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The deadline for feedback is the end of day on March 15, 2021.

Omaha's Spatial Justice Project

The Omaha Spatial Justice project will develop an interdisciplinary research group to examine the historic implications of redlining and restrictive covenants, as well as other projects addressing issues of spatial justice throughout Douglas County. Geographer Ed Soja defines spatial justice as “the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and opportunities to use them” (2009). Resources and opportunities in the form of property ownership were denied to some Omaha residents through the use of racially restrictive covenants, contractual agreements prohibiting the purchase, lease, or occupation of property by a defined racial or ethnic group. Their widespread implementation was linked to the development of the professional real estate industry. African American organizations in Omaha contested restrictive covenants throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. While the Supreme Court ruled racially restrictive covenants illegal in 1948, the practice continued through the mid 1960s. These covenants and their long-term impacts are not well documented: this project intends to create a systematic inventory of the practice in Douglas County to document its breadth and scope while allowing for in-depth analysis examining the impact of these covenants on marginalized communities. A major component of the project will be to develop and maintain a comprehensive research database documenting and mapping racially restrictive covenants. The project will examine Douglas County to document how racially restrictive covenants impacted migration patterns of marginalized groups.

The deeds database will document racially restrictive covenants geographically throughout the Omaha area and across time. It will provide a complex set of data that will be useful to a broad range of academic disciplines and public inquiry. The data for this project will be sourced from historical property records (primarily warranty deeds) in Douglas County, acquired through a MOU with the Douglas County Registrar of Deeds. This project is entering into a formal partnership with Mapping Prejudice through an NEH grant. Mapping Prejudice, a community facing project based at the University of Minnesota, has documented and mapped racially restrictive covenants from six million pages of Hennepin County deeds. It will provide the project with programming scripts and support. Optical character recognition (OCR) will be used to turn the property records into searchable text documents. Deeds with possible racial language will be identified and their content verified through community crowdsourcing. This methodological approach engages community partners as equal participants in the project as Omaha Spatial Justice Project PI's and community members work together to transcribe racially restrictive language from property deeds. (Additional crowdsourcing support could be provided by Mapping Prejudice's team of 6,000 community volunteers.) Faculty, staff, and students from UNO's Geography program will provide Geographic Information Systems (GIS) support for spatial analysis and mapping of the resulting deeds.

This new electronic resource will reside permanently at Criss Libraries for faculty, students and the public to develop research and scholarship as well as curriculum and community engagement projects. The database will be housed in the cloud and the infrastructure of the database infrastructure will be sustained through partnerships developed with UNO's Information Technology Services.

The Omaha Spatial Justice Project will establish a Spatial Justice Research Center structured with a governing board of engaged scholars, representing all of the colleges throughout the University of Nebraska-Omaha. The board will develop and carry out a mission statement focused on developing and promoting research and interdisciplinary collaborations for scholarship, curriculum, and student and community engagement projects.

The Spatial Justice Research Center will feature the expertise of scholars from the Black Studies department, the Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS), the Native American Studies program, and the Women Gender Studies program. It will collaborate closely with UNO's Service Learning Academy to support and enhance their existing Redlining Project which develops community engagement projects between UNO, K-12 educators, and community partners. The goal of this partnership is to collaboratively develop and coordinate service learning and community engagement projects and document the results through the Spatial Justice Research Center website. All these groups have submitted letters of support for the project.

Deans from across campus have submitted letters of support for the project documenting how the project supports the mission statements and ongoing initiatives of their colleges. Other campus partners who have submitted letters of support documenting concrete ways the Omaha Spatial Justice Project will enhance their work include chairs and faculty from departments of art and art history, communications, history, mathematics, public administration, information science and technology, and urban studies as well as the UNO Real Estate Center and the Nebraska Education Policy Research Lab. These scholars will become members of the Spatial Justice Research Center which will develop accompanying projects, such as an oral history component, an examination of historic Native American land dispossession in Nebraska, the long-term implications of the 1957 Omaha Plan, and studies of Omaha's current eviction patterns.

Community partners from throughout Jewish and African American community organizations have expressed interest in participating in crowdsourcing and community engagement projects with the Omaha Spatial Justice Research Center. Douglas County Commissioners and Nebraska State Legislatures have expressed interest in the study and are a potential source for ongoing funding.

The initial seed funding for this project will come from the UNO Strategic Investment and the NEH partnership with Mapping Prejudice at the University of Minnesota. There is potential local support from the Jewish Federation of Omaha, the Sherwood Foundation, and the Weitz Family Foundation. National grant support could come from NEH, the National Archives' National Historic Publications and Records Commission, and the Russell Sage Foundation.

Success of the Project will be measured by three main points. First is the breadth and depth of research projects and scholarly contributions made to a growing body of publications connected to this topic. Second will be the numbers of courses across diverse disciplines integrating material from the database with particular focus on the development of Service Learning Projects where students are directly engaging with marginalized communities that have been affected by racially restrictive covenants. Third will be new and sustaining collaborations between the Project and philanthropic and community organizations in Omaha.

Project Investigators	Department/College Affiliation
Christina Dando, Ph.D.	Geography and Geology/CLAS
Jeannette Gabriel, Ph.D.	Schwalb Center for Israel & Jewish Studies/CLAS
Jennifer Harbour, Ph.D.	Black Studies/CLAS

Letters of support available upon request.

Project Stages for a Three-Year Pilot Project

Year 1

Summer 2021: Establish a MOU with the Register of Deeds; finalize a Memo-of-Agreement with the Mapping Prejudice Project.

Fall 2021: Set up an office and project coordinator; coordinate with the Register of Deeds contractor to extract the deeds; coordinate programming with Mapping Prejudice and UNO staff; begin trial targeted searches using Optical Character Recognition software; set up the Project Board.

Year 2

Spring 2021: Begin developing community outreach; develop trial research projects and develop Service Learning courses and community engagement projects working with preliminary data; identify potential funding sources and apply for grants for sustained funding; continue identifying deeds with restrictive language.

Summer 2022: Launch community crowdsourcing project to transcribe language of restrictive covenants; launch initial research projects; begin comparative analysis work with Omaha pilot data and Minneapolis data.

Year 3

Fall 2022: continue work identifying, transcribing, and verifying deeds; send out a call for next round of research projects; assess results of grant applications and possibly identify more sources.

Spring 2023: make presentations to the UNO and Omaha communities about progress on the project; select next round of research projects; continue building community collaborations; plan expansion of database.