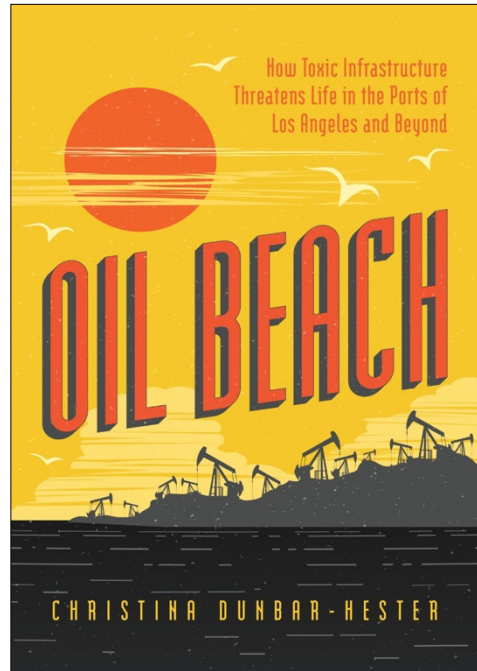


Christina Dunbar-Hester, **Oil Beach: How Toxic Infrastructure Threatens Life in the Ports of Los Angeles and Beyond**, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 272 pp., \$30.00 (paperback), \$99.00 (hardcover,) \$29.99 (ebook).

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Oil Beach: How Toxic Infrastructure Threatens Life in the Ports of Los Angeles and Beyond invites readers to consider the intricate relationships of violence and vitality between “toxic infrastructure” and life around the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach through a series of “multispecies stories,” which account for global interconnections through the ports that shape them as key nodes in international industries. This is the third book from science and technology studies (STS) scholar, and University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication professor of communication, Christina Dunbar-Hester. Dunbar-Hester’s previous books include *Low Power to the People: Pirates, Protest, and Politics in FM Radio Activism* (2014) and *Hacking Diversity: The Politics of Inclusion in Open Technology Cultures* (2020). Both have won awards and recognition for their contributions to communications research. Compared to these previous works, *Oil Beach* widens the frame on themes of society, politics, technology, and infrastructure to include environment. Dunbar-Hester takes an interpretative and ethnographic approach to understanding the points of connection shared in the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach between global infrastructures, people, and nonhuman residents. Taking the ports as nodes in capitalist expansion, she illustrates how different life forms that transit there have been harmed through industrial commodification processes. She proposes “infrastructural vitalism” as a way for understanding infrastructural growth as in direct contention with biological life. As she explains, “Infrastructural vitalism is the premise for a global system that drives violence and lethality” (p. 15).



Oil Beach will appeal to a variety of audiences based on the dynamic topic and the author’s approach through historical contextualization, multispecies analysis, and ethnographic methods. The book would benefit readers, including upper division undergraduate students and graduate students, in these fields: anthropology, environmental studies, colonial and postcolonial studies, geography, global studies, media and communication studies, STS, sociology, and other social sciences and critical humanities.

The book is organized conceptually by bringing a different biological lifeform into focus with each chapter, within their “ecological lines of relation” (p. 5) with human and nonliving entities, in particular processes of violence and flux. The chapters together support Dunbar-Hester’s aim to “denaturalize” the way we understand infrastructural and economic vitality in our industrial systems and reconceptualize how actions

of accountability and environmental stewardship, like wildlife conservation, are actually supportive of infrastructural vitalism. Chapter 1, "Precariously Perched in a Port," centers on avian wildlife and oil spill rescue efforts and the history of how the ports historically evolved into a "petroleumscape." Chapter 2, "Yes, We Have No Bananas," considers the ports and the coevolution of the banana trade and containerization in global product transportation. Chapter 3, "Coastal Translocations," looks at sea otter habitation in oil transport zones, and their rehabilitation to other territories. Chapter 4, "Aqua Nullius," reflects more recently on the "anthropause" in the movement of global supply chains during the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on cetaceans (such as whales and dolphins) and their global movements. The book's Conclusion, "Flux: Bridging to Futures," connects the historically situated phenomenon discussed in the previous chapters to possible shifts in the future as "infrastructural vitalism" pushes the port complex forward.

