Toxicity + Complicity
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FEATURE

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What Gets Inside: The Adaptability of Colonia Periférico

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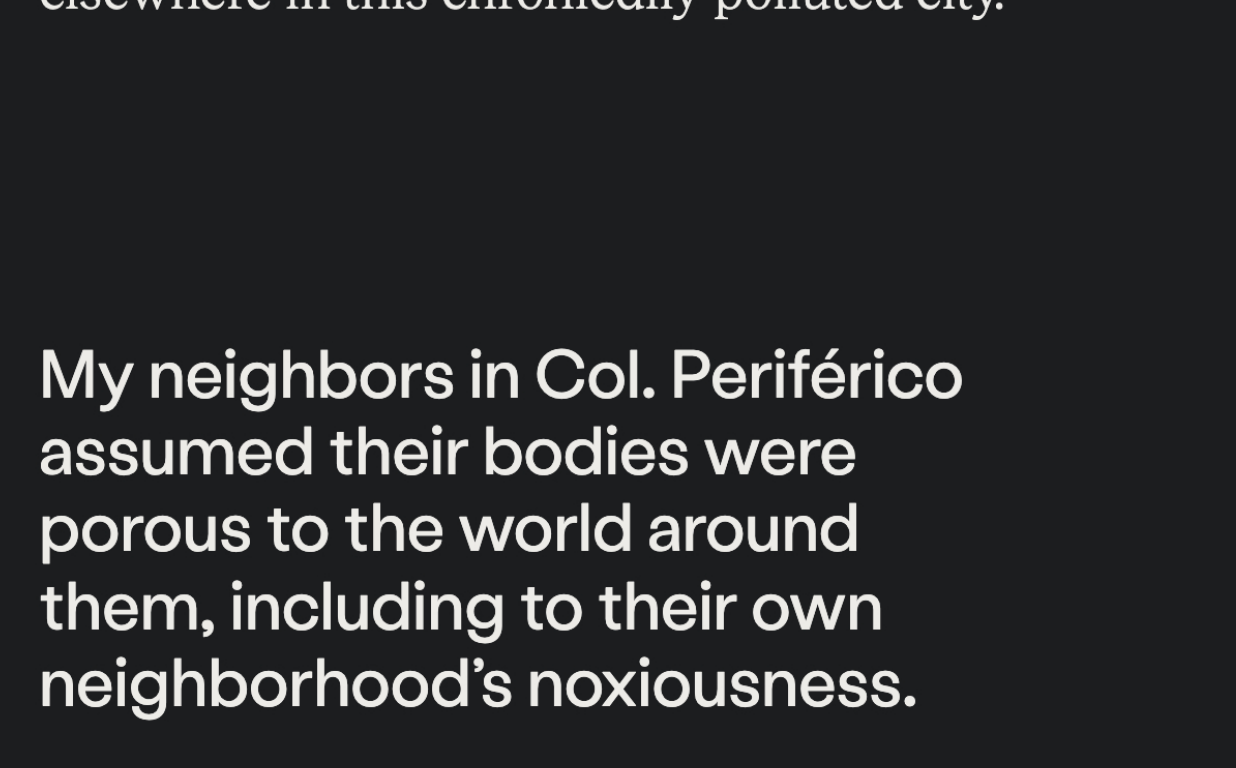
Señora Natividad's sturdy, narrow, four-story house was perched on top of a ravine. Painted a rich aquamarine and sandwiched between similarly vertical houses, it overlooked a narrow stream of dam runoff filled with *aguas negras* (untreated sewage) and garbage. Birds, rats, and dogs frolicked in the brush entangled with garbage on the riverbank below. The ravine formed the northernmost boundary of Colonia Periférico, a working-class neighborhood of *mala fama* (bad reputation) in Mexico City.

