



A state of suspended animation: Urban sanitation and water access in Nogales, Sonora



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ABSTRACT

With its hilly terrain and fast-paced growth, Nogales, Sonora, located on the US-Mexico border, is an extremely challenging place for sanitation and potable water provision wherein access to basic services is highly uneven. The labor demands of *maquiladoras* (typically, foreign-owned assembly plants) draw a steady influx of newcomers to the city, many of whom must turn to land “invasion” to create spaces for affordable housing. With tacit government approval, invasions occur on inexpensive, often topographically precarious land. Officials tend to frame these spaces as “illegal,” and, by extension, those who inhabit them, as existing outside the realm of formal governance. Despite such views, in this paper we understand the distinctions drawn between so-called formal and informal urban governance to unfold along two key axes: regularization of informal land titles and piped water and sanitation. We show how *colonia* residents feel caught in a state of suspended animation between hope for full urban service provision and trepidation that it will ever reach them. This ambiguity is visible in residents' and government officials' interactions with each other and the public services landscape, and in the unevenness of services provision. We critique the claim that such ambiguousness reflects an instrumental approach within official planning. Instead, we draw from state theory within political geography and political ecology to show how ‘the state’ is an emergent effect of the processes of inclusion and exclusion, an effect constantly destabilized by Nogales's precarious physical geography and uneven urban services grid. Reconceptualizing authority and ambiguity holds quite different implications for the struggle for urban services provision.

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Introduction

The steep and heavily eroded hillsides of Nogales, Sonora, are dotted with colorful houses and assorted shacks crafted from a variety of locally available materials, from wooden pallets to spent car tires. It is a striking tableau of contrasts when viewed from a distance. Less visible but nonetheless prominent is the myriad of spaces created by a diversity of land tenure arrangements and related practices of sanitation and water access that are largely independent of the city services grid. Together, these loosely stitch together this urban landscape. Such practices are the result of a convergence of forces registered at different scales: a rapidly

growing population drawn to the city either by the promise of *maquiladora* (assembly plant) jobs or the hope of making it across the line into the United States; a municipal government unable to accommodate such rapid growth; and urban property owners who have seized an opportunity to increase the value of otherwise marginal land. Within this tattered fabric of “invasion” neighborhoods, or “informally” settled *colonias*, we explore the mechanisms of inclusion in or exclusion from basic services like potable water and drainage, seeking out the best way to understand the role of the state and government authority in creating and sustaining an exploitative urban geography.

Borrowing a phrase from anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz (2001), we focus primarily on the “idioms of distinction” that are drawn between so-called formal versus informal, or illegal versus legal, practices. Our central claim is that constructions of informality are intrinsic to but not necessarily instrumental for official urban planning. Although it can be seen as a critical mechanism of social control in this uneven border environment, and is often

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framed as such in the relevant literature, the rhetoric of informality does not operate in an easily discernible manner; its role in stabilizing political authority is more spatially and temporally contingent than the literature seems to suggest. We draw from Mitchell (1999; 2002) and scholars in political ecology and critical infrastructure studies (Anand, 2011; Loftus, 2009; McFarlane & Rutherford, 2008; Robbins, 2012) to rethink a prevailing assumption that we perceive in scholarship and practice. Namely, this is the idea that the state stands above or outside of the informal flows of politics and daily life in *colonias*, and that when state actors do engage with informal practices, the rhetoric of informality becomes an instrument of domination and control for them to wield at will. In this pursuit, we answer calls for political ecologists to grapple in a substantial and nuanced way with the state and state policies (Robbins, 2003) and, conversely, to consider how differentiated resource access histories influence perceptions of the state (Harris, 2012). We suggest that the relationship between informality and political authority appears less stable and predictable when analyzed in terms of the confluence of flows in the physical landscape and the social effects of objects attached to unfinished infrastructure.

There are two primary processes of socio-spatial distinction at work in Nogales: the regularization of land titles and the everyday politics of potable water and sanitation provision in tension with the changing physical landscape. The process of regularization is portrayed as a necessary condition for delivering on the promise of full urban services, and is critical to generating a sense of hope among *colonia* residents. Hope creates a temporal horizon within urban politics, for promises must be delivered upon – or must seem to be fulfilled – at some point. This sense of fulfillment in turn hinges upon residents' proximity to pipes and other infrastructure, giving hope a spatial horizon as well. The ambiguity of incomplete services therefore emerges through these processes that bring together diverse objects (pipes, etc.), landscape flows (flooding, erosion), *colonia* residents, and government officials. What we derive from analyzing them together, therefore, is a different view onto how authority is produced or debased – that is, we gain a sense of political authority as mediated by and only tenuously established within these unstable processes. In this landscape of human and nonhuman actors, political power thus remains highly diffuse, the power of the state effect ebbing and flowing along with the sentiments of hope that services are soon to arrive, and despair that they will ever make it.

