of uneven
development that has seized El Paso, just three months prior to the inau-
aguration of NAFTA on 1 January 1994, the Border Patrol undertook its "Operation Blockade," a major offensive to secure the border in El Paso that to many observers looked like a military occupation of the city (Immigration Law Enforcement Monitoring Project 1994; Vila 2000; Spener, this volume). More recently, with the increasing criminalization of unlicensed migration, the stakes for determining who belongs on which side of the border have risen dramatically, making the metaphors of dirt and excrement that enliven imaginations of colonias ever more potentially damaging in their material consequences for colonia residents.

The work that public health officials and politicians have done on behalf of colonias has persistently fueled ideas about colonias as a demarcated spatial zone of social difference, a boundary area with an ambiguous legitimacy within the boundary of the United States. While colonias are a key public issue in El Paso County, as Lopez and Reich (1997) have documented, the actual considerations of colonia residents are consistently ignored by county officials and business leaders who use talk of colonias to veil their inaction on colonias problems. Moreover, the talk of colonia residents’ inability to govern their hygiene easily translates in the local imaginary to colonias’ inability to self-govern as communities. This view of limited ability to self-govern reinforces contemporary practices of casting Mexican immigrants as incapable of appropriating American culture and thus undeserving of political entitlements (Chavez 1997).

One particularly powerful agent active in fixing colonias in both senses is Dr. Lawrence Nickey, the now-retired long-term director of the City-County Health District. Nickey is perhaps the best-known authority on border health. Although Nickey’s ceaseless efforts to bring attention to the urgent public health problems present in colonias have generated significant social and material changes in colonias, he continues to make frequent public presentations with now egregiously outdated descriptions and photo illustrations. He has done so before audiences ranging from congressional committees to out-of-town medical conventioners, and visiting local high school, college, and postgraduate groups, including the students in the University of Texas, Houston, School of Public Health’s satellite program in El Paso. His practice of spatially fixing colonias—defining and mapping a determinate space called colonias—has been predicated on a characterization of colonias as sites of temporal stasis, as places where Mexicans remain Mexican, mired in their self-soiling ways. I heard Nickey on three separate occa-
sions in 1995 and 1996 deliver a public address in which he pointed to a photograph of a colonia homestead to illustrate the proximity of a family’s failed septic system to its well. His description never varied: “These people are literally drinking their own excrement.” As of 1998 (the latest report I have heard of his presentations), he continued to underscore the class interests underlying uneven development and the pathologization of colonias. According to Nickey, colonia residents work in the service economy—in food preparation, housekeeping, and child care—thereby spreading their contagions to all those city residents who, despite their own careful attention to good hygiene practices, are defenseless against colonia pathologies.

Nickey’s slide show is a blunt instrument. According to Nickey, the failure to maintain a strict boundary between the self and its excrement anywhere in the county indexes a colonia. In his descriptions, the absence of sanitary infrastructure and piped drinking water signals a presumed set of household behaviors in violation of sanitary norms. This campaign to promote widespread awareness of a widespread problem has created a uniform definition of colonias and colonia residents; it has helped to render virtually all of the lower valley area of the county a colonia. As Nickey has said on more than one occasion, pointing to a slide of a little girl dipping into a barrel clearly marked “Not for storage of potable water,” “This happens every day, all along the U.S.—Mexico border.” In this way, colonias’ timelessness makes them potentially spaceless as well. By declaring that “we have a whole town that is essentially one big colonia—Socorro,” Nickey has dulled city residents’ powers to imagine the heterogeneity of social life of colonias, flattening a broad range of heterogeneous social relations, diverse land-use patterns, and differential construction of the built environment. With his aggressive public relations work, he has helped fold many areas of the county not actually colonias but contiguous to colonias into the spatial logic of colonia production, making them indistinguishable from colonias in the normative imagination of city residents, public health officials, and others who unwittingly participate in the reproduction of colonias even as they work toward colonia eradication. This discursive production of colonias has been so powerful and thorough that living in areas of the county designated as “colonias” converts residents of those areas into colonia residents whether or not they ever relied on self-drilled wells and homemade excreta disposal systems.
Where Are the Colonias? What Are the Colonias?

