Valley Fever Through the Lens of Environmental Racism and Health Justice

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In this seminar, Dr. Rios will discuss how environmental racism in Kern County connects with the experiences of farmworkers and formerly incarcerated men and women of color who have suffered from Valley Fever, an illness caused by Coccidioides fungus spores that can lead to long-term pulmonary, brain, and spinal infections, and in some cases, death. Previous biomedical studies have explored the efficacy of different medical interventions and developed better diagnostic tests and treatments, but they have also deployed long standing hypotheses and arguments that attribute higher chances of risk and dissemination largely to biological characteristics of people of color. Epidemiologists have further explored the impacts of climate change and made efforts to map areas where the disease is most likely found. Although biomedical and public health approaches are sometimes legitimate and necessary, defaulting to identifying genetic markers among people who are grouped into racial categories does not begin to resolve the question of why people who work outside and people who are locked inside are the most vulnerable to contract and die from this disease. Dr. Rios will discuss the drivers of cumulative and connected vulnerabilities that are present in the everyday lives of vulnerable groups, asking: How do at-risk groups understand Valley Fever’s causes, consequences, and potential cures? How does their knowledge differ from conventional experts in public health and biomedical research? What socio-economic, environmental, and political structures in the Central Valley shape processing, contracting and recovery?

Dr. Sarah Rios’ research agenda focuses on advancing the study of race, health, and the environment. Rios is interested in the health implications of industrial agriculture and carceral expansion, and community-based resilience through environmental justice activism. Currently, Rios is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Community and Environmental Sociology at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Her ongoing research about an environmental illness known as Valley Fever that is endemic in the Central Valley of California, places the apex of the medical conversation in a discussion about the racialized social determinants of health and community-based knowledge. Rios analyzes how farm workers and former prisoners’ contract and recover from Valley Fever while mitigating poverty, pollution, and the threats of incarceration or deportation. Rios also works closely with environmental justice activists and prison abolitionists to discuss alternative perspectives about environmental health and justice. She is an alumnus of California State University Fresno, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in Women’s Studies and in Communication Disorders and Deaf Studies. In 2018, Sarah earned her Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her areas of specialization include Environmental Justice; Race and Health; Qualitative Research Methods; and Latino/a Sociology. Sarah is originally from the Salinas Valley of California.