We base these findings on semi-structured interviews, analysis of news articles, and participant observation conducted primarily in one informally settled *colonia*. Considering the vulnerability of Nogales's poor neighborhoods and the political sensitivity of the issues discussed, we do not reveal the name of this *colonia*. Interviews with government officials and news articles together highlight officials' ambivalence in their approach to *colonias*, particularly as they attempt to process the informal or illegal land titles of invasion communities. Here we see how promises of service connection connect with a sense of hope, and the role that hope plays in the politics of provision. Participant observation and interviews with residents in the *colonia* also demonstrates how officials' ambivalence articulates with infrastructure objects and topography – that is, with the ever-incomplete built environment and a landscape shaped by cycles of flooding, erosion, and road and home construction.

Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were conducted by the lead author, who worked with *colonia* residents over a period of a year and a half on a project to develop alternative technology projects, including construction of a dry composting toilet at a local community center. This was part of a participatory research project implemented with students at the *Instituto*

Tecnológico de Nogales (ITN) to assess the economic and social viability of this infrastructure alternative. Research included simultaneously analyzing a government-led water provision and sanitation project that intended to connect six *colonias* to the municipal infrastructure grid as part of a plan for new wastewater treatment plant. This experience strongly informs our analysis.

Interview data collection was focused within a three-month period during summer of 2012. Twenty interviews were conducted with residents of the *colonia* (in some cases multiple times) who expressed interest in the alternative technology project. Targeting residents who were interested in environmental alternatives was adopted to explore how more engaged residents viewed piped water and sanitation service progression, the role of the state and citizens in meeting these basic needs, and the nature of the water and sanitation issues they faced. Twenty-four additional semi-structured interviews were conducted with municipal government officials, community organizers, and non-profit personnel. While the project began with a focus on sanitation and water management, the participatory approach revealed that the crux of this story was the interrelation of land tenure, sanitation, and water management, and the politics related to conceptions of the state.

In the section that follows, we outline our examination of urban planning in Nogales. Then, we detail our theoretical approach to understanding the state as the emergent effect of relations between government officials, residents, steep hillsides, and pipes that deliver the promise but not the reality of water and drainage. Subsequently, we provide a general overview of the water and sanitation issues that developed in Nogales following the arrival of *maquiladoras*, starting in the mid-1960s. From there, we go on to discuss the process of regularizing informal land titles, pointing to the practice of labeling settlements as informal and illegal, and the way in which such practices shape the range of the political, in this case within the daily negotiations that take place around basic public services in Nogales. We next explore how government officials and residents understand and enact service provision in spaces deemed “informal” and, oftentimes, “illegal.” We conclude by assessing the outcomes of this discussion, and the theoretical contributions of this approach.

A closer look at urban planning in Nogales

Contrary to popular belief and official discourse, *colonias* do not simply constitute unregulated environments existing outside of state control; rather, the perceived lack of regulation (and perception of a basic inability to regulate) can and oftentimes does provide justification for officials to avert broader responsibility for the many existing gaps in access to services across the city. Roy (2009), whose work has been highly influential in debates over the rhetoric of informality within urban planning and its role in perpetuating marginality, has found this to be the case for planning in Mumbai. She asserts that, “there is nothing spontaneous or casual about the calculated informality that undergirds the territorial practices of the state,” and conceives of such structured planning as a manipulation of “informality from above” (pp. 83 & 84).

Analysis of planning in Nogales, however, requires a different reading of the relationship of the state to the ambiguity and unevenness of service provision. Certainly, unregulated spaces and areas lacking in basic services can to some degree be attributed to a mode of planning characterized by official manipulation and, of course, to neglect. As Roy suggests, manipulation and neglect can be understood to be fundamental features of the state's territorialized sovereignty. In the case of Nogales, however, we find that the authority to direct the rhythms of the city is just as or more likely to be an *effect* of the contest over the distinctions drawn between informal and formal spaces, rather than, a priori, a callous

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