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Purity and Danger on the U.S-Mexico Border, 1991–1994

Of this unrest I myself saw nothing. In private I observed that once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians. There is no woman living along the frontier who has not dreamed of a dark barbarian hand coming from under the bed to grip her ankle, there is no man who has not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing in his home, breaking the plates, setting fire to the curtains, raping his daughters. These dreams are the consequence of too much ease. Show me a barbarian army and I will believe.

—J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*

If you visit American city,
You will find it very pretty.
Just two things of which you must beware:
Don't drink the water and don't breathe the air.

—Tom Lehrer, "Pollution"

In the early 1990s, the U.S.-Mexico border region acquired an environment—a polluted and threatening environment.

During this time, there appeared in the media, in numerous policy and "gray literature" documents, in the parlance of activists, and increasingly in the everyday imaginings of Americans living both near and far from the boundary line something commonsensically called "the

border environment.” This commonsensicality achieved enough recurring believability that “the border environment” took on iconic status and intuitively came to index the predicted dangers inherent in the then-being-debated North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In fact, “the border environment” became one of the NAFTA critics’ most potent weapons for galvanizing popular opposition to the treaty. Although it is impossible to precisely trace the effects of this border discourse on NAFTA’s final form, depictions of the border as a polluted zone certainly contributed to the famed side accords on labor and the environment that were intended to temper the deregulatory impact of NAFTA when it was subsequently ratified by the U.S. Congress in November 1993. NAFTA, it has been widely observed, was the world’s first trade treaty in which environmental issues played a defining role not only in the actual language of the treaty itself but also in the public perception of what the treaty would do to the conditions in which average citizens lived.¹

More than a decade later, environmental concerns about the U.S.-Mexico border have receded into the background, while concerns about illegal immigration and global terrorism have taken center stage. Yet all the conditions of the border environment that made their way into the mainstream reporting in the early 1990s can still be found: the shanties, the squatter settlements, the open sewers, the illegal dumping. Indeed, some conditions — such as air quality — are decidedly worse, thanks to increased vehicular traffic in booming border cities. Examining the discursive construction of the border environment in the 1990s, especially through the media’s reporting on NAFTA, offers some clues as to why the urgency of thinking about the border environment in the contemporary catalog of American dangers and concerns has diminished considerably. It seems plausible to conclude that environmental concerns have faded at least in part because the environment was never truly the focus of popular opposition; rather, it stood in for, albeit sometimes inadvertently, the belief that the Mexican immigrant was the real source of pollution.

The environment at the center of projections of NAFTA’s future was the far-distant environment of the U.S.-Mexico border region. Yet media coverage succeeded in making this threat seem immediate to the lives of Americans all over the nation, so much so that many Americans initially opposed NAFTA, reportedly for environmental reasons. I contend that the environment depicted in NAFTA media coverage was so alarming, even to Americans living far from the border, because this environment mimicked

something already inherently antipathetic and threatening to many Americans: Mexican immigration. Indeed, the implicit link drawn in media representations between immigration and the border environment not only enhanced what historians have shown is a traditional American stereotyping of Mexicans as dirty, unhygienic, and self-soiling;² it also made the prospects of uncontrolled immigration seem both *naturally* inevitable and consequently more threatening. By linking “dirty” immigrant Mexicans to a “dirty” border environment, the NAFTA-era media coverage of the U.S.-Mexico border not only reinforced existing stereotypes but also provided nativists with another seemingly natural reason to disparage and denigrate Mexicans. Furthermore, it stoked demands for greater immigration control,³ which in turn further fueled seemingly logical associations between immigration and environmental degradation. This nativist discourse figured—sometimes prominently—in the rhetoric of environmental activist groups that opposed NAFTA, especially those, such as Ralph Nader’s, that were based in Washington, D.C. Since anti-Mexican immigration has had a particularly durable persistence in the repertoire of American nativist habits of thought,⁴ the “pollution rules” that the environmental opposition to NAFTA inspired were, in fact, rules of Mexican immigrant exclusion.

In her seminal essay on cross-cultural rituals of avoidance, *Purity and Danger* (1966), British social anthropologist Mary Douglas observed that pollution’s material composition is always culturally specific; dirt, she noted, lies in the eye of the beholder. Moreover, dirt is never absolute. It is, rather, “matter out of place.” By way of illustration, Douglas suggested that shoes on the floor are not dirty, while shoes on the coffee table are.⁵ Keeping Douglas’s observations in mind, I suggest that what the media presented along the U.S.-Mexico border during 1991–94 was an extreme portrait of “matter out of place” implicitly borne by the movement of people out of place: Mexican immigrants. This is not to say that air, water, and ground contamination did not exist at the border or that border cities had no public health problems. In fact, border cities did face unique public health and pollution situations. But why these very local concerns mattered to people living far from the border in the American heartland can be attributed on the one hand (in part) to the implicit mobility of the border environment itself, as depicted in the media, and on the other hand to the recurring suggestions that Mexicans routinely self-soil so that wherever they travel, their dirt goes with them. The “filthiness” of the border environment appeared in the media as immanently associated with a population that was always

on the move and ever threatening to expand beyond its existing territory. In short, the border environment implicitly threatened to expand its elastic boundaries northward and in so doing transport its inherently tainted, degraded conditions deep into mainstream and mainland America.

In this essay, I detail first how reporting in the 1970s characterized the border as porous, vulnerable, and ultimately boundaryless through a mixture of natural and martial imagery. I trace this emerging taken-for-granted character of the border through 1980s coverage of pollution on the border and then turn to the NAFTA period to show how characterizations of the border's degraded environment became a surrogate for immigration-writ-large through depictions of trespassing, soiling, and contaminating matter and bodies that appeared to threaten the integrity, safety, economic security, and hygienic future of the American nation.⁶ Finally, I examine in detail the imagery at the heart of the mobile border environment and show how these images contributed to the naturalization of the self-soiling of Mexican immigrants.

