

BUILDING AFRICAN FUTURES:
AFROPRENEURIALISM AND INNOVATION IN LAGOS

A Dissertation

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by

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines how actors in the Lagos startup ecosystem deploy discourses and practices of technological entrepreneurship to fashion new subjectivities within and beyond national boundaries in order to imagine alternative futures for their nation and the African Continent. In so doing, I argue for a reconceptualization of technological innovation beyond materialist preoccupations with objects to include innovative practices of self-making and national boundary-making. I also urge for a redefinition of African entrepreneurship beyond neoliberalism as a complex sociocultural practice at the interstices of culture, capital, and class. And ultimately, I conclude that Africa has always been a site and source of technological innovation, through an examination of the Lagos tech ecosystem as a convergence of deeply entangled global and local processes, practices, and imaginaries.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Oluwakányinsólá Oluwademilade Ọbáyàn was born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria, until she emigrated with her family to America as a young girl. Although she has lived in the United States for over twenty years, she proudly calls Nigeria her home.

Kanyinsola attended The University of Texas at Austin, where she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in International Relations and Global Studies, as well as in African and African Diaspora Studies. She is also the founder and Executive Director of a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Orisun Collective Inc.

DEDICATION

Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that *I can* ask or think, according to the power that worketh in *me*. ~Ephesians 3:20

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A popular Yoruba proverb says, “*eniyan laso mi, timo ba weyin timo reni mi, eniyan laso mi.*” In essence, this proverb means “people are my covering.” It is people who do not allow me to walk naked through life. It is people who provide support, guidance, and protection. My past five years as a Ph.D. student have duly confirmed the timeless wisdom of the elders encapsulated in this adage. For without the support of countless people in the form of my family, my friends, and my committee its chair, among others, who labored in love for me, I would certainly not have been able to complete this program with so much joy and peace.

First and foremost, I am grateful for the intellectual guidance of Dr. Carole Boyce-Davies. It was in her African Diaspora: Text and Theories graduate seminar that I first began to conceptualize the richness of diaspora as a theoretical framework for studying the experiences of African peoples. As my dissertation chair, she not only ensured that I was grounded in this framework but she also pushed me to approach this work through a black transnational feminist lens. Besides mentoring me in the production of rigorous intellectual work, she was also well-versed in the radical mothering tradition of Africana women. Indeed, she actively embodies the powerful Toni Morrison quote, “When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else.”¹ And as such, it is with great expectation and trepidation that I walk in her path of student-centered, people-centered, and community-centered work.

I would also like to acknowledge my committee members, Dr. Naminata Diabate and Dr. Virajini Munasinghe. Naminata has been a great source of support ever since I first spoke with her on our shared interest on African women’s naked

¹ Toni Morrison in the November 2003 issues of O, The Oprah Magazine,

protest as an undergraduate at The University of Texas at Austin. Even though I ended up pursuing a totally different project, she remained a constant source of encouragement and laughter. Moreover, her critical insights on afropolitanism and “postcolonial” Africa during our meetings always pushed me to ask deeper questions about my work. Similarly, Virajini Munasinghe has played a significant role in guiding my theoretical and methodological approaches, especially within the complexities of an interdisciplinary program like mine. Her class on Temporalities of Empire, Nation and Postcoloniality was what initially catalyzed my thinking on futurity and possibility as an entry point into afropolitanism.

Time would fail me to talk of the many others who have mentored, supported, and encouraged me at various points in my intellectual journey, such as Dr. Christen Smith, Dr. Toyin Falola, Dr. Choquette Hamilton, Dr. Edmund Gordon, Dr. N’dri Assie-Lumumba, Dr. Olufemi Taiwo, Dr. Judith Byfield, Dr. Fehintola Mosadomi, Dr. Abimbola Adelakun, Dr. Omiseke Tinsely, and Adeolu Ademoyo.

I am also grateful to the Africana Studies and Research Center, Cornell Graduate School, Fulbright-Hays GPA program, and the West African Research Association for financially supporting me at different stages of my dissertation research.

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the errors and imperfections of this work are undoubtedly mine and are in no way a reflection of your wonderful experiences.

Friends are like family. I have been beyond blessed with the most beautiful, most loving, and most supportive friends a woman could ask for. Thank you, Nadia Sasso and Marsha Jean Charles, for being phenomenal cohort members through thick and thin. Thank you, Idowu Odedosu and Osahon Akpata, for your kind introductions to my first round of interviewees during my preliminary research in 2016. Thank you, Lolade Siyonbola, Darlene Njoku, Latricia Eguavoen, and Damilola Olorunsogo. You ladies kept me grounded through the very best of times and the very worst of times. Dami, thank you for telling me outright that you wouldn't support me when I said I wanted to drop out in 2016. Would you look at God now?

Last but never the least, my family, I cannot express the love and appreciation I have for you. To my beautiful and powerful Mommy, and my loving and resilient Daddy, I pray God continues to keep you for me so that you will reap the fruits of your labor. For they "that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing sheaves with them." To my siblings, Oluwasijibomi, Ifeoluwa, and Oreoluwa, we have been chosen to walk this journey together, and I am beyond blessed to call you friends. Thank you all for loving and accepting me.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------|---|
| AAF | AFRICAN ARTISTS FOUNDATION |
| AMI | ASSOCIATION OF MERCHANTS AND INDUSTRIALISTS |
| ANDE | ASPEN NETWORK OF DEVELOPMENT ENTREPRENEURS |
| ARPANET | ADVANCED RESEARCH PROJECTS AGENCY |
| ASP | APPLICATION SERVICE PROVIDER |
| AU | AFRICAN UNION |
| AVR | ASSISTED VOLUNTARY RETURN |
| AWAM | ASSOCIATION OF WEST AFRICAN MERCHANTS |
| BE | BLACK EMPOWERMENT |
| BPO | BUSINESS PROCESS OUTSOURCING |
| BRICS | BRAZIL, RUSSIA, INDIA, CHINA, SOUTH AFRICA |
| CDMA | CODE DIVISION MULTIPLE ACCESS |
| DO | DIASPORA ORGANIZATION |
| EDTECH | EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY |
| ENIAC | ELECTRICAL NUMERICAL INTEGRATOR AND COMPUTER |
| FESTAC | FESTIVAL OF ARTS AND CULTURE |
| GAFM | GOOGLE, APPLE, FACEBOOK, MICROSOFT |
| GDP | GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT |
| GSM | GLOBAL SYSTEM FOR MOBILE COMMUNICATIONS |
| IBM | INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS MACHINES CORPORATION |
| ICT | INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY |
| IFC | INTERNATIONAL FINANCE CORPORATION |
| IMF | INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND |
| IOM | INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION |
| IP | INTERNET PROTOCOL |
| ISP | INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDER |
| IT | INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY |
| ITU | INTERNATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATION UNION |
| LBA | LICENSED BUYING AGENTS |
| LEDB | LAGOS EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT BOARD |
| MINT | MEXICO, INDONESIA, NIGERIAN AND TURKEY |
| NAAIE | NIGERIAN ASSOCIATION OF AFRICAN IMPORTERS AND EXPORTERS |
| NCC | NIGERIAN COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION |
| NET | NIGERIAN EXTERNAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS |
| NITEL | NIGERIAN TELECOMMUNICATIONS LIMITED |
| NLDB | NIGERIAN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT BOARD |
| NSA | NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY |
| NSF | NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION |
| NYSC | NATIONAL YOUTH SERVICE CORPS |
| OAU | ORGANIZATION OF AFRICAN UNITY |
| OUniv | OBAFEMI AWOLOWO UNIVERSITY |
| OEM | ORIGINAL EQUIPMENT MANUFACTURER |
| OPEC | ORGANIZATION OF THE PETROLEUM EXPORTING COUNTRIES |

| | |
|------|---|
| PC | PERSONAL COMPUTERS |
| P&G | PROCTER AND GAMBLE |
| P&T | DEPARTMENT OF POST AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS |
| PTO | PRIVATE TELECOMMUNICATION OPERATORS |
| R&D | RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT |
| SAP | STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAM |
| SBIC | SMALL BUSINESS INVESTMENT CORPORATION |
| SCOT | SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TECHNOLOGY |
| SFEM | SECOND TIER FOREIGN EXCHANGE MARKET |
| STEM | SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING, MATH |
| STS | SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY STUDIES |
| TCP | TRANSMISSION CONTROL PROTOCOL |
| UAC | UNITED AFRICA COMPANY |
| UH | UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON |

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INTRODUCTION

*I come from a place where mothers go to battle each day
with a baby strapped across their backs
another still clinging from their breast, childcare at its finest
A place of street business men
who don't need a white collar to makes deals
they sign contracts with handshakes shirtless sometimes shoeless
they'll show you how to make money, make money
You will find anything in these streets from hubcaps to toilet seats
and it's been said:*

*If you leave home naked find yourself caught in the gridlock traffic of Lagos roads
they will have you dressed boardroom sharp, briefcase in hand
between the mainland and the island*

~From A Place by Titilope Sonuga

This dissertation examines how actors² in the Lagos startup ecosystem³ deploy discourses and practices of technological entrepreneurship to fashion new subjectivities within and beyond national boundaries in order to imagine alternative futures for their nation and the African Continent. In so doing, I argue for a reconceptualization of technological innovation beyond materialist preoccupations with objects to include innovative practices of self-making and national boundary-making. I also argue for a redefinition of African entrepreneurship beyond

² The term “technology actors” here refers to individuals who are actively involved in the local ecosystem, which includes entrepreneurs, investors (angel and venture capitalists), state and federal officials, individuals in tech media, and employees of supporting organizations.

³ A “tech ecosystem” refers to a “network of individuals, startups in various stages, and various types of organization interacting as a system to create new startup companies” (startupcommons 2019). Although there is a lack of consensus surrounding the usage of the word “ecosystem” in Lagos, I retain the term for several reasons. First, the term is widely used among my research collaborators to describe the community they operate in. Second, the word is used by others outside the community locally and globally to describe the practices of tech entrepreneurship in Lagos. Third, retaining the term facilitates comparative work with other emerging ecosystem on the Continent and across the Global South who have also adopted the terminology. Thus, I find it useful in discussing technologists, entrepreneurs, investors, and other players in the tech community.

neoliberalism as a complex sociocultural practice at the interstices of culture, capital, and class. And ultimately, I argue that Africa has always been a site and source of technological innovation, through an examination of the Lagos tech ecosystem as a convergence of deeply entangled global and local processes, practices, and imaginaries.

This dissertation also makes several important contributions to African Studies, African Diaspora Studies, and Science, Technology and Society Studies. First, it contributes to the field of African Studies through an examination of the historical development of contemporary technology startup culture in the critical site of Lagos, and through ethnographically theorizing a new subject position that can accommodate the complexity of emergent entrepreneurial practices on the African Continent. Second, it contributes to the field of African Diaspora Studies through the reconceptualization of *diaspora as innovation* to incorporate the creative productions of the African diaspora and reveal innovation as a constitutive element of diasporic formations. Third, it contributes to Science, Technology and Society Studies by adding greater nuance and cultural particularity to studies on users, which further disrupts the field's Eurocentric and modernist ideological foundations. Consequently, by elucidating on the ways in which technological innovation and entrepreneurship are being used to articulate new possibilities in Lagos, this study is part of a critical scholarship that seeks to reposition Africa within the contemporary moment as a constitutive player in the making of the world.

I first began to explore questions of technology entrepreneurship in Lagos during the summer of 2016. At the time, my research questions were predominantly

located within an African and African diaspora studies framework and focused on how Nigerian returnees from Diaspora negotiate and navigate the politics of identity and belonging in Lagos. Spending time in Lagos that summer, I could not help but notice the entrepreneurial pulse of the city, especially since Nigeria was experiencing the worst economic recession in twenty-nine years. Not only did I regularly hear many individuals I interviewed mention the numerous “opportunities” presented by the dire economic situation, I also observed that a large number of them were either entrepreneurs on the side or full-time, or aspiring to be. Before I could make sense of what all this meant for my research, news of Mark Zuckerberg’s⁴ \$24 million investment into Andela, a Nigerian tech startup, and his visit to Lagos flooded my social media timelines. Together these concomitant developments pushed me to explore the relationships between technology entrepreneurship, innovation, diaspora and subject-formation in the Lagos startup ecosystem.

The Andela Story

In September 2016, the Lagos tech startup ecosystem received unprecedented global attention when the CEO and founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, visited Nigeria to meet with software developers and entrepreneurs to learn more about the local technological community (Busari 2016). Zuckerberg’s first trip to Africa was prompted by the \$24 million investment of the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative⁵ into a

⁴ Mark Zuckerberg is the CEO and founder of Facebook, a popular social media site. Since his successful establishment of Facebook in 2007 after dropping out of Harvard University, he has become a global icon for tech entrepreneurs around the world who want to create something that will change the world.

⁵ The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative is a limited liability company owned by Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan, which aims “to advance human potential and promote equality in areas such as health, education, scientific research and energy” (Maloney 2015).

Nigerian tech startup, Andela, in June (Agbugah 2016). Although the investment was not the first funding received from Silicon Valley by a Nigerian startup, it was notable because of Zuckerberg's popularity and the fact that it happened amidst a severe, nationwide recession. Given these circumstances, Andela's story played a crucial role in validating the viability of high-technology entrepreneurship, in Lagos and Africa more broadly, for the world to see.

Founded and incorporated in Nigeria and the United States in 2014, Andela is an education technology (edtech) startup that recruits and trains promising young Africans to be software developers before placing them to work remotely for global companies like Google and Microsoft (Aboyaji 2016). Although the company boasts an incredibly diverse set of co-founders, including Nigerians (Iyinoluwa Aboyaji and Nadiyah Enegesi), Americans (Christina Sass and Jeremy Johnson), a Cameroonian (Brice Nkengsa), and a Canadian (Ian Carnevale), the founding team did not originate with Andela. Instead, what brought this team together was a different yet similar idea, called "Fora."

Started in 2013 by Iyin, Nadiyah, Ian, and Brice, Fora was an online education platform for African universities to create access to quality education and reduce unemployment. Despite a strong mission and \$135,000 of funding, by early 2014, the company faced several challenges, including a lack of financial capital and a plethora of regulatory issues (Atagana 2014, Aboyaji 2016). During this time, Iyin (also known as "E") had built a mentorship relationship with Jeremy Johnson, co-founder of an American online education startup 2U (ibid). When the Fora team realized that their options were to redirect the company's business model before running out of

cash or to die, Iyin traveled to New York City to meet with Jeremy for a brainstorming session. During this meeting, Iyin and Jeremy arrived at an idea that Jeremy promised to fund and advise if Iyin and his team were interested in it. Iyin then discussed the idea with his other co-founders who, upon deliberating, decided to pivot the company to the new model. This idea is what eventually became Andela.

Although the initial plan was to change the business model of Fora, the team discovered that their new concept was an entirely different startup. Sometime in May 2014, Jeremy met with the team in Toronto and “told them that instead of just funding the idea, he would leave 2U, which had just gone public, to join Andela as the full-time CEO” (Aboyeji 2016, Nkengsa 2018). Not too long afterward, Jeremy returned to Toronto with Christina Sass, an expert in the nonprofit education space, who had dropped out of her Harvard Ph.D. program to join the team. And ultimately Andela was born.

Ever since the company held its first developer program with six students in Lagos in 2014, Andela has grown to around 1,100 developers in offices in Lagos, Nairobi, Kampala, and Kigali (Enegesi 2017, Munshi 2019). Employed by the company as full-time staff, these developers work for over 200 companies predominantly based in the United States, such as “Viacom, GitHub and Cloudflare” (Munshi 2019). Despite having a long way to go before reaching its goal of 10,000 developers, the company’s \$100 million investment in early 2019 from U.S. Vice President Al Gore’s investment firm expresses confidence in the startup’s ability to accomplish its goal (Brustein 2019). This investment, along with others from Google Ventures, Spark Capital, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, African investors like CRE

Venture Capital, Pule Taukobong and Idris Ayodeji Bello, brings the total amount raised to date to \$180 million.

However, despite being widely regarded as one of the continent's most successful startup companies, many within the local ecosystem have publicly criticized the nature of Andela's relationship with the West. These criticisms were prompted by Iyin Aboyeji's exit from the company in 2016 due to internal differences and his role in founding another tech startup, Flutterwave. His unexpected exit, along with the global media's preoccupation with the white American co-founder, Jeremy Johnson, has resulted in many local technologists and entrepreneurs questioning the identity of Andela as a Nigerian startup. According to notable tech ecosystem player Oo Nwoye (2016), many international publications failed to mention the significant contribution of Iyin in birthing Andela and also diminished the role of Lagos in their telling of Andela's story. Nwoye adds that obscuring the Nigerian origins of Andela defeats the purpose of the startup's being seen as proof that Africans can successfully build startups in Africa.

Yet others have gone as far as to read the silencing of Andela's origins as a "subtle form of racism and neocolonialism" in Africa's startup ecosystem (Adepoju 2016). Paul Adepoju (2016) notes the average Nigerian tech founder believes that he must hire foreign talent and/or register his company abroad to attain global recognition. Admittedly, he does not blame tech entrepreneurs because, according to him, "they are just trying to scale up in an ecosystem that only favors foreigners" (ibid). As a result, he locates the issue within Nigeria's externally-oriented economic system.

Aside from the question of the company's origins, the brain drain is also another issue for which Andela has been criticized. In particular, Martins Hile has asserted "Andela's mission to find and train the brightest young minds in Africa for Fortune 500 companies is a recipe for institutional brain drain" (Hile 2016). Although Andela's impact on the brain drain phenomenon cannot be quantitatively ascertained from my research and the empirical evidence, a few individuals that I spoke with discussed the harmful effects of Andela developers on the local ecosystem. One of my collaborators stated the following: "Andela was a Nigerian company. E started Andela. Now Andela is a white man coming to save and educate" (Yinka, interview, 2018). What's more, as developers emigrate abroad or work remotely for higher paying salaries, local tech startup companies find it increasingly difficult to match competitive offers for well-established global firms (Brustein 2019). This controversial debate demonstrates the fraught place Andela occupies in the Nigerian tech imaginary in terms of its identity and ultimate value to the betterment of African social issues while also helping to counter Western stereotypical conceptions of African technological backwardness and ultimately to legitimize the Continent's ability to participate within the larger project of global modernity. And yet, the Janus-faced politics surrounding Andela perfectly captures the dynamic complexities involved in creating local technology startup companies in an increasingly global world, as I encountered during my study. Such complexities, however, go hand in hand with the practices of what many of my research subjects called "building the future."

The notion of building the future rose to prominence within mainstream society through the New York Times bestseller, *Zero to One: Notes on Startup, or How to Build the Future* (2014), written by tech entrepreneur and investor Peter Thiel. In his book, Thiel discusses how aspiring entrepreneurs can mobilize technology to create innovative companies that will make the world a better place. Although the prospect of creating the future is a deeply entrenched ideology of Silicon Valley, “building the future” has become a global catchphrase for anyone around the world seeking to articulate transformative impact in the fields ranging from architecture, agriculture, and health. Notwithstanding the widening scope of its application, the term still remains closely linked to technology innovation and entrepreneurship, especially in the Global South.

Even before I began my field research, I had already encountered Nigerian content in the form of blog posts and a podcast using the phrase “building the future.” Upon entering the field, I observed that the notion was also very evident as I started attending various industry events. Fascinated and perplexed by its usage in the ecosystem, I began asking my interviewees to describe and explain what “building the future” meant. As to be expected, the responses I got varied. For one female interviewee, the future meant “telling local stories in a way that is globally appealing and locally understood,” whereas a male investor defined it as “a future where healthcare is sensible. A future where a million kids that are uneducated can be educated. A future where we have power. A future where you can travel to Ghana, you can use your card to buy something. That’s the future. We want to build a connected future” (Yinka, interview, 2018, Ade, interview, 2018). Yet the reality of building the

future is not always so easily articulated within the challenging entrepreneurial context of African societies. As another entrepreneur and investor informed me, “We haven’t fully defined what we are doing. A lot of things are still push vs. pull but again when you look at the half a billion youths that we have on the Continent, the rate we are giving birth, and what we are going to have in the future. If we cannot give those people hope, we are done for. Which is the reason why I do what I do, creating those opportunities” (Idris, interview 2018).

From the narratives described above, it is obvious that my interviewees’ notion of building the future is not merely a trendy catchphrase to demonstrate global relevance. Rather, the term’s meaning ranges from the material realities of social, economic, and political life to the affective ties of culture, belonging, and aspiration. And as such, I contend that the notion is a poignant analytical category enmeshed within the social realities and contexts of contemporary tech entrepreneurs. For the tech actors I interviewed, the future means something more concrete than a better life in a distant temporal spatial imaginary. For many of them, the future means better infrastructure, education, and healthcare, as well as the ability to pursue freedom and happiness in their homelands without sacrificing claims to human rights. These specific visions of the future are what many of my interviewees are trying to build for their nation and the Continent in general using technological innovation. Taking this notion of building the future as a departure point, my dissertation thus examines technological innovation in Lagos as a critical juncture through which we can explore how contemporary African subjects attempt to reimagine present situations and create desirable futures for themselves and their nations.

Theorizing Technological Innovation from Africa

Historically and contemporarily, theorizing technology and innovation in Africa has been an extremely fraught exercise. This historic tension can be attributed to discourses of Eurocentrism, modernism, and technological determinism that underpin much of the literature on technological innovation. As Michael Adas (1989) has shown in *Machines as the measure of men: science, technology, and ideologies of Western dominance*, the ideological construction of the West as the sole author of modern technoscientific knowledge justified Euro-American imperial and colonial dominance of African and Asian peoples. As a result, these hegemonic enterprises were responsible for the discursive constructions of Africans as devoid of technoscience and as passive recipients of Euro-American tools of modernity (Mavhunga 2017).

A rich scholarship in the fields of Science and Technology Studies (STS) and postcolonial studies, however, has deconstructed the underlying myths of technological determinism and Modernity found in Western technoscience. In particular, the work of social constructivist (SCOT) theorists and actor-network (ANT) theorists have drawn our attention to the formative role of society and networks between human and nonhuman actors in shaping processes of technological innovation (Pinch and Bijker 1987, Winner 1993, Latour 1987, Callon 1986). Notwithstanding these important interventions, feminists and postcolonial scholars have challenged social constructivism for its reification of a Western, masculinist project of modern technology based on racial and sexual exclusion (Haraway 1985, Cowan 1987, Anderson 2002, Harding 2011). And as such, this scholarship has

argued for a critical focus on the agency and subjective experiences of users to allow for a conception of technological innovation that fully embraces different technological practices, histories, and cultures (Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003, Eglash 2004).

And though it is now evident that technologies are life forms that make us even as we make them, African technological practices and cultures have yet to be taken seriously within mainstream STS literature (Winner 1986, Mavhunga 2017). Indeed, as Clapperton Mavhunga argues in *What do Science, Technology, and Innovation Mean from Africa*, “Africa must be repositioned in technology as other than its pitiable victim” (2017:5). For although scholars have powerfully critiqued the imperial and colonial foundations of technology discourses, this work is equally problematic because its victimhood narratives deny Africans of their historical heritage as coauthors of modernity by reproducing the West as the sole originator of technology. Mavhunga thus calls for a recentering of Africa as a source of technological innovation to unsettle the unequal power dynamics still present in technoscientific knowledge productions.

My dissertation answers this recent call in several ways by demonstrating that Africans have always been innovators of technology through the creation of their own technologies and the appropriation of foreign technology. Drawing on historical and contemporary examples of technological innovation in Africa, I argue against both the Western misconception of Africa as barren of technology and the reductive contemporary narrative of Africa’s digital technology revolution as solely linked to the advent of the mobile phone and the Internet. Through a historiographical analysis of

the contemporary emergence of the Lagos tech ecosystem, I chronicle the evolution of technology entrepreneurship in Nigeria to complicate overly simplistic popular narratives of Africa's digital technology revolution and to decenter the ahistorical narratives of Silicon Valley's cultural influence in Lagos.

Apart from historically grounding the contemporary Lagos tech ecosystem, reconceptualizing technological innovation in relation to diaspora is a key intervention that my dissertation makes. This intervention draws from the work of Africanist technology scholars such as Reginald Royston (2014) and Toluwalogo Odumosu (2017), who have stressed the importance of user practices in the production and process of technological innovation. Consequently, I explore diaspora as a key site of innovation—the creative act of introducing a new technique or object, externally or internally derived, to produce new opportunities for individual users and society. More specifically, I advance the notion of *diaspora as innovation* to push for innovation as a constitutive element of diasporic formations and create an archive of innovation wherein African subjects occupy a central place. These arguments are especially important given that mainstream conceptions of technological innovation have yet to shed their Western epistemological logics, and innovation has been widely appropriated across the Diaspora and the Global South. In particular, I examine the way this form of innovation manifests in the Lagos tech ecosystem through the return migration of Nigerian diasporans. By theorizing innovation in this way, this dissertation therefore repositions Africa as dynamic coauthor in the making of the technology and opens up possibilities for Africans in creating their own futures.

Theorizing Afropreneurial Subjectivities

Central to this new theorization of technological innovation is the African entrepreneur. Historically speaking, much of the literature on African entrepreneurship has centered on small enterprises in the informal sector or on large foreign or public enterprises in the formal sector (Forrest 1994, Hart 1973). Stemming from Western theories of entrepreneurship as espoused by Joseph Alois Schumpeter and Max Weber, this literature is primarily concerned with how entrepreneurship as an innovative response to market dynamics can drive economic development (Schumpeter 1934, Weber 1978). And despite compelling studies of entrepreneurship within the fields of sociology, history, and anthropology that have shifted conceptions of entrepreneurship beyond economics, contemporary studies on African entrepreneurship maintain this overly economic focus by employing classical, Marxist and Foucauldian theoretical injunctions in reading African entrepreneurial subjectivities (Barth 1963, Belasco 1980, Stewart 1991).

The complex multidimensional practice of entrepreneurship in Africa cannot be limited to “the definitional scope as conceived by Schumpeter and subsequent Western and neoliberal economic thinkers” (Ochonu 2018:5). For one, these definitions “lack the flexibility to accommodate nonindustrial and non-capitalist” modes of entrepreneurship that operate alongside and in contradiction to Western economic behavior (ibid). Especially since entrepreneurialism in Africa, as Moses Ochonu (2018) states, was not the sole preserve of the self-employed rather an entrepreneurial spirit found across almost all occupations, the complicated workings of entrepreneurship and its relationship to neoliberalism continue to elude scholars of

contemporary Africa (Ferguson 2006, Peterson 2014). Thus, while the recent rise of entrepreneurship can be linked to the structural adjustment program (SAP), a historical and cultural examination of the African middle class reveals the emergent entrepreneurial subject as an outcome of imbricated historical processes of capitalism, culture, and class.

Contrary to classical conceptions about the bourgeoisie being borne out the private sector, the African middle classes have been historically linked to the colonial and postcolonial state. Prior to the post-independence period, only a few members of the African middle class were engaged in private enterprise due to the colonial state's systematically safeguarding business and commerce for large foreign private firms and smaller Lebanese, Asian, and European firms (Handley 2015). These racist and mercantilist policies, along with the colonial state's dependence on the technical skill and knowledge of educated Africans, kept the majority of the African middle class in professional occupations as native clerks, bookkeepers, teachers, surveyors, lawyers, doctors, and professors (West 2012). Thus, entrepreneurship was mainly the preserve of those outside the purview of the colonial state, like uneducated African women, who were relegated to positions in the informal economic sector after the introduction of formal education and waged labor (Ogundipe-Leslie 1987, Bujra 1983, Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997).

Following the implementation of state-led developmental policies of indigenization and nationalization, which transferred ownership of foreign enterprises to local entrepreneurs, the African middle classes engaged in entrepreneurship expanded, though an overwhelming majority of them were still employed by the

public sector (Resnick 2015, Lofchie 2014). The introduction of structural adjustment policies in 1980s was what restructured the traditional relationships between social class and professional occupations. Indeed, many African professionals either migrated abroad to the United States and Europe, sought new employment opportunities in the formal private sector, or started their own entrepreneurial ventures (Okpweho 2009, Handley 2015, Ekpo et al 2014). It can therefore be argued that the contemporary rise of middle- class entrepreneurship signals the convergence of African and neoliberal logics of entrepreneurship more than anything else.

And yet this emergent entrepreneurial subject is not only limited to middle-classness and technological innovation. Contemporary African entrepreneurial subjectivity also emerges from the transnational cultural practices of afropolitanism (Mbembe 2005). Although afropolitanism has been criticized for legitimatizing neoliberal “configurations of power and production,” the discourse of afropolitanism is not inherently a class-based project (Zeleza 2006: 124). Furthermore, as Achille Mbembe notes, afropolitanism includes the internal migrations within the African continent, not just the extra-continental that it became, as well as “popular forms of everyday life” (2016: 35). Accordingly, I argue that Afropolitanism is primarily a critical discourse that seeks to render black subjectivity as human and Africa as a part of the world (Mbembe and Balakrishnan 2016: 29). Through an analysis of cosmopolitanism and black self-theorizing discourses of Pan-Africanism and Negritude, I show how afropolitanism theoretically appropriates neoliberal logics of freedom into these cultural discourses to articulate new and diverse ways of being African in the twenty-first century, beyond race, nation, and traditional hierarchies of

the neopatrimonial state (Ferguson 2010, Miyazaki 2006, Gikandi 2011:9). Primarily because African women writers are at the forefront of the concept, I also contend contemporary theorizations of afropolitanism must be situated at the intersections of “gender and nationalism, class and culture” especially since logics of racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism still condition migration experiences (Boyce-Davies 1991: 260).

This dissertation therefore goes beyond Western economic definitions of entrepreneurship *as the process of creating a new business or organization for profit* and instead emphasizes the practice-driven and context-specific nature of entrepreneurship. In so doing, I follow Moses Ochonu’s understanding of entrepreneurship as not being narrowly defined by the “assumption of a permanent occupation identity” but as a fluid and encompassing range of actions and thought that almost all individuals are “capable of at different points in their lives” (2018: 321). Entrepreneurship is therefore a practice “through which individuals see problems as opportunities, then take action to identify the solution to those problems, and create value through solutions” (Akinyoade et al. 2017: 1). In essence, I argue that the complex and multidimensional practice of tech entrepreneurship in Lagos cannot be fully understood using neoliberalism. Instead, I suggest that entrepreneurial practices of Lagos tech actors are best conceived as afropreneurial, which refers to how Africans deploy entrepreneurial thinking and actions to identify and solve local challenges for profit and impact to assert their coeval membership in a globalizing world. Ultimately, I assert that these individuals purposefully draw from a discursively entangled assemblage of class, culture, and capital to fashion subjectivities toward the future they want to see for themselves, their nation, and their Continent.

TOWARD A THEORY OF AFRICAN FUTURES

Emerging in the European Renaissance and reaching its zenith during the Enlightenment era, modernity is a trope “through which Europe constructed itself as the center, and the rest of the planet as its periphery” (Pratt 2002: 28). We tend to think of modernity spatially, especially in regard to the geographical occupation of territories during colonialism and imperialism (Bhabha 1994). Time, however, plays an equally important role in the construction of the myth of modernity. For Africa, as Johannes Fabian (1983) has convincingly argued, was invented outside the Time of Man based on Hegelian conceptions of history.

Indeed, many scholars have traced the discursive origins of African alterity to philosophical works of G.W.F. Hegel (Kuykendall 1993, Taiwo 1998, Camara 2005). In *Lectures in the Philosophy of World History*, Georg W.F. Hegel constructs an Africa of utter abjection, lacking history and civilization: “African proper, as far as History goes back, has remained—for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World—shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself—the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night” (Hegel 1956: 91). In essence, Hegel’s ethnocentric construction of Africa located the Continent outside of world history and dehumanized the African subject.

The advent of African diasporic movements of Pan-Africanism and Negritude in the twentieth century, which drew on the earlier radicalism of enslaved African revolutionaries and activists, against imperialism and colonialism, is what exposed the myth of modernity. Since then, contemporary social science and humanities scholars have strongly contested the concept’s discursive frame and conceive of it as an

ideological construct based on European culture and history. In fact, some have even claimed *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour 1991). In particular, the influential work of postcolonial theorists like Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000), Gayatri Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1988), and Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), and Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) have shown us that the relationship between Empire and colony was mutually constitutive in the making of the modern world, thus provincializing Western universalism and repositioning the agency and humanity of postcolonial subjects.

This critical scholarship has disrupted the teleological narrative of modernity by uncovering modernities occurring in other times and places especially in the wake of globalization. For example, Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996) demonstrates how new global flows of media and migration restructure local contexts in order to create new modernities outside the confines of the nation-state. Dilip Gaonkar (1999) has also posited the concept of “alternative modernities” to disrupt the singular narrative of Western modernity. According to Gaonkar, “The very idea of alternative modernities has its origins in the persistent and sometimes violent questioning of the present precisely because the present announces itself as the modern at every national and cultural site today” (1999: 13). Although both of these works have significantly challenged the hegemony of Western modernity within social science scholarship, its over-emphasis on cultural difference reifies culture and obscures the structural dimensions of global capitalism (Dirlik 2013). Moreover, it fails recognize that the Global South imbrication with

modernity is not limited to culture but is often coevally experienced as the “darker side of modernity” historically and contemporarily.

Arif Dirlik (2013) therefore urges scholars to pay attention to “the dark side of modernity responsible for historically unprecedented forces of alienation, deprivation, human insecurity, racist intolerance, and mass slaughter” (ibid, 42). The “darker side” of modernity was first articulated by Anibal Quijano (2000) and following him, Walter D. Mignolo (2007) using the concept of coloniality—which refers to “an invisible power structure, an epochal condition, and epistemological design, which lies at the center of the present Euro-North American-centric modern world. As a result, these scholars have called for the radical project of decoloniality, a “dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geo-political hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015: 488, Maldonado-Torres 2011: 117).

Despite these powerful arguments against modernity, Africanist anthropologist James Ferguson has asserted that we cannot do away with modernity simply because it makes for inconvenient and awkward theory especially in regard to the Continent. As he has poignantly stated, for most Africans, modernity is not about the absence of culture. It is about global socioeconomic inequalities and having access to the material means to make life livable. Moreover, modernity and its concomitant notion of modernization—myths or not—have become a “powerful discourse of identity” which in the aftermath of their demise have produced Africa’s political-economic condition on “the enduring axis of hierarchy, exclusion, and abjection, and the pressing political

struggle for recognition and membership in the emerging social reality we call the global” (Ferguson 2006:193).

Comprehending the fraught relationship between Africa and modernity becomes easier if we follow the critical interventions of Olufemi Taiwo and Elisio Macamo. Extending and following Walter Rodney’s classic *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), Taiwo (2010) states that colonialism actually preempted the formation of modernity on the Continent. He argues that West Africans had already begun embracing modernity on their own before the imposition of colonial rule in the region. He also adds that colonial theories and policies, which drew on Hegelian notions of Africa, denied the complexity of African societies and the existence of social life forms outside their ahistorical stereotypes of African cultures and traditions. In a similar fashion, Elisio Macamo (2005) locates the ambivalent nature of the colonial enterprise as key site in understanding African modernity. For example, he articulates how “the regulation of native labor by Portuguese colonial authorities in Mozambique was a way of denying modernity to Africans and how, through the agency of Christianity, the latter sought to recover a sense of self and community” (Macamo 2005: 1). Negotiating this ambivalence, he argues, enabled Africans to counter their subjection and claim citizenship in some instances. Thus, even with the partial imposition of formal colonialism, Africans were still very much active participants in the making of modernity.

Within the colonial period, these modern African subjects were often the source of much ridicule and accused of aping European culture. Colonial officials in particular found African mimicry troubling because, as Homi Bhabha (1994) has

noted, the practice of mimicry reveals the agency of the colonized thus disrupting the colonizer's logic of power and domination. Additionally, the dilemma of mimicry unsettled anthropological understandings of African cultural practices, according to James Ferguson (2006). As a result, most anthropologists reinterpreted this colonial and postcolonial practice of cultural assimilation as a form of cultural appropriation and political resistance (ibid, 160). In truth, however, many Africans were *bricoleurs* who sought to fuse “the best of their indigenous heritage with what they had imbibed from the missionary school of modernity” (Taiwo 2009: 7, Levi-Strauss 1962). And while this might have been the case for many of them, James Ferguson reminds us that “when urban Africans seized so eagerly on European cultural forms, they were asserting rights to the city and pressing by their conduct claims to the political and social rights of full membership in a wider society” (2006: 161).

These claims were also closely related to discourses of developmental time and national progress. The temporal dimensions of modernity were particularly evident at the end of Empire through modernization frameworks that stated that “the progressive nature of historical time being taken for granted, nations could anticipate their inevitable, if gradual, rise in the global order through a natural process of development” (Ferguson 2005: 3). Based on social evolutionist notions of time, modernization paradigms held sway in the post-independence period as many African governments enlisted the help of Western experts to play “catch up.” The subsequent failures of these paradigms in the structural adjustment era heightened this sense of “being behind,” leading to a decomposition of historical time and its attendant promises of development and progress, such that Africa is now seen as being in state

of inescapable abjection (ibid). Ultimately, the complicated relationship between time and modernity in the African context has made imagining and foreseeing futures for the Continent nearly impossible.

At the start of this century, social and cultural theorists were preoccupied with questions of how to make sense of Africa as an idea, concept, and place in a globalizing world, given the epistemic rupture of modernity and its teleological narratives of progress (Ferguson 2006, Nuttal and Mbembe 2004, Ndlovu-Gatheni 2015). More specifically, these scholars explored ways to rethink Africa outside the afropessimistic discourses of catastrophe and crisis that had overwhelmed productive research within African studies (Hyden 1996). James Ferguson's *Expectations of modernity: myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (1999) and Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001) were two of such works; they examined the subjective experiences of abjection and disconnection produced by discursive production and social realities of crisis on the Continent. Together these works revealed how the reductionism and essentialism of Western theory rendered it incapable of explaining the complexities of African sociocultural life. Although James Ferguson (2006) has expanded this theme of disconnection in terms of Africa's place in the world in the global world order, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttal (2004) seek to undermine the conceptual paradigm of otherworldliness through an exploration of the compositional character and general worldliness of the African metropolis.

The present claim for a future is therefore a powerful injunction that brings together an assemblage of discourses on subjectivity, modernity, and coloniality, to name a few. Beyond the experience of economic decline, the crisis is one of meaning,

“in which the way that people are able to understand their experience and to imbue it with significance and dignity has (for many) been dramatically eroded” (Ferguson 1999: 2). As such, conceptions of time in the colonial and postcolonial are marked by “the contingent, the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the fortuitous—radical uncertainty and social volatility” (Mbembe 2016: 223). This widespread condition of temporariness was produced by global capitalism and intensified by the neoliberal turn of the past forty years.

Several scholars have provided some theoretical insights on how to overcome temporariness. For example, Gerda Reith has suggested the notion of risk “as a means of calculating and quantifying the uncertainties of that future and so provide a guide for action in the present” (2004: 384). Jane Guyer (2007) has also called for new articulations of temporality in the field of anthropology, which takes into account the near future using punctuated time—dates as events—instead of the current preoccupation with the enduring time of the distant past and distant future. Consequently, emphasizing the near future allows the heterogeneous and overlapping nature of time in Africa—“an interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintain the previous ones”—to be apprehended (Mbembe 2001: 16).

Reconceptualizing time will not be enough though, if the underlying structure is marred by the Western ideologies of modernity. For as Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni notes, truly African futures can only emerge outside the confines of global coloniality because “modernity is said to have unfolded as a phenomenon that colonized time, space, and being” (2015: 488). Given the current epistemological breakdown of

Euroamerican modernity and its theoretical underpinnings in making sense of our world, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that decoloniality is a necessity for productive thinking about inclusive and free futures for all, not just the African Continent.

More recent scholarship has moved from theorizing Africa in relation to the rest of the world to thinking about the world and its attendant futures from Africa. Answering the Fanonian call to “leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man,” Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbembe in *Sortir de la grande nuit* (2010) situates Africa as a vital center wherein the goal of decolonization to dis-enclose the world and reconstitute the human subject can be fully realized (Fanon 1963: 311). For Mbembe, following Fanon, decolonization reaches far beyond the historical moment of political struggle for self-determination to include a reopening of possible futures where new conceptualization of humanity and new modes of life can emerge. In “Theory from the South: Or, how Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa,” Jean and John Comaroff (2012) advanced a similar argument that the Global South provides a productive site for understanding the workings of the world at large, especially since Europe is at theoretical dead-end and currently faces the same crises that have plagued the Continent. Thinking the World from Africa is therefore not only useful for the Continent but also offers valuable insights into contemporary global transformations.

In addition to the importance of decolonial praxis in the realization of African futures, *hope* is another method that can be used to reimagine the present and future of the African Continent and the world. The contemporary turn to hope as a “category of social and psychological analysis” stems from the general loss of hope in progressive politics among social scientists (Crapanzano 2003, Miyazaki 2006, Harvey 2000). As

Ghassan Hage (2003) notes, neoliberalism has shrunk society's capacity to distribute hope among its citizens. Hence, the pressing need for hope in social theory in order to imagine a new world absent of the depredations of capital. More than just a space for conjuring up dreams of better future, hope "is not a subject but a method that serves as a radical temporal reorientation of knowledge" of ourselves and our worlds (Miyazaki 2004:5). This reorientation of knowledge manifests itself in the constant search for alternatives to present realities. And although this method of hope can certainly be found anywhere, I contend that Africa is a critical site through which notions of global utopian hope can truly materialize, given the theoretical impasse of Euro-American modernity and capitalism.

For much of its history, Africa has been regarded as a hopeless continent, a place of crisis with no history and no future. The contemporary discourse of Africa rising is therefore less about a sudden discovery of hope on the Continent than an opportune confluence of global capitalist ambitions and African diaspora desires. Without a doubt, this shift in the popular narrative about Africa occludes much of the long-standing existence of African hope in various forms. Movement and migration, for example, have been widely employed in Africa as a method of hope even before the advent of colonialism. Since the 20th century, religion, and most especially Pentecostal Christianity, represents another strategy mobilized by Africans to realize alternative futures for themselves amid social conditions of privation and political instability. Both these methods of hope emanate from the widespread failure of the African state to provide citizens with good governance, economic stability, and social services. As such, they are primarily exit strategies, a physical, psychological

and spiritual retreat from the state (Vigh 2009, Ferguson 2006). And though retreat is often viewed negatively, it cannot be equated to a passive acceptance of the status quo; retreat demonstrates a refusal to accept the current order of things by searching for elsewhere within and without the state.

Yet there are others forms of hope, such as those found in the everyday life of African cities and the more forceful articulations encapsulated within projects of decolonization and civil society activism. As Bill Ashcroft (2013) has shown in his discussion of postcolonial African writing, anticolonial struggle was shot through with hope for a transformed future beyond imperialism and colonialism. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's (1986) notion of utopia as the place from which ideology can be countermanded and Ernest Bloch's (1986, 1989) theorizations of art and literature as inherently utopian projects of imagining the future, Bill Ashcroft contends that African cultural and creative productions are powerful tools for "reconsidering the possibility of an ahistorical past, and rethinking the function of memory and of time itself" (2013: 94). Accordingly, he demonstrates the importance of "willed action" as seen in creative productions in undoing current conditions of crisis and transforming the future of the African Continent beyond Western developmentalism.

Following Miyazaki's (2006) compelling insights on hope as a search for alternatives in fulfillment of personal and collective goals for better futures and Ashcroft's (2013) notion of utopian hope in willed actions as a critical site wherein a radical project of decoloniality can emerge, I foreground hope as a space-making strategy for understanding the complexity of contemporary African lives and practices. It is important to mention that hope is not equally distributed among social actors, due

to differences of gender, class, religion, and ethnicity. What seems to unite these disparate groups is the shared sense of uncertainty that plagues much of social life on the Continent. Indeed, the possibility of the unknown directionally orients Africans toward the future or what has not-yet become. The subjective experience of not knowing what the future holds, however, is significantly conditioned by one's social access to options.

For instance, how does the hope of returnee tech entrepreneurs relate to the hope of non-returnee tech entrepreneurs? And how does the hope of tech entrepreneurs as a broad category relate to the hope of aspirational migrants out of Lagos? Though we are not yet able to measure gradients of hope, I realize that the futures being imagined by tech entrepreneurs are not compatible with the futures envisioned by other social actors in Lagos. And while shared notions of the future might emerge from merely occupying the same social context and facing similar social problems, the future is also very personal, based on individual hopes, desires, dreams, longings, and aspiration.

Taking these critical insights of hope and future as an overarching context, this dissertation explores how actors in the Lagos startup ecosystem deploy discourses and practices of entrepreneurship and technological innovation Africans to make their lives work by any possible means. Accordingly, I contend that the discursive practices of Lagos tech actors are part of contemporary repertoires of hope used by contemporary Africans to engage with the world and the local on their own terms. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in the primary fields of African and African Diaspora studies, Sociocultural Anthropology, African History, and Science and

Technology Studies, my dissertation ultimately demonstrates that contemporary practices and discourses in the Lagos tech ecosystem have uniquely positioned the Continent to be a source for theorizing the nuanced complexity of cultural phenomena and its attendant political-economic structures within today's globalizing world.

RESEARCH SITES AND METHODOLOGY

The data used for this dissertation are primarily based on my ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Lagos, Nigeria, from October 2017 to October 2018 (12 months) and preliminary ethnographic field research carried out over two months in Summer 2016. Specifically, I conducted in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interviews with actors—mainly entrepreneurs, technologists, and investors, as well as government officials, media, startup employees, and non-tech industry professionals—in the Lagos startup ecosystem. I also conducted participant and nonparticipant observation at a startup accelerator and incubator, various community events, such as meet-ups, festivals, conferences, and master-classes, popular work and hangout spots such as co-working spaces and coffee shops, and virtual sites like Facebook groups, Twitter feeds, Medium blog posts, and company webpages. I also collected and analyzed press articles, policy documents, and industry reports, YouTube videos, and podcasts to gain nuanced and comprehensive knowledge about the ecosystem and related industries of telecommunications, banking, media, entertainment, fashion, agriculture, health, and government.

Fieldsites and Social Media

Given the plethora of online and offline sites involved in my ethnographic fieldwork, my dissertation is a multi-sited research project (Marcus 1995). The complexity of doing fieldwork in the increasingly globalized context of the contemporary moment was especially evident in my interactions with tech actors in Lagos. Digital media played a crucial role in my study on the Lagos tech ecosystem from the very beginning. Even before I started my fieldwork, I had read several tech media publications and Medium blog posts from tech actors, listened to podcasts and watched video interviews with entrepreneurs and investors, and scoured through my Facebook and Twitter feed for any tech entrepreneurship related threads. Conducting this digital ethnography was a key starting point in familiarizing myself with key players, debates, and the overall culture in the community.

As many of them were often in transit locally, nationally, and globally, meeting an investor, attending a technology event, or visiting their families in diaspora, following their digital footprint on social media was also an important way through which I could understand their situated technology practices and discourses. In particular, WhatsApp and Twitter proved to be two of the most valuable social media platforms in this regard. WhatsApp was primary mode of communication with tech entrepreneurship that I sometimes used for initial conversations and follow-up questions. Most of my research participants were also very active on Twitter, which provided me with insight into individual and group identities in the ecosystem and the overall sociocultural worlds of tech startup entrepreneurship in Nigeria (Coleman 2010).

Despite the importance of offline, virtual sites in keeping me abreast of current occurrences in the ecosystem, the primary site of my dissertation research is a physical place, Lagos, Nigeria. Although many individuals consider Yaba, a centrally located suburb on the mainland surrounded by a number of educational institutions, to be the nucleus of the local technology space, my fieldwork experience went well beyond the geographic confines of the Yabacon Valley. In fact, my fieldwork took me outside of Lagos at times to the nearby Ogun state and Oyo state. The busy schedule of my interviewees often required that I be extremely flexible in terms of location, time, and style. On one evening, I found myself conducting an interview in the backseat of a car as we made our way through traffic to the Lekki Palms Mall. While this was not the ideal location I had in mind, I did not hesitate to meet in this way after waiting nearly six months to talk with the interviewee in question. I say this to reinforce my contention that the Lagos tech society in its entirety was my field site.

Indeed, the centrality of Lagos to the ecosystem is the main argument of Chapter Two. Historically speaking, Lagos has always had an entrepreneurial ethos. Even before the formal amalgamation of the Nigerian colonial territory in 1914, Lagos was a major port city in the transatlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century (Mann 2007: 31). Under British colonialism, the city became the political and commercial capital of Nigeria, which drew an influx of migrants from the Nigerian hinterland and other West African countries seeking their economic opportunities. Although the political capital was moved to Abuja in 1991, Lagos remains a long-standing site for the realization of economic aspirations in Nigeria. More recently, Lagos has garnered new global attention from its emerging startup ecosystem. Although there are other

notable startup ecosystems in South Africa, Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Kenya, I chose Lagos because of its growing prominence as Africa's most valuable startup ecosystem, boasting an estimated 400-700 active startups worth over \$2 billion (Jackson 2017).

Gaining Access: On Studying Up and Native Ethnography

Access was another important factor that informed my selection of Lagos as a fieldsite. Conducting research among tech actors meant that I was interacting with high-profile and highly networked individuals. Although contemporary scholars in the social sciences and humanities have predominantly shied away from the old anthropological models of investigating subjects especially in Africa who are not disempowered and disadvantaged, this dissertation posits that investigating people that share social and cultural similarities with the researcher can open our eyes in new ways to current configurations of power and culture (Nader 1974). Indeed, many ethnographic researchers have shed light on the complexity of studying up and sideways especially in regard to power differentials between the researcher and research participant (Nader 1974, Hannerz 2010).

Conducting field research in my home country of Nigeria with only cursory knowledge of tech entrepreneurship made me acutely aware of power and its gendered dimensions. Globally, tech entrepreneurship is a male-dominated industry, and the same attains in Nigeria. And as a result, I spent much time and energy straddling multiple subject positions as an Americanah (Nigerian-American), Yoruba woman, single young lady⁶, and Cornell Ph.D. candidate, especially when interacting with

⁶ Nigeria is still a very patriarchal society. Moreover, tech entrepreneurship is male dominated. Young and unmarried women, who are financially independent, bear the brunt of

older Nigerian men. Based on societal perceptions about young single women and my own familial connections, I did frequent self-policing because there were certain places that I could not go to for fear of being seen by a relative and misread. For the most part, however I was able to overcome my initial angst through friends, based in New York and Lagos, who introduced me to their networks. The process provided much more challenging than I had initially expected because of my familiarity with the local context.

Apart from engendering a heightened sense of self-awareness, the overall process of studying up went smoothly for me. Not only was I able to gain direct access to high-profile individuals, but also I found building rapport with them to be extremely easy. My positionality as a Nigerian-American Ivy League graduate student greatly facilitated my establishing connections and building relationships with my research participants. Although I was born and partially raised in Lagos, I grew up in, and was primarily educated at, elite institutions in the United States. All the same, I never questioned my Yoruba-Nigerian identity because I grew up in a transnational world of Nollywood movies, Nigerian Pentecostal churches, and the strict Yoruba culture of my parents.

Still, I am hesitant to call myself a native ethnographer (Narayan 1993). As Kirin Narayan (1993) and others have informed us, native ethnographers occupy tense positions within their disciplines and cultural communities because their legitimacy and identity are always in question (Nelson 1996, Jackson 2004). I benefit from the fact that this does not specifically apply to scholars in African diaspora and Cultural

the inequality within the general society because they are viewed as a threat to the preexisting structure.

Studies fields. Drawing on those poignant insights and my experiences as an Americanah in Nigeria, I do not ever assume that sharing ethnicity, nationality, gender, and social class translates into automatic acceptance, even at home. Instead, I deliberately work to build trust and connections with my research participants through constant reflexivity and cultural code-switching (Jacobs-Huey 2002).

Methods

My primary research methods were participant observation and ethnographic interviews. Working through professional and personal contacts, I conducted interviews with over forty startup entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, investors, media and government officials at their various startup offices, co-working spaces, and leisure spots like hotels, coffee shops, and restaurants. I also had semi-formal interviews and informal conversations with employees of startup companies to capture a wide range of voices involved in the ecosystem. Throughout my dissertation fieldwork, I also collected relevant documents such as economic policy reports, newspapers, and economic data in order to analyze the wider socioeconomic and industry trends. I also examined organization documents and press releases of the startups in order to assess how they articulate and position themselves between global and local narratives of startup entrepreneurship.

