Duality + Complexity

FEATURE

CULTURE / CHICAGO

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 pale aquamarine and sandwiched between similarly vertical houses, it stood out like a narrow stream of aquamarine against a backdrop of muted (untreated wooden) and garbage. Birds, rats, and dogs foraged 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 rolling with the debris of the city. In the 2000s, Colonia Periférico I learned from local urban water ecologists that this flooding fits the walls of cement houses like this. Nat's with substandard, ill, cold, and fecal entrancesses. Some in Col. Periférico blamed the flooding for the various 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 washed off the dam and infested the neighborhood. She lived with her daughter, son-in-law, and three grandchildren, other relatives, and boarders like me, on the first or so floors, sizzling in so much more. She would tell us how whenever she left, she wanted to be back in Col. Periférico. Nati was occasioned to feel neighborhood, when every day, she would return home to a stench she hadn't ever felt 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 would laugh at this, because we knew Col. Periférico is the air was sh*t. 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 factories made Col. Periférico a "dirty" neighborhood, nonetheless 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 come and go as I pleased. Because of my privileges, I was 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 2018, I joined the team. We had a grant 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 an different academic community. Unlike the public health scientists, concerned 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. Their noxiousness helped maintain boundaries against the encroachment of outsiders.

Boundaries and Protective Porosity

Entering Col. Periférico by vehicle involved passing under a thoroughfare overpass near a Costco, and over a congested boulevard where new luxury condos tow their through an odoriferous recycling and garbage processing zone. Junk food distribution centers, and dusty cement factories established near the new neighborhood, lined the road. Entering 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 entryway downhill from Sra. Nati's house. The river was a dumping ground for the entire city of Col. Periférico: two elementary schools, a corrugated metal community center with a playground and exercise zone, and a security module manned 24/7 by three retiring policemen who had been assigned to Col. Periférico. Nati and I, as residents, for all practical purposes, city 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 the ravine's northeastern slope. Calle Benito Juarez was a narrow two-way lane clogged with cars, delivery trucks, and microbuses, often completely at an impasse. Instead of heading up Benito Juarez, you could enter one of several footpaths that branched off it. Each of these originals a long embankment wall, topped by a cyclone fence, that served as the neighborhood's western border. More look local factories lay on the other side. The embankment, fitted with garbage and cans of active (gas) grass advertised the presence of Col. Periférico. The fence also served as a stage for sign groups protesting police violence.

Trapped by a causeway, the dam upriver from the security module was the strongest stink point in Col. Periférico. It was the place, I was told, that you had to go to to see the river in a gift-wrapped plugged the grates where the water oozed through. This act was repeated every year. Col. Periférico was the last residential stop for a spectrum of dams that controlled this particular river. Nati's house was the last stop for the garbage and when it arrived at Col. Periférico, the smell reached its maximum reek point before the agave negras headed underground.

Col. Periférico's boundaries were also marked by dark stains. Señora Nati's house's gaudy aquamarine was one of many. Some had been painted over, in that she was never a person whose virtuous life could be emulated. Patron of the marginalizados the Incarnatured, the queer, and the poor, "La Virgen," "La Niña Blanca" is the great equalizer of Mexico City's working class. Her followers are of Death, Mexican ritual, the Catholic Church forbids her worship. Instead, Col. Periférico, even those who wanted nothing to do with Santa Muerte maintained respect for her and her devotees, explaining simply, "A caído quien sur coraz" (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 officers were posted at the neighborhood's entry borders guarded by Santa Muerte, telling me I could not enter the neighborhood (no dangerous for a gringa). These were the early times I ever felt menaced in Mexico City. One afternoon four officers, two in a pickup truck and two on foot, blocked 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, who had been hanging out in the dam, emerged from the shadows hurled insults toward their backs. At that moment they and Col. Periférico were imperceptible to the police, and so was I.

This is what Menander, the most seasoned and calm of the three policemen stationed at the security module, explained to me when the three policemen wouldn't enter Col. Periférico. They wouldn't go further than ten meters past their post, lest they became too vulnerable. If they tried to chase someone, he would be delinquent's would be gone in a flash, and they would be stranded in the dangerous neighborhood, surrounded by the residents, who were all willing to hurled miscreants. Menender was navigating about his inability to enter Col. Periférico. He opposition to know every resident who came by the module, and knew Col. Periférico's "dirty" secrets, "all of the bathtubs. The other two policemen, both younger and hotheaded, were disdainful of the colonia they could not enter, explaining how Col. Periférico boundaries protected dysfunction, corruption, and crime. Menander explained that that I was not the only person who had drinks deposited at the security module at night, refusing to pass inside the menacing neighborhood so that I had to walk the rest of the way home.

Soon after I moved to Col. Periférico in September 2013, I helped Nati's daughter and son-in-law's friends and furniture to Sra. Nati's house in a pickup truck. I spent hours with these two cousins in the cab of their beach truck, slowly winding our way through rush-hour traffic. They told me they had been kicked out of their house in Col. Periférico, and they didn't know why. Their dad, perhaps, had be polite, they reasoned on that now I could sell 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 her ex-boyfriend, who had been a local resident of Col. Periférico, with her baby girl, but he kept it come after her and threatened them all. The boys the 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 night 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 talk passed on the street. Neighbors would wave and call out greetings. Life was boring, but also exciting. Stalking 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 made *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 the perspective of a person who had lived in three unrelated a remnant of tody days, marked by nightly street parties usually preceded by a mass. Frequent novenas, processions, wakes, quinceañas, fiesta commitments, and children's birthday parties took place in the middle of the street, with tents and chairs spilling out of the 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, sabres, and pirated DVDs.

Col. Periférico's close quarters allowed for many forms of "chemical kinship." People's bloodloads colonized the cramped streets, mostly without complaint. Some of these bloodloads spread outward, from car spray painting on sidewalks to the chemicals used in the cement factories and shops with clouds of dust jacking up noses 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 hold a candle to the Saturday night boombox speakers on the buildings of Calle Benito Juarez.

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 drugs as well since the neighborhood had spiralled into neighborhood in the 1960s.

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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 *segura* 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 object 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 Sta. Natí'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. Periférico'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. Natí'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, Natí'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. Natí'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. Periférico, 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. Natí 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. Natí missed her safe haven, sheltered by the stench of shit.

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