DURING THE RAINY SEASON, the dam usually overflowed and the ravine filled, flooding the houses with torrential brown waters roiling with debris. During my time living in Colonia Periférico, I learned from local urban water ecologists that this flooding fills the walls of cement houses like Sra. Nati's with salmonella, E. coli, and fecal enterococcus. Some in Col. Periférico blamed the dam for the respiratory diseases that plagued the residents. Who can say though, if there was a higher incidence of respiratory problems in Col. Periférico than elsewhere in this chronically polluted city.

My neighbors in Col. Periférico assumed their bodies were porous to the world around them, including to their own neighborhood's noxiousness.

When I lived with Sra. Nati, who was my landlady, she always joked about the smell that wafted off the dam and infused the neighborhood. She joked to her children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, other relatives, and boarders like me, as she fed us to bursting, scolding us to eat more. She would tell us how whenever she left, she wanted to be back in Col. Periférico. Nati was accustomed to her neighborhood, where every family had arrived alongside other rural migrants over fifty years before. And then, always, the punch line: "I need to be back here where the air is sweet." Or sometimes she would say "I need to be back here, where we get the stink for free." We laughed loudly either way because in Col. Periférico the air was shit. When I lived in Col. Periférico I got used to the stench, but when I left, even for a few days, upon return I would have to brace myself all over again for the olfactory assault.

The smell wasn't the neighborhood's only noxious attribute. Cement factories surrounded Col. Periférico, filling its perimeter air with dust. These features did double duty to make the place distinct. Besides the signature scent, the dam and the cement factories formed part of a miasmatic membrane that provided protection. They managed what got inside the neighborhood, especially the police, whose presence elsewhere in the city had intensified in the wake of NAFTA and the War on Drugs.



I'm a professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan. I am also a US citizen and white woman who, until Covid-19, could move with ease across the Mexican/US border. That ease has allowed me to work in Mexico City since 2013, as part of a collaboration with public health and environmental health scientists who have been studying the developmental effects of chemical exposures over the course of a lifetime. In 2014/2015 I moved into Col. Periférico to find out how chemical exposure impacted the daily lives of the study participant families who lived there.

As I went back and forth between Col. Periférico and the research world of environmental health scientists, I found two different models of chemical exposure at work. The scientists assumed that to maintain health, bodies must be somehow sequestered from the world. My neighbors in Col. Periférico assumed their bodies were porous to the world around them, including to their own neighborhood's noxiousness. That noxiousness helped maintain boundaries against the encroachment of outsiders.

Boundaries and Protective Porosity

Entering Col. Periférico by vehicle involved passing under a freeway interchange near a Costco, and over a congested boulevard where new luxury condos rose–then through an odoriferous recycling and garbage processing zone, junk food distribution centers, and dusty cement factories established near the now-defunct sand mines that built midcentury Mexico City. Walking in through this passageway would leave you covered in a fine cement residue.

The smell hit at the entrance to Col. Periférico, at a river overpass downhill from Sra. Nati's house. Three civic buildings converged at this spot: one of Col. Periférico's two elementary schools, a corrugated metal community center with a playground and exercise zone, and a security module manned 24/7 by three rotating policemen with varying attitudes toward Col. Periférico and its residents. For all practical purposes, this was the only entrance for vehicles, although there were many more by foot.

This entrance alone opened to Col. Periférico's main artery, Calle Benito Juarez, a street that rose up a hill, atop exhausted sand mines. All day and early evening Benito Juarez was clogged with cars, delivery trucks, and microbuses, often completely at an impasse. Instead of heading up Benito Juarez, you could enter one of several narrow *callejones* (alleys), or drive or walk alongside a long embankment wall, topped by a cyclone fence, that served as the neighborhood's western border. More junk food factories lay on the other side. The embankment, littered with garbage and cans of *activo* (pipe glue solvent that provides hallucinations when inhaled), sometimes served as a stage for rap groups protesting police violence.

