

# “WE ARE IN THE AIR:” LAND CLAIMS AND LIMINAL SPACE ON GHANA’S VOLTA DELTA

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My research focuses on practices of claiming land and property in the face of dispossession by tourism development in southern Ghana. As development projects are increasingly concentrated in the hands of private corporations, local communities frequently find themselves ensnared in disputes over the land they inhabit. These battles rarely involve only two parties, however, as the Government of Ghana and customary authorities typically share some claim in the land, and those claims are far from clear-cut. My fieldwork is situated in an estuary fishing village on the outskirts of Ada Foah, a coastal town roughly three hours’ drive outside of the capital, Accra, and the easternmost point of the Greater Accra Region. In 2013, the Government of Ghana leased land in this estuary village to an Italian-Ghanaian estate development corporation for tourism development. Although residents have remained steadfast and refused to leave, even three years later, the threat of removal continues to loom. I first became acquainted with village residents in 2013 as a study abroad student in Ghana participating in a land advocacy project as part of a course in service learning. Since entering graduate school, I have maintained those ties and continued developing questions about land tenure systems. In June and July of 2016, I completed six weeks of ethnographic research in the community, asking how land claims are asserted, contested, and evaluated amid the shifting material realities of capitalist integration. When I arrived for fieldwork, I was immediately struck by the yellow numbers painted on the houses’ facades on one side of town, marking them for demolition. In my interviews and conversations with residents and members of the village council, the numbers arose frequently in the narratives they shared. What emerged was a complex and fragmented story about building and rebuilding and struggling for autonomy

amid more authoritative claims on the land—whether from a chief, a corporation, the government, or the ocean itself. My MA paper explores the paradox these numbers create. On one hand, they extend a logic of legibility to transactions in land, dividing property into quantifiable units, and, on the other, they generate and sustain an uncertainty among residents about when and to where they will be relocated. As material markers of territory, they imbue the spaces they mark with this uncertainty, which many residents describe as a sensation of being “in the air.” For some, the numbers are a betrayal: proof that the Ada Foah chief, their landlord, to whom they have always been loyal, sold their future. On the bright side they became fodder for a soccer analogy that circulated among the fishermen: “They have given us yellow card,” men would laugh. “Now we are waiting for the red card.” In this half-joking remark, there lurks a profound comment on the nature of territorial relations and the warning these numbers deliver.

I presented a preliminary rendition of my findings at the annual meeting of the African Studies Association in December,

and the Social Change and Development in Africa working group at UF’s Center for African Studies in January. My dissertation research will resume in this village, but will pivot toward exploring how property relations are developed through interactions with the landscape itself. In particular, I will ask how claims are made in the face of a double dispossession by tourism development and coastal erosion, and how the ocean comes to be understood as a territorializing agent.

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