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Elizabeth F.S. Roberts

What Gets Inside: Violent Entanglements & Toxic Boundaries in Mexico City

Wednesday April 12th, 12:00-1:30 PM, Hagerty Library L-33



Entanglement is a key concept in contemporary science and technology studies (STS). By tracing all the contingent and uncertain relations that endow objects with seemingly stable boundaries, entanglement allows us to see how such boundaries restrict our ability to know the world better. This talk deploys the concept of entanglement in an examination of contemporary life in a working-class Mexico City neighborhood, Colonia Periferico, and a longitudinal environmental health project that studies the neighborhood's residents. While entanglement is useful for analyzing the study (e.g., for reconnecting variables that the scientists have isolated), my examination of the entanglement of working-class bodies with NAFTA and the ongoing War on Drugs shows that the concept has its limits. For working-class residents of Mexico City life is already deeply entangled with chronic economic and political instability shaped through the violent ravages of transnational capital. To explore the utility and limits of entanglement I trace how residents in Col. Periferico seek stability by making boundaries to keep out the disruptive effects of police and public health surveillance. Col. Periferico's toxic boundaries, which include a sewage-filled dam, cement dust, and freeway exhaust, are clearly entangled with residents' health. They get inside. These entanglements are the price paid for a remarkable stability within Col. Periferico's boundaries, where children can play on the streets and attentive care for drug-addicted and disabled residents is part of everyday life. Additionally, residents would like to share in the privilege of inhabiting a world where objects can be experienced separate from the relations that make them; a world with reliable drinking water and accurate blood lead measurements. With the goal of knowing the world better, then, STS might complicate celebratory calls for the uncertainty of entanglement by taking into account both the practices that make boundaries, and what boundaries have to offer.



Elizabeth F.S. Roberts is a feminist ethnographer of science, medicine and technology, who teaches anthropology at the University of Michigan. She has researched assisted reproduction in Ecuador and the United States, reproductive governance in Latin America, and transnational medical migrations, and is currently investigating environmental health science in Mexico and the United States.



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