When I first arrived in the county, I presumed that finding the colonias would be easy, that they would readily stand out from the landscape. But seeing colonias proved no easy task. In my first few months, I accompanied several county and state agents on their rounds of colonias, training my eyes to discern the features that my guides pointed out. However, when I encountered residents of these areas, they qualified my vision. For example, at a U.S. EPA hearing in downtown El Paso, I met a resident of Montana Vista not long after my first driving tour of an area of subdivisions north of Interstate Highway 10 that radiates off of Montana Avenue, one of the city's major east-west axes. This man rattled off the names of several subdivisions in the vicinity of his house (including the one in which he lived) that were not colonias. Colonias, he instructed me, are subdivisions that do not have water access, and only certain areas of Montana Vista lacked water, making only them colonias. Later a resident of one of the subdivisions that he had named as a colonia pointed out to me that her subdivision was not a colonia because it should have had water. This resident explained that the state had imposed a moratorium on further water connections after her family had purchased its lot, paying a substantially higher price than they would have paid in neighboring areas because of the guarantee of water.

Unsurprisingly, such efforts to redraw the colonia boundaries—to specify colonia contours with more social and spatial precision—were not uncommon in the mid-1990s. Often these efforts themselves etched more firmly into the landscape the definitions of colonias as predicated on a lack of sanitary infrastructure and corresponding failures of household hygiene. A 1994 visit to one of the farming communities that has been home to the county's oldest colonias was illustrative. On this occasion, another anthropologist and I stopped in the old town center of San Elizario to admire the shady square and its colonial-era buildings, including a reconstructed adobe church, which displayed a large memorial to those from San Elizario who had died in World War II. As we studied the mostly Hispanic names painted on the wall inside the church, we met an older man, who introduced himself as the caretaker. He praised us for our interest in history, something that in his view local kids did not possess. Excitedly and with exaggerated pantomime, he described the boys in the town, high school kids—cholos, he called them—who wore their ball caps on backwards, who didn't even greet him as they slouched past the church, and defaced its walls with their vandalism. My companion asked if the kids caused any kind of trouble. The caretaker pointed to the public bathrooms just near the church door. “We keep the baños closed because you wouldn't believe what they do.” Then he described jamming toilets, shaking his head in disgust.

When I asked where the cholos came from, the caretaker gestured southward, and with emphasis said, “Las colonias. You just drive over there, and you'll see them, the colonias.” He explained the problem: “Those people are new, but us, we belong here, we have been here for a long time. They are new. They don't know how to behave, and they are messing things up for us. People like you from El Paso, when they think about San Elizario, they think ‘colonias.’” In San Elizario's shrine of history, the caretaker underscored the relationship of spatial boundaries to extraneous imagery with his insistence that colonia residents have come to dominate the spatial imaginary of people like us, from El Paso. He marked the difference between himself and the colonia residents not simply by a claim to prior residency in San Elizario (dating from long before there were either “illegal subdivisions” or “colonias”) but also by a legitimacy of “behaving right” and respecting social norms. His mention of bathrooms was telling: colonia residents “don't know how to behave,” and part of the lack of understanding of good behavior is evident in their abuse of sanitation.

Similarly, many families I met during the summer of 1996, while I was conducting an evaluation of a hygiene intervention designed to help colonia residents safeguard against self-contamination, likewise took great pains to distinguish themselves from what the prevention presumed to be colonia behaviors. Premised on the City-County Health District's reports of colonia residents' consumption of fecal-contaminated well water, the intervention aimed to instruct householders in basic sanitary education (i.e., demonstrating the dangerous link between fecal contamination of drinking water and intestinal illnesses) and in low-cost measures to purify well water (e.g., chlorination). Modeled on successful interventions undertaken throughout Latin America, the intervention had frustrated its planners and implementers, for according to a follow-up survey one year after the intervention, fewer than one-half of the trained families adhered to the practices advocated by the intervention. One reason quickly became clear in my interviews.