In addition to the interviews and document analysis, I attended multiple industry events around Lagos over twelve months between October 2017 and October 2018. More specifically, I attended conferences such as the High Growth Startup Conference, Stears Summit, TechPoint Inspired, TechFest, Emmanuel Macron at the Tony Elumelu Foundation, and the Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs

(ANDE) West Africa Regional conference. I also attended accelerator demo days and bootcamps like the Wennovation Agritech Incubation program, Google Launchpad program, and SheHive Lagos. Aside from these events, I frequented popular spots where technologists and entrepreneurs congregate, including Vestar Café, Café Neo, and MEST Lagos. To gather deeper insights on certain industry topics, I also occasionally attended master classes and talks hosted by local innovation hubs. Participant observation at these events allowed me to closely examine the everyday practices and discourses within the startup ecosystem.

I also gained deeper insight into the internal workings of the startup culture and the broader ecosystem while conducting participant observation for three months at an innovation hub in Lagos. I was able to gain access to the hub through the founder, who I had interviewed early on in my research. My participant-observations ranged from attending employee meetings and public events to helping with company communications and social media content strategy. I also helped with grant proposals for the hub, which is a nonprofit organization. From these observations at the hub, I was able to understand the everyday practices of building tech startups in Lagos from a more grounded perspective. Lastly, I paid attention to social media platforms, such as Medium, Twitter, Facebook, and popular tech news websites, to gain insight into how tech actors not only narrate their experiences but also imagine themselves. In doing so, I explored the formation of individual and group identities within the ecosystem and how the ecosystem relates to the larger sociocultural environment within Lagos, Nigeria, Africa, and other parts of the world.

ORGANIZATION OF DISSERTATION

This introductory chapter has provided the background context along with theoretical and methodological approaches used in the study on the Lagos tech ecosystem. Most of all, I introduced the notion of building the future as an overarching framework in this dissertation's argument. Within this frame, I explore afropreneurialism and innovation as strategies employed by research subjects in the creation of desirable futures.

Prior to delving deeper into that discussion, I provide much-needed historical context on the Lagos tech ecosystem in **Chapters One** and **Two** to counter ahistorical constructions of tech entrepreneurship as solely situated within Western spatial contexts and histories. In **Chapter One**, I investigate how the local startup ecosystem maps into the socio-historical and cultural contexts of Lagos by tracing the historical and theoretical foundations of entrepreneurship and crisis in the city. Specifically, I examine the urban social history of Lagos in relation to the political economy of Nigeria to demonstrate that the entrepreneurial ethos found in the contemporary startup ecosystem is derived from legacies of entrepreneurship and trade and Western ideological production of crisis.

Chapter Two builds on this broader context by detailing the historical background for the contemporary emergence of the Lagos tech ecosystem. I first begin by making space for the examination of technology entrepreneurship in Nigeria by historicizing and deconstructing Silicon Valley as the site of global technology par excellence. I then interrogate the underlying philosophical and ideological traditions that have shaped contemporary conceptual understandings of technology and

entrepreneurship. Following these examinations, I situate the Lagos tech ecosystem within historical genealogies of technology and entrepreneurship in Nigeria and Africa more broadly in opposition to popular narratives of Africa's digital technology revolution. In so doing, I contend that the production of technology and the practices of technology entrepreneurship are deeply rooted within local sociocultural processes of subject formation and nation-building in the global context.

In **Chapters Three** and **Four**, I explore the innovation of diaspora by bringing together theorizations on innovation, return migration, and the African diaspora.

Chapter Three introduces my reconceptualization of diaspora as a form of innovation. By advancing a conception of innovation beyond Western materialist and modernist paradigms focused on tools and objects to include innovative practices and techniques, I contend that the innovation of diaspora is a product of the historical and contemporary experience of alienation and the various attempts to mediate the temporal and spatial gap between diasporans and their homelands. As such, the production and consumption of Nollywood content are an innovative way to mediate differences between the here and there.

Chapter Four builds on my analysis of diaspora as innovation in Chapter Three. Taking the contemporary trend of return migration to Nigeria as a point of departure, this chapter examines the Nigerian diaspora along with historical practice of return migration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I also ethnographically explore contemporary practices of return migration through an in-depth case study of four Nigerian returnees in Lagos. In addition to explaining their motivations for return, I specifically demonstrate how Nigerian returnees are driving innovation in the

Lagos ecosystem and society at large through an examination of two returnee-led startups.

Chapters Five and Six begin my argument on afropreneurialism in the Lagos tech ecosystem. In **Chapter Five**, I assert that current African entrepreneurial practices are best conceived of as a convergence of global and local logics of neoliberalism, middle-classness, and afropolitanism. In so doing, I challenge the uncritical use of neoliberal discourses in reading African entrepreneurial practices by first examining the historical emergence of neoliberalism and the notion of *homo economicus*. I then explore African neoliberalism in relation to the formation of the African middle class. This middle-class entrepreneurial subject formation is then situated within the cultural identity discourse of afropolitanism. Ultimately, I argue that interrogations of contemporary entrepreneurship must take seriously the entangled global and local workings of class, culture, and capital within these processes in order to avoid flattening the complex and multidimensional experiences of entrepreneurial subjects.

Chapter Six builds on the insights made in Chapter Five through an ethnographic examination of the new entrepreneurial subject formation that emerges at the interstices of capital and class; culture and diaspora; technology and mobility. In particular, I argue that Lagos tech actors enact new subjectivities to articulate their desires for Africa's future. Instead, these subjectivities, I propose, are afropreneurial. To flesh out the makings of afropreneurial subjectivities, I elaborate on some of the discursive practices of Lagos tech actors in terms of education, gender, consumption patterns, new entrepreneurial practices, digital media, local impact, and relationship to

the African state. Accordingly, I suggest that afropreneurialism is a compositional technology of self-making used by Lagos tech actors to position themselves and their Continent within the larger global context of technological innovation and entrepreneurship.

My **Conclusion** summarizes the main argument of my dissertation and my theoretical contribution to the field of African and African Diaspora scholarship. It also outlines future opportunities for further research. I discuss the popular narrative of tech ecosystem as predominantly focused on similarities to Silicon Valley or on recent transformations within the Lagos urban landscape. By starting from this popular discourse, I shed light on how stories play an important role in shaping realities. As such, I restated my primary aim not only to reconceptualize technological innovation and entrepreneurship outside Western ideological constructions but also to expand theorizations on African futures as a veritable source for overcoming the present so that new modes of life can emerge for the world. I also explore new research directions to pursue in my work, which range from centering gender and class more prominently through a sole examination of female tech entrepreneurs and non-returnee entrepreneurs to conducting comparative work between emerging tech ecosystems across the Continent, such as those in Kenya, South Africa, and Ivory Coast, and in other countries of the Global South, including India and China.

CHAPTER 1

CONTEXTUALIZING THE LAGOS ECOSYSTEM: CRISIS AND THE PRODUCTION OF AN ENTREPRENEURIAL CITY

Lagos has never been, will never be, and has never aspired to be like New York, or anywhere else for that matter. Lagos has always been indisputably itself.
~*Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013: 519).

INTRODUCTION

On a sunny afternoon in August 2017, Kunle and I sat in an open-plan office, surrounded by the sound of tapping keys, mouse clicks, and chatter of staff in Yaba, a historic suburb on the Lagos mainland. We were discussing his entrepreneurial journey and the general transformations that he had observed in the startup ecosystem during the past six years. Kunle, a thirty-year-old entrepreneur, enthusiastically recalled how he went from working as a security guard to owning a successful media startup within Africa's largest and most valuable tech ecosystem. "I came to Lagos to hustle. I was actually a security man. I was sleeping in slums," he said. Startled, I asked what year that was. "2008," he replied. I listened intently as he told his story of moving to Lagos almost ten years ago to pursue his dreams of getting an education.

When his father could not afford to further his education and his friends began to enter university, Kunle moved to Lagos to "hustle and become a baby police" after waiting at home for three years after finishing secondary school. Struggling to make ends meet, he slept in a dump house in the slums of Lagos and eventually found a job as a security guard. After working for about a year, he saved up enough money to enter a university in Lagos. His venture into technology did not occur in school, however, but in the church. While working his way through school, he joined a

popular church in Lekki Phase I, an up-and-coming city on the island, where the newly wealthy in Lagos reside.

One Sunday, an engineer, who recently returned to Nigeria after completing his Master's degree in the United States, gave a talk at Kunle's church on the importance of technology and mentioned that it was easy to learn. After the talk was over, Kunle met the speaker and asked if he too could learn technology. The speaker assured him that he could and asked anyone who was genuinely interested to send him an email. Following that initial meeting, Kunle sent the speaker, who later became his mentor, an email, which resulted in his using the money he had been saving to pay his tuition to learn how to code. He first started working with his mobile phone until he could afford to purchase a friend's laptop.

By 2010, he was fully engaged in the tech community, actively attending weekly meet-up events like Mobile Monday. In 2011, Kunle became a blogger and photographer for a tech media company. When his blog's host started having issues, he left to explore his interest in photography. Realizing the lack of compelling stories about the nascent tech ecosystem, Kunle began working on his media startup, with a team of two people, in November 2014, and he launched it in 2015. Although Kunle's media startup was initially assured financial support for the first six months, he soon had to go straight to the market when his investor suddenly pulled out. Through the help of his mentor, Kunle was able to survive, build the company, and eventually receive some seed funding in 2016.

Although common in the broader Lagos imaginary, Kunle's story is often occluded within dominant narratives of the Yabacon Valley, the nickname given to the aspirational epicenter of the Lagos technology space. Centrally located between the mainland and island, Yaba has a high concentration of educational institutions, including the Yaba College of Technology and the University of Lagos (Adeshokan

2017). Yabacon Valley first began to take shape in 2009, when Pagatech, a financial technology startup, moved into a building on Herbert Macaulay Way. The subsequent opening of the Co-Creation Hub (CcHub), one of the first⁷ innovative hubs in Nigeria, fostered the rise of the technology cluster in Yaba (Adeshokan 2017). Founded by Bosun Tijani and Femi Longe in 2010, CcHub is a pre-incubation and co-working space, which also serves as a home to over fifty Nigerian startups. With the introduction of CcHub and the addition of iDEA Hub, a government-run technology accelerator, technologists, entrepreneurs, and students now had an affordable place to build their ideas and forge community through meet-ups, talks, and demo events.

The idea of the Yaba tech cluster was also bolstered by the collaborative efforts of CcHub, Lagos State Government, MainOne cable, and other community stakeholders in laying high-speed broadband fiber cable along Herbert Macaulay Way (Oluwafemi 2013). Subsequently, the arrivals of venture-backed startups like Hotels.ng in 2013, e-commerce startups like Konga and Jumia in 2014, and Facebook (Mark Zuckerberg) in 2016 cemented the future of Yaba in the Nigerian technology narrative. Despite these promising signs, the “Yabacon Valley” narrative has recently been called into question as old startups move out of Yaba due to logistical issues and new startups establish themselves on the island for enhanced access to clients (Adeshokan 2017, Adetunji et al. 2017).

Yet Yaba is not alone. Indeed, the suburb’s emerging identity is one of the many ongoing transformations within the Lagos metropolitan area. With a population of over 21 million people and an estimated GDP at \$137 billion, Lagos, “if it were a country, would be Africa’s seventh largest economy in 2014” (ibid, 4). As demonstrated by a recent investor’s guide titled *Lagos: City of Opportunities* that

⁷ Winnovation Hub was another hub formed at about the same time as CcHub. However, its founding role in the ecosystem is often obscured because it was located outside of Yaba.

showcases the promising business climate and investment landscape of the city, contemporary Lagos is making and unmaking itself in alignment with neoliberal capitalist production in order to attract investment capital (PWC 2015). Since 2000, the city of Lagos has engaged in what Grace Ogunyankin (2019) calls “afropolitan Imagineering,” which is part of a wider global urban shift from managerialism to neoliberal entrepreneurialism that began in the early 1970s (Harvey 1989). According to Ogunyankin, afropolitan imagineering refers to “ongoing, pervasive and conscious efforts to project a new image of Africa and Africans as worthy of being considered world-class and central to the global imaginary” (ibid, 425). For many cities on the Continent, this urban remaking has meant public-private partnership with Chinese firms for new infrastructure, construction of ultramodern shopping malls and grocery stores, and a growing proliferation of restaurants, bars, and movie theaters.

But Lagos is more than just a place where people struggle to make a living. It is site of becoming, where individuals are unmoored from the strict confines of religious, regional, and ethnic affiliations and are thrust into a melting pot of structures, memories, spaces, bodies, and dreams. In “Imagination and the City,” Nigerian poet Odi Ofeimun states that Lagos “provides the finest Archimedean points from which dreams may be regenerated and a new way found of gaining access to the future” (2001:13). Emphasizing this point, the co-founder of *Newswatch* magazine, Ray Ekpu, says, “People come searching for the bright lights. They think they can find a good life here. Some of it is true. Some of it is a myth. They think if they can get here, they can find something to do” (Rosen 2018). What these two people aptly describe is the powerful mythical reality of Lagos in the average Nigerian imaginary. For many Nigerians and West African nationals, Lagos—given its status as a commercial and cultural epicenter in the West African region—represents an opportunity to escape from their economic and political woes.

Unpacking this social imaginary of opportunities is the primary aim of this chapter. Drawing on historical, literary, and theoretical materials, I trace the emergence of this social imaginary to the historical emergence of entrepreneurialism in Lagos. I define entrepreneurialism here as the ethos and practice of “making do” and “hustling” that many Lagosians employ to navigate the uncertainties of their social lives. This entrepreneurial ethos is what provides the grounds for certain opportunities to materialize. In particular, I demonstrate that entrepreneurialism in Lagos is a junction of historical legacies of trade and entrepreneurship, and the imposition and adoption of Western economic ideologies of modernization, development and neoliberalism. The confluence of these sociohistorical processes is what physically and discursively produced Lagos as a site of crisis. And it is this crisis and the uncertainty it engenders that underwrite entrepreneurialism in Lagos.

My goal in examining entrepreneurialism in Lagos is twofold. The first goal emanates from a pragmatic need to provide historical context for my study of the tech actors in the Lagos startup ecosystem. Lagos constitutes a social field of interactions that simultaneously constrains and enables certain actions from becoming a part of the urban social reality (Bourdieu 1990). Given the importance of the social in structuring what is possible, I must examine the urban social history of Lagos in relation to the political economy of Nigeria in order to situate the Lagos tech ecosystem within its specific historical and cultural contexts. The second goal, which is closely related to the first, is to complicate overly simplistic mainstream portrayals of the Lagos tech ecosystem as primarily a contemporary product of mobile technology and return migration. Although I acknowledge the formative role of these processes in the development of the ecosystem, I contend that Lagos itself must be centered within the mainstream, not only as a social context but also as a critical unit of analysis in the

making of the ecosystem. For without Lagos, there simply could not be an ecosystem in Nigeria.

Indeed, social constructivist theorists have strongly critiqued the autonomous and asocial conception of technological design and development, arguing instead for the constitutive role of society in these processes (Bjiker and Pinch 1987). As such, these scholars have advanced concepts such as the *sociotechnical system* to show the imbrication of the society in the creation and adoption of technological innovation (Hughes 1987). I also encountered the import of social interests during my field research among Lagos tech actors. My research subjects regularly mentioned that the numerous social problems in Lagos provided critical fodder for entrepreneurial ventures. Many interviewees asserted that the most innovative startups stemmed from an in-depth knowledge of local problems. And yet, the critical importance of the social is often cast as a problem space or is sidelined for sexier global technology practices in the local tech ecosystem. This chapter pushes back against such a reading of Lagos within the dominant narrative by demonstrating that the Lagos tech startup community cannot be understood outside the social and political economic contexts of the city itself. Furthermore, showing how Lagos as a site of “ordered disorder” produces innovation not only counters the pervasive sign of crisis and dysfunctionality that plagues social forms, processes, and practices in the city but also allows for more a nuanced understanding of Lagos to emerge.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF AN ENTREPRENEURIAL LAGOS

Historically, Lagos has always been an entrepreneurial site of self-realization and economic opportunities. Before the sixteenth century, migrant fishermen of the Awori Yoruba ethnic group settled at present-day Ebute Metta before establishing two island settlements, Iddo and Oto, within dense mangrove forests and swampy marshlands (Losi 1967, Mann 2007). This small fishing community attracted many

fishermen, who eventually began to establish farms on Lagos Island. By the sixteenth century, Portuguese⁸ sailors started to trade in enslaved Africans, cloth, and ivory behind Lagos Island with the Ijebu kingdom and later began trading pepper, enslaved Africans, beads, and cloth with the larger Benin Empire (Mann 2007). Shortly after, Oba Orhogbua of Benin sought to conquer Lagos to preserve his control of the European trade from other rising kingdoms nearby, Allada and Ouidah. However, after several unsuccessful attempts, Oba Orhogbua set up a military base on Lagos Island to pursue his political and economic interests in the area.⁹ As Uyilawa Usuanlele notes, the Benin imperialism was “built on an enterprise in which its citizens took risks for rewards” (2018: 155). Through the pursuit of entrepreneurial practices, citizens amassed wealth, which they used to acquire titled offices and increase their political clout. Thus, in addition to the fusion of governance structures, the highly entrepreneurial nature of the Benin Empire became a part of the growing Lagos community.

As a result of the rise of the of the New World plantation system, the exportation of enslaved Africans increased significantly “from about 276,000 between 1519 and 1600 to about 1,173,000 between 1651 and 1700” (Mann 2007:30). The intense labor requirements of the plantation system were what caused European traders to search for more sources on the Bight of Benin for the growing trade in human beings. Geographically, Lagos was a prime location for the trade as its series of waterways connected it to both the hinterland and the Atlantic Ocean. However, it was not until the 1780s when slave traders became increasingly attracted to the city. During the eighteenth century, Ouidah and Allada had become key ports for slave

⁸ It was the Portuguese who named the island Lagos.

⁹ Not long after the establishment of the military base, the Benin military chiefs and neighboring rulers of Oto and Iddo formulated a governing council. Through intermarriage and assimilation, the council and community members eventually adopted the Awori identity of Iddo and Oto settlers.

traders until the military conquests of the Kingdom of Dahomey disrupted trade routes and shifted the flow of slaves to the ports of Badagry and Port Novo. The search for new slave ports, along with offers of protection from the kings of Lagos led to both European traders (French, Dutch, Portuguese, and British traders) and several Yoruba states (Ijebu, Egba, Oyo, Ilorin, and Ijesa) establishing trading relations with the monarchy. Thus, the slave trade transformed Lagos from a small series of marshland settlements into a formidable Yoruba kingdom and major international port, boasting an urban population of about 5,000 inhabitants by the late eighteenth century.

The impact of the transatlantic slave trade on the development of regional and international market economies has been extensively documented in the social science literature. Eric Williams's seminal work, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), powerfully presented an "economic study of the role of Negro slavery and the slave trade in providing the capital which financed the Industrial Revolution in England and of mature industrial capitalism in destroying the slave system" (ix). Thus, Williams argues that slavery and the subsequent abolition of the institution was primarily a question of economics, not racism. Expanding on Williams's insight into the contribution of Africa to European capitalism, Walter Rodney (1972) demonstrated that the development of Europe was predicated on the underdevelopment of Africa. Rodney and other members of the dependency school contended that the structurally unequal relationship between center and periphery was the very nature of the capitalist system. By restructuring African economies through the slave trade, colonialism and imperialism, Africans were compelled to orient their markets toward the international trade rather than on domestic and regional trade. As a result, African economies were not only exposed to the volatilities of the world economy and the stagnation of their local markets.

Joseph Inikori (2011) further elaborates on the development of West African markets and market economies during the transatlantic slave trade. Although he acknowledged that “the growth of the transatlantic trade redirected the West African markets away from centers of commerce and manufacturing in the interior savannah to the Atlantic,” he has argued, “the first two hundred years of the trade, with its concentration on commodities produced by African entrepreneurs, further reinforced the preceding inter-regional trade expansion, the commercializing process, and the growth and geographical spread of the market economy” (Inikori 2007: 80). The expansion of the regional trade during the first 200 years was because of an international demand for African made products of gold, ivory, wood, pepper, hides, cotton, and a few enslaved Africans. However, with the rise of plantation agriculture and mining in the Americas during the mid-seventeenth century, the Atlantic market economy shifted from trading African products to trading African slaves. The subsequent demise of West African markets was prompted by this shift in trade, which “generated negative externalities—the sociopolitical conflicts engendered and the loss of population at a time when population growth was needed to stimulate the extension of the division of labor” (Inikori 2011: 672). Consequently, the development and expansion of West African market did not resume until the mid-nineteenth century, with the beginning of the “legitimate trade” in palm oil, ivory, and other African agricultural products.

By the time of the British invasion in 1851, Lagos was already a bustling international, cosmopolitan entrepot composed of European merchants, missionaries, and repatriated Sierra Leoneans (Saros), Brazilians, and Cubans (Agudas). There was also a large presence in Lagos of Egba, Ijebu, Oyo, Ijesha, and Ife migrants from Yorubaland and Hausa and Nupe settlers from Northern Nigeria (Whiteman 2013). By the 1861 annexation of Lagos as a direct colony, these diverse groups had formed four

distinct residential quarters on Lagos Island: Olowogbowo (Saro Town), the European Marina, Brazilian Quarters (Popo Town), and Isale Eko (Baker 1974: 25). As a direct colony of the British Empire, inhabitants were British subjects; the traditional political structure was only ceremonially in place because local residents had no real formal political powers, unlike what obtained with the Native Authority system in other parts of Nigeria.¹⁰

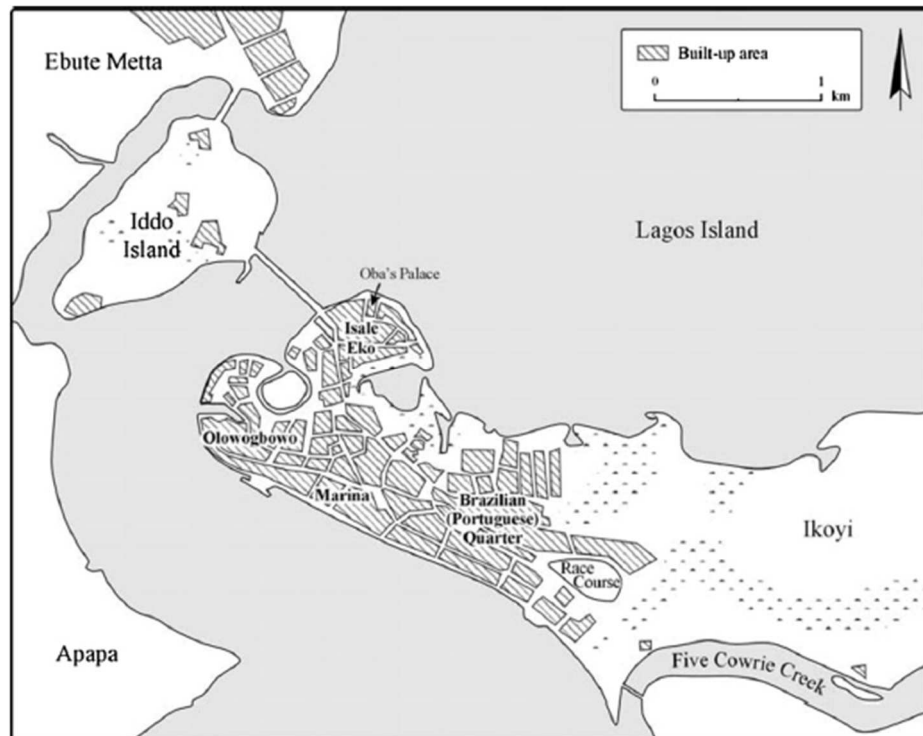


Figure 1: The four main quarters in the 1890s. Source: Bigon, Liora. Urban Planning, Colonial Doctrines and Street Naming in French Dakar and British Lagos, c. 1850–1930.” *Urban History* 36, no. 03 (December 2009).

Occupying the southwestern corner of Lagos Island, Olowogbowo was the residence of the Sierra Leonean repatriates (Saros) beginning in 1853. Due to their

¹⁰ The spatial segregation of strangers or foreigner is relatively uncommon in Yoruba towns (Lloyd 1959: 60). Non-native inhabitants usually have freedom to live anywhere in town, once consent from the Oba and its chiefs is received.

early exposure to Western education, the English language, and Christianity, the Saros¹¹ dominated the public sphere and colonial service during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the British naval patrol intercepted and liberated Africans who had been sold into slavery and settled them in the British colony of Freetown. While in Freetown, Christian missionaries converted and educated the liberated Africans. In 1839, these Sierra Leoneans repatriated and resettled in their native Yorubaland. Following their resettlement, the Christian Saros urged the missionaries to bring the light of the gospel to Yorubaland. The Christian Saros were also able to meet the employment needs of a colonial government that could not afford European experts to lead public service projects, especially when West Africa was known as the “white man’s grave” (Zachernuk 2000). The small number of Europeans established themselves on the Marina, “a thin strip of land along the southern shore of the island” (Bigon 2009: 439). The Marina was the location of the financiers, government administrative buildings, and the “residences of high-level colonial officials” (George 2014: 23).

Another Lagos community was the Brazilian Quarters. Located in the middle of Lagos Island, it was the residence of repatriates from Brazil and Cuba who had successfully purchased their freedom through “industry, frugality or conduct” (Waterman 1988: 234). Brazilian returnees were skilled builders who left a major architectural imprint on Lagos. “On the northwest end of the island and larger than the other three districts put together,” Isale Eko was the residential area for indigenous Lagosians as well as the Lagos royal family (Baker 1974: 24, George 2014: 24). Additionally, many Lagos residents resided in the neighborhoods of Epetedo, Lafiaji, Oke Suna, and Isale Gangan. Besides the traditional elite, indigenous Lagosians did

¹¹ According to Jean Koptyoff (1965: 208), the Saros held twenty governmental posts in 1862. Brazilian emigres were not noticed until 1887 under the administration of Governor Moloney.

not occupy notable positions within the colonial government until the twentieth century.

Although Lagos played a major role in the transatlantic slave trade, the city did not rise to prominence on the African Continent until its twentieth-century transformation from a regional slave port to a new colonial capital and port city. In 1914, Lagos became the political and commercial capital of the newly amalgamated Nigerian colonial territory. With the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Nigerian protectorates, the British colonial administration pursued a policy of indirect rule, which essentially was the use of traditional kings and chiefs to rule local communities (Falola and Heaton 2008). In addition to the political changes in the Lagos colony, the colonial authorities transformed the domestic economy by “redirecting economic activity towards external markets” to sustain the colonial enterprise and make profits for the metropole. The colonialists achieved this aim by “expanding local import-export markets through increased cash crop and mineral production, thereby creating an extractive economy based on the export of raw materials and the import of finished goods and luxury items” (ibid, 111).

The introduction of the cash economy using British currency was also another way of externally orienting the domestic markets because it made wage labor compulsory for most Nigerians. After the amalgamation, the economy expanded due to the infrastructural development of roads, port facilities, electricity, pipe-borne water, and the railroad (Waterman 1988). The economic expansion attracted an influx of labor migrants from the hinterland and other West African countries, raising the population to over 70,000 by 1911 (Olukoju 1996). This ultimately led to an increase in ethnic representation, as Igbo, Edo, Hausa, and other Nigerian immigrants settled in Lagos.

In spite of these transformations, Lagos remained an internally divided society due to social, religious, and racial differences. Although Lagos indigenes were the largest community on the island, they were the most socially and economically marginalized within Lagos society. This resulted in the indigenous community's being untouched by the wealth of the growing economy, as their needs were relatively disregarded in the areas of socioeconomic and public works development (Bigon 2007: 610).

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, the growing city was plagued with congestion, disease, and deteriorating infrastructure. The British colonial administrators were limited in their ability to improve urban conditions due to “lack of financial from the British Treasury, regional political instability and wider economic perturbations affecting the price of commodities such as cotton and palm oil” (Gandy 2006: 375, Bigon 2009). Rather than improve sanitation, medical service, and public health, colonial administrators employed urban policies of segregation and town planning influenced by new Western public health policies on hygiene (Davies 2018). The 1924 bubonic plague epidemic was what ultimately spurred the colonial government to comprehensively implement town-planning schemes and to establish the Lagos Executive Development Board (LEDB) as the agency for urban planning and development (Olukoju 2003, Gandy 2005, Davies 2018). Focusing mainly on the “slum” clearance of entire communities, the LEDB was however ineffective and grossly unpopular with indigenous Lagosians because the new houses built in the demolition areas were too expensive for its original working-class inhabitants.

A new wave of urban policies did not emerge again until the late colonial period, in response to the changing nature of the imperial state and the rise of anticolonial sentiment in the colonies. The beginning of World War II in 1939 especially played a role in the developmental efforts of the colonial state. In Nigeria,

the colonial government sought to mobilize local resources and facilitate the war economy by “investing in infrastructure, building more harbors, railways, and airfields” and establishing hospitals and training centers (Falola and Heaton 2008: 141). Strongly influenced by the experience of economic exploitation of the inter-war era and the wartime development initiatives, Nigerian nationalists began to demand from the colonial state greater participation in managing the country and more development initiatives across Nigeria (Odeogwi 2011).

Between the world wars, Lagos became the political, economic, and cultural epicenter of Nigeria. Even before World War II, the cosmopolitan city’s makeup had begun to foster the growing nationalist movement by bringing various interest groups—kinship and ethnic unions, labor unions, cooperative societies, and women’s unions—together. Within the postwar environment of decolonization, however, urban issues were politicized and used to attack the colonial government (Olukoju 2003, Gandy 2005, Gandy 2006). Because of the ethno-regional governmental structure of the 1950s, much political debate arose about Lagos regarding its status as the political capital and its sociocultural and geographical connection with the rest of Yorubaland that was under the Western Region. Although these concerns were eventually incorporated within the general demands of nationalism, their importance would come to the fore once again in the postindependence period.

Due to an agricultural decline during the Great Depression and the growth of the wartime economy, migration to Lagos had steadily increased over the years. The end of World War II brought an unprecedented population growth of over 100% as war veterans and migrants from the hinterland and throughout West Africa flocked to Lagos (Ohadike 1968, Olukoju 2003, Falola 2008, Osinulu 2015). Invigorated by “high prices for export crops, massive increases in imports, and an extension of import-substituting industries,” the Nigerian postwar economic boom offered

numerous employment and economic opportunities in commerce and industry (Ohadike 1968, Sievers 1996: 51).

In addition to the attractive modern-day amenities of running water, electricity and education, cities were symbols of modernity that appealed to the aspirations of young people seeking opportunities outside traditional ways of life (Falola and Heaton 2008). Particularly within the nationalist context of independence, where salient discourses of modernization and development discourses were being appropriated by the post-Independence nation-state to articulate collective aspirations for the future, urban cities like Lagos emerged as sites of modernity *par excellence* wherein individuals could access capital, commodities, and related social practices of consumption (Cooper and Packard 1997, Osinulu 2011).

As Western-educated nationalists embraced an economic nationalist program, which tied political independence to economic independence and called for decolonization, the British colonial power structure began to crumble (Sievers 1996, Falola 2003, Olukoju 2010, Schler 2011). Although the colonial government's initial response—implementing more development-planning programs and pursuing a gradual internal self-government for Nigeria was meant to dampen the growing nationalist fervor—this plan became untenable in the long-term as the constitutional reforms and greater participation in political power only succeeded in increasing the nationalist appetite for independence.

Lagos, Postindependence of Modernity, and Adjusted Dreams

At independence, Lagos was considered an embodiment of the Nigerian aspiration for global relevance. Christened the “Giant of Africa,” Nigeria not only possessed the highest population in Africa but also had recently discovered large commercial deposits of petroleum in 1958 and was well positioned for economic growth (Falola and Heaton 2008). Tejumola Olaniyan notes, “The distinctive character

of the city in Nigerian public consciousness as the anonymous-neon-lights capital of immense opportunity and bottomless uncertainty was already formed” in the early 1960s (2004:89). Comprising no less than 30 percent of national industrial production, Lagos continued to attract migrants, and the population grew from 1.14 million in 1963 to 4.07 million in 1982 (Immerwahr 2007). The outbreak of the Biafran war, however, had dire consequences for the spread of urban development because the city was now subsumed under the newly created Lagos State government in 1967 (Olukoju 2003, Gandy 2005).¹²

Fear of regional domination¹³ coupled with the weakness of the Federal government ended the civilian democratic rule of the First Republic in January 1966, when five military officers—Kaduna Nzeogwu, E. Ifeajuna, D. Okafor, C. I. Anuforo, and A. Ademoyega—led a military coup and overthrew the government, killing the Federal Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa, the Premiers of the Northern and Western Regions, Ahmadu Bello and S. L. Akintola respectively, and many northern military officers. Considering the coup as a form of southeastern domination, several northern officers led a countercoup in July 1966, inciting the Igbo Eastern Region to secede from the Federation and declare an Independent Republic of Biafra. This ultimately culminated in the Biafran War, a “two-and-a-half-year Nigerian Civil War from 1967 to 1970 that rent the country along regional and ethnic lines, killed between one and three million people, and nearly destroyed the fragile federal bonds that held together the Nigerian state” (Falola and Heaton 2008: 158, Uche 2008, Adichie 2006, Nnaemeka 1998, Achebe 2012).

¹² The Military Government under General Gowon created Lagos State in 1967 along with eleven new states to prevent additional efforts to secede from the republic

¹³ The structure of the political scene was heavily dependent on regional political parties that were largely based on ethnic affiliations. The strength of regionalism came from a widespread belief held by most Nigerians that another region would dominate their own; for example, the Southerners feared Northern domination and vice versa.

After the civil war ended, the Federal Military government began a massive reconstruction and development program across the country fueled by an exponential rise in petroleum revenues in the 1970s. During the early 1970s, the United States devalued the U.S. dollar in order to stabilize its domestic economy, leading to a global economic recession.¹⁴ In order to protect itself from the ongoing recession, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) hiked the prices of crude oil and “pegged oil to gold instead of the dollar” (Peterson 2014: 46). Influenced by these events, Nigeria’s oil boom made it the “wealthiest country in Africa” as petroleum production grew and revenues went from N166 million in 1970 to over N5.3 billion in 1976 (Falola and Heaton 2008: 181). Driven by the increase in revenues, the government embarked on a massive expansion of the public sector, wage and salary increases, and huge infrastructural investments across the country (Osinulu 2011). Before the civil war the national economic plan focused on developing agriculture, industry and education, by 1974, oil had turned Nigeria’s economy into a petro-economy making up 82 percent of government revenue (Gandy 2005). In essence, oil became the life-blood of the nation (Apter 2005: 23).

This overreliance on oil negatively affected non-oil economic sectors. Consumer imports grew and overly exposed the domestic economy to fluctuations in the world economy. Equally important, Nigeria’s petro-economy transformed general societal conceptions about money and wealth “in what became the magical realism of Nigerian modernity the signs of development were equated with its substance” and “the flaunting of material possessions also became part of a systematic display of new

¹⁴ The United States removed itself from the Bretton Woods gold-backed system of international financial exchange and began to float the dollar in order to stabilize the domestic economy (Peterson 2014). In addition, the government, which had fewer gold reserves than dollars in foreign banks, printed more money. In turn, this action devalued the dollar and caused a global economic recession because other countries that had also begun to float their currencies were pegged to the U.S. dollar.

social and economic hierarchies”(Apter 2005: 41, Gandy 2006: 381). Nowhere was this transformation more evident than in the megacity of Lagos.

Although the government had been actively involved in transforming the city’s built environment to meet the growing housing and infrastructural demands prior to the war, the oil prosperity of the 1970s heralded a pronounced attempt to tout Lagos as the paragon of African modernity (Gandy 2005, Osinulu 2011). Discussing the infrastructural projects of colonial and postcolonial African governments, Brian Larkin (2008) stated that infrastructural technologies are never neutral objects but are instead ideological tools used to bring particular forms of subjectivity into being. Exemplifying this argument, the Nigerian military government channeled an enormous amount of its growing oil wealth into constructing a vast network of roads, bridges, highways, and other national structures in order to produce a unified national cultural identity ideologically during the 1970s (Apter 2005, Gandy 2005).

In 1977, the government’s ideological program reached its zenith when it hosted the month-long international cultural event, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC '77).¹⁵ In an attempt to produce a global African modernity, the government utilized oil funds to build expensive infrastructural projects, which included “a 144 million naira Bulgarian-designed National Theater, new road overpasses and bridges,” skyscrapers, a national airport, and a planned town called FESTAC Village (Osinulu 2011:42, Apter 2005). The national production of modernity began to fall apart in the late 1970s and early 1980s due to pervasive economic mismanagement, corruption, and over-dependency on oil wealth.

¹⁵ FESTAC was an international festival, which drew over 17,000 people from all over the African Diaspora to Lagos.

As oil prices fell because of a global recession, the country was plunged into huge amounts of debt and could no longer afford to maintain its ambitious new infrastructure despite the ever-increasing population of metropolitan Lagos. While the economic and political scene was declining, metropolitan Lagos became the “dystopian representation” of an aborted national project of modernity (Osinulu 2011). Moreover, with the decision to move the political capital from Lagos to Abuja in 1975, the government was generally less concerned with the growth and development of Lagos. Indeed, the city’s future was officially aborted in 1983, when the incoming military government tore up the 1980 Master Plan for Metropolitan Lagos, which had proposed several much-needed infrastructure developments (Gandy 2005). As a result, the national monuments fell into disrepair, roads deteriorated, and construction projects were abandoned throughout the city.

What the economic situation of the 1980s revealed was the ineptitude of the political leadership—military and civilian—in managing the affairs of the country. This ineptitude along with a series of military coups created general instability. Coming to power in a bloodless coup in 1975, the Mohammed/Obasanjo regime attempted to correct the inefficiencies of the Gowon administration and promised to return the country to civil rule (Forrest 1994, Osaghae 1998, Falola 2008). Due to its inability to control rising levels of state expenditure, and the declining economy, the Mohammed/Obasanjo regime was strongly criticized for corruption, economic mismanagement, and repressive tendencies by the time the civilian government of the second republic came to power in 1979. This situation only worsened under President Shagari (1979–1983) as corrupt practices and capital flight proliferated while large numbers of workers were being retrenched and were owed back salary payments. After Shagari’s re-election to power, Major General Buhari led another military coup in 1983 with the aim “to improve the economy and bring order and discipline to

Nigerian society” (Forrest 1994: 93). Although the Nigerian people widely supported the military coup, the regime lost its support because of its authoritarian rule and lack of a comprehensive economic strategy. In addition, this period of economic decline was marked by the repressive political conditions of authoritarian military rule.

After the ousting of Buhari’s administration in 1985, the economy and society underwent radical transformations at the hands of the successive military governments of Major General Ibrahim Babangida (1985–1993) and General Sani Abacha (1993–1998). In order to reschedule the country’s mounting debts and obtain a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Babangida adopted the IMF’s Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). The IMF required debtor countries to devalue their currency, deregulate foreign exchange, remove subsidies and price controls, cut public spending in healthcare and education, and privatize national corporations (Ferguson 1999:10). Cuts in government expenses severely impacted the quality of healthcare, education, and public utilities while also affecting the ability of average Nigerians to afford these services (Falola and Heaton 2008).

These adjustments, which were intended to develop the economy, only further exacerbated the ongoing economic crisis—increased unemployment rates and inflation, expanded poverty, and widened social inequalities. Moreover, increasing unemployment rates and migration to Lagos led to the growth and expansion of informal economic practices and slum settlements (Gandy 2005, Fourchard 2011, Meagher 2011). And as Filip de Boeck (2004) has said, the ‘invisible’ city-dwellers began to repurpose the ‘visible’ cityscape for their own use. The structural adjustment programme economy fostered the proliferation of petty trading, converting almost every inch of public space into a market (Immerwahr 2007: 182). These practices were not uncontested as the government not only implemented a policy of heavy policing and disciplining of street traders but also embarked on a series of forced evictions that

“culminated in the large-scale Maroko eviction of 1990 where some 300,000 people were forcibly ejected” (Agbola and Jinaudu 1997: 272). The economic program also greatly enhanced class distinctions, visibly widening the geographic segregation between the wealthy and urban poor. With the growth of poverty and the subsequent effect of societal anomie, outbreaks of violence were rampant and crime levels increased significantly ranging from drug trafficking, street gangs, armed robbery, and “419” (advanced fee fraud) scams.

In response to the rupturing politico-economic and social fabric, many Nigerians retreated from society physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Those who could leave the country emigrated to the United States and Europe—resulting in an estimate that between 25 and 50 percent of all educated Nigerians lived outside the country by 2000—while those who remained either turned to religion and spirituality or politically confronted the military government (Falola and Heaton 2008: 223).

The return to civilian rule in 1999 provided Lagos with formidable urban development under the political administrations of Governors Tinubu, Fashola, and Ambode. In spite of the Federal opposition party, All Progressives Congress (APC) dominating Lagos until when winning the presidency in 2015, the state government achieved financial autonomy because of its revenue-collection efforts (Whiteman 2013). Through the Lagos Development Plan, which was initiated by Governor Tinubu and continued by Governors Fashola and Ambode, the government sought to transform Lagos into a global megacity (Whiteman 2013, Odion 2018). In addition to improving safety, clearing traffic congestion, and providing basic services of water, sanitation, and power, the government embarked on massive development projects like the Eko Atlantic City Project and Lekki Free Trade Zone, which it claims will foster job creation, tourism, and investments (Gandy 2006). Despite this fact, an estimated 70 percent of residents continue to face vast urban challenges “including

massive flooding, congested traffic, epileptic water and electricity and inadequate housing” in Lagos (Adama 2017:2). Underpinning these urban transformations are the liberal economic policies championed by the Obasanjo administration (1999–2007), which primarily focused on increasing foreign investments, debt reduction, and privatization (Falola 2008, Ekanade 2014, Gandy 2006).

The result of liberal economic policies can be seen in the early 2000s telecommunications boom. With the privatization of the state telecommunications company, Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL), Nigeria underwent a telecommunications boom with the pioneer entrance of South African mobile phone company, MTN, along with several others (Whiteman 2013). Starting in Lagos before sweeping across the country, the success of mobile phones created new employment opportunities and fostered the development of new industries. Leaving an indelible mark on Lagos, South African companies have invested heavily in the Nigerian market by establishing fast-food chains, shopping malls, hotels, and supermarkets. This increased investment coupled with the relative macro-economic stability and increased oil production, had led to an average GDP growth of 7.5% because of (Enweremadu 2013). However, the 2016 economic recession, which was widely regarded as one of the worst economic recessions since the SAP era, revealed the insubstantial nature of Nigeria’s economic growth over the past decade and actively contributed to the expansion of the popular economy. Recent circumstances have not attenuated the entrepreneurial ethos of Lagos in the public imaginary. In the next section, I explore the conceptual history of crisis to understand how it specifically came to bear on social forms, processes, and practices of entrepreneurship in Africa.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ENTREPRENEURIAL LAGOS

Pulsating with sights, sounds, and smells, Lagos is at the forefront of contemporary debates on African cities. Despite defying rational logics of urban

development and city planning, Lagos attracts a never-ending sea of people seeking to make something of their lives, including scholars and researchers seeking to make something of its very existence. Indeed, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, scholars declared Lagos as the future of all cities (Koolhaas et al. 2000).

Championed by world-renowned architect Rem Koolhaas and the Harvard Project on the City research team, this narrative states that “Lagos represents a developed, extreme paradigmatic case-study of a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity” (Koolhaas et al. 2000: 653). Inciting much criticism, however, for its “promotion of an essentialist vision of the African city,” this post-modern narrative “ignores the suffering of the urban poor and underestimates the ongoing criticism of Lagosians of their own city” and occludes the historical politico-economic circumstances that created its present condition. In many ways, this representation is a reaction to the other dominant narrative of Lagos within urban scholarship. This afropessimistic narrative portrays “Lagos as hell on earth” and as a dirty, overpopulated, poverty-stricken, and crime-ridden city full of moral decadence, decay, and gross disorder (Peil 1991, Gandy 2005, Davis 2006, Probst 2012). And although scholars strongly contest this dystopian narrative for its perpetuation of historical conceptions of Africa as place of lack along with its positive twin, these criticisms have very little to say *analytically and theoretically* about the overarching sign of crisis continually written and read into/onto Lagos (Mbembe 2001, Mbembe and Nuttal 2004, Ferguson 2006).

Considering my previous historical overview of urban Lagos and Nigerian political economy, reading Lagos under the sign of crisis has roots dating from the increasing urbanization of the late nineteenth century. But alongside those problematic representations another Lagos emerges from complex historical processes of colonialism, nationalism, petroculturalism, SAP, and liberal democracy. Therefore,

Lagos can be cited as a compendium of densely layered and entangled histories being made and unmade. Given this historic complexity, it is fascinating that crisis continues to be the primary regime of representation in which Lagos and its workings become legible. In what follows, I explore the conceptual origins and theorizations of crisis by social scientists before examining it in relation to African cities and Lagos in particular.

Many scholars have examined the concept of crisis in relation to social life. Originating as Hippocratic medical term, “crisis” used to refer to a decisive moment in an illness in which a patient could either live or die. Later the term came to mean “conditions in which people must improvise with the elements of their social and political technologies and cope with a variety of unexpected disruptions and opportunities” (Greenhouse 2002: 9, Koselleck 2006). The shift in meaning from its medical roots to its contemporary definition as a “rupture in the order of things” can be attributed to the temporalization of crisis (Vigh 2008:8, Koselleck 2006). Building on Koselleck’s notion of a distinct moment of rupture between distinct periods, Brian Larkin (2016) argues that crisis is best conceived of as a series of events continuously unfolding over time. For Larkin, crisis does not have solely a temporal quality. It also has a narrative structure. Because narratives depend on a temporal-causal sequence that “presumes causal relations between chronologically-ordered events,” understandings of crisis are deeply connected to its underlying structure (Larkin 2016: 41). Additionally, the narrative structure of crisis fills it with a temporal dimension such that it always contains both the past and the future.

Departing from traditional conceptions of crisis as a temporal category, Henrik Vigh (2008) suggests moving from placing crisis *in* context to seeing crisis *as* context. He argues for an understanding of crisis “as a terrain of action and meaning rather than an aberration” (Vigh 2008: 8). Following Vigh’s intervention, several social scientists

like Roitman (2016) and Berckmoes (2017) have also explored the relationships between prolonged conditions of crisis and social practices, rules, and norms. Conceptually then, crisis emerges as a productive site to examine the modes and operations of social life in persistent states of “ordered disorder” (Taussig 1992).

Yet even with these rich theoretical insights most social scientists seem unwilling to move beyond the idea of African crisis as “ordered disorder” to more nuanced ethnographic understandings of crisis as “an observation that produces meaning” (Roitman 2016: 36). For even within the contemporary period, most social scientists, journalists and even Africanist scholars continue to portray the African continent as being in crisis. According to them, there was a widespread collapse of social services and state infrastructure in most African countries, and the Continent was plagued with tragedies such as famine, poverty, disease, malnutrition, infant mortality, sexual violence, armed conflict, genocide, HIV/AIDS, chronic debt, and economic and political instability (Soske 2004).

More specifically, the African state is described as always in crisis—failed, weak, and collapsed—due to its inability to exert sufficient hegemony over civil society and to effect good governance, economic management, and democracy (Grovoqui 2002, Kabamba 2010). In *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*, Jean-Francois Bayart (1996) notes that the condition of the African State is a product of *the politics of the belly*, a mode of governance through which corrupt African political leaders seek economic and political power to enrich themselves. Extending this notion, he and others claim that “the process of criminalization has become the dominant trait of Africa in which the state has literally imploded under the combined effects of economic crisis, the neoliberal program of structural adjustment and the loss of legitimacy of political institutions” (Bayart et al. 1999:20). This political crisis is

also closely connected to the economic downturn experienced across most of the African Continent.

In *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*, Nicholas van de Walle (2001) claims that Africa's "permanent crisis" is due to the clientelistic politics of the governing elite. To protect their access to wealth and power, African leaders only partially implement liberal economic reforms, thus hampering economic growth and leaving their countries in a state of perpetual crisis. Moving beyond van de Walle's examination of Africa's economic crisis in relation to a neopatrimonial state, Jane Guyer (2016) focuses on the exchange value of African currencies since the collapse of the Bretton Woods International Financial system. She contends that currency devaluation and volatility have substantially impacted the economic crisis but remain unexamined "in the study of experiential crises, in part because, for structuralists, devaluation and submission to market dynamics have seemed necessary for the solution of the perceived crisis" (2016:64). Ultimately Guyer argues for a nuanced understanding of the African economic crisis beyond that of a structural condition solely imposed by the state, which takes into account the small monetary crises of everyday people and their ability to make sense of their lives.

Another prominent sub-narrative of the African crisis has been in relation to the nation-state and nationalism. Central to the crisis is the state's inability to build the necessary "facilities needed for a decent life and possibilities of progress" and to construct "an ideological edifice in which their fellow citizens would participate" (Cooper 2014: 89). Although nationalist ideologies have existed on the Continent since precolonial times, the decolonization period ushered in an ethno-regional political apparatus. And while various African leaders pursued nation-building projects as seen in Nigeria's FESTAC '77, forging a collective identity proved difficult because of the numerous political insecurities troubling their countries

(Lonsdale 2015). According to Fred Cooper, African political elites found the idea that “a singular people should correspond to a single government” worrisome because it turned the question of whose state it was or was not into a political contest (2014: 89). With the ethnicization of the state and politics, ethnic difference has become a pervasive force in most African societies as most individuals mobilize their ethnic identity for access to resources, subsequently engendering high levels of anxiety, conflict, and violence.

An important yet often neglected narrative within popular conceptions of the African crisis is how Africans—individually and collectively—make sense of their lives during these national economic and political confusions. In his work on former Zambian Copperbelt mineworkers, James Ferguson poignantly expresses the subjective experience of economic decline in stating that “Zambia’s recent crisis is not only an economic crisis but a crisis of meaning, in which the way people are able to understand their experience and imbue it with significance and dignity has (for many) been dramatically eroded” (1999: 15). Similarly, Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman (1995) demonstrate how in Cameroon the crisis has written itself on people’s bodies, making it so that people’s lived experiences are no longer understood or intelligible to them. Consequently, these authors claim that these dramatic transformations produce a crisis in subjectivity. Although James Ferguson, Achille Mbembe, and Janet Roitman attribute this crisis to the postcolonial economic decline, Olufemi Taiwo (1993) earlier argued that it originated with the colonial encounter and its denial of the African subject, which left African societies without “unifying myths and common meanings.”

I maintain instead that the notion of “crisis” that often plagues scholarship on the African continent is about the joint collapse of Western epistemological orderings of modernity and its inability to place Africa *in* the world and the lack of unifying myths in African societies. In the first instance, consistently reading Africa as being

under the sign of crisis is a form of intellectual laziness employed by the West to escape its own theoretical and epistemological failings in making sense of African realities. Western theoretical shortcomings are also compounded by the coloniality of African knowledge production, which has left the Continent with a dearth of coherent language or grammar to articulate its truths. For those who have been able to make such theoretical interventions on the Continent and in diaspora, their scholarly productions are often occluded by the Euro-American academy's ordering of knowledge about Africa into intelligible categories for the consumption and reproduction of coloniality/power.

Unmaking the West's Single Story and the Crises of Theory

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Western imperialism employed the discourse of modernity to justify the European installation and administration of colonial rule on the African Continent. Despite these claims, British and French colonial rulers pursued only the modernization initiatives of absolute necessity in their colonies due to budgetary constraints and general disinterest. Prior to the 1940s, church missionaries and their converts were at the forefront of "modernizing" African subjects through the *mission civillatrice*. As a set of attributes, modernity refers to the modernization package—comprising industrialization, urbanization, secularization, rationalism, and individualism—through which the West sought to create a place called "Africa" (Trouillot 2003, Cooper 2005).

And yet, this changed in the 1940s, when France and Britain became concerned with developing the resource of local colonies and socializing urban workers to wage employment and city life (Cooper 1996). The ideological underpinning of these new modernizing efforts was the concept of development, which sought to transform the "backwardness of the African past to a modern future" (Cooper 2004:20). Especially after the "West Indian" strikes of 1935–1938, in Africa,

the British Colonial Office saw the need to stabilize colonial cities and implemented the Colonial Development and Welfare Act in 1940 to channel funds toward the development of the colonies and the improvement of the social welfare of colonial subjects. In the Nigerian context, this developmentalism took the form of improvement of communications infrastructure, more agricultural research and development, and increased spending on rural development and social services like healthcare, education, and welfare, as well as local industries (Falola and Heaton 2008; George 2011).

