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Destination: Nairobi, Kenya

IRIS Graduate Summer Fieldwork and BLAC Foundation Award Report

I am grateful to the Institute of Regional and International Studies for offering me a Graduate Student Fieldwork award and the BLAC Foundation for a supplemental award to conduct archival research in Nairobi, Kenya from June 22 to August 20, 2023.

Briefly, my dissertation research studies the new African diaspora, that is, sub-Saharan African immigrants in the United States since the late 1950s. In particular, I examine the racialization processes, that is, how they become Black—through their incorporation into the ethnoracial hierarchical order within the United States—and how they negotiate this identity. My starting point is the 1959 to 1963 East African Students' Airlift which saw almost eight hundred students (mostly Kenyans) come to the U.S. and Canada on university scholarships. The Kennedy Airlift (as it is commonly referred to in the U.S. because of John F. Kennedy's involvement in 1960) was envisioned and executed by Kenyan nationalist and trade unionist Tom Mboya and American entrepreneur William X. Scheinman (who later formed the African American Students Foundation for this endeavor), with endorsements from African American celebrities such as Harry Belafonte, Jackie Robinson, and Sidney Poitier.

The goal of the airlift was to provide the necessary education for a generation of nation builders who would go on to occupy positions in government, civil service, and education sectors in the newly independent states of East Africa, and of Kenya in particular. The Airlift (as a concrete historical moment) and its subsequent archives allow me to construct a periodization that runs from the late 1950s to the present. This period therefore embraces migration in the turbulent 1960s (Black Power and Civil Rights Movements, Jim Crowism, Cold War, African

independent statehood), the post-independence economic migrations of the 1970s-2000s, and the current Black Lives Matter moment in its local and global orientations.

My advisor, Dr. Matthew Brown often reminds me that what one proposes for fieldwork and what they encounter on the ground are always very different. This is because, as he says, the proposal is the best possible guess that one makes without accounting for the realities and uncertainties of life. Consequently, he adds, it is important to be flexible and to create room for the unexpected. This advice has proved to be very helpful and accurate on my last two archival research trips to Nairobi, Kenya. For example, during the summer of 2022 (through the generosity of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson (SKJ) fellowship), the Kenya National Archives which was my principal site only had one Airlift document, while the Standard Media Group's (Kenya's oldest and colonial newspaper) microfilm reader was not working. Although this was very disheartening for my first few weeks, I found physical copies of The Standard Newspapers in Nairobi's oldest Library, MacMillan Library, where I also met an employee of a rival newspaper The Daily Nation, who helped me acquire digital copies of corresponding articles.

Dr. Brown's advice came in handy again when I arrived in Nairobi on Jun 22, 2023, to the news that the archives that I had proposed to examine were no longer available because of the political nature, including the 1969 assassination of the principal actor, Tom Mboya. Although I had accounted for some accessibility issues and propaganda, I had assumed wrongly that the nature of my research project (African immigrants) and in particular its context, that is, the U.S. would not be seen as suspicious or problematic. After a few days of trying to get over jet lag and to strategize my next move, Dr. Brown's unexpected moments began to present themselves. One of the elements that I had not considered was the significance of the Airlift to the Kenya nation building project, which meant that many people over the age of forty knew of

someone who was a beneficiary of this scheme. This collective memory facilitated connections with several people, including three researchers whose interest in the Airlift generation mirrored mine. One of these is a retired University of Nairobi professor, Humphrey Ojwang who is a leading scholar on the East African Airlift, and whose father and several uncles went on the 1959/60 Airlifts.

Professor Ojwang introduced me to Kabinda Lemba, a historical documentarian who has been working on an Airlift documentary replete with interviews from a number of Airlifters. These two connections aided me with video recordings of interviews, contextual and anecdotal information, and corroborated some of the information that I found at Michigan State University's Murray & Hong special collections, where the largest Airlift archives reside. I was also fortunate to meet Louise Nyambura, through a mutual acquaintance, whose father was on the 1960 Airlift. Louise, a PhD Candidate has made numerous connections through Facebook with children of Airlifters who have curated their own archives, a reminder of how social media continues to provide avenues for knowledge production and dissemination beyond academic institutions. Louise and I made a pact that we will write a book about the Airlift after we are done with our dissertations.

The most significant connection that I made was with Philip Gitonga (1960 Airlift) who attended Barrington College in Barrington, Rhode Island. Gitonga allowed me to peruse through and photograph his documents from his stay in the U.S., including year books and photographs. He also gave me a signed copy of his autobiography, which has a chapter on the Airlift and includes photographs and different correspondence letters. Before I left, he informed me that a number of Airlifters wrote autobiographies and I purchased about five of them, including *Unbowed: A Memoir* by the late Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Wangari Maathai. These first-hand

accounts (autobiographies and memoirs) have been an amazing source of information about this generation and in particular their time in the U.S.

When I reflect on this trip, fortuitous is an apt descriptor. The connections that I was able to make, particularly with Professor Ojwang, Lemba, Nyambura, and Gitonga have produced more for my research than I could have hoped and especially as I embark on writing my first dissertation chapter titled “The First Wave of the New African Diaspora’s Voluntary Migration (1950s to 60s). I am grateful again to IRIS and the BLAC Foundation for making this possible.