The intervention had been premised on a flawed assumption that revealed what Teresa de Lauretis (1997) calls the “violence of rhetoric”: none
of the interviewed colonia residents reported that they had ever drunk water from their on-site wells. Rather, they reserved that water for general nonpotable uses (though they often expressed reluctance to bathe or wash dishes or clothes in it). They simply described it as unsuitable. It smelled bad, and it left an itchy residue on the skin. Most residents obtained drinking water from city-supplied standpipes or taps at venues such as churches, a local lumberyard, or the homes of kin living in the city. This in itself was a remarkable finding. It suggested to me that health officials may have engaged in a slippage between describing colonia residents as using contaminated well water and drinking contaminated well water. Even if perhaps some colonia residents had, in the early 1980s, drunk well water, the generalizations about colonia residents, propagated by Nickey and others over the course of more than a decade, had not only brought much-needed federal aid to colonias. These generalizations also perpetuated acts of violence upon residents—intrusions into their most private and personal spaces—that explained some residents' open hostility to reasonably helpful environmental health interventions (after all, this particular intervention provided useful information on the secure storage and dispensing of drinking water). Target families were well aware of the assumptions about colonia residents' excremental violations underlying the design of the intervention. It was this, more than the lessons of the intervention itself (which residents all largely agreed was useful), to which residents objected.

Residents expressed their hostility to the intervention by indicating their awareness of city residents' imagining of colonia residents as self-soiling, a characterization that extended to all colonia residents irrespective of their actual sanitation practices and physical facilities. As one participant acidly pointed out, "People think we are poor because we live in colonias, and in Mexico only poor people do not have water or plumbing." She went on to provide a counternarrative of Mexican hygiene; Mexicans, she asserted, are hypervigilant of cleanliness because to be poor in Mexico "is one thing, to be dirty is another." Another resident, after coldly receiving my assistant, declared: "You people don't know how we live here. You just think you do." He then described how his family was well aware of the dangers of dirty hands, dirty bathrooms, and so forth—knowledge, he said, that the intervention presumed he lacked.

An interview with one of the intervention's promoters was particularly telling. Over the course of a long afternoon, this promoter told me

how powerless she felt to combat the powerful normative discourse that had converted her into a colonia resident. Like many of her neighbors, before moving to the colonia, she had never before lived without plumbing or city-supplied water. She had grown up in Amarillo, Texas, and had moved to El Paso with her husband, who wanted to be closer to his family in Juárez. Although she and her husband had prepared themselves for the physical hardships of homesteading by planning before their move how to secure drinking water, they found themselves shocked at the presumptions about colonia residents that they regularly encountered on their trips to the city, in the local media, or from their children's experiences in the local public schools. Much of this sensation, she recalled, was vague—she could not pinpoint its source. However, with some reluctance, she confessed that the intervention itself had proven decisively to her that those who did not live in colonias regarded colonia residents as lacking a basic sanitary code of behavior. During the course of her training as a promoter, she found herself struggling for distance from the normative notion of the typical colonia resident. At the same time, she eagerly sought to appropriate the tools that could help such residents overcome the behaviors that had so stigmatized them and the larger space in which they all lived. She admitted that she had embraced the horror of her neighbors' putative hygienic violations, which then did not bear up upon actual encounter with many residents themselves. To be sure, she assured me, there were certainly some residents whose sanitary behaviors and conditions she felt could benefit from the intervention's lessons, but far fewer than she had imagined. Moreover, she encountered great variation among her neighbors. While some of them were indeed quite poor, many were not and were in fact more solidly lower-middle-class, like her and her family.

Strategic Appropriation of "Colonia"

In the mid-1990s, residents in colonias knew that they remained suspect of self-soiling long after infrastructure installations. The spatial logic had become tautological, revealing how the violence of rhetoric takes on material force. Initially, the presence of self-soiling defined colonias as distinct spaces. Nonetheless the persistent efforts to redraw the boundaries of colonias outside of oneself were not the only response to what Silva (1998) calls the process of colonialization. Some embraced the language of uneven development and in so doing sought to upset the process that created colonias; they appropriated the term "colonia" as
part of a strategy for taking control over the very excremental problems that created the spatial stigma of colonias. They engaged in what Bakhtin (1968) called displaced abjection—the appropriation of oppressive discourse for subversive political ends. As federal monies began to flow toward the border for infrastructure improvements in colonias, in the mid-1990s, I encountered greater discussion about whether areas that had traditionally not been called "colonias" might now call themselves colonias. Some noncolonias began to call themselves colonias to stake a claim on federal funding that could greatly benefit border communities lacking a significant tax base for public works and social services expenditures. While securing welfare state largesse would hardly seem to be a subversive undertaking, in the context of the highly charged atmosphere that had so tainted colonias as sites of excremental violation, it indeed takes a certain bravery to willingly appropriate the term. And those who did so only did so with the confidence that they could control its meaning—in other words, they intended to sever the term from its excremental origins and in so doing resignify the space of colonias while resignifying themselves.