After World War II, development discourses primarily centered on modernization and industrialization. As the Colonial Office came to terms with the fact that African colonies were the last resort to sustaining the Empire, these discourses were pursued more aggressively. In the long run, however, these plans proved untenable due to the cost-burden on the Imperial purse and the growing fervor of anticolonial sentiments. In fact, modernization was one of the ideological grounds employed by nationalists to push for decolonization. Frederick Cooper has shown how development theories “originally supposed to sustain the empire facilitated its transfer to power,” as African and Asian leaders appropriated the discourse to argue that “directed change must take account of the social and political needs of the people most concerned” (1997:85). Furthermore, with the entry of the United States as a world superpower and the growth of international finance and governance institutions, development rose to prominence globally as a joint initiative of developed and developing countries in cooperation with international institutions to alleviate poverty (Escobar 1995, Cooper 2005, Edelman and Haugerud 2005). Consequently, several African and Asian nations such as Ghana, Nigeria, and India pursued development planning and programs with the desire to realize their own national dreams of modernity.

By the 1970s, however, the general excitement about development had begun to dwindle as critiques of modernization theories took apart “the package” for its “ahistorical and uncritical perspectives of Western-produced state-orientated development discourse” (Leys 2005:112). With the demise of the Bretton Woods system, which tied the international currency exchange to the gold standard, along with the shift in U.S. policy from Keynesian economics to economic neoliberalism, countries of the Global South, or the “Third World” as they were then called, experienced unprecedented economic downturn and amassed enormous amounts of debt ultimately leading to the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs). The SAPs, which are now widely seen as failures, demanded that developing countries implement economic reforms from the World Bank and IMF as a precondition for debt relief (Mkandawire and Soludo 2003).

Upon implementing the SAP reforms, African economies worsened and the postindependence development dreams of modernity soon gave way to the nightmare of the African crisis. Beyond the theoretical breakdown of modernization after structural adjustment, narratives of African crisis are today underpinned by afropessimism. In his article on the relationship between development economics and afro-pessimism, Jon Soske (2004) argues that development functions as a dissimulated theory of race because it is based on Eurocentric doctrines of biological racism and liberal imperialism through which a racialized discourse of African traditionalism was formulated.

Afropessimism can be defined in two ways. In one sense, afropessimism pertains to the necropolitical and abject state that pervades large swaths of the African Continent as captured in Achille Mbembe’s (2001) *On the Postcolony*. This condition stemmed from the confluence of Western modernization theories and failed African political leadership. On the other hand, afropessimism as advanced by Frank B.

Wilderson III (2008) and Jared Sexton (2008) refers to the theoretical discourse of blackness as a position of social death and thus a subjectivity of nothingness. Whereas both strands of afropessimism have been strongly criticized by several African Diaspora scholars such as Fred Moten (2013) and Greg Thomas (2018), the strand advanced by Sexton and Wilderson has received most of these critiques and rebuttals for its “canonical erasure” of Black radicalism, Pan-African activism, and by extension black subjectivity, thereby leaving the black subject without hope in the world.

By consistently portraying Africa in crisis, contemporary scholars reproduce modernization and developmentalist discourses of African alterity and otherness. Analyzing recent theorizations or lack thereof about Africa’s place in the world, James Ferguson (2006) illustrates how narratives of development—premised on teleological conceptions of modernity—placed postcolonial nations on a temporalized historical trajectory to becoming modern. Thus, when Africa does appear in these narratives of global convergence, it is mainly in the negative sense of lack, absence, nothingness, and non-being.

One obvious conclusion is that modernization theories originate from Western social evolutionist thought on cultural difference, which did not place African societies in the same time as (coeval with) the West (Fabian 1983). Indeed, Western discourses on African and Black Otherness were foundational to the emergence of the modern White subject. For example, in *Becoming Black*, Michelle Wright (2004) shows how Hegel dialectically structured the modern White subject in relation to the Black Other by locating the Black outside analytical history and positing Black as the antithesis of the White subject. Specifically on the African subject, V.Y. Mudimbe’s (1988) *The Invention of Africa* had already shown how African alterity was discursively “invented” within Western epistemological orders of anthropology,

philosophy, history, geography, and linguistics along with the “*mission civilatrice*” and colonial education and how this invention provided the ideological basis for the forced extraction of Africans and the subsequent colonial subjugation of the Continent.

The mid-twentieth century rise of modernization discourses was thus predicated on the social evolutionism of the nineteenth century. Within the social sciences, two dominant theories of modernization were responsible for discursively producing knowledge of African social and economic development (Cooper 2004). One theory focused on industrialization, and the other arose from the field of development economics. Drawing on the work of Talcott Parsons, an American sociologist who mobilized Max Weber’s dual society model to create the modernization paradigm, postwar sociologists contended that industrialization was beyond the administration of factories and instead posited it as necessary way of life for making a modern society (Moore 1951, Cooper 2004). This ideological stance was based on a problematic universal conception of society without any attention to local sociocultural values and unique historical contexts.

The economic subfield of development economics adopted a similar approach by simply assuming that former British and French imperial colonies would eventually move from precapitalist, traditional societies to advanced industrialized capitalist societies with proper development planning. Primarily conceived by Paul Rosenstein-Rodin and W. A. Lewis, a Black man from the British West Indies who later won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, this new subfield advanced the notion that “focused capital formation, strategic government and private capital investment, and increased national savings” would lift former colonies out of poverty and backwardness (Cooper 2004). W. Arthur Lewis advanced a theory of structural change, which “aimed to industrialize agriculture and engage more population in profit-generation labor” (ibid).

In so doing, Lewis argued that poor countries were poor because they largely engaged in subsistence agricultural production whereas wealthy countries amassed capital through industrial production. The “stages of growth model,” as advanced by Walter Rostow (1960), was yet another theory that sought to predict the economic transformation of traditional agricultural societies to modern high-technology ones. Rostow’s economic approach advocated for rigorous development planning to promote economic growth in impoverished nations.

Theories of development economics, however, do not address wealth inequalities within underdeveloped societies or the uneven accumulation of capital within the world economy. Thus, when many African economies began to fall apart in the 1980s and 1990s, development discourses and modernization frameworks were unable to provide a reason outside grammars of crisis and African alterity. Couched in modernization language and epistemologically predicated on the invention of the Black African Other and the subsequent denial and exclusion of this subject from humanity, though often framed within the context of political economy, crisis is a theoretical formation of Africa as place of nothingness and being African as condition of shame and hopelessness.

Through my examinations of the relationship between crisis and modernity in Africa, it is clear that beyond euphoric dreams of an industrial economy, modern transportation and infrastructure, and stable political institutions. Crisis, for most Africans, has become a pervasive condition and feeling of being a part of the world. And modernity, as a process of making claims, is an important way that Africans counter the sign of crisis and write themselves into world. Consequently, when Africanist scholars such as Achille Mbembe (2016) and John and Jean Comaroff (2012) say that the West is falling apart and argue for Africa as the critical site in which contemporary workings of modernity can be deciphered, they perform

important work in unsettling prevalent notions of crisis and opening up newly emergent possibilities for Africa outside the sign of crisis.

Theorizing the African City Beyond Crisis

African cities and urban life have been the object and subject of much social science and humanities literature in the past few decades. Although anthropologists, historians, and sociologists have studied African cities since the mid-twentieth century, these early studies of urbanization on the Continent were dominated by the Western teleological meta-narrative of modernization, even when their authors were African scholars (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1991, Ferguson 1999, Mbembe and Nuttal 2004). Before World War II, scholars did not think that urbanism and urbanization were indigenous to Black Africa even though urbanization was known to have existed within North African societies since ancient times (Mabogunje 1990). Consequently, it was not until after 1945 that historians and anthropologists began to study African urbanization seriously and as a result of rural-urban migrations during the 1950s and 1960s (Miner 1967, Bascom 1955, Balandier 1956, Little 1974). Study of African urbanization waned, however, as narratives of modernization began to unravel, thus relegating African cities to the background within mainstream scholarship (Ferguson 1999, Myers 2011).

During the early 1990s, interdisciplinary scholarship on African cities reemerged. Moving away from development and modernization frameworks in understanding the nature and character of African urbanisms, this recent work expanded theoretical understanding of global urbanisms beyond Western structural-functional preoccupations with the city form (Robinson 2002, Myers 2011, Edensor and Jayne 2011). This rich literature explores notions of citizenship and belonging (Landau 2006, Locatelli and Nugent 2009, Diouf and Fredericks 2014); informality, mobility, invisibility, and spectrality (Simone 2004, de Boeck 2004); popular

economies, popular culture, and everyday life (Guyer 2002, Larkin 2008, Agbigboa 2017); cosmopolitanism and transnationalism (Diouf 2000, Mbembe and Nuttal 2008, Quayson 2014, Skinner 2015), crisis and uncertainty (Ferguson 1999, Pieterse 2008, Cooper and Pratten 2015, Thieme 2017). Despite its generative insights, scholars continue to critique this work for its reduction of all urban experience to two dominant theoretical approaches: “political economy of globalization,” which corresponds to the afropessimistic narratives of African cities as sites of chaos and crisis; and the “postcolonial focus on subaltern agency,” which coincides with the more celebratory narratives of local creativity, bricolage, and invention (Ong and Roy 2011: 2, Diouf and Fredericks 2014, Simon 2015).

In turn, several scholars have radically departed from conventional notions of African urbanism in order to combine African politico-economic realities with urban socio-cultural practices and norms in innovative ways. For example, in *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City*, Filip de Boeck (2004) shows that the physicality of the African city as expressed in its material infrastructures and architectural built forms is not what primarily determines the workings of its social life and spatial practices. Instead, de Boeck argues that the invisible represented in the imaginaries, cosmologies, memories, and semiotics of the human body are the prevailing forces in making the city’s public and private spaces. Given this reality, Kinshasa is a product of a contentious interplay between seen and unseen forces in which newly emergent forms of sociality and fields of solidarity are constantly produced. In a similar fashion in *For the City Yet to Come* (2004), AbdouMalik Simone compiles various research and experiences from over fifteen years of living and working in different cities around the world. To do this, he examines the improvisatory and organized collectives of African urbanites to understand the ways in which African cities are productive. He illustrates the internal realities of these workings through the

conceptual framework of informality, invisibility, spectrality, and movement in order to render disparate and inchoate urban life forms knowable and to focus attention on the processes of convergence between urban institutions, spaces, and practices All these works attempt to explore the role of the ephemeral in making and remaking the urban social life of African city albeit from differing methodological vantage points (Guyer 2011).

Writing along the same lines, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttal (2008) explore Johannesburg as a site *par excellence* to read and write the city in their contemplation of an African modernity. Preoccupied with the present moment and its key learnings for the future, their work considers the city not only as a site of material, aesthetic, artistic, and bodily forms but also as a key site in comprehending meanings of African Worldliness. Drawing on this literature, Ato Quayson's *Oxford Street, Accra* (2014) "retells the urban social history of Accra from the vantage point of the singular Oxford Street" from the seventeenth century to the contemporary period. Quayson departs from this literature, however, in his argument that past approaches merely conceive of the everyday ephemera of urban life as a creative reaction to the "structural morphologies" of the city. Subsequently through ethnographic and literary analysis, he argues for reconceptualization of urban spatial productions in which the daily ephemera of urban life are integrated "into interpretations of material conditions and read for insights into processes and structure" (Quayson 2014: 241).

Taking these insights on contemporary urban life in Africa as a critical point of departure, I explore the emergence of an entrepreneurial ethos in Lagos by examining how uncertainty shapes people's lived realities and how it is mobilized individually and collectively as a ground for action and meaning. The city has long been a critical site of convergence for scholarly and popular understandings of uncertainty. According to Austin Zeiderman et al. (2015), uncertainty has historically occupied a

central position in urbanism as a quality of urban life and an object of urban intervention. Within this broad literature, African cities have been productive sites for examining the relationship between uncertainty and urban life (Mbembe and Nuttal 2004, Simone 2004, Johnson-Hanks 2005). In particular, I contend that uncertainty is what makes cities like Lagos sites *par excellence* for entrepreneurial action because such a social context provides a productive site for African urbanities to make sense of their lives. In what follows, I delineate the contours of entrepreneurialism in Lagos through an examination of the social context of uncertainty, and the entrepreneurial subjectivity it engenders.

Living in the Wake of Crisis: Uncertainty and the Production of Lagos

Ever since the introduction of colonial rule in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, life in most African societies has been marked by uncertainty, instability, and unpredictability. Whereas the colonial state had a decisive impact on indigenous social, economic, and political institutions as well as indigenous knowledge productions, most scholars tend to locate the current urban social context of uncertainty to the currency devaluation, deregulation, and general economic decline of the Structural Adjustment era of the 1980s (Guyer 1995, Falola and Adebayo 2002, Guyer 2002, Peterson 2014). Examining urban life in post-structural adjustment Cameroon, Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman (1995) describe how crisis inscribed itself in the material life of the city and remade public spaces and infrastructures such as roads, office buildings, and residences. In the Cameroonian city of Yaounde, formerly paved roads are now semi-paved patches of earth riddled with potholes and ditches. Traffic lights are either broken or absent. Public lighting is also really nonexistent, and unfinished buildings and construction sites abound. Coupled with the physical transformations of the cityspace is the collapse of normal distinctions

between formal or informal, legal or illegal, and official or unofficial, into an opaque system where things are neither here nor there.

Central to the haziness of social realities is the ubiquitous condition of temporariness or instability and volatility of social life on the African Continent. In such contexts, “this uncertainty is materialized and inscribed onto physical bodies, location, and infrastructures (Simone 2001). Thus, living more than just trying to make a living becomes a battle “against the constant corrosion of present” and the challenge to “produce one’s humanity” (Mbembe 2016: 10). Accordingly, most African urbanites are caught within a relentless and prolonged state of preparedness in which individuals must be “prepared to migrate at a moment’s notice, to change jobs, residences, and social networks with little apparent hesitation” (Simone 2001: 20). In this state of preparedness, planning and scheduling become nearly impossible, as one must be prepared to seize opportunities at any moment. Reflection and hesitation—signs of deep thought—are thrown to the wind and replaced by the “tensed mobility” of doing something, or anything, but never nothing, to keep mind and body at bay (Taussig 1992). One sees this appear in literary representation such as Chris Abani’s (2004) novel, *Graceland*.

In *Graceland*, Chris Abani portrays the incoherence and instabilities of quotidian life in Lagos through the coming of age story of one boy. Elvis, the main character, is a teenage boy who recently emigrated from southeastern Nigeria to Lagos after his mother died from cancer and his father lost political elections in their village. For Elvis and his father, Lagos was supposed to be a place of new beginnings where they could start new lives without the presence of old stories. Instead, they both are thrust into a world that is literally falling apart. Abani depicts their precarious living condition in Maroko as swamp city suspended on narrow planks (p. 9). While staring at the half slum, half paradise city, Elvis asks two jarring questions: what do I have to

do with all this, and how could a place be so ugly and violent yet beautiful at the same time? (Ibid). These questions hang in the air as characters navigate the pervasive violence of the urban landscape with incredulity while transgressing social norms and rules through the use of global cultural practices.

What Abani's *Graceland* compellingly depicts is the spaces of the postcolonial African metropolis. Emerging from the tension between the violent, decaying material world and cosmopolitan self-fashioning practices of Lagos is an uncertainty about urban life and society. This uncertain environment is shown throughout the novel by Abani's constant vacillation between violence and acts of resistance, in order to document the social contingences of crisis. The narrative structure, for example, makes it nearly impossible for readers to make sense of Elvis's life. In other words, the disjunctive intertextuality of *Graceland* in fictional form closely mirrors Elvis's loss of coherence. This coherence only emerges through the fragmentation of temporality into episodic snapshots and the corporeal body that must constantly attempt to mediate the gap between violence and resistance. Still, Abani does not attempt to resolve this incoherence at the end of the novel. He leaves us further in the dark as Elvis emigrates to the United States. The novel closes not with him in a plane heading to or arriving in America but with him in airport saying, "Yes, this is redemption" (p.339). By employing the idea of departure as redemption, Abani therefore constructs the African city as a space of radical openness, contingency, and uncertainty.

And yet even with its imposition on urban material reality, this social space of the African city does not extinguish its inhabitants' agentic possibilities. Kunle's story, which I shared at the beginning of this chapter, clearly expresses the entrepreneurial practices of "making do" that urbanites employ to navigate their precarious contexts (Thieme 2018). This precarity is a product of what Kristin Peterson (2014) calls a

“nominalization of the economy.” Nominalization in this context refers to the “deriving something out of an economic exchange and giving it a new meaning or material form” (Peterson 2014: 105). Drawing from Jane Guyer’s (2004) significant work on monetary transaction within African popular economies, Peterson’s work on the Nigerian pharmaceutical industry shows how widespread political and economic instability engendered a determination to “make it now” in order to manage uncertainty and risk in the society. Subsequently, this never-ending chase for money has produced “new subjectivities and new forms of individual risk” (Peterson 2014: 107).

For many individuals like Kunle who are involved in the informal and formal economy, entrepreneurialism is a productive site of agency and hope through which one can rethink contemporary experiences of urban uncertainty beyond poverty, crime, and violence. Although the tech ecosystem is not commonly linked to precarious economic life in Lagos, this notion of “making do” is part of the city’s social imaginary. Thus, it constitutes the social field in which everyday life occurs. Dayo Olopade (2014) has described this entrepreneurial practice of making do as *kanju*, “a Yoruba word which means, “to rush or make haste.” *Kanju* is the innovative capacity to take risks and create opportunities born from African difficulties. As such, the development of the Nollywood film industry and even the criminal activity of 419 (advance-fee fraud) can be seen as exemplary forms of entrepreneurial actions or *kanju*. In what follows, I briefly provide an overview of the Nollywood film industry to develop my argument about the relationship between entrepreneurialism and the social context of uncertainty.

The Nollywood Story

Contrary to popular belief, the emergence of the Nigerian film industry now known as Nollywood¹⁶ did not begin in 1992 with Kenneth Nnebue's video film classic *Living in Bondage*. Nigerian cinema began instead in the 1970s with celluloid films shot in 16 mm and 35 mm formats by technically and artistically skilled filmmakers such as Ola Balogun, Eddie Ugbomah, Francis Oladele, and Ladi Ladebo (Haynes 1995, Adeshokan 2004). These filmmakers were contemporaries of Ousmane Sembene and Souleymane Cisse, fathers of African auteur cinema, and their films frequently appeared at the Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO). This festival is known for featuring intellectually and politically engaged films that pose an explicit African counterdiscourse to the Western gaze. Indeed, Nigeria's first feature film, *Kongi's Harvest* (1970) was based on a play written by Wole Soyinka, who also acted as the lead in the film. The film had diasporic roots having been directed by the African-American actor and director, Ossie Davis, and produced by Ola Balogun and Francis Oladele, who trained in France and the United States respectively. The film also received financial support from U.S. backers. Despite its high intellectual, artistic, and influential production, this cinematic practice was not embraced by the Nigerian mass market due to the proliferation of Indian, American, and Chinese imports and limited cultural understanding on the usage of film as an overt tool for social change (Lobato 2010). Simply put, it was not Nigerian cinema for the people.

The Yoruba film industry, however, was extremely successful, beginning with the first Yoruba film, Ola Balogun's *Ajani Ogun* (1977). Rooted in the Yoruba Traveling Theater, these films featured acting troupes of the late Hubert Ogunde, Duro

¹⁶ The Nigerian film industry was not referred to as Nollywood until 2002 (Oguamanam 2018).

Ladipo, and Moses Olaiya to produce movies including *Aiye* (1979), *Jaiyesimi* (1980), *Orun Mooru* (1982) *Mosebolatan* (1986), and *Ayanmo* (1988). These films were largely concerned with the metaphysical world of African science and the mediation of African modernity divide during the postcolonial era (Jeyifo 1984, Barber 2003, Haynes 1995, Adeshokan 2011).

The push toward video films began in the late 1980s as a consequence of the structural adjustment program in 1986. Specifically, the SAP policies of currency devaluation made the production of celluloid film expensive as they relied on “imported film prints and raw film stock” (Lobato 2010: 350). Video films, in contrast, were a cheap and fast way to entertain and express the condition of disillusioned masses. In addition, whereas celluloid films were made for theater screening using analog technology, video films were made for private viewership using digital technology, making the format easier to circulate and access in an anomic context where cinemas were going out of business and public safety was a concern. Within this economic context, informal entrepreneurial practices developed, such as the use of video cameras to make music videos and to record private events and public performances of the Yoruba theaters troupes (Lobato 2010, Adesokan 2011). These informal practices, along with the availability of television soap opera producers following the mass retrenchment of National Television Authority (NTA) staff, culminated in the Nollywood video boom. Subsequently, the first Nigerian video film Muyideen Aromire’s *Ekun* was produced in 1989 (Adeshokan 2004, 2011). As such, the rise of video films is intrinsically connected to an economic environment that necessitated informal and improvisatory innovations to negotiate societal uncertainty.

Nollywood videos thus emerged as “popular art form for and about” ordinary Nigerians (Haynes 2016).

Living in Bondage, a two-part film about a man who kills his loving wife as a ritual sacrifice to become wealthy, marked a turning point in Nigerian film history because it was the first Igbo-language video film. The second part, subtitled in English, encouraged the production of English-language films in Nigeria. *Living in Bondage* was also “the first independent and most successful Nollywood movie to fully optimize and leverage the technological opportunity of video and the creative ingenuity of Nigeria’s informal content distributors,” most of whom were Igbo (Oguamanam 2018:12). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the Nollywood industry grew exponentially, producing more than 2,500 films in a year without governmental support or foreign funding, making it the second-largest film industry in the world (after Bollywood) in terms of production output.

Despite these notable achievements, Nollywood films were and are heavily criticized for their low production values with “many films suffering from clumsy camerawork, cursory scripting, and poor sound,” although these films have significantly improved recently (Lobato 2010: 342). Critics of Nollywood also complain about the lack of narrative and aesthetic complexity, which is a result of merely functional use of the camera, and the video film’s origins in televised soap operas and Yoruba theater troupes (Adesokan 2004). Another critique cites Nollywood’s repeated engagement with moral and occult economies genres, such as the occult thriller, urban crime thrillers, the palace romance, political allegory, and campus drama (Adesokan 2004, Adejunmobi 2015, Ryan 2015). These critiques

notwithstanding, Nollywood serves a wide audience segmented along the lines of language—Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and English—and thus tries to cater to each segment’s needs. The ability to tell stories that matter to the people is what has made, and continues to make, Nollywood a veritable “social diary of the collective life that ordinary people live in Nigeria” and “the most visible form of cultural machine on the African Continent” (Okome and Kriggs 2013).

The Nollywood example indicates that uncertainty is not always negative or problematic, even though it fundamentally involves risk, lack of knowledge, and potential danger (Cooper and Pratten 2015, Endres and Six-Hohenbalken 2014, Boholm 2003). Indeed, as Elizabeth Cooper and David Pratten have stated, uncertainty “can be used to negotiate insecurity, conduct and create relationships, and act as a source for imaging the future with the hopes and fears this entails” (Cooper and Pratten 2015:14). Accordingly, the very certainty of uncertainty and the agentic ways in which people recognize and respond to it are what make living life in the “unforeseen and unfolding” possible (Thieme 2018, Mbembe and Nuttal 2004: 349, Agbigboa 2016).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an overview of the literature on Lagos as an African city in order to assert that narratives and practices of tech entrepreneurship within the local startup ecosystem cannot be understood apart from the historical and social context of Lagos. Although crisis and uncertainty are often considered to be emblematic of precarious urban dwellers, Kunle’s story, however, has demonstrated that lines are increasingly blurred between informal and formal, risk and uncertainty,

crisis and possibility, even within the tech ecosystem. Indeed, this hazy reality is what has made certain opportunities possible for the most unlikely people.

By examining the urban social history of Lagos in relation to the political economy of Nigeria, I have attempted to show that entrepreneurship and trade were constitutive elements in making the city. From its very inception, Lagos has had an active trading community due to its geographic location. With the rise of the transatlantic slave trade, this local community transformed into a regional market economy between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The city's entrepreneurial ethos grew only when it became the critical port city in the legitimate trade of the newly amalgamated Nigerian colonial territory in the early twentieth century. During that time, Lagos declined from being the political and commercial capital of the largest black nation in Africa in the 1960s to becoming a globally infamous slum of anarchy and waste (1980s–1990s).

The unpredictability of Lagos coupled with the political economic realities of Nigeria have worked together to produce a social context of uncertainty. Uncertainty is essentially what emerges from the ruins of modernity's crisis. And when it becomes a permanent state, uncertainty emerges as the terrain in which social life unfolds (Taussig 1992, Vigh 2008, Agbigboa 2017: 936). The underlying ethos of entrepreneurship in the city is therefore more of a strategy of living than of making a livelihood. In other words, entrepreneurialism in Lagos is a tool for mitigating the risks that come with the uncertain urban environment. Ultimately, I am convinced that the sociocultural environment of Lagos and Nigeria more broadly has greatly enabled the contemporary tech ecosystem, contrary to more popular comparisons to Silicon Valley, which I will develop in further detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICIZING THE EMERGENCE OF THE LAGOS STARTUP ECOSYSTEM

Africa's tech ecosystem can't work like Silicon Valley, and they shouldn't try to
~ Varathan 2017

INTRODUCTION

Whether the Lagos technology ecosystem should be modeled after Silicon Valley culture or rooted in local cultures of technology and entrepreneurship is debatable. Prominent local venture capitalist Eghosa Omogui, expressed the need for returnee entrepreneurs and investors to “unlearn everything you learned in Silicon Valley” (Varathan 2017). Ola Brown, founder of the Nigerian Flying Doctors, tweeted, “Silicon-Valleyism in Africa has actually held us back. We continue to build great products that aren't useful to our people” (Brown 2017). As tech entrepreneur, Uzoma emphatically stated in his interview with me, “Silicon Valley style of doing things will not work here” (interview, 2018). He mentioned, for example, the practice of startups that have received foreign investment capital moving into a new office and posting pictures and videos online. Although he realized startup founders are not to be blamed because investors primarily drive the narrative, he stated, “The problem is that money could be used to build the actual business and pay salaries of some people for some years if managed well.” He specifically stressed that the American style of tech entrepreneurship is incompatible with local realities of running a business. Likewise, he situated these practices within a broader American culture of “noise-making” or showmanship, which he contrasted with the European culture of his investors, who “are not the type that force you to release press” because “Europeans are very patient and they don't make noise.”

The pervasive influence of Silicon Valley was a recurring theme that both I as an

Africanist researcher and my research subjects also have had to wrestle with. Whereas some entrepreneurs have argued that Lagos tech startups must be open to Western cultural influences in order to receive foreign capital investment given the limited nature of the Nigerian funding landscape, others have also begun to call into question the whole American-centric model of finding the proverbial golden fleece of global tech entrepreneurship, the Unicorn, on the African continent, especially as the local investment scene continues to grow (Nwoye 2012, Onuegbu 2018). Yet many draw inspiration from the Silicon Valley model of collaboration and seek to make the old neighborhood of Yaba, a tech cluster for startup companies due to its central location and proximity to tertiary institutions. Others reject the existence of a local ecosystem especially one modeled after the West (Kazeem 2017, Matuluko 2017). More recently, the influence of Silicon Valley has taken on a political dimension as members of the Nigerian Federal Government, led by Vice-President Yemi Osinbanjo, toured Silicon Valley in summer 2018 with hopes to attract U.S. tech investors (AFP 2018).

Attempting to make sense of these divergent perspectives as an African Studies scholar wrestling with questions about Africa's place in the world, I kept asking my collaborators why Silicon Valley was the most immediate reference point. Could Africans not think of technology on their own terms? Were Africans not technologists, entrepreneurs, and innovators before startup entrepreneurship, venture capital investment, e-commerce, and fintech? Instead of Silicon Valley, why were local cultural and historical practices of tech entrepreneurship not used as a point of reference? Asking these questions not only pushed me to think about where current practices and narratives of technological entrepreneurship were going but also forced me to consider what led to this contemporary emergence of tech entrepreneurship. Although I was well informed about indigenous practices of entrepreneurship in Nigeria from historical sources, family narratives, and personal experiences, I knew less about technological innovation in Nigeria and Africa generally.

As Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholar Clapperton Mavhunga has aptly stated, “ A geophysical zoning of the definition and directionality of technology has been hammered into our brains: that technology is for academy-trained engineers, hence the emphasis on experts, and [the assumption] that technology can only come from the West and is “transferred” to the *technology-poor* Global South” (2017:4). Moreover, these perceptions have been reified within the contemporary framing of technology for development discourse, which primarily depicts Africa as a technological desert bankrupt of innovative practices (Burrell 2012). For Mavhunga and other Africanist STS scholars, this point of view is completely ahistorical because practices of technological innovation on the African Continent are not solely Western authored, nor do imported technological practices occur in a vacuum. On the contrary, Africans have always been innovators of technology and entrepreneurship through the creation of their own intellectual property and the appropriation of foreign technology (Odumosu 2017, Berry 1974).

This chapter provides the broader historical context for the contemporary emergence of the Lagos tech ecosystem. It does so by placing the Lagos tech ecosystem within historical genealogies of technology and entrepreneurship in Nigeria and in Africa more broadly. In so doing, I decenter the pervasive narrative of Silicon Valley’s influence and complicate this narrative by showing how Africans were engaging with technology entrepreneurship before the Lagos tech ecosystem became mainstream. To do this, I show how Silicon Valley emerged as a historical convergence of socioeconomic, political, and cultural processes within larger ideological debates about American dominance. I then analyze the popular narrative of Africa’s digital technology revolution to reveal its underlying narrative of technodeterminism, which oversimplifies nuanced local histories, and cultures of technological innovation.

A Brief History of Silicon Valley

Located in Santa Clara County in northern California, Silicon Valley is considered to be the global epicenter of technological innovation. With the formidable growth of technology companies like Apple, Google, and Intel, and the subsequent rise and spread of digital platforms like Facebook, Uber, and Airbnb, “the Valley” as it is often called, is not just making significant contributions to world economies. It is also revolutionizing the ways we experience technology, communicate, travel, and work. More than ever before, techno-missionaries, futurists, and their converts evangelize about the social benefits and ultimate good that this technology revolution will engender in the economic, political, social, and cultural sphere throughout the world (Srinivasan 2017, Duff 2016). Although news media outlets, popular culture, and policymakers often recast the Valley in neutral, utopian, and even quasi-socialist terms like “sharing economy,” “internet freedom,” and “global village,” recent discussions on data privacy, inequality, and labor have drawn attention to the underbelly of this silicon ideology and its imbrication within new and existing power structures (Kenney and Zysman 2016, Srinivasan 2017).

Classic and contemporary scholarship has also revealed the inner workings of Silicon Valley and its attendant ideology as a socially constructed product of multiple historical transformations (Rogers and Larsen 1984, Saxenian 1994, English-Lueck et al. 2002, Studholme 2014). Drawing on this body of work, I present a historical overview of Silicon Valley formation to critically reframe our understanding of its ideological construction as the technological model for the world.

Contrary to popular conceptions, Silicon Valley did not emerge overnight as the technology capital with the introduction of the computer and Internet. Well before it was even nicknamed Silicon Valley in 1971, Santa Clara County and surrounding counties within the San Francisco peninsula were home to a growing electronic industry focused on “radio, television, and military electronics” (Sturgeon 2000: 16). For example, in the military, the U.S. Department of Defense has played a significant role in the development of the region’s electronics industry. Shortly after graduating from Stanford

University, Cyril Elwell started the Federal Telegraph Corporation (FTC) in 1909 to develop “wireless telephone and telegraph services on the Pacific Coast” with financial assistance from both the president of Stanford University and the head of its civil engineering department (ibid, 19). The company rose to prominence in 1912, when the U.S. Navy began using its Poulsen arc transmitters. During World War I (1914–1918), FTC grew in response to increasing demand from the navy attracting top engineering and technical talent from across the United States. With the end of World War I in 1918 and the rise of RCA, ITT acquired FTC, although by then the company had produced some notable spinoff companies such as Magnavox, Litton Industries, and Fisher Research Laboratories.

The joint efforts of military patronage and university-industry relations in shaping the Peninsula’s electronics industry persisted after the war under the leadership of Fredrick Terman. As a professor of engineering at Stanford, Terman created a commercially focused electronics program and built relationships with local electronics companies by taking students there on field trips and inviting engineers to give talks on campus (Leslie 2000: 51). According to James Gibbons, former dean of engineering at Stanford, it was Terman’s frustration with the job outlook for electrical engineering graduates that led him to encourage some of his former students to start their own companies (2000: 215). Indeed, he personally believed in his students’ ideas, investing \$500 in Bill Hewlett and David Packard’s company, otherwise known as Hewlett Packard (HP), in 1939.

When World War II broke out in 1939, Terman conducted his tour of duty as the director for the Radio Research Laboratory at Harvard, where he worked on microwave engineering and came to understand the process of translating scientific research into commercial products (Leslie 2000: 53). Taking these insights back with him to Stanford as the new dean of engineering, Terman transformed the university into a leader in technology transfer and commercialization. As

by Stanford research laboratories like Varian Associates and Watkins-Johnson and funded through defense contracts—became successful in the 1950s, they began to attract well-established East coast companies like Sylvania, IBM, General Electric, and Lockheed.

In World War II, the military funded the design and development of the first general-purpose digital computer, the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC) to calculate the trajectories of ballistic weapons (Rosado Murillo 2015). Before the arrival of computer machines in the 1940s, women were commonly referred to as human computers because they served as computer programmers. As Rosado Murillo notes,

“The shortage of men of whom a large contingent was enlisted for the armed forces is one of the reasons for the opening of positions which were traditionally reserved for men, but also the division of labor among scientists and military men, who worked as designers and managers, identifying the computer operator positions as something akin to clerical work” (2015: 87).

Despite the silencing of women programmers within dominant computer history, these human computers played a significant role in “training new operators and documenting, operating, and maintaining the ENIAC” (ibid, 88). Women such as Grace Hopper, a mathematician turned programmer, helped to formalize the field of computer science as a discipline.

With the emergence of the silicon industry in the fifties and sixties, the Peninsula’s economic prowess was solidified. Ahead of the industry’s establishment on the San Francisco area, silicon electronics was being developed at Bell Telephone Laboratories in New Jersey (Lecuyer 2000: 158). However, it was Fairchild Semiconductor in California that played a formative role in creating the silicon industry “by adopting the diffusion process recently developed at the Bell Telephone

Laboratories” (Lecuyer 2000: 159). Founded by a group of eight physicists and engineers from Shockley Semiconductor Laboratory in 1957 with financial backing from a small New York investment bank and military contractor, Fairchild was first to bring the silicon transistor, the planar transistor, and the integrated circuit to the commercial market (Phillips 2016, 3).

Due to an increasing demand for silicon electronic components in digital avionics systems, Fairchild captured a large portion of the military market. By 1959, the company was the second major manufacturer of silicon components and the foremost manufacturer of diffused silicon products in America. Not only did Fairchild transform the production, processes, and manufacturing of silicon electronics along with its sales and marketing, the company also fostered the creation of silicon subsidiaries and the expansion of the venture capital industry.¹⁷

Until the late 1950s, military contracts fueled the growing electronics industry because these contracts included a production and research and development (R&D) contract along with a guaranteed market (Leslie 2000:50). The military’s requirements for reliability also promoted innovation (Lecuyer 2006: 7). Despite these positive attributes working with the military was challenging because military procurers often tried to acquire intellectual property rights and constantly fluctuated their volume requirements. This ultimately made tech firms more willing to enter commercial markets in order to break their dependency on R&D-centered Cold War defense policy.

Although venture capital funding had achieved success in the East Coast since the late 1940s and informal investing¹⁸ had been ongoing on the West Coast since the infancy

¹⁷ Venture capital is a form of investment funding that provides financial capital to high-risk, early-stage startup companies in exchange for equity (Gompers and Lerner 2001). The first venture capital firm, American Research and Development (ARD), was founded in 1946 by “MIT President Karl Compton, Harvard Business School professor George Doriot, and some local businessmen” (ibid, 146). Their initial investments were into companies “that were based on technology developed for World War II” (ibid).

¹⁸ What we now refer to as angel investing.

of the electronics industry, the first limited partnership, Draper, Gaither and Anderson, in California was not started until 1958 (Kenney and Florida 2000: 105, Gompers and Lerner 2001).¹⁹ Interest in high-technology investments only increased, however, with the successful initial public offerings of Varian Associates and HP on the New York Stock Exchange in the fifties. In 1958, the government passed a Small Business Act “which provided up to \$300,000 in government matching money for \$150,000 in investments by a person or institution wishing to establish a Small Business Investment Corporation (SBIC)” (ibid, 106). Although the SBIC program grew unpopular as an organizational vehicle for venture capital in the late sixties, it was a crucial step in formalizing the previously informal investment activities in the Bay Area and led to the institutionalization of the limited partnership model for subsequent venture capital organizations. This, along with the easing of strict laws on investing pension funds in the late seventies,²⁰ encouraged more individual and institutional investments in venture capital funds, thus leading to the creation of megafunds. As the regional economy expanded in the 1970s, the ideological construction of “Silicon Valley” as the very heart of the information revolution entered into public discourse. Moreover, immigrants primarily from Asia and India who were aided by the Hart-Celler immigration act of 1965 flocked to the Valley in increasing numbers to take advantage of the new economic opportunities that the burgeoning high-tech industry offered (Studholme 2014, Saxenian 2000: 250-251).

What completely revolutionized the Valley in the global imaginary was the introduction of personal computers and the Internet in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively. As computers became more affordable and easier to use, more people began to use them

¹⁹ It closed shortly after a major investor withdrew his capital.

²⁰ Pension funds were the largest investors into venture capital limited partnerships (Kenney and Florida 2000:114). In exchange, pension funds required more accountability and additional justifications for their investments. Therefore, VCs had to make formal presentations during fundraising process because the past performance of their fund was taken into consideration.

in their offices and homes (Duff 2016, Schulte 2013). Although computing had become common in the mid-eighties, the military-funded, Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET), what is now generally called the Internet, did not gain popularity until the nineties (Berlin 2017, Schulte 2013).²¹ The technological backbone of the ARPANET emerged in 1991 when the National Science Foundation (NSF) developed a networking system, which connected the military's ARPANET with computers on several university campuses (Berlin 2017). However, it was the development in 1991 of the World Wide Web, “a hypertext system that *runs* on the Internet to link sites” by Tim Berners-Lee and Robert Cailliau that decisively transformed the Internet into its current user-friendly form (Schulte 2013: 86). This along with the launch of the user-friendly Mosaic browser in 1995 was behind the growing popularity of the Internet.

Although Silicon Valley was definitely a strong proponent of the emerging techno-utopianism and idealism attached with the Internet in popular culture between the 1980s and 2000s, these narratives were not exactly constructed in a vacuum either (Duff 2016). As Stephanie Schulte aptly states, “the internet was (and continues to be) a culturally constituted, history object and a “subject of history,” meaning that qualities essential in the technology itself did not alone determine the ways it was, and is, understood” (2013: 6). In *The Rise of the Network Society*, prominent sociologist Manuel Castells (1996) articulated the critical role of networks—which encompass actors, sites, and technologies—in engendering the information technology revolution and transforming society, culture, and the economy. The invention of the Internet can thus be

²¹ There is common conflation of computing, computer networking or the Internet, and storage technologies in the intellectual histories of the Internet (Srinivasan 2017: 38, Schulte 2013:2). Computing refers to “the use of analog instruments to make mathematically precise measurements” whereas computer networking refers to the process where computers shared data over networked wires (ibid). This infrastructure on which this data is shared the Internet Protocol/Transmission Control Protocol (TCP/IP) was later simplified to the “Internet.” Storage technologies, on the other hand, features “a number of technologies devoted to storing, indexing, and classifying massive amounts of data (ibid). In the 1950s, storage technologies became more important in the West than computational technologies.

credited to the combined efforts of the state, corporations, individuals, and the public (Adam Fisk quoted in Srinivasan 2017: 29). Indeed, the rise of the Internet cannot be understood in isolation from the emergence of America as a global superpower because technological innovation played a critical role in the Cold War (Phillips 2016, Schulte 2013). Stephanie Schulte has shown how the Internet was simultaneously and contradictorily constructed as a product of globalization while being seen as its catalyst through what she calls “corporations.” For Schulte, Internet companies like America Online are metonyms for the nation, advancing ideologies of Americanization virtually and globally.

The discursive construction of the Internet was, however, not homogenous. As Ramesh Srinivasan (2017) points out early technologists like Doug Engelbart and Alan Kay were informed by ideals of social constructionism and were striving to improve both human and environmental conditions. Coming of age in the late 1960s, Silicon Valley was shaped by the political and social activism of the Bay Area albeit within the framework of capitalism (Duff 2016). For the public, however, overlapping timelines of the Internet, computing, globalization, and the Cold War converged to posit the Internet as a key cultural expression of American dominance, even amid anxieties of what the new technological future would hold under free-market capitalism or neoliberalism. And although the collective public imaginary might not have been fully aware of the Valley’s technological contribution to U.S. defense efforts, the pervasive image of Silicon Valley “as the center of a techno-economic revolution” only proliferated and led to the growth and expansion of tech entrepreneurship and investments in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Duff 2016).

At the turn of the century, high-tech industries in the Valley experienced a drastic decline during the Y2K scandal and the burst of dot.com bubble. Since then, the industry has made a comeback with the entrance of digital platform technologies, mobile smartphones, and social media—along with

their visions to connect and unite the

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world. By the mid-2000s, the Valley's popularity now extends to developing countries like India, Brazil, and Kenya (Irani 2015, Takhteyev 2012, Ndemo and Weiss 2017, Mann and Luo 2010). Moreover, it is commonplace to find technology ecosystems with incubators, startups, venture capitalists, co-working spaces and hubs, tech meet-ups and conferences where people are earnestly looking to create their own unicorns (Facebook, Airbnb, Uber, Twitter, and Google) in any of these places. Although there is nothing essentially wrong with copying best practices in technological innovation from around the world, the uncritical adoption of this practice is problematic because much of the historical and material realities of these technological infrastructures have been erased as popular perception places more emphasis on the content. The recent Theranos and Facebook-Cambridge Analytical scandals,²² in conjunction with the ongoing scrutiny of the Valley's practices of gender inequality and sexual harassment (Kenny 2014); race and class divisions (Cavin 2012, Kuchler 2014); environmental injustice, and erosion of work-life balance (Park and Pellow 2014, Duff 2016) in news media and popular culture, are just a few examples of the social, economic, environmental and political implications of unbridled technological innovative practices (Baird 2017, Granville 2018, Wamsley 2018).

Deconstructing Silicon Valley Ideology

Although these problematic technological practices have called into question the techno-utopian myth of digital universalism in popular media, scholars have long examined the social inequalities extant within technoscience. For instance, Ron Eglash (2002) has demonstrated how technological expertise encapsulated in the figure of the nerd (read: young, white, and male) was constructed in relation to specific racial and

²² Theranos is a health technology startup, which claimed to have invented new technology for blood testing. The company was recently liquidated and the founder indicted for fraud and conspiracy charges. The Facebook-Cambridge Analytical scandal involved Cambridge Analytical, a political consulting firm, using the personal data of Facebook users without their consent to manipulate political campaigns and elections.

gendered notions of African and Asian identity. Moreover, he contends that the gatekeeping identity of the nerd cannot simply be overcome by asserting reactionary identities, such as “Black nerds, Asian hipsters, and geek grrls” but must be radically transcended by seeking alternative visions of the future (ibid, 60). Unsettling altogether the prevailing myths of cyberspace as place devoid of race and gender, Anna Everett’s *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace* (2009) reveals the early experiences of African diasporan men and women in cyberspace. In so doing, Everett destabilizes notions of “black technophobia” as constructed by news media that underpin the widespread digital divide discourse. Instead, Everett demonstrates the online presence of African diasporans since 1995, which is the very moment the Internet entered the public imaginary, and she documents the impact and contributions this population has had on new information technologies.

Likewise, Ron Eglash and Julian Bleecker have elaborated on the “unacknowledged traditions of coding and computation from indigenous African practices and black appropriations of Euro-American technologies” (2001: 353). According to them, the modern binary code, on which “every digital circuit from alarm clocks to super computers” was built, originates from geomancy, an indigenous divination practice found in West African knowledge systems like Ifa (ibid, 357). Moreover, they argue that the use of analog representation, which is “created when variation in the physical structure of the signal is proportionate to variation in the information structure it represents,” was present within precolonial African societies (ibid, 358). And although digital representation “based on physically arbitrary signals” is prevalent today’s world, analog representation still forms the basis of innovative technologies such as cybernetics (ibid). By providing these examples among others, Eglash and Bleecker not only debunk the common misconception of Africa as void of technology but also demonstrate the ways in which the technological knowledge from the African diaspora has played a foundational role in shaping modern technologies. The

dominant construction of technoscience as de-racialized and de-culturalized is thus a ahistorical strategy to whiten the contributions of black people to the world and reinforce Euro-American technological dominance.

Aside from the hidden racial and gendered logics that structure them, new global technologies are also problematic given the ways in which they can shape geopolitics and economic realities. Drawing attention to the power dynamics underlying these new global technologies, Ramesh Srinivasan (2017) states that the current technology revolution is not global because it is a revolution shaped by the narrow commercial interests of powerful Euro-American corporations. Anthropologist Carla Freeman (2000) has, however, demonstrated how Caribbean cultural conceptions of class and gender reconstitute the internal workings of global labor-disciplining techniques of offshore production enterprises in the high-tech informatics industry. Thus, while “ninety-nine percent of the world population is excluded from most decisions around the future of the Internet and digital technology,” this does not mean that they are merely passive recipients of new technologies (Srinivasan 2017: 1). As such, technological innovators outside the West employ “their lived realities and local complexities” to innovatively produce alternative technological future for their societies and the world at large (Chan 2018: 3). Despite the radical potentialities of technology adoption and creation in the Global South, it is important that we stop assuming that commercial platforms were made to serve public interests merely because they are marketed using democratic ideals (Srinivasan 2017).

Examining how the digital platform economy is changing the nature of work and the structure of the economy, Kenney and Zysman (2016) discuss the potential for platforms like Apple iOS, Android, Amazon Web Services, Microsoft’s Azure, and Google Cloud to be virtual monopolies. Because the Internet currently functions as an infrastructure connecting nearly 2 billion people, these digital platforms have tendencies to become monopolies if unchecked because of the growing platformization of

infrastructure and infrastructurization of platforms (Plantin et al. 2018). Using Facebook as an example, Plantin et al. (2018) show how Facebook as an infrastructure deploys its application programming interface (API) to “transform itself from a centrally controlled system into something more like a network of independently-developed, yet seamlessly-interconnected systems and services” (2018: 304). While “as a proprietary largely opaque platform, it filters our daily communicative acts through a profit-extracting sieve, deploying its intimate view of users’ activities and relationships for the benefit of advertisers and others, who in turn provide further data (via the API) for the Facebook social graph. As a result, its power to shape our communication behavior for its own ends increases” (Ibid).

Although this picture coupled with the near impossibility for some users to choose not to use these platforms, especially in the workplace and academic environments, is somewhat disturbing, the point is not to promote a conception of technology as evil (Srinivasan 2017). Neither is it a call for national isolationism because fragmentation can make it difficult for us to unite around issues of global concern. Instead, we could rethink not only how technology is made and deployed but also how we can imagine alternative possibilities for technologies that harness the voices and visions of people on the margins, rather than conceive of them as passive users. In what follows, I document the history and use of technology in Africa generally and in Nigeria specifically.

Toward An African Digital Technology Revolution

The African Continent’s current digital revolution is often traced to the 2007 launch of M-PESA in Kenya. A close examination, however, shows a more complex and entangled Pan-African history of the *digital mobile* technology revolution, which portrays Africa as suddenly leapfrogging from a few landlines to exponential numbers of mobile phones. Africa’s mobile telecommunications industry started in 1986 when Rwandan entrepreneur-engineer Miko Rwayitare and his company, Telecel International,

introduced the first cell phone in Zaire (Mavhunga 2017: 18).²³ Previously, most Africans used fixed telecommunications from the colonial era for voice communication and letters and telegraph for textual communication. Rwayitare's foundational work in establishing Africa's first mobile telecommunications infrastructure was what paved the way for the introduction of prepaid airtime by the South African telecommunications company, Vodacom, in 1996 ('Great South African Inventions' 2014).

In 2001, this mobile technological innovation took on a new dimension in Kenya with Safaricom's (a local telecommunications company which spun-off from the state's Telkom Kenya) introduction of low-cost mobile telephony networks (Gitonga 2017: 17). The introduction of Safaricom, along with the Kenya's government relaxation of import taxes on computers and mobile phones, made mobile phones more affordable and laptops more accessible to the people. The combination of these historical transformations and technological advancements facilitated the launch of Safaricom's mobile money-transfer platform, M-PESA, which provides financial access to large numbers of unbanked individuals in Kenya (Osiakwan 2017: 64). Even as M-PESA's impact was being recognized throughout the country and beyond, Kenyan crisis crowdsourcing platform, Ushahidi, was launched in 2008 to monitor the country's election before later becoming a global crisis-monitoring platform (Ndemo 2017: 1). Ultimately, these disruptive technological innovations have advanced the popular notion of Kenya as the epicenter of the African digital technology revolution.

Although innovative technologies emerging from Kenya have certainly corrected the Western misconception of Africa being barren of technology, the popular narrative elides the more complex, Pan-African histories of technological innovation on the Continent. Indeed, South Africa played a pivotal role in the dissemination of digital mobile technology across the African Continent (Mavhunga 2017: 19). Through

²³ Zaire is now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo.

President Thabo Mbeki's winning bid to host the 2010 World Cup tournament in South Africa, undersea cables were laid "near Africa's shores linking the Continent with the Europe to India cable to connect the East Coast, and stretching from the West Coast to Brazil to link with Latin America and, by extension, North America" (ibid). After the World Cup, technological innovation on the Continent increased substantially as the number of tech hubs rose from 21 in 2012 to 117 in 2015.

The other issue with the popular narrative of Africa's digital technology revolution is that it undermines other technological innovations that had taken place before the advent of mobile phones. Technology, after all, is not limited just to mobile phones. The narrative, however, reduces such complex historical realities along with the politics surrounding these technologies to a single story due to the influence of in-bound technological discourses. As Nicolas Friederici et al. (2017) noted, African governments, international organizations, and Internet and technology companies often mobilize Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and digital technologies within development discourses as instruments through which social and economic development on the African Continent can be achieved. ICTs, sometimes called information technologies (IT), refer to the convergence of computer and telecommunication technologies. More specifically, ICTs refers to technologies used mainly for information storage, dissemination and processing that include but are not limited to the "Internet, email, telephone, fax, satellite communication, videotext, and cellphones" (Akpan 2004: 5).

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Internet has become the most prominent ICT in the world because of its role in creating a global network society (Castells 1996). However, the actual impact of ICTs on statebuilding and peacebuilding remains inconclusive within academic literature (Gagliardone et al. 2015). As Richard Heeks notes, "ICT is socially constructed, "as an artifact of a particular environment, created by particular stakeholders for particular purposes" (2002:5). Within Africa and most of the developing world, ICTs are linked

modernization paradigms and their historical narratives “about technology as a modernizing, democratizing, and globalizing agent” (Gagliardone 2010: 29).

Consequently, Nicolas Friederici et al. (2017) argue that ahistorical technological determinism and modernist discourses underpin the ICT (ICT4D) for development discourse in Africa.

Jenna Burrell (2014) has also shown that the “developmentalist thinking that understands material technological forms transferred from the West as carriers of modernity” can reduce both dynamic local use practices of technologies and the agentic capabilities of technology users. In a study specifically focused on gender, Christobel Asiedu has argued that although the ICT4D discourse deploys the “language of empowerment, it portrays African women as passive recipients of ICTs” (2012:241). While in-bound ICT discourses are not a new phenomenon in Africa, recent manifestations focused on “disruptive innovation” seemingly obscure the close relationships between these technological discourses and Western modernization theories. As in most countries of the Global South, technological innovation in Nigeria cannot be separated from economic development because, as previously mentioned, ICTs are enmeshed in Western discourses seeking to promote development on the Continent.

