



2024 S4 Graduate Fellow Lecture

# Environmental risk and the reorganization of urban inequality in the late 19th and early 20th century

Jonathan Tollefson

Day/Time: Friday, Apr 26<sup>th</sup>, 12-1pm ET

Location: Zimmer Lounge (Maxcy 010)



**Abstract:** This paper investigates the changing nature of racial environmental inequality during the initial formation of the segregated and unequal neighborhood in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Environmental inequality research is largely left-censored to about the 1980s, primarily due to a lack of comprehensive environmental site data prior to EPA-era regulatory and monitoring requirements. As a result, the field has developed during a period in which neighborhood-scale racial inequality was already an established fact on the ground, and sociologists have limited understanding of the relationship between environmental and racial marginalization during the initial solidification of the neighborhood as the primary spatial structure shaping urban inequality. In response, this paper uses an original computational methodology to identify and geolocate sites related to a particularly important source of early industrial pollution. These sites are paired with geolocated historic census data to measure changes in the social stratification of environmental exposure in six US cities from 1880 to 1930. Results reveal that the 1880 to 1930 period was characterized by the steadily racialization of environmental risk, as nonwhite residents increasingly came to occupy the same neighborhoods and streets as hazardous industry. These findings suggest that racial-environmental inequality emerged much earlier than other empirical studies have demonstrated, and that environmental risk is likely more central to the formation of the neighborhood than previously acknowledged.

**Bio:** Jonathan Tollefson is a Ph.D. candidate at the Brown University Department of Sociology and the Institute at Brown for Environmental and Society. Their research investigates inequality and stratification as environmental processes with a focus on long-term trajectories of social and environmental change in cities. Jonathan's dissertation uses an original computational methodology to present the first comparative analysis of urban environmental inequality during the late 19th and early 20th century. A second strand of their research seeks to understand complex interactions in the spatial dynamics of environmental privilege and risk over the long term, through collaborative efforts with the Rhode Island Department of Health and Brown University's Superfund Research Program. Prior to their work at Brown, Jonathan received an M.S. from the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Vermont, where they conducted fieldwork in southwestern Alaska. Their Master's research investigated how the governance of extractive development excludes Native Alaskan communities from formal, state-led processes of environmental knowledge production – and how community coalitions make alternative knowledge claims to the state and public. Linking computational analysis with their interests in the sociology of knowledge, more recent research efforts use network-based methods to investigate the formation of the community resilience planning field, through an ongoing collaboration with colleagues at Brown and at the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