The discussion reached Sunland Park, New Mexico, an incorporated community abutting El Paso's western city limits, in the fall of 1994. Unlike a colonia, Sunland Park had been platted before lots were sold. Its streets were laid out on a neat grid, residents enjoyed water, sewerage, and electricity, and most lived along paved streets. Nonetheless residents wondered if they undid their articles of incorporation whether they might be eligible for some "colonia" funds. One evening in the fall of 1994 at a crowded meeting of the Concerned Citizens of Sunland Park, one resident commented, "Somos más una colonia que city![We are more a colonia than a city]." Well aware that colonias had a distinct and negative notoriety associated with excremental pollution, the concerned citizens nonetheless debated whether the designation could help them defeat what they viewed as their corrupt city hall and bring federal help for their principal environmental concern, a hazardous-waste landfill operating adjacent to one of the city's wells. Sunland Park residents expressed their willingness to appropriate the term precisely because of its associations with effluent waste, but only because they felt they could turn those associations to their advantage. Key, however, in this appropriation was the source of water pollution. The contamination that they feared in their drinking water did not stem from the presumed habits of individual households but rather came from the actions of a suspect waste management company. Implicitly acknowledging that "colonias" were about pollution, they considered calling their community a colonia to close down a polluting agent.

On other occasions in their effort to obtain bureaucratic redress for their lack of infrastructure, colonia residents vigorously identified themselves as colonia residents. They did so, like the Concerned Citizens of Sunland Park, by externalizing the origin and continued source of colonia sanitation and pollution problems, by in effect striving to politicize uneven development and turn the attention back onto the class interests underlying colonias. For example, in August 1994, a group of around thirty residents of Sparks, one of the county's best-known colonias, turned up at a county commissioners meeting to protest the proposed sale of lots north of the interstate highway. While the developer carefully referred to his properties as "minifarms," the Sparks residents boisterously called the real estate a colonia. They raised concerns about the health of prospective lot purchasers, asserting the county's moral obligation to prevent the proliferation of more unsanitary settlements. In so doing, these colonia residents could willingly embrace the term. While they had not necessarily actually separated themselves from their wastes, they had done so symbolically by attributing the problem of colonia excrement to its origins, not the colonia residents but the bureaucrats, elected officials, and developers who had made, and could continue to make, colonias in the first place.

Conclusion

Many have commented that the contemporary moment's extensive ontological reworking of borders—the debordering and rebordering, as Staudt and Spener (1998) put it—calls for more than descriptions of "transverse borders," but instead a wholly new epistemology of borders and boundaries (see especially Price 2000). Borders need to be understood as not simply productions of an innate, structural human tendency to deploy what Mary Douglas (1966) calls "pollution rules" to mark social limits when a social order feels itself under attack. Certainly, pollution rules seem to have risen to the fore in El Paso County, as dirt and disease were the primary symbols that made colonias into distinct spaces to delimit the otherwise vague borderlands. And as Douglas so astutely observed, there does seem to be something particularly compelling about dirt—as matter out of place—that serves to mark the temporal and spatial limits of modernity. The hallmark of Western civilization, noted Norbert
Elías, is the ability to separate oneself from one's bodily waste (Elías 1978). Because open sewers both define the Third World and harken back to the nineteenth century (Reid 1991), their contemporary presence seems irrefutable evidence of significant social difference between those who have perfected the individual and collective care of the self and those who have not.

Nonetheless it is vitally important to recognize the particular material processes of uneven development that enlivened the discourses of dirt and disease that came to mark El Paso’s border in the mid-1980s, and to pay attention to how those discourses became constitutive of uneven development itself. In this we may obtain a more effective epistemological grasp on the formation of new borders and the means for subverting them ontologically. Ironically, the material impoverishment suffered by many suburban residents of El Paso County became the means by which the metaphors of the border became so enriched. Colonía discourse, because it emerged from processes of wealth accumulation that disadvantaged poor suburban residents, obstructed colonia residents’ access to the most transformative visions of the border metaphor, that which, as Chela Sandoval writes, “self-consciously transform[s] . . . identity” in a way that “maneuvers, poetically transfigures, and orchestrates while demanding alienation, perversion, and reformation in both spectator and practitioners” (1991, 3, 15). So long as colonia residents are subjected to the spatial label of colonias and the predatory practices of real estate development, they will have only limited access to the transformative material and discursive possibilities that the border’s indeterminacy holds. So long as they remain imprisoned in normative imaginings of themselves as unrelentingly, statically dirty Mexicans, wrongly positioned on the north side of the border, they will remain on the downside of material power. But, as the closing section of this chapter illustrates, colonia residents may just be beginning to upset the colonia balance of power.