With this in mind, a key contribution of this dissertation is to place technological development in Nigeria within its own context and history. To do this, I examine technology entrepreneurship in Nigeria to provide much-needed context for the contemporary emergence of the Lagos tech ecosystem. I also posit that a nuanced historical understanding of African technological innovations and entrepreneurial practices can be more instructive in furthering economic development and national progress than can “self-evident” teleological modernization discourses. Through the use of newspaper articles, ethnographic interviews, and secondary source materials, I chronicle in the following sections the evolution of technology entrepreneurship in Nigeria and the emergence of the contemporary Lagos startup ecosystem.

The Origins of Technology Entrepreneurship in Nigeria

Before Nigeria achieved political independence in 1960, technological developments in the area of ICT were limited to communication (Awa 1996: 68). Even then, this communication infrastructure was poor and underdeveloped. The extractive nature of the colonial enterprise ensured that only communication technologies that served the British metropole and colonial administration were developed (Akpan 2004: 141). Any benefits of these technologies to the colonized were unintended. However, this led to the development of a vertically integrated communications infrastructure. During the colonial period of 1900–1945, the British colonial administration extended telephone and telegraph services in the country (Awa 1996: 68). In 1929, telephone trunk lines were completed, and the telephone exchanges were completed in 1945.

With the end of World II and the rise of development discourse, the British Colonial Office allocated funds toward the 1946 Ten-Year Plan for Development and Welfare to develop Nigeria and address the social welfare of its citizens (Akpan 2004: 143). Although the Ten-Year Plan's primary goal was to improve the societal condition of Nigerian people through the provision of better water facilities, nutrition, and public health, the plan played a key role in the introduction and installation of private wire and telex services, which increased telephone lines from 9,000 to 39,000 between 1950 and 1960 (Awa 1996: 68). However, as Pius Okigbo (1989: 20) states, the plan was not in any way concerned with overall industrial development of the country or any areas that would contribute extensively to macro-economic growth. Instead, as Robert Tignor notes, the plan was more preoccupied with laying the necessary infrastructural foundations for a healthier and more educated populace before striving for rapid economic growth" (1998: 211).

Although the first national development plan of 1962–1968 primarily revised some of the previous initiatives of the 1950s plan, the country sought to create a self-reliant development strategy by expanding and diversifying the domestic economy

through an emphasis on education, industrialization, and agriculture (Awa 1996: 34). Technological developments especially in information technology were neglected in the national development agenda. And despite computerization beginning in the 1960s, IT technology had minimal impact on the larger society because it was limited to government offices, multinational companies, and later private financial organizations (ibid, 65, Odebiyi and Soriyan 2001). As Kelechi Kalu noted, “Nigerian policymakers have tended to think of technology mainly in the context of finished products rather than as a set of ideas rooted in the local culture with the set purpose of serving the basic needs of the people since independence” (2000: 93). Consequently, he states that this conception of technology, along with the lack of maintenance culture it engenders, has hindered technological development in Nigeria, except in the telecommunications industry.

Immediately after independence, the Nigerian government began making sustainable advancement in the telecommunications industry to attract investments into the country (Awa 1996: 15). Not only had the government begun “a 5-year plan to execute work on the provision of a microwave radio relay route to link Lagos with Port Harcourt near completion, a program linking member states of the Organization of African Unity (OAU)” was also underway at the time (ibid). The outbreak of the Biafran War in 1967 disrupted the implementation of the first national development plan. Moreover, the war influenced the strong focus on economic, political and infrastructural reconstruction in the Second National Development Plan of 1970–1974, which mainly prioritized education, social welfare, agriculture, and industry, including telecommunications. This plan notably foreshadowed the Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree of 1972 in “introducing measures for the accelerated training of local businessmen, the provision of advisory and training services and the improved flow of capital, technical and market information” (Hoogvelt 1979: 56).

Indigenization Decrees as a Catalyst for Tech Entrepreneurship

The Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decrees of 1972 and 1977, otherwise known as the Indigenization Decrees, were economic policies to increase local control, ownership and management of productive enterprises in the Nigerian economy. At the time of independence, much of the Nigerian economy was in foreign hands (Falola 2004:157). Through British control of the colonial state, the British business class gained access to Nigeria's economic surpluses, thus enabling them to monopolize and accumulate profit from the country's financial and economic activities (Asobie 1988: 34). These profits were then transferred overseas to the British Metropole. For example, British colonial administrators held positions as directors and shareholders in two British Banks—Bank of British West Africa (now called First Bank) and Barclays Bank, Dominion, Colonial and overseas (now called Union Bank)—and these banks practically monopolized the industry, accounting “for over 70% of total time and savings deposits in Nigeria on the eve of independence” (ibid). The British and other Western European countries therefore dominated the Nigerian economy, especially within the banking, shipping, import-export, and mining sectors; Nigerians played a very minimal role in the overall economic structure.

Before the entrenchment of the colonial enterprise however, Nigeria had a rich cultural history of trade and entrepreneurship. Although Lagos had a strong local trade economy from its earliest origins due to its geographic location between the hinterland and the Atlantic Ocean, it was the emergence of the transatlantic slave trade that transformed it into an international port city. Similarly, in southeastern Nigeria, Ijaw middlemen and European merchants had been trading on the coast for nearly four hundred years (1500–1885) (Olutayo 1999). Beginning with the slave trade, the widespread coastal migration of the Ijaw and then Igbo people formed trading communities that subsequently transformed the small coastal towns into city-states. With the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the

markets in Europe, and the influence of Christian missionaries, the British colonial administration was looking for strategic avenues to end the slave trade and establish a “legitimate trade” in palm products (Bigon 2005). By intervening in local political conflicts and cunningly playing one side against another, the British succeeded in establishing a consulate in Lagos in 1851 before later annexing it as a Crown colony in 1861 and intervening on the southern Nigerian coast between 1881 and 1916 (Forrest 1994, Harnett –Sievers 1996).

As Patrick Cole has stated, “the overriding concern of colonialism was economic not political” (1975: 5). At the time of the annexation, Britain’s economic policies were driven by “the quest for a cheap state and balanced budget” (Mann 2007: 103). Not only were the ongoing internecine Yoruba wars interfering with the transport of produce from the hinterland, the trading monopolies of coastal middlemen like Ja Ja of Opobo and Nana Olomu of Itsekeriland were blocking direct trade with Igbo oil markets. The colonial administration’s decision to expand into the hinterland was therefore driven by a need to open trade routes and realize economic profit. The new “legitimate trade” was extremely beneficial for the colonial administration in many ways because it made new export crops like rubber, timber, and cocoa available while also contributing to the British economy and allowing the colony to be economically self-sufficient (Harnett-Sievers 1996).

As the British opened up the hinterland and built transportation infrastructure toward the end of the nineteenth century, several European firms began to establish local trading stations. Before the expansion into the hinterland, some European firms had organized themselves into the Central African Trading Company Limited now known as the United African Company (UAC). This group monopolized trade via the Niger River after being granted the Royal Niger Charter at the Berlin Conference in 1886 (Olutayo 1999: 154). By the twentieth century, all but a few independent local traders had been pushed out of the import and export trade and

foreign firms (Cole 1975, Forrest 1994). Axel Harriet-Sievers (1996) and Ayodeji Olukoju (2010) have both drawn attention to the pyramidal commercial structure of the trading system. Within this pyramid, small-scale African traders were at the bottom, larger African merchants in competition with Lebanese merchants were in the middle, and larger European companies occupied the top of the pyramid.

Notwithstanding the widespread marginalization of independent African traders, African middlemen were not simply relegated to petty trade, mainly because European companies still largely depended on them (Forrest 1994). Moreover, the growing colonial economy provided a favorable and lucrative business environment. Examining the impact of indigenous entrepreneurs on the colonial economy during that period, Forrest states that the arrival of Nigerian produce-buyers with trucks was both a competitive advantage and a limiter of the expansion of European buying stations. However, African traders were susceptible to economic fluctuations because they possessed limited amounts of capital and often relied on European firms to provide them with credit (Harneit-Sievers 1996). Their vulnerability was only more pronounced during periods of market decline as in 1921-1922 and 1937-1938 because European firms had a propensity to regulate prices and enter into market sharing agreements, thus forcing many smaller indigenous traders out of business and bankrupting larger African merchants (Forrest 1994: 15, Harneit-Sievers 1996: 29).

Decline of the indigenous entrepreneur coincided with the burgeoning African nationalist movement of the 1920s and 1930s that laid the foundation of modern Nigerian economic nationalism and decolonization.²⁴ The entanglement of political and commercial issues in the colonial enterprise made African businessmen easy allies with political elites (Olukoju 2010, Harneit-Sievers 1996). This period thus saw a rise in the establishment of what Axel Harneit-Sievers calls “political enterprises by which African

²⁴ According to Ayodeji Olukoju, “economic nationalism was an anticolonial agenda in which political, cultural and economic strands were intertwined” (2010: 139).

businessmen usually connected with organized political nationalism, tried to mobilize to build up commercial firms and promote their business through the employment of political arguments, and vice versa” (1996: 31). These political enterprises were limited to trading associations and indigenous banks, such as the National Bank of Nigeria in 1933 and Agbonmagbe Bank (now known as WEMA Bank) in 1945.

The interwar nationalist political agitation reached its apogee during the Cocoa Pool crisis of 1937-1938 in Nigeria and the Gold Coast. The Cocoa Pool Crisis erupted when ten of the largest expatriate firms secretly entered a price agreement designed to “fix cocoa prices, the market shares of the firms, and the condition of credit given to African traders” in the event that world market cocoa prices dropped (Harneit-Sievers 1996: 33, Olukoju 2010: 145). Consequently, when the agreement between firms became known, African nationalists, produce traders/farmers in Nigeria, and cocoa farmers in the Gold Coast began to mobilize individuals and organize protests. Although the pool crisis eventually led to the official dismantling of the pricing agreement, expatriate companies continued to collude informally on prices.

With the outbreak of World War II, nationalist political fervor increased as the conditions of African traders deteriorated in the wartime economy. Even as the country was struggling to remedy the impact of declining agricultural export prices, the Colonial Office marshaled the domestic economy “for the war effort of the Empire as source of agrarian raw materials” (Harneit-Sievers 1996: 38). This began an excessive trend of state intervention into the economy through government wartime control policies on external trade in export produce. Moreover, the Colonial Office established the West African Produce Control Board in 1942 to control the prices and marketing of cocoa, palm produce, and groundnuts. These policies were primarily executed by “the old-established Association of West African Merchants (AWAM) including the major European trading firms and run by the U.A.C.” (ibid). According to Tom Forrest, the top six trading firms “accounted for 70 percent of

the value of mineral exports” (1994: 23). This new trend of government involvement in the commercial sector persisted after the war ended with the introduction of statutory marketing boards by the Colonial Office (Williams 1953). In response to these new commercial and economic policy changes, African businessmen formed political and business associations such as the Nigerian Association of African Importers and Exporters (NAAIE) and Association of Merchants and Industrialists (AMI) to confront and agitate against the unfair practices of European trading companies, thus becoming fodder for the nationalist politics of the late 1940s (Olukoju 2010: 148).

Seeking to pacify nationalist political elites after the war, the Colonial Office, in line with the developmentalist thrust of the period, implemented the ten-year development plan and began to gradually devolve power to the Nigerian politicians in an effort to promote economic progress and political stability (Tignor 1998). This development plan, coupled with the “positive general economic outlook” of the early 1950s, created a supportive environment for African businessmen. Following the “establishment of the marketing boards in 1947 for cocoa and in 1949 for palm produce and groundnuts,” African cocoa traders now operated as Licensed Buying Agents (LBA) instead of direct exporters (Harneit-Sievers 1996: 53). Through this new system, they became the dominant players in the export produce trade, owning 20 percent of the total crop in 1960. Not only did the Cocoa Board become a source of finance for indigenous enterprises like indigenous banks, it also began to provide financial support to political parties and their candidates after the regionalization of marketing boards in 1954. They also played a huge role in funding the first public lending agency, the Nigerian Local Development Board (NLDB)²⁵ (Forrest 1994: 26). As Forrest notes, “over 4 million pounds was loaned to Nigerian entrepreneurs by government agencies between 1950 and

²⁵ Although dissolved in 1949, the NLDB’s functions were passed to the Regional Development Boards and the Colonial Development Board, later followed by the Federal Loans Boards in 1956.

1965” (ibid). In *The Underdevelopment of Indigenous Entrepreneurship in Nigeria*, E.O. Akeredolu-Ale mentions that these lending agencies along with other government attempts to boost indigenous enterprise “achieved disappointingly modest results”²⁶ (1975:26).

Although the British strategically wanted to control decolonization in Nigeria through political gradualism and to nurture capitalism, the ethnic nationalist politics of the period undermined their vision. Whereas Sarah Stockwell (2000) has argued that relationship between colonialism and capitalism was not as closely integrated during decolonization and that British firms took it upon themselves to influence nationalist political developments in the Gold Coast, Robert Tignor’s *Capitalism and Nationalism at the End of Empire* demonstrates that the British colonialists actively sought “to secure a place in the Nigerian economy for British capital and joint stock companies” (1998:230). To execute this economic strategy, the British minister of finance, Eric Himsworth, formulated a series of policies to encourage and attract foreign investors, including legislation to provide “tax relief to companies willing to invest in industries favored by the government” and another that “offered a large mining concession in the East to a foreign firm”(Tignor 1998: 238). In addition, Himsworth proposed legislation to regulate the banking sector, which “made obtaining a banking license the prerequisite for opening a bank in Nigeria” (ibid, 242). Although the British successfully implemented the new federal economic legislations, the nationalist opposition to the policies—amid a political terrain of ethnic rivalry and regional antagonism—eroded British colonial power.

With the transfer of national political power in 1960, Nigeria’s economy became extremely porous. Peter Kilby (1969) describes it as an “open, market-orientated

²⁶ “Even when the evaluations adopted only rather limited and conservative criteria of success, and even when the performance of the Nigerian businessmen concerned had been assessed only within limits of relatively static view of the capacities and potentialities of indigenous enterprise” (ibid).

economy.” Moreover, state subsidies and tariff escalations drew new foreign investors into the country (Forrest 1994: 24). Consequently, European trading firms pivoted from retail and produce buying to large-scale manufacturing to maintain their market interests. Companies like John Holt and United African Company were among the first to go this route. In response, African traders and businessmen moved into the business segments previously occupied by European firms. As Axel Harneit-Sievers (1996:51) states, however, this “was far from a takeover of the economy by Nigerians, but rather an extension of the commercial and business frontier in favor of African entrepreneurs with a shifting boundary line between the indigenous and the expatriate sectors.” Moreover, expatriate companies employed strategic tactics to protect their commercial interests “by encouraging Nigerians to take up shares in their company, by forming joint venture with local firms, and by finding niches where they were safe from nationalist attack” (Tignor 1998: 274). This strategy was a success according to an industrial survey from 1966.²⁷ Thus, achieving political independence in Nigeria did not necessarily translate into economic independence (Biersteker 1987, Tignor 1998).

Accordingly, the Indigenization Decree of 1972 and 1977 were not just economic policies to further industrial development in Nigeria; instead as many scholars noted, the decrees are rooted in historical debates among local entrepreneurs, foreign capitalists, and nationalists of the colonial era (Biersteker 1987, Ogbuagu 1983). As Ankie Hoogvelt (1979) states, indigenization policies started as early as 1946 with the NLDB followed by the formation of the “Nigerianization of Business Enterprises” national committee and then the establishment of the Expatriate Quota Allocation Board in 1968. This historical

²⁷ The survey shows that “private foreign investment as at that date accounted for at least 70 percent of total industrial investment; for over 90 percent of the total investment in each of basic industrial chemicals, paints, miscellaneous chemical products, metal fabrications, motor vehicle/bicycle assembly and even motor vehicle repairs; for at least 80 percent of the total investment in the manufacture of each of grain mill products, miscellaneous food preparation and soft drinks; and for at least 60 percent of the total investment in the manufacture of sugar confectionery, beer brewing, textiles, footwear, and vegetable oil-milling” (Akeredolu-Ale 1975:27).

context matters in discussing the indigenization because it helps in understanding the rationale and the effectiveness of these decrees. In the 1972 decree, the government mandated a “transfer of those businesses in the private sector which were believed to be within the competence of indigenous expertise (Schedule I, 21 enterprises in the commercial and servicing sectors), and required a minimum Nigerian interest of 40 percent equity in other businesses where joint participation was still considered necessary (Schedule II, 35 enterprises in light manufacturers and primary processing industries)” (Hoogvelt 1979: 57). The remaining 80 enterprises, which were “high-growth, high technology, high-profit industries,” were left under full foreign control (Biersteker 1987: 92).

Due to the decree’s being “sloppy in implementation” and the overall lack of government oversight of the process, the first indigenization decree, although publicly popular, was hugely unsuccessful, having a mere 33 percent compliance rate (Hoogvelt 1979: 57). Upon reviewing this report from the Industrial Enterprises Promotion Panel, which was set up to investigate the NEPD, the new military government enacted the second indigenization decree in 1977, to extend and improve upon the first one. Unlike the first decree, the second one had three schedules, “providing for whole or part indigenization of all foreign enterprises,” forcing all multinationals to enter into joint-venture agreements with indigenous businessmen or the State (ibid). Additionally, “enterprises listed under Schedule II in the 1972 decree (i.e., 40 percent Nigerian participation) now had to divest another 20 percent equity, whilst companies previously not affected were now required to have at least 40 percent Nigerian participation” (ibid). There was also some reclassification of a few enterprises from Schedule II to Schedule I. Not only that, the decree limited individual Nigerian participation to 5 percent or N50, 000 and stipulated that 10 percent of stock divested under the second decree be allocated to the firm’s personnel.

After the implementation of Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decrees, numerous authors have debated whether or not the decrees effectively increased indigenous ownership and control of local businesses. Ankie Hoogvelt has aptly stated an evaluation of the program's success must be based on the stated objectives "which was not to drive away foreign technology and capital but to give Nigerians the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to assume ownership, control and management of the nation's economy and to make foreign participation complementary to indigenous efforts rather than compete with it" (1979:67). On the basis of these stated objectives, Chibuzo Ogbuagu argued that although the indigenization program has increased the number of Nigerian entrepreneurs, it "failed to meet its primary objective" (1983:263). Despite the fact that many Nigerians acquired shares in the newly indigenized firms, they did not acquire the requisite managerial or technical skills actually needed to control the national economy. This failure, coupled with the program's increase of unequal wealth distribution, has strengthened the indigenous bourgeoisie class and led to an entrenchment of foreign capital (Asobie 1988).

Ogbuagu mainly attributed this failure to the countervailing measures of foreign firms—large European multinationals and small-scale Lebanese and Indian firms. Such tactics included fronting, which involved "finding a silent partner (or partners), someone who knew and cared little about the business and create the appearance of a change by having the Nigerian partner visible, taking orders in the front room while the foreign partner (or former owner) manages the firm from the backroom" (Biersteker 1987: 113). Moreover, as Chibuiké Uche (2012) has shown, British businesses in Nigeria were not alone in securing their interests; they received substantial assistance from their home government. This is not particularly surprising given the entangled relationship between government and business during this period.

Indeed, as Thomas Biersteker and Chibuzo Ogbuagu stated, the first indigenization decree was the consequence of an ongoing economic nationalist

discourse between the Nigerian state and indigenous businessmen since the colonial era while the Nigeria state implemented the second decree to legitimize itself. The indigenous business elites were at the forefront of the implementation of the first policy, and as such they were its primary beneficiaries. Discussing the different interests among the political actors (local capital, foreign capital, and the state) throughout the process, Biersteker has convincingly argued that indigenization was “part of political process, the outgrowth of recurring combinations and recombinations of prominent political-economic actors in the country operating to maximize their conceptions of group, national and occasionally international welfare” (1987: 284). Consequently, the contested nature of the indigenization exercise accurately depicts the political nature of policymaking in the post-independence Global South.

Despite the politics surrounding the first and second indigenization programs, these programs made significant contributions to indigenous enterprise and the national economy. Particularly after the promulgation of the second decree, the Nigerian state gained control over the country’s banking and finance system, along with the insurance, hotel, and shipping industries (Biersteker 1987: 245, 298). The strategic importance of the domestic financial sector has enabled the state to “push local capital into productive activities” (ibid). Thus, in addition to increasing the number of indigenous entrepreneurs and local ownership of share in foreign companies as mentioned earlier, the decrees created opportunities for Nigerian businessmen in services, construction, manufacturing (electronics assembly and furniture) and commerce (“agricultural equipment, food, hardware, timber, office equipment and computers”) (ibid: 251, 257). Although foreign companies still dominated the high-technology and capital-intensive industries, a few local entrepreneurs moved into these areas as well, thus marking the advent of technology entrepreneurship in Nigeria (Forrest 1994: 44, Biersteker 1987: 272).²⁸

²⁸ I am specifically referring to technology in the high-technology sense. Local cultures and peoples have been producing technology since antiquity.

Two of Nigeria’s earliest technology companies—GICEN and Data Sciences—emerged during this era. In 1979, Chief Don Etiebet founded Data Sciences Nigeria Limited (DSNL). DSNL spun off from Earth Sciences Limited, “a resource engineering and geophysical exploration company that applies computer techniques for mineral exploration” that was founded in 1972 (Osugwu 2008). DSNL was one of the first indigenous computer companies to offer services in the “use, production, marketing, installations, maintenance and training, and also in developing of applications for hardware and software computer systems in Nigeria” (Uwen-Obong 2017). DSNL is one of the oldest and leading Information Communications and Technology (ICT) companies in the country. In addition to DSNL, one of Chief Etiebet’s companies, Obodex Companies, was one of first to introduce personal computers, Obodex PC, that were assembled locally in Nigeria and sold internationally across Europe in 1992 (Mirilla 2002).

Founded in 1970 by Chief Godwin Ifeanyi Eneli, GICEN Investment and Properties was another company with initial interests in investment services and insurance brokerage before later expanding into computer agencies, food and beverages, engineering, and chemical trade (Forrest 1994: 92). Discussing the impact of indigenization on GICEN, Arinze Valentine,²⁹ a former employee of the company and tech industry veteran, shared the following:

There are a lot of institutions that have been here that were using technology. We had a lot of companies here that were actually using mainframes and minis. You know the old computers. IBM was here as IBM, as themselves, so IBM was selling everything from typewriters to mainframes and minis. Obasanjo did something in 1978, had this whole indigenization drive. Indigenize all the foreign companies. Even 100% local, so what he did was in 1978 Obasanjo basically

²⁹ This is a pseudonym to protect his identity.

killed foreign investment in Nigeria by indigenizing all the foreign companies, so like IBM had to. Standard bank sold to- had to become First Bank. Standard bank was a foreign bank. The foreigners basically owned our economy. So, what he did was to empower the locals and he had a decree that every company should become local. Have 100% local ownership. A lot of guys could not do that so they all left. The banks left, that's why we had local ownership of banks and that's why you could have Nigerians in banking rise to the top. The same thing happened in technology as well...Indigenization was like a reset button pressed in the economy and tech was actually part of the sectors that had to move to 100% private ownership. Now what IBM did was split up the business. They had the mainframe and mini business, they sold to a company called DPMS, Data Processing and Management systems, which was basically French owned (interview 2018).

According to Valentine, GICEN had been the primary dealer for International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) and specialized in the sale of electronic typewriters, printers, mainframes, minis, and other computer hardware products prior to the second indigenization exercise. With the enactment of the second decree in 1978, IBM was forced to indigenize and separate its local business operations (Valentine 2018). This resulted in GICEN taking over the IBM market for electronic typewriters and personal computers while another firm, Data Processing Maintenance and Services (DPMS) took over IBM's mainframe and minicomputer market (Fátúnmbí 2019, Valentine, interview, 2018).

Given the story mentioned above, indigenization was not a total failure, especially considering its impact on specific industries. At a time when high-technology ventures were the exclusive preserve of foreign companies, the program led to the increase of local technology entrepreneurship in Nigeria, which in turn had a significant impact on the

development of an indigenous technology industry. This story thus reveals that it might be beneficial for future analyses of the indigenization program to critically examine the specific ways it positively contributed to certain sectors and how that has shaped their development, instead of viewing it as a failure in a broad sense.

The Structural Adjustment Programme and the 1990s Banking Boom in Lagos

The previous section examined the history of Nigeria's indigenization program because it laid the foundations for the pursuit of indigenous high-technology entrepreneurship. Considering the colonial impact on the socioeconomic environment, indigenization was a critical turning point in shifting economic power from foreign capitalists to Nigerian nationals. Notwithstanding its misgivings and failures, the program did in fact positively contribute to the growth and development of local Nigerian industries such as technology companies. It was this foundation that later led to the development of a local technology scene in Lagos during the turbulent economic era of the eighties and nineties, which is the focus of this section.

The crash of world oil prices in 1981 ushered in a period of severe economic decline for the Nigerian state, causing it to accumulate large amounts of internal and external debts. Although there had been an oil boom from 1974 to 1978 and another miniboom from 1980 to 1982, the increase in oil revenue only led to an increase in public and government expenditure, which subsequently led to an accumulation of external debt (Forrest 1995: 135). This was primarily because "expenditure tended to outstrip revenue, leading to large internal budget deficits, which were financed in an inflationary manner and which led to a rapid erosion of the foreign reserves position" (ibid). Coupled with the fact that "Nigeria was about 90% import dependent," agricultural exports were in decline,

and manufacturing using local raw materials was practically non-existent (Forrest 1995: 139, Umoren 2001:19). With external public debt rising from N3.3 billion in 1978 to N14.7 billion at the end of 1982, the gross mismanagement of the economy only persisted under President Shagari's civilian government (1979—1983) (Forrest 1995: 165). Despite attempts by the Shagari administration to implement emergency stabilization measures and the subsequent Buhari military regime (1983—1985) to implement domestic austerity and fiscal probity measures, the growing debt crisis resulted in the implementation of the IMF-formulated Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986.

Although both the Shagari and Buhari administrations had secretly begun negotiations with the IMF on the economic crisis, it was not until President Babangida took office in 1985 that an agreement was reached. With rising external debt, international creditors (Paris and London Clubs) insisted on Nigeria accepting an IMF loan and a credit worthiness assessment from the World Bank as a condition for debt rescheduling and offering new lines of credit (Osaghae 1998: 197). Taking an IMF loan at the time was widely unpopular, so Babangida organized a national debate to educate the masses on the benefits of the loan. To his chagrin, the debate only revealed the strong opposition to the IMF loan across different segments of society. The IMF loan was opposed by “the Nigerian Labor Congress, which threatened a strike, student bodies, university lecturers, market women, and religious leaders” (Forrest 1995:209-210). In addition, “urban petty traders, producers, and transporters” resisted the IMF loan (ibid). Babangida was able to successfully implement SAP amid such public antagonism only by cleverly using the debate to divert attention away from the government's agenda. From the very beginning, the main emphasis of the debate was the issue of the loan and not on

the IMF conditions or broader questions of economic strategy. Thus, while the debate was ongoing, the government had already started implementing many of the IMF conditionalities. The subsequent termination of negotiations with the IMF, which was widely celebrated by the public, did not deter the government's economic strategy.

In 1986, the Babangida administration introduced the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) through the assistance of the World Bank. The World Bank, not the IMF, would "offer \$4.2 billion over three years to fund the SAP, conditional on progress with policy reform" (ibid, 212). Overall, the SAP aimed to

strengthen demand management through monetary, fiscal, and wage policies; stimulate domestic production by encouraging non-oil exports and by reducing dependence on imported goods through changes in relative prices (notably a lower exchange rate) tariff rationalization, and export incentives; reduce public regulation and administrative control by the reduction of subsidies, price decontrol, deregulation of the financial sector, and trade and payments liberalization; rationalize the bureaucracy and public sector projects, and commercialize and privatize public corporations and companies; and reschedule the external debt so as to shift the main burden of debt servicing to 1991 and beyond (ibid, 213).

The core of SAP however was the devaluation of the naira, caused by the introduction of the Second Tier Foreign Exchange Market (SFEM). The devaluation wreaked havoc on the standard of living and quality of life of the average Nigerian citizen (Osaghae 1998: 204). Indeed, the decline happened rapidly. Within five years, the "1991 World Bank Report ranked Nigeria as the thirteenth poorest country in the world, while the United

Nations Development Program's human deprivation index concluded that it had one of the worst records for human deprivation of any country in the third world" (ibid).

Ultimately, a program meant to improve the economic crisis only heightened and made it palpable for Nigerians.

Although the SAP marked an ideological shift from state-led developmentalism to a private-sector led, free-market economic strategy, its effects were not immediately apparent. Instead, the SAP forced many companies to shut down in the industrial and manufacturing sectors because devaluation had shrunk demand and raised production costs, especially for importing raw materials (Forrest 1994: 41-42, Osaghae 1998: 203). Even with the relaxation of the indigenization policies, the implementation of the privatization program, and "other incentives offered like tax-free holidays, general concession for industries using local raw materials and/or export-oriented, and the establishment of the Calabar Export Processing Zone in 1991," foreign firms continued to divest (ibid, Forrest 1994: 44. Forrest 1995: 178). Devaluation discouraged foreign investment, high infrastructural costs, along with a slow, inefficient bureaucracy and uncertain and unpredictable government policies, factored into investors' apprehensiveness. Besides the oil industry, the only other major exception was the banking sector.

Still, the introduction of the SAP opened up new opportunities for banking due to the deregulation of the financial sector and relaxation of banking license requirements (Forrest 1994: 44, Forrest 1995: 178, Uche 2000). These new banking-related policies, coupled with lower entry costs into banking, created an explosion of new banks that were eager to capitalize on "access to foreign exchange and opportunities to profit from

currency exchange” (ibid). According to Tom Forrest, there were over 100 banks in operation by the end of 1990, and over 80 percent of these banks began operating between 1988 and 1991 (Forrest 1994: 53, Forrest 1995: 216). Many of these banks were taking advantage of the huge disparity between the official rate and autonomous interbank rate—which was as much as 60 percent in early 1989—within the foreign exchange market. Thus, it was the existence of arbitrage opportunities that led to the banking boom.

The SAP-induced banking boom spurred the growth and development of local technology companies. Before the boom, older technology companies had primarily worked with oil companies that utilized mainframes, minicomputers, and microcomputers (Coker, interview, 2018). With the emergence of new generation banks, however, technology especially since it was relatively easy to source local technologists, became a critical player in the banking industry as the younger banks leveraged to compete with older banks. More than willing to experiment and take risks, this fresh crop of bankers hired new technology companies to build networks to connect their branches across the country and consulted them on system purchases and maintenance agreements. This along with the personal computer (PC) revolution in Nigeria during the late eighties and nineties left an indelible mark on the burgeoning technology scene in the country.

As tech industry expert and investor Collins Oneugbu (2017) notes, the PC revolution was a time when tech companies densely populated Ogunlana Drive in Surulere and spilled over and onto neighboring streets of Bode Thomas, Adeniran Ogunsanya, and Adelabu Street. Indeed, almost every house in the area doubled as an IT

company. Two primary clusters of technology companies existed in Lagos: one was off Toyin Street around the Opebi/Allen axis and the other was in Surulere. Given its status as a young professional town and its proximity to the new banks in Marina, Surulere was the more popular of the two. In Surulere, young entrepreneurs founded technology companies that engaged in a myriad of activities, ranging from the assembly of personal computers and servers and the sale of enterprise to large Nigerian companies to the creation of the first generation of local software (ibid). In addition, these entrepreneurs forged corporate partnerships with global tech companies (i.e. Dell, HP, IBM, Microsoft) “and built business around supporting and extending their services to Nigeria” (ibid). Companies like Simoch, Computer Warehouse Group, Chams Plc, SystemTech, Gicen, and others focused predominantly on enterprise technology and hardware and primarily served large banks and corporations on Lagos Island (Asemota 2016).

Before the PC revolution, typewriters were the main electronic equipment used in most Nigerian corporations. Describing the overnight transition from typewriters to computers during our interview, Arinze Valentine (2018) narrates how Chevron ordered 300 typewriters with the word-processing screen from Dyson along with a few PCs in 1990. After conducting corporate training on the products, the corporation discovered that productivity was more enhanced with the use of PCs rather than with typewriters. As a result, Chevron returned the typewriters and ordered 300 computers, the first major order of computers in Nigeria.

The PC revolution was huge in the country because many universities and government institutions were still using minis and needed to replace them with computers. This opened a large market for hardware companies in particular. During that

time, there was strong focus on hardware, so many tech companies either resold imported hardware from global tech companies or assembled the hardware locally. Buttressing this point, Oluwole Coker (2018) states, “the glamor of tech in those days was to be a PC engineer because software was secondary.” Moreover, local hardware assembly was not only easier because the Chinese started selling parts so people could build their own hardware, but it was also cheaper because prices for locally assembled computers were much cheaper than their IBM counterparts.

Nevertheless, software was still important in the technology space. Approximately one-third of Nigerian banks at that time were utilizing local software to run their networks (Matuluko 2017). In fact, as early as 1994, Nigerian software support and consulting services company, Tara Systems, was exporting its software internationally. Under the direction of Seni Williams, who “personally wrote the world’s first imaging and BLOB storage subroutines and systems for the Oracle database system,” Tara had earlier forged a corporation agreement with Oracle and introduced Oracle to Nigeria and West Africa in 1985 and developed Autobank, a new generation banking software based on Oracle, TC/IP and networking in general (Maier 1998, Fick 2002). According to a 1995 ATT article, Tara’s banking software, Autobank, had been sold globally to 22 banks in South America, Africa, Europe, North America, and Canada. With the increasing consumerization of the PC, the software industry grew more prominent because the corporate sale of PCs in Surulere was no longer a viable business within the market. Given this fact, most companies pivoted into other technology-related areas while others along with artisans and businessmen focused on hardware sales and repairs and helped to jumpstart the Otigba Computer Village in Ikeja (Asemota 2016).

After the PC consumer boom, the Surulere technology cluster declined, for several reasons. First, most of the successful technology companies left Surulere to be closer to their clients in Victoria Island, Ikoyi, and Marina after the new generation of banks migrated to Victoria Island (Asemota 2016, Onuegbu 2017). After that, subsequent technology companies—Zinox, Interswitch, Telnet Group and others—completely avoided Surulere and started their operations on the Island. Second, the impact of SAP eventually led to a mass exodus of Nigerian professionals, including technologists, because living and working in Nigeria no longer made sense, especially since their skills could be better compensated abroad. Third, fraud had become a pressing issue within the banking industry, resulting in general distrust for local software. Nigerian banks thus welcomed the entry of Indian software companies into the local market because their software was relatively cheap and had better standards. These Indian firms eventually came to dominate the software industry. Fourth, the onset of the telecommunications boom in the early 2000s and the rise of consumer technology through the Internet and social media dealt a terrible blow to earlier technology companies. Whereas older technology eras were primarily driven by business-to-business relationships with banks, new tech startups depend more on fostering relationships with customers. These unprecedented transformations have ultimately resulted in technology that is more accessible to diverse groups of people.

The Emergence of the Contemporary Lagos Startup Ecosystem

Although indigenization and SAP laid the foundations for the development of indigenous technology entrepreneurship, Obasanjo's administration facilitated the transformation of Nigeria's fledgling technology sector into today's globally recognized

startup ecosystem through the liberalization of the telecommunications industry. With the ushering in of the newly democratic fourth republic in 1999 under the leadership of ex-military head of state, President Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria entered a new era of unparalleled technological advancements in the twenty-first century. Under Obasanjo, Nigeria reintroduced the neoliberal economic reform policies of the SAP and pursued a privatization program with the help of the International Finance Corporation (IFC) to “make the government leaner and more efficient, reduce waste and corruption, free up resources tied down by public enterprises, and improve service delivery to the people” (Ekanade 2014: 14). Among the many policy objectives captured within the reform agenda, it was the privatization of the Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL) in 2001 that played a key role in shaping the country’s current digital technology revolution (ibid, 16).

NITEL was established in 1985 after the separation of the Department of Post and Telecommunications (P&T) and Nigerian External Telecommunications Ltd. (NET) housed under the Ministry of Communications (Awa 1996). With the creation of NITEL, “the Nigerian Postal Service was created out of the postal division of P&T to handle postal communications while the telecommunications division was merged with the Nigerian External Telecommunications to become the country’s national carrier, the Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (Nitel) which now provided both internal and external telecommunication services” (Akpan 2004: 2000). Following NITEL’s full commercialization in 1992 and the subsequent establishment of the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) as a regulatory body in 1993, the Nigerian telecommunications infrastructure began to grow in leaps and bounds, and “the network

capacity of NITEL's 450,516 lines in 1991 was increased to 600,000 at the end of 1992 and to about 1,000,000 at the end of 1995” (Alabi 1996). Moreover, between 1992 and 2000, the entrance of private telecommunications operators (PTOs) led to increased penetration of affordable telephone services as well as the provision of Internet, email, and online banking services by local banks (Nnama 1999, Akpan 2004).

Despite the growing impact of PTOs during this period, it was the licensing of three Global System of Mobile Communications (GSM) operators—Econet Wireless (Airtel), MTN, and NITEL—to provide mobile telephony services in 2001 that heralded the Nigerian telecommunications boom (Nnama 1999, Akpan 2004, Okonji 2017).³⁰ Before the introduction of GSM technology, some PTOs like Visafone, Reitel, Multilinks, Intercellular, and Starcomms were run on Code Division Multiple Access (CDMA) technology (Okonji 2017). But after various stakeholders debated extensively between CDMA and GSM technologies, the Nigerian government decided upon GSM as the preferred technology for the country’s digital mobile telephony system (Akpan 2004:204, Ajakaye 2005). However, this was not just a conversation between the private sector and regulators. Examining the adoption of mobile communications in Nigeria, Toluwalogo Odumosu (2007) uses the notion of constitutive appropriation to argue that Nigeria’s mobile phone success story can be largely attributed to the active innovations of Nigerians in the design, use, and architecture of the mobile telephony technology. In other words, he argues that Nigerians were at the forefront of the telecommunication boom, not just as consumers but as designers and users.

³⁰ Patience Akpan (2004: 30) notes that within a year of the operators’ entrance there were almost “800,000 GSM cellphone users in a country that had less than 500,000 functional phone lines in its 136 years of telecommunications history.”

The telecommunications boom also occurred within the context of growing excitement about the potential use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for development in the country, especially in regard to the Internet. Patience Akpan (2004) describes the revolutionary ICT discourse espoused by several public officials who voiced strong beliefs in the ability for ICT to solve socio-economic development issues in the country. She also mentions President Obasanjo's frequent statements about Nigeria's technology-driven future and his vision "to see Nigeria embark upon the transformation of our national economy from a primarily natural resources-based one to a more diversified and knowledge based one" (Akpan 2004:189). Although the government continues to encourage the use and development of ICTs, it did not bring the Internet to Nigeria.

Nigerian Women and the Rise of Information Computer Technology

Significantly, the groundbreaking efforts of a woman, Ibukun Odusote, brought the Internet to Nigeria (Akpan 2004:240). Often referred to within the country as the Mother of the Internet, Odusote led the "first public use of the Internet in May 1994 when she was the head of the computer science department at Yaba College of Technology in Lagos" (Akpan 2004: 266). According to her own account, Mrs. Odusote sent the first email out of Nigeria from a direct TCP/IP link, although other organizations like Shell had begun using private networks (intranets) to send emails much earlier (Akpan 2004: 380). Although Nigerian women have historically been at the forefront of technological innovations in their societies, the contributions of women like Ibukun Odusote are often marginalized (Emeagwali 2018). Dr. Nadu Denloye, who co-founded one of the country's premier engineering and consulting companies, Telnet Nigeria Ltd, in 1986, is

another important woman innovator in the Nigerian technology space (“Nadu Denloye” 2009). Yet another forerunner among Nigerian women in technology is the late Mrs. Florence Seriki, who founded one of the first indigenous Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) of computers, Omatek Ventures, in 1987 (Okonji 2017). These women’s contributions were what laid the foundation for contemporary women technologists like Funke Okpeke of MainOne Company, one of the leading broadband Internet providers in West Africa (Oludimu 2017).

Prior to the entrance of MainOne, the work of male technologist Chima Onyekwere, who founded the country’s first Internet Service Provider (ISP), Linkserve Nigeria Ltd, in 1996, was instrumental in improving network connectivity in late 1990s and 2000s. This was followed by the entrance of telecommunications companies, which led to the new consumer-orientation of technology of the contemporary tech startup era (Iwerebor 1999, Osuagwu 2008, Asekun 2000). Nevertheless, the Internet was primarily accessed through dial-up linked to NITEL or satellite linked directly into the U.S. network backbone. This limited general usage of the Internet to cybercafés and computer learning centers across the country. Consequently, it was the overlapping emergence of the telecommunications boom and Internet access that made digital technology a recognizable part of everyday life in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued against the use and imposition of Silicon Valley as the primary ideological construct in reading the Lagos tech startup ecosystem. In the first part of this chapter, I examined the origins of Silicon Valley in order to critique its technological determinist constructions as the site of global technology *par excellence*.

An historical examination of Silicon Valley critically revealed how technological development in America is connected to its political desires to become a global superpower. Moreover, this pursuit of political power was promoted through the establishment of free-market capitalism and military prowess.

The second part of this chapter placed the Lagos tech ecosystem within historical genealogies of technology and entrepreneurship in Nigeria and Africa more broadly. Whereas popular narratives of Africa's digital technology revolution often celebrate the contemporary moment as the beginning of the Continent's tech story, my work highlights the multiple historical transformations that have brought us to the present. Using Nigeria's technology history as a point of departure, I argued against the ahistorical technological determinist and modernist development discourses that often underpin the popular narrative of Africa's digital technology revolution and assign it to an elsewhere. In so doing, I demonstrated that technology and technological entrepreneurship in Nigeria have always been a product of socioeconomic and political forces.

Indeed, the indigenization programs of 1972 and 1977 that led to establishment of the first technology companies had roots in the economic nationalism of the decolonization era. Moreover, the subsequent growth and development of the technology sector were the product of neoliberal structural adjustment program (SAP) policies. Incidentally, that era of technology companies also declined because of the SAP policies and the PC consumer boom. With the telecommunications boom and the ensuing proliferation of Internet service providers (ISPs) and cybercafés, the use of digital technology—especially the Internet—became pervasive, which created an environment for technology startups to flourish. This along with the wave of return migration could

not have been accomplished without the democratization of the country and the liberalization of the telecommunications industry.

It is therefore historically inaccurate to assume that technology alone could drive national development in any context. Another important point is that production of technology and the practices of technology entrepreneurship have always been a transnational process; it is not limited to the Global North. Thus, I contend that the widespread narrative of Silicon Valley in the Lagos ecosystem is deeply rooted within a desire to articulate and position local tech startups within an asymmetrical global context of startup entrepreneurship, which I explore at greater lengths in subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER 3

RECONCEPTUALIZING DIASPORA AS A FORM OF INNOVATION

*“So, here you are
too foreign for home
too foreign for here.
never enough for both.”*

~ Ijeoma Umebinyuo, *Diaspora Blues*

INTRODUCTION

Originating from the ancient Greek word *diaspeirien*, “diaspora” historically refers to the global dispersal or *scattering* of religious, national, and ethnic communities outside a real or imagined homeland. The term was first used to describe the exile of Jewish Diaspora from their native homeland of Palestine, which led to the idealization of the imagined homeland as an inclusive way of expressing commonalities among diasporic peoples (Braziel and Mannur 2003, Safran 1991, Clifford 1992, Shepperson 1993). The African Diaspora, however, complicates this ideal type of diaspora because it focuses equally on the networks created through scattering and dispersal (Hall 2007).

This dispersal, as Carole Boyce-Davies and Babacar M’Bow note, “occurred through *voluntary migrations* (pre-Columbian Atlantic and Indian Ocean trade and exploratory journeys), *forced migrations* (Indian Ocean transatlantic and trans-Saharan slavery over at least four centuries in the modern period), and *induced migrations* (the more recent dispersal of African peoples based on world economic imbalances in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries). These migrations have resulted in the relocation and redefinition of African peoples in a range of international locations” (2007: 14). Thus,

although diaspora boasts rich intellectual and political movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, Negritude, and Pan-Africanism, based on shared racial origins and cultural similarities, the frame problematically flattens out the complex historical processes and conditions that compelled these vastly different migrations and relocations of African peoples. In an effort to address the “material and ideological networks of power” that such complex intra and interdiasporic processes are enmeshed in, black feminist scholars have drawn attention to the internal nuances of race, class, gender, and sexuality that position diasporic subjects differently within diasporic formations. For instance, Tina Campt and Deborah Thomas (2008), following Carole Boyce-Davies and Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie’s seminal work on *Moving Beyond Boundaries: International Dimensions of Black Women Writing* (1995) have revealed the underlying asymmetrical power structures that privilege masculine subjects with the diasporic framework. Similarly, Omiseke Tinsley’s (2008) essay has destabilized universal conceptions of diaspora through her discussion on transoceanic crosscurrents as the confluence of blackness and queerness in African diaspora studies using Dionne Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2012) and Ana-Maurine Lara’s *Erzulie’s Skirt* (2006). In addition to the racial, gendered, and sexual inflections of diasporic subject positions, diaspora is also imbricated in temporal-spatial differences. As Paul Zeleza (2010) notes, a contemporary rethinking of African diaspora demands a reconceptualization of its meanings beyond traditional terms of process and condition to include spatiality and temporality. The African Diaspora is a global diaspora, which encompasses a wide range of geographic regions and continents from the United States, the Caribbean, Latin America, Asia, India, and Africa. Isidore Okpewho (2009) has also examined notions of temporality especially within the contemporary moment where diasporas overlap and interact with nondiasporas. To delineate the specific historical process that fostered African migrations, he refers to the old diaspora as precolonial (enslavement) and the new diaspora as postcolonial (imperialism). Given the reality of spatiotemporal gaps

between and within diasporic experiences, diaspora is best conceived as a multiple consciousness of being and becoming mediated by belonging to here and there, then and now (Zezeza 2009).

This relational aspect of diaspora is often lost in the grand search for the constitutive element of diasporic formations à la roots or routes. More specifically, the route vs. roots debate decenters the African Continent, leaving it to occupy a nebulous position within African Diaspora scholarship. The problem with this decentering is that it inadvertently privileges the West as the site *par excellence* for diasporic formation because primarily emphasizing the middle passage and plantation slavery as formative diasporic events reproduces Hegelian dialectics of ‘white actions and black reactions’ (Wright 2015). Within the contemporary moment, much of the literature on African migrations also reproduces this same logic by viewing the diaspora communities in Global North as the *source* of innovation for their homelands.

Without a doubt, the African diaspora contributes significantly to national development on the Continent especially within the contemporary era of intense transnational exchange and knowledge circulation. This chapter, however, argues against the conception of diaspora as a *source* of innovation and instead pushes for an understanding of diaspora as a *form* of innovation. In so doing, I show how the innovation of diaspora is less about the location in which it occurs and more about the ongoing processes of mediation and negotiation that migrants must undertake along with the resultant effects of those processes on their selfhood, nations, and cultural productions. By building and expanding on Africanist science, technology, and society scholarship, this chapter thus elucidates on how diaspora as innovation reorients and positions the nation towards the realization of global futures for the African Continent. In what follows, I advance the theoretical concept of *diaspora as innovation* by bringing together literature on Science and Technology Studies and African Diaspora.

Conceptualizing Diaspora As Innovation

One can hardly conceive of innovation in relation to diaspora without conjuring up images of technological artifacts like mobile phones and laptops or entrepreneurial ventures like Uber and Facebook. The fusion of technology and entrepreneurship in the concept of innovation has become a dominant feature of the present digital revolution in Africa. Explored in relation to diaspora, innovation is largely seen as the transfer of technoscientific knowledge from highly skilled diasporans in the Global North to the African Continent in the form of technical products, engineering talent, research and development, and high-technology equipment with the aim to drive national development. Whereas the contributions of such technological innovations are undeniable and have transformed social life in Africa, my examination of diaspora as innovation departs from popular understandings of innovation as exogenously derived material objects and devices and argues for a reconceptualization that includes innovative techniques and discursive practices.

To delineate the notion of *diaspora as innovation*, I work with Clapperton Mavhunga's (2017) and Reginald Royston's (2014) definition of innovation as the creative act of introducing a new technique or object, externally or internally derived, to produce new opportunities for individual users and society. Stemming from a medieval legal term, *novation* used in reference to the substitution of a new creditor or new debtor's obligations in a contractual agreement, innovation is historically linked to invention or the *creation* of a new idea (Mavhunga 2017: 8). Indeed, the idea of novelty in innovation comes from a shift in the meaning of invention over the years. Before the seventeenth century, invention had meant the search for knowledge, and this

encompassed imitation or “selective borrowing and creative copying that substituted for imported goods and lowered costs of original products” (ibid). With the emergence of the industrial revolutions, research laboratories and patent laws in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, imitation was viewed negatively, whereas invention came to signify novelty in producing technology like “machines, artifacts, devices, engines, and methods,” which led to a conflation of innovation with technology (ibid). By the twentieth century, innovations began to “make history.” And as societal transformations and economic growth were tied to the introduction or creation of new technologies such as “flight (1903), nuclear power (1945), contraception (1955), and the Internet (1965),” technological innovation became indicators of modernity and national progress (Edgerton 2008: ix).

The popular business concept of *disruptive innovation*, which refers to the ability of an innovation—especially a product—to create new markets and value networks, emerges from this conflation of progress and technology. Although disruptive innovation is often attributed to Harvard Business professor Clayton Christensen (1997), the technologization and commercialization of innovation can be traced to the theoretical work of Austrian-American economist Joseph Schumpeter and MIT economist Rupert Maclaurin (Godin 2008, Mavhunga 2017). In *The Theory of Economic Development* (1934), Schumpeter introduces five classifications³¹ of entrepreneurship and prominently states that innovation or “*making new combinations*” is the constitutive factor of entrepreneurship not invention. He also notes that entrepreneurship is not a constant practice but one that occurs only when engaging in innovative activities (Swedburg

³¹ The five classifications are: (1) the introduction of a new good; (2) the introduction of a new method of production; (3) the opening of a new market; (4) the conquest of supply of raw material; and (5) the creation of new organization of an industry.

2000). Schumpeter thus helped to cement the image of the entrepreneur as the central agent in innovation. Rupert Maclaurin's theories, on the other hand, were foundational to postwar research and development science policies (Godin 2008). Indeed, he first formulated the widely-used linear model that sequentially outlines technological innovation, beginning with basic and applied research, then development and commercialization, and then diffusion and adaptation. Consequently, the joint efforts of Maclaurin and Schumpeter's theories have been instrumental to the amalgamation of entrepreneurship, technology, and innovation in theorizing innovation.

Notwithstanding the celebrated status of technological innovations in much of the world, works by social scientists and science and technology scholars have productively shifted notions of innovation from a product and innovator-centered focus to one that considers it as user-centered and socially constructed process. E. M. Rogers' *Diffusion of Innovation* (1962), for instance, played an important role in moving the concept of innovation beyond material products by focusing on how innovative technologies are constructed through a more incremental and interactive process between the innovator and society. Notwithstanding this meaningful contribution, Rogers' work has been criticized for not considering the relationship between users and technological innovations, especially in regard to the ways users "modify technology for their own purpose and "create a set of distinct social practices around the technology" (Donner 2008: 9).

The seminal work of Nelly Oudshoorn and Trevor Pinch (2003) in *How Users Matter: The Co-construction of Users and Technologies* and Ron Eglash (2004) in *Appropriating Technology: Vernacular Science and Social Power* played an instrumental

role in moving science and technology studies away from an undifferentiated view of the social shaping of technology that was primarily preoccupied with users from the perspective of designers and producers. By focusing on users and consumers of technology, Oudshoorn and Pinch (2003) not only highlight the agency of users in technology creation and development, but they also demonstrate the importance of sociocultural context in making use of technology. Eglash (2004) further develops the central role of users as producers of technoscience through his notion of appropriation. For Eglash, focusing on appropriation is critical in redressing the unequal power dynamics. And as such, understanding the ways in which use and appropriation have always played an important role in the creation and development of new technologies allows for a broader conception of innovation that fully embraces alternative technological practices, histories, and cultures.

