

# Literacies on the Margins: Border Colonias as Sites for the Study of Language and Literacy

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Border colonias—unplanned communities along the U.S.-Mexico border—are among the fastest growing and poorest communities in the U.S. (Martínez, 2010). Although in the public imagination colonias are densely populated by immigrants from Mexico, poverty, and disease (Hill, 2003), residents regard them as zones of economic opportunity and transformation where poor people can “make a middle-class kind of place” (Campbell & Heyman, 2007, p. 16). Colonias are among the most bilingual communities in the country. Many residents describe themselves as bilingual speakers of Spanish and English (de la Puente & Stemper, 2003), and even a quick walk or drive through a border colonia will attest that residents produce diverse texts, many of them bilingual and multimodal, in the form of advertisements and other publicly displayed texts. Thus, although English literacy rates for children and adults living in colonias are historically low (Ellis, 1995; Rodríguez, 2007), residents are surrounded by texts they navigate in their daily lives.

Our objectives in this paper are to introduce border colonias as sites for literacy research and to propose an agenda for research that focuses on the literacies of border colonias. To do this, we summarize colonia research conducted over the past decade and identify conceptual issues for future literacy research and practice. First, we provide an overview of border colonias and explain why they are compelling sites for studies of language and literacy. Next, we review the growing scholarly literature and documentary record on Texas border colonias, including local press, government archives, and census records. Using Quantitative Content Analysis (QCA), we summarize recent research in order to gauge the present state of knowledge about colonia literacies and related areas such as education. Informed by this analysis, we conclude with a discussion of how literacy research can contribute to more complete understandings of border colonias and, potentially, to increased agency and quality of life for colonia residents.

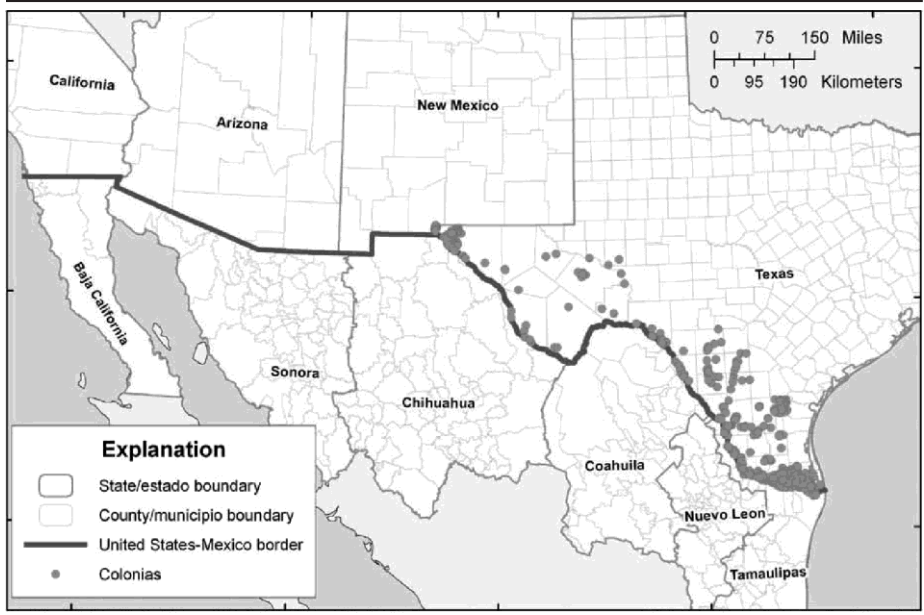
## LOCATING BORDER COLONIAS

Although border colonias are also found in Arizona, New Mexico, and California, Texas is home to more colonia residents than any other state. Approximately 500,000 Texans live in some 2,300 colonia communities along the 1,248-mile stretch from Brownsville on the Gulf of Mexico to El Paso in the west (Texas State Energy Conservation Office, 2010). Figure 1 shows the distribution of colonias along the Texas-Mexico border.

The greatest concentrations of colonias are found in the Lower Rio Grande Valley counties of Hidalgo and Cameron counties in east Texas; El Paso County in far west Texas; and Webb County (Laredo) in between. Holz and Davies (1993, pp. 10-11) list common features of border colonias:

- (a) located in rural areas but often close to town;
- (b) developed on land units of 10 to 20 acres;
- (c) well-developed street pattern with mostly unpaved streets;
- (d) divided into small lots, typically

**Figure 1.** Colonias in Texas Within 100 Miles of the U.S.-Mexico Border. Adapted from Parcher and Humberson, 2007, p. 2.



about 60 by 100 feet; (e) contain mostly small, substandard houses; (f) high frequency of litter (due to no public waste service); (g) impacted by agricultural activities on surrounding cultivated land; and (h) lack essential services.