The chapters, constructed as "multispecies stories," create opportunity for readers to consider ecologies and infrastructure together in novel ways that challenge our conceptual separations between the two. Dunbar-Hester here methodically selects certain "charismatic species," like birds, whales, and bananas, which carry socially embedded significance in American, and more locally, Southern Californian, life. In this respect, Dunbar-Hester analyzes not only the mutualistic relationships between ecologies and infrastructure but also their interwoven social meanings. For example, in chapter 1, Dunbar-Hester provides a vignette of the rescue and rehabilitation attempts of a Nazca booby bird in 2020, during which the International Bird Rescue organization in San Pedro gave regular social media updates. She contextualizes the meanings of the rescue and public investment in receiving social media updates on the bird's rescue by recounting previous decades of rehabilitative response to the port's effects on local environment and wildlife. This includes mediated events like oil spill rescues, which have become readily recognizable as responsible acts of care toward local species. However, Dunbar-Hester demonstrates how, if we denaturalize understanding of caring acts like these, they may also be understood to be performed in a broader context of violence—both spectacular and "slow violence" (Nixon, 2013)—that come with the port complex and global commerce. Following this structure with subsequent chapters and charismatic species, Dunbar-Hester demonstrates the effectiveness of this method for thinking through ecologies and infrastructure as mutualistic systems—most especially by creatively attending to layered temporal aspects (historical unfolding and future projections) and spatial aspects (global interconnections and local life).

Readers will find connection between *Oil Beach* and thinking through other works on multispecies/more-than-human relations and sociomaterial concerns with infrastructure. Dunbar-Hester's conceptualization of the port complex as an analytical subject reads as familiar in many respects to Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox's (2015) approach understating the interoceanic highway between Brazil and Peru (*Roads: An Anthropology of Infrastructure and Expertise*), and Nicole Starosielski's (2015) approach to understanding the transoceanic undersea cable network (*The Undersea Network: Sign, Storage, Transmission*). Like these works, *Oil Beach* considers the totality of an infrastructure by paying attention not only to a particular node in the international oil industry but also the infrastructural and commercial interconnections that also compose the ports in San Pedro Bay. However, *Oil Beach* sets itself apart from these works of ethnographic interpretations of global infrastructure by methodologically giving voice to ecological roles and impacts. *Oil Beach* also shares commitments to theorizing multispecies and nonhuman experiences within the broader historical processes of colonization, capitalism, and global interconnections alongside works like Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's (2021) *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the*

Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins and Juno Salazar Parreñas's (2018) *Decolonizing Extinction: The Work of Care in Orangutan Rehabilitation*.

Overall, *Oil Beach* presents an exciting interweaving of methods and perspectives from multiple disciplines, most prominently STS and anthropology, and an original interpretive and historical narrative that gives balanced presence in the text to nonhuman biological life, like animals and plants, and to the built environment. This accomplishes the author's aim to illustrate the complex interrelations between these and human life, which together compose the ports—most important, how violence and flux form in those interconnections—and to “denaturalize the infrastructure and economic vitality” (p. 27) of the ports. The book's framing, which relies on theoretical perspectives on both environment and infrastructure, generates a valuable framework for those working in environmental studies and social studies of infrastructure. This framework demonstrates the value of thinking through questions of environment that account for infrastructure, and vice versa, rather than conceptually separating the two. Dunbar-Hester's concept of “infrastructural vitalism” will be useful for those also working to describe and explain violence attendant to processes of capitalist growth and infrastructural development. Another conceptualization in the work, “transspecies supply-chain justice,” however, was not developed as thoroughly throughout the book as infrastructural vitalism. The concept is intriguing, though, and could become very useful to future work in multispecies theory. Readers will find a theoretically exciting and vibrantly composed read with *Oil Beach*.

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