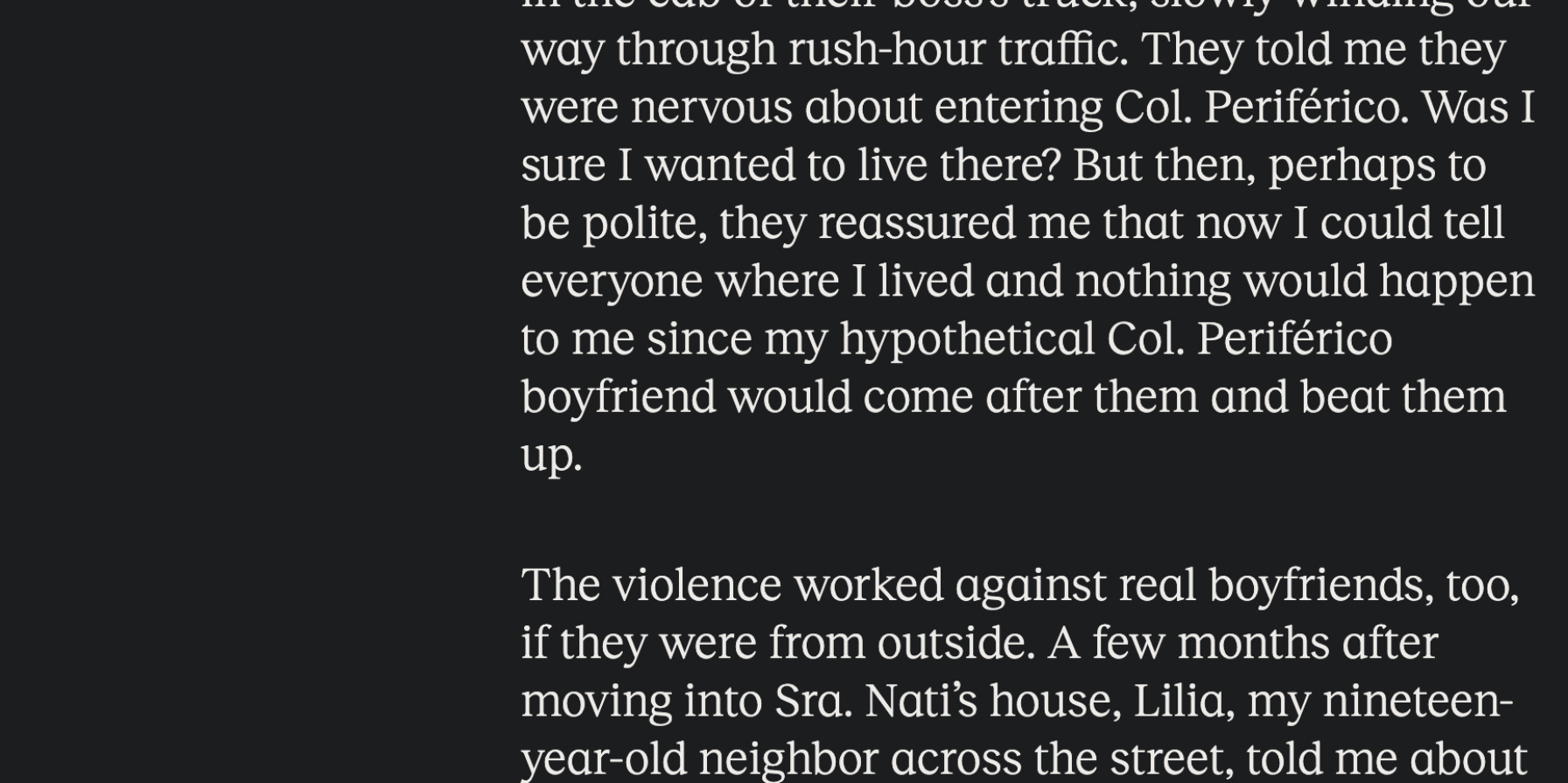
Topped by a causeway, the dam upriver from the security module was the strongest stink point in Col. Periférico. In the dry season city officials dredged the dam to remove the garbage that plugged the grates where the water sluiced through. This act was repeated every year. Col. Periférico was the last residential stop for a system of dams that controlled this particular river. The sewage moved down from on high, and when it arrived at Col. Periférico, the smell reached its maximum reek point before the *aguas negras* headed underground.