The Politics of Representation

The larger question indirectly addressed in this essay concerns the nature of environmental representation and environmental politics.⁷ In the enduring age of “virtual reproduction” (to borrow from Walter Benjamin),⁸ we experience in mediated form environments that we don't physically come into contact with. That is, we experience them through a medium other than nature itself: the mass media, for example. Thus, we can “know” of “pristine” wilderness environments by viewing images of stately forests, majestic mountains, and dazzling wildlife widely disseminated through television, print journalism and—with growing frequency—the Internet. The endless repetition of such images enables us to believe that environments are *real* even if we've never touched a particular environment.⁹ As Bruce Braun demonstrated in his study of the cultural politics of Canada's temperate rainforests, the materiality of any environment is an epistemological problem, one that is both posed and solved (in part) by representation in the media.¹⁰ And as Braun also observed, whether or not humans appear in representations of nature does not fully disguise the fact that such representations implicitly express a human imprint on nature. While it might be hard to see “culture” in pictures of “pristine” nature, Braun argues that images of nature always imply where humans belong (far from nature)

and don't belong (in nature), unless the humans depicted are of nature (e.g., First Nations). It is, of course, much easier to see the implicit presence of humans in images of degraded nature. We can know that an environment is degraded by iconic images of human things inappropriately mingled with nature: tires clogging a waterway, plastic flotsam and jetsam strewn across a patch of desert, or factory smokestacks staining the sky black with billowing emissions. Each such image not only indexes deteriorated nature, each also implicitly narrates human imprints on nature: *People* litter, *industries* pollute. What is sometimes less clear, however, is what kind of human culture is implied in images of degraded nature, or, in other words, *which* humans are to blame. For this, the images drawn in words as accompanying text become crucial; they guide our reading of pictures and help us see otherwise invisible blame.

While imagery can't tell us everything about environmental politics, it can tell us something important. Representational imagery can reveal what Raymond Williams called the "structure of feelings," the almost inchoate organization of cultural affect around the political economy of nature-society relations. Moreover, as Williams also demonstrated, sociospatial language, metaphor, and representation do not merely reflect views on nature. They both emerge from political history and also effect political and material consequences.¹¹ The entanglement at the border of environmental imagery with anti-immigration sentiments is one instance of a more complicated late-twentieth-century set of political economic projects that deployed environmentalist rhetoric or goals for otherwise regressive or questionable ends. These kinds of environmentalized projects include "development"¹² and rural resource control and exploitation.¹³ In addition, nativist movements elsewhere in the world have found environmental imagery a particularly potent tool in producing anti-immigrant sympathy.¹⁴

NAFTA's representational trail began in early 1990, shortly after newly elected Mexican president Carlos Salinas de Gortari announced to his U.S. counterpart, George H. W. Bush, that he sought a comprehensive trade pact with the U.S. and Canada. Unions and environmental organizations promptly joined forces to oppose any such treaty.¹⁵ Their mobilization was itself partly fueled by what the media had already revealed about existing trade relations with Mexico, which at that point were largely limited to a narrow "free trade zone" along Mexico's northern frontier, just south of American cities such as El Paso, Brownsville, and San Diego. The steady slide of U.S. manufacturing across the border to a cheaper labor market and

the largely unenforced pollution regulation of Mexico suggested to labor unions and environmental organizations that NAFTA would only produce more of the same. They reacted to the news of proposed free trade talks with Mexico swiftly and aggressively. Labor leaders were joined by environmental organizations, both those in the border region and the international environmental “Big Ten,” based in Washington, D.C., and New York. In a concerted publicity and lobbying effort, these groups banded together to strike the only vulnerable target of any future trade deals: They sought to prevent congressional renewal of the president’s authority to negotiate trade relations on the “fast track,” that is, without congressional line-item veto power. Initially, that authority was set to expire in June 1990 (though procedural stopgaps kept the issue open until May 1991).

The monumental scale of NAFTA’s proposal—to integrate the economies of nearly half a billion people into a single open market—endowed it with the capacity to generate what anthropologist Phyllis Pease Chock calls a “myth-making” national identity event, a legislative debate that reverberates far beyond congressional hearing rooms with iterations of “canonical versions of national myths and hegemonic ideology” in opposition to immigration.¹⁶ It is perhaps not surprising that NAFTA’s prospective equivalency of the Canadian, U.S., and Mexican economies and populations would provoke anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican rhetoric on the part of legislators and that this, in turn, would filter through media representations of areas already affected by trade with Mexico, or areas that would be affected by NAFTA. However, the myth-making that ensued during the fast-track debates drew on, as I shall detail shortly, an existing repertoire of images that showed Mexican immigration to be essentially threatening to the *entire* American nation. In other words, the media provided some of the raw material from which legislators could make their mythical claims, or in the words of a former environmental organization staff member who was closely involved in NAFTA, the media came up with “those shocking visuals” that played particularly well in congressional chambers.¹⁷ In turn, this rhetorical feedback loop between the media and law makers enhanced what Nicholas de Genova terms the larger “border spectacle” that has naturalized the hardening categories of legal and illegal immigration and consequently reified the popular presumption of guilt—for all kinds of alleged crimes—on the part of Mexican immigrants.¹⁸

Indeed, during the period of the fast-track debates, the media provided ample opportunities for Americans to view the border environment. Sierra

Club's John Audley's Lexis-Nexis research identified that while the majority of the thousands of newspaper articles published during the fast-track debates concerned labor, business and agricultural issues, nonetheless, 15 percent of that coverage presented an environmental focus.¹⁹ Clearly, the media helped link environmental issues to NAFTA for Americans not directly engaged in the lobbying for or against fast-track.

By May 1991, NAFTA had become a central issue for incipient primary campaigning for the 1992 general elections, even though by then the negotiations were well under way. NAFTA's growing popular opposition prompted President Bush to ensure that "labor" and "environment" would be protected through negotiations external to the treaty, conducted on a "parallel track." Despite that gesture, Bush encountered anti-NAFTA challengers from within his own party primary fight in advance of the 1992 presidential elections. Bush found himself fending off anti-NAFTA Republican opponents including Pat Buchanan, whose unvarnished anti-immigrant claims hyperbolically warned that NAFTA would propel millions of Mexicans to cross the border illegally, in the wake of NAFTA's crushing of Mexican economic autonomy. The turning point for the successful Democratic challenger, Bill Clinton, came when he promised to support NAFTA only if the parallel-track negotiations were substantiated.²⁰ The electorate's growing worries about NAFTA siphoned votes away from Bush and funneled them toward the quixotic billionaire third-party candidate, Ross Perot, who famously promised that NAFTA would result in "a giant sucking sound" of jobs going to Mexico. Despite his defeat, Bush signed NAFTA in December 1992, leaving Clinton to work out the details of his promised side accords in the next nine months before a ratification deadline.