Building on this insightful work, David Edgerton (2008) in *Shock of the Old* has called for a “rethinking of our notion of technological time” from innovation-based to use-based timelines in order to accommodate the diverse practices of innovation beyond Western modernist discourses of technological determinism. Technological innovation, after all, is an intrinsically human phenomenon that cannot be limited to certain social, economic and cultural contexts. For example, Africanist economic historian Sara Berry has shown that cocoa farming and production is an example of a successful indigenous innovation, “a new productive activity which led to economic growth and structural change within a given institutional and social context” (1974: 95). Expanding on this work, Gloria Emeagwali (2018) has argued that Nigerian female entrepreneurs, who often made surplus products beyond their domestic needs, collaboratively developed

technological innovations in the processing and production of soaps, vegetable oils, ceramics, and textiles (Emeagwali 2018: 140). However, with the incursion of colonial rule and the subsequent influx of cheap imported goods, these innovations declined as female-run industries like pottery, textiles, and salt processing were weakened by the patriarchal colonial system. Together these historical examples demonstrate that adopting a use-based approach of innovation not only deconstructs the entangled notion of innovation as technological products or entrepreneurial but it also draws attention to the multiple, indiscriminate forms that innovation and innovators can take, especially in non-Western contexts.

My attention to diaspora stems from a desire to expand the scope of innovation to incorporate the creative productions of the African diaspora and to explicitly reveal innovation as a constitutive element of diasporic formations. Though scholars have shown and continue to demonstrate the material innovations of the African Diaspora, such as the technological transfer of African rice farming techniques from Sierra Leone and Guinea to the South Carolina Low Country (Fields-Black 2008) and gold mining practices from the Gold Coast to the Mina Gerais area in Brazil (Ofosu-Mensah 2017), this work rarely ever uses the term “innovation” to describe them although they undoubtedly qualify. And even where much extensive work has been done on creative productions, the “rhizomorphic, fractal structure” of diasporic formations is given primacy over more spectral origins (Gilroy 1993). Accordingly, theorizing diaspora as innovation fills gaps in scholarly research on innovation studies and the African diaspora.

Central to my reconception of innovation is a need to move beyond the dialectical structure between Africa and its diaspora found within the African Diaspora scholarship.

Although Africa primarily occupies an ambivalent position within this literature, I argue that a rhizomatic understanding of diasporic formations need not evade the question of Africa. My emphasis on Africa is not coming from an idealistic stance that privileges African roots over diasporic routes. Instead, it comes from a realization that all roots inevitably come from somewhere. This incontrovertible fact means that Africa is more than just a specter in the making of diaspora. In other words, the innovation of diaspora does not merely lie in the transportation to an elsewhere or the habitation of an elsewhere. Rather, innovation arises from the productive tension involved in making the new location livable using elusive fragments of past locations, lives, and memories. Such an innovation is essentially a process of *constitutive appropriation* or coproduction between Africa and its diasporas. As Toluwalogo Odumosu argues both consumption and production are involved in the act of appropriation because

“The act of using a technological system entails producing knowledge about its possible and varied uses, constituting cultural practices around the artifact or system, the formation of community, and in some cases even the reconfiguration of the artifact or system itself—all activities subsumed in the term consumption” (2017:139).

In the same manner, the diasporic process of bringing disparate locations together involves not only the consumption and production of sociocultural knowledge but also a domestication of externally derived knowledge forms and materials. Ultimately then, examining innovation and diaspora in this way means that Africa can be clearly seen as dynamic coauthor in the making of the diaspora and the world at large.

Conceptualizing diaspora as innovation also helps to disrupt the Eurocentric and

modernist discourse that underpins much of the literature on technological innovation. For the most part, the historical silence on diasporic cultural productions as innovations can be attributed to the historic marginalization and continued racial oppression of African peoples, which were either labeled as primitive tools or stolen by the dominant class. Acknowledging African diasporic products and processes as innovations thus destabilizes these hegemonic enterprises of Western modernity because innovation inherently displays agency that oppressors claimed African people lacked. Although postcolonial and postmodern theoretical injunctions have deconstructed the myth of Modernity, the mainstream concept of innovation is yet to shed these ideological trappings, thus making it difficult to grasp the full complexities of diasporic creativity. Still, we cannot simply discard the notion of innovation because the term itself has become widely appropriated across the Diaspora and the Global South. Moreover, it is obvious that technological innovation will continue to play a vital role in our present and future just as it has played in our past. Redefining diaspora as innovation thus creates an archive of innovation wherein we occupy a central place, especially as we imagine a truly liberatory future for African peoples.

One such intervention can be found in Reginald Royston's (2014) thesis "Reassembling Ghana: Diaspora and Innovation in the African Mediascape." For Royston, focusing on innovation allows for the emergence of "material creativity and forms of novelty beyond conceptions of technology obscured within "modernist paradigm of science and development" (ibid, 11, 16). Royston primarily focuses on the ways in which Ghanaians in Diaspora deploy digital technologies to connect with the homeland and thus overcome asymmetries of the global network society. In contrast, this

chapter examines the specific ways in which Nigerians construct diaspora as a form of innovation. To further explore the innovation of diaspora, I first investigate the relationships between digital media and new African diaspora before presenting a brief overview of the Nigerian diaspora in the sections that follow.

Digital Technology and the Making of the New African Diaspora

The emergence of digital technologies has had far-reaching consequences for the New African Diaspora and has led to formation of *digital diasporas*. Similar to Benedict Anderson's (1991) seminal argument in *Imagined Communities* that the invention of print capitalism laid the foundations of modern nationalisms, several scholars have cogently articulated the multifaceted ways that digital media has created diasporic communities between and across Africa and the diaspora. According to Michel Laguerre, "a digital diaspora is an immigrant group or descendant of an immigrant population that uses IT connectivity to participate in virtual networks of contacts for a variety of political, economic, social, , and communicational purposes that, for the most part, may concern either the homeland, the host land, or both, including its own trajectory abroad" (2010: 50).

Departing from Laguerre's connection of digital diaspora with real-life diasporas, Victoria Bernal (2018) states "online spaces can be constructed not only to serves as virtual, extraterritorial space experience untethered from any national territory, but alternatively can be used to create an experience of re-territorialization, as if one is located in a particular physical space"(ibid, 2-3). In so doing, she argues that the power of digital diaspora lies in this nebulous and fluid relationship between cyberspace and territory. This conceptualization contrasts with her earlier work on the diasporic use of an

Eritrean website, www.dehai.org, which showed how the utopians projects of cyberspace and nationalism converge to transform experiences and imaginaries of citizenship and community. Eritrea continues to strongly define the notion of digital diaspora.

Although postmodern scholars posited that globalization and its forces would render nations and nationalisms irrelevant forms of identity and belonging in the new millennia, the first decades of the twenty-first century have shown that individuals and communities are still very much invested in the nation-state (Appadurai 1996, Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). More recently, scholarship on the African diaspora continues to explore the multivalent and polysemic connections between identity and the nation-state, particularly with the rise of voluntary and induced emigration from Africa to the West in the past twenty-five years.³²

For these new members of the African diaspora, the nation is not just an imagined concept. Rather, it is a historical reality and social unit of organization that remains a salient site for individuals and communities to constitute their diasporic subjectivities (Makalani 2009). In the *New African Diaspora: The New African Immigrant Experience*, Paul Zeleza also points out that African migrants “have to contend with the imperative of the modern nation-state, which often frames the political and cultural itineraries of their

³² Although global international migration has risen from 77 million in 1960 to 258 million in 2017, African immigration “between 2010 and 2017 has grown at a higher rate (31%) than in the 2000s (25%) and the 1990s (1%)” (Connor 2018, UNDESA 2017). The dire political economy of many African countries has created precarious and nearly impossible conditions for nationals to survive much less realize their dreams and aspirations (Arthur 2000, Zeleza 2009). While the bulk of Africans migrate within the Continent, immigration to the West, specifically the United States, has increased in the last thirty years as a result of favorable U.S. immigration policies between the 1960s and 1990s (UNCTAD 2018, Takyi 2009). Additionally, African migrants are attracted the number of educational and professional opportunities in the U.S. According to the Pew Research Center (2018), the U.S. African immigrant population doubled, rising from 574,000 in 2000 to 1.6 million in 2016. This is a significant shift from older international migration patterns, which saw larger amounts of Africans migrating to Europe (Takyi 2009).

travel and transnational networks” (2009: 36). Moreover, new African migrants inhabit a liminal state of being because they struggle to identify with their new homes due to powerful homogenizing logics of racism, which collapses all phenotypical black persons into the same category without attempting to understand the differences and similarities between them. These assumptions have led to problematic misconceptions between African Americans and immigrant Africans. Thus, in contrast to diasporic formations of identity, recent African immigrants are more transnational in their emphasis on identity.

Transnationalism and diaspora are inextricably entangled and overlap in multiple ways; however, distinctions lie in the ways in which these phenomena emphasize scope, time, and identity (Faist 2010). With regard to scope, Faist states that transnationalism is the broader term that encompasses a variety of cross-border interactions, such that “transnational communities encompass diasporas, but not all transnational communities are diasporas” (2010: 21). Jana Braziel and Anita Mannur (2003) reiterate this claim in stating that diaspora is primarily a human experience and cannot be used to describe economic and technology like transnationalism can. Time is another distinction between the two terms because diaspora pertains to dispersal over a span of multiple generations (Faist 2010). Transnationalism, on the other hand, often refers to more recent migration patterns. Both time and scope greatly influence identity, which is one of the main differences between transnationalism and diaspora.

Although transnationalism and diaspora both stress strong connections to their countries of emigration and immigration, diaspora’s emphasis on identity is primarily preoccupied with forming a collective identity diasporic among dispersed peoples globally. As a result of long periods—decades or even centuries—away from countries

of origin, diasporans are less likely to espouse nationalistic fervor and more likely to mobilize national identity symbolically to foster group identity abroad. In contrast, transnationalism is more invested in the project of the nation-state, which stems both from the recent migration of most transnationals and from the frequent contact between transnationals and the nation-state through travel, media, and capital.

Still, contemporary members of the African diaspora remain viscerally connected to their nations in tangible ways beyond mere nostalgia. The economic impact of the African diaspora is well recorded in the academic literature (Brinkerhoff 2009, Mohan and Zack-Williams 2002). Indeed, economics was constitutive in the formation of both the historic and contemporary diaspora, since according to Zeleza, “both were engendered by labor imperatives, one involving demand for forced slave labor and the other supply of free wage labor” (2009: 46).

More recent diasporas contribute to the economic development of their countries through remittances and investments. According to the World Bank’s Migration and Development Brief, global remittances grew to \$613 billion in 2017. Despite the fact that remittance transfers to Africa are the highest in the world, Nigeria with \$22 billion and Egypt with \$20 billion ranked fifth and sixth in the list of top remittance recipients. These contributions are either made on an individual basis or with the help of diaspora organizations (DOs) (Brinkerhoff 2009). Remittances are a critical and constant source of external finance for Africa because they are larger and much less volatile than official development assistance and foreign direct investment. These remittances also directly impact the welfare and well-being of individual households, as they are primarily used for food, health, and education (UNCTAD 2018).

Apart from remittances, the transnational engagement of new African diasporans with the homeland also extends into the political sphere. An example of this transnational political engagement can be found in Michel Laguerre's *Diaspora, Politics and Globalization*, which describes a growing trend in Haitian politics where "diasporic politicians return to the homeland, and homeland politician may find themselves living in diaspora, either by their own choice or after being forced to do so by events over which they have no control" (2006: 113). He thus argues that the transnational dynamics of local politics are best conceived using the terms, "circulation rather than exit and repositioning rather than exile" (2006: 113). Similarly, Misty Bastian (1999) examines the construction of a virtual Nigeria through the Naijanet listserv during the Abacha regime of the nineties. According to Bastian, Naijanet was "virtual nationalist community in the making" because of its strong nationalist discourse and fostering of actual political activism in some instances. Indeed, the listserv came under the surveillance of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria after 1995, which attests to the growing importance of this virtual community. Furthermore, with the example of the 2007 arrest of a U.S.-based Gambian journalist upon arriving at Banjul airport for her online activity, Wisdom Tettey (2009) portrays the real-life implications of online political activities for digital diasporas.

The complexity of diasporic politics is further complicated by homeland governments, which Beth Whitaker (2011) states are at the forefront of the increased political participation of the African diaspora. She contends that African governments continue to extend dual citizenship and voting rights to their diasporans abroad in order to increase investment back home and garner financial support for their political campaigns.

Moreover, with the African Union (AU) officially recognizing the diaspora as the “Sixth region of Africa” in 2003, African governments have intensified their efforts to leverage overseas nationals for socioeconomic development (Kamei 2011).

In response, scholars have begun to call for the actualizing of African Diaspora citizenship rights (Boyce-Davies and M’Bow 2007). The call for African Diaspora citizenship is premised on the fact that “African peoples uprooted by forced enslavement never did give up their rights to citizenship on the Continent of Africa, even though the nation-states that now make up this geopolitical entity did not exist during the time of transatlantic slavery” (ibid, 17). African Diaspora citizenship should therefore be taken seriously by all African nations and relevant supranational bodies as a key step in correcting the ills of history. Though making it a political reality will be difficult, as evidenced by the Liberian and Rastafarian case, this should not dissuade African governments because there are historical examples of successful returns to the Continent such as the Sierra Leonean, Cuban, and Brazilian repatriates in Lagos, Ghana, and Togo. Implementing African Diaspora citizenship rights will also inevitably benefit the Continent as diaspora members can help to develop the African nation-states through “brain circulation” (Patterson 2006).³³

Aside from fostering transnationalism, the new African diaspora has also been greatly impacted by the corresponding rise of the Network Society within the same time period. After the invention of the World Wide Web in 1989, the number of global

³³ This is in opposition to the phenomena of “brain drain and gain” often found in immigration and development literature. The brain drain terminology refers to the migration of highly skilled nationals from their countries of origin to more economically developed countries. On the other hand, the brain gain is used to describe the movement of highly skilled returnees back to their countries of origin. While some scholars have criticized the notion of “brain drain” for its depiction of African as victims, other have used the term brain circulation to describe the transnational movement and exchange between the diaspora and the homeland (Nnaemeka 2007).

Internet users, referring to those who use the Internet or own a smartphone, has exponentially increased from 44 million in 1995 to 4.3 billion in 2019 (Murphy and Roser 2019). This translates into more than half of the global population accessing the Internet. Of this group, the Global North has over 80% of its population online.³⁴ Africa, on the other hand, has the lowest Internet penetration in the world with an estimated 35.2% of its population, or 1.04 billion users online, according to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).

And although accessing the high-quality Internet remains a persistent problem due to high costs and poor Internet speeds, the Continent boasts the most pronounced growth in Internet usage, with an increase from 2.1 percent in 2005 to 24.4 percent in 2018 (“ITU” 2018).³⁵ This growth is primarily being driven by the mobile phone revolution in Africa. According to the 2017 GSMA Mobile Economy Report, Africa is the global leader in mobile phone adoption with a 50% subscription rate. And while wealthy and educated young Africans are at the forefront of the growth in Internet usage, the overall impact of the information and communication technology revolution on Africa is indisputable, especially in facilitating engagement and communication between the Continent and its diasporas (Silver and Johnson 2018, Tettey 2013).

THE NIGERIAN DIASPORA IN CONTEXT

The migration of Nigerians outside the country’s geographic borders predates the formal amalgamation of Nigeria under British colonial rule in 1914. Africans had been moving across the Continent for several centuries, searching for new farmlands and

³⁴ While the digital divide discourse permeates the Global South, it is important to point out that inequality persists in accessing the Internet in the Global North (Everett 2009).

³⁵ Internet access is expected to grow with the new connectivity initiatives of Facebook and Google across the Continent (Shapshak 2019).

security (Adepoju 2005). Well before the advent of the transatlantic slave trade, the trans-Saharan caravan trade, which reached its zenith between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries with the rise of the West African empires of Songhai and Mali, had fostered the circulation of cultural, religious, and economic practices (Boahen 1966). This movement, however, took an unprecedented turn with the forced extraction of Africans from the Continent to the Americas during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. J. Lorand Matory (2000), for example, traces a Yoruba imperium in the New World, which includes the spread of Orisha practices. Given this long history of external and internal migration, the Nigerian diaspora rightly includes enslaved Africans who formerly inhabited societies within the geographic region now called Nigeria. Accordingly, Olukoya Ogen (2017:114) has defined the modern Nigerian diaspora “as those living outside the shores of the country who not only trace their origins to Nigeria but also identify with and support the development of the homeland.”

In addition to the complications that historical breadth introduces into examinations of the Nigerian diaspora, estimating the magnitude of contemporary Nigerians abroad proves an extremely arduous task. Although the Migration Policy Institute (2015) documents approximately 376,000 Nigerians immigrants resident in the United States and the Mayor of Brent mentioned in 2013 that over 1 million Nigerians lived in London, the numbers do not account for the growing number of undocumented migrants in the UK and America (Ogen 2017). This, along with the poor documentation of Nigerian immigration authorities, complicate Asekun and Arogundade’s (2017) recent estimate of 20 million Nigerians living in different countries across the world.

The existence of a sizeable portion of the Nigerian population abroad is a

relatively recent phenomenon of the past three decades. Although Nigerians have lived in Western countries of Europe and United States of America since the transatlantic slave trade, those migrations were predominantly involuntary. Olaudah Equiano, an enslaved Igbo man, was one of the involuntary migrants to the West Indies before purchasing his freedom and becoming a prominent abolitionist in London (Adeniyi 2016: 2). By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries however, travel between African colonies like Nigeria and colonial metropolises like England grew after the slave trade ended in 1807 and the introduction of Christian missionary societies and colonialism in 1839 and 1851, respectively (Mann 2007). During that time, many Nigerian students migrated to England to further their education and ultimately formed the West African Students' Union, an early pan-African and nationalist organization, in London in 1925 (Adi 1998). Emmanuel Akyeampong (2000:199) is careful to note that "not all travel outside the colony or between colony and metropole was voluntary, as African recruitment and deployment during the First and Second World Wars illustrate." The end of World War II and growing anticolonial sentiments of the 1950s witnessed an increase in educational opportunities as Nigerians sought to return home with "valuable skills needed for nation building" (Ogen 2017, Mberu and Pongon 2010).

Although Nigerians have migrated to England for over 200 years and are notably the largest and oldest black community in the UK, the period after independence saw a shift in this migration pattern as Nigerians began to travel to the United States (Ojo 2013: 76). Prior to the 1960s, Nigerian students mainly went to the United States to further their studies with the support of missionary societies (Udofia 2007: 228). More specifically, most of these students were from the Igbo ethnic group of southeastern

Nigeria. The first President of Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikwe, was among the first wave of Nigerians who sojourned to America for higher education between the late 1930s and mid-1950s.

After the country emerged as the ‘Giant of Africa’ upon achieving independence in 1960, the number of Nigerian migrants to the US increased as the country began to play a key role in US-Africa foreign policy (Udofia 2007: 200, Kperogi 2011). By the mid-1960s, this migratory pattern had intensified with the introduction of the 1965 Immigration Act, which jettisoned the national origins and quota system and gave preference to highly skilled immigrants (Arthur 2000: 7). My paternal grandfather, who traveled abroad to pursue his Master’s degree at Yale University in the mid-1960s, was one of the beneficiaries of this new immigration policy (Obayan family oral history).

With the widespread influence of economic recession and military rule in the 1980s, which made “obtaining or practicing meaningful work increasingly difficult” for the average citizen, Nigeria has been the “largest source of African immigration to the United States” (MPI 2015, Reynolds 2004: 22). According to the Migration Policy Institute’s (2015) conservative statistics, “the size of the Nigeria-born population in the United States has grown from a small base since 1980, when an estimated 25,000 Nigerian immigrants were U.S. residents to approximately 376,000 Nigerians living in the United States.” In general, African immigration to the US has been greatly facilitated by the establishment of the Diversity Visa Lottery Program under the Immigration Act of 1990 (Arthur 2000: 10).³⁶ I personally benefited from this program when my mother

³⁶According to John Arthur, “the act made it possible to increase the total number of immigrants admitted on the basis of skills for employment in the United States and increase the admission of immigrants from countries and regions of the world with a low representation of immigrants” (2000:10).

won a visa through the lottery program, which resulted in my entire family migrating to the US in 1999.

Although North America and Europe continue to be the main destination for Nigerian immigrants, the early 2000s witnessed a growing number of Nigerian youth who generally possess lower skills and education migrating to Europeans and Asian countries. Some of these countries include: “Germany, China, Malaysia, France, Belgium, Italy, Netherlands, the Gulf States, South Africa, and Botswana” (Ogen 2017: 115, Mberu and Pongon 2010). In fact, Ogen notes that fifty percent of Nigerian migrants actually reside on the African Continent (2017: 116). Unfortunately, not all migration has been positive, as Nigeria has become a major source of child and female trafficking to Europe for sex slavery, child labor, and forced labor (Adepoju and van de Wiel 2010). Furthermore, the dire economic conditions of the country have led to the growth of illegal immigration to the US and Europe (Ojo 2013: 77). The U.S. Department of Homeland Security recently documented that 29,004 Nigerians overstayed their visas in 2018 (Gomez 2019). As a result, President Donald Trump has implemented new visa restrictions on countries whose citizens overstay temporary visas. Though the effects of such an order are not yet known, one thing is certain: Africans and Nigerians most especially will continue to migrate outside their countries of origin in search of opportunities if national economies do not improve soon (Connor 2018).

DIASPORA AS INNOVATION: REMAKING NATIONAL BOUNDARIES

The proliferation of African cultural productions (which I refer to as innovations) has been a much-celebrated aspect of living as an African diasporan in the twenty-first century. More so, the rate at which this information circulates instantaneously through

digital networks never ceases to fascinate. Thus, when Chimamanda Adichie's (2013) magisterial novel *Americanah* came out and her older novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) was made into a film, we were informed. And when Nollywood actress Genevieve Nnaji made Netflix's first Nigerian original film, *Lionheart* (2019), we were aware. And when Nigerian *Afrobeats* artist Wizkid collaborated with American pop-rapper Drake on the 2016 global hit, "One Dance," we knew that too. And we were elated. By using "we," I intentionally draw from my personal identity and experiences as an African in diaspora. As such, the centrality of the African Diaspora to the success of these innovations cannot be overstated.

The watershed moment of our time is therefore the fact that more people outside Africa are now aware of African cultural innovations. While an increase in African books, music, film, art, fashion, and food does not necessarily translate to an increase in opportunities for Africans, it has certainly helped to counter dominant perceptions about African primitivism and backwardness although it has not displaced them. This flurry of African-authored images on Africa was what made the notion of African rising legible within global African diasporic imaginaries. We are not ignorant, however, of its neoliberalism underpinnings. All the same, the intersection of neoliberal-inflected African rising discourse with the spread of African cultural innovations is not a matter of coincidence but rather it is a result of an accumulated archive of culture finally given broad-scale expression through the Africa Continent's encounter with social networking and global interconnectivity. The global expansion of digital technology and virtual shrinking of physical borders has undeniably made African cultural productions more accessible to all.

To further establish the relationship between diaspora and innovation, I examine Nollywood as a transnational cinematic cultural practice to show how diaspora remakes and extends the nation beyond its territorial borders. Redefining these cultural productions and material practices in this way is important because it allows for more productive engagement between Africa and its diasporas from an unashamedly African vantage point. Such an examination also provides profound possibilities for imaginatively traversing the borders of deterritorialized nation space-time in order to forge global futures for Africa and its diaspora.

Diaspora and the Innovation of Global African Identity: The Nollywood Example

Although contemporary scholars in the sub-field of Nollywood Studies have extensively examined the film industry in relation to transnationalism, migration, and the African diaspora, the connections between Nollywood and the African diaspora, this scholarship has yet to explore the cinematic culture through the concept of innovation (Okome and Kriggs 2013, Adejunmobi 2014, Arthur 2016). Since 2007, Nollywood has witnessed a shift in its mode of film production, financing, and distribution. This shift stems from a “crisis of overproduction” and audience dissatisfaction with low production values (Ryan 2015, Adejunmobi 2015, Haynes 2014). As such, some filmmakers decided to focus on making A-grade films for domestic and international consumption through the distinct use of new filmmaking practices including “an initial theatrical exhibition, an avoidance of the straight to video format that characterized Old Nollywood, and most importantly, the pursuit of higher production values” (Adejunmobi 2015: 34). The segment of the Nigerian film industry is referred to as “New Nollywood” and features the work of filmmakers like Kunle Afolayan, Obi Emelonye, and Mahmood Al-Balogun. As

a cinematic practice, New Nollywood is more invested in representing an Africa as a center of global modernity by using high definition images to cultivate affective desires for global urban middle-class consumerism (Ryan 2015, Adejunmobi 2015).

The new shift in Nigerian cinema has also led to the development of new distribution channels. For most of its history, Nollywood has relied on informal distribution networks derived from piracy networks for international films (Lobato 2010, Larkin 2008). While these networks have been relatively efficient in distributing video to their audiences, the oversaturation of the industry with low-budget movies and the “unregulated broadcast of Nollywood movies” on African Magic satellite television channels “have created a new puncture in an already leaky distribution system” (Ryan 2015:57). Thus, with the entrance of smartphones, Internet connectivity, transnational corporation financiers, and multiplex cinema theaters, Nollywood filmmakers are embracing new distribution channels in the form of social media, “satellite television, streaming video websites, video on-demand, in-flight entertainment, and especially theaters in West Africa and the diaspora” to target and serve a more affluent crowd (Ryan 2015:59, Haynes 2018).

Significantly, Nigerians and Africans in diaspora have primarily driven the development of these new distribution networks, especially in the West (Madichie et al. 2019). British-Nigerian tech entrepreneur Jason Njoku, for example, founded IROKO Partners, the first online video on demand platform for Nollywood movies in 2011 to connect diaspora audiences with home (Haynes 2018, Adejunmobi 2014, Ebelebe 2019). Consequently, since then, the online consumption of Nollywood content has expanded to include Netflix and Amazon Prime, among other media, and watching Nigerian movies

has now become a transnational, diasporic, and global cultural practice. And even more recently, the Nigerian diaspora has been reversing this content flow by producing its own films. Facilitating such exchanges between and across Africa and its diaspora is one of the central ways Nollywood epitomizes diaspora as innovation. In what follows, I further this point through an examination of Nollywood's role in creating a digitally mediated global African identity and encouraging return between Africa and its diaspora.

The consumption of Nollywood content connects members of the African Diaspora thus creating a digitally mediated global African identity that is simultaneously national, African, diasporic, and global. According to Nigerian screen media scholars, Nollywood has such a global appeal because of its ability to “offer viewers an immediacy with their own lives and experiences” and “read into the soul of its audiences” (Ryan 2015: 8, Ajibade 2013: 264, Adejunmobi 2010). If we take this to be true, what then should we make of the widespread engagement of Africans on the Continent and in the diaspora with Nollywood? As Matthias Krings and Onookome (2013) note, Nollywood is influential in African countries like Tanzania, South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana as well as across the diaspora in Caribbean countries like Jamaica and Barbados and in the South American country of Brazil. On one hand, the global popularity of Nollywood is outstanding when one considers of how rooted the filmic practices are in Nigerian (Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa) cultural idioms. On the other hand, its popularity is not so difficult to grasp when one considers the shared African diasporic and Global South experiences of slavery and coloniality/modernity. Although Nollywood movies (videotapes and then DVDs) were initially exported to the diaspora through “informal transnational distribution networks” and sold in African stores or borrowed from family and friends

with the latest releases, the increase in Internet connectivity speeds shifted Nollywood consumer markets to online streaming on digital platforms like YouTube, iRokoTv, and Netflix (Ewing 2016). Thus, digital technology has expanded Nollywood's appeal beyond the nation.

Victoria Bernal's (2014) conception of the nation as network is especially apt in thinking about how the contemporary proliferation of digital technology has deterritorialized the nation and forges new forms of sociality and identity among members of diaspora through the cross-border consumption of digital media content. In particular, she states,

“Through the web, the diaspora does much more than simply assuage their homesickness or vent their political passions... Online activities have off-line consequences. Eritrean posters shape public opinion, revise national history, mobilize demonstrators, amass funds for national projects, engage in protest and exert influence and pressure on the government of Eritrea. We cannot understand these online activities simply as a feature of diaspora, but rather as part of the configuration of Eritrean nationhood” (ibid, 3).

As such, I argue for an understanding of Nollywood as an innovation co-produced between African and its diaspora to configure a global “Africanity,” or African identity, which all members of the African diaspora can embrace.

For members of the historic African diaspora, Nollywood movies function as a representational tool to counter the visual hegemony of Whiteness in media and to correct misconceptions of African backwardness. Kamhara Ewing's (2016) dissertation research on Nigerian cultural productions in Brazil, for example, has revealed that Nollywood

movies can challenge the way Africans in Brazilians and Afro-Brazilians view themselves in an environment dominated by Eurocentric media content. Not only were many audience participants of her study empowered by the all-Black cast, they also mentioned being more informed about Nigerian and African culture. This point on being educated about African culture clearly resonates with Jane Bryce's (2013) earlier study on Nigerian video films in Barbados, where audiences commonly referred to Nollywood movies as African movies. In this work, Bryce argues that "Nigeria has become a sign for Africa" in this sense, so watching Nigerian films is tantamount to learning about an African elsewhere. And while audiences in Brazil and Barbados identified with Nollywood themes of race, spirituality, gender, and melodrama, the shared experience of "postcolonial marginality in the face of global capital than from any superficially identifiable kinship relation" and Nollywood's "Africanity" were what clearly connected members of the old diaspora to Nigeria and those on the African Continent.

According to Jane Bryce (2013), Heike Becker (2013), and Katrien Pype (2013), the widespread popularity of Nollywood can be linked to its Africanity, an unabashed self-styling and self-representation of Africa as a participant in the 'global project of modernity.' This explicitly African vantage point not only does political work on a representational level but it also creates a new non-Western cultural archive that other Africans can draw from in fashioning their subjectivities. More specifically, the individual works of Bryce, Becker, and Pype demonstrate that continental Africans draw on these stylistic repertoires for diverse reasons ranging from charismatic Christianity to an embrace of African conceptions of beauty. This embrace of Nollywood's Africanity, however, is not an uncritical adoption without mediation but rather it entails a reworking

and remixing of Nollywood cultural idioms in relation to the local contexts (Kriggs and Okome 2013).

Even for Nigerians and Africans in diaspora, Nollywood films stand as a synecdoche for Africa and are used to affirm their Africanity. In her study on African immigrants in the United States and their consumption of Nollywood movies to digitally remediate home, Tori Arthur (2016) demonstrates the ways in which Africans³⁷ immigrants' used Nollywood film to connect and engage with home. Through Nollywood films, diasporans can connect with distant memories of home as familiar neighborhoods are depicted on screen. Nigerians in diaspora are also able to educate themselves and their American-born children about Nigeria and Africa as a whole while also drawing from their personal experiences. As Reginald Royston (2014) has shown us in the Ghanaian context, the consumption of digital media content is significant in the identity formation of Ghanaian diaspora. He therefore contends that Ghanaians living abroad are just as dependent on media content from the homeland as Ghanaians at home are dependent on financial flows from diaspora. As such, Royston argues that the nation also actively contributes to the making of global Ghanaian identity.

Watching Nollywood movies also provides a clear example of how digital media has reshaped the affective economies of diaspora, especially in regard to return migration by creating “digital structures of feelings” (Kuntsman 2012: 3). Digital structures of feelings consist of reverberation, cybertouch, and affective fabrics. “Reverberation” describes “simultaneous presence of speed and stillness in online sites; to distortions and resonance, intensification and dissolution in the process of moving through various

³⁷ Her study included immigrants from Nigeria, Congo, Benin Republic, Ghana, Cote D'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, and Kenya

digital terrains” (ibid, 2). “Cybertouch” refers to how events can touch us through our digital devices by bringing distanced experiences closer and generating instant emotional responses (ibid, 3). “Affective fabric” describes “the lived and deeply felt everyday sociality of connections, ruptures, emotions, words, politics and sensory energies, some which can be pinned down to words or structures; other are intense yet ephemeral” (ibid). Together these digital structures of feelings produce what Reginald Royston has called “affective exchange:” intense, sensorial experiences that “transfer the physicality and emotional sentiment through digital media forms” (2016:278). Thus, for diasporic subjects, the speedy circulation and consumption of digital content —unmediated by the harsh everyday realities of life in Nigeria—can have powerful emotional effects on them.

For example, Margie, a participant from Sierra Leone, stated that whenever she feels homesick, she goes to YouTube because “those Nigerian movies on YouTube take me home” (Arthur 2016: 189). Similarly, “Paula and Penny are so emotionally attached to Nollywood films that they both desire to marry “real Nigerian men” and live in Lagos or Abuja and “live a real African life” (ibid, 185). Nollywood’s ability to create such strong emotional connections stem from its melodramatic origins in Latin American telenovelas, Bollywood films, America soap operas, and Yoruba Theater. Consequently, the affect produced by these films, coupled with the failed expectations of the hostland and interactive world of new media, have enhanced the emotional dimension of contemporary diasporas “through the redefinition of presences and absences and the increasing exercise of post-corporeal agency” (Tettey 2013: 350).

This intensification of emotions can also be traced to the surmounting of *decalage*—“a difference or gap in time or in space”—by the digital diaspora (Edwards

2003: 65, Royston 2014). Before the advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs), individuals in diaspora were disconnected temporally and spatially from their friends and families back home (Tettey 2013). Nowadays, the time-space compression capabilities of digital technologies have enabled a process wherein “distance is created, displacement is controlled, and something is kept present whilst also being lost” (Callon and Law 2004:10).

By mediating and manipulating time gaps, Nollywood movies allow diasporic subjects to time travel and essentially create new affective borders of their imagined communities. In “Affective Economies,” Sara Ahmed argues against the notion of emotions originating within individual subjects and instead posits that emotions “create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds” (2004: 117). Taking this point further, emotions also do things to mediate the relationship between home and diaspora, and between the physical and virtual. The ranges of emotions involved in these processes and relationships are what constitute the affective economies of diaspora, which is marked by loss, nostalgia, and melancholy for the imagined communities left behind (Quayson 2005, Quayson and Daswani 2013). These affective economies of diaspora, however, transcend the realm of emotions into actions.

Using digital technology, migrants can act on their emotions in ways previously unimagined and can enrich their affective economies through virtual and physical returns to the homeland. Virtual return is primarily enacted through interaction with digital media content such as Nollywood movies, music, photography, and real-time connections with family and friends on social media. These new digital platforms enable migrants to be completely in-sync with new developments on the African Continent. While simply

“scouring Nigerian websites, Nigerian profiles on Facebook, and Nigerian blogs” might be enough to imaginatively return diasporic members back to their homeland, this new form of connection can actually intensify emotional ties and catalyze physical return or diaspora travel to the Continent (Adichie 2013: 16). As a result, return continues to persist as a practice and as a symbol for individuals who cannot go home for political or economic or other reasons. Nollywood movies therefore facilitate these returns for those who want to go home, and for those who never been home, and for those who cannot go home and in so doing, unite a fragmented community by forging an inclusive African identity.

CONCLUSION

This chapter contended that diaspora as a process and condition is a form of innovation by bringing together theorizations on innovation and the African diaspora. In so doing, I advanced a concept of innovation that extend beyond Western materialist and modernist paradigms and is focused on tools and objects to include innovative practices and techniques. The innovation of diaspora in this sense is a product of the experience of alienation and the various attempts to mediate the temporal and spatial gap between diasporans and their homelands.

Within the African diaspora literature, the concept of diaspora itself has been creatively transformed by the constant innovations of its members who need new languages to describe the complexity of their experiences in a rapidly globalizing world. Thus, diaspora has come to mean different things to different people at the same time, even as it refers to a large imagined polity. The coexistence of these historic tensions is why diaspora has withstood the test of time as a malleable and mobile discursive

technology. Taking this as a point of departure, I asserted in this chapter that innovation sits at the very heart of the diaspora as a condition and process of being and becoming. Using Nollywood as an example, I demonstrated that the diverse tools of old and new African migrants in forging connections with each other and the homeland must be called innovations.

Although historically African migrants have innovated various cultural productions to overcome this physical, emotional, and social distance, the contemporary rise of information technology has produced novel techniques and practices that lead to the creation of digital diaspora and nations as networks. Despite these positive developments between Africa and its diaspora, the diasporic experience is still filled with various anxieties, which “encompasses the possibility of never arriving or returning” because diaspora, as Stuart Hall states, “is always going to be lost to you, because 'they' have a double stake, an investment in both here and elsewhere” (2007: 284, Zelzea 2009: 34). Consequently then, these new forms of digital sociality enable diasporic subjects to innovatively mediate the liminal processes of diaspora while simultaneously moving beyond it.

CHAPTER 4

RETURN TO THE FUTURE:

INNOVATIVE RETURNEES IN THE LAGOS TECH ECOSYSTEM

It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness. She scoured Nigerian websites, Nigerian profiles on Facebook, Nigerian blogs, and each click brought yet another story of a young person who had recently moved back home, clothed in American or British degrees, to start an investment company, a music production business, a fashion label, a magazine, a fast-food franchise. She looked at photographs of these men and women and felt the full ache of loss, as though they prised open her hand and taken something of hers. They were living her life. Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil

~ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013:13)

INTRODUCTION

In 2002, Dr. Aloy Chife, a technology executive with extensive experience in Silicon Valley, returned home to Nigeria after spending over a decade abroad (first in the United Kingdom and then in the United States) to found the software startup, Socketworks Limited (now known as SW Global). Aloy Chife initially emigrated from Nigeria in the late 1980s to pursue a doctoral degree in political economy at the London School of Economics. He then settled in the United States and worked in corporate America as Director of Information Systems and Services at Enron in Houston, Texas. More recently, he had served as Director of Business Systems Processes at Apple in Silicon Valley before moving back to Nigeria (Asemota 2012, Afigbo and Muegge 2008). While in the Valley, Chife decided to return to Nigeria after observing the growing prominence of business process outsourcing to Indian software development firms. He “surmised that Nigeria and India shared much in common, and he saw an opportunity to set up a

visionary software company that could focus on automation” (Afigbo and Muegge 2008). Moreover, he was driven by a desire to build Nigeria. In an interview with *Thislife*, he states:

One generation or a group of individuals within a generation have to sacrifice itself for the good of the next generation. No country has grown without one generation sacrificing itself for the good of other generations. So, in my case, it is right that I attained the highest in corporate America, coming back from Silicon Valley. The point is that as good as that life is, it isn't my country and we all have a stake in this country. The knowledge I have acquired, the experience that I have acquired, the competencies that I have will be useful in my country. For me, it isn't money that drives me or fulfills me. It isn't those things, professional attainments, those kinds of academic achievements, I have got it all. What drives me now is the good to which I positively impact the lives of people. If all I do here is to create job for one or two Nigerians, I will die smiling. That to me is a life worth living that to me is the essence of life itself. So that's why I came here to be part of a group that will drive national development in Nigeria (Haruna 2002).

To drive this change, Dr. Chife sought to use Socketworks to position Nigeria as a formidable player in the global market for information technology services and offshore business process outsourcing (BPO).

Although Socketworks had initially targeted oil and banking as key sectors needing process automation software technologies, this plan changed when the company approached the International Finance Corporation (IFC)'s African Project Development

Facility for growth capital (Asemota 2016). Victor Asemota (2012), a prominent local technologist and investor who consulted for the IFC on the project, noted that the market size of local software in Nigeria was virtually unknown at the time, especially since Indian software companies had replaced locally built software enterprises. To assess the opportunity and market of Socketworks' proposal, Asemota (2012) conducted what he described as a "crude market maturity analysis, which looked at the strategic importance of technology and plotted it against the availability of resources to come up with a two-by-two matrix to show where there was more opportunity for local BPO. He then overlaid it with sector data, and it was clear that Education, Healthcare, and Government were the areas that required BPO." The use of computers for most public universities and government institutions at the time was still not widespread, so administrative processes were primarily manual and the few digital records were limited to Word documents and Excel spreadsheets (Muegge and Afigbo 2008).

Seeing the immense opportunities in the education, healthcare, and government sectors, the IFC agreed to provide capital to Socketworks only if the company focused on those areas (Valentine, interview, 2018). Taking this advice, Chife decided to focus on the higher education sector and successfully secured a \$7 million equity investment from the IFC in 2003. After launching a configurable package of automation services called College Portal at its first university using an innovative Application Service Provider (ASP) model of Pay-As-Use, which is described as "provid[ing] IT infrastructure at no cost to the university and recover[ing] costs through student fees," the company rolled out the product to the federal universities and ultimately captured the education market. Socketworks later expanded into the government sector and eventually began automating

processes for educational and governmental institutions across Africa (Ghana, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Liberia, South Africa, and Uganda) and Southeast Asia (Sri Lanka and India).

Although other successful technology companies like Interswitch were established by local entrepreneurs during this period, Socketworks marked a watershed moment in Nigerian technology entrepreneurship for several reasons. First, as the first company to operate like a startup and receive a multimillion-dollar equity investment, it introduced in Nigeria a new era of technology entrepreneurship based on Silicon Valley startup culture and practices. Second, the company was instrumental in developing the contemporary ecosystem because many of its former employees had left either to create another generation of tech startups or to become important players in global technology. Third, his success story encouraged other Nigerians in Diaspora to return home to pursue opportunities either as mid-senior management professionals in multinational corporations or as startup entrepreneurs.

As Jackline Wahba and Yves Zenou (2012) have stated, international migration increases the likelihood for return migrants to become entrepreneurs because it provides them with an opportunity to accumulate human and physical capital. Specifically examining elite return migrants from Ivory Coast and Ghana, Savina Amassari (2004) noted that human capital acquired abroad by returnees contributes positively to development through nation-building for the older generation and entrepreneurship for the younger generation. Francesco Cerase's (1974) study of return migration from the United States to Southern Italy calls this type of return, a return of *innovation*. For Cerase, innovative returnees are migrants "who are prepared to make use of all the means

and new skills they have acquired during their migratory experiences in order to realize greater satisfaction of their needs and aspirations” for national development (Cassarino 2004, Cerase 1974: 251).

Although the *return of innovation* is important for understanding contemporary return migration, the notion is constrained by its narrow origins in economic development and migration research on the brain drain. This scholarship, which first emerged in the 1970s, remains inconclusive on the implications of return migration for national development due to the lack of distinction between diverse migrant categories and the unstable migration patterns of contemporary returnees (Ammassari 2004, Cassarino 2004, Sinatti 2011). Situating the practice of return migration within the “totality of material, emotional and symbolic ties between emigrants and their communities of origin” thus becomes extremely important in refining the theoretical limitation of conventional migration and development literature (Carling 2004: 113). A combination of family demands and educational opportunities has made Nigerians one of the most successful immigrant groups, boasting the highest education level in the United States. This social experience has created a pool of Nigerians who are able now to return home with new business, technical, and marketing skills to make a decisive impact on the country’s development.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how the return of Nigerian diaspora encompasses a wide range of historical and social practices, beyond the political and economic, into that of identity and belonging. The emphasis on diaspora helps to ground contemporary practices of return migration within broader and more nuanced sets of transformations beyond the narrow, binary framework of international migration and economic

development. Such a contextualization is needed for richer theorizations on the complexities of return and for developing grounded frameworks to facilitate more return of skilled diasporans. I first redefine the notion of return within the African diaspora framework and then examine the historical phenomenon of return migration to Lagos. I then explore the experiences of several Nigerian returnees to reveal contemporary motivations for return migration using in-depth case studies before moving on to highlight their innovative contributions in the Lagos tech ecosystem.

Redefining Return Migration in the Context of African Diaspora

The physical or symbolic notion of return has been a central preoccupation of African diaspora thought and politics since the forcible extraction of enslaved Africans from the Continent between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although the term diaspora did not emerge until the 1950s to describe “the dispersal of African peoples, cultures and knowledge all over the world,” the international and transnational flow of black culture and politics has been taking place since the nineteenth century (Edwards 2001: 45, Boyce-Davies 2008: xxxiii). Pioneered by the work of black intellectuals such as Edward Blyden, George Padmore, W. E. B. Du Bois, St. Clair Drake, and George Shepperson, this early scholarship constructed the African Diaspora framework primarily on the basis of racial identity and shared experiences of racial oppression and violence (Gordon and Anderson 1999, Edwards 2001).

Following this foundational work, scholars such as Melville Herskovits, Jean-Price Mars, and Zora Neale Hurston shifted the focus from race to culture as the central analytical category of the African Diaspora. The African Diaspora thus “became conceptualized not simply as a racial entity but as a cultural community dynamically

uniting African and its communities in displacement through commonalities of African cultural practice and worldview” (Gordon and Anderson 1999: 285). Consequently, the Herskovitsean model of African cultural survivals and the mobilization model, which focuses on overt and covert resistance, has become the most prominent theorization within the last three decades of twentieth century African diaspora scholarship (Hanchard 1999).

Several contemporary theorists such as Jared Sexton, Saidiya Hartman, and Frank Wilderson deviate from this preoccupation with Africa as origins (roots) and instead place more emphasis on cultural hybridity (routes), especially in the wake of Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* (1993). In his attempt to move concepts of diaspora beyond theories of recovering a historical past, Gilroy disavows Afrocentrism, Negritude, and Pan-Africanism because of their romanticization of Africa; and instead, he stresses the new cultural productions of African-Americans in the aftermath of slavery. Scholars, however, continue to critique Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* for its conflation of the black Atlantic with diaspora; its preoccupation with multicultural pluralism at the expense of negating an African ontology; and its hegemonic eclipsing of all other inter- and intra-African diasporas (Echeruo 1999; Patterson and Kelly 2000; Zeleza 2005).

Privileging notions of return, which focuses on Africa as a shared site of origin, over simplifies complex transformations that the African diaspora has undergone and conceals the ways in which diasporic formations are produced at sites of difference. In “Diaspora and the Localities of Race,” Minkah Makalani draws attention to “how place stretches, twists, and ultimately severs any presumption of a necessary correspondence between African diaspora and blackness” (2009:4). Richard Wright’s *Black Power*

(1995) poignantly expresses this complex process of racialization when, during his trip to the Gold Coast in the 1950s, he encounters a group of people dancing to drums after a girl dies. Unable to understand why they are dancing, he becomes incredibly frustrated and remarks, “I had understood nothing. I was black and they were black, but my blackness did not help me” (1995: 140). Thus, it becomes apparent that blackness does not readily translate into other national contexts.

For Africans who came to the New World during the transatlantic slave trade, return does not mean the same thing as it does for recent African migrants. The violent enterprise of slavery’s middle passage traumatized and distorted the linearity of that historicity (Clifford 1992: 318). In *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman (2008) describes her return via Ghana’s slave routes as a project in search of “routes traveled by strangers, which were as close to a mother country as I would come” (9). Indeed, she refuses to romanticize her connections with Africa and instead marks the middle passage as an irreversible spatiotemporal rupture of blackness from its origins and the beginning of black social death (Hartman 2002; Sexton 2016). Michelle Wright (2015) emphasizes this point when she states the inability of linear time travel for Black Americans because their pasts are now entangled with the temporalities and spatialities of multiple (non-African) geographies. In other words, most Black Americans cannot claim “authentic” African ancestry due to the reality of racial and cultural mixing in the New World.

The complexity of contemporary Black identity formation confirms that return should be engaged dialogically, not dialectically. As Jemima Pierre (2008) has argued, this linear notion of return continues to reify Africa as static and unchanging. She problematizes the overrepresentation of Africa within African Diaspora discourses as

either a romanticized imaginary or a passive negative in the afterlife of slavery. Stating that these articulations of Africa function to freeze it in time as only an unchanging point of origin and render its influence in the contemporary nonexistent, Pierre demands that theories of African diaspora reconsider Africa as an idea and place that is mutually constitutive of then and now. As Stuart Hall (1990: 233) notes, “the original Africa is no longer there. It too has been transformed.” The African Continent should therefore be seen as diasporic (Piot 2001).

Even with this compelling point, scholars still recognize the importance of “the myth of return” in the formation of diasporic identity. In her study of African-American repatriates in Ghana, Obiagele Lake (1995) shows the importance of return migration for diaspora Africans who were forcefully extracted from their homeland. During slavery, many enslaved Africans maintained their humanity through rituals of memory, such as religious practices, songs, and stories of home. Considering the immense difficulty of physical return, some of them attempted and actually succeeded, whereas some returned in spirit (Lake 1995). As time passed, the notion of return became manifest in other forms, such as the Harlem Renaissance, Negritude, and Pan-Africanism, which sought to reformulate racist and ideologically impoverished notions of Africa (Edwards 2001; Drake 1982; Goyal 2014: vii). These connections are what allow descendants of Africans in the Americas and beyond to not be reduced to nothings (Echeruo 1999).

Michael Echeruo (1999) has stated that roots are not only about where we are from but also who we are. For him, the question of roots is an ontological question. He claims that asserting a foundational and constitutive African identity is important even though historical conditions of diaspora and transnationalism have restructured its

expression. In this sense, to deny the possibility of return is to deny one's ability to be African. Inasmuch as interpellation is important for subject formation, having particular origins attests to the foundations of Being. Thus, the return is less about incorporation into a body politic and more about knowing that we undoubtedly exist.

Historical Examples of Return Migration to Nigeria

As numerous scholars have shown, return migration has been a central aspect of diasporic consciousness throughout much of its history. Given this history, it is astounding that literature on the physical repatriation of enslaved Africans—except for Liberians—is scant. For indeed, many enslaved Africans did successfully return to the African Continent. The liberated Africans from Sierra Leone, Brazil, and Cuba, who returned to the Bight of Benin between the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, are fascinating examples of successful return. In addition to their remarkable feat of return, these repatriates went on to play influential roles in the ideological, spiritual, economic, and physical transformation of their homelands. Thus, examining their return migration processes can provide necessary sociohistorical context for analyzing contemporary returns to Africa and Nigeria more specifically.

Although they are often homogenized as a singular group, the liberated Africans who returned to Lagos were extremely diverse. These differences affected their repatriation processes. For example, the Afro-Brazilians, who had been directly sold into slavery and taken to Bahia, or their descendants, were repatriated to the West African coast in small numbers, starting in 1810 (Matory 1999, Reis 1995). However, this number rose

drastically in 1835 due to the Nago-led Male rebellion in Bahia (Reis 1995).³⁸ Brazilian colonial administrators forcefully expelled suspected rebels and increased surveillance within the state, which encouraged “manumitted Bahians to act upon their earlier dreams of going home” (Matory 1999: 84). Cuban repatriates were also integrated in the Lagos Brazilian community due to similar linguistic backgrounds and experiences.

The Sierra Leoneans repatriates were more fortunate than those from Brazil and Cuba because they were not sold into New World slavery. This major difference inevitably informed their resettlement and subsequent ways of living, in comparison to the Afro-Brazilians and Afro-Cubans (Herskovits 1965). The strong missionary presence in Sierra Leone also influenced the Christianization and education of the liberated slaves. As a result, the Saros occupied prominent positions within the returnee community because they had accumulated some wealth in Sierra Leone from trading, along with their affiliation with the missionaries and their educational background. Olabiyi Yai (2001) states that the Brazilian returnees were aware of the privilege of Christianity in this new environment and sometimes called themselves Christians even though they were not. Thus, Christianity was clearly an attractive option because of its connection to the colonial state, especially as the Saros began to occupy important positions within the colonial government.

In addition to their influence on the colonial state, repatriates actively transformed the meaning of modern Yoruba identity. Before the nineteenth century repatriation of Sierra Leonean and Brazilian Yorubas, there was no such thing as a pan-Yoruba identity (Matory 1999). Instead, there were several sub-ethnic groups, such as the Egbas, Ijeshas,

³⁸ According to Yai (2001), there were an estimated 350,000 repatriates from Brazil with two-thirds of them living in Nigeria. Matory, however, states that only about 8,000 Afro-Brazilians repatriated to West Africa.

Ijebus, Oyos, and the Ondos, which traced their roots to Ile-Ife. Yoruba, at this time, only referred to the Oyos. The early nineteenth century fall of the old Oyo Empire, however, threw the entire socio-political structure of Yorubaland into crisis. The Empire's collapse led to internecine warfare as various Yoruba sub-ethnic groups started competing for power and access to resources. Given that this period of warfare also coincided with the height of the transatlantic slave trade, many Yoruba people were captured and sent to Bahia and Cuba, among other places.

Although they were from different sub-ethnic groups, their shared experience of capture and, for some, enslavement united them. It was this sense of unity that they brought with them as they returned from Cuba, Bahia, and Freetown. Furthermore, the British colonial state and missionaries advanced the idea of a unified pan-Yoruba identity and used the Oyo sub-ethnic as a prime model (Matory 1999). They believed in Oyo superiority because of the vast and powerful Oyo Empire. This resulted in the translation of the Bible into standard Oyo Yoruba and the publication of Samuel Johnson's seminal (1969) book, *History of the Yorubas*, from an Oyo-centric perspective. Consequently, Nigerian returnees literally transformed the meaning of what it means to be Yoruba through the use of Christianity and education. This is an important development that deserves more attention because it unsettles "nationality" as understood today.