Although they share many characteristics, each colonia experiences unique local conditions. For example, access to drinking water and waste water facilities are challenges that face colonia communities all along the border, but they are not the same in El Paso (where water scarcity is a fact of desert life) as in the lower Rio Grande Valley (where sea-level elevations experience flooding during hurricanes and tropical storms). Individuals and families in colonias have distinct personal, immigration, and labor histories, as well as dispositions for agency that allow them to react differently to environmental, structural, and economic conditions. Thus, we stress the need to avoid essentializing border colonias as sites for research.

### *Origins and Demographics*

Colonia-like communities have existed on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border since at least the 1950s (Richardson, 1996). In the 1980s, rapid growth in the number of colonias and in the number of colonia residents in the U.S. was spurred by increased demand for cheap labor and inexpensive housing. Weak zoning laws permitted real estate developers to create new subdivisions and sell housing lots without first installing water, drainage, and other services (Ward, 1999). In 1990 the Gonzalez National Affordable Housing Act (NAHA) defined a colonia as an “identifiable community in Arizona, California, New Mexico or Texas within 150 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border, lacking decent water and sewage systems” (cited in Núñez & Klammenger, 2010). Passage of

the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and consequent demand for low-pay, low-skill labor at the border, is another factor in the rapid growth of colonia populations.

Research in colonias presents unique challenges. Colonias are typically unincorporated territories “at the margins” of binational cities (Núñez & Klammenger, 2010), and the county governments nominally responsible for maintaining local population records often lack the funding and perhaps the political will to carefully document populations in colonia settlements (Smith, 2010). Efforts to document colonia populations through the U.S. Census face difficulties, including:

(a) identifying residences without street names or numbers; (b) hiring and training bilingual census takers; and (c) providing adequate translation of instructions (Campbell, 2003). Additionally, accurate counts of colonia residents are undermined by the effects of intimidating immigration policies that may discourage them from participating in the Census. Finally, there is the perplexing problem of definitions, as state, federal, and local agencies count colonia communities and residents using various criteria, with estimates of colonias ranging between 1,400 and 2,400 communities in Texas (Guisti, 2010).

Despite these challenges, demographic research consistently reports that colonia residents are, on average, younger, poorer, and have completed fewer years of formal schooling than other Latinas/ os in Texas (Donelson & Esparza, 2010; Ellis, 1995). Although seldom reported, positive findings include a greater proportion of two-parent households; a high percentage of families owning or buying their own homes; and households in which adults and children share the same language(s) (Díaz, 2011).

A growing number of ethnographic studies seek to describe colonias from the perspective of residents. Ethnographic work thus contextualizes, and in some cases counters, the portraits of colonias as described by demographers, sociologists, and public health researchers, whose research relies primarily on surveys (Campbell, 2003). For example, Dolhinow’s (2010) study of women’s shifting roles in three colonias near El Paso describes transnational and community aspects of life in colonias not considered in other types of research:

For all intents and purposes, [colonias] are Mexican communities. Yet these are in the United States, and many of these Mexican immigrants are U.S. citizens, and others are fully documented residents with social security numbers and all the other symbols of “American-ness.” At the same time, you often feel as if you have stepped across the border when you walk into a colonia: the houses are often surrounded by brightly painted flowerbeds, and there is loud Mexican music playing on a Saturday morning. It always smells like strong chile is cooking, and there are other trappings of Mexican culture on display. Colonias come to exist out of transnational flows of labor and capital that converge in isolated pieces of unused farmland. They are communities with significant ties to Mexico that are reproduced in the United States (Dolhinow, 2010, p. 26).

Typically, close to 100% of colonia residents in Texas are of Mexican origin. Thus, colonias differ from immigrant beachheads in urban centers and nonborder communities in that they are not very ethnically or linguistically diverse. While this ethnic concentration may limit opportunities for immigrant integration, residents choose to live in colonias, in part, because they feel safe “being Mexican” there. A mother from a colonia in Hidalgo County expressed this feeling of security:

In the colonias people live peacefully because if someone needs something you

can just ask your neighbor and borrow it. Here you live like a family and the children play together in the afternoon, they all play in someone's yard or in the street (Villarreal, 2008, p. 53).