Between January and September 1993, a coalition of seven environmental organizations and several labor unions worked feverishly to draft the side accords. In the meantime, anti-NAFTA labor and environmental organizations continued to lobby against NAFTA's ratification. During this period the press focused intensely on the issues invoked by NAFTA's organized opposition (Audley found a total of 20,000 articles in his Lexis-Nexis search of NAFTA coverage during the entire NAFTA debates, from June 1990 to November 1994). It is important to recognize that most of the feature-length coverage of the border environment appeared after a split between moderate and adversarial environmental groups (in May 1991). While the moderate groups tried to distance themselves from some of the media

coverage of the border (at least in how some staffers now recall those days in my discussions with them), the adversarial groups continued to link the border environment to illegal immigration and did not shy away from fanning the flames of fear. The adversarial groups continued to work the press with doomsday environmental scenarios and quite happily joined forces with the nakedly anti-immigrant, anti-Mexican NAFTA opponents Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot. Indeed, Perot's impressive political following suggests he managed to "elevate the symbolic potency of NAFTA's threat to national sovereignty and industrial decline."²¹

In the end, the split in the environmental movement caused many congressional representatives to turn away from the environment as a compelling reason for the treaty's support or objection, meaning that on the day of ratification, environmental issues receded into the background, leaving jobs and prospects for economic growth at the forefront.²² NAFTA's environmental side agreement essentially boiled down to some commitments to protect the environment of the three signatory nations and a commission to oversee environmental concerns (the Commission for Economic Cooperation) and arguably had little significant impact, in the view of some international legal scholars.²³ Nonetheless, the border environment had by then been created.

Naturalizing Immigration: Water Imagery and the War against Nature

The troubling features of the border environment—its teeming untreated, illegally discharged effluent, both industrial and human—echoed characterizations of immigrants themselves, who, prior to the emergence of NAFTA as a concern for the media, had dominated reporting on the border. In fact, in the 1970s and 1980s, a "border" story was almost always an immigration story,²⁴ with the exception of a handful of stories that appeared in the late 1980s, which focused not on illegal immigration of Mexicans to the U.S. but on the effects of American firms that had migrated the south of the border to set up shop to produce goods for the U.S. market and in so doing frequently took advantage of Mexico's anemic enforcement of pollution regulations.

So what did these immigration stories look like? In his book-length study of magazine cover stories on immigration, Leo Chávez found a thickening anti-immigrant sentiment not only in the visual imagery representing immigration, but also in the metaphoric language and the actual tone of

magazine reporting from 1965 to 1999. Thus, even though magazine covers in the month of July (the month of America's "birthday") of any given year tended toward more favorable depictions of immigrants, the general tenor of immigration coverage since 1965 has steadily but persistently moved toward ways of sanctioning and bolstering nativism. This all has bearing on how the border came to be a cultural space defined by immigration, but perhaps the most important trope in doing that work has been the use of water imagery. In my view, this water imagery has three principal effects. First, its crude sensationalism helps present illegal immigration as an urgent crisis. Typically, in the 1970s and 1980s, immigration features pictured "invading" Mexicans easily traversing boundary rivers, "flooding" across the border in "incalculable waves."²⁵ They "surge" in streams that become "torrent[s]" and "deluge[s]."²⁶ At the same time the natural boundary between the two countries is but a poor defense—a "skimpy barrier"—against the nature of immigrants. The Border Patrol, by its own admission, "is all but powerless to do more than hinder the swelling tide."²⁷ Like water from some mysterious underground source "communities of sorts . . . spring up in the staging areas for illegal crossers."²⁸ A Border Patrol spokesman complains that the efforts of "Customs, D.E.A., Immigration and others" are "just a drop in the bucket against them."²⁹

Neither the timing nor language in immigration features were incidental or accidental, as Tim Dunn has shown. Stories typically appeared when immigration enforcement agencies sought increased budgets and expanded policing mandates. Dunn also observed that the Immigration and Naturalization Service provided the nearly exclusive sources that journalists used in the early days of immigration reporting.³⁰ Indeed, agencies' ambitions led not only to the sensationalist and hyperbolic language of their press releases and congressional testimony but also to their intentional efforts to whip up anti-immigrant fervor: In the 1970s, INS reportedly doctored immigration estimates in order to produce a national sense of urgency.³¹ Their efforts to produce a popular sense of immigration as a national security threat worked especially well when immigration stories appeared during downturns in the U.S. economy.

The second effect of the recurring water imagery in immigration stories is that this trope has helped to characterize what is often described as a "battle" against immigrants as a struggle against *nature*. In other words, water imagery suggests that immigrants possess a natural essence that threatens American culture and civilization. This, in turn, has helped char-

acterize the border as a zone unlike the rest of the United States, one that is *naturally*—by virtue of the Mexican immigrant presence there—not American. In the ensuing years, media reports have only further reinforced the conflation of Mexican/immigrant culture with nature. And that kind of thinking, anthropologist Franz Boas long ago observed, reveals a racist impulse to characterize members of some cultures (e.g., Mexican) as unassimilable.

Scholars of Mexican immigration have long observed that while most immigrant populations in the U.S. have suffered outsider status for a period of a few decades at most, Mexicans in the U.S. have withstood this characterization largely without stop since the end of the Mexican-American war.³² The media have contributed substantially to this phenomenon.³³ For example, during the run-up to the hotly debated Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, media coverage of Mexico, Mexicans, and the border turned Mexican immigrants into “aliens”—the new preferred term for immigrants lacking legal status to be in the U.S.—and characterized the border as an alien space, populated by humans who are described in other-than-human ways. According to Immigration and Customs officials, the border was a “horror” and “a monster, growing, feeding on itself.” On the border, stolen vehicles were “cannibalized” and youth gangs “who could come from the American or Mexican side” “pounce on their prey” and the weaker among their own numbers.³⁴

One sustaining feature in descriptions of Mexican immigrants’ alienness has long centered on their purported lack of hygiene. The popular epithet “greasers,” for example, a term used for Mexicans in the nineteenth century, provided a coded term to signify the inherent dirtiness of Mexicans.³⁵ In fact, the suspiciously subjective official view of Mexicans as dirtier than other immigrants helped give birth to the U.S. Public Health Service, as Alex Stern has documented in her history of El Paso’s bath riots in 1917. Immigrants from Europe who landed at Ellis Island at this time were famously treated to the poking and prodding of physicians and, if found ill, subjected to a delousing or to other sanitizing treatments.³⁶ By contrast, *all* Mexicans walking across El Paso’s Santa Fe bridge in 1917 were stripped and sprayed with disinfectant, and sometimes had their clothes destroyed, in general a much more rigorous inspection that *presumed* Mexicans were infected by “filth diseases” before inspection began.³⁷ This difference is notable and durable, and as we shall see shortly, vital to the normative idea of the border environment, by the early 1990s.