Col. Periférico's boundaries were also marked by death. Santa Muerte (Saint Death) guarded the dam entrance. Santa Muerte is an unusual saint in that she was never a person whose virtuous life could be emulated. Patron of the marginalized, the incarcerated, the queer, and the poor. "La Flaquita," "La Niña Blanca" is the great equalizer since everyone dies. Linked to the Aztec Goddess of Death, Mictecacihuatl, the Catholic Church forbids her worship. Inside Col. Periferico, even those who wanted nothing to do with Santa Muerte maintained respect for her and her devotees, explaining simply, "*A cada quien sus cosas*" (To each their own).

Despite Col. Periférico's reputation, I realized, soon after I was ensconced in Senora Nati's house, that I had never felt so safe in my life.

While I was living in Col. Periférico, police stopped me several times at the pedestrian borders guarded by Santa Muerte, telling me I could not enter the neighborhood: too dangerous for a *gringa*. These were the only times I ever felt menaced in Mexico City. One afternoon four policemen tried to prevent me from crossing the dam back into Col. Periférico. They followed me across the causeway. The moment I stepped back inside the neighborhood, the police stopped as if held back by an invisible wall. They turned and walked away as a group of young men, smoking weed safely inside Col. Periférico's boundaries, hurled insults toward their backs. At that moment they and Col. Periférico were impermeable to the police, and so was I.

This is what Menendez, the most seasoned and calm of the three policemen stationed at the security module, told me—that he and other policemen wouldn't enter Col. Periférico. They wouldn't go farther than ten meters past their post, lest they became too vulnerable. If they tried to chase someone, *la rata* (the delinquent) would disappear in the maze of *callejones* and through the doors of houses, opened by the neighborhood residents, who were all willing to harbor miscreants. Menendez was sanguine about his inability to enter Col. Periférico. He appeared to know every resident who came by the module, greeting them warmly and letting them use the bathroom. The other two policemen, both younger and hotheaded, were disdainful of the *colonia* they could not enter, explaining how Col. Periférico's boundaries protected dysfunction, violence, and drug use. Menendez reassured me that I was not the only person taxi drivers deposited at the security module at night, refusing to pass inside this menacing neighborhood so that I had to walk the rest of the way home.



Soon after I moved to Col. Periférico in September 2014, I hired two young men to haul some of a friend's old furniture to Sra. Nati's house in a pickup truck. I spent hours with these two cousins in the cab of their boss's truck, slowly winding our way through rush-hour traffic. They told me they were nervous about entering Col. Periférico. Was I sure I wanted to live there? But then, perhaps to be polite, they reassured me that now I could tell everyone where I lived and nothing would happen to me since my hypothetical Col. Periférico boyfriend would come after them and beat them up.

The violence worked against real boyfriends, too, if they were from outside. A few months after moving into Sra. Nati's house, Lilia, my nineteen-year-old neighbor across the street, told me about how when she moved back in with her mother in Col. Periférico, with her baby girl, her boyfriend came after her and threatened them all. The boys she grew up with on the street, her lifelong neighbors, beat him and told him never to come back. She laughed as she told me about the sight of him leaving in humiliation.