### *Metaphors*

Reinking (2011) notes the power of metaphors to “set agendas, to shape perceptions, and to inspire action” in literacy research and policy (p. 5). The following list, based on Núñez and Klammenger's (2010) work, includes metaphors commonly used to describe border colonias:

- the “Third World inside the U.S.” (Galán, 2000);
- economic and political margins on the borders of globalizing cities;
- environmental hazards; “sites of failed hygiene” and pathology (Hill, 2003);
- corridors for international and internal migration, through which residents pass en route to seasonal jobs in other states;
- buffers, safety nets, and safety valves that provide affordable housing and economic opportunities, including in the informal economy, that are not easily found elsewhere;
- traps where those with poor credit or no credit are lured into monthly payments they cannot sustain; and where marginality is magnified (access to health care, basic services, and transportation);
- havens where it is easier to be Mexican and safer to live with family members whose immigration status may put others in jeopardy (Núñez & Heyman, 2007).

By examining the metaphors used to describe colonias and colonia residents, we can gain insight into the ways the literacies of border colonias are conceived and portrayed.

### *Why Colonias are Important Sites for Literacy Research*

In keeping with our objective of proposing a research agenda that focuses on colonia literacies, we believe there are three primary reasons why colonias are important sites for literacy research. First and foremost, colonia literacies matter because of the large numbers of children and adults who live in border colonias. As the initial U.S. residence for immigrant families maintaining close ties to Mexico, colonias are ideal contexts for investigating literacies crossing borders (Smith & Murillo, forthcoming). Currently, middle-class families, including professionals with high levels of formal education, are moving to U.S. border cities to escape drug-related violence in Ciudad Juárez, Matamoros, and other cities in northern Mexico (Martínez, Alvarado, & Chávez, 2011). The integration of these newest immigrants into the local schools that serve colonia populations is a major development in education at the border (Valdés, 2011). Research in colonias can help us understand how literacy is understood and practiced by those who have been educated in two distinct education systems (Miller, 2003; Smith, Murillo, & Jiménez, 2009).

Second, border colonias are intriguing contexts for broadening current theories about the use and development of biliteracy (Reyes, 2011). As overwhelmingly bilingual communities, colonias embody discourses of place (at the border, on the margins of cities) as well as the movements and flows of people, ideas, services, and products taking place in two languages (de la Piedra & Araujo, forthcoming). Because colonia residents “incorporate daily activities, routines, and institutions located both in a destination country and transnationally” (Levitt & Glick-Schiller, 2007, p. 182),

research on the forms and practices of Spanish and English literacy they generate can inform the study of biliteracy in transnational contexts.

Third, given the historic lack of access to services and the individual and collective actions of colonia residents to secure them (Donelson & Esparza, 2010), colonias are rich sites for investigating the literate consequences of immigrant agency. Border anthropologists Howard Campbell and Joseph Heyman (2007) propose the term “slantwise” to describe the moves that colonia residents make in order to secure housing, water, employment, healthcare, and education. These authors critique conventional binary models of agency that, they claim, assume that people’s decisions and actions can be categorized as examples of either compliance with or resistance to government regulations. Based on participant observation in colonia households in West Texas, they argue that a more nuanced view of agency is needed to account for actions that may be instances of transgression (such as the practice of registering children at school under a U.S. address while the family’s legal address remains in Mexico), but which are undertaken to realize socially accepted goals (such as attempting to provide safety or the best education possible for one’s children).