Notes
I am grateful to Jeff Maskovsky and to participants in the Eighteenth Latin American Labor History Conference, particularly my commentators Danny James and Anure Horton, for their careful reading of earlier versions of this chapter. (And I offer my apologies for obstinately failing to heed all of their suggestions.) I also thank Megan Reynolds for her encouragement and contributions to some of this article’s substantive points.

1. There is now extensive information available on colonias, including dozens of studies, reports, and Web resources, produced by agencies ranging from the El Paso Community Foundation and the Texas Attorney General’s Office to the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

2. A note on methodology: George Towers’s (1991) thorough combing of the local newspapers archived on microfilm yielded the rich reference list on which my historical investigation is based.

3. Prior to 1987, while not an unknown term to El Paso newspaper readers, “colonia” carried no particular social or spatial signification and certainly no social stigma in El Paso; it was a term, if recognized at all, as something that referred to spaces across the border in Ciudad Juárez, where until the early 1980s “colonia” simply meant neighborhood or community. In fact, Juárez’s most elite subdivision of the 1960s and 1970s was named “Colonía Los Nogales.” The term’s meaning shifted in Juárez when the city’s population boomed and the PRI (Mexico’s longtime ruling party) lost control of land allocation. Beginning in the 1980s, impoverished settlements organized by maverick political brokers proliferated on the city edges. As these settlements have all been called “colonias,” “colonia” has come to refer specifically to working-class or poor settlements. Thus, for some time now, developers in Ciudad Juárez have called their fully serviced subdivisions “fraccionamientos” (which translates literally as “subdivision”) to make clear to prospective buyers that they are purchasing real estate in middle-class neighborhoods, rather than in working-class “colonias” (Hill 2002).

4. This imagery has captured attention not only locally but nationally. From the moment of their naming, in these early 1987 accounts, colonias quickly burst their boundaries to become a problem of national concern. In August 1987, the Washington Post featured a headline story entitled “El Paso’s Perimeter of Poverty,” and Newsweek, NBC’s Today Show, and Life magazine soon ran features on colonias. Within months Congress announced plans to hold hearings to learn the magnitude of the “colonia problem” on the border. The border is made and remade in the periodic return, by national media outlets, to colonias. In April 1995, the New York Times published a lengthy feature on colonias, and in October of that year, CBS’s Sixty Minutes broadcast a segment on colonias in El Paso County.

5. Typical headlines ran: “City, County Discuss Plans to Control Subdivision Sales” (El Paso Herald Post, 17 April 1986); “Developers outside El Paso Are Targeted” (El Paso Times, 22 July 1982); “City Begins Subdivision Crackdown” (El Paso Times, 2 July 1983); “City Files Lawsuit over Subdivisions’ Failure to Conform” (El Paso Herald Post, 2 July 1983); “El Paso Targets Illegal Subdivisions” (El Paso Herald Post, 21 February 1984); “City Moves In on Developers outside City Limits” (El Paso Times, 21 July 1984).

6. This is especially clear in the Herald Post’s 104-page supplement, published in the summer of 1983, which devoted one-third of its coverage to the
topic of “illegal aliens.” One story documented Mexican American violence against “illegal aliens” who crossed the river into the predominantly poor, Hispanic neighborhoods of South El Paso, and others featured complaints about illegal aliens by several of the city’s leading Mexican Americans. Nationally known historian Oscar Martinez stated boldly that the illegal “affects and hurts the image of the Hispanic here” (El Paso Herald Post, summer 1983, 24).

7. This funding came through the declaration of colonias as “economically distressed areas” (EDAP) and has been appropriated to colonias all along the Texas border, not just in El Paso County. See Ward 1999.

References