By the twentieth century, the colonial government's need to utilize educated African elites as cultural brokers had dwindled. Earlier, the colonial government used educated elites as middlemen to facilitate the easy flow of trade products from the interior while they primarily maintained law and order (Cole 1975: 74). However, as the Colonial Office policy changed and the numbers of whites in Lagos increased, a new era of racial

imperialism began in the colony. In response to the colonial state, the educated African elites adopted strong cultural nationalist stances, which involved them, using Yoruba names, wearing Yoruba clothes instead of European ones, and starting their own churches. The totalizing logics of racial oppression thus functioned to unite all African residents against the colonial administration and inspired the early anticolonial movements, which were precursors of nationalism.

Philip Zachernuk (2000) discusses the formative role of *overseas* education in development of the political consciousness of this social class and in the ascription of their elite status. James Coleman (1965:115) also notes “western education did not merely facilitate the emergence of a separate class; it endowed the individuals in that class with the knowledge and skills, the ambitions and aspirations, that enabled them to challenge the Nigerian colonial government and ultimately wrest control over the central political power from it.” Although E. A. Ayandele (1974) has called the educated elite “deluded hybrids and collaborators” who were mentally enslaved to Western ideals, this social class “laid the foundation of anticolonial sentiment through Western education” (Aderinto 2014: 28, Zachernuk 2000: 5). As a growing number of West African students sojourned abroad, they became sensitized to the pressing political issues of their time, “often as a result of the racism they encountered, but also because they came into contact with a wider range of political ideas” (Adi 2000: 73). Founded by a Nigerian law student, Ladipo Solanke, and Amy Ashwood Garvey in 1925, the West African Student Union (WASU) served as “a training ground for future political leaders and an important anticolonial force in its own right” in addition to its organizational aim to forge unity among West African students (ibid, 75). WASU’s impact, however, was not limited to

the metropole; it established branches throughout the British West African colonies during the 1930s.

Whereas Western education had mostly been the preserve of Saro returnees and a few members of the traditional political elite in the nineteenth century, the 1930s saw the emergence of new educated elite class who were more than likely the first in their families to receive a Western education and had lived the entirety of their lives under colonial rule (Falola and Heaton 2008: 138). During their time abroad, these new generations of elites, especially those who studied in America, were exposed to black Atlantic ideologies of Garveyism and Pan-Africanism, as well as communist and socialist thought (Zachernuk 2000). For example, a prominent nationalist leader, Obafemi Awolowo, was a member of the Fabian Society while studying in London in the 1940s (Zachernuk 2000: 141). As such students returned home to Nigeria, their radical political ideals of self-government transferred to the colonial society, especially as many of these students took on leadership positions in kinship and ethnic unions, trade unions, and political parties (Basse 2009, Falola and Heaton 2008).

Nnamdi Azikwe, the first president of Nigeria, is also another member of the political elite who was radicalized during his educational sojourn abroad. Starting in 1925, Azikwe studied in the United States first for his bachelor's degree at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and later for his master's degrees at Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania (Basse 2009, Idemili 1978). After completing his education, he worked as a journalist in Ghana before returning to Nigeria in 1937 and establishing his anticolonial newspaper, *West African Pilot*, and co-founding a political party, National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons, with the doyen of Nigerian

nationalism, Herbert Macaulay, in 1944. Consequently, Azikwe along with other notable political leaders actively led the nationalist movements and helped Nigeria attain political independence in 1960.

After independence, return migration continued, as many overseas students returned to Nigeria upon completing their academic studies. At the time, return migration was appealing because the economy was booming and jobs awaited them in the civil service and petroleum sectors (Kperogi 2011: 113, Mberu and Pongon 2010). The late 1970s and 1980s saw a change in this migration patterns as Nigeria became extremely unstable economically and politically (Ojo 2013). Many lost their jobs or were unable to survive as a result of currency devaluation. Although many Nigerians had stayed abroad in the past, especially during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70), the economic crisis spurred an exodus of Nigerians to the US and UK in search of “better jobs, commerce and political asylum” (Sousa 2019: Ogen 2017, Knowles 2013).

Since the early 2000s, however, return migration to Nigeria has increased due to the end of military rule and the establishment of democracy in 1999. Moreover, this reverse migration saw an increase during the global economic recession of 2008. This along with the widespread global narrative of “Africa Rising” has encouraged the return of Nigerian diasporans who are starting entrepreneurial ventures in Lagos and throughout the country (Taylor 2016, Sylla 2014). Consequently, as these Nigerians return to Lagos, they position themselves as the prime brokers of the country’s global future due to their adeptness at navigating international spaces. Investing in the future potential of the Continent and in their individual countries for economic, familial or nostalgic reasons was a strong motivation to return home for many people whom I interviewed. Not only

were returnees enamored with the prospect of living a global lifestyle with friends and family, and pursuing a creative and intellectual entrepreneurial career, they were very much invested in building a future where collective dreams and aspirations could be realized. The following section explores this contemporary return migration of Nigerian diasporans in Lagos to consider the individual motivations and social factors involved in moving back home.

CASE STUDIES OF CONTEMPORAY RETURN MIGRATION TO NIGERIA

I conducted interviews with 16 returnees over a period of two months during the summer of 2016. Although a handful of returnees were born and raised in America or Europe, most of them were born in Lagos and spent their formative years in Nigeria with either limited international exposure or a more transnational upbringing of spending holidays abroad. Aside from those who lived the entirety of their lives in diaspora and only came to Nigeria as adults, most returnees initially traveled abroad to pursue their university and/or postgraduate education. After completing their studies, many decided to stay abroad (where they studied and/or relocated to another country) to acquire work experience in their fields, whereas others returned home to Nigeria to complete their compulsory national youth service year (NYSC) before traveling abroad again for additional educational and/or employment opportunities. Yet others remained in Nigeria after NYSC and gained employment locally, primarily within the private sector. Having provided some background context on the returnees, below I examine the common motivations for return among high skilled migrants through four different case studies.

Case 1. Ashley: “Discovering my roots and connecting with my family”

Ashley was a 30-year-old Nigerian-American returnee entrepreneur, when I interviewed her. Today, she owns a luxury lifestyle and wellness business in Lagos. Ashley, the firstborn child of Nigerian parents who migrated to the United States in the early 1980s, was born in the mid-1980s. Her parents met while pursuing their education at Howard University, the major historically Black university in Washington, DC, and decided to settle in America. Growing up in the D.C., Maryland, and Virginia (DMV) area, Ashley was “very aware of being Nigerian” and was taught to do the Yoruba cultural greeting for aunts, uncles and everyone older than she was (MPI 2015).³⁹ However, she felt “disconnected” from the culture because her parents gave her an American name, did not speak Yoruba to her, and never took her to Nigeria. Despite these attempts to “disconnect” her culturally, Ashley had a “childhood thirst to understand Yoruba that she kept a secret.” She narrates the following story to describe how her parents discovered she understood Yoruba:

One particular Saturday, mum and dad had had a heated discussion. After I was so concerned so I asked my mum what’s going on? I said why was daddy talking about this and she said what are you talking about? She just looked at me and said, “Where did you get that from? Where did you hear that?” And I was like “oh, I heard you and daddy speaking.” she said, “no you didn’t. We weren’t speaking in English,” and I was like “yeah I understood what you said.” She said, “Ashley what are you talking about? No really where did you hear this?” I said, “I really heard it today when you guys were speaking this morning.” She said, “okay, let me speak to you in Yoruba.” She spoke to me in Yoruba. She said,

³⁹ The DMV area has the second largest population of Nigerian immigrants in the United States.

“translate,” I translated it. My mom was like crying. She didn’t know where it came from, she wondered how? Why? She was like okay maybe that’s why you’re so good at Spanish...because you have an ear for languages (Ashley, interview, 2016).

In addition to her thirst for understanding the language, Ashley also had a strong desire to visit and see Nigeria. From around the age of 12, she started begging her dad to take her along with him on his trip to Nigeria so she could see what it was like. On one such occasion, she even asked her godparents to talk to her dad so that she could go with him. Although they said they would work on it, nothing happened.

Notwithstanding, she continued to nurture that desire throughout her journey from childhood to college because she sincerely felt that she was missing something. As a college student at the University of Maryland, she served as president of the African Students Association. After college, she landed a great job in New York City, working for an energy company, where her job focused on increasing profit and having the biggest margin. As she started working on successful renewable energy deals in the energy sector, she realized that she needed to invest in Nigeria. This is how she expressed the desire she felt:

I know I am from a place where they don’t even have electricity. That’s one thing I knew when I was young. Why am I here? And I just started thinking forward like what am I really going to do? The best thing I am going to do is become Vice President of this company. Do I really want to become the Vice President of this company or do I want to take a risk, and I started thinking of all these things. I am young, what happens if I go and I don’t like it, I’ll just come back. Like it’s okay,

I'll find another job, I'll go back to school... and I felt like there was absolutely no risk, to go; and that's when I decided that I'm going to go. I resigned before I told my parents (Ashley, interview, 2016).

Before telling her parents about her plans to move to Nigeria, Ashley leveraged a contact she met at a Harvard African Business School conference to help her coordinate a six-month internship at a government agency in Abuja. According to her, the rationale was to create the best package before going, which would also help sell her parents on the idea. When she finally told her parents, their reaction was split. Although her mom was generally okay with the move and approached it more from the spiritual angle of prayer and divine direction, her dad was upset and threatened to disown her. In order to show her dad how serious she was, she took a bold step:

In spring 2011, I remember how I went and I just was like he [her dad] needs to know how serious I am. So, I went and got a tattoo on my ankle. And to me, it was something that my parents would never think I would do, but the purpose of it was that it was a map of Africa with Nigeria starred, and it was on my foot to show that this is essentially my foundation. This is like the ground, this is my source, where I am from, this is where I want to walk, I want to tread. I want to do the Nigerian journey, the African journey. He [her dad] was the 1st person that I came and showed it to and he was just like I don't understand why would you do this. And I'm like, just to show you how serious I am, and he goes, so you love this place that you've never been to that much (Ashley, interview, 2016).

Ashley's story, like a few of the stories my informants told me, highlights the role of cultural identity and belonging in structuring return migration. The desire to discover her

roots and connect with her culture made return migration a deeply emotional exercise for Ashley and her family. Ashley's story has a unique place within the broader diaspora literature, which either emphasizes the affective dimensions of old African diaspora's irreparable loss or the new African diaspora's nostalgia for home (Quayson 2005, Bakare-Yusuf 2008). The complexity of feeling like one is "missing something" that is both simultaneously familiar and distant is a plight that second-generation immigrants often experience as they grow up within their cultural communities. Second-generation immigrants often inhabit a liminal space within the diasporic condition of *knowing yet not knowing enough* about their cultural identity because, unlike old African diasporans who are generations removed, they possess a direct knowledge about their homeland but do not know as much as first-generation immigrants or Continent Africans. This makes them unable to fully connect culturally with their African-American peers and their first-generation African peers in Diaspora, and Continental Africans. Consequently, return for them is about belonging and connecting with what is rightfully theirs.

Case 2. Kehinde: "I always had it in my mind that I'd go back"

Kehinde was born in Ibadan in the 1970s and spent most of her childhood and adolescence in Lagos, Nigeria. She left Nigeria immediately after secondary school to study Economics at Leicester University in the UK. After completing her studies, she returned to Nigeria to participate in the NYSC program before going abroad to Scotland for her master's degree. After completing her postgraduate degree, Kehinde moved back to Nigeria and started working in the private sector. When I asked her if there were any immigration-related issues that restricted her from staying longer in the UK, she stated the following: "for my first degree, yes that would've been an issue, but not after my

Masters. We did have this work experience visa in Scotland. A two-year visa that makes you entitled to work, but I didn't take advantage of that” (Kehinde, interview, 2016).

When I pressed further to understand why she chose not to remain abroad like the rest of her siblings, who had opted to remain in the UK, Kehinde explains: “I’m a girl. My family is here. It's not that I didn't seek out opportunities there. It's just that I always had it at the back of my mind that I'd go back. I think I might have stayed a bit longer if I had seen opportunities that were attractive enough, but I always had it at the back of my mind that I wanted to be here” (Kehinde, interview, 2016). Moreover, she contrasts her experience as a UK returnee with the American one, stating that: “the UK system is quite difficult. It’s very difficult to accommodate students. Even though people don’t stay longer beyond school, I still find that they still leave eventually. They’re not as welcoming as they should or for one reason or the other, they still come back. They still find home more than those who studied in America, I assume it's because they feel better integrated...So the UK-based people are mostly back, but the US-based people hardly ever come back” (Kehinde, 2016).

While this statement may or may not be empirically provable, it is undeniable that education was the sole reason for emigration for Kehinde and many of my collaborators. She stated that staying in Nigeria to pursue an education was not an option for her. Both of her brothers had studied abroad in the nineties primarily because the socioeconomic environment significantly impacted the Nigerian education system, which “at that time...just went, nosedived and Nigeria wasn't really an option” (Ashley, 2016). Subsequently during that period, “a lot of people made sacrifices because they knew how important education was” (ibid). Although it was “more so people of a certain

socioeconomic group, there were also people that already planned for it, like her parents” (ibid).

The notion of “always knowing that I would return” was something that was repeatedly echoed by most of my interviewees, especially those who had spent most of their formative years in Nigeria. Although expressing a desire to return home is common among immigrants of all backgrounds, actually returning home requires a level of commitment, conviction, and capital (social and cultural) (Ammassari 2004). For returnees like Kehinde, this step is greatly facilitated by strong familial and social connections and the availability of attractive opportunities. Within the Nigerian context, these two things are often interrelated, as it is very common for returnees to leverage their family’s or school connections to access certain opportunities. Kehinde’s story thus brings to the forefront the importance of family/social networks and opportunities in compelling diasporans to return home.

In addition, Kehinde’s story introduces the notion of return being gender-related. As the only girl in the family, Kehinde felt compelled to return home, even though none of her siblings did. This desire might have been influenced by her not wanting to leave her parents, especially with both of her brothers living abroad. Although Kehinde’s claim of being a girl plays into conventional gender tropes of women being “more family-oriented and less individualistic than men,” it is important to note that according to the literature on this subject, “some women show a higher reluctance to resettlement for fear of losing their perceived more equal status vis-à-vis men” (Guarnizo 1997: 292). In other words, some women do not want to give up the freedom that living outside the sociocultural context provides them. With that being said, Kehinde’s claim for needing to

return because she is a female cannot be substantiated within my research, as many of my female interviewees primarily cited opportunities rather than family as a motivation for their return.

Case 3. Jide: “I can have more impact here”

Born in Ibadan, Jide was a 38-year-old founder and partner in an investment management company in Lagos who moved back to Nigeria between 2007 and 2008. Although he grew up in many places in Nigeria because his father was in the military, he spent most of his time in Ibadan. After graduating from a private secondary school at the age of sixteen, Jide moved to the United States, where he studied engineering for his undergraduate and master’s degrees. After obtaining his degrees, he began working as an engineer at a telecommunications company in South Florida before he moved to Philadelphia to pursue his MBA at the prestigious Wharton Business School. He immediately got a job as a consultant right for one of the big three consulting firms in New York. Although Jide initially planned to spend three years working in consulting before joining a private equity firm, he found himself “becoming quite miserable with the work he was doing” during his last year (Jide, interview, 2016). During our interview, he connected his lack of fulfillment at work with his decision to move back to Nigeria.

I was earning good money living in New York, a city that was fun but I was miserable. That was the first time I challenged myself, and I am a very passionate person, but for the first time in my life I lost passion, so I challenged myself that the next thing I do will not be to build a resume but because I'm passionate about it. I remember there was a night I was walking home. My office was in Times Square and home was in Hell's Kitchen and I was walking home. I saw this Indian

guy that was running one of those shops and he was taking flowerpots from the front to the back and he just seemed so happy and I was just like, wow. He looks so happy. I don't know how much he's making, but he just looks so happy and look at how much I'm making and I'm miserable and I think that night I decided, and I'm like, that's it.

I'm passionate about Nigeria. I've always talked about Nigeria, even if I do anything I want to be on the ground. I don't want to be a consultant, flying in and out. I want to go figure out how to get involved in the economy, helping businesses grow, that's what I'm passionate about. Part of why that also was because I was working with big businesses in the US, I didn't connect with what I was doing. I didn't feel like I was making as much of an impact, so I needed something that I would connect to, and at that moment I decided that was Nigeria. I grew up there and I don't have a glass ceiling. I can have more impact; impact is very important to me but not in an altruistic way. One thing I didn't like as a consultant is that I advise and just walk away, so you don't even know if it gets implemented or whatever. And for me, I'm a roll-up-your-sleeves kind of guy and I felt like I could do that more in Africa but I didn't know Nigeria. I decided that the next thing I do will be in Nigeria and it will be looking for businesses to buy and build hands-on, so I started looking for an opportunity to come back, so that's my story (Jide, interview, 2016).

Jide describes his last year as a consultant as a time when he lost one of his core ideals: passion. Being unfulfilled and miserable at work took a toll on his sense of self. This is not uncommon in the neoliberal era, where work has become a defining aspect of

one's self (Urciuoli 2008). Nikolas Rose also points out that "work has been re-
construed, not as a constraint upon freedom and autonomy, but as a realm in which
working subjects can express their autonomy... the prevailing image of the worker is of
an individual in search of meaning and fulfillment, and work itself is interpreted as a site
within which individuals represent, construct and confirm their identity, an intrinsic part
of a style of life" (1990: 14). For Jide, work was not simply about making a lot of money;
rather it was about passion and impact. His happiness and ultimately self-fulfillment were
tied to these two ideals finding expression through his work and for him that meant
playing an active role in an economic and business environment he was connected to.

While "technologies of self-making" have become commonplace "under the
precarity of neoliberalism," it becomes clear that it was not just a lack of fulfillment at
work that impacted Jide's decision to move back. His decision was also based on a lack
of connection to the American society due to the existence of a "glass ceiling." Even after
spending most of his adult life abroad and "becoming partially American," he never
really felt connected to what he was doing. According to him, this transition started while
he was working at his first company as an engineer when he "had some experiences that
made him realize that the U.S. wasn't home." As a result, he "put himself on a fast track
of getting as much as he needed out of the American system and getting ready to come
back rather than just enjoying [his] time."

When Jide finally decided to return to Nigeria, he specifically sought out a job
opportunity that allowed him to work six weeks from Lagos and two weeks from the U.S.
because his wife was still based in New York. Although he had observed an emerging
youth culture and professionalism during various visits to Nigeria, this work arrangement

allowed him to familiarize himself more intimately with the local environment until he was ready to live there full time.

The practice of using job opportunities at multinational corporations to facilitate return is common among individuals looking to move back home. Indeed, this widespread trend has led to the establishment of headhunting companies who specialize in recruiting talent from abroad for multinational companies on the African Continent. This coupled with strong familial support provided him with the confidence that he needed to take the final step to move back and start his own company. Describing the importance of familial support in the process of moving back, he states:

My wife was the major catalyst in my confidence and comfort in moving back. Part of the reasons why I proposed to her when I did was because I said that she's not Nigerian. First of all, before we started dating, I had made it clear that if she won't consider moving out of the US then there's no point in it. When I was having the frustrations at the consulting firm, I was very open with her. I told her that chances were that the next thing I do will be in Nigeria or related, when I started realizing that this person I wanted to be with for the rest of my life. There were a number of things that were clear to me, you don't start relocating to Nigeria if you know that this is the person you want to be with without letting that person know that you're the one I want to be with for the rest of my life because questions will come like so what does this mean for us. For me it had become clear by then, I was not just moving back to take a job. I was moving back because I wanted to do something entrepreneurial and I wanted the person I was going be with to understand that there's also a risk with that. I also needed the

person I was going to be with that I would also need you to join me at some point to try it out. Talking to someone I wanted to spend my life with that was cool with that as much as it was unknown, gave me more confidence to go do it.

Now on this side [Nigerian family], the first thing my dad said to me when he knew that I was moving back was that what are you coming back to do. Because although I come from a comfortable home and Popsi [his dad] is connected and everything, his view is this place is not working and you have a good job and good education. Will you be able to earn what you earn there here? I don't have any jobs for you. I don't have any business for you. That was his reaction and my reaction was don't worry I will figure myself out. I might need you to make a few calls but I'll figure myself out. I don't need you to provide for me. I've been doing that for a while now. My siblings were happy. My mum was happy so that's the summary they all wanted me to come (Jide, interview, 2016).

Ultimately, Jide's return to Nigeria was based on a myriad of factors such as: a personal search for fulfillment in the workplace; a realization that America was not home; a favorable working arrangement; and a strong familial support system. Together these reasons are important in facilitating the average diasporans return home, according to most of my collaborators. Their availability or lack thereof determines if a Nigerian diasporan will either return to Nigeria or remain in Nigeria after returning.

The impact of discrimination and racism in the host society continues to be an important push for migrants to return home (Amassari 2004: 140). Members of the new African diaspora find it incredibly difficult to call their new countries home because they often experience the same systemic racism as African-Americans, which denies them

access to better job opportunities. These racist experiences in turn makes them cling more closely to the only home they have known. Moreover, while familial support tends to be present for first-generation Nigerians with strong connections back home, more emphasis is placed on finding a favorable working arrangement that can provide all the luxuries and necessities of middle-class livelihood as experienced abroad. As Jide's father clearly shows, familial support is often dependent on returnees having secured reliable and lucrative job opportunities before making the decision to move back. Although being at home with family is important, long-term financial stability and sustainability take precedence in this sociocultural context.

Case 4. Obinna: "Opportunities are here"

In 2016, Obinna was a 41-year-old consultant at a global management-consulting firm in Lagos, who took an opportunity to work for the firm in Nigeria after receiving an MBA at Columbia Business School. Although he had spent the first eighteen years of his life in Lagos, Obinna had lived abroad for half of his life, three years in the United Kingdom and fifteen years in the United States, before moving back to Nigeria in 2011. He initially left the country in the early nineties to pursue his undergraduate education in the United Kingdom. Prior to completing his education in the UK, Obinna won the U.S. visa lottery and relocated to northeastern America in the late nineties as a result. With the green card lottery, he eventually became a naturalized U.S. citizen. Living in the U.S. in the 1990s, he found himself immersed in the American environment with limited exposure to Nigerians. This changed, however, in the 2000s, when he started working in the pharmaceutical industry and met quite a few Nigerian physicians and healthcare practitioners. At that time, he noted, maintaining connections with the Nigerian

community was primarily done through personal friendships and occasional attendance at weddings in areas with large Nigerian populations such as in Maryland or Atlanta. The Internet boom significantly impacted how diasporans accessed information and made it easier to connect to Nigeria in the early 2000s compared to the early nineties.

During his time abroad, Obinna visited Nigeria every three to five years. It was on those visits that he began to see some changes in the country that he describes below.

I could see some progress, especially after 1999. Democracy and then private sector development, the telecom firms came in started doing GSM. You could see that a lot more people had more places they could work after finishing university that paid a decent wage, and so you had more professionals being able to afford to buy a car and rent an apartment—young professionals—and basically making their way up the ladder and that was not what I saw in 1993 when I left the country. In 1993, when I left the country, we had military rule, the economy wasn't growing very fast. There were no new industries if you worked in an oil company you had to be very fortunate and connected because that was the only industry that paid a decent wage. But as time went along, the new generation banks showed up and that was in the early 90s that they really started to do in the late 90s so that became a new sector for people to work in, and then you get telecom firms coming in with GSM later in the early 2000s, and that was when you started seeing a lot more and all the value chain involved in those industries. Opportunities started to exist more for young professionals, and it became more attractive, more like a place to develop. With the increased purchasing power, you start seeing more places like this where we are sitting [Radisson Blu Hotel, VI] and more places for people to hangout and things that we see in the Western world we

were beginning to see them in Nigeria (Obinna, interview, 2016).

Despite these obvious transformations in the socioeconomic environment of Nigeria, Obinna did not seriously entertain the idea of moving back until the late 2000s and early 2010s. In 2009, he had an eye-opening moment while watching Zina Saro-Wiwa's film, *This is My Africa*, which showed him "all the things that we have that are Nigerian and African that were actually good. Because when you live in the western world, a lot that you hear is all that is bad." After watching that film, Obinna said that he "started getting some of the books, some of the movies, some of the music, more of the food from different places that [he] could find them in the U.S., which at that time wasn't very prevalent."

Although he credits the movie as turning point for him, he cites a trip to India during business school as the major catalyst for his move back to Nigeria. During our interview, he narrated how this Indian trip impacted his decision to return home.

The real catalyst was when I was in business school. I traveled to a lot of countries, developing countries, you could say third world somewhat, but further ahead than where Nigeria was, emerging markets. And the one that made the huge difference was India and what happened was that I worked on a project when I was in school. We had a class called Private Equity and Entrepreneurship in Africa where you worked with real clients on the Continent. Our client was Segun Aganga, who was the Minister of Finance at the time, working on the Sovereign Wealth Fund. I came to Nigeria, spent ten days in Abuja and then I went back to the US for Christmas. Two to three days after Christmas, I went straight to India for three weeks so I had a chance to look at Nigeria and India side by side. And in India I saw things that were

similar to what you would hear about Nigeria. I saw some corruption, some poor infrastructure in some places. I saw extreme poverty and I said but this is India, Incredible India. Then why do people see Nigeria so bad because in Nigeria I had seen good things as well. I had seen Abuja, which is a better-planned city than Lagos, less traffic and people doing things that were progressive in Abuja and Lagos. This is basically where a Nigerian goes when some things work out well so I said that there is no reason for me not to go to Nigeria. It's a growing economy and I can see opportunities over there to do relevant things and it actually became quite easy for me to decide to move (Obinna, interview, 2016).

Based on the excerpt above, Obinna's return home was predicated on seeing that issues of underdevelopment and corruption were not only Nigerian problems. India, another emerging market in the global economy, is a country with very comparable conditions to Nigeria. By traveling there, he was able to view Nigeria in a more positive light than before. Both the movie and the trip to India played similar roles to different degrees in persuading him to return to Nigeria. Those two interrelated things helped to change his mindset about Nigeria by dispelling the perception of Africa as an exceptional place of lack where only bad things happen. Paul Zeleza states that "African immigrants not only pay a racial tax but they also pay a cultural tax, the devaluation of their human capital in a society where things African are routinely negatively stereotyped and despised" (2009: 41). The unwelcoming aspects of the host society "do things" to the minds and bodies of African migrants, which range from an atavistic desire for culture and homeland to a deliberate erasure and watering down of cultural difference in order to belong.

Although Obinna never cut himself off from the Nigerian community and periodically visited his homeland, something subtler had happened within him about the way he saw Africa, and that was exactly what he had to unlearn to return. Thus, coming home for him was more a psychological journey than a physical one. Once he made up his mind to return, the process in itself was relatively easy. He was fortunate enough to get a job working at a “global consulting firm, where standards of work are high and the quality of the people has been high.” This work situation afforded him the ability to live comfortably in Nigeria, so he didn’t have to worry too much about the general infrastructural problems in Lagos of power, water, and security. In addition, he had family support during the process. In the following quote, he describes why returning to Nigeria was not greatly related to family.

It wasn't as much of a big deal for me to come back so I give you further clarification to where my family was because we are all over the world. So my dad left Nigeria in the late 80s, he's a foreign-trained physician. He trained in the UK. He's a dentist, a professor in dentistry. So the Saudis had come here to recruit people who had that level of qualification to help them build their healthcare system; he was working in Saudi Arabia from the 80s so we would go there sometimes for holidays and my mom stayed there with the family as we were going through school and all that stuff. When he left Saudi, he moved to Kuwait in the early 2000s and my mom joined him there.

At that point, we were all living (my brothers and I. I have two brothers) and we were all living in the U.S. and Canada. So, basically what happened was my older brother moved back to Nigeria in 2008 to work in banking and I'm sure you've

probably seen this with your interviews. When the stock market crashed, we had a number of Nigerians working on Wall Street and the dynamics of being in an organization like that when they're downsizing. A good number of them got downsized but fortunately for them, a few years prior to that, Nigeria's banking system began improving and they needed people with some level of experience to help build it. So they had poached a good number of those people to come back so there was an influx of Nigerians from like 2005/2006 to come back to Nigeria and work so my brother had started that process and by 2008 he had moved over. By then my parents moved back from Kuwait, the month after I moved back so we all moved back to Nigeria at the same time. It's something they were thankful for, that two of their sons are right here, and we all lived within a 10-minute drive from each other (Obinna, interview, 2016).

Ultimately, Obinna's family was receptive to his return because they were also returning. Having experienced the diaspora from different vantage points and historic moments, they could understand the allure of being home, especially when "you find an opportunity that makes sense." He reiterated this point a couple of times during our discussion: that returning home has to make sense financially for the average diasporan. In professions like law and medicine, return just did not make sense "because their profession wasn't properly monetized in Nigeria." Though he realizes that "some people don't care about that," being able to live like a human being might become difficult unless you were "an entrepreneurial person that wants to create a field for yourself." Furthering expressing why people move back, he fleshes out the importance of economics in structuring one's decision to move back in the excerpt below.

When something doesn't make sense financially and it's not necessarily to compare the income you would earn in an economy where the average income is \$35,000/\$40,000 like the U.S. But it has to make sense for you to be able to live in the country that you're going to and what we saw is over the years, those types of opportunities pay a living wage, where people could actually live like a human being, have an apartment, you could maybe buy a car after a little bit of saving, actually be able to socialize with your friends, do things here and there and that started to make more sense.

So as the economy grew and the Africa rising narrative became real for some people, it became more likely that people would move back, because you wouldn't move if you were making probably \$100,000+ to work in Nigeria to earn \$30,000+ and being in an environment that costs almost the same or more than you had in the U.S. So it just doesn't make sense. So I think when you started hearing about the African middle-class and some stuff happening, that really was backed up by opportunities that were structured and open for people to move back to. You wouldn't move if there's nothing to move to except if you had a trust fund and you're just hell-bent on moving. A lot of people actually move because it made economic sense for them to do so (Obinna, interview, 2016).

Obinna's emphasis on the economics of return is not particularly surprising given the fact that most contemporary Africans migrants traveled abroad to escape the poor socioeconomic conditions in their home countries. Conveying the difficulty in "living like human beings" during the structural adjustment period, Isiodore Okpewo says:

If conditions at home deteriorate to such an extent that you can no longer

guarantee to yourself and your family the basic needs of life: when the water does not run for weeks, so that conditions in both the kitchen and bathroom become hazardous; when toilet facilities in the grade schools break down completely so that, in their dire need to relieve themselves, your children pick up diseases floating freely in the severely endangered environment; when the clinics can no longer provide prescribed medications because their budgets have been deeply slashed or suspended, and families are left to buy unregulated drugs from open shelves, thus putting their lives at risk; when salaries are not paid for months, so that parents cannot afford even the unregulated drugs, let alone sufficient food for the table; now who, under these conditions, would resist the urge to seek employment outside the country just so the family can at least stay alive? (2009: 10).

The historic conditions that shaped “the diaspora of structural adjustment” therefore cannot simply be erased from the migrants’ memory by narratives of African progress. Instead, these narratives must be backed by opportunities grounded in the present-day economic realities for return to make sense.

As such, many highly skilled Nigerian professionals cannot go back home because, as one of my interviewees said, home is not ready for them (Ore, interview, 2018).

According to Oyebamiji and Adekoye (2019), by the year 2000, over 10,000 Nigerians professors were employed across the United States, along with many of Nigerian professionals in the fields of medicine and health. These individuals, although highly skilled, often choose to remain exiled in diaspora because of the poor state of most academic institutions and health facilities in the country (Nnaemeka 2007). These

unfavorable working conditions, coupled with the high levels of successes and comforts experienced abroad and the difficulties of uprooting one's family, mean that the desire and reality of returning often stand at odds with one another (Okpewho 2009).

Accordingly, the realities of return migration must be taken into serious consideration before acting on mere desire. Considering the fact that I was conducting these interviews during the worst economic recession in twenty-nine years, this point cannot be overemphasized.

INNOVATIVE RETURNEES IN THE TECH ECOSYSTEM

The case studies above have elucidated the diverse motivations for the recent wave of return migrations to Nigeria. These returnees prove that one can in fact go back home again; the decision, however, depends on how connected the return migrants are to the homeland and the availability of viable opportunities—structured and unstructured—at home. Moreover, what returnees move back with, in terms of skills, resources, networks, and capital, can determine if the return, whether permanent or temporary, will be successful.⁴⁰ Examining the impact of elite return migrants in Ivory Coast and Ghana, Savona Amassari posits “the impact of return migrants in the workplace depends on three main conditions: that migrants have learned something abroad and have acquired experienced; that what they have learned is useful in their home context; and that migrants are willing and able to apply what they have gained abroad (2004:142).” Highly skilled return migrants bring back to their countries of origin substantial amounts of “financial, human, and social capital” due to the educational and occupational experience attained while in diaspora (ibid). More specifically, they bring back “specialized

⁴⁰It is important to note this chapter focuses on highly skilled returnees, in contrast to lower skilled migrants whose return tends to be significantly different because they are either unable or yet to amass sufficient amounts of capital from their host countries.

technical expertise, organizational and managerial competence, communication skills, and a sense of professional responsibility” (ibid, 144-145). Although returnees’ skills are valuable and relevant for their homelands, non-migrants in their places of work, who sometimes perceive them either as arrogant know-it-alls or potential threats, do not always readily accept return migrants along with their skillset (ibid, 145). This is especially true within the bureaucratic and hierarchical structures of the local public sector and older private institutions, resulting in many returnees seeking private sector positions or starting their own companies where they can easily drive change and innovation (ibid, 148).

Within the Nigerian context, returnees like Dr. Chife Aloy have made notable contributions to broader society based on their achievements abroad. It is important to note that Nigerian immigrants are regarded as one of the most successful and most educated immigrant communities in the United States, boasting a large number of middle-class professionals who “create jobs, treat patients, and teach students while contributing back home” (Sousa 2019: 40, Kperogi 2011:116). When they return home, these returnees subsequently introduce brilliant innovations that change the way people live and work. In Sanya Ojo (2017)’s exploratory study of returnee entrepreneurs from the UK in Nigeria, he demonstrates how return migrants attempt to transfer “operational and ethical best practices as obtained in the UK” and not only technological expertise and knowledge to the homeland.

Anna Lee Saxenian (2006) also buttresses this point in *The New Argonauts: Regional Advantage in a Global Economy*, when she discusses how foreign-born high-tech entrepreneurs and engineers are driving change and innovation in peripheral

economies by transferring technical and institutional knowledge acquired in Silicon Valley to India, Taiwan, mainland China, and Israel. According to Saxenian, these groups of return migrants transform traditional economic development concerns of “brain drain into brain circulation by returning home to establish business relationships or start new companies while maintaining their social and professional ties to the US” (2006: 101). Although Anna Lee Saxenian’s thesis that technological innovation in peripheral economies is not just a unidirectional, top-down flow from the West but a “complex, two-way process of brain circulation” is a critical intervention in both economic development and science and technology studies (STS) literature, I find her dismissive claim that “large parts of Africa and Latin America have yet to build the base of skill and the political and economic openness needed to become attractive environment for technology entrepreneurs” disappointing, to say the least (2006: 332). Indeed, Jenna Burrell’s (2012) point about Africa’s being invisible and viewed as a technology-poor region within STS literature is proven here. For Saxenian’s remark blatantly ignores technological advancements on the African Continent that were happening alongside the innovative transformations she documents in India, China, Israel, and Taiwan. I discussed some of these transformations in Chapter Two.



Figure 2: Mapping the Nigerian Tech Ecosystem, www.paradigmhq.org

Innovation in the Lagos tech ecosystem did not happen overnight. It was a part of cumulative sociopolitical and economic processes in Nigeria and the wider African landscape. The transformations that I examined in Chapter Two that culminated in the introduction of ICT connectivity in the country produced a fertile ground for the germination of a nascent technology ecosystem. As one Nigerian techie noted, the evolution of the Lagos tech ecosystem can be segmented into at least four (but I would say five) generations (Shittu 2016). The first generation included computer companies like Gicen, Data Sciences, and Debis computers, which started after President Obasanjo’s indigenization policies. The second generation comprised the banking software and technology solutions companies, which emerged during the banking boom of the 1980s and 1990s, such as Tara systems, Resourcery, and Telnet Nigeria, among many others. The third generation consisted of financial payments and Internet/software companies,

which were founded in the early 2000s after the telecommunications boom like Nairaland, eTranzact, Interswitch, and Socketworks.

The fourth generation, which is where most people start to chronicle technology companies in Nigeria, can be traced to online e-commerce and financial payment companies such as Wakanow, Jobberman, Pagatech, Konga, Jumia, iRoko, and Hotels.ng. Founded between the late 2000s and before 2014, these companies originated from a combination of factors, such as a surge in return migration after the global financial meltdown in 2008 and the introduction of social media platforms. Moreover, primarily returnees from abroad started the companies in this generation. Aided by foreign investment capital. The fifth generation is made up of more sophisticated technology companies in the areas of finance, insurance, agriculture, human resources, health, and educational training. This group includes Andela, Paystack, Lifebank, Flutterwave, mines.io, and several others. Companies within this fifth generation are solving diverse local problems for specific markets. They are made up of both local and returnee founders. And although a number of local tech founders, starting with Paystack, have participated in globally-acclaimed tech accelerators, such as Y Combinator, Techstars, and 500 Startups, returnees continue to be a notable segment in this entrepreneurial pool for providing talent, mentorship, networks, and funding.

Historically and now, African return migrants and non-migrants have helped to redraw the global technological innovation map not only by looking to Silicon Valley but also by forging south-to-south links with new Argonauts type countries. Thus, although the successes of new technology startups in the early 2010s are an important part of Nigeria's technology story, they should be placed within the broader local and historical

context of technology entrepreneurship in the country. Notwithstanding this important point, returnee-led companies like Iroko, Jumia, and Konga have transformed the local technology scene and paved the way for other startups that are innovating relevant solutions to local challenges. In what follows, two returnee-led startups show the impact of innovative returnees on Nigerian society.

Tech Startup 1: Healthcare Logistics

An immaculate and stylishly dressed, full-figured woman, Bimbo is a 33-year-old founder and CEO of a healthcare technology startup company in Lagos. One of six children, Bimbo was born in a small town in southwestern Nigeria to two teacher parents. When she was fourteen, she and her siblings relocated to Minnesota in the American Midwest after her mother won the U.S. visa lottery. She subsequently completed her secondary school education in the U.S. and completed her undergraduate and graduate degrees in Minnesota and California, respectively.

Although she initially had aspirations to become a lawyer, Bimbo decided to become a diplomat after reading the autobiography of Nelson Mandela (“Revolution of Necessity” 2018). According to her,

The plan had always been to work in the UN [United Nations] system. Even my Master’s degree, is like the Master’s degree you get if you want to work in the UN. International Management and Policy, and you’re supposed to learn in a foreign, in, like, a UN, language. So, all my classes were in French” (Bimbo, interview, 2018).

It was during this Master’s program that she ventured into the international healthcare sector. Between the first and second year of the program, she received a summer

internship in 2009 with the UK Department for International Development (DFID), which took her to Northern Nigeria. Below she expresses the impact of this summer internship on her personal and professional life.

They have projects all over Nigeria, but the project I was working on was specifically for healthcare and was in Kano, Kaduna, and Jigawa. I traveled between these places. But I have come to Abuja as well. I was there for 3 months. Then on a day, just a normal day, the team went to a village and found a young girl. She was about my age at the time. She had been in labor for a long time. At that time, they said 3 days, and everyone [was] around her. The baby had been breached, so the baby couldn't come out, so everyone was waiting for her to die. It was a really big deal, and I remember just hearing that, and I was so shocked. I was in shock! My colleagues at work would mock me because they didn't understand why I was freaking out so much about her story. So basically, that story launched my obsession with maternal healthcare. This was so long ago. So, I was obsessed with maternal healthcare and I was always trying to figure out how I could do something about maternal healthcare. I went back to the U.S. and studied. I worked at WHO [the World Health Organization] in Switzerland, and worked at UNDP [United Nations Development Programme] in Western Uganda, so I travelled the world, worked (Bimbo, interview, 2018).

The traumatic experience of essentially watching a young mother die was what jumpstarted Bimbo's passion for solving healthcare challenges in Nigeria. Despite her passion for solving maternal mortality in developing countries, this was not why she

returned to Nigeria in 2012. Instead, it was marriage⁴¹ that brought her back. She and her husband came to Nigeria together in 2012, got married two months later, and “just never left.”

Although she “never stopped caring about maternal healthcare and always wanted to do something about it,” Bimbo found herself working for the Lagos State Government before starting a nonprofit organization, “which promoted voluntary blood donation across Nigeria and collected more than 3,100 pints of blood” (Gaffey 2016). She also worked in the local film industry, helping to disseminate healthcare messages in Nollywood movies. This all came to a stop, however, after her own personal experience with maternal health. In 2014, Bimbo had a “very difficult childbirth” in the U.S., and she and her child both needed intensive care (ibid). Her childbirth was the turning point; afterward, she “decided to quit her job and focus on maternal mortality.” Deciding to put all her energy into solving maternal mortality was what led to the formation of her startup. In the following excerpt, she chronicles the journey that led to the discovery of her solution.

During that I found out that the highest cause of maternal mortality is something called postpartum hemorrhage; basically, a mum gives birth, then she starts bleeding, and if she doesn't get the blood she needs, she's going to die. That was just the bottom line of it, so I realized that fact, then I knew I needed to do something about maternal healthcare. So, as you're doing, I will do it for hospitals and blood banks. I will just say: please just give me 5 minutes, let me talk to you

⁴¹ This is an important yet understated point in migration literature: the role of love in fostering emigration to the hostland and return migration to the homeland. Indeed, some contemporary returns back home are done because people are looking for husbands and wives from their countries of origin. This fact needs further research but lies within the current scope of my project.

about your problems and what you're facing. I kept doing that, just trying to figure out what can I do. So at this time, I was running, like, a small NGO, doing blood donations, basically trying to get people to give blood. I knew that was not it. I knew it couldn't just be a blood donor problem. There has to be something else. I kept researching and talking to people.

It was just on a random Friday. My family and I were travelling to Ibadan, and I just met with this blood bank guy, and he was like, "Sometimes we have to discard a lot." I was like, "What, discard?" All throughout this time, I thought the problem was a shortage, and I didn't know there was a surplus in the market. During that conversation, I kept probing, and it turns about that blood is a short shelf-life product. It only lasts 6 weeks, then it needs to be discarded. No matter how well you keep it, in 6 weeks it needs to be discarded. So, I was like, "Wow, you have a market where there is a surplus and shortage at the same time." What we needed to do was sort of like, bridge the gap, and one of the ways to do that was with technology, so that they communicate (Bimbo, interview, 2018).

After receiving a \$25,000 pre-seed funding from a local innovation hub, Bimbo launched an online platform in 2016 that "connected hospitals with blood banks, and blood banks with donors" (Jackson 2018). She soon realized that an online platform was not enough after starting operations "because sometimes hospitals will find the person who has the blood then send an ambulance. The ambulance will get stuck in traffic and the patient dies." This resulted in the business model's evolving to the current startup, "which combines data, smart logistics, and technology to deliver life-saving medical products like blood and oxygen to hospitals on time, and in the right condition" (ibid).

Using local motorbikes and innovative blood box technology, her healthtech startup has served over “485 hospitals, saved over 3,500 lives, and moved over 11,750 products” in Lagos and Abuja, and she has plans to expand across Nigeria and Africa. As of the date of our interview, she had raised over \$200,000 in seeding from local venture capital firms, and her startup has been accepted into an international accelerator program and innovation challenge in Europe and America, respectively. Bimbo’s widespread impact is not merely because she uses innovative technology. Instead, her success is because she leverages technology to solve real-life problems for people. According to her, the local market is “at the phase where peoples’ problems should be solved first before we are thinking about technology innovation.”

Although her intimate knowledge of the local challenges has helped Bimbo build an innovative product and company, she credits being a woman as an important indicator of her success. She expresses the benefits of being a female entrepreneur:

I think women tend to make more empathetic leaders, more self-aware leaders, and you’re paying attention to your tone and making sure everyone is fine. I think that gives sort of like an edge in terms of protection, so I think that helps me. You’re leading with empathy, you’re thinking about other people, and that allows you to sort of build a strong team that lasts. In that market, there is a lot of turnover, especially in tech. I think that organizations run by empathetic leaders, and it’s not just women. Women are more- Society has socialized us to care about other people. Maybe more than we care about our [selves]...Leading empathetically is important...I also think that is important for people to bring themselves to work. I hope my team feels this way. That’s what I’m trying to do,

that you should be yourself. You should bring yourself to work. You shouldn't be a different person at work (Bimbo, interview, 2018).

For Bimbo, being a female is an advantage as a leader because she is able to empathize with her staff and think about other people, which are vital aspects of team building. However, she admits that these characteristics are not intrinsically found in women but are a product of a socialization process that women undergo. She also implicitly questions this form of socialization when she notes that women often care about others "more than our [selves]." Though her acknowledgment does not go any further than that, Bimbo obviously negotiates the complex relationships between gender, culture and power in the workplace that many women entrepreneurs experience. Accordingly, she attempts to bring herself to work without putting herself in a box.

Tech Startup 2: Financial Services and Inclusion

Dressed in the typical Silicon Valley dress code of t-shirt and jeans, Nosa is a 40-year-old entrepreneur and investor who founded a Lagos-based mobile money payment company that enables users to send, receive, and pay bills on its digital platforms. Born and raised in Lagos, he emigrated to the United States at the age of 16 to pursue an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering in California. Upon completing his bachelor's, Nosa worked for a couple of startups in Los Angeles before spending four years at a global management consulting firm in San Francisco. He then received an MBA at Stanford Business School. Although he "had a strong desire to come right back [to Nigeria] after business school," he decided it against during a trip to Nigeria in 2003, when fellow returnees told him not to come back yet because "they felt Nigeria was still very much about who you knew and not what you knew" (Nosa, interview, 2018). As a

result, these returnees suggested that he “stay in the U.S. longer and come back to Nigeria at a much higher level rather than coming back right out business school.”

Knowing that he wanted to go into early-stage venture capital investing in the long term, Nosa sought out relevant opportunities in that area. He eventually ended up joining the venture and acquisitions team of a multinational technology conglomerate in Silicon Valley. He considers the experience to be “one of the most intense growth periods” in his career, “in terms of growing as a leader and a person.” While leading his company’s investment expansion in Africa, he began to think moving back to Nigeria, which he describes in detail below.

I remember, for me the decision point, it was less about me just being a Nigerian and wanting to give back. There was some of that, but I think it was more of, you know, I felt two things. I felt one: Nigeria indeed felt like where India and China had been about 15 years prior, where you’ve seen steady growth. It started becoming easier to do business, and it’s just a rare opportunity to be part of the people who will actually make a real difference in the future of the country. Uh, so, that was a big draw for me and also very clear to me that if you were in the mix of it, you could also do very well financially. So I said also on the third side of it, like, if i9 don’t do this now, I probably will never do it. I’ll start a business in the U.S., come in 5 or 6 years, probably be married, probably have kids, and probably forget about this thing. So I said okay, you know what, I’m going to do it. I have nothing to lose, and so I did, and I made that decision sitting in Bhutan, overlooking an amazing, amazing landscape. It’s like one of the most beautiful countries I’ve ever been to. I spent 5 days there, and on that trip, I made that

decision to move back home (Nosa, interview, 2018).

From the story above, Nosa's move back to Nigeria was an extremely intentional one involving a mixture of different factors such as opportunity, financial gain, impact, and the absence of real risk. These factors combined were what pushed him to return home in 2008. He did not immediately start his company when he first returned to Nigeria; rather, he decided to work for a local private equity firm in Lagos. According to him, the rationale behind this career move was that "a lot of the times the conversation we had in the board [investment] were a bit theoretical for me because I had not experienced what the CEO had gone through." Thus, his plan after leaving his position in venture and acquisitions was "either to start a business or go into venture capital for someone else." After which, he would start a business and then become a principal at his own investment fund. Following the latter option rather than the former, Nosa joined a private equity firm upon arriving in Nigeria, and he planned to do that for five years before moving onto the next steps in his career plan. Three months after joining the firm, however, he decided that he had to leave because he "was actually super excited" about the opportunity of Nigeria. Indeed, he mentions that even if he were not Nigerian and had experienced that period in 2008; he would have decided to stay.

After coming up with "a list of twenty ventures that could pass the big idea test" and make a huge impact, the combination of two ideas, "mobile payments and banking the unbanked," stood out to him (Olopade 2014: 108). Using his personal savings, Nosa launched his financial technology startup in 2009 in order to build "core infrastructure that the country needs." According to a 2018 Enhancing Financial Innovation and Access (EFInA) report, more than 60 million Nigerians are "unbanked," meaning that they do

not have access to financial services. Nosa's company helps to provide financial services to the mass market through an extensive network of over 20,000 agents running small kiosk shops, pharmacies, and grocery stores across the country. This large agent network provides individuals with more financial access points than all the bank branches in Nigeria combined. The startup's phenomenal growth took off when it started receiving angel and institutional investment after six months of bootstrapping the business. To date, the company "processes over 72 million transactions worth over \$4.5 billion for over 12 million unique customers" (Nosa 2019). Moreover, the business currently employs about 460 people and has created over 10,000 jobs in local communities (ibid). A recent investment of \$10 million puts the total amount of funding raised at \$34.7 million, which will be used to scale operations into new countries like Mexico, Ethiopia, and the Philippines.

Beyond the direct impact of providing financial inclusion to the masses, Nosa has actively championed the development of the technology ecosystem in Nigeria by lobbying for specific government policies and initiatives, such as the installation of broadband fiber cables in the Yaba neighborhood in 2013. He explains his role in the process:

We were in active conversations with both MainOne and also with the Minister Omobola Johnson, and she was instrumental in making that happen, so the person that was working with her on that policy is a very good friend of mine. She worked on that policy and on state government. So, what we actually did was to get Lagos' state governor to waive taxes on laying fiber on Herbert Macaulay, so [that] made it cheap for her, Main One, to come and lay fiber. And we were one

of their first, if not the first, client. Before that, twenty-first century also laid a cable, so now we actually have both of them in the office (Nosa, interview, 2018). In addition to his policymaking efforts, Nosa has funded early-stage startups in Nigeria. He discusses how important being an early-stage investor is to him:

It flows from what I said actually, my personal life mission is to help build the ecosystem with financing startups in Nigeria and probably Africa. So, for me one of the things that I would like to do is to play a role from the early stage all the way down to later stage investment. So, for me it's about ...I've invested in three companies of my own outside of my company, and one of them I actually helped pool together people to invest in it. After going through that experience, I said I actually don't have a lot of cash but I'm passionate about helping entrepreneurs. I also don't have a lot of time so I want to be wise about how I use my time. And so, I decided to pool a friend of mine together, and both of us decided to form a club, an investor club. There are nine of us in the club, but two of us that run it, so we make the decisions on what we invest in and what we look at. But for both of us, we want to really help the entrepreneurs, both from [the] operational side of their businesses but also on fundraising, which we both have a lot of experience doing. And so we are going to focus our energies that way. In the first cohort, we will probably do three maybe four deals, but we are looking for entrepreneurs who we really believe in and we believe in [what] they're doing and think their opportunities are scalable, so we will look at Nigeria and outside Nigeria (Nosa, 2018).

Although Nosa's effort in building the local technology ecosystem is not an uncommon

practice within emerging startup scenes, it is significant when considering the infancy and limited numbers of exits within the market. Traditionally speaking in the Silicon Valley context, technology entrepreneurs primarily invest in startups after they have successfully exited from their own companies. By choosing to contribute to the ecosystem while building his own company, Nosa thus forges a new path for himself and others through unprecedented practices that are locally specific and culturally sensitive.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has expanded contemporary understanding of return migration beyond the narrow confines of migration and development literature. Although contemporary return remains relatively undertheorized or poorly theorized, it continues to be an important aspect of African migratory flows and the African diasporic experience in both its physical and symbolic dimensions. Consequently, this chapter demonstrated how return migration encompasses a wide range of historical and social practices, beyond the political and economic, into that of identity and belonging. To accomplish this, I examined the notion of return within African diaspora scholarship and established that return remains a constitutive element of the diaspora because it is an ontological argument about black subjectivity. In addition to this theoretical redefinition of return migration in relation to diaspora, this chapter specifically examined the repatriation of liberated African enslaved to nineteenth century Lagos to show return migration as a long-standing sociohistorical process. This historical analysis also served as a critical foundation for my examination of contemporary return migration to Lagos.