The third by-product of water imagery stems from how it contributes to the idea that the borderlands are boundaryless; in other words, as long as a steady stream of immigrants flows across the political boundary, the immigrant space of the “border” will keep seeping (northward). Indeed, some Mexican American intellectuals and political activists have celebrated the inherent elasticity of the border as a place: they claim that wherever Chicanos/Mexicanos are found—as in Chicago—the “border” is found as well.³⁸ But in the 1980s such elasticity became one of the threats routinely invoked by advocates of immigration restriction who called immigration an “invasion” that will “tak[e] over our [entire] nation” if “we don’t control these borders.”³⁹

In combination, the three features of immigration water imagery helped shape a popular notion of the border as a polluted place: American soil contaminated by Mexicans, and therefore—by implication—in need of containment before further spreading takes place. These three features of water imagery in turn contributed significantly to how the border environment became so easily imaginable when the anti-NAFTA forces called attention to industrialization’s impacts in Mexico’s northern corridor once NAFTA negotiations were announced. Before turning to that media coverage, let us briefly explore the character of stories on what is more conventionally understood as “pollution” at the U.S.-Mexico border. These, as we shall see, also reinforce the commonsensical nature of Mexican immigration as a pollutant.

Pollution: It Comes from Mexico

Occasionally in the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, journalists ventured far into Mexico. Tellingly, however, a stock theme in any lengthy coverage of Mexico included primarily “immigration,” and rarely “emigration.”⁴⁰ This tendency to focus on the impact in the U.S. of the cross-border movement of people (rather than exploring how Mexico was affected) resonated in the early pollution reporting generated in response to U.S. industrial relocation to northern Mexico. In this reporting, local health personnel in El Paso, San Diego, and Brownsville reportedly described health conditions in border cities in terms of immigration: They noted that “pollutants” which “are being transported across the border in the wind” invade, like illegal immigrants, “[without] a green card [i.e., a residency permit].” An “18-mile-long open sewage ditch in Ciudad Juárez” is troubling because “disease-carrying

mosquitoes . . . don't know north from south. And they don't carry green cards." "Air [pollution] doesn't stop at the border." And the Tijuana River, which receives "12 million gallons of raw sewage a day," "does not recognize the U.S. border" and consequently contaminates San Diego beaches.⁴¹ Almost without exception, references to transboundary health problems in the late 1980s began, like immigrants, in Mexico and migrated with their ill effects to the U.S. side of the border. According to this logic, "pollution knows no border," as one *Christian Science Monitor* headline put it, but that logic was firmly grounded in U.S. concerns, as if to say, "Mexico's pollution does not respect boundaries."

Many of these accounts also stressed that what emanated from Mexico was fundamentally different than what is ordinarily found in the U.S. So, on the one hand the two sides of the boundary seem starkly different, as different as the "first world" is from the "third world," as many articles put it. At the same time, however, the accounts suggested that what's in Mexico does not stay there. So the "squalid living conditions," "putrid open sewers," "reeking contaminated canals," "squatter camps," "shanty towns," and even the "filthy, unsafe plants" that characterize the Mexican side of the border always seemed poised to spill over onto the U.S. side, following the logic that "pollution knows no boundaries." The commonplace Mexican practices of "indiscriminate and widespread dumping of . . . garbage and industrial wastes" that "trash . . . the landscape" also thus "poison" the implicitly cross-boundary "water and soil."⁴² These repetitions of "different" but "merging" conditions suggested that the border's pollution rules took shape by heightening the sense that what Mary Douglas calls a "system" (the environmentally clean U.S.) had come under attack by literal dirt from Mexico.

One way in which pollution (literal and symbolic) seemed to dissolve the boundary between the U.S. and Mexico while simultaneously creating the commonsense notion of "the border" as a shared space was through a rhetorical juxtaposition that many of the border stories employ. Border stories, even more so than the previous generation of immigration stories, needed to cover a lot of diverse settings in order to produce a coherent narrative of the border. Thus "border" stories typically hop-scotched around different boundary cities—from Brownsville to Tijuana—presenting each as characteristic of a larger, seamless geography with discernible features: illegal immigration, poverty, booming industrialization, and filth (with negative valences) and Spanish language, Mexican food, and lively music (with neutral to positive valences). Repetition of the form provided

the building blocks from which the whole—"the border"—was eventually constructed. For example, after extolling the accomplishments of manufacturing in northern Mexico, a 1989 *Wall Street Journal* article⁴³ paused briefly to describe a factory-worker settlement outside of the booming industrial city of Nogales, Sonora. Using the settlement as illustrative, the article explained that the success of foreign-owned factories in Mexico has "turned the border region into a sinkhole of abysmal living conditions" because a "huge, continuing migration of people looking for work has simply overwhelmed the already-shaky infrastructure." Such "shantytowns" where the squatters live "spring up overnight." Not only did these shantytowns echo the descriptions of waves of unstoppable illegal immigration that overwhelm the Border Patrol; they also drove home the point that the border has common features, all up and down—and on both sides of—the 2,000-mile line. For example, because "the border region" referred to in the article entails both sides of the boundary, conditions in Mexico (a factory-worker shantytown) could apparently just as easily show up on the north side of the boundary line. Like the movement of immigrants, border pollution does not stay put.

