Nick Lally
Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-dissertation Travel Fellowship 2017 Report
United Kingdom

With generous support from the Scott Kloeck-Jenson fellowship program, I spent ten weeks in London during the summer of 2017 conducting pre-dissertation fieldwork. During that time, I engaged with three main research sites, which all tie into my broader academic project of investigating the spatial, political, and social implications of software and data used to inform political decision-making.

First, I interviewed people involved with a UK-wide mapping project that aims to make social vulnerabilities visible in relation to climate change. Made up of a group of scholars, government workers, and independent consultants dispersed across the UK, the project aims to aid local governments in identifying geographical locations where flooding, overheating, and other climate-related threats intersect with populations that are most vulnerable to those threats. The website the group has produced and continues to develop provides additional materials to help interpret these maps and develop adaptation and resilience plans that can better address climate justice concerns. Through interviews with key participants in the project, I was able to learn about the difficulties in integrating projects like these into infrastructures of governance, particularly in the face of government austerity programs. I was also able to gain firsthand knowledge of the ongoing negotiations that go into choosing how to choose and represent data in addition to the difficulties inherent in translating the complexities of climate science into simplified representations useful for policy makers. The interdisciplinary makeup of the team reflects the challenges in translating climate change between scientists, policy makers, the general public, and academics as well as the multi-faceted approaches that will be required to study these projects.

Second, in a project that overlaps with the first, I observed meetings and interviewed people within city government who use and build software tools to develop adaption and resilience plans. Through this work, I was able to witness firsthand the everyday negotiation that happen in government offices as concerned stakeholders negotiate approaches to urban adaptation, resilience, and mitigation plans. Additionally, I was able to collect documents, both internal and public-facing, that outline the goals, achievements, and tools that address urban climate change. These documents will allow me to compare how these efforts are communicated with how they are enacted and talked about in the everyday practices of governance. So too did it allow me to compare the politically-sanctioned climate efforts within city government with the more loosely organized climate justice project described above. Both, however, are intimately tied together as people hold complex affiliations with academia, government, and independent companies as they move between the two projects.

And third, I volunteered at an international privacy organization as a researcher to investigate methods of data exploitation deployed by governments and corporations. Since much of the climate work I research uses potentially sensitive or identifying personal data, I decided that researching privacy issues would help me develop a stronger data ethics framework for understanding climate projects, especially those concerned with social vulnerability. During this time, I researched emerging methods for data exploitation that invade people's personal privacy—research that will soon be released as a report and that has already contributed to other reports written by the organization. During that time, I was able to learn from the organization's legal, technical, communication, and research officers, who shared various methods for researching, understanding, and communicating computational privacy violations. These

skills have contributed to my research around data issues as well as helping communicate my findings to diverse audiences.

These three research foci have all become central to my dissertation, which focuses on climate change software in the UK and US, while offering broader lessons about software and data used for political decision-making. As data collected, analyzed, and sorted by software processes increasingly comes to shape our understanding of the world, and thus how we will shape it in the future, studying the organizational and technical contexts in which these processes are developed becomes increasingly important. In the case of climate change, how an uncertain future is understood and communicated through software interfaces—often taking the form of digital maps—will become central in efforts to reshape the city. We must then ask how and for whom these changes will take place and how we might otherwise construct the world through maps that is more attentive to social concerns and vulnerabilities. My dissertation will use insights gleaned from this trip to begin answering some of these questions, showing how different contexts, organizations, and ways of using data different construct an understanding of the world.

The SKJ fellowship allowed me to begin accessing the main actors involved with these climate change efforts and begin charting out the complex and distributed networks that are emerging in response the looming threat of an uncertain future. Since my trip, I have continued to be in contact with key informants working on climate change and privacy issues. In fact, I am writing this from London where I am continuing the research I began this summer. Thank you to the Jenson family and everyone who has facilitated this research—my dissertation will certainly be richer because of this funding opportunity.