Through the use in-depth case studies, I explored the experiences of several Nigerian returnees to arrive at a deeper understanding of what motivates diasporans to

return home and in some cases make innovative impacts. Although there are indeed very diverse and complex factors associated with return, my use of the case study method enabled me to identify primary motivations for return migration among returnees in Lagos. In the first case study, Ashley's desire to discover her roots and connect with her culture was what drove her return to Lagos. Her complex identity as a second-generation immigrant, which entails *knowing yet not knowing enough* about her cultural identity, is often lost within dominant diaspora discourses about loss and nostalgia. Return was therefore about establishing a deeper connection with her roots. The second case study, on the contrary, confronted return as a process that was bound to happen. For an educational migrant like Kehinde, return was more about returning home to where she rightfully belonged than about connecting to her cultural identity. As someone who spent most of their formative years in Nigeria and constantly visited home, Kehinde's story portrays return as inevitable process of transnational migration.

Although the motivation for return in the third case study was multidimensional, I would like to highlight these two factors: a personal search for fulfillment in the workplace and a realization that America was not home. For Jide in particular, a negative early career experience coupled with a realization that the American glass ceiling kept him from making his desired impact was what motivated him to return home. As scholars have shown, members of the new African diaspora find it incredibly difficult to call their new countries home because they often experience systemic racism that denies them access to better job opportunities. This in turn makes them cling more closely to the only home they have known.

Whereas Jide's return was catalyzed by a realization that America could never

truly be home, Obinna's return was motivated by a new consciousness of home as place of possibilities and opportunities. And although coming home was more of a psychological journey than a physical one, he repeatedly emphasized the point that returning home has to make sense for the average diasporan. By this, he meant the economics behind being able to live like a human being are paramount. Return therefore is the result when psychological processes meet opportunities that make sense.

Although scholarly research has yet to reach a consensus on the benefits of return migration to the homeland, the impact of returnees like Bimbo and Nosa cannot be denied. Through their startup companies, more Nigerians now have access to essential medical products like blood and oxygen as well as financial services. Thus, it is obvious that Nigerian returnees are making larger societal impacts by solving social problems and driving technological innovation in the country.

CHAPTER 5

AFRICAN NEOLIBERALISM AND
THE RISE OF AFROPOLITAN MIDDLE-CLASS ENTREPRENEURSHIP

“We are solving African problems. The companies that are going to thrive will be the one solving African problems. We are trying to solve African problems. We are trying to solve issues in health care, in human capital, in medicine. There are issues here, you seen a lot. There are a lot of companies trying to do that for a better accountability for our public sector officials, better ideas around power, better ideas around education. Around these things like they are people that are doing those things here and we just want more. What the West has done is assured us that we should want and we do deserve more. Gone are the days where we have a company that says oh, we will pay you 3, 4, 5 months late in your salary or you should just be lucky you have a job. The West has showed us that you can expect better. You can do all of those things and do it in African way and that’s what I really love” – Yinka, interview 2018

INTRODUCTION

Not long after entering the cream-colored house turned office, I was led upstairs to a moderately sized conference room bathed in warm sunlight where Idris sat working on his laptop. He greeted me with a smile as I introduced myself. As the interview started, my initial excitement about having a conversation with him was confirmed. Ever since being introduced by a mutual friend based in New York City nearly two months before, and chatting periodically on WhatsApp about my research on the Lagos tech startup community, I had been eager to speak with Idris. Moreover, my anticipation only grew during the hour and half drive across the Third Mainland Bridge onto the Lagos-Ibadan expressway past Ojodu Berger, onto the dusty roads of the Isheri Opic Estate, which lies on the border of Lagos and Ogun State.

Born in Ibadan, Idris Ayodeji Bello, a highly educated and passionate 39-year-old Nigerian “Afropreneur,” grew up in an academic and entrepreneurial environment. His

father was a librarian at the Federal Polytechnic in Ogun State who owned a poultry farm, and his mother worked in the medical profession as a radiographer. Idris attended Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile Ife, Osun State, in southwestern Nigeria, where he received a First Class Degree in Computer Engineering. Shortly after finishing his degree, he got a job working as a Strategic Planning Manager at Procter and Gamble (P&G) in Ibadan. Even before graduating, Idris was already determined to pursue his master's degree abroad, based on advice given by his cousin working at Chevron in Houston. After experiencing challenges with getting a visa for about seven months, he moved to Houston in January 2004. After thirteen months with P&G, he began a master's program in computer science at the University of Houston (UH). Idris graduated from UH in 2005, and he too got a job working for Chevron, where he had opportunities to travel to Cabinda, Luanda, and Lagos. Four years into his tenure at Chevron, he decided to pursue an MBA at Rice University to transition from a technical to a business management role.

At Rice, the entrepreneurship bug bit him, especially after one of his professors charged him with testing low-cost baby incubators in Nigeria. During this Nigerian trip in 2010, he got somewhat involved in the Lagos tech entrepreneurship scene and was also interviewed by local Nigerian newspapers about his work in the U.S. After this interview, a friend he met while at UH connected Idris with friends who were also interested in entrepreneurship in Africa. This connection resulted in the four of them founding Wennovation Hub in 2010, one of the first startup accelerators in Nigeria.

After graduating from business school in 2011, Idris left Chevron to pursue another master's degree in Global Health Science at the University of Oxford in England

and then worked for the Clinton Health Access Initiative in Swaziland. Between 2011 and 2014, Idris started actively investing in the tech ecosystem and shuttled back and forth between Houston and Lagos. Around this time, Idris along with his co-founders at Wennovation Hub played a role in founding the Lagos Angels Network in 2012. He was also one of the early investors in Fora and later transitioned with that founding team to the global tech startup, Andela, as an investor, advisor, and supporter. Consequently since 2014, Idris has been traveling between Cairo, Lagos, and Houston, managing his business and investment interests in these places.

Given the itinerant and transnational nature of his work and lifestyle, Idris Bello along with most of my research subjects, are part of the emerging global middle class of “flexible citizens” who are refashioning local cultural meanings and practices of identity in alignment to contemporary neoliberal entrepreneurial notions of subjectivity and nationalism (Ong 1999, Kanna 2010). Indeed, Idris, who identified himself as an “Afropreneur” at the onset of our interview, seems to embody this new neoliberal entrepreneurial subjectivity, which is based on flexibility and mobility. Or, as he said during our interview, “young smart, people...who use market forces to actually change the narrative about the Continent” (Bello 2018). While this depiction easily fits into the flexible, neoliberal, and entrepreneurial subjectivity described by Ong and others, I refuse to theoretically cut and paste and oversimplify the complex local sociocultural processes taking place in Lagos under the moniker of neoliberalism.

Considering the frequent conflation of entrepreneurship under free-market liberalization policies, this chapter situates these seemingly neoliberal practices and discourses with their historical and cultural context in order to open up an alternative

space for thinking about Lagos tech entrepreneurs outside the “density and totalizing weight” of neoliberalism (Clarke 2008: 145). In doing so, I first examine the historical emergence of neoliberalism and the notion of *homo economicus* as a technology of self-making. I then explore African neoliberalism in relation to the historical and contemporary formation of the African middle class. This middle-class entrepreneurial subject formation is then examined in relation to the theoretical concept of afropolitanism. Ultimately, I argue that contemporary African entrepreneurial practices are best conceived of as a convergence of global and local logics of neoliberalism, middle-classness, and afropolitanism.

THEORIZING NEOLIBERALISM

Since the end of the Cold War in 1991, neoliberalism has become a widespread social, economic, and political phenomenon of the twenty-first century. Indeed, the prevalent use of “neoliberalism” within academic and popular discourses has led to a semantic slippage and has emptied the term of its theoretical purchase in contemporary social science scholarship.⁴² In other words, neoliberalism means too many things to too many people everywhere, which makes it hard to define what *is* and *is not* neoliberal in today’s world. Academics significantly contribute to this conceptual confusion as they continue to use neoliberalism to describe and analyze most of the ills of global capitalism. Although “native categories of market-based policies and neo-conservatism” proliferate within the U.S. public discourse, the term neoliberalism can be predominantly found in academic literature as *economic reform policies*, a *theory* which stresses the “indirect economization of areas of social and political life,” a *political project* which

⁴² Taylor Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse document that the term “has become an academic catchphrase used in nearly 1,000 academic articles between 2002 and 2005,” spanning different geographical regions, cultural contexts, and national economies (2009: 138).

directly speaks to “forms of capital accumulation,” a *discursive formation* which constitutes subjectivities in accordance to values of “individualism, entrepreneurialism and market competition, and a *mode of governmentality* which “constructs economic logics of calculation and invites people to become self-governing (Ong 2006: 1, Clarke 2008:136, Ganti 2014; Boas and Gans-Morse 2009). Together this scholarship, despite generating useful insights on workings of neoliberalism, continues to construct neoliberalism as a totalizing and coherent concept.

Historicizing neoliberalism, however, can demystify and situate its workings and provide much needed analytical clarity. The prescient work of Michel Foucault and Michel Senellart’s *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (2008) has been instrumental in demonstrating the global rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s as a product of the specific historical convergence of American neoliberalism and postwar German ordoliberalism. Though originating from the late eighteenth century classical liberalism as espoused by Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, and David Ricardo, which advocated a free-market economy with limited government intervention, American neoliberalism and German ordoliberalism were products of their own time (Mirowski and Plehwe 2015).

For German ordoliberals like Alexander Rüstow, Alfred Müller-Armack, and Wilhelm Röpke, who argued for the role of a strong state within the free market economy in interwar Germany, neoliberalism was viewed as a means to correct societal injustices and counter the increasing wealth of the powerful in the wake of the Great Depression and the demise of the Weimar Republic (Ptak 2009). With the rise and fall of Nazi Germany, neoliberalism emerged under the leadership of Austrian philosopher Friedrich

August von Hayek,⁴³ who was strongly opposed to the Keynesian economics and state-centered economic planning of the early twentieth century. For example, in *The Road to Serfdom* (1956), von Hayek argued that socialism was inherently dangerous and eroded democracy. Thus, he believed that the free market was the only way to preserve democracy.

American neoliberalism, on the other hand, rose to prominence between the 1930s and 1960s through the influential work of the Chicago School of Economics. Although the school's philosophy was initially more moderate under the leadership of Henry Simons, a friend of Friedrich von Hayek and major thinker at the Chicago School, the school, under the leadership of Milton Friedman, sought to erase any differences between economy and society by redefining the social domain as economic (Harvey 2005). Friedman's teachings also greatly influenced the work of Latin American economists known as the "Chicago Boys," who implemented neoliberal economic reform policies in Pinochet's Chile in the 1970s that led to the collapse of the economy in the early 1980s. Consequently, the neoliberal experiment carried out in Chile became the basis of the first wave of mainstream neoliberalism (Thatcherism and Reaganomics) in the 1980s. Friedman, who was Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher's economic advisor, transformed Hayek's philosophical ideologies of the free market into free-market policies of marketization, privatization, and deregulation, which was used to restructure and roll-back the Fordist-Keynesian welfare state in the United States and United Kingdom.

Moreover, with the widespread diffusion of neoliberal economic theories across

⁴³ Due to his leadership in the Mont Pelerin Society, which included powerful individuals from Europe and the United States, Hayek's ideas became extremely influential in policy circles. In fact, many of these intellectuals played prominent roles in the reviving Western Germany's post-war economy.

economic departments in American universities, which trained many world economists, international institutions like the IMF and World Bank and national governments adopted economic policies of privatization and liberalization. These policies were then exported across the Global South through the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and the Washington Consensus in the 1980s and 1990s (Ong 2006). Neoliberal theories, which were forced upon many African, Asian, and Latin American governments in exchange for debt payment rescheduling and loans, ultimately failed to accomplish the goals for economic development, thus worsening already dire conditions.

Central to the spread of neoliberalism is the concept of *homo economicus* or economic man, who is “an entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings” (Foucault 2008: 226). According to Michel Foucault (2008), the rise of *homo economicus* produced neoliberalism as a new regime of subjectivity. Drawing on the human capital theories of Chicago School economists Gary Becker, Theodore Schultz, and Jacob Mincer, Foucault traces the ways in which neoliberalism birthed a new mode of subjectivity. Foucault contends that human capital theory involves widening the scope and field of economic analysis to encompass non-economic and other unexplored areas. The theory also involves “shifting the locus of economic analysis away from the concerns of the classical economists (including Marx) with aggregate relations between production, consumption and exchange and away from the supply and demand for labor power” toward “an active economic subject” (Flew 2012: 58, Foucault 2008: 223). Human capital theory thus entails the transformation of the worker to an entrepreneur of himself, “who allocates their time and resources between consumption and the generation

of personal satisfaction, and investment in the self” (ibid). As a result, the idea that the human becomes inextricable from capital and market principles can be easily applied to “social and political relations” (Read 2009).

Contesting Neoliberalism and its Entrepreneurial Subject

Despite Foucault’s insight into the discursive formation of an economic subjectivity as a constitutive element of neoliberalism, this post-structuralist conception has been challenged for its uncritical assumption of the hegemony and coherence of neoliberalism. Such criticism is warranted given the issue of translation into different geographic contexts and the role of agency in the construction of neoliberal discourses and practices (McClanahan 2019, Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008). In addition to the uncritical assumption of the economization of self and society as complete and inevitable, Foucault’s work has been taken to task for failing to distinguish between “neoliberalism as a theory which is intellectually hegemonic and as a practice of governance which is never assured or complete” (McNay 2009: 66, 69). Yet for some theorists, it is precisely this understanding of neoliberalism as grounded in “contradictions, construction, and conflict on the one hand, and ambivalence, assemblage, and articulation on the other” that makes space for agency and possibility (Clarke 2008: 144).

Eminent cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2011) has also portrayed the site of contradiction to be important in making neoliberal ideologies. For Hall, the conjunctural consolidation of neoliberalism is exemplified under the contradictory elements of Thatcherism, which appropriated and translated classic liberal political and economic discourses of freedom in dismantling the “reformist social-democratic welfare state” (Hall 2011: 12). Despite the end of Thatcherism in 1990, neoliberalism continues to

progress as a political ideology and project under various political establishments, even those of the supposed Left in the U.K. For instance, in response to the deleterious effects of Thatcherism and Reaganomics, a new form of neoliberalism materialized in the 1990s, seeking to solve socioeconomic problems through technocratic market-based strategies. Consequently, under the political administrations of President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Tony Blair, neoliberalism shifted from “the mobilization and extension of market logics to the “individual internalization of neoliberal traits” through new modes of policymaking (Peck and Tickell 2002: 389, Ong 2006:11).

Whereas Stuart Hall locates the hegemonic spread of neoliberalism in its ability to strategically reconstruct itself at moments of crisis, Wendy Brown argues in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* that “neoliberal political rationality does not merely marketize in the sense of monetizing all social conduct and social relations, but more radically, casts them in an exclusively economic frame, one that has both epistemological and ontological dimensions” (2015: 62). Drawing from and moving beyond Foucault’s work on neoliberal governmentality, Brown investigates the biopolitics of neoliberalism through the notion of human capital and the subjectivity of *homo economicus*. According to Brown, the economization of human beings as human capital in the figure of *homo economicus* underpins the reconstitution of political life into economic terms. As individuals increasingly seek to “entrepreneurialize their endeavors, appreciate in value, and increase in ranking,” they not only extend this mode of reasoning into social and public spheres but they also displace the political and sovereign subject of *homo politicus* from these same spheres (ibid, 36). This erasure of *homo politicus* lies at the root of the “undoing” of democracy and public life in contemporary times.

Radically departing from Brown's argument about the economization of political life, Sylvia Wynter (2003) situates the *homo economicus* of neoliberalism as the present-day manifestation of the overrepresentation of the Western concept of Man. According to Wynter, Man emerges with the origin of modernity and the attendant coloniality of power/being/truth/freedom. Consequently, the central struggle of our world today is between the "ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of Western bourgeois conception of Man, *homo economicus*, and that of securing the well-being of the human" (ibid, 260). Moreover, she argues that this "central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle" is the root and source of social ills, injustices, and inequalities (ibid, 261). Given the fact of Man, the only solution to the current overrepresentation of *homo economicus* and concomitant erasure of *homo politicus* is not in obstructing the economization of subjectivity but in redefining the human outside the descriptive statements of Man.

This compelling argument about the inherent class and culture identity of neoliberal economic subject formation is particularly significant in complicating the global spread of neoliberalism. As scholars have shown, neoliberalism is often resisted and challenged outside the West because of its close relationship with American imperial capitalist interests (Ong 2006). And even when neoliberal logics are being appropriated, individuals and governments in the Global South distance themselves from the value-laden nature of its discourse on the grounds of cultural nationalism. This ambivalent engagement of neoliberalism is why I emphasize the importance of context—local and national—in investigating the operations of neoliberalism. Consequently, examining neoliberalism outside the West not only reveals its ethnocentric and fragmentary workings but also opens up critical space for thinking and living outside its dictates.

AFRICAN NEOLIBERALISM AND THE AFRICAN MIDDLE CLASS

The following section analyzes the workings of neoliberalism in Africa in order to “add greater cultural particularity and precision” to the concept and fill a gap in contemporary scholarship on global capitalism on the African Continent (Freeman 2014). In so doing, I investigate whether African economic logics and neoliberalism are commensurable. In other words, I explore questions of whether Africans can make neoliberalism work for them or if there are any specific conjunctures or sites where Africans use neoliberalism on their own accord. These questions radically depart from the historical relationship between Africa and neoliberalism that I briefly presented above. Neoliberalism as we have seen did not originate in Africa. And following the World Bank’s 1981 Berg Report,⁴⁴ international institutions like the IMF created and imposed neoliberal economic policies to stabilize the growing debt crisis and achieve economic growth (Ferguson 2006, Peterson 2014). Instead of fulfilling its promise of economic growth and stability, these policies further compounded the economic downturn and African economies recorded the lowest of per capita growth between 1980 and 2000 (Mensah 2008). In many ways, then, neoliberalism used Africa as a testing ground for its global social engineering project (Harrison 2013).

Yet even with this controversial and painful history, ideologies of neoliberalism are being appropriated and mobilized in Africa and its diasporas. The African state, for one, employs neoliberal logics of governmentality to reconfigure state-society relationships and intensify its power without assuming needed responsibilities in an era of democratic rule (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, Hilgers 2012, Chalfin 2010). Still, the state is

⁴⁴ This report essentially blamed African governments for economic crisis on the Continent.

not alone as African citizens at home and abroad also embrace neoliberal ideologies through the narrative of “Africa Rising.” Championed by global financial media outlets like *The Economist* and *Financial Times*, African business conferences, development banks, and multinational consulting firms, the “Africa rising” discourse claims that Africa is on the rise due to the vast economic potential of its untapped markets, increasing purchasing power of its growing middle class, and its large populations of youth.⁴⁵ Undoubtedly, the positive shift in representations of Africa from afropessimistic narratives as a “Dark Continent” to hopeful ones in mainstream media are much-needed contributions to the global discourse on Africa. And it is important to note that these new images of Africa do not yet outpace the historic and contemporary constructions of African alterity. More importantly, however, the Africa rising discourse has not succeeded in transforming longstanding structural and global inequalities.

Instead, the narrative obfuscates the increasing dependency and underdevelopment engendered by the commodity boom and Chinese investment in Africa. As James Ferguson (2005) has stated, global capital is distributed unevenly on the African Continent because it “hops” over large areas and settles in enclaves. The unevenness of African economies has become more pronounced with the “neoliberal export-oriented strategy” and associated “enormous damage to human development, gender equality, and the natural environment” on the Continent (Bond 2017, Nothias 2014). And with the slowdown of economic growth, rising unemployment rates, a crash

⁴⁵ This along with increased political stability, new infrastructural projects, and neoliberal economic reform policies have enhanced the attractiveness of African “emerging markets” to international investors and multinational firms seeking to capitalize on potential profits. Specifically, British economist and former chairman of Goldman Sachs, Jim O’Neil, identified South Africa and Nigeria as one of the emerging global economies, BRICS and MINT, respectively (Enweremadu 2013).

in commodity prices, and an economic recession in recent years, the reality of a “rising” Africa has been called into question in academic and popular spheres. Furthermore, these claims are compounded by the complacency of African states in seriously addressing widening inequalities and “providing social services to establish safety nets and protections for those at the bottom” (Lemma 2013).

Notwithstanding these problematic contradictions, I argue that the Africa Rising discourse cannot simply be reduced to the inconsistent operations of global neoliberal ideology. The African appropriation of Africa rising discourses instead reveals a much complex desire than an increased income and international investment. And although economic and political stability are valid wants for contemporary Africans, I contend that it is the proposed vision of an alternative Africa beyond failure and crisis that fuels this narrative. As James Ferguson (2005) has noted, Africans desire better infrastructure and more power, not only to meet fundamental materials needs but also to meet subjective needs of self-worth and dignity as human beings. The entrance of the Africa Rising narrative and wider neoliberal thinking thus maps onto this pre-existing need. For as Hiro Miyazaki has argued, “certain economic concepts of neoliberal ideas may serve as sources of hope” (2006: 151). Miyazaki’s point is especially salient when one considers that the concept of freedom is a central aspect of neoliberal reasoning. The confluence of African desires and neoliberal promises of freedom should therefore be seen more as a purposeful strategy of self-fashioning than as an exploitative act of economic gain. Through a historical examination of middle-classness and theoretical analysis of afropolitanism in Africa, I complicate the seemingly neoliberal practices of the African entrepreneurial subject in order to refine the analytical and theoretical purchase of

neoliberalism in the African contexts.

Defining the Contemporary African Middle Classes

Although much of the Africa Rising discourse is based on the growth and emergence of the middle class, attempts to define the social class have cast doubt upon its transformative potential in broader society. According to the African Development Bank, earning a daily income level of between \$2 and \$20 defines one as middle class, which places more than 300 million Africans in the middle class (Akwagyiram 2013). Nonetheless, this amounts to less than five percent of Africans being within the global middle-class's daily income level of between \$10 and \$100. In addition, a recent report by Credit Suisse, using individual wealth between \$50,000 and \$500,000, suggests the much lower number of 18.8 million Africans in the middle class, one quarter of whom are in South Africa (Melber 2016:8). A more recent study has furthered the definition of this category using the Vulnerability Approach to Middle Class (VAMC) framework in order to "avoid counting vulnerable households as middle class" (Rodas et al. 2017: 3). Given the sheer difficulty of a person's living a middle-class lifestyle on \$2 or even \$10 a day in any society, it is evident that more work needs to be done in defining this category (Melber 2016).

Suffice it to say, this overly economic emphasis on the middle class has not advanced the current debate, especially given the rich historical and anthropological research on African class formation. In Africa, except for South Africa, the middle classes occupy a murky terrain within the historical record. The general scholarship around class formation is noteworthy. Between the 1960s and 1980s, the concept of class was widely used in Marxist-influenced Africanist scholarship, such as G.N. Kitching's

Class and Economic Change: Making of an African Petite Bourgeoisie 1905-1970 (1980), Richard Sandbrook and Robin Cohen's *The Development of an African Working Class: Studies in Class Formation and Action* (1975), Alpheus Manghezi's *Class, Elite, and Community in African Development* (1976), and Richard Sklar's "The Nature of Class Domination in Africa" (1979). Seeking to understand the role of the peasantry and bourgeoisie in postcolonial African state formation, this research was more concerned with nascent working-class formations and members of the "ruling class or state class"

The concept of "elite" has also contributed to the dearth of scholarship on the African middle class. Within African historical and anthropological studies, the term "elite" was often used to "describe highly educated and relatively affluent men and women" who would otherwise be categorized as members of the middle classes (Lentz 2016: 39). Although the concepts of elite and middle class are not interchangeable, Africanists in the 1950s and 1960s utilized "elite" instead of "middle class" because the group in question was so small and because they considered elite theory more suited for their roles as modernizers as opposed to class theory (Lloyd 1966). Moreover, this body of scholarship could not reconcile the dynamics of African societies, which "were characterized by high rates of social mobility through education, networks of kin that cross-cut status boundaries, out-marriage, as well as relative cultural homogeneity and persisting ethnic loyalties across difference in occupation and wealth," with classical Marxian and Weberian class theory (Lentz 2016: 20). Nonetheless, the concept of middle class is more useful in exploring complex questions of social stratification in Africa than the elite concept because it refines the theoretical shortcomings of classical social theory and allows for comparative work with other middle classes.

A Brief History of the African Middle Classes

To begin, it is important here to indicate historic definitions of class and how they apply in the African context. Historically, the middle class, a social class that occupies a position between the capitalist bourgeoisie and working-class proletariat, has occupied an ambivalent position within social science research because, unlike the proletariat and bourgeoisie, their contradictory practices do not fit into classical Marxist and Weberian class analysis. Classical Marxism focused on the dual class structure of the capitalist mode of production, where owners of capital derive surplus value from exploiting the labor of propertyless workers who in turn must sell their labor for a wage thus becoming extremely dependent on capital (Marx 1963). Marx thus envisaged the eventual dissolution of the middle class into either the proletariat or the bourgeoisie.

Weber (1946), on the other hand, saw bureaucracy as the central structure of modern capitalist societies, leading him to posit a three-class social structure marked by occupation, income, status, and power. As such, class relations were rooted in market exchange, which meant that social class distinctions were evident through consumption, lifestyle, leisure, place of residence, and acquired commodities. And though Weber's class analysis is much more useful in examining the complexity of social class, he too failed to clearly define the boundaries of the middle classes, thus contributing to these terms' persistent ambiguity and indeterminacy in social theory.

Contrary to the classical conceptions about the bourgeoisie being born from the private sector, the formation of African middle class has been historically linked to the colonial and postcolonial state. Although the emergence of African middle classes was not necessarily championed by the colonial state, their formation as a class can be

directly traced to the advent of colonialism, particularly to colonial education (Handley 2015: 610). Through Western education, Africans saw an opportunity to escape “from the life of hewers of wood and drawers of water” (West 2012: 46). The technical skill and knowledge of the African middle classes in Zimbabwe proved to be invaluable to the colonial state, which depended on native clerks, bookkeepers, teachers, surveyors, lawyers, doctors, and professors to operate its bureaucratic functions. Even after the demise of the colonial state and the subsequent attainment of political independence in the 1960s, most members of the African middle classes assumed positions as civil servants in the newly established governments (Lofchie 2014).

Prior to the post-independence period, only a few members of the African middle class were engaged in private enterprise. Their low numbers were primarily due to the colonial state’s systematically safeguarding business and commerce for large foreign private firms and smaller Lebanese, Asian, and European firms, as discussed in chapter two of this dissertation (Handley 2015). Thus, entrepreneurship was mainly for those outside the purview of the colonial state, such as uneducated African women.

Although often invisible within the wider scholarship on class formation, African women across all socioeconomic strata have always worked. This historical silence on the class condition of women in Africa can be attributed to the joint forces of what Ogunjide-Leslie (1987: 129) refers to as the “six mountains on her back”: one, oppression from outside (colonialism and neocolonialism); two, from traditional structures, feudal, slave-based, communal; three, her backwardness (neocolonialism); four, man; five, her race; and six, herself.” In this discussion, I focus on the first two: oppression from outside and from traditional structures.

Prior to the colonial encounter in the mid-nineteenth century, West African women were actively involved in many economic activities, such as subsistence agriculture, food processing and marketing, trade and commerce, and crafts and industrial production of textiles, pottery, salt, beads, soap, and palm products, in addition to their domestic and reproductive labor as mothers and wives (Chuku 1995, Denzer 1994, Aina 1993, Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997). The advent of colonialism, along with related institutions of Western education and Christianity, restructured preexisting gender relations by reinforcing the inherent sexism and patriarchy of most African societies and by introducing Western Victorian notions of male superiority (Ogundipe-Leslie 1987). This gender bias was especially evident in the Christian missionary educational system, which used sex-differentiated curricula (Obayan 2016). As a result, educated boys were prepared for careers in the colonial civil service, the indigenous private sector, and the clergy, whereas educated girls were prepared mainly for domestic careers as full-time housewives. This development notwithstanding the colonial impact on African women was ambivalent neither completely bad nor good (Denzer 1994).

With the colonial introduction of waged labor and the money economy, the capitalist enterprise became entrenched in most African societies to varying degrees. The penetration of capitalism, however, was markedly different from that in the West because “capitalist modes of production coexisted with non-capitalist modes of production” in Africa (Bujra 1983: 21). The combination of capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production, coupled with the dominance of foreign capital, has led to the incomplete proletarianization of male labor and the simultaneous intensification of female labor in the non-capitalist sectors of peasant agriculture and petty commodity production and

commerce. For as Janet Bujra demonstrates, this system of capitalist production was maintained by the colonial state because peasant agriculture and petty commodity production subsidize the reproduction of cheap male labor power for capital.

Moreover, since the patriarchal colonial state ensured that most African women were insufficiently educated and poorly compensated for waged labor jobs, most women were relegated to positions in the informal economic sector, except for women factory workers in South Africa (Boserup 2007, Bujra 1983, Aina 1993, Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997). Working outside the wage-labor force, however, was not entirely unfavorable for African women because working in the informal economy gave them more flexibility to combine their domestic responsibilities with their productive responsibilities (Bujra 1983). The preponderance of women's work in the informal economy has also contributed to their invisibility in class analysis, which is primarily concerned with waged labor in the formal economy. African women found their class positions tied to their husband's position within capitalist production relations, which radically departed from the financial and economic independence they experienced before colonialism (Bujra 1983).

Despite this fact, a small number of women were employed in the waged economy as manual laborers and white-collar workers. Although the overwhelming majority of students educated during the colonial period were boys, some limited educational opportunities were available for African girls. In fact, a few wealthy girls furthered their education at elite boarding schools and universities in England (Denzer 1994). For instance, Kofoworola Aina Moore, who was "the first black African to attend Oxford University," was one of the privileged few women with a university education at

this time (ibid, 21). After World War II ended in 1945, education access and opportunities for girls increased in the British colonies, leading to more employment prospects for them as seamstresses, teachers, and nurses.

Under colonialism, the construction of middle-class female subject was tied to education, marriage, and Christian religion. With the expansion of employment opportunities, the emerging professions of teaching and nursing became a part of this subject formation (Mann 1985). In particular, this new class formation of African women speaks to a cultural evolution among educated elite women who primarily assumed roles as full-time housewives, based on the Christian and Western ideals of marriage, in the first half of colonial rule.

Despite the shift to roles in salaried professions, the practice of entrepreneurship was not considered to be a part of this female subject formation. For the most part, trade and commerce was tied to the informal economic activities of illiterate market women (George 2011). Though many market women like Alhaja Humuani Alaga and Madam Alimotu Pelewura were in fact extremely wealthy and played prominent roles in party politics of the nationalist movement and postindependence period, their Muslim religion and lack of Western education kept them outside the purview of middle-class respectability politics (ibid, Denzer 1994). Educated women like Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Adelaide Casely-Hayford, however, did try to bridge this gap through their political activism in the 1950s movements of nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and communism (Boyce-Davies 2014).

The post-independence period, however, saw an increase in the African middle classes in the private sector through state-led indigenization and nationalization policies

that transferred ownership of foreign enterprises to local entrepreneurs (Resnick 2015). Although the entrepreneurial middle classes expanded after the implementation of state-led developmental policies, the overwhelming majority of this social class was employed by the government or government-sponsored industries. The middle classes' dependence on the state for economic livelihoods weakened their political voice in the face of military rule and economic corruption (Lofchie 2014). As a result, the African middle classes of the state-centered postindependence era played a marginal role in promoting economic growth and good governance.

Introduction of structural adjustment policies in 1980s was what restructured the traditional relationships between social class and professional occupations. Prior to this time, doing business with the government was the primary way to achieve economic wealth because the state was the largest customer (Handley 2015: 620). However, with the implementation of privatization and liberalization policies, many African intelligentsia and professionals within the middle classes migrated to the United States or Europe, sought new employment opportunities in the formal private sector, or started their own entrepreneurial ventures (Okpweho 2009, Handley 2015, Ekpo et al 2014). Specifically, for most African women, the structural adjustment period led to the feminization of poverty due to its deleterious effects on the informal economic sector (Aina 1993).

The subsequent rise of the African middle class since the 2000s can therefore be attributed to the expansion of the banking, telecommunications, and services sectors following the structural adjustment period. Notwithstanding the emergence of an independent private sector, the middle class continues to be closely linked to the public

sector and state government. In Nigeria, for example, the public sector continues to be largest employer of labor (Ekpo et al. 2014). Thus, while the recent rise of entrepreneurship can be linked to the structural adjustment program (SAP), a historical examination of the African middle class reveals the emergent entrepreneurial subject as an outcome of imbricated processes of capitalism, class, and the neopatrimonial postcolonial state.

The formation of this entrepreneurial subject, however, cannot only be limited to middle-classness but must also focus on sociocultural practices such as lifestyle, leisure, and consumption patterns. As Michael West's study on the Zimbabwean middle class compellingly demonstrates, "one's relationship to the means of production and distribution is merely the starting point of class ranking; it is not the ending point or sole determinant. Ideology, or the consciousness of class, is no less important than the material reality of class" (2002: 2). This is especially true in the African context, where employment and income statistics are usually limited.

In his seminal work on the relationship between social class and taste, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has also argued that consumer practices and lifestyles are important sites for the production and reproduction of class distinction. Building on Bourdieu's work on class, Claire Mercer contends that "the architecture, interior décor, and compound spaces" of new houses in Tanzania are key sites through which members of middle classes highlight intra-class difference as well as distinguishing themselves from other social classes (2014: 227). Yet becoming and being middle class are not solely restricted to housing preferences. Rachel Spronk's (2012) research on young middle-class professionals in Nairobi demonstrates the importance of lifestyle and leisure practices in

defining identity and expressing desire among African middle classes. these newly emergent sociocultural practices are best conceived in today's Africa through the concept of afropolitanism, which refers to the heterogeneous social practices and cultural productions of transnational and/or cosmopolitan African urbanites, primarily mediated by digital media technology. In what follows, I explore the Afropolitan definition of the new entrepreneurial African middle classes.

PROBLEMATIZING THE AFROPOLITAN DEFINITION OF THE NEW AFRICAN MIDDLE CLASSES

Though strongly criticized for proffering what some define as an “elite identity as a kind of cultural capital, style without substance, commodifying a newly exotic cosmopolitan identity as a claim of difference that cannot be sustained,” afropolitanism reveals much more complexity than is acknowledged within academic and popular discourses (Goyal 2014: xv, Dabiri 2014). Indeed, many of these criticisms are tied to Taiye Selasi's description of Afropolitans as a new generation of hybrid, highly educated, well-traveled African émigrés in her 2005 *LIP* magazine article, “Bye-Bye Babar.” A self-described “multilocal afropolitan,” Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu (Taiye Selasi), is identified as coining the term to articulate her complicated identity as a Nigerian-Ghanaian born in London, raised in Boston, and educated at Yale and Oxford. For her, afropolitanism is personal and primarily an identity discourse tied to the transnational worlds of the new African diaspora. Although Selasi's definition of afropolitanism triumphantly celebrates global middle-class identity markers of education, travel, and white-collar professions, it is also boldly rooted in the Continent, which complicates critiques that question its Africanness and link it to an imitation of the West (Musila

2015).

This African sensibility becomes even more pronounced with an interrogation of Achille Mbembe's theorization of afropolitanism. Around the same time as Selasi, historian and theorist Achille Mbembe (2005) started writing about Afropolitanism. His initial theoretical work was later published in English in the 2007 *Africa Remix* catalogue and was followed by an in-depth exploration in his 2010 book, *Sortir de la grande nuit; Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée*. For Achille Mbembe, "afropolitanism is an aesthetic and a particular poetic of the world. It is a way of being in the world, refusing on principle any form of victim identity...it is also a political and cultural stance in relation to the nation, to race and to the issue of difference in general" (Mbembe 2007: 29). In other words, afropolitanism is an African identity that refuses to be essentialized on the mere basis of geography, race, color, and ethnicity. Mbembe also foregrounds mobility in the shaping of afropolitanism (Kasanda 2018, Toivanen 2017). He asserts that mobility is not a new phenomenon of globalization but a sociocultural and historical practice that has characterized the Continent through immersion (people from elsewhere living in Africa) and dispersion (African diasporas) since antiquity (Toivanen 2017: 193).

Given the historical traditions and practices of migration and cosmopolitanism on the Continent, Mbembe's afropolitanism is not necessarily defined only by the African diasporic and transnational experience. Instead, it ultimately gestures to new and diverse ways of being African in the twenty-first century beyond afropessimistic narratives by which, according to Simon Gikandi, "the continent and its populace is hopelessly imprisoned in its past, trapped in a vicious cycle of underdevelopment, and held hostage to corrupt institutions" (2011:9).

Although Mbembe and Selasi come from different epistemological traditions as well as differing conceptions of temporality, it is obvious that they both face similar criticisms of their shared anti-essentialist stance on identity. Accordingly, afropolitanism “has been accused of programmatically ignoring power relations, both within African communities and between African and Western societies” (Marzagora 2016: 173). For Simon Gikandi, the Euro-American deconstructionist turn to poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism (and I would add afropolitanism to this group) “was premised on a critique of notions (history, nation and consciousness) that were still central to subjects and citizens faced with the crisis engendered by the collapse of modern institutions” (2003: 125). Taking this debate further, Paul Zeleza has argued that “the multiplication of identities, memories, and resistances surely must not be used to forget the larger contexts, the hierarchies of power between the colonizer and the colonized, Europe and Africa, the unequal impact the empire had and left behind for the metropolises and the colonies, the fact that imperial power was upheld by physical force not simply by ideas and images, that it was underpinned by material structures not simply ideological constructs, by political economy not simply by discursive economy” (2006: 124). And as such, African writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Yewande Omotoso have also disavowed the Afropolitan label and instead insisted that being African is enough to encapsulate and express their range of complexities (Bosch Santana 2016, Fasselt 2014).

Yet while I somewhat agree with the need to account for the nation-state’s persistence as a crucial site for identity formation in the contemporary and the need to expand popular conceptions of African identity, I consider afropolitanism to be a necessary intervention in moving the current discussions on contemporary Africa

forward. Even beyond the need for new representations of African life forms on a global scale, the African Continent needs new names, as NoViolet Bulawayo (2013) has poignantly claimed. We need these new names to tell ourselves new stories about who we are now, who we have been, and who we are yet to become. And to be frank, afropolitanism has not yet begun to overwhelm other realities on the African continent (Ogbechie 2008, Bwesigye 2013). On the contrary, news about Africa is still primarily bleak everywhere one goes. As an African living in diaspora, I confront this reality from multiple angles: Western media, African media, social events, and even around the dinner table. We must also face the fact that the ascription and celebration of an afropolitan identity have yet to curtail the victimization and oppression of black African peoples at home and in diaspora. I say this not to be pessimistic but to push toward deeper contemplation of afropolitanism. Taking this as a departure point, I examine the theoretical foundations of the concept and advance a more nuanced definition of afropolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism with African Roots?

Like afropolitanism, cosmopolitanism refers to an open way of being and perceiving the world. It is an idea or practice that constantly reaches beyond the demarcations of nationalism, ethnocentrism, racism, and other particularistic notions to one of a universal human community. According to Jeremy Waldron (1991: 754),

“the cosmopolitan may live all his life in one city and maintain the same citizenship throughout. But he refuses to think of himself as *defined* by his location or his ancestry or his citizenship or his language...He is a creature of modernity, conscious of living in a mixed-up world and having a mixed-up self.”

Although afropolitanism has been labeled “cosmopolitanism with African roots,” a closer look at the former reveals a more radical project than cosmopolitanism (Gehrmann 2015).

In “Rethinking African Culture and Identity: the Afropolitan model,” Chielozona Eze (2014) affirms the cosmopolitan ideals of afropolitanism by situating it within the intellectual genealogy of cosmopolitanism which emphasizes the moral standpoint of individual devotion to universal humanity through decentralized sovereignty, human rights, and global communities (Nussbaum 1994, Waldron 1991, Derrida 2001). Eze proposes that placing afropolitanism in this cosmopolitan context allows for the creation of a new moral topography through which Africans can forge new expansive identities in relation to “people of diverse ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds.” Thus, he defines an Afropolitan as “one who can stake moral claims to Africa and the world, and conversely admits that others can lay the same claim to Africa” (Eze 2015: 4). Building on this work, Suzanne Gehrmann conceives of afropolitanism as an emancipatory concept, which can possibly “complete the as yet unfinished decolonization process of Africa” (2015: 4).

Although these scholars generally locate afropolitanism within the intellectual history of cosmopolitanism, Anna-Leena Toivanen (2017) in “Cosmopolitanism’s new clothes? The limits of the concept of Afropolitanism” challenges afropolitanism connection with cosmopolitanism. As an identity discourse of “affluent diasporic Africans,” it departs from the “utopian thinking, ethics, self-awareness and critical spirit” captured in cosmopolitanism (Toivanen 2017:192). Moreover, as form of mobility and transculturality, afropolitanism “promotes territorialized and potentially racialized biases

of which the concept of cosmopolitanism should be free” (ibid, 201). Thus, for Toivanen, afropolitanism in both Selasi’s and Mbembe’s articulations is a weaker and needless theoretical concept in comparison to cosmopolitanism.

Problematizing the concept altogether, Simon Gikandi states, “cosmopolitan identities were not simply corrupted by racialism, but were immanently racialist, if not racist” (2002: 599). Contemporary cosmopolitan thought stems from the work of Immanuel Kant, despite originating from the Greek Stoics (Delanty 2006). Following Gikandi’s work, Cheryl Sterling asserts, “discourses of cosmopolitanism and afropolitanism simplify the affective range of continued prejudice against the Black subject rather than deconstructing the foundational prejudices of Euro-humanism and their continued effect in global inequalities” (2015: 138). Relating afropolitanism to cosmopolitanism therefore is both useful and problematic because although cosmopolitanism enriches the theoretical purchase of the term, it saddles afropolitanism with the ideological baggage of its history. Rather than remedy the epistemological inconsistencies of Western discourse, many scholars seek to explore afropolitanism in relation to the black diaspora discourses of Negritude and Pan-Africanism.

Afropolitanism and Self-Theorizing Discourses of the African Diaspora

Pan-Africanism and Negritude were among the first generation of black counterdiscourses to contest Western misrepresentations of African subjectivity and engage questions on “what it means to be an African in the modern world” (Gikandi 2001: 3). Western enterprises of colonialism and slavery not only transformed and reconfigured the indigenous sociopolitical institutions of African societies but they also discursively constructed Africa as a “Dark Continent” and Africans as abject Others. In

fact, the mythical invention of Africa, as V. Y. Mudimbe has shown, significantly preceded its colonization and actually provided the ideological basis for the forced extraction of Africans and the subsequent colonial subjugation on the Continent. Furthermore, a prominent postcolonial theorist, Gayatri Spivak (1988), stresses this point in her seminal examination of the sheer difficulty of the subaltern to claim subjectivity within Modernity's epistemically violent discourses because so much of the West's history has been dependent on the silencing of the subaltern.

According to Albert Kasanda, pan-Africanism can be characterized in two ways: "The original Pan-Africanism as conceived by African diasporans, and the Pan-Africanism developed by its African heirs" (2016: 181). The former deals with solidarity between black people outside of Africa, in a context of racial discrimination in countries such as the United States, Latin America and Europe, while the latter focused on solidarity inside Africa in the context of colonial domination and exploitation."

An earlier work by George Shepperson (1962) also conceives of pan-Africanism in two distinct ways:

"Pan-Africanism (capital P) indicates the history of the transnational movement itself, the limited parameters of the Pan-African Congress from 1900 on, and pan-Africanism with the small letter p covers both aesthetic evocations and political institutions, such as church organization, academic conferences and associations, lobbying groups, and various radical pressure groups" (qtd in Edwards 2001:50).

Ultimately, pan-Africanism is best conceived of as discourse and political movement seeking to establish commonality between members of the global African diaspora in

order to combat white supremacist ideologies of racism and colonialism and usher in a global humanism predicated on dignity and freedom (Sterling 2015: 129, Goyal 2014). The earliest form of pan-Africanism, often called “racial pan-Africanism”—emerged in the late nineteenth century from the black internationalism of Edward Wilmot Blyden, Martin Delany, Anna Julia Cooper, and Pauline Hopkins. Its intellectual and political roots were in the black new world discourse of Ethiopianism (Goyal 2014: vii, Kasanda 2016: 180, Edwards 2001).⁴⁶ Initially championed by Edward Blyden, the father of African nationalism and Pan-Africanism, this strand of pan-Africanism called for African revival through the “exploration of the African past and current reality, the avoidance of social mimicry, and the promotion of new educational policy in Africa” (Kasanda 2016: 181, Mudimbe 1988). Blyden’s over-preoccupation with racial unity became the weakness of his political ideologies, leading to developing an “antiracist racism.” Indeed, scholars like Valentine Mudimbe and Kwame Appiah (1992) have noted the contradictory nature of Blyden’s intellectual discourse. Notwithstanding the problematic undercurrents of Blyden’s thought, Pan-Africanism’s ideological project of articulating a truly global humanism cannot be reduced to the racialist thrust of its various formulations.

In the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois explicitly denounced the underlying racial essentialism of this strand of pan-Africanism. Instead of focusing on the biologism of race, Du Bois firmly upheld a stance of multiculturalism and viewed race in relation to “the influence of psychological, spiritual, social and historical strengths in the

⁴⁶ Based on the Bible verse stating, “Ethiopian shall soon stretch forth her hands to God” (Psalm 66:3). Ethiopianism was linked to the independent African Church in South Africa and later mobilized by the Black church in the United States (Psalm 66:3, Shepperson 1953, Boyce-Davies 2008, Drake 1982).

configuration of human races” (Kasanda 2016: 186). Moreover, he played an active role in the Pan-African Congresses after the death of the original convener, Henry Sylvester Williams. Held in 1919, 1921, 1923, 1927, 1945, and 1974, the Pan-African gatherings of African-descended intellectuals explored and engaged ideologies around “a real or symbolic return to Africa” (Edwards 2001: 46).

The 1945 Manchester Pan-African Congress marked the Africanization of the Pan-African movement as leadership shifted from members of the diaspora to Continental Africans like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, and Adelaide Caseley-Hayford in partnership with George Padmore and Amy Ashwood Garvey. Using concepts of African personality and consciencism, Kwame Nkrumah galvanized the African nationalist movement and led the liberation from colonialism and imperialism. While the impact of Pan-Africanism on the African diaspora people cannot be downplayed or denied, scholars such as Achille Mbembe (2001) state that the central organizing principle of the African Continent cannot be based on ‘biological inheritance and cultural roots’ in the face of present-day cultural diversity and racial multiplicity.

In addition to the pan-African movement, the twentieth century also saw the emergence of Negritude, which Leopold Senghor defines as “the ensemble of cultural values of the black world as these express themselves in the life, the institution, and the works of black people” (1964:9). Pioneered by Aimee Cesaire, Leopold Senghor, and Leon Damas as well as the Nardal sisters (Paulette and Jeanne), the Negritude movement, influenced by Marxism and surrealism, first began in interwar Paris as a tool to dismantle colonial cultural oppression then later as a poetics of a new humanism. Although there had been a long intellectual tradition of Othering in Western discourse,

this counterdiscourse was in response to the nineteenth-century European philosophies of man, especially those of Hegel and Gobineau (Wright 2004). In *Becoming Black*, Michelle Wright shows how Hegel dialectically structured the Modern White Subject in relation to the Black Other by locating the Black outside analytical history and positing Black as the antithesis of the White Subject. Consequently, the refutation of this discursive formation became the primary basis of Negritude.

In constructing their poetics of black subjectivity, Negritudinists drew upon Joseph Arthur de Gobineau's racist stereotype of art being the only possession of the Negro and formulated a notion of civilization and subjectivity based on the superiority of African artistic prowess. Moreover, Senghor links art to language (logos) to posit Creation and claim Africa's equally important role in humanity (Wright 2004:100). Despite its success in giving voice to the marginalized subject and "forcing the terms of the debate to become more equitable," Wright states that Negritude was inherently limited because "counterdiscourse only comes into being through discourse which makes it fundamentally subsidiary to the latter" (Wright 2005:67). In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (2008), via Sartre, also locates Negritude within this dialectic and realizes that Negritude's antiracist racism could never be an end in itself. Furthermore, Fanon refuses to plunge into Negritude's "black hole" "at the expense of his present and future;" instead, he considers the production of Black subjectivity within a materialist dialectic (Fanon 2008). Ultimately, although Negritude was initially conceived to locate the black self, its inheritance of Western discourses of alterity reproduced an essentialist Black identity, thus making it a problematic self-theorizing enterprise.

Toward A New Gendered Theory of Afropolitanism

What a critical examination of cosmopolitanism, pan-Africanism, and Negritude reveals is the difficulty in constructing an African subjectivity outside prevailing notions of difference, such as the nation, race, and gender. Indeed, Achille Mbembe's concept of afropolitanism was formulated with the intent to liberate the African self from this burden of difference premised on the historical events of "slavery, colonization, and apartheid" (2002: 241). In *African Modes of Self-Writing*, Mbembe and Randall argue that nationalist thought has reduced African history to "a series of subjugations" and absolved Africans from taking responsibility for its current catastrophes (ibid, 243). Moreover, he contends that nativism has constructed African cultural identity within a "metaphysics of difference," which has created a notion of citizenship based on "color and a privileged autochthony" (ibid, 256). To counter African scholarship's obsessive preoccupation with difference and victimhood, Mbembe proposes self-rewriting, which "reinterprets subjectivity as time, emphasizes historical contingency, and facilitates the process of subject formation" (2002: 242; Cawood 2015). Thus, he conceptualizes afropolitanism as a refusal of nation and difference as organizing principles of African subjectivity and promotes a cultural identity and history based on mobility, creativity, and diversity.

Beyond offering a respite from troubling cultural essentialisms and Eurocentrism, afropolitanism offers an escape route from the androcentric nature of black self-theorizing enterprises. A central critique of pan-Africanism and Negritude has been the construction of the Black subject as inherently male and the silencing of other Black subject positions. During the African diasporic movements of Negritude and pan-Africanism, black diasporan women and their contributions were often sidelined, in service to racial solidarity and nation-building (Boyce-Davies 2005, Reddock 2014).

Black women thus found themselves and their needs silenced within dominant discourses since neither black men nor white women could give voice to their intersectional subjectivities. The silencing of black women's subjectivities resulted in the subsequent erasure and diminution of their foundational intellectual and political work within the African diaspora (Blain et al.2016: 139, Sharpley-Whiting 2005, Boyce-Davies 2014).

Michelle Wright (2004) locates the silencing of the Black female subject within African diasporic counterdiscourse as a product of Western dialectical discourses on subjectivity. According to Wright, pan-Africanism and Negritude mobilized the same logics of Western dialectics to construct and legitimize the Black subject within the discourse of the modern nation, which “operates on a series of heteropatriarchal assumptions and leaves little for the black female subject” (2004: 110-111). She posits that “only the introduction of dialogic structures can subvert the fallacious arrangement of time and space on which nationalist discourse (and, consequently, the Black male subject) relies to bring the Black female subject into being” (Wright 2004:4).

Following this intellectual work, Bridget Tetteh-Batsa (2018) advances the notion of afropolitan feminism, based on Adiche's *Americanah* (2013), as a space-making critical counterdiscourse for African female migrants and their voices within the exclusionary discourse of nation-state. Mobility and migration are the principal ways black female bodies transgress the boundaries of nation and invent their own dynamic possibilities of existence (Kumavie 2015, Tetteh-Batsa 2018). Taiye Selasi, for example, prominently features mobility in her debut novel *Ghana Must Go* (2013) to explore “the desires, means, and consequences of being free from categorizations like nationalism, free to build homes, and identities in multiple places while striving to connect them together”

(Crowley 2018: 128). Through the story of the Sai family and their quintessentially Afropolitan children—“Olu, the elder son, a Brookline surgeon; the twins Kehinde and Taiwo, international artist and aspiring lawyer respectively; and Sadie, a high achieving Yallie,”— she complicates the one-dimensional view of afropolitanism as privileged mobility by “showing that the ability to take one’s ‘Ghana must go’ and ‘move on’ is an ambivalent gesture, a mixed bag containing both constraint and freedom” (Gehrmann 2015: 7, Morales 2017: 228). Consequently, she posits an afropolitan as a constant state of being and becoming in the world outside the delimiting boundaries and temporalities of the nation-state.

