

Scott Kloeck-Jenson International Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant Report (2009)

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Two years ago, I read a BBC News article about an American student filmmaker who directed a short film in Kibera, the largest slum in East Africa, located just a few miles outside Nairobi's city centre. According to the article, the short film had become quite successful (as far as student films go), and the filmmaker was making plans to produce a feature-length film also in Kibera. This was all a part of an organization the filmmaker co-founded called Hot Sun Foundation (HSF), which was designed to help develop storytelling talents among Kibera's youth. After reading this article, I was inspired to start brainstorming a rough dissertation topic that combined my research interest in African media with theories about media production and representation.

This past summer, through the support of a Scott Kloeck-Jenson International Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant, I spent two months in Kenya working with the organization I read about in that article, and I got to witness some of their movie being filmed. Thanks to this trip, I've also seen my dissertation topic come into much clearer focus.

Media studies scholars have long had an interest in analyzing how the powerless (in terms of race, gender, class, etc.) are depicted in the media, usually by the powerful. Within the context of international media studies, this has often taken the form of analyzing how Western media producers depict the people and places that comprise the 'developing world.' Much of this research has focused on analyzing and critiquing media products (film, photos, newspapers, etc.) or understanding how audiences interpret the messages found in these media products. My work falls within a smaller body of research that examines how representations are constructed through the media production process. After all, media products are created *by specific people* with a range of abilities, intentions, and constraints *in specific contexts* that offer a variety of opportunities and challenges. It is my view that through media production studies we can come to understand how the choices made by media producers and the conditions in which media are produced impact the final media product.

Although the bulk of my dissertation fieldwork will begin at the end of this year, being in Kenya this summer allowed me to observe several aspects of the production of HSF's feature film. I got to go out with the film crew as they shot some of the final scenes for the movie. I attended a 'wrap party' where the cast and crew celebrated all of their hard work throughout the filming. I worked with HSF's youth participants as they put together a series of short films about the making of the feature film. Before I left, I watched an early edit of the film as it was coming together and asked the director how the production conditions impacted what we were watching in the film. Through this entire process, I developed relationships with Kibera youth who worked as the cast and crew for the film and spoke with them about what they planned to do next with their newly acquired skills.

At the same time they were finishing production on their movie, HSF was preparing to launch a film school in Kibera. Designed to teach Kibera youth the ins and outs of film production, the school boasts an extensive and intensive curriculum. For 6 months, the students meet 6 days a week to learn a variety of media production skills, from script writing and camerawork to acting and marketing. Over 30 youth applied for 10 spots in the school, and those accepted were given

free tuition and a stipend to help offset living expenses. HSF arranged for professionals from the Kenya film and television industry to come in and serve as instructors in the film school so the youth could learn from experts in the field (including the creator of a successful Kenyan television program and an acting teacher who is well known for his Simon Cowell-esque role in a nationally televised talent show). Although the school officially opened the day after I left Kenya, over the summer I helped interview potential instructors and contributed notes and ideas for the film school curriculum.

In addition to working with HSF, I also spent time with Mwelu Foundation, an organization that offers photography training to youth in Mathare, the third largest slum in Nairobi. Over the summer, Mwelu Foundation worked with a graduate student from Colorado to create a photography exhibit that depicts everyday life in Mathare. I visited Mwelu several times and attended their 'parliament meetings' where the members came together to discuss and decide upon the organization's future goals and activities. At the request of some of the youth, I offered a short training session on how to plan for and produce a documentary video. After this session, MF's founder talked to me about preparing a series of workshops on video production upon my return to Kenya. During my time with Mwelu, I met several youth who were eager to learn how to use cameras and edit video so that they could start telling their own stories through movies.

While I met a number of people who are learning to create their own media through these two formalized organizations, I also came across a group of Kibera youth who were determined to produce their own movies without the assistance of well-financed organizations. They had shot an hour of footage with a borrowed camera and edited it down to a 30-minute movie using my laptop because they had nowhere else to edit. They knew their productions were rough, but they also knew they were getting better with each film they made.

My involvement with HSF's film school, Mwelu Foundation, and these independent filmmakers opened up a fresh set of questions about new opportunities for self-representation. In short, what happens when a group of people who typically have stories told about them in media are equipped to tell their own stories through media? When given the opportunity to pick up the camera and turn it back on themselves, how do the representations change? How are the stories different? Do these new media producers find themselves reproducing the same storylines and representations they have consumed through years of watching media produced by the dominant powers? Beyond challenging representations in Western media, slum youth must also confront misrepresentations in Kenyan media, where class remains a major fault line. Kenyan television, produced almost entirely in Nairobi, is full of stories about middle- and upper-class Kenyans, with little attention paid to those who live in the slums. Considering most Kenyans reside in rural areas and over half of Nairobi's residents live in the slums, Kenyan media largely neglects voices and stories from the majority of its population.

Each day I spent with these groups, I scribbled down thoughts and observations, spending hours at night typing up page upon page of formal fieldnotes. Going back through these notes, I've started to highlight themes and ideas that I plan to pursue in my dissertation. I know I have a tremendous amount of work left before me, but I also recognize how much I have gained from my trip to Kenya this summer. I am incredibly grateful to the family of Scott Kloeck-Jenson for making this trip possible and for helping me move forward on a project two years in the making.