

Injurious Infrastructures:

Environmental Disasters, Residential Exposure to Toxic Substances, and Toxic Tort Litigation

Presented by:

Cristina Bejarano, Ph.D.

UC Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellow,
Department of Anthropology,
University of California, Riverside



In this talk, I examine the uneven distribution of environmental health risks in areas of Southern California where exposure to toxic substances from multiple sources has been an everyday reality for generations. It centers around a case in Carson where, in 2008, a community of 285 homes was discovered to have been built on land formerly used to store large amounts of crude oil. Known carcinogens like benzene have been entering the homes in the form of soil vapor for up to fifty years. I situate this particular case within the larger infrastructure of oil extraction, storage, and refineries in Los Angeles, which date back over one hundred years. This infrastructure can cause injury in expected ways that are difficult to prove, as well as create the conditions for injury in ways that often go unexamined and unquestioned, such as “beautification” projects. I also detail how affected communities struggle to make sense of the often conflicting information they receive about health risks, which become even more difficult in the context of toxic tort litigation. Finally, I argue that, while resource-intensive lawsuits can bring important attention to the failures of oil companies to protect the public from toxic substances, the legal process itself can lead to further injury, entrench biologies more deeply in unequal environments, and obscure other ways of understanding the causes of injury in environmental disasters.

Wednesday, January 25, 2017

INTS 1113

3:10-4:30pm

Sponsored by the Anthropology Department