Understandably though, the class dimension of afropolitanism continues to pose a problem for scholars and critics who see it as reproduction of neoliberal ideologies. Although it is true that the underlying class privilege of Afropolitan mobility often “precludes working class immigrants and poor Africans on the Continent” and legitimizes neoliberal “configurations of power and production,” the discourse of afropolitanism is not inherently class-based (Zezeza 2006: 124, Tetteh-Batsa 2018: 128). Instead, afropolitanism is predominantly a critical discourse that seeks to render Black subjectivity as human and Africa as a part of the world (Mbembe and Balakrishnan 2016: 29). Consequently, its appropriation of seemingly neoliberal logics of freedom does not erase afropolitanism’s theoretical indebtedness to black radical discourses of pan-Africanism and Negritude, and African nationalism. For it ultimately shares the same liberatory desires for black subjects to become fully human. Afropolitanism just creates such a space amid twenty-first century realities of technology, mobility, and the failures of the postcolonial African state.

Yet this reality does not excuse apathy in the face of political injustice and social inequality. Mbembe's afropolitanism, for instance, not only takes mobility on the Continent into account but also includes "popular forms of everyday life" (Mbembe and Balakrishnan 2016). And primarily because the "creative theorizing" of transnational black feminist writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Taiye Selasi, NoViolet Bulawyo, Yaa Gyasi, Sefi Atta, Sarah Ladipo Manyika, and Aminatta Forna have laid the foundations of the concept, I also contend that contemporary theorizations of afropolitanism must be situated at the intersections of "gender and nationalism, class and culture" especially since logics of racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism still condition migration experiences (Boyce-Davies 1991: 260, Boyce-Davies 1994: 44). Accordingly, I suggest that the liberatory potential of afropolitanism as a relevant contemporary discourse for black subjectivities will be best realized through a gendered diasporic theory of afropolitanism that creatively combines and grounds the emergent theory in relation to the dialogic spaces of transnational black feminism and African diaspora ideologies.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has challenged the imposition of neoliberal discourses in reading African entrepreneurial practices. Although African entrepreneurs might in fact borrow from cultures outside their local context, their practices are undeniably rooted in historically situated processes of class and culture. Consequently, interrogations of contemporary entrepreneurship must take seriously the entangled global and local logics within these processes in order to avoid flattening the complex and multidimensional experiences of entrepreneurial subjects.

As Carla Freeman's *Entrepreneurial Selves: Neoliberal Respectability and the Making of a Caribbean Middle Class* (2014) has demonstrated, entrepreneurialism is not solely a process of recognizing and capitalizing on opportunities within the local market. Instead, Freeman convincingly argues that entrepreneurialism is a "generalized way of being and feeling in the world," which is inextricably linked to larger social and political economic dynamics of labor, enterprise, and the market. Moreover, she highlights the pivotal role that history and culture play in the unfolding of these dynamics processes. Shedding light on the workings of entrepreneurship in African societies, Moses Ochonu's *Entrepreneurship in Africa: A Historical Approach* (2018) similarly argues that entrepreneurialism was not the sole preserve of the self-employed; rather, the entrepreneurial spirit was found across almost all occupations. This cultural logic of entrepreneurship thus cannot be reduced or conflated with neoliberalism.

Given the relationship between neoliberalism and the emergence of the new African middle class, I found ahistorical interrogation of middle-class formation in Africa to be particularly useful and necessary. Class, after all, does not just refer to occupation or income levels; it refers to "a set of historically determined relations forged in the sphere of production" (Bujra 1983: 18). Moreover, these relations are forged in particular social locations and mediated through multivalent cultural registers. Situating emergent entrepreneurial practices within these historical processes allows us to see the incomplete and partial character of neoliberalism and the extent to which its form and content must be locally translated to have any relevance.

The complex discursive formation of the new African middle class was also revealed in my examination of the popular identity discourse of afropolitanism. Often

perceived to be rooted in Westernized conceptions of middle classness and neoliberalism, afropolitanism is here shown to be firmly located within African and African diasporic intellectual discourses. As a philosophical concept and identity formation, afropolitanism is primarily concerned with the positionality and relationality of Africa and African peoples in the globalizing world. Further, with its local roots and global outlook, the concept of afropolitanism is especially productive in thinking about new African entrepreneurial practices outside the widespread ideologies of neoliberal subjectivity.

Despite arguing for the importance of examining African entrepreneurship on its terms, this chapter has also explored the neoliberal processes at work on the African Continent. This exploration of neoliberalism ultimately demonstrates that its ideological impact in today's world cannot be simply ignored but must be elucidated and contextualized alongside other significant socioeconomic transformations. Investigating African entrepreneurial practices thus necessitates an understanding of class, culture and capital. Only by foregrounding this assemblage we see new modes of being entrepreneurial and doing entrepreneurship in all its nuanced complexity.

CHAPTER 6

THE MAKING OF AFROPRENEURIAL SUBJECTIVITIES

“Suddenly, one can hold out hope that Africa’s numerous social and economic problems, which have defied solution by governments, will be solved by the new wave of young women and men, enabled by technology and facilitated by new social media, who are taking ownership – bravely — of the continent’s economic destiny. These are the people I like to describe as Afropreneurs.” – Idris Bello

INTRODUCTION

Afropreneurialism is a new mode of subjectivity derived from a term of social and cultural practice called afropreneurship. Coined in the early 2010s by Idris Bello, an actor in the Lagos tech ecosystem, afropreneurship refers to “bright, independent, and tech savvy entrepreneurs who use creative thinking and the power of innovation to take over Africa’s economic destiny” (Kermeliotis, 2012). In short, afropreneurship is a process whereby entrepreneurial Africans leverage innovation to solve local problems, make profits, and impact society. Using this definition, “afropreneurialism” refers to how Africans deploy innovative and entrepreneurial thinking and actions to identify local challenges and create value through solutions to assert their coeval membership in a globalizing world.

Interviews with Lagos tech actors often revealed ideas for solving African problems. As I listened to Yinka, a young Nigerian-American returnee and female investor, explain the importance of having an African impact in the ecosystem, I wondered why many contemporary entrepreneurs, technologists, and investors felt so

personally obligated to solve local problems (interview 2018). Historically, African entrepreneurs have occupied a very politically and economically ambivalent position in their societies, as I showed in Chapter Five. Thus, I found it interesting that today's African entrepreneurs were so eager to turn societal problems into business opportunities, thus marrying social impact and profit-making.

Exploring and unpacking the nuanced contours of this new entrepreneurial subject formation is the primary focus of this chapter. Historically speaking, much of the literature on African entrepreneurship has centered on small enterprises in the informal sector or large foreign or public enterprises in formal sector (Forrest 1994, Hart 1973). Stemming from Western theories of entrepreneurship as espoused by Joseph Alois Schumpeter and Max Weber, this literature is primarily concerned with how entrepreneurship as an innovative response to market dynamics can drive economic development (Schumpeter 1934, Weber 1978). And despite compelling studies of entrepreneurship within the fields of sociology, history, and anthropology that have shifted the concept beyond economics, contemporary studies on African entrepreneurship maintain this overly economic focus by employing classical, Marxist, and Foucauldian theoretical injunctions to read African entrepreneurial subjectivities (Barth 1963, Belasco 1980, Stewart 1991).

In a recent edited volume, Moses Ochonu has argued that Western conceptions of entrepreneurship cannot fully capture “the multiple networks and realms of economic, cultural, and political action” that African entrepreneurs occupied historically and in the contemporary (2018: 5). According to him, “entrepreneurs were not shaped by the narrow permutations of combining forces of production—capital, labor, and knowledge—to

produce profit. Entrepreneurs occupied multiple positions and professions in society; entrepreneurship was only one of several elements that defined them (ibid, 320). He thus advances the concept of “entrepreneurial Africans” rather than African entrepreneurs to articulate “the premise that almost all occupational groups of Africans were capable of entrepreneurial thinking and actions and were entrepreneurial at different points in their lives” (ibid, 321) Moreover, he notes that for entrepreneurial Africans profit-making and social impact were not mutually exclusive. As a result, local understandings and practices of entrepreneurialism cannot simply be subsumed under neoliberal discourses of economy, enterprise, flexibility, and power.

The Lagos tech actors⁴⁷ in my study come from diverse social backgrounds. Ranging between the ages of 28 and 64, many of these tech actors were born and raised and in varying degrees experienced firsthand the height of Nigeria’s political and economic crisis during the SAP era of the 1980s and 1990s. A few among this group had received their university and postgraduate educations at Nigerian public and private universities; others completed all or some of their higher education abroad, in North America and Western Europe; still others attended Ivy league schools. Many of these highly educated people had achieved substantial success at prominent local and global firms in information technology, banking, and finance; media and telecommunications; and health and lifestyle, before pursuing careers in entrepreneurship. Only a few became entrepreneurs immediately after completing their education.

Thus, while tech actors are entrepreneurial, they are also a part of the global middle classes. By middle class here, I do not specifically refer to a socioeconomic class

⁴⁷ I differentiate between tech actors who have spent some time abroad using the term, returnee. For those who have not been abroad, I simply leave it blank.

position. Instead I refer to class as sociocultural practice. As Rachel Spronk has noted, middle classness is a cultural practice that allows African subjects to understand “their local and cosmopolitan lives and experiences as coeval social phenomenon” (2014:99). This examination of class is also particularly instructive given that class backgrounds of tech actors in Lagos are ‘flexible and layered’ (Avle 2014). Indeed, I confronted this definitional complexity head on when I first began my field research and asked my research subject about their class positions. Although it was easy for some to assess their class position, many of my research subjects found it difficult to define their class identity. This left me to rely on my local knowledge or to remain generally uncertain, as I did not want to blatantly impose my own biases onto them. For instance, where does one locate the experiences of an interviewee like Kunle, which I introduced in Chapter One, within the middle class? This challenge, along with my redefined conception of afropolitanism that I delineate in Chapter Five, makes the primary use of economic phenomenon an extremely murky enterprise.

Lagos tech actors thus draw from a wide assemblage of global-local logics situated at the interstices of capital, class, culture, and digital technology to produce entrepreneurial subjectivities that are neither fully neoliberal nor middle class nor afropolitan. Instead, these subjectivities, I propose, are afropreneurial. To flesh out the makings of afropreneurial subjectivities, this chapter ethnographically examines the discursive practices used by Lagos tech actors to position themselves and their Continent within the larger global context of technological innovation and entrepreneurship while also being grounded in their local contexts. In particular, this chapter elaborates on some of the afropreneurial qualities and practices of Lagos tech actors in terms of education,

gender, consumption patterns, new entrepreneurial practices, digital media, local impact, and relationship to the African state.

Education for Entrepreneurial Practice

One Tuesday evening, a friend from college and I were working at Café Neo, a popular coffee roaster and coffeehouse chain founded by two returnee brothers. While at the coffee shop, we entered into an engaging discussion with other people about our university experiences. This is not uncommon because the coffee shop is a popular place where young professionals and entrepreneurs, especially returnees, go to work on their businesses and projects. In such a setting, an overly loud conversation between two people easily becomes a group discussion. As we began discussing our university experiences, one man made a comment about how working in groups was not part of his educational experience. I remember being surprised by his comment saying that it was a very strong part of the American education system. My friend, who had experienced education in Nigeria and America, also mentioned that she mainly learned group work while in the States.

Group work was later referred to by our new friend as one of the benefits of an American education in comparison to the “flawed” Nigerian education system. Indeed, the problem of education was a recurring theme during my field research among tech entrepreneurs. Education, for many of my research subjects, was a formative part of their actual or aspirational middle-class identity. Since many of their parents were academics and professionals in healthcare, banking, information technology (IT), and commerce, getting a higher education was inevitable. As Carola Lentz states, “a certain level of educational credentials seems to be regarded necessary in order to legitimately claim

middle-class status even by those new rich who demonstrate middle-classness mainly through consumerism” (2016: 29). Despite the more recent scholarly focus on the consumption practices of the global middle classes, “education, and the respectable work to which it gives access,” remain important tools in establishing one’s middle class status and facilitating upward mobility, even for the newly rich (ibid). Consequently, investing in quality education for children is non-negotiable for anyone looking to become middle class, remain middle class, or exceed the middle class (Berry 1985, Behrends and Lentz 2012).

For many interviewees who came of age in the wake of structural adjustment, the poor educational system made studying in Nigeria next to impossible. To secure better opportunities for their offspring, many middle-class parents did all they could to send their children abroad. While abroad in North America and Western Europe, children from the Nigerian middle class obtained undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the lucrative fields of medicine, engineering, banking, and law. Given the difficulties of career advancement as people of color in these foreign environments, many Nigerian diasporans consider obtaining a postgraduate degree to be almost a mandatory requirement in achieving success abroad. Obi, a returnee investor who used to work in Silicon Valley, mentioned in our interview that he “needed to go back to school again because I found out that being an underrepresented minority, looking to set a switch to the business side of the house was going to be difficult without having some sort of business degree and the likes”(2018). While Obi was specifically talking about the ways in which people of color pursue education to demonstrate professional competence abroad, I find it interesting that another returnee interviewee, Lekan, also decided to

study abroad in order to remain competitive in the Nigerian job market. Discussing his experience at a prominent Nigerian telecommunications company, he said:

Glo was trying to expand into Benin republic and most of them were looking for Nigerians that were working outside [abroad] that they want to bring back...A lot of my senior colleagues then were telling me that I was wasting my time in Glo that you are too young, you are too sharp. Glo is a place to come and sit down at the time not to build a career, go out, get your degree and then come back so I left then for MBA. I wanted to go to US. I got admitted into Darden but I was refused visa twice. The school called the embassy to call me to come back. Eventually I just opted for the UK, I wasn't bent on location. My focus was on getting MBA so I went to MBA. Then from school, I was recruited back to Nigeria by Nokia to come and start a unit (Lekan, interview, 2018).

For Lekan, staying in Nigeria without a foreign education meant limited chances career-wise “because they are going to bring in someone from outside, and the guy will come back and become your boss even though you have more experience than the person and you are the one that is going to do the job”(ibid). The reality of having someone from outside “become your boss” is a legitimate concern for many Nigerians who attended local public and private institutions. Most of the individuals I interviewed in this category blatantly admit “it was not like it was anything we learnt in university that prepared us for the challenges” (Hassan, interview, 2018). Others remarked that the Nigerian education system only “teaches people how to cram” and that there was no effort to teach “critical thinking” (Idris, interview, 2018, Yinka, interview, 2018). Indeed, some expressed that “being educated here is actually worse now than when we were going to university”

(Nosa, interview, 2018).

Although there are successful tech entrepreneurs who studied completely in local educational institutions, it is not a coincidence that a growing number of them went to private universities like Covenant University and Obafemi Awolowo University, the first public university in the country to get Internet access. Even with that, the educational experience received at these institutions was still “very limited.” When I asked about her experience at Covenant University, Emma, a computer engineering graduate, said:

I think Covenant University tried its best, did what it could do but it was very limited still. Education is still heavily theoretical, a bit repetitive. The syllabus hasn't changed [and] is archaic, but they did what they could do, and the one thing that Covenant did was provide the resources for you to add to the knowledge that they were able to impart on you. So the thing is, the university has to follow something set by the NUC [National Universities Commission], the syllabus and things like that, they don't have a choice. But Covenant had a giant library and we had Internet access before many students in Nigeria had Internet access. That way, after everything, you could research. They basically gave you the tools to be what you can be, do you get. So it's not like the school particularly said look you must be this. The resources were kind of there, and if you took advantage of it, you came out (Ema, interview, 2018).

Idris, a first class computer engineering graduate from the University of Ife (now known as Obafemi Awolowo University), also explained the challenges he faced as a student:

“We started computer science, programming was really done on paper so here's what we did. You write your program on paper. Then when it was your group's turn, they gave

you access for 30 minutes to quickly type it in and then see whether the computer ran it or not. And they were telling us that we were really lucky, that years before it was punch cards and all” (Bello, interview, 2018).

The problematic state of the educational system has widespread consequences for the broader society. Many university graduates struggle to realize their aspirations for a professional career because they find themselves unprepared for the job market in an environment where there are hardly enough jobs. As one returnee entrepreneur, Chisom, aptly stated: “We just don't have enough jobs. Even when we look at the education sector, we have over a 150 or 180million [people] with no jobs. Even when you look at it, there are a million people that write jamb every year to get to universities give or take in a typical year” (Chisom, interview, 2018). The gross imbalance between the rate of students produced by universities and available jobs creates a disproportionate amount of educated yet unemployable individuals in society. Thus, while educational opportunities have expanded resulting in more educated people, most of the available employment opportunities are taken by experienced professionals and/or returnees from abroad (Orji 2016).

The physical return of diasporic Nigerians after the neoliberal-influenced withdrawal of the state has been very much welcomed by the private sector. These returnees are well positioned not only to join global companies but also to start their own ventures based on skills they acquired from learning and working abroad. During an interview with Owen, a local investor and government official, he explained:

You need to have a decent foundation in order to build a business, and that foundation has come a lot from people who have come back from out of country,

and I always say to people that, no disrespect, there are always examples of people who studied in Nigeria and are great... But if we are being brutally frank, there are many reasons why if you come back to Nigeria, you are more likely to succeed in tech startups. The thing is the technology itself; you have probably seen it used better elsewhere. But you find that when people even go for accelerator programs and come back, they look at the businesses differently, you know. There is a place for the actual education and if the university is not giving it to you, then a guy who goes to Stanford will recognize that this model can work in Lagos (Owen, interview, 2018).

Although Owen acknowledges that some locally educated entrepreneurs have founded successful startups, he insists that returnees have driven the changes in the tech ecosystem. He is not alone, however, because both local and returnee entrepreneurs repeatedly mentioned to me that “a majority of the top tech startups in Nigeria are founded by Nigerians who grew up in the diaspora, or diasporans who came to Nigeria” (Frank, interview, 2018). Summarizing the reason for the returnee emphasis, Bayo, a young returnee investor, stated that “poor education also affects the quality of the founders in terms of skill set. So you don’t have good universities that are teaching you true computer science degrees or design thinking, problem solving. So a lot of people that you find in startups in Nigeria, these guys have to learn online, right” (interview 2018).

Due to the growing popularity of online educational platforms like Udacity, Udemy, and Coursera and the impact of former employees from older tech startup companies, a vibrant population of local technologists and engineers are now starting their own startup companies. Despite the growth of technical talent in the ecosystem,

Ahmed, a local venture capitalist, commented, “the smartest people in Lagos are not building companies” (2018). Instead, many of them are choosing to work in white-collar jobs in the private sector. For many members of the middle classes, a professional career is more reliable than entrepreneurship, especially if they have families to care for. Considering the underlying risk of entrepreneurship in an already unpredictable environment, it is unsurprising that many entrepreneurs within the current ecosystem are young singles who either have nothing to lose or no viable source of income.

Regardless of whether or not they enter the workforce or pursue entrepreneurship, receiving a quality education was a defining marker of success for many people I interviewed. All but one person that I interviewed had a bachelor’s degree, over fifty percent had a master’s degree, and one had a PhD. Education thus remains a central pillar of afropreneurial subject formation because it provides valuable experiences that can be used for venture creation or societal transformation within local communities.

Consumption Patterns of the New Entrepreneurial Technoclass

Even as education continues to play a foundational role in African middle class formation, consumption is another critical arena in defining their class identities. Although consumption has historically been explored in studies of middle classes, the consumer practices of the African middle classes have only recently been studied in the wake of structural adjustment policies on the Continent (Heiman et al. 2012). For members of the new African middle classes, this consumer turn has meant a deeper consideration of their housing styles, sexuality practices, family life, and lifestyle choices (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, Ncube et al. 2011, Spronk 2012, Mercer 2014). The tech actors discussed here are firmly located within the emerging global middle classes, also

called “the technoclass” (Avle 2014).

After liberalization, the Nigerian middle classes expanded as job opportunities opened up in new industries such as telecommunications, banking, aviation, and entertainment. Moreover, as Nwachukwu Orji has stated, the new Nigerian middle classes are urban, with “the number of urban centers rising from 133 in 1960 to 438 in 2000, and urban population from approximately 6 million in 1960 to 103 million in 2010” (2016: 132). The growth of African urbanites can be linked to the rise of the African middle classes and their rising demand for the trappings of middle-class lifestyles (Heilbron et al. 2017:99). As a result, Western brands like Radisson Blu, Four Points, Apple, and Uber, along with local and international bars, grocery stores, ultramodern high-rise apartments, mega shopping malls, are now familiar sight on the Lagos cityspace.

Since the turn of the century, the city of Lagos has engaged in what Grace Ogunyankin (2019) calls “afropolitan imagineering.” Afropolitan imagineering refers to “ongoing, pervasive and conscious efforts to project a new image of Africa and Africans as worthy of being considered world-class and central to the global imaginary” (ibid, 425). Afropolitan Imagineering is part of the wider global urban shift from managerialism to neoliberal entrepreneurialism since the early 1970s (Harvey 1989). In this specific context, Lagos is redefining itself not only to attract investment capital but also to foster the creation of new modes of being in the world (Adama 2017).

Lagos plays a formative role in consumption practices of tech actors, whether they are local or diaspora returnees. Given the itinerancy and unpredictability of Lagos living, the tech actors I interviewed were always on the move between the mainland and

island, Yaba and Silicon Valley, investor meetings and networking events. Because they regularly expressed the difficulty of meeting in their offices, I mostly met with them outside their offices in coffee shops, hotel lobbies, cafes, and restaurants in Lagos. On one of the few occasions that I decided to conduct an interview in the entrepreneur's office, I remember walking in and being told that our previously scheduled hour-long meeting could now take only thirty minutes. Apparently, something more pressing had come up that needed his attention. Flexibility and patience thus became my watchwords because sometimes things just came up, and meetings had to be rescheduled.

The unpredictable and fast-paced lifestyle of tech entrepreneurs also meant working late into the night. For instance, one evening in March 2018, I waited for a few hours to interview a startup founder in his office after he had been pulled into an impromptu meeting. When he eventually finished the meeting, he was extremely apologetic and asked if I was still open to interviewing him that night. Initially, I was reluctant to conduct the interview because it was late and I was physically tired. But upon realizing that not interviewing him then would have been my second failed attempt within a span of weeks, I decided to power through the interview because I was not sure if there would be another opportunity to meet. As a result, I ended up conducting his interview at midnight! I share these anecdotes from the field to demonstrate the busyness of entrepreneurial lifestyles in Lagos. This lifestyle is not limited to entrepreneurs, however, as it is pervasive within broader society. In fact, family members and close friends sometimes do not see each other for months or even years.

Yet I would not attribute this demanding way of life for every tech actor in Lagos. I did, after all, frequently run into some of my interviewees at coffee shops such as Vestar

Coffee. Located in Victoria Island, Vestar Coffee is a cozy coffee shop that combines a Starbucks layout with an African ambiance. Despite a nascent local coffee culture, Vestar is almost always full of people, especially entrepreneurs and freelancers, working, meeting, talking, and laughing. After being introduced to the coffee shop by one of the first entrepreneurs I interviewed, I also made Vestar my spot for working. While I observed that some individuals mostly came there to network because it was a popular spot for members of the middle class, I also saw that connections of all sorts were also easily made because of the warm ambiance. Though Vestar was mainly a transitory spot for entrepreneurs in between the next item on their agenda, it made them slow down for a minute to connect with old friends or make new ones. I also met quite a few interviewees while attending various networking events, conferences and meet ups, including Social Media Week Lagos, High Growth Africa Summit, and TechFest among others. Despite some entrepreneur's questioning the usefulness of going, I continually ran into them at these events, as either attendees or speakers. For many people, tech events were not just social events. They were critical avenues for sharing experiential knowledge with old and new entrepreneurs. These events were also places for upcoming entrepreneurs to meet potential investors and mentors while also promoting their own startup brands.

Besides the work-related lifestyle of tech actors, fashion and other aesthetically oriented practices are key ways in which they not only “articulate social and cultural identity but also reveal individual agency” (Spronk 2014: 106). For example, TechFest, a two-day technology event hosted by one of Nigeria's leading banks in May 2018, featured a startup competition for technology hubs across Nigeria. In addition, there were various panel discussions on investing, women in tech, healthtech, agritech, fintech,

and the role of digital media in society. Held at Landmark Center in Oniru, a popular venue for upscale Lagos weddings and industry events, TechFest was creatively designed with lighted cubes branded with event partners' logos dangling from the ceiling and colorful exhibition booths for startup hub competitors. Despite resemblances to Silicon Valley design aesthetics, the atmosphere had an undeniably Lagos feel, with Afrobeat music and Nigerian appetizers. Many attendees were stylish dressed in modernly fashioned cultural attire, nicely tailored corporate wear, or wore the typical techie uniform of jeans and a t-shirt. Most women wore flawlessly done makeup and immaculately presented hairstyles of braids, Afros, or hair weaves. Through their aesthetic choices, these tech actors showcase their willingness not only to adopt global modes of consumption but also to fashion a distinctively African startup culture and community.

Gender and Entrepreneurial Subjectivity

According to Finbarr Toesland (2018), “sub-Saharan Africa boasts the world’s highest rate of women entrepreneurs at 27%.” In Nigeria specifically, female entrepreneurs make up about 41 percent of the female population whereas entrepreneurs account for only 29 percent of the male population (GEM 2015). Despite the notable presence of female entrepreneurs on the Continent, their entrepreneurial efforts and business impact go relatively unnoticed within academic and popular discourses (Toesland 2018). The disregard for women entrepreneurship can be directly linked to the fact that most female-led ventures are micro-scale and small-scale businesses in the informal economy (Spring 2009, Aina 1993). More often than not, female owners solely run the business, hiring few to no staff. While this may be due to a lack of business skills,

Diarietou Gaye (2018) attributes the marginal economic growth of female enterprises to a “lack of information and social factors.”

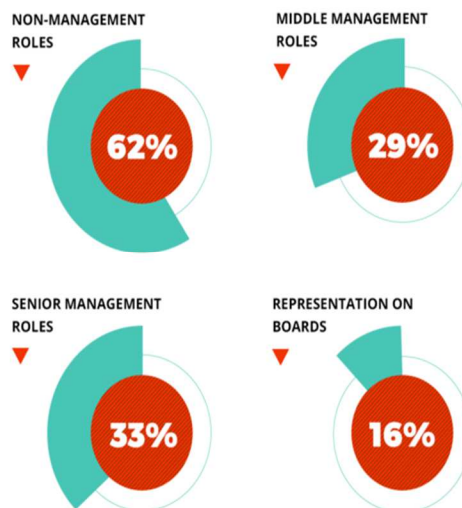
Specifically for women who operate in the formal sector, insufficient access to financial capital and cultural barriers impede the growth and expansion of their ventures. According to Gaye (2018), “data collected in ten African countries indicated that on average, male-owned enterprises have six times more capital than female-owned enterprises.” This lack of capital is also linked to a more general cultural bias about women and entrepreneurship. As Bruni et al. (2004) have shown, entrepreneurship is inextricably connected to hegemonic masculinity, as evidenced in the imperial conquests and the California Gold Rush. The inherently gendered underpinning of entrepreneurship often goes unacknowledged, thus universalizing masculine values and ideals of risk, heroism, and conquest. Within the patriarchal context of most African societies, which encourages African women to be “subservient, supportive, and submissive” in order to be marriageable, female entrepreneurs confront serious issues in obtaining the necessary access and support within such a system (Woldie and Adersua 2004, Toesland 2018).

TECH
WOMEN
LAGOS

Women in Africa's telco, tech & media industry

Source: Women Matter in Africa,
McKinsey & Company, 2016

Life  



The marginality of female entrepreneurs is even more pronounced within the androcentric world of technology. Although the gender gap in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields is a global phenomenon, African women face unique challenges because of cultural barriers and their historic underrepresentation in the academic pipeline. One of my returnee interviewees, Linda, notes the gender bias in career selection as follows, “Nigeria is a male dominated sector. Also because of our upbringing, like, you are a girl, study law, a girl, study accounting, a guy, engineering, you know (laughing), that’s like where we are traditionally” (interview 2018). Her point has also been statistically proven as the National Bureau of Statistics has shown that women account for only 22 percent of the total engineering and information technology university graduates in Nigeria, and about 20 percent of the total number of information and technology workers. Despite their lack of representation, Africa south of the Sahara is slightly ahead of women in technology fields globally, making up about 30 percent in comparison to the global total of 28 percent, according to UNESCO statistics. Yet even with their marginal numbers, female tech entrepreneurs secure only 2 percent of total venture capital investment (Toesland 2018). While the overall lack of support and representation has engendered significant initiatives in the form of gender-lens investing, women-focused incubators and accelerators, and several women in technology networks, it is even more important to understand the qualitative experiences of female tech entrepreneurs.

Bianca, a young pretty and stylish returnee tech entrepreneur, has been successfully running her company for the past ten years in Lagos. When I asked why she

became an entrepreneur, she said she wanted to be able to have time for her kids. Specifically, she “wanted to be able to go every school function no matter how mundane and boring it is because my mom was there” (Bianca 2017). Being her own boss and managing her own time has therefore allowed her to realize her mothering goals.

Although Carla Freeman (2014) has elaborated on the importance of flexibility in conceptualizing of marriage and family life among the emerging middle class, the notion has been a long-standing feature of African women’s lives based on their role in productive and reproductive labor. And as I discussed in Chapter Five, the desire to own one’s time was what dissuaded a lot of African women from pursuing employment opportunities in the formal sector. Even with the flexibility provided by entrepreneurship, female tech entrepreneurs with families must actively work within and against cultural expectations and gender roles to achieve work-life balance. For example, when I asked how Bimbo “juggled her multiple roles as a wife, mother and entrepreneur,” she said:

“I always say that I married an adult. That was the first thing I did that I think helps me. My husband is very hands-on, especially when it comes to our children. He is very there and I think that was the biggest thing. I married a partner. It wasn’t just like roles and all of these responsibilities. I think the most thing, ensure that the person you are most close to is your partner and believes [in] what you are doing. That helps, but I also think I have some support systems. My nanny and housekeeper are also very important and also very useful. If you don’t have your family members, then make sure you have that. It takes a village to raise children and build a family and that’s what good about our culture” (interview, 2018).

Flexibility, for Bimbo, extends beyond time management into the inner workings of her marriage. She stresses the necessity of having a companionate marital relationship based on shared responsibilities and mutual support for managing her multiple roles. Because her relationship is based on partnership, she can be away from her family without feeling guilty. This arrangement, coupled with cultural notions of childrearing and family life, allows her to take full advantage of the flexibility that entrepreneurship provides.

While having the flexibility to network and fundraise within the ecosystem equips female founders with the opportunities for success, maintaining an active public presence can be difficult for African women, who are often discouraged from talking about their successes. As Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013), has eloquently stated, “we teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, you can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful. Otherwise, you would threaten the man.”

Naturally reserved, Bianca admitted that her father was the one behind her public profile. A long-time player in the Nigerian information technology, her father “was always very persistent” about her having a voice (interview, 2017). He often told her, “Having a company is not enough. They must know who you are, you must speak and have an opinion and know what is going on” (ibid). Explaining the marginality of local success stories about women in tech, Bianca also mentioned the following:

Women don't beat their own chest, women don't do their own PR. We are not brought up to brag. You learn to make yourself smaller and the women are more focused on doing the work. The guys that are in it know they need PR to raise the

funds and the women are like, I have ten kobo. Ok, we will do this one first. And she's still going to get there, but it just takes her much longer, but she can bootstrap. She can manage the money and stuff like that. She's not out there saying I'm the best new startup in town...But it's the reality. Women are more focused on the journey, on doing the work, on getting things done, and not about talking about what we are doing (ibid).

Beyond the internalization of certain gender roles, women in technology also confront blatant and subtle sexism associated with prevailing notions of entrepreneurship as masculine. Dressed chicly in a fitted black dress with sneakers and gold hoop earrings, Uwana, another returnee tech entrepreneur, discusses the realities of female entrepreneurship in Lagos mentioning the following: "As a woman, what I would say is I don't know if it depends on attraction or not. I get hit on way more than I want. I get people that, make you know, comments like, even employees here will be like, oh you're looking nice today, you're looking good today. I'm kind of like, would you say that to your man boss?" (Uwana 2018). Or she states that some clients ask her inappropriate questions about her marital status. Beside these more subtle comments, she cites an example: "where the guy [a client] basically was like, I don't want to talk to you because you're a woman. I need to talk to your male partner...I was kind of like, I am the CEO of the company so...." (ibid). Similar experiences also came up in my other interviews with female entrepreneurs. For instance, Linda shared the following encounter with a local banker:

We entered into a partnership with a bank for our services. There was a process and the bank was working with a number of startups and all of that. They [her

team] had been having meetings with the bank, but I wasn't even around, so it was one of our team members that had been attending the meetings from the firm. We had told them that we wanted to do an automated integration to their online banking. They just kept saying, "Let us do it manually first this time. The guy who was spearheading the project decided to actually use our service to make a budget too, and then he called my team member who had been leading this project. He was like, wow, he just went to our website. He thought it was just an information website, that why aren't we doing an API integration with them. But we told you we wanted to do an API integration that it is. He said it's because you kept saying that it was founded by 3 women he just felt... I was like, ooh. I haven't seen him since then, but I plan to see him and say, "Because it's female led, you felt that we don't know our technology or something." And this is a young guy, he's not an old person." (Interview 2018).

Although most of my interviewees acknowledge the difficulty of being a woman in what can be a "boy's club," they generally believe Nigeria is more progressive than other places abroad when it comes to women in leadership positions. According to returnee tech investor Yinka,

"Nigeria is really weird because as much as there's sexism and all of those things, Nigeria is actually place where a lot of women are in leadership. It's better than South Africa in terms of like, having women in positions of power than a lot of other places. It's not great, but what I have seen here is a willingness of people to give. If the right person introduces me, people tend to listen and believe what I say so it's less barriers for me than dealing with some of the more racist people in

America. The bar is much lower here so that even though I'm still having to work harder than the other Nigerian men, I'm not having to kill myself like when I was in America, to make sure every single thing was tight and on point (Yinka, interview, 2018).

By comparing Nigeria with South Africa and America, which people normally consider more progressive, Yinka is able to demonstrate the ambivalent nature of local patriarchy especially in the face of global capitalism and racism. Comparison can therefore be seen as way to negotiate the fact of oppression. However, women, who do not have such experiences, may not be able to say the same. That said, Ema, a local tech entrepreneur, also agrees that even though “there is a lot of work to be done, women are actually increasing. In 2015, you could go to a tech event and count just three women, but now people are increasing. People are speaking out. More people are joining. More people are not being kept down” (interview 2018). Uwana, for one, is passionately convinced that “women are going to change Nigeria.” Citing prominent Nigerian woman politician and recent 2019 presidential candidate Obiageli Ezekwesili, as an example, she concludes that the future of the country is tied to women's leadership and empowerment.

Despite these positive developments in closing the gender gap, there is still significant work to be done to increase female participation in the developing ecosystem. While Bianca has experienced some micro-aggressions of sexism as a tech entrepreneur, she considers technology to be a leveler, dependent on skills more than anything else. Furthermore, she believes the African Continent is uniquely positioned to have “equality in technology much faster than the American market” (interview 2017). As such, she regularly tells “male tech founders to consciously hire more women” (ibid). By this, she

means ensuring that the “recruitment process is open enough for women because there is a difference right. A man would apply for a job he is not qualified for. A woman won’t just because of how the job description is written. She will say but I don’t have a certificate in PHP I can’t apply. A man will be like, I don’t have PHP, and he doesn’t care. And he’s going to brag. And he will most likely get the job because at the end of the day the person who wrote the job description knows you can’t match all the criteria. But the person who actually knows how to do it has not applied and does not get the job. So, I think those are things that are real issues when it comes to women in technology” (ibid).

Still, several individuals and organizations continue to advocate for women in tech and have actively developed gender-specific programs. For example, Andela and Greenhouse Capital have both offered all-female accelerators and boot camps to specifically target women interested in technology entrepreneurship (Guthrie 2017). Companies and networks started by African women like SheLeadsAfrica and Women in Tech Africa are also empowering aspiring female founders across the Continent with the requisite skills, networks, and resources to impact their local communities (Ema, interview, 2018). More recently, a Nigerian tech media company, TechCabal, launched a portrait series and exhibition event called *Tech Women Lagos* featuring the stories of 50 audacious women involved in the local technology space (Ugwede 2019).

Though there is still a lot of work to be done in bridging the gender gap, these diverse efforts have not only encouraged women to consider tech as viable field but they have also exposed existing logics of patriarchy and sexism for all to see. The female afropreneur is inherently subversive because she disrupts the hegemonic masculinity of certain spaces by inserting and asking to be inserted within them. In so doing, she

reconstructs and recreates the sociocultural landscape to reflect a more equitable future. Although my research shows that quite a number of men are involved in this process, the notion of gender continues to be a fault line in the making of afropreneurial subjectivities.

Leisure is another unique site where female tech entrepreneurs negotiate the global-local dichotomies of making afropreneurial subjectivity in the Nigerian tech startup ecosystem. I had first met Uwana at the African Artist Foundation (AAF) in Lagos. AAF is a local nonprofit organization that promotes contemporary African art. A popular spot for the Alté (an abbreviation for alternative) crowd, a group of Lagos cool kids known for their creative non-conformist style and music, AAF was hosting a photo and musical installation followed by a live set. Sam, who is Uwana's cousin, had invited me to the show, and I brought along a friend visiting from the States. Although I had not yet met her, I recognized Uwana immediately when we were introduced. At that point, we had been connected on LinkedIn for over three years. A returnee tech entrepreneur, Uwana moved back to Nigeria in 2015 after spending most of her life in the United States, where she was born. Since moving back, Uwana has done well for herself and become a formidable advocate for women's entrepreneurship on the local tech scene. Her former company was selected to participate in one of the globally acclaimed accelerator programs, and she currently leads another startup company.

One night, Uwana, a local tech entrepreneur, and I went out to a popular restaurant and bar located inside in the Eko Hotel in Victoria Island, Lagos. Upon reaching the venue door, we were denied entrance by the bouncers and asked to show our wedding rings. Attending certain events, as young single women in Lagos, can be extremely difficult and insulting, to say the least, because bouncers often automatically

labeled unmarried women as “prostitutes.” Although I was shocked at the man’s comments, I was not surprised, because a similar incident had happened at the hotel entrance with a cousin of mine a couple of months before. Completely outraged by the blatant sexism of the bouncer and the entire restaurant, Uwana demanded to speak with a manager and repeatedly said, “I am CEO of a tech company and you’re calling me a prostitute.” Although many sex workers do frequent that establishment, the way we were both dressed—wearing little makeup and no high heels—did not in any way associate us with sex work. Subsequently, we both created a scene outside of the entrance, drawing a small crowd of men who told us to calm down. Further infuriated by their comments, we kept on demanding to see the manager until a Lebanese man eventually came outside, apologizing, and let us inside.

As prolific Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013) has said in “We Should All Be Feminists,” young unmarried women are often saddled with the assumption that they cannot earn a living without a man. She also mentions that women are often not allowed into popular establishments if they are unaccompanied by men. Within the patriarchal context of Nigerian society, women are primarily considered in relation to the men in their lives, either their fathers or their husbands. When young successful women decide to enter public spaces without male supervision and chaperones, they disrupt hegemonic attempts to control their bodies, which they end up being punished for by denial, disgrace, and sometimes violence. I know of young women who deliberately dress like a “madam” and wear wedding rings in order to avoid this gender stereotyping, which works in some instances. However, this general rule applies to visibly young women, even if they are from the middle to upper class.

As this narrative has demonstrated, all members of a certain class group, tech actors in the case, cannot equally embody certain class identities. Leisure is often thought to be an important universal marker of middle-class identity. Moreover, the choices people make on how to spend their money are considered to be sites of agency where individual subjectivities and group identities are displayed. These examples shown above demonstrate how gender often undermines class privilege, especially if someone is not a prominent figure within society. The performance of global middle-class identity must ultimately be mediated by the local contexts within which they occur. To negotiate these complex and contradictory relationships, women especially must enact their own distinct set of afropreneurial practices; thus, afropreneurialism represents a critical conjuncture where logics of power, gender, and class are revealed.

Embracing the Global and New Entrepreneurial Subjectivities

Sitting at a simple yet modern desk with a dry-erase board mounted behind him, Soluto, a returnee CEO of a global technology startup in Lagos, pointedly mentions, “I don’t want to be a Nigerian businessman who is sort of like a local champion...I want to actually still maintain a global presence and exposure” (2018). By making such a statement, Soluto, like many of the people I spoke with, was trying to distance contemporary tech entrepreneurship from older cultural practices of business in Nigeria. Further emphasizing the distinction between the “traditional Nigerian businessman and the entrepreneur,” returnee tech entrepreneur Laolu states:

“Judging from my father's business and his colleagues and other people, there was a tendency to go down the route of solo entrepreneurship where you make a lot of money and you build an empire that is kind of centered around you. Which is kind

of what I've seen with him and his network of people around him, and I feel like my aspirations are more built like a global entity. That's not really about you but build something that is bigger than you and then outlives you from generation to generation. Kind of what we see successful American companies like Google, Microsoft, Facebook of the world where they build companies where you don't even know who started it and it's just grown up to be this mammoth enterprise and it's global. That's one way I see it differently that makes us run it in a slightly different way" (2018).

In describing his father's approach to business, Laolu highlights the global orientation of new forms of entrepreneurship in Lagos while also rooting these practices within particular intergenerational cultural shifts.

To provide some context on these new forms of entrepreneurship, I will describe the typical process of starting a tech startup company as outlined by Silicon Valley. First, come up with an idea and then research it. The idea could be a product or service, but it should be a solution to a problem. Second, build a founding team of people, who are committed to the vision and have complementary skill-sets. Third, make a minimum viable product and introduce it to a sample market to test the concept, which could be friends, family, and local community members. Fourth, launch and begin to build the business organically through the help of early-stage funding from friends, family, and angel investors who believe in the team, idea, and vision of the startup. Fifth, start networking within the tech ecosystem with other entrepreneurs and investors. Sixth, secure venture capital investment to scale and grow your business idea. Seventh, once you are in the growth stage, plan your exit strategy from the company, either through an

initial public offering (IPO) or by a buyout. The entire process could take seven to ten years, or more.

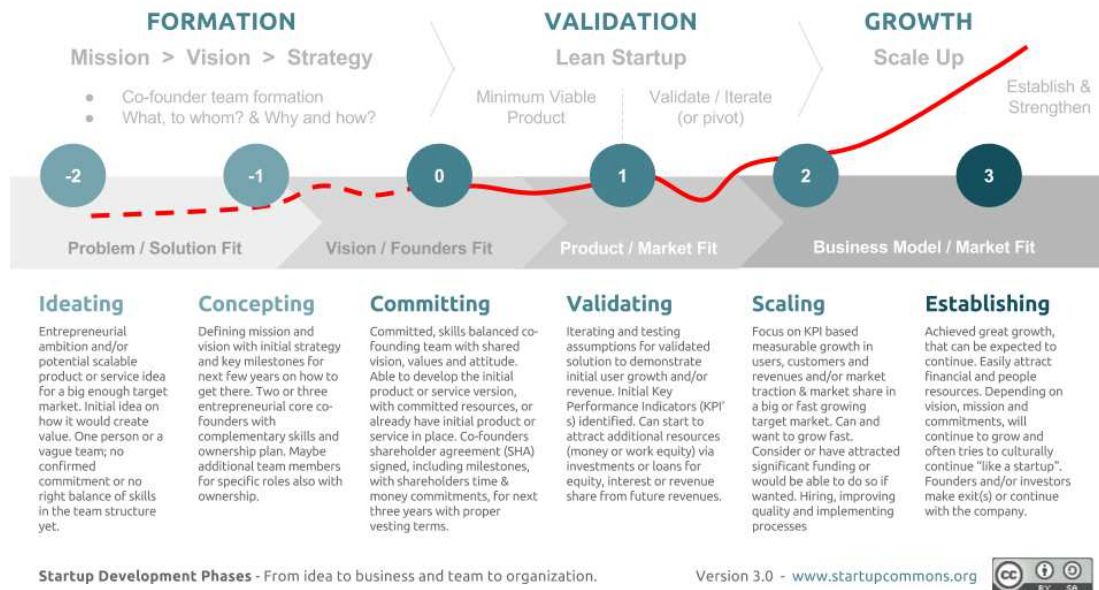


Figure 4: Startup Development Phases. Source: www.startupcommons.org

Although many interviewees often contrasted their entrepreneurial approaches with those of their parents, some used these historical business styles to explain their own entrepreneurial journeys. Returnee tech entrepreneur and investor Kenneth, for instance, attributed being “born into a very entrepreneurial family” as influential in his becoming an entrepreneur. As a university student, he ran what some would consider a more “traditional business.” For many of my research subjects, running a side business during their university education was quite the norm. These side ventures were mainly started to fund their educational expenses or as an extra source of income in addition to the monthly allowances they received from their parents. Relating the entrepreneurial culture on the Obafemi Awolowo University campus as a student, Ore, a tech entrepreneur, states, “Some students were doing beads, jewelry different people and all of them are doing well today. Some of them have branched out, left those business models, moved to

other business models and all of that. We were all doing something” (Ore, interview, 2018). When I asked why entrepreneurship was so common on his campus, he mentioned that “OAU is kind of secluded, is not a very social university, so there were very few artists. It was not Ibadan. It was not Lagos, so you were either a church person or a businessperson. The rest were jobless, kind of like you were not looked upon with favorable eyes by anybody like you, like you were wasting your time, you know” (ibid). The impact of this entrepreneurial culture, however, was not solely limited to the campus community, as large numbers of former OAU students have become important players in the tech ecosystem.

Although several people admitted that “Nigeria had always been somewhat entrepreneurial” as evidenced by “people selling stuff to their colleagues and renting out their spare rooms,” this “traditional” mode of business was limited by a lack of collaboration and delegation, strategic thinking, and funding (Olukoju 2014). Ore conveys the traditional approach to creating a business in the following excerpt:

Africa is a place where we have very few big businesses but a lot of small business. Like everybody is an entrepreneur in Africa in that sense and everybody wants to be boss, which means lesser amount of money that they are making. They don’t get opportunities to learn from others. No collaboration, no huge expansion, you get the point. You know, and of course, there is a tradeoff once you are not doing all those bigger things, big dreams, big ambition. I call it lifestyle business, meaning you know the business can grow but you choose not to grow it or not to take those steps that will let you to grow because you don’t want to experience those tradeoffs, right? You don’t want to hire a hundred people.

You want to be the one to sign all the checks, you get the point. You want to check every consignment to see everything is there. Then you can't grow a business with one thousand people, so there is a tradeoff there. You know you can't run five branches because you want to see what's happening in every branch, you get the point (interview 2018).

Charles, a returnee investor and entrepreneur in the ecosystem, also expresses similar sentiments about the typical mindset of Nigerian businessmen:

You can see that even reflected in many traditional businessmen that we know. There are so many folks even in our political class. There are so many things people are building now or investing now, even in government. Even if we start from government, we are not thinking about ten years from now. We are not thinking about three years from now, two years from now. Okay, I'm building this railway four years from now. There is no long-term vision or plan on what that future looks like, you see. You see that firsthand, even in the government side. There is some part of our thinking that needs to be more long termish, or it's maybe part of how our society is, and you see that even reflected in many ways in many African businesses. I'm not talking about startups directly, African businessmen that you know, who you think are poster boys for entrepreneurship. Many of them say, "I buy it at nine naira. I sold it at twelve naira and made four naira." They keep on doing it consistently and then they are fine and then the business dies, and so on. There is no long-term vision most times in our planning, when people think about building the future. Part of building the future is building the mindset of people to be able to think that way, to be able to see markets before

they emerge, and to be able to position themselves for being able to do that (Charles, interview, 2018).

For Charles and most people in my study, the practices mentioned above are not characteristic of entrepreneurs but of businessmen, who are more focused on trading. Obi (2018), an investor with Silicon Valley experience, does not consider Nigerians to be entrepreneurial at all. Rather, he posited, they are risk-averse arbitrageurs who capitalize on gaps in supply and demand. To further his point, he asked, “How many market-defining businesses in Africa have Nigerians?” Yet he asserts that “the same group of South African boys” were behind Naspers, MTN, and M-Net.

By comparing Nigeria to South Africa, Obi attempts to establish commensurability between the two countries; however, he, along with many entrepreneurs who deploy global (read Silicon Valley) definitions of entrepreneurship, neglect their complex social and political economic differences. Although commonly known as the most industrial and diverse economy in Africa, the economic strength of South Africa is predicated on the prior establishment of white settler capitalism, apartheid, and the concomitant accumulation and dispossession of the black population. Nigeria, on the other hand, has a strong sociocultural history of trade and entrepreneurship, which was subjected to the political excesses of the colonial and postindependence state, as I demonstrated in Chapters One and Two. As I stated in Chapter One, most Nigerians find it difficult to think long-term because living in a state of emergency or preparedness was the corporeal tool used to survive the effects of economic and political crisis (Simone 2001, Mbembe and Roitman 1995). This social and political economic context must be considered to understand historical and

contemporary entrepreneurship in Nigeria.

Another contextual example, which has shaped new tech entrepreneurial practices, is the historic and ongoing practice of corruption in Nigeria. Underlying these conceptions of traditional business is the undesirable image of the Nigerian businessman. When describing or explaining their definitions of “traditional businessmen,” many entrepreneurs were quick to mention Aliko Dangote, a Nigerian multibillionaire business magnate who is also the richest black person in the world (Akinyoade et al. 2017). For instance, Laolu mentioned, “people always explain away Dangote’s success because he got help from the government. Or people explain that that your rich uncle is a friend of a politician. That’s a different kind of story, right, but I think one we all aspire to in Silicon Valley is that whole merit-based success” (2018). Buttressing this point, Obi also states: Like I always like to say when you saw the picture from Dangote’s daughter’s wedding, I have a question: how many people there are self-made, that will be it. But in ten years, fifteen years that should change. Then you have entrepreneurs that you can literally track how they made their money.” As many entrepreneurs echoed in my study, stories that negatively portray the corruption, nepotism, and neopatrimonialism of Nigerian society, and of businessmen in particular, are not only problematic for doing business *in* Nigeria; they have also made doing business *as a* Nigerian extremely difficult.

Although the general description of Nigerian corruption has a negative impact on new tech entrepreneurs, it does not deter them. Tech actors, especially those who returned from the diaspora, are therefore incredibly bullish about building a global future for the Continent through solving African problems and fashioning new cultural practices of entrepreneurship. Driven in part by the opportunities of the post-millennium new

information economy, which sees technological innovation as an enabler for broad-scale societal transformation, this new form of entrepreneurship is growth-oriented, globally focused, and locally rooted. Moreover, it is youth driven. Although African “big men” have historically dominated entrepreneurship, the rising ecosystem has created a space for talented young professionals who in the past would have worked in “oil and gas, telecoms, or travel out of the country” (Daniel, interview, 2017). Many of these young ecosystem actors are greatly inspired by the meritocratic and youthful culture of Silicon Valley. For instance, whenever I asked my collaborators to define the concept of startup or entrepreneurship, most of them often quoted technologists and entrepreneurs from the Valley. The success stories of young entrepreneurs locally and globally have inspired many recent graduates to create their own startup companies, which “they believe will be the next Facebook, Instagram or Twitter” (Nedu 2018). Aided by the generally meritocratic nature of the ecosystem, young people are empowered to build innovative businesses based on the merit of their ideas.

Reworking Entrepreneurial Subjectivity in Relation to the Public Sector

Another significant characteristic of this new afropreneurial subject formation has been its relationship to the state. While some entrepreneurs described the government’s contribution to the ecosystem as unserious, minimal, or “publicity stunts,” others contended that “the Federal Ministry of Trade and Investment and Bank of Industry were doing a lot” and had even given them a grant (Fela, interview, 2018). Speaking with both federal and state government officials, I also discovered the state was in fact helping to develop the ecosystem through capacity building and financial support. My conversations with tech actors further revealed that government being involved was not the central

problem, contrary to popular expressions of “everyone is their own government.” Instead, the problem was defining what the specific nature of government involvement should be.

As one investor noted:

The data is showing that the government in Nigeria and Africa is still overwhelmingly significant. I would say