

Reflections on “Bridging the Gap: Race and the Environment” Mini-Conference

By:

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The Committee on Racial Equity began preparing for the Bridging the Gap mini-conference in the fall of 2016. Given our concerns about the limited diversity within the Section on Environmental Sociology, we saw the conference as an opportunity to bring diverse practitioners together to imagine a more diverse and inclusive environmental sociology. About one hundred demographically diverse scholars, students, activists, and regulatory scientists participated, making this event a truly watershed moment for Environmental Sociology.

For those of us working at the intersection of race and the environment, we knew this would be a challenging day. Airing one’s fears and frustrations in public is always a risky venture, particularly for those who have much at stake for speaking “out of turn,” or simply being too honest. And survival—both personal and political—the visionary black scholar Audre Lorde (2007) reminds us, is *not an academic skill*. Much more is always on the line.

We were pleasantly overwhelmed as conference participants encouraged us to think about the intersection of race and the environment through the perspectives of Black feminism, Black Studies, Indigenous Studies, critical race theory, critical environmental justice studies (CEJS), and intersectionality theory. The first keynote, David Pellow, rearticulated his CEJS approach. CEJS “bridges the gap” by seeing “race” and “environment” as mutually constituted and by critically interrogating “carceral colonial logics” that criminalize and degrade racialized and multiply-marginalized bodies and environments throughout the world. Bob Bullard, the second keynote, spoke of the history of the environmental justice movement in the United States, emphasizing important milestones and legislation. Despite these achievements, Dr. Bullard underlined the enduring problem of racism and environmental injustice in the United States.

We had additional contributions from our academic colleagues that helped us reimagine the link between race and the environment. In the morning, conference participants gained valuable insights from Michelle Jacob, C.N.E. Corbin, and Amy Lubitow, who spoke eloquently and passionately of both personal and professional barriers to equity and diversity at various academic ranks. We particularly appreciated Dr. Jacob’s Indigenous perspective and strategies for “academic activism” and “creating a home in the academy,” C.N.E. Corbin’s graduate-level research and advocacy for just and democratic recreational spaces in Oakland, California, and Dr. Lubitow’s recommendations for positive community-university engagement in the context of the white and gendered spaces of academia.

The next session featured research papers that encouraged us to rethink the intersection of race and the environment in differing contexts and places. Tracy Perkins illuminated California's history of multiracial and gendered environmental justice activism with implications for rethinking the racial, gender, and regional politics of the environmental justice movement. Michael Warren Murphy argued powerfully for the need to refocus environmental sociology on the lasting impact that European settler colonialism has had on socioecological relations throughout the world. Drawing on intersectionality theory, Anne Saville and Alison Adams lifted up the voices and plight of racialized and gendered collective illness experience of African American farmworkers, in general, and African American women farmworkers, in particular, who are systematically disadvantaged by Florida's agricultural industry and lax labor and pesticide regulatory regimes.

In the second paper session, our presenters consistently demonstrated how geographic space—variously conceptualized—is central to intertwined political projects of racial formation and environmental destruction. Danielle Purifoy and Louise Seamster analyzed “creative extraction” and “black towns in white space” with the case study of Tamina, Texas. In so doing, they made the forceful point: The making and unmaking of jurisdictional boundaries serve white people and spaces but “are tied to the environmental harms and extractions” inflicted on black people and spaces. George Lipsitz and Sarah Rios used an intersectional, social-ecological lens to examine how the causes, consequences, and potential cures of “valley fever” in California's San Joaquin Valley are shaped by multiple-modes of marginalization and discrimination, which only become visible when challenging regulatory and industry scientific expertise with “respectful and reciprocal relations of research.”

This second paper session also included Manuel Matos's initial formulation of the “territorial politics of Black mothering” in his case study of Black Women's Mobilization for the Care of Life and Ancestral Territories. His inquiry was informed by Black feminist theory and political philosophies embedded in reproductive and environmental justice. Manuel's deep commitment to fighting structural racism and supporting women's rights also influenced his research. He tragically passed away one month after our conference. Manuel, we all admire the people and causes for which you advocated, and the passion you brought to your life and work. They are all inspiring to us—as is your perseverance in the face of significant academic and political obstacles to advancing your rigorous and important scholarly challenge to the canon of environmental sociology. Manuel, you taught us much at the conference, and you have motivated us further to pursue positive changes to the conduct of environmental-sociological research and graduate student mentorship.

Our conference included spaces for advocates working outside of the academy to contribute to our project of bridging the gap between race and the environment. During lunch, conference participants benefited from conversations with members of community-based organizations in Philadelphia (i.e., Wholistic Arts, Soil Generation, the Overbrook Environmental Education Center, and Garden Justice Legal Initiative) on productive community-university partnerships to advance racial, environmental, and food justice initiatives within and beyond Philadelphia. Our afternoon “Beyond the Academy” session included presentations on the opportunities and constraints facing regulatory scientists to advance various environmental justice initiatives. This session also highlighted the transformational strategies of the Environmental and Climate Justice

Program of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the continuing struggle of the Lenape people of Pennsylvania and other Indigenous peoples of the Mid-Atlantic and throughout the U.S. for basic recognition, human rights, and environmental protections.

A continuous theme throughout the conference was that a common denominator in the oppression of people of color and environmental degradation is white supremacy and the multiplicity of social divisions that it uses to uphold its influence throughout the world. Further, our section is not immune to these issues. It is the work of all of us—especially white folks—to dismantle the divisive interpersonal and institutional mechanisms that stabilize and strengthen white supremacy, multiple-marginalization, and environmental degradation. However, we diminish our collective power if we fall into the trap of pitting our oppressions against one another's. If we pay attention to the particularities though, it can help us be solutions-oriented, to recognize that we face multiple forms of oppression they are not reducible to each other; *for the master's tools will never dismantle the masters house* (Lorde 2007). We welcome section members in our project of bridging the gap between race and the environment within and beyond environmental sociology.

Reference

Lorde, Audre. 2007. *Sister Outside*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.