

Confronting White Space and White Ignorance: A Summary of the Committee on Racial Equity's Mission and Work (2016-2019)

The SES Committee on Racial Equity:
Elisabeth Wilder, *Northeastern University*
Lauren Richter, *Rhode Island School of Design*
Michael Mascarenhas, *University of California, Berkeley*
Raoul S. Liévanos, *University of Oregon*
Jennifer Carrera, *Michigan State University*

Background and CRE Formation

The Section on Environmental Sociology (SES) is a comparatively new section of the American Sociological Association (ASA). The section was officially formed in 1976 as an outgrowth of the U.S. environmental movement and the need to strengthen sociologists' ability to contribute to environmental impact assessments, which had recently been mandated by national legislation (Caldwell 1988). Over the past four decades, membership in the SES has steadily grown. However, while there have been some gains in diversity in the discipline of sociology as a whole, these gains have not been achieved in the SES (Mascarenhas et al. 2017).

In 2015, Dorceta Taylor received the Fred Buttel Outstanding Contribution to the Field of Environmental Sociology Award. At the SES (formerly, "ETS") business meeting that year, Dr. Taylor observed that the section has remained as white as it was when she first joined decades ago. At the 2016 SES business meeting, the section council placed the topic of section diversity on the meeting agenda. However, after other agenda items were discussed, the meeting was set to be adjourned without this topic being addressed. Section member Elisabeth Wilder rose to call our collective attention to which agenda item was set to be dropped without comment, and noted that this paralleled her experience in other white spaces where race and equity are often an afterthought rather than a foundational concern. The Committee on Racial Equity (CRE) was subsequently co-founded by Wilder and Lauren Richter, both graduate student members at the

time, and Michael Mascarenhas, to investigate racial and ethnic diversity within the section, assess the educational and professional climate for scholars of color, recommend changes in section policies and practices, and engage environmental sociologists in laying the foundation for a more inclusive scholarly community. Jennifer Carrera joined the CRE soon after.

The CRE's Initial Work

The committee published a report entitled “Diversity in Sociology and Environmental Sociology: What We Know About our Discipline” (Mascarenhas et al. 2017) in the Spring 2017 Section Newsletter.¹ That report showed that in spite of growing overall membership in recent years, the section has lost graduate students and faculty members of color. In addition, according to the ASA membership database, the percentage of scholars of color in the SES is markedly low in comparison to other ASA sections and the association overall. Just under 5% of SES members identified as Asian/Asian American in both 2005 and 2016, and around 3% as Hispanic/Latinx. The number of SES members who identify as African American increased from six in 2005 to twelve in 2016, but still represent just 2.4% of section membership. Scholars classified by the ASA as “Other” in the membership database, which includes Indigenous people, represents 1.8% of section members. Those classified by the ASA as identifying with “Multiple” racial-ethnic identities represent just under 8% of total section membership. An overwhelming 81.5% of section members identify as white. We therefore argue that scholars of color in the section constitute what Moore (2008) describes as a “micro-minority” in an otherwise exclusively “white space” (Anderson 2015, Mascarenhas 2018, Moore 2008).

White space is characterized by the overwhelming presence of whites in everyday interactions and positions of authority, which formally and informally act as barriers to inclusion

¹ CRE Reports and Newsletter articles can be found on the SES website: <http://envirosoc.org/>

and belonging for people of color or “non-whites” (Anderson 2015). White space can also produce and reproduce “tastes, perceptions, feelings, and emotions” (Bonilla-Silva 2006:104) on racial dynamics that protect and promote white “in-group solidarity and negative views about non-whites” (Bonilla Silva et al. 2006:233). This dominant framing fails to acknowledge the centrality of white supremacy in upholding other axes of power and domination (e.g., heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and neoliberalism) and creating a world in which people of color were never really meant to thrive, let alone survive (Costa Vargas 2008).

Following the publication of this first report, the CRE conducted a survey of section members to gauge perspectives on racial diversity and equity within the section. Nearly half of all survey respondents identified “discrimination,” “microaggressions,” and “not feeling welcome within the section” as main reasons scholars of color might choose not to participate in the section. However, among the majority-white survey respondents, there seemed to be little knowledge about the actual working and learning conditions of faculty and students of color in the section. Furthermore, while a majority of respondents expressed support for the work and initiative of the committee, some respondents explicitly or implicitly placed the onus on scholars and students of color to insert themselves into the field rather than on the field to provide an environment and scholarly community that is more welcoming. The CRE presented these results at the SES business meeting at the 2017 ASA and also held two follow-up focus groups on site that year.

Coupling the data on membership trends with our section member survey and information gathered in the ASA focus groups, the committee and section are better positioned to understand why it is that the section remains and is becoming an increasingly white space. In line with Mills (2007), the committee views the section’s collective lack of knowledge about the

experiences of faculty and students of color as symptomatic of a broader culture of white ignorance that must be intentionally disturbed. It also suggests that we must critically evaluate our normative landscape and shift our focus from simply recruiting students and faculty members of color to retaining and supporting scholars of color within the section. Everyone in the section has an opportunity – arguably a duty amidst the growing threat of white nationalism and academic indifference that is all too reminiscent of earlier racial crises in which sociology turned a blind eye to matters of racial injustice and justice (Du Bois [1920] 1999; Morris 2015; Steinberg 2007) – to listen to, center, support and most importantly respond to the experiences of colleagues of color.

The 2018 ASA Pre-Conference and Beyond

SES members' survey responses and focus group data indicated that more space and time needed to be devoted to race and the environment in SES and the broader discipline of sociology. Alongside new committee member Raoul Liévanos, the CRE organized an ASA pre-conference entitled “Bridging the Gap: A Conference on Race and the Environment” that took place during the summer of 2018. The committee secured a National Science Foundation workshop grant and additional funds from the University of Oregon Underrepresented Minority Recruitment Program, the University of California, Berkeley, and a small stipend from the SES upon request from the CRE. The conference actively sought and included participation from a demographically diverse community of scholars, students, local activists, and regulatory officials from around the United States. It also featured a diverse set of theoretical approaches, empirical research strategies, and practical insights to better understand the intersections between race and the environment and centered work by graduate students and junior faculty of color who

are publishing research that largely uses frameworks and techniques from outside the sub-discipline of environmental sociology *in an active attempt to redefine the sub-discipline*.

The CRE published a reflection on the pre-conference in the Fall 2018 Section Newsletter, noting that a “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” (Mascarenhas et al. 2018). The committee is currently guest editing a forthcoming special collection in *Environmental Sociology* featuring papers from the conference. This special collection seeks to continue the conversation about (and advance a more critical approach to) race and racism within the section and the discipline.

Regarding next steps, the CRE has been presented with the option of the SES council voting to formalize the committee, thus institutionalizing this committee within formal section operation. For the past three years, the committee’s work has been driven by independently-generated questions regarding the history and current state of section racial diversity and curiosity regarding member experiences. Further, the committee aimed to create space for conversation, reflection, and new scholarship. The committee therefore sees the benefits of a group of people acting outside formal section operation, in a spirit of evaluative, critically-informed drive for assessment and change. Yet, the committee also sees the benefits of institutionalizing the goals and sentiments behind this work into section policies and committee structures. It may be that multiple organizational forms can best help the section and broader

field achieve needed change. These conversations are ongoing, and the committee looks forward to further discussions and input moving forward.

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