The Border Environment: Cesspools and Love Canals in the Making

The use of "shocking" visuals and the rhetorical mobility of discrete events and conditions that formed the basis of border reporting and, in turn, border pollution reporting became increasingly reckless during the NAFTA debates: Any remote—and unflattering—feature of Mexico could portend the U.S.'s free-trade future and came to signify the expanding border. Reporters quite deliberately erased distance and social and regulatory differences in order to project a seamless environmental disaster that was but a heartbeat away from spreading across the continent. In one characteristic example, Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes* asked viewers to "take a look" "across the border from Texas at the garbage dumps of Mexico City," as if Mexico City were six miles—rather than six hundred—from the nearest point in Texas and as if conditions in Mexico City were synonymous with those on the border.⁴⁴ Like the Mexican aliens in the older immigration reporting, who purportedly "threaten the entire nation," the border itself now presented "a growing environmental nightmare that if left unchecked, could spread to the rest of our nation," according to U.S. Senator Howard Metzenbaum.⁴⁵ As popular opinion turned against NAFTA, this kind of hysteria

came to seem quite logical. It repeatedly appeared in the border's evidence of the unrestrainable forces of migrancy that NAFTA would unleash: Factories would migrate to Mexico, taking American jobs with them, while more Mexican illegal immigrants and toxic wastes would flood north. In short, unwanted movement became the means by which the border environment became comprehensible to the American public.

However, it was not simply unwanted movement but particular components of the border environment's pollution that helped linked Mexican immigration to environmental problems. Several tropes routinely appeared in the characterization of the border environment's threatening capacity to grow and grow. One was the routine characterization of the border as a "2,000-mile garbage dump."⁴⁶ But the most interesting images were a pair of metaphors that were often deployed in conjunction with one another: the "cesspool" and "Love Canal." The image of the cesspool became nearly required language in border reporting following the publication of an editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in June 1990, shortly after the fast-track vote. The article stated that "the border area is a virtual cesspool and breeding ground for disease."⁴⁷

In light of the numerous factories along the border, press reports of industrial dumping, chemical spills, and the like, it might seem strange that the AMA would employ an essentially excremental/bodily metaphor to call attention to the border's health conditions. In fact, the cesspool metaphor logically refracted the light cast by the immigration lens through which the border had been traditionally projected. Because the border had been rendered believable through images of migrancy and immigration, it is logical that one of the key metaphors to define the border environment should rest, at least implicitly, on a presumed social characteristic of immigrants—their intimacy with excrement. The cesspool became a compelling metaphor for the border environment precisely because it assigned blame: Producers of a cesspool, a repository of human wastes, are eminently human. Because the border itself is created out of Mexican immigrants, it is only *natural* that the principal perpetrator of the cesspool should be the Mexican immigrant.

The cesspool and its associations with immigrants resonated not only with long-standing Euro-American stereotypes of Mexicans as dirty but also with more recent media accounts of the border's public health problems. For example, Dr. Laurence Nickey, longtime director of the El Paso City-County Health District and arguably the most quoted of border environmental authorities,⁴⁸ suggested to a *New York Times* reporter in 1988 that

Mexican immigrants lack an essential aversion to their own wastes. In the *colonias* of El Paso County, which are populated by “Americans of Mexican heritage,” Nickey noted that the absence of sanitation “has polluted ground water to the point that many residents are literally drinking their own wastes.”⁴⁹ Similarly, an EPA regional director reported that in poor settlements in Texas, new residents—described as “Mexicans”—“show up, build a house and then drink their own sewage.”⁵⁰ During two days of preliminary meetings between Presidents George Bush and Carlos Salinas to discuss “free trade, immigration and drugs,” *CBS Morning News* aired a brief segment showing how “towns near the Mexican border . . . are paying a high price for low-wage immigrants who are staying and building squalid villages in the canyons of suburban neighborhoods.” Pam Slater, the mayor of Encinitas, California, complained, “These people are performing all the sanitary activities necessary for human survival in the open.”⁵¹

The second trope that routinely appeared in border environmental accounts, the Love Canal, by contrast situated blame not on individual migratory Mexicans, but on the emigrant firms that had relocated to Mexico. By invoking Love Canal, these accounts called to mind U.S. corporate crime and disregard for citizen welfare. The images of cesspools and Love Canal were often deployed in conjunction with one another to indicate environmental conditions of the U.S.-Mexico border, although they linked ideas that worked in opposition to one another. On the one hand, images of Love Canal call up a pivotal moment in American history—when hazardous wastes became an abiding household concern. Most associations of Love Canal (which according to environmental historians Colten and Skinner “has been seared into the collective memory of the country”)⁵² center on corporate abuse of the middle-class families whose neighborhood was poisoned by an industrial giant, Hooker Chemical. The concerns embodied by the signifier “Love Canal” are democratic and middle-class. Love Canal is the tragic but triumphant story of victims of industrial hazardous waste dumping who fought back, bringing a corporation to its knees and helping generate the political will to pass the Superfund legislation. Even for those unfamiliar with housewife-turned-grassroots-environmentalist Lois Gibbs and her Citizens’ Clearing House for Hazardous Wastes, Love Canal evokes frightening images of industrial irresponsibility and chemical hazards. The heroes in the mythic image of Love Canal are average Americans, the villain a greedy corporation.

By contrast, cesspools signal individual irresponsibility and inattention

to hygiene and cleanliness. Love Canal was a community poisoned by the wanton disposal practices of a large, powerful agent far removed from the consequences of its actions. But cesspools are the small, domestic, failed repositories of household wastes. A cesspool is the product of poorly constructed and/or maintained low-tech plumbing typical of rural poverty. Cesspools threaten to subject a household to the dangers of its own excrement, a perpetual concern signaled by border public health and environmental personnel. Love Canal as a metaphor implies villains and victims who are distinct from one another. In contrast, the victims and perpetrators of cesspools gone foul—households sickened with diseases borne in fecal matter—overlap much more completely than do their counterparts in a Love Canal. And herein lies the suggestive power of cesspools. Cesspools readily allow the designation of blamable victims. Perhaps unsurprisingly, during the free-trade era, the cesspool image appeared much more frequently in the press than the Love Canal image did. In the instances where cesspools and Love Canal were deployed side by side, the suggestive power of the cesspool eclipsed the suggestive power of Love Canal by showing that industrial contamination could in fact be blamed on self-soiling Mexicans.⁵³

