

## **Abstract Workshop Proposal**

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America and Ownership: Territory, Slavery, Jubilee

*Workshop: Hazardous Territory - Environmental Discourses, Ownership, and Disaster Policies in the United States*

In the United States, the natural environment has not only been a place of identification, socio-economic development and change, but it has also been marked by large-scale environmental hazards that cause a risk to human health, agriculture, and the natural environment. Some regions, and some communities within those regions, have been affected more often, and more seriously, by environmental hazards such as storms, droughts, or flooding, but also by “slow” forms of disaster such as the decline of biodiversity, and have experienced massive economic and social conflict. While climate change, the search for new energy resources, infrastructural measures, and the expansion of agriculture, have led to an increase of such problems in both number and intensity, government institutions seem ill prepared to monitor and manage environmental disaster and its social, economic, mental consequences for communities and to introduce legal prerequisites to avoid and mitigate environmental disaster caused by human behavior.

One of the major obstacles they encounter are issues of ownership: in the United States, private property and long-term safety issues tend to be legally incommensurable, and the fact that impoverished and ethnically distinguished minority communities are disproportionately affected by environmental hazards, have turned natural and human-induced ecological disasters into an environmental justice issue that is now at the heart of environmentalist and social justice movements throughout the nation. American culture, including film and literature, have crucially contributed to the discourse on environmental disaster, property and class issues, and government responsibilities, thereby increasing the prominence and visibility of these issues but also perpetuating problematic perceptions of environmental hazards and responsibility.

This workshop seeks to examine, from an interdisciplinary perspective, how U.S. policies and culture have engaged with and reacted to the threats of environmental disaster. Besides contemporary perspectives, we welcome contributions that help us place current developments in a larger framework of American self-definition and socio-economic change. After all, the history of the nation can be told as a succession of land appropriations that involved massive violence against people who were killed, dispossessed, “owned,” and forced off the land, to enable its transformation into farms, villages, cities, and infrastructure for the new settlers and immigrants, mostly from Europe. They

brought with them ideas about transforming a presumably untouched 'nature' and used European traditions to land cultivation. Indigenous knowledges about locally distinct, hazardous conditions, and experiences from other communities, including the slaves who often tilled the land for white plantation owners, were ignored and not sought after. As a cultural concept, owning land in America has been immediately connected to ethnic ignorance: those who possessed the soil also had the power of defining its usage along their own, often imported, or highly individualistic agenda.

Of course, ownership as well as ideas of property of the natural environment have significantly changed over time, from the colonial period to today and among various groups in society (indigenous societies, settler societies, enslaved population, rural and urban dwellers, mobile communities, etc.). They have all been affected, albeit very differently, by the disaster policies implemented by state and national governments. Today, Indigenous and Black Americans, but also Latino immigrants, the materially poorest groups in society on average, are disproportionately affected by the consequences of natural hazards and the warming climate. This can be traced back, in part, to American ideas of property and land use and their legal implementation. Past failures to coherently address the long-term consequences that emerge from the transformation of natural environmental processes, the warming climate, and the disruption caused by natural hazards, continue to increase socio-environmental problems. In addition to this, and along with the overwhelming, scientific evidence of human-induced natural disasters, climate change denial and conspiracy theories have taken center stage among Republicans in particular, and also in parts of the American media landscape that identifies necessary environmental measures as an attack on U.S. property rights, individualism, and democracy.

This workshop aims to explore environmental and disaster discourses and representations of environmental hazards as well as environmental and disaster and risk mitigation policies in the United States from an interdisciplinary perspective. We invite papers from a variety of disciplines including (but not limited to) cultural and literary studies, media studies, political science, economics, geography, (environmental) history, sociology, environmental studies, risk management.

Confirmed Speaker: Prof. Dr. Uwe Lübken (LMU)