

WINTER 2015 COLLOQUIA SERIES

Date: Wednesday, March 11

Time: 3:15-4:45PM

Location: Social Sciences 1, room 261



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Body Burdens: Soil, Sediment, and Accretive Violence in Martinique

For the past half century, anglophone toxicologists and environmental activists have used the term “body burden” to describe the accumulated amount of harmful substances present in human bodies. In recent years, “charges corporelles” have emerged as part of the popular conversation in Martinique, a French territory in the Caribbean where I conduct ethnographic research. There, narratives about the origins of gender transgression and same-sex desire have shifted recently to include a story about their relationship to bodily contamination by a pesticide once used widely on the island’s banana plantations. As a source of rising levels of estrogen-like chemicals in the environment, the pesticide *chlordécone* has been linked to both male infertility and prostate cancer. Concerns about the effects of the island’s soil contamination have been heightened by uncertainty about the range of its impacts, and popular responses have included panic about male effeminacy and intersex births as well as critiques of the postcolonial dynamics that drive uneven exposure. This talk investigates the relationship of racialized and gendered bodies to their environments in Martinique via a theorization of the accretive effects of colonial violence. Plumbing the ways that the Caribbean has functioned as an imperial laboratory for the elaboration of European techniques of (bio)power, I highlight the particular vulnerabilities, as well as the contradictory assemblages of power, that body burdens reveal in postslavery societies.

Vanessa Agard-Jones is Assistant Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Yale University, where she teaches courses in transnational gender/sexuality and feminist science studies. Her ethnographic research focuses on the intersections of sexual and environmental politics and their relationship to debates about sovereignty in the (French) Caribbean. Professor Agard-Jones' work has been published in *Small Axe*, *GLQ*, and on the medical anthropology platform *Somatosphere*. With late historian Manning Marable she is editor of *Transnational Blackness: Navigating the Global Color Line*. She is currently writing a book about pesticides, (sexual) politics, and postcoloniality in Martinique.