For example, a widely read article on the border that appeared in *The Atlantic* in 1991 spent some time on industrial pollution: The opening paragraph suggests that industry has contaminated the border: “This much I knew already: the border is a chemical mess. The ground, the water, and sometimes the air have been poisoned. Miscarriage, birth-defect and cancer rates are high. The situation is worse on the Mexican side, where dangerous wastes are dumped haphazardly.” However, the following paragraph, which adds a description of what goes on inside a factory, shows how the cesspool narrative takes over: workers, not a powerful corporation, are to blame: “The dumping is not necessarily intentional: at a General Motors plant in Matamoros which makes bumpers, workers are provided with tanks for emptying their cleaning guns. Instead they simply purge the guns into the drains, which empty into a nearby canal.”⁵⁴ The article did not explore why General Motors might be interested in neglecting to facilitate the disposition of wastes in the legally mandated manner. Rather, readers are left to imagine that Mexican working-class habits—Mexican customs, culture, or nature—are the root cause of the border’s befouled waters. In a separate account (in *U.S. News and World Report*), managers complained that any attempts to operate a maquiladora “up to EPA standards are sometimes stymied by the

slovenly practices of workers.” One manager explained why: “There’s a lot of ignorance on the shop floor and *old habits die hard*.”⁵⁵

Conclusion

No doubt many Americans who feared the border environment in the early 1990s did so because they feared industrial pollution and transnational corporate malfeasance. Nonetheless, it is impossible to dismiss the associations drawn between self-soiling Mexicans, mired in their own excrement, and the larger projection of the expanding border, seeping like a swamped septic system’s drainage field across the greater American landscape. Whether or not this is really what Americans thought would happen with NAFTA, the images of excrement certainly reminded them to consider Mexican immigrants as less-than-fully civilized, due to their self-soiling habits.

We might push the argument a bit further. Mary Douglas suggested that excremental imagery, cross-culturally, symbolizes an incomplete separation of the self from its surroundings and an inadequate understanding of the boundaries of the individual. Like Douglas, Julia Kristeva argued that antipathy toward human effluvia (including fecal matter, blood, and mucous) stems not so much from concerns about hygiene as from fear of *fundamental* boundary transgression—the failure to distinguish between the subject and object, or the self and its others.⁵⁶ In allowing a porosity of the boundaries of the body, Mexicans, in such imagining, appear both more natural and less so. They are closer to nature (as they are less civilized), but they are distant from their basic human nature. In failing to recognize the subject/object or the self/surrounding boundaries, Mexican subjects pollute the environment. In so doing, they spread matter that threatens to breach the bodily boundary of American subjects who share the border environment.

Immigrants, in most conventional American perceptions, are largely out of place, especially if they lack legal entitlement to be in place in the United States.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, when associated with excrement—as Mexican immigrants often putatively are—Mexican immigrants become inherently polluting, and the environment around them becomes itself inherently polluted. According to Anna Meigs, in her refinement of Douglas’s theory, polluting substances are those that attempt uninvited contact between bodies.⁵⁸ This makes sense as far as the border environment is concerned.

All the U.S. media reporting that contributed to the groundswell of opposition to NAFTA either implicitly or explicitly suggested that Mexican effluvia threatened to enter the body—symbolic and literal—of Americans.

While the border environment no longer captures the media attention the way it did during the NAFTA debates, the border's presumed porosity and Mexican immigration have become even more exploited by nativists; in recent years, "pollution" continues to appear in the litany of offenses committed by immigrants as they breach the border with their "assaults"⁵⁹ on the U.S., "cleaving" American society into two unbridgeable halves, with the Anglo-Saxon side, as Samuel P. Huntington suggested, gravely imperiled.⁶⁰ It could be argued that the border environment no longer needs to appear in the media, as it has already performed its work in further naturalizing, on the one hand, a public health logic of exclusion, and on the other, the inherent illegality of Mexican immigration itself. And, ultimately, as it appears now that the environmental problems of NAFTA, during the NAFTA debates, were only a means (albeit an ineffective one) to the larger end of Mexican exclusion from U.S. soil, their relevance as a media issue can vanish, although many of the conditions reported during that period persist.

Notes

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- 1 John Audley, *Green Politics and Global Trade: NAFTA and the Future of Environmental Politics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1997); Michael Dreiling, *Solidarity and Conflict: The Politics of Sustainability in the NAFTA Conflict* (New York: Garland, 2001); Barbara Hogenboom, *Mexico and the NAFTA Environment Debate* (Utrecht: International Books, 1998); Arturo Zárate-Ruiz, *A Rhetorical Analysis of the NAFTA Debate* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000).
- 2 Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Steven W. Bender, *Greasers and Gringos: Latinos, Law and the American Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Arnoldo De León, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Towards Mexicans in Texas, 1821–1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); Mario T. García, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880–1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Howard Markel and Alexandra Minna Stern, "Which Face, Whose Nation?: Immigration, Public Health and the Construction of Disease at America's Ports and Borders, 1891–1928," *American Behavioral Scientist* 42.9 (1999): 1314–31; Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Sub-*

- jects: *Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Charles Ramírez-Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 2002); Rolando Romero, "Border of Fear, Border of Desire," *Borderlines* 1 (1993): 36–70; Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).
- 3 See especially the debate over immigration within the Sierra Club that ensued, in 1996, in numerous online fora and on the Sierra Club's on Web site. T. M. Maher, "How and Why Journalists Avoid the Population-Environment Connection," *Population and the Environment* 18.4 (1997): 339–72. Also: www.cis.org/articles/1998/IR33/sierra_club.html (accessed December 14, 2005).
 - 4 Leo R. Chávez, *Covering Immigration: Popular Images and the Politics of the Nation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001); Leo R. Chávez, "Immigration Reform and Nativism: The Nationalist Response to the Transnationalist Challenge," in *Immigrants Out!: The New Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the United States*, ed. Juan Perea, 61–77 (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Nicholas De Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 419–47; Nicholas De Genova, "The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant 'Illegality,'" *Latino Studies* 2.2 (2004): 160–85; David Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).
 - 5 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 35.
 - 6 It should be noted that the research conducted for this essay can no longer be exactly replicated as I undertook the bulk of it in the fall of 1998, when my two primary tools, *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature* and Lexis-Nexis Academic were quite different than what they are now. At that time the *Readers Guide* was only available in a nonsearchable print edition and Lexis-Nexis contained full-text articles of a number of newspapers and magazines that now have their own, subscriber-only, databases. In 1998, to find articles on the border in the *Readers Guide*, I was restricted to subject terms, while in Lexis-Nexis, I could search under a variety of key-word terms, such as "NAFTA," and "border" and "environment" and so forth. (My recent effort to reproduce these searches yielded significantly different data sets than when I first conducted the research.) I also reviewed the transcripts of several hundred broadcast news programs, indexed on Lexis-Nexis. Although electronic media no doubt played a significant role in what Americans consumed by way of images during NAFTA, methodologically it was (in 1998) and still is difficult to track thematic coverage of a topic through the electronic media. (For an argument on the relation between electronic media and contemporary subjectivity, see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996].) Nonetheless, because of the enormous overlap between print and electronic media, print media serves as a valuable barometer of overall media coverage, especially the prestige and mainstream periodicals which often provide source material and set the standards for stories that warrant coverage for other media outlets. See John Bailey, "Mexico in the U.S. Media, 1979–1988," in *Images of Mexico in the United*