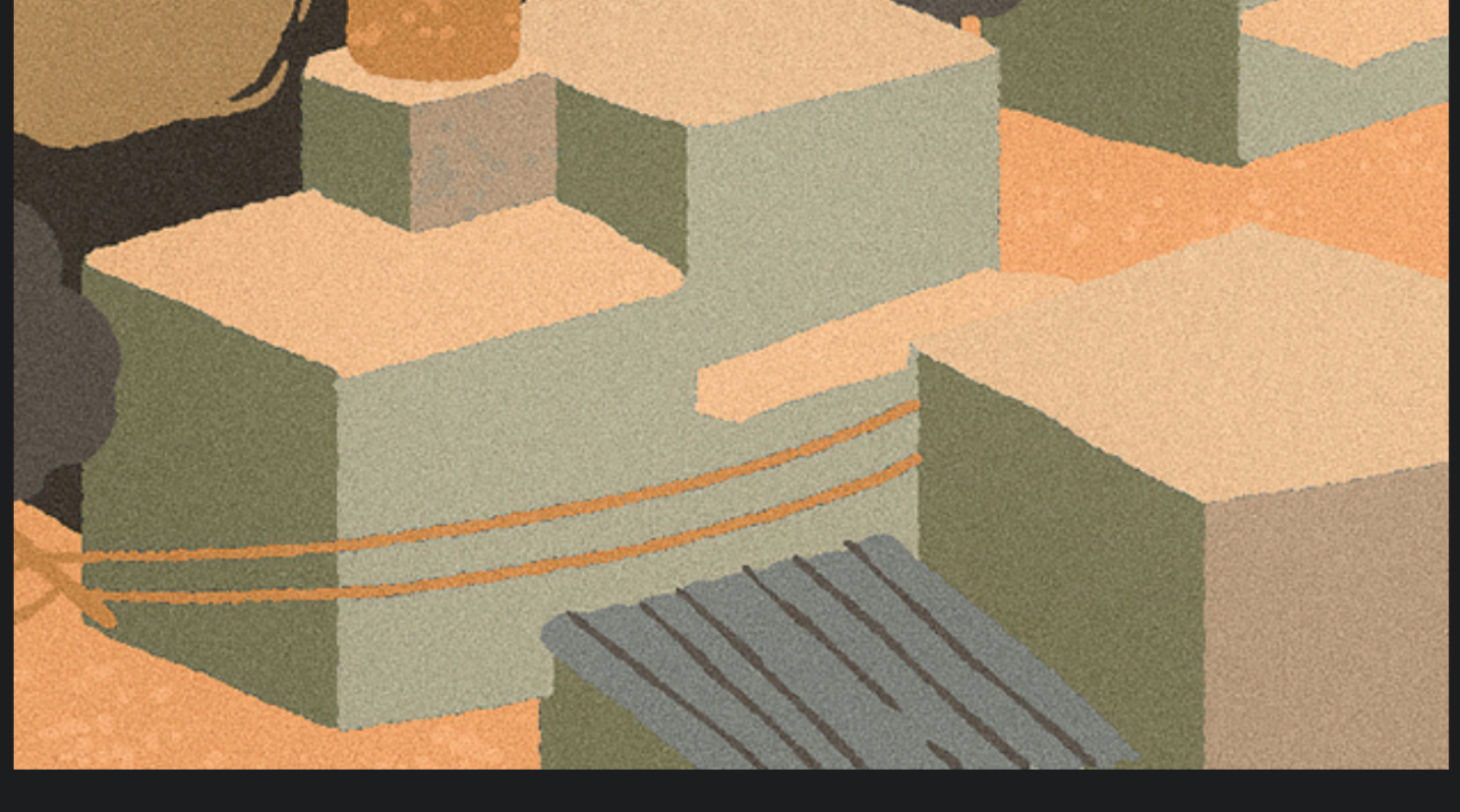
Despite Col. Periférico's reputation, I realized, soon after I was ensconced in Senora Nati's house, that I had never felt so safe in my life. Inside Col. Periférico everyone knew each other and kids played on the street. You needed to say hello to everyone on entering and goodbye when exiting. Walking up Benito Juarez took forever because of how many people must be greeted. People from Col. Periférico who had moved elsewhere told me they missed the "knowingness".

Stability in Col. Periférico relied on, not gates and private security guards, but the *mala fama* and toxicity that permeated the bodies of its residents, enabling them to persevere.

