December 1st, 2014

Dr. Conner Bailey
Search Committee Chair
Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology

Dear Dr. Bailey and Search Committee:

Please find enclosed my application for your Assistant Professor position in Rural Sociology. I will defend my PhD in sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in May 2015. My work combines political and rural sociology to study the interaction between the environment, political action, and inequality. I am delighted to have the opportunity to share with you my work, and be considered for your position.

My dissertation, *Cracks in the Corporate-State: Rebellion and Resistance in the Georgia Countryside*, documents local responses to environmental injustices rendered by privatized state projects. Yale University Press has extended a contract for my book based on this work in the Agrarian Studies Series. With the support of a Mellon-Wisconsin Fellowship, the Rural Sociological Society, and multiple research awards, I studied Burke County, Georgia, a mixed-race community that houses the first new nuclear reactors constructed in the United States in over three decades. Through four years of fieldwork, I found what I call the *corporate-state*, an alliance of government and private interests that reconstructs the state as a defender of corporate rights rather than individual ones. In contrast to current neoliberal scholarship that documents private property rights as expanding, I find that the corporate-state retracts individual property rights in its reformulation of the public good and eminent domain. The corporate-state’s violation of residents’ moral economy through land grabbing and surveillance disenfranchises them from government channels for reform. To push back, white rural residents ‘rebel’ through trespass and poaching, a type of criminal protest relegated to history books and unincorporated in social movement scholarship. Black residents live in a climate where such actions remain too risky, and turn to religion for justice. Locals frame the corporate-state in racially distinct patterns that hamper collective reform, which I argue makes mixed-race communities vulnerable to injustice in addition to the single-race focus predominant in environmental justice scholarship.

Reforming governance mechanisms to better resolve agricultural and environmental problems motivates my research. I spearheaded the receipt of a $65,681 landscape agroecology grant to explore participatory methods as a means to reduce non-point water pollution. With my co-authors, including a soil scientist and extension specialist, we found that individual identities in dialogue with structural constraints complicate the traditional dichotomy in participatory scholarship between expert and local knowledge. In a forthcoming paper in *Rural Sociology*, for which I serve as first author, we examine democratic deliberation in action and detail how
individual identities and existing governance paradigms impact participation across local or expert typologies. In addition, we found that when farmers value the same production techniques, for example conventional methods in the Corn Belt, that they are more likely to engage in collective strategies to reduce non-point sources of water pollution. This paper, recently published in *Agriculture and Human Values*, was recognized with the graduate student paper award from the Society for Agriculture, Food and Human Values; and the doctorate student paper award from the International Symposium on Society and Natural Resources. In a project related to my dissertation, I am working with an epidemiologist to incorporate nuclear weapon workers’ perspectives of exposure to existing datasets in an article being revised for resubmission to *New Solutions*.

I pay attention to growing poverty and vulnerability in rural communities domestically and internationally, and legal pathways to counter such trends. With fewer people residing in rural places, the rural has become a convenient space for housing a disproportionate amount of toxic and hazardous wastes. I am serving as co-editor of a special issue in the *Journal of Rural Studies* that probes from interdisciplinary perspectives the international and domestic attributes that help explain the targeting of rural places for extractive and hazardous industries. In the lead article of *Rural Sociology*’s March 2014 issue, I detail as first author with a lawyer and anthropologist how Limited Liability Law provides an increasingly popular pathway for farmers turned investors to disorient protest and displace pollution onto communities. To further study the interaction between the law and rural burdens, I plan to analyze the language used to conceptualize farming and agriculture in Right-to-Farm Laws, which mainly protected farmland from encroachment, but now are widely used to prevent nuisance suits against agricultural operations. This project will reveal what types of farms and agricultural operations are protected in urban and rural contexts, and how these meanings shape environmental and food rights. I will pursue funding from the USDA’s Agriculture and Food Research Initiative.

I take a pragmatic approach to teaching by integrating theory with practical steps for change. As second author of the fifth edition of Michael M. Bell’s *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology* published by Sage’s Pine Forge Press, I explain the material and ideological factors shaping the environment by engaging real life examples and solutions. In the classroom, I apply theoretical knowledge to unfolding social problems to better enable students to learn. As a Teaching Assistant for Racial and Ethnic Minorities, 93 students who completed individual evaluations at the end of the semester rated my overall performance 4.95 on a 5-point scale of excellence, a score well above the department TA average of 4.04. My pedagogy earned me the 2014 University of Wisconsin-Madison’s College of Letters and Science Early Teaching Excellence Award. I would enjoy offering a community service-learning course formed around a natural resource or agricultural issue to capture students’ attention through on-the-ground action. Such a course would bring underserved communities into the university setting and offer an opportunity for students to gain real-life experience. I am prepared to teach courses on society and natural resources, environmental justice, the state and agriculture, agrifood studies, classical sociological theory, qualitative research methods, and race and ethnicity.

My next major research project makes important inroads into the ethics of environmentalism by studying the philosophical roots of leading environmental groups and how these framings resonate with vulnerable communities. Current research on environmental politics situates
ideologies along a modern-day liberal versus conservative spectrum. My dissertation showed unusual political affiliations with environmentalism, such as pollution violating individual private property rights. While this idea draws on classic liberalism in the Locke sense, other mainstream ideas of environmentalism like deep ecology use commonage, rather than private rights, to promote reform. These differences have yet to be carefully pulled apart to understand the placement of environmentalism in current politics. To do so, I will complete a multi-institutional ethnography and interviews with national environmental groups. After I produce a clearer understanding of these ideologies, I plan to return to a community coping with pollution to study the resonance of these environmental ideologies. In doing so, I will offer a better understanding of what political ideologies estrange burdened communities from building alliances with environmental elites, and hinder sustainable futures. I will pursue funding from the National Science Foundation.

My research engages the public to work toward rural social justice. I have spoken to the Illinois Lt. Governor’s Rural Affairs Council and testified before the Illinois Department of Agriculture. My service on the state non-profit board of the Illinois Stewardship Alliance helps urban minority groups and struggling rural regions use local food to revitalize their communities and inspire change through the hope of agriculture. I am a founder and former president of the west central Illinois non-profit, Rural Residents for Responsible Agriculture, which serves as a reference and mentor for poor communities facing large industrial animal facilities. Last year, I presented my dissertation research at the North Carolina Environmental Justice Summit.

I have enclosed my curriculum vitae, my teaching philosophy, a research statement, and copies of my academic transcripts from Northwestern University, National University of Ireland, and University of Wisconsin-Madison. I would be happy to provide you chapters from my dissertation or published journal articles. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone at 309-333-5848 or by e-mail at ashwood@wisc.edu. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Loka Ashwood, M.Litt.
Doctoral Candidate, Sociology and Community and Environmental Sociology
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Enclosures (6)