- States, ed. John H. Coatsworth and Carlos Rico, 55–90 (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1989).
- 7 I mean politics in a broad sense of how environmental ideas came to inform political sensibilities, though not necessarily specifically in the form of environmental organizations or lobbying.
 - 8 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (1936; reprint, New York: Schocken, 1968).
 - 9 I am borrowing from Butler here. See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
 - 10 Bruce Braun, *The Intemperate Rainforest: Nature, Culture and Power on Canada's West Coast* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
 - 11 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford, 1973). See also David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Don Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (New York: Blackwell, 1984); Bruce Willems-Braun, "Buried Epistemologies: The Politics of Nature in (Post)Colonial British Columbia," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87.1 (1997): 3–31.
 - 12 Frederick H. Buttel, "Environmentalism: Origins, Processes, and Implications for Rural Sociology," *Rural Sociology* 57.1 (1992): 1–27; Arturo Escobar, *Uneven Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Wolfgang Sachs, ed., *Global Ecology: A New Arena of Political Conflict* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Books, 1993).
 - 13 Buttel, "Environmentalism"; James McCarthy, "Environmentalism, Wise Use and the Nature of Accumulation in the Rural West," in *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millenium*, ed. Bruce Braun and Noel Castree, 126–49 (London: Routledge, 1998).
 - 14 Eeva Berglund, *Knowing Nature, Knowing Science: An Ethnography of Local Environmental Knowledge* (Cambridge, England: White Horse Press, 1997), Dorothee Schneider, "I Know All About Emma Lazarus': Nationalism and Its Contradictions in Congressional Rhetoric of Immigration," *Cultural Anthropology* 13.1 (1998): 82–99.
 - 15 Audley, *Green Politics and Global Trade*, 46.
 - 16 Phyllis Pease Chock, "'Illegal Aliens' And 'Opportunity': Myth Making in Congressional Testimony," *American Ethnologist* 18.2 (1991): 280.
 - 17 Author interview, January 2006.
 - 18 De Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life"; De Genova, "The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant 'Illegality.'"
 - 19 Audley, *Green Politics and Global Trade*, 49.
 - 20 Guy Gugliotta, "North American Free Trade Pact Could Shorten Clinton Honeymoon," *Washington Post*, November 14, 1992.
 - 21 Dreiling, *Solidarity and Conflict*, 77.
 - 22 Audley, *Green Politics and Global Trade*, 102–3.
 - 23 See, for example, Steve Charnovitz, "The NAFTA Environmental Side Agreement: Implications for Environmental Cooperation, Trade Policy and American Treaty-making," *Temple International and Comparative Law Journal*, no. 257 (1994): 3–62. Of more significance has been the Border Environmental Cooperation and the North American Del-

- opment Bank, which together address specifically infrastructure deficits in border cities and towns.
- 24 Chávez, *Covering Immigration*; De Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life," 436–39.
 - 25 Carl J. Migdail, "Invasion from Mexico: It Just Keeps Coming," *U.S. News and World Report*, March 7, 1983; "Troubled Neighbor," *MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour*, July 11, 1986.
 - 26 Wayne King, "Mexican Money Crisis Impels New Surge of Aliens to Texas," *New York Times*, March 10, 1983.
 - 27 Joel Brinkley, "U.S. Set to Act on Mexico Border Drug Flow," *New York Times*, June 26, 1986; George Russell, "Trying to Stem the Illegal Tide," *Time*, July 8, 1985, p. 54.
 - 28 Lawrence Coates, "Crossover Dreams: Impoverished Mexicans Find It Still Pays to Enter the U.S. Illegally, Risk or No Risk," *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, April 3, 1988, p. 12.
 - 29 Brinkley, "U.S. Set to Act on Mexico Border Drug Flow."
 - 30 Bailey, "Mexico in the U.S. Media, 1979–1988"; Christine Contee, "U.S. Perceptions of United States-Mexico Relations," in Coatsworth and Rico, *Images of Mexico in the United States*, 17–54; Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978–1992*; Frank D. Bean, Barry Edmonston, and Jeffrey S. Passel, "Perceptions and Estimates of Undocumented Migration to the United States," in *Undocumented Migration to the United States: IRCA and the Experience of the 1980s*, ed. Bean, Edmonston, and Passel, 11–31 (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 1990).
 - 31 Bean, Edmonston, and Passel, "Perceptions and Estimates of Undocumented Migration to the United States," 16.
 - 32 Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*.
 - 33 Chávez, *Covering Immigration*; Daniel B. German, "The Role of the Media in Political Socialization and Attitude Formation toward Racial/Ethnic Minorities in the U.S.," in *Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Identity*, ed. Russell F. Farnen, 285–94 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994); Rita Simon and Susan Alexander, *The Ambivalent Welcome: Print Media, Public Opinion and Immigration* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993).
 - 34 Brinkley, "U.S. Set to Act on Mexico Border Drug Flow"; John Borrell, "Journey Along the Border," *Time*, October 24, 1988; Brinkley, "U.S. Set to Act on Mexico Border Drug Flow"; Coates, "Crossover Dreams: Impoverished Mexicans Find It Still Pays to Enter the U.S. Illegally, Risk or No Risk," 11.
 - 35 De León, *They Called Them Greasers*.
 - 36 Alan Kraut, *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the "Immigrant Menace"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Howard Markel and Alexandra Minna Stern, "The Foreignness of Germs: The Persistent Association of Immigrants and Disease," *Milbank Quarterly* 80.4 (2002): 757–88.
 - 37 Alexandra Minna Stern, "Buildings, Boundaries, and Blood: Medicalization and Nation-Building on the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1910–1930," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79.1 (1999): 41–81.
 - 38 Alurista, "Myth, Identity and Struggle in Three Chicano Novels: *Aztlán*, Anaya, Méndez and Acosta," in *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*, ed. Rudolfo A. Anaya and Francisco Lomelí, 41–81 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989); Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994); Sergio D. Elizondo, "ABC: *Aztlán*, the Borderlands and Chicago," in *Missions in Conflict: Essays on*