It would be hard to overstate the density of this "knowingness" in Col. Periférico. Especially from October through February. During this period there unfolded a stream of holy days, marked by nightly street parties usually preceded by a mass. Frequent *novenas*, processions, *velorios*, *quinceaños*, first communions, and children's birthday parties took place in the middle of the street, with everyone moving to the side when cars needed to pass. Passing neighbors often joined in. Different parties spilled over onto each other. Cars and pedestrians had to maneuver around stalls selling fruit, underwear, costumes, saints, and pirated DVDs.

Col. Periférico's close quarters allowed for many forms of "chemical kinship." People's livelihoods colonized the cramped streets, mostly without complaint. Some of these livelihoods spread outward, from car spray-painting on sidewalks with fumes emanating outward, to woodworking shops with clouds of dust pouring out doors and windows, to the metal shop releasing its acrid plume on the hill above the dam. These street businesses were noisy, too, though they couldn't drown out the cacophony of blasting rooftop speakers or the barking of chained dogs.

Nearly everyone told me that Col. Periférico was safer than it had been before, when they were young. There were multiple theories as to why. Some said there had been neighborhood delinquents, and these young men were now dead or in prison, or grew up. That could have been true. Time and geography seemed part of this story as well. The density of knowingness had had more time to develop as well since the residents arrived and squatted this neighborhood in the 1960s.



So had the boundary-making industrial ramparts: the cement plants, the freeway, the junk food factories. Another way the defenses had grown was through smell—the garbage and shit. The dam used to be a soccer field half the year, and during the rainy season the river had run so clean that people came from all around to play in its waters. Now the dam was a boundary that permitted passage, but who would cross this shit isthmus, except for those who lived inside?

The police force guarding Col. Periférico's entrance had little power to get inside. It was the same for social and health workers. The director of the local *seguro* popular health care clinic, which served Col. Periférico and other nearby low-income *colonias*, seemed stunned when she heard that I lived there. She had not been able to complete health surveys in Col. Periférico because her workers refused to cross its borders. In the landscape of the city's social services, Col. Periférico was a *punto rojo* (problem area). In meetings, interviews, and informal conversations, social workers who had been charged with making Col. Periférico "less marginalized" all described it as an abject and dangerous cesspool of violence, drugs, and broken families. It came to seem as if the *colonia* was designated a *punto rojo* precisely because of its successful resistance to state actors like the police and public health workers.

One thing that the social workers and police got right is that drugs were done inside Col. Periférico, and those who did them, mostly young men, did them in public. What would be difficult for the social workers and police to know is that in many ways public drug taking was evidence of Col. Periférico's stability. Two drugs dominated the streetscapes—marijuana, and *activo*. Marijuana was a social drug. On Sra. Nati's street the same group of young men smoked joints together every evening, leaning against hollowed-out cars, the sweet herbal smell wafting around them and adding to the miasma. The young men smoking weed and sometimes drinking beer or pulque were unfailingly polite. They chatted with passersby at all hours of the day or night. They were the same group that beat up Lilia's abusive boyfriend and hurled insults at the police at the edge of the dam causeway. Older men smoked weed, too, on the steps winding up Benito Juarez with their friends. You stepped around them as you greeted each other.

Activo, a pipe glue solvent easily purchased at hardware stores, provided hallucinations on the cheap but was much less social. The young men who inhaled it usually did so alone, or sometimes together but alone, on religious pilgrimages. They stared into space, sometimes shadow boxing the air while muttering. Yellow and red *activo* cans littered the *callejones* and the graffiti wall on Col. Periférico's perimeter. *Activo* users were usually very thin. I began to wonder about any thin man. Did he use? Did he have no women to feed him? Accepting public drug use was a striking nonacceptance of the terms of the War on Drugs, which, in the name of health, had forced drugs underground elsewhere. It was the very public nature of their drug-taking within Periférico's boundaries that allowed *activo* users safety, enmeshed in the care of a *colonia* that integrated drug users into everyday life.

