

PhD Statement of Purpose Example

Field: Modern African History | Program: PhD in History

***What this essay does:** Leads with the intellectual argument rather than a personal narrative. The thesis statement appears in the second sentence. The research method and archival sources are named in the first paragraph. Faculty fit is addressed specifically by name with a clear explanation of why that particular scholar's work matters for the project. This is the structure humanities and social science PhD programs expect.*

The existing historiography of post-independence urban governance in West Africa treats colonial infrastructure primarily as a historical inheritance that newly independent governments chose to retain, modify, or dismantle. I argue that this framing mischaracterizes the relationship. Colonial road and rail networks in Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya were not simply structures that post-independence governments inherited; they were legal and administrative frameworks embedded in land tenure systems, municipal boundary designations, and public works financing mechanisms that actively constrained what post-independence urban planners could build and where. My dissertation will demonstrate that the spatial logic of colonial infrastructure functioned as a binding constraint on urban development policy through at least 1985, well beyond the historiographical consensus of roughly the first decade of independence.

My argument draws on three archival sources that have not been used in combination in the existing literature: the Ghana National Archives colonial public works files from 1948 to 1966, the Lagos State Ministry of Works administrative records digitized by the University of Lagos between 2018 and 2022, and the World Bank urban development project files for Kenya from 1970 to 1988. Together, these sources allow me to trace specific planning decisions, identify when colonial infrastructure constraints were the explicit rationale given by planners in government memoranda, and compare the pattern across three countries with different colonial administrations and different post-independence political trajectories. I am also developing a GIS database that overlays colonial road network maps with contemporary satellite imagery of informal settlement distribution, which will provide a spatial dimension to the archival argument.

I am applying to the PhD program in History at Columbia University to work with Professor Amara Diallo, whose monograph on the political economy of post-colonial infrastructure in Francophone West Africa is the closest existing work to my own project and whose methodological approach, combining archival research with spatial analysis, is directly relevant to the interdisciplinary framework I am developing. I am also drawn to Columbia's African Studies program and its relationship with the Center

for Spatial Research, where GIS methods are taken seriously as historical evidence rather than as supplementary illustration.

I completed my undergraduate thesis at the University of Michigan under Professor Claudia Osei, who supervised my initial archival work in the Ghana National Archives during a summer fellowship funded by the African Studies Center. That project, which examined the relationship between colonial sanitation infrastructure and post-independence municipal financing in Accra from 1957 to 1970, was awarded the Department of History Prize for best undergraduate thesis and is currently under revision for submission to the Journal of African History. The doctoral project I am proposing extends that single-city, single-decade argument to a comparative, multi-decade framework.

My long-term goal is to produce scholarship that engages both the historical discipline and contemporary urban policy debates in sub-Saharan Africa, where urban planning decisions made today are frequently constrained by infrastructure built a century ago in service of an entirely different political project. I intend to pursue that goal from a position in an African Studies or History department where I can also teach the African urban history that was absent from my own undergraduate education.