- U.S.-Mexican Relations and Chicano Culture*, ed. Renate Schmidt-Von Bardeleben, Dietrich Briesemeister, and Bruce-Novoa, 13–24 (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Center for Chicano Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1986).
- 39 “Border Clashes,” *Macneil/Lehrer Newshour*, July 8, 1985.
- 40 John M. Crewdson, “Border Region Is Almost a Country Unto Itself, Neither Mexican Nor American,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1979; Anthony Parisi, “Economic and Political Concerns Could Slow Tide of Mexican Oil,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1979; Alan Riding, “Mexico Angry at U.S. As Carter Visit Nears,” *New York Times*, February 11, 1979; William K. Stevens, “Millions of Mexicans View Illegal Entry to U.S. As Door to Opportunity,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1979; “Troubled Neighbor.”
- 41 Howard LaFranchi, “On Rio Grande, Pollution Knows No Borders,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 12, 1988; Lisa Belkin, “Separated by Border, 2 Cities Are United by Needs,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1988; William Branigan, “Pollution under Scrutiny at U.S.-Mexico Border,” *Washington Post*, October 24, 1989; Howard LaFranchi, “On Rio Grande, Pollution Knows No Borders,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 12, 1988; Sonia Nazario, “Boom and Despair,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 22, 1989.
- 42 J. Michael Kennedy, “Border Has the Worst of Both Worlds,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1989; John Dillin, “Mexico’s Pollution Threatens Free Trade,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 13, 1991; Anne Reiley Dowd, “Viva Free Trade with Mexico!” *Fortune*, June 17, 1991; J. Michael Kennedy, “Border Has the Worst of Both Worlds,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1989; Michael Satchell, “Poisoning the Border,” *U.S. News and World Report*, May 6, 1991.
- 43 Nazario, “Boom and Despair.”
- 44 “Overpopulation in Mexico’s Cities Causes Problems,” *60 Minutes*, November 3, 1991.
- 45 Dillin, “Mexico’s Pollution Threats Free Trade.”
- 46 Joe Old, “How Do You Clean up a 2,000 Mile Garbage Dump?” *Business Week*, July 6, 1992.
- 47 “A Permanent U.S.-Mexico Border Health Commission,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 263.4 (1990): 3319–21. Almost immediately references to the “AMA report” and the border as a cesspool began to appear in the press: Ana Arana, “The Waste,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Image section, August 30, 1992; Phillip Elmer-DeWitt, “Love Canals in the Making,” *Time*, May 20, 1991; Linda Roach Moore, “AMA Urges Action on Severe Pollution along U.S.-Mexican Border,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 1990; “NAFTA and the Environment,” *New York Times*, September 27, 1993; Old, “How Do You Clean up a 2,000 Mile Garbage Dump?”; Satchell, “Poisoning the Border”; “U.S. Companies Move to Mexico Because of Cheap Labor,” *CBS Evening News* (1992); “U.S.-Mexico Border Zone near Ecological Disaster,” *Journal of Commerce and Commercial Bulletin*, March 14, 1991; Larry Williams, “Fears of a Trade Deal ‘Cesspool,’” *Chicago Tribune*, January 13, 1992. The media also continued to refer to the border as an “open sewer”: Branigan, “Pollution under Scrutiny at U.S.-Mexico Border”; Dillin, “Mexico’s Pollution Threatens Free Trade”; Nazario, “Boom and Despair.” In so doing, they employed a stock motif found in media accounts of the generic third world; see Donald Reid, *Paris Sewers and Sewermen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). But “cesspool” during this time became nearly synonymous with that corner of the third world that was the U.S.-Mexico border.
- 48 Nickey was a key congressional witness in hearings that brought the border’s problems

- to Washington's attention. For example, U.S. House, Subcommittee on Water Resources, *Inadequate Water Supply and Sewage Disposal Facilities Associated with "Colonias" along the United States and Mexican Border* (Washington: U.S. GPO, 1991) and U.S. Senate, Committee on Environment and Public Works, *Economic and Environmental Implications of the Proposed U.S. Trade Agreement with Mexico* (Washington: U.S. GPO, 1991).
- 49 Belkin, "Separated by Border, 2 Cities Are United by Needs."
- 50 "The Mexican-American Border: Hi Amigo," *The Economist*, December 12, 1992.
- 51 "California Border Towns Pay High Price for Low-Wage Immigrants," *CBS Morning News*, November 26, 1990.
- 52 Craig E. Colton and Peter N. Skinner, *The Road to Love Canal: Managing Industrial Wastes before the EPA* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).
- 53 In comparison to "cesspool," Love Canal, a potentially powerful trope, appeared far less frequently: Elmer-DeWitt, "Love Canals in the Making"; S. C. Gwynne, "From Yukon to Yucatán," *Time*, June 3, 1991; Nazario, "Boom and Despair."
- 54 William Langewiesche, "The Border," *The Atlantic*, June 1992.
- 55 Satchell, "Poisoning the Border," 36, emphasis added.
- 56 Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
- 57 De Genova, "The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant 'Illegality.'"
- 58 Anna S. Meigs, "A Papuan Perspective on Pollution," *Man* 13.2 (1978): 304-18.
- 59 At this point most of these characterizations appear not in the "old" media, but rather on blogs and Web sites devoted to nativism. Some of the characteristic language can be found on www.limitstogrowth.org (accessed December 14, 2005), or on many of the Web sites of local chapters of the Minuteman Project, a growing nativist organization.
- 60 Samuel P. Huntington, "The Hispanic Challenge," *Foreign Policy*, no. 141 (2004).