Col. Periferico's boundaries were necessary against the police who personified Mexico's transformation in the last decades from a protectionist state to a "free market." Together, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), signed into effect in 1994, and the War on Narcos, declared in 2006 in partnership with the United States, had severe and intertwined effects on Mexico. These two policies have caused rural land dispossession on a massive scale; increased both internal and external migration; intensified militarization, including that of the police; furthered the privatization of public services and land; and restructured the legal system. Transnational corporations have benefited the most from these disruptions.

In 2015, Col. Periférico seemed to be holding steady against these transformations, helped by earlier mid-century land title programs. Sra. Nati's house title was in her name. She paid for its construction with savings from selling her hand embroidery. Her now-deceased husband's earnings as a taxi driver supported daily life during the construction. Built continuously from the 1970s through the 1990s, Nati's house had become a compound with six separate units that over the years housed her husband, her four children, several grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and now boarders. She was proud of how well built her house was and how well she maintained its boundaries, from sweeping the street every day to strictly controlling who had keys.

Sra. Nati's household was similar to the majority of households I got to know in Col. Periférico. Few who lived with their natal family paid rent. These conditions brought an extraordinary level of stability to Col. Periférico residents, who did not have to contend with the evictions so common to working-class, poor, and-increasingly-middle-class people in regions with skyrocketing real estate markets. Col. Periférico residents told me of shopping mall developers coming around a few years before but losing interest because of the stench and reputation.

In Col. Periferico, the stench permeated its residents, but it also prevented incursions by outsiders who threatened violence. Within the standard public health and social work model of bodily boundaries, it's difficult for state actors to imagine this toxicity as protective. After living in Col. Periférico for a few months I realized this place was the inverse of every U.S. middle-class coastal city or college town I've known. Even before the hyperfocus on organic food and BPA-free baby bottles, residents of my middle-class world assumed the ability and the right to protect one's insides. For the U.S. middle class, protection occurs without any visible boundaries, the benefit of a century of zoning laws seeking to prevent the incursion of the poor and non-white.

In a curious way, Col. Periférico was more like the gated communities that academics in the United States so disdain. Like the wealthy who live inside these walled zones, residents of Col. Periférico were able to protect inside from the outside, even as NAFTA and the Drug War raged on. Stability in Col. Periférico relied on, not gates and private security guards, but the *mala fama* and toxicity that permeated the bodies of its residents, enabling them to persevere. For Sra. Nati and her neighbors, bodily porosity to drugs, shit, spray paint and concrete residue fortified the borders of Col. Periférico in the time of NAFTA and the War on Narcos. And anytime she went away Sra. Nati missed her safe haven, sheltered by the stench of shit.

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Elizabeth F.S. Roberts *is a professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan, who investigates scientific and public health knowledge production and its embodied effects in Latin America and the United States. She currently collaborates with engineers and environmental health scientists in the United States and Mexico as part of two ongoing team-based projects in Mexico City that she directs: "Mexican Exposures: A Bioethnographic Approach to Health and Inequality" and "Neighborhood Environments as Socio-Techno-bio Systems: Water Quality, Public Trust, and Health in Mexico City" (NESTSMX). In these projects, she and her team trace the looping social, economic, biological, and technical processes that shape everyday life, health, and inequality in working class neighborhoods. One of the key aims of Professor Roberts' current work is the development of bioethnography, a method that combines social and life sciences approaches in order to make better knowledge about health and inequality. Dr. Roberts' earlier research focused on assisted reproduction in the United States and Ecuador, reproductive governance in Latin America, and transnational medical migrations. She is the author of the book* God's Laboratory: Assisted Reproduction in the Andes *(U.C. California Press 2012) and is currently finishing a book manuscript on addiction called* In Praise of Addiction: Devotion and Defiance in Narcolandia.

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