

How was your research impacted by your travels?

My travels greatly impacted my research question, they helped me shift my focus from government policies to the people targeted by these policies and their stories. I realized my research did not have to fit a box of previous migration studies and was instead based on people and combining diplomacy with anthropology. My research was impacted by my travels as it pushed me to not limit myself. I initially, only aimed to conduct 10 diaspora interviews but once I arrived and started reaching out to contacts, I saw there was high interest in my interviews. In the end, I reached out to over 300 people on online group chats and spread information about my interview with word of mouth; I was able to get close to 50 interested people, of which I interviewed three dozen, as is expected in survey follow-up and response rate decreases.

I was able to improve and tailor my questions over time thanks to my research trips. Initially, my research paper aimed to conduct a comparative analysis of the challenges and opportunities of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire's governments in engaging diasporas, focusing on diaspora economic ties to these countries, and social links, including sentiments about returning home. As I interviewed my first cohort of respondents, I understood my focus had to change; just like the Ghanaian government realized the potential of their diasporas as vital contributors to national development, I realized the vital potential of the interviewed diasporan population themselves as the core of my thesis. I found while listening to them that their voice and experience were what was missing from return migration literature. I also changed my case study focus from Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire to Ghana and Kenya; I recognized that Kenya would be a more fruitful and relevant comparative case study to Ghana. These are both anglophone countries, on opposite coasts of Africa, with large international diasporas but very different diaspora engagement policies. I learned from Kenyan respondents (like Nia pictured below) that the Kenyan government does not target its diaspora as heavily as the Ghanaian government but still receives as many if not more expats seeking to settle and invest in Kenya comparatively. This made me wonder and want to dig further to identify what the differences in diaspora experiences could be between such 'similar' countries with such opposite diaspora engagement strategies. Although I wanted to cover Cote d'Ivoire in my research, especially as a person of Ivoirian descent, I let the research findings lead my thesis structure instead of forcibly making my findings fit inside a predetermined mold. I realized how crucial field research is in determining the actual issues and relevant topics compared to making inferences and hypotheses from an armchair philosopher's stance. Now, rather than being solely policy-focused, my research seeks to fill the gap in global north-to-global south migration literature, answering the question: why do members of the diaspora who have established their lives in the Global North move to the Global South, specifically in the context of return migration?

What did you learn about the people you visited that you would not have otherwise learned?

I took my time with each person I interviewed, spending between an hour and three hours in interviews with diasporans ranging from 22 to 70 years old. I learned that regardless of their backgrounds, they all came to contribute (their skills, capital, ideas, etc.) to the country they moved to, regardless of whether they came from the U.S., or the E.U., had high income or not, etc. I also realized how similar our cross-sectional identities are, and how we are all shaped by a combination of our environment, education, and experiences. Though I could see similarities between every respondent and my own story, I also saw how their motivations for return varied. I identified patterns when analyzing the dates of many African Americans' move to Kenya and Ghana. I saw four main waves of arrivals to Kenya: my older interviewees came to Kenya at the tail-end of the civil rights movement, a few middle-aged respondents moved permanently after 9/11, many millennial respondents came soon after Trump's election and Brexit, and still another group arrived after Covid-19 changed the ways we live and work from home. This finding will help my thesis avoid trying to fit every diasporan's experience in the same box.

I can also say that I would not have discovered the insights into diaspora challenges with Ghanaian and Kenyan locals if I had not visited and done interviews with people living there. There was a certain freedom that people felt in sharing the challenges and opportunities they faced in Kenya because I was there with them and could relate. In fact, in my anonymous post-interview survey, I asked interviewees "How comfortable did you feel sharing your experiences and perspectives during the interview?" 96% of my respondents reported they felt 'extremely' or 'somewhat comfortable' sharing their experiences and I believe my presence there helped them see me as someone trustworthy and familiar although we had never met before.

Though I gained countless policy recommendations and insights from the diasporans I interviewed, if I could undertake this research and travel again, I would have liked to have more time. If I had the opportunity to stay longer, I would have interviewed the US Embassy in Kenya and the Ghanaian Embassy in Kenya. I would have also loved to travel to Ghana for a few days to interview a representative at the Ministry of Tourism.

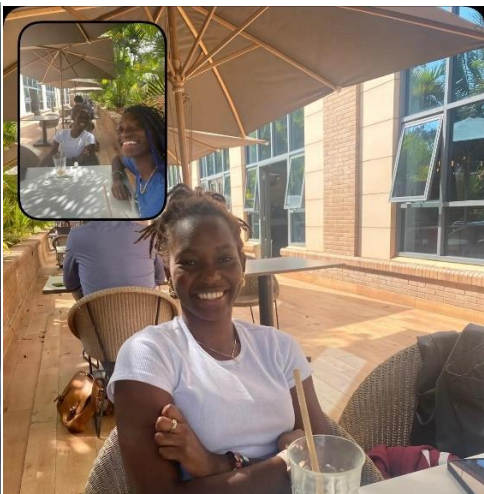
How have you grown, as an individual, as a result of this travel and research experience?

I have grown in confidence as an individual because of this research experience. For instance, I asked every person I interviewed if they could refer me to two or three additional people who could be interested in being interviewed, which allowed me to get from 10 interviewees to 30 in less than a week! I also had to be confident and diligent as an independent researcher, interviewing people twice my age and following up with my survey afterward.

I learned to be more flexible as I modified the interview questions and survey along the way. I accommodated people by providing a virtual interview option to a respondent who could not meet in person; I met with a respondent who preferred to conduct the interview at the arboretum rather than at a coffee shop; I also adapted to my older interviewees when they said they preferred that I take handwritten notes instead of notes on my computer. Finally, I realized that one of the keys to being a great interviewer is being a great listener and adjusting along the way.

I had a plan and trajectory for every interview but was also able to give the respondents space to tell their stories and dwell longer on a topic or cut another theme short. Overall, I am very grateful to the Gilman Grant and program for allowing me to conduct this research and travel.

Photos:



Interview - How comfortable did you feel sharing your experiences and perspectives during the interview?		Percentage
Extremely uncomfortable		4%
Somewhat comfortable		12%
Extremely comfortable		84%