ROSY ASPIRATIONS: WORK, ENVIRONMENT, & GLOBAL COMMERCE IN NAIVASHA, KENYA [1]


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Cut flowers, mainly roses, grown for European markets are Kenya's second largest earner of foreign exchange, but floriculture frequently generates controversy amidst allegations of poor working conditions and unintended ecological effects. Most Kenyan roses are grown near Lake Naivasha, a critical freshwater body north of Nairobi, and heated debate surrounds the effects of floriculture in this space. Naivasha has become a critical locus of both aspiration and anxiety in contemporary Kenya. Based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork and archival research, this dissertation investigates both what it means for Kenyans and international actors to “work” in floriculture in Naivasha and their perspectives on the socio-political and environmental transformations that accompany this form of global commerce. Each chapter investigates the perspectives of a different set of actors, revealing discrepancies in their aspirations and investigating the attachments they form to Naivasha as a place. "Working" in flowers is a conceptual and material enterprise that involves more than cultivating roses. "Rosy aspirations" are also aspirations for specific forms of national development, environmental and social control, and socio-economic security and prosperity. These actors meet with significant frustrations in pursuit of these aspirations, but many still believe that floriculture can provide for their well-being and spur Kenyan development. Naivasha is a place where the politically ambitious build support working as union organizers or human resource managers. A place where educated middle class Kenyans find work as farm managers or NGO representatives. A place where entrepreneurs operate successful subsidiary businesses. And, to a lesser extent, a place where low-wage workers can earn the capital to invest in land and businesses elsewhere in Kenya -- provided they do not get caught in cycles of debt, lose their jobs, or encounter myriad circumstances that might derail these aspirations. Even white Kenyans, who express dismay over a loss of "control" in Naivasha, have established secure livelihoods in floriculture. Naivasha is a space of anxiety, but it is also a space of possibility, a locus of "rosy aspirations" that reveal much about the contested meanings of "development" in Kenya and the evolving effects of "neoliberalism" on Kenyan livelihoods, environments, and subjectivities.

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