

Student Reflection

“Taboo Talk: Dismantling Racism in a Society that Doesn’t Believe in It” Alexandria Hopkins – PUBP 3315

On November 3rd, 2016, SLS hosted a discussion entitled “TabooTalk: Dismantling Racism in a Society that Doesn’t Believe in It” as part of a series about environmental justice. The discussion was about racism, its various forms, and how it affects our society, specifically through environmental policy. After an introduction on the various ways that racism is defined, panelists discussed how racism and environmental policy affect their work.

Many people are unclear about the ways race functions in our society. Race and racism are social institutions, and there are various ways that racism affects people. For example, social race refers to race that is distinguished by law or custom based on what race people perceive you to be. Another way to define race is biological race, which manifests in superiority of one race and inferiority of another. Biological race is based on beliefs that there are genetic differences between people groups that make them inherently, biologically different, and is often pseudoscience that is used as justification by the superior race for subjugating the inferior race.

One panelist whose work I was really interested in was Berneta Haynes. She works in the Access and Equity Department at Georgia Watch, Georgia’s leader consumer advocacy organization. Their mission is to ensure that Georgians know about issues that impact their lives and help ensure access to good healthcare, utility rates and the courts, to name a few of their services. Haynes works directly with ensuring affordable healthcare, energy equity, and financial literacy, and says that race affects all of these issues.

Another panelist was working to improve the quality of surface water in DeKalb County. While DeKalb’s government is led by black politicians, people in the county still suffer from environmental racism. An example of this is the county’s two watersheds; one which feeds from the Chattahoochee river, the other from the Altamaha river. The water from the Chattahoochee river goes to the areas of the county that are much more affluent and are majority Caucasian, while the water from the Altamaha river goes to areas that are low-income and predominantly African-American. The two watersheds are in the same county and should therefore comply with the same quality standards and maintenance regulations and monitoring. However, the Altamaha river watershed is near a battery plant, recycling facility, and landfill, and the water quality is therefore lower than that of the Chattahoochee river watershed.

The conversation with the panelists finished with them discussing the importance of dialogue. Dialogue and conversation about environmental issues and racism educate people about the issues and raise awareness. Some notable examples of this are the protestors of the Dakota Access Pipeline, who have used the media to spread the message of their cause and gain national support. Dialogue is also important for people

groups who experience racism because oppressed groups often don't have the power or resources alone to make the necessary change in their communities. Therefore, by spreading the word about issues disenfranchised communities have, more people will be able to sympathize with and help them, providing resources and support that they otherwise would never have been able to access. Allies also play a powerful and critical role here. People are more likely to listen to and be receptive of information from someone they can identify with. White allies can be an ally to communities of color by being a messenger and spreading true information to other white people who can identify with them. Another way is by listening directly to the communities before making decisions that will affect them. Outsiders often think that because they are educated or have been able to solve problems in the past, they know all the solutions. However, input from people who will be directly affected by policies can make the difference between a theoretical - rather than practical - solution.

Overall, I really enjoyed this seminar from SLS and the series as a whole. All of the panelists had interesting and unique perspectives and experiences and did a great job of illustrating the connection between racism and environmental policy and justice. The conclusion with how we can all be allies to these communities was the perfect ending to an empowering and informational discussion.