## CONTENT ANALYSIS

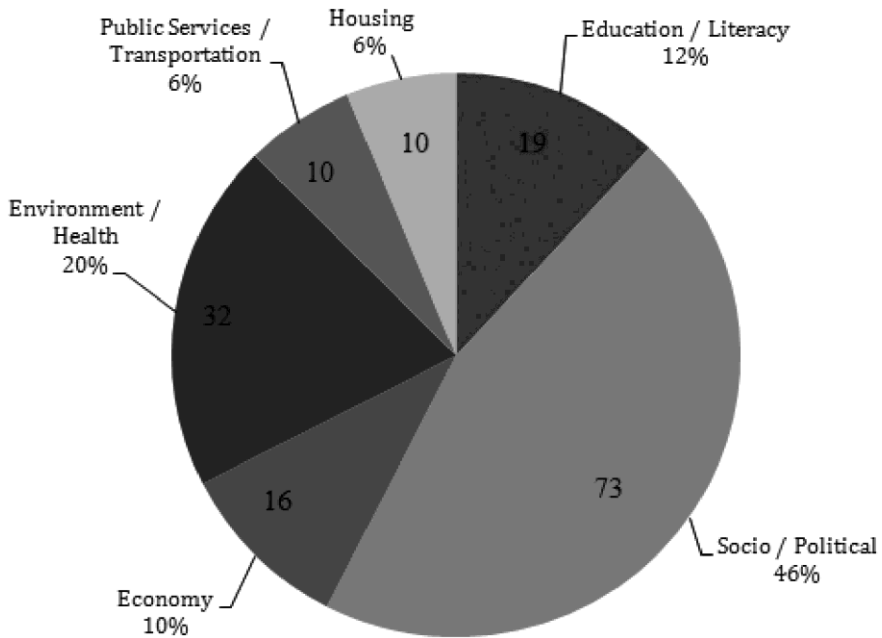
In preparation for a comparative study on literacy practices in colonias in the El Paso and lower Rio Grande Valley regions, we read everything we could find about border colonias. We soon realized that research on colonias is reported in many distinct formats and from multiple disciplinary perspectives. To make sense of these diverse sources, we created a corpus of research publications and reports about Texas border colonias. We initially searched for combinations of the keywords “colonia,” “literacy,” and “education,” but found few examples. For this reason, we expanded our search to include publications that addressed factors commonly associated with literacy, education, and schools (for example, parents’ years of education, child poverty, and school funding). Our final corpus consisted of 160 texts published between 2000 and 2011.

We used QCA to identify, categorize, and count the main themes found in our corpus. Content analysis involves a “systematic and replicable” analysis of messages (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005, p. 23) and is useful as a prelude to empirical research in underexplored domains such as border colonias (Berg, 1995). The corpus was analyzed in two phases. The first round of analysis consisted of classifying the 160 texts by literature source, resulting in the following 10 categories: journals ( $n = 43$ , 27%); books ( $n = 22$ , 14%); newspapers ( $n = 36$ , 23%); electronic media ( $n = 18$ , 11%); reports from state ( $n = 10$ , 6%), county ( $n = 2$ , 1%), and federal ( $n = 7$ , 4%) levels of government; reports from independent school districts ( $n = 3$ , 2%); university websites ( $n = 9$ , 6%); and dissertations ( $n = 10$ , 6%). The highest number of published texts was found in journals while the lowest number was found in the category of county reports.

In the second phase of analysis, we classified the texts in our corpus according to dominant theme. This classification resulted in six main themes: (a) Education/Literacy; (b) Socio-Political; (c) Economy; (d) Health/Environment; (e) Housing; and (f) Public services/Transportation.

The analysis of thematic frequencies is represented in Figure 2. The highest number (73) of published works fell under the socio-political theme, or 46% of the total number of texts.

**Figure 2.** Number and Percentage of Texts in a Colonia Corpus, by Theme.



Conversely, the theme of education/literacy was represented in only 19 publications, or 12% of the texts in our corpus.

### LITERACIES ON THE MARGINS

Content analysis demonstrates that research on border colonias has largely ignored issues of education, language, and literacy. This finding is consistent with previous research (Donelson & Esparza, 2010; Ward, 1999), and reflects the predominance of what Guisti (2010) calls “place-based” rather than “people-centered approaches” to colonia research and policy. These findings are relevant to our purposes of introducing colonias as research sites and proposing a research agenda focusing on the literacies of border colonias. The theme of education was addressed to different degrees. Few studies focused specifically on language or literacy. Instead, we found numerous passing or superficial mentions of literacy within general discussions of educational attainment by colonia residents and the educational issues they face. For example, an article about service learning in an after-school program in a colonia community center described a student-organized drive to raise money to buy school uniforms (Castillo & Winchester, 2001) for students living in the colonia. The authors listed activities that must have involved multiple uses of literacy (identifying and contacting local businesses for donations, record-keeping, thank-you letters), but provided few details about students’ writing and reading during the project.

Across disciplinary orientations, texts in the corpus presented education as lacking or incomplete in colonia communities and, by extension, their residents. For example, Coronado

(2003) noted that parents in colonias have limited formal schooling, often leaving school in order to work. Public health research portrayed the Spanish dominance of colonia residents as limiting the effectiveness of public outreach (Peña & Rosenthal, 2010), including the nonstandard Spanish literacies of the *promotoras* (community outreach workers) who conduct surveys and disseminate information about health services. Public policy research examining access to potable water and wastewater treatment services cited residents' limited formal education and English literacy as barriers to equitable distribution of resources and services (Lopez & Reich, 1997).

Likewise, ethnographic accounts tell us little about the literacy practices of people living in border colonias. For example, Dolhinow's (2010) study of women's roles in community development found that mothers were more likely than fathers to read written communication sent home from school with children, but did not consider parents' responses to these notes. Similarly, ethnographic studies of the work of *promotoras* show that these community workers disseminate, interpret, and coproduce written texts as they conduct door-to-door surveys; schedule appointments for home visits; share information about education and health services; and translate legal and medical notices (Contreras, 2005; Villarreal, 2008), but not how *promotoras* learn to develop these specific literacy practices, or how these practices may impact families and other community residents. Thus, although ethnographic studies have reinforced the importance of multiple forms of literacy in the lives of colonia residents, overall, they provide few details about the actual uses and production of colonia literacies.

As this review has noted, border colonias are portrayed in the literature as communities "on the margins" (Núñez & Klammenger, 2010). It is not surprising then, to find that the literacies of colonia residents, like those of other marginalized communities, have received little scholarly attention. As "colonia studies" emerges as a "field of study worthy of its own identity" (Smith, 2010, p. 245), this identity is only beginning to consider literacy as an object of study or to include findings from literacy research. The paucity of literacy research in the context of border colonias, in turn, reinforces unfounded notions that literacy is unimportant in the lives of colonia residents and that colonia literacies are, therefore, unworthy of study. In the following sections, we discuss ways that literacy research can challenge these assumptions and how a research agenda focusing on the literacies of colonias might contribute to the demarginalization of colonia residents.

## DE-MARGINALIZING COLONIA LITERACIES

Our review of research in border colonias identified recent studies that challenge common deficit assumptions about colonia literacies by providing details of specific literacy practices of colonia residents. Díaz (2011) examined family support for Spanish language maintenance in a colonia in Cameron County. She found strong support for children's development of oral Spanish, but less explicit support for children's literacy in Spanish. She attributed this difference to English-only discourses and practices in local schools, which were further reinforced in the after-school tutoring program that served as the focal point of her study. Díaz (2011) also noted residents' resistance when similar language policies were enacted in the local Catholic church, suggesting that family support for Spanish literacy in colonia communities is domain-specific rather than absolute.

The digital literacy practices of immigrant youth in the same Cameron County colonia were explored by Bussert-Webb (2011), who found that elementary school children's peer-to-peer, out-of-school digital literacy practices, such as text messaging, were more likely to be authored in Spanish than in English. Children attributed the choice of Spanish to their preference of that language for expressions of friendship and intimacy. This pattern was noted even among students unable to afford their own cellphone or other digital devices, which participants explained as a matter of sharing technologies and ideas for how to use them with wealthier peers.

In a pair of studies involving residents of Hidalgo County colonias, Murillo (forthcoming) worked with bilingual reading teachers to explore bilingual families' literacy practices and found that household and workplace literacies were conducted primarily in Spanish, particularly in families in which adults were self-employed. Murillo (2010) also described the use of case studies in the preparation of reading teachers at a border university. By collecting and analyzing digital photographs of publicly displayed texts in border colonias, preservice teachers came to understand the diverse forms and functions of literacies in colonia communities. They documented a range of family and work-related literacies used in colonia households, and observed that although Spanish and bilingual writing were accepted as legitimate in some domains (advertising, business, and religion), they were less welcome in local schools. In both studies, teachers expressed surprise that students in colonia families were immersed in so much reading and writing at home, and also that so much of it was taking place in Spanish.

Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of literacy in the lives of colonia residents. They show that, in contrast to uninformed and deficit views of colonia residents' literacies, children and adults in colonias are engaging in the creation and interpretation of texts in traditional print and multimodal forms. Furthermore, they suggest that teachers who may hold such deficit views about colonia literacies can learn to see them more positively when provided with explicit guidance. Finally, they provide insight into the views and practices of bilingual parents with respect to the use of Spanish literacy in school and non-school domains.

## LITERACY RESEARCH AND AGENCY

Research on the literacies of border colonias could also contribute to the development of agency among colonia residents. As we have seen, Campbell and Heyman (2007) found that residents improve their lives by engaging in "slantwise" practices that defy easy categorization as either compliance or resistance. In our own work, we think that some of the ways colonia residents use written Spanish (providing religious instruction in Spanish while supporting English literacy development in school, and the production of bilingual advertisements to attract bilingual and biliterate consumers) are slantwise ways of developing biliteracy (Smith & Murillo, forthcoming). Another example comes from 8th- and 9th-grade students in colonias in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and in El Paso County, who published a book of captioned photographs depicting daily life in their communities (Chahin, 2000). Although the purpose of this collection was to show how people live in colonias, in doing so, these young photographers documented the use of literacy tools such as computers, typewriters, calendars, and televisions, as well as the presence of texts including books, birthday cards, notebooks, food and product packaging, and religious literacies. This project



suggests that agency among colonia youth could be supported by research that examined the artifactual literacies (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010) of colonia life, and by writing that connects expressions of youth identity with the meanings of texts and objects found in colonias.

We also see potential for the development of agency through projects that develop youth literacies using digital tools and with the expectation of an audience beyond the level of classroom or school. Bussert-Webb's (2011) observation that colonia youth are finding ways to author digital texts although they themselves are not (yet) owners of the hardware needed to produce them is one example of slantwise agency around digital literacies that might be unnecessary or invisible among youth with easier access to computers and smartphones.

Finally, we see some evidence that the relationship between agency and literacy in colonias is highly gendered. While border colonias were often created by Mexican families that moved to the U.S. seeking employment for male family members, the demographics and local economies of colonias are contributing to a shift away from idealized notions of males as paid workers outside the home and females as unpaid workers at home (Vaccaro & Lessem, 1999). Recent research suggests that women's income generation in the informal economy (making and selling food, and engaging in the care of young children and elderly adults) is critical to the economic viability of at least some colonia households (Smith & Murillo, forthcoming). Other studies show that women are also emerging as civic leaders in colonia communities, particularly in association with religious and nongovernmental organizations (Dohlinow, 2010). Given the role women play in many colonia households as managers of calendars and other record-keeping systems that help manage family activities and obligations (e.g., doctors' appointments, bill payments, school events, and religious and civic responsibilities), literacy researchers might ask how women's leadership in family domains and in community work shapes the production and interpretation of texts and literacy practices in colonias. Conversely, what kinds of additional literacy training and knowledge are women receiving in their roles as *promotoras*? How do they learn to successfully handle the literacy demands needed in order to be able to conduct door-to-door surveys; schedule appointments for home visits; translate legal and medical documents; and interpret for non-English fluent residents? (Villarreal, 2008). Does this training and/or the literacies practiced by *promotoras* lead women to pursue additional formal education, including university degrees? We believe that research on such questions would shed light on and perhaps celebrate the role of literacy in helping women and families in colonias move away from the margins.

## CONCLUSION

This study focused on border colonias, a particular type of unplanned and under-researched transnational community on the U.S.-Mexico border. In Texas, colonias are home to a growing number of Spanish-speaking and bilingual children and families of Mexican origin. Given their unique characteristics as physically bounded, ethnically and linguistically homogenous, and economically and politically marginalized communities, border colonias are promising and potentially illuminating sites for literacy research. We conducted a quantitative content analysis of a corpus of 160 scholarly texts, government reports, and examples of local journalism that addressed aspects of life in Texas border colonias. The most numerous sources in our corpus were journals,

followed by newspaper articles and books. In terms of content, texts that featured socio-political and environmental/health themes were most common.

Despite the emergence of “colonias studies” as a distinct field of research, our analysis showed that very few studies have looked closely at education in border colonias. To date, even fewer examine how residents perceive, produce, and practice literacy. We argue that the lack of literacy research in border colonias reflects and reinforces the belief that literacy is unimportant in the lives of colonia residents, and that scholars are unaware of the unique forms and practices of literacy in colonias or do not consider them to be worthy of study. To counter unfounded and deficit assumptions about colonia literacies, we reviewed recent studies that focused more directly on aspects of language and literacy in border colonias. These included: (a) family support for biliteracy; (b) preservice teachers’ attitudes toward colonias and the forms of language and literacy practiced in colonia households; and (c) the digital literacy practices of colonia youth. We proposed a research agenda to focus on colonia literacies, and suggested ways that such research might contribute to the de-marginalization of colonia literacies and the development of agency among residents of border colonias.

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