

KD Brown Writing Sample:

Below, I've provided an example of a successful grant application. My work praxis and research combines advocacy, analysis, education, and litigation. Land seizure and leasing are highly politicized elements of utility-scale renewable energy generation, distribution, transmission, and storage. Land use is a special interest because sustainable utilities access is an essential driver of vertical economic mobility and growth within historically marginalized and oppressed communities.

Solidarity is found in shared struggle and cooperative land use / ownership for zero emission electricity generation (wind and solar, for instance) could be an avenue to gain electoral buy-in from the multi-racial, working-class US majority. Local governance has considerable power in the decision making process of all climate adaptation strategies. We need an educated, active, trained, and dedicated population to bring a net-zero future into fruition. What better way than a collective investment in literal and political power through redistribution of land often opportunistically seized, hoarded, held, and unused? Additionally, these strategies are applicable for frontline industrial communities and a sure fire way to organize impacted families. Here's the context within the US South and some food for thought for legally actionable research approaches.

Rectifying Environmental Justice in the Black Belt: Documenting Ownership in the Wake of Industry (2019)

Across the rural South, African-American-owned land has been lost at an alarming rate, as protracted state violence, political suppression, and economic dispossession converge with land seizure by a growing network of actors, including transnational corporations, property developers, and heavy industries. A 1910 agricultural census reported African Americans owned over 16 million acres of rural land throughout the South. By 1997, only 10% of that land remained in possession of their families (Mitchel 2005). This project focuses on the retention of African-American-owned land in North Carolina's rural Black Belt through the lens of environmental justice activism, collective mapping, and community storytelling. It asks: *What is the relationship between heavy industrialization in rural NC and historic, ongoing Black land loss? In the absence of legal support, what are community-based methods to document and formally stabilize Black ownership?*

In collaboration with the Rural Empowerment Association for Community Help (REACH) and the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network (NCEJN), this project seeks to document and support Black land retention efforts in rural communities significantly impacted by heavy industrialization and environmental racism. We plan to collect oral histories from land owners, perform archival research on their property and adjacent industries, and create formal documentation of land ownership (past and present) via geospatial analysis, photogrammetry, and orthorectification of historical maps.

Our work will also center on stories, depictions, and other evidence of land ownership in the Black Belt as a legacy of triumph over white supremacy. Our goals are to better understand (1) the patterns of present-day African American land ownership and (2) the relationship between African American land ownership and historical state violence, forced enclosure, and racialized subjugation experienced in the Black Belt. In addition, with the support of NCEJN and REACH and key community

members, we will collaboratively develop and validate an open-source, accessible toolkit for property mapping, with a special focus on accessibility in both cost and technical requirements.

Background. The Black Belt is a geopolitical region that expands across the US South, containing large African American populations who are descendants of enslaved people living in the wake of plantation economies. Here, black land ownership is exceptionally rare due to historical and systemic discrimination in lending, combined with exclusion, intimidation, and fraud. State-sanctioned segregation, exclusion, and voter suppression limited economic mobility during the Jim Crow Era, and federal, state, and local laws institutionalized poverty for communities of color through legal restrictions on transgenerational wealth creation (Mitchel 2005, USDA 2002). The New Deal codified white supremacy via deliberate statutory exclusion of labor benefits and protection for agricultural and domestic workers. These were often the only jobs available for African Americans in the South, eliminating access to one of the most significant sources of economic stability for multiple generations of Americans (Daniel, 2013).

African American communities had, and continued to have, limited access to quality legal and cartographic services, hindering formalization of property via land deeds and wills and fractionating transfer of assets between generations. Consequent “Heirs’ Property” – e.g. the equal familial distribution of property in the absence of wills – increased the vulnerability to land seizure by the state for auction or fraud by unscrupulous developers. The Great Migration (1916 – 1970) saw geographic extensions of African American families, as millions left for better job opportunities or in direct response to racialized violence. Large swaths of land, still owned by African Americans, became increasingly at risk. For decades, property developers and industry have acquired historically black-owned land at submarket prices through partition sales from distant relatives or through outright theft. Heavy industries (concentrated animal feeding operations, smelters, landfills, mines, power plants, etc.) are disproportionately sited in low income, indigenous, and communities of color. Heavy industry acts as a disabling infrastructure for the health, economy, environment and culture of the people surrounding (Johnson, 2017).

Industrialization without consent threatens the lives and livelihoods of rural communities across the US South (Bullard, 2000). Today, the Black Belt is an epicenter of industrial wealth extraction and environmental racism. In 1982, the concept of environmental justice was created in a small, black town in Warren County battling a PCB landfill. Now, an estimated 900 coal ash dumps are disproportionately in communities of color. Duplin and Sampson counties have become the global epicenter of pork production through the government-sanctioned corporate extraction of the economic mobility and public health of communities neighboring industrial hog farms. Moreover, a multinational plan is in development to bulldoze a large path for the Atlantic Coast Pipeline through predominantly black, indigenous, and low-income communities.

At the same time, community activism continues to counter these patterns of dispossession. In August 2018, a jury awarded predominantly black homeowners impacted by nearby industrial hog operations \$473.5 million in compensatory damages for the “loss of enjoyment” of their homes. This was immediately capped to a fraction of the award by the NC legislation, but it signals a sea change that could impact and inspire communities across the world.

Method. Using existing scholarship and my training as an environmental health scientist and geographer, I will document historical property boundaries and assess potential land loss in order to provide documentation for transgenerational property exchange and to defend against illegal encroachment. I will collect oral histories and perform archival research and site visits with community partners and their families. Archival information may include historic surveys, deeds, hand-drawn maps, and old photos. I will spatially analyze and georectify archival materials to generate up-to-date maps and analyze change over time and space (USDA 2017). Digitalization can help stabilize property ownership if land documents are lost in extreme events like flooding or (as reported in some cases) alteration in public records offices. All resulting maps will be printed and shared with participants and will meet the NC Documents Standards NC General Statute 161 14(b) for submission to local government as public record. This project will work in consultation with other networks focused on black land loss and will be shared, with consent, through an online platform for use by local historians, artists, policymakers, and educators in service of reclaiming history, defending the dead, celebrating the living, and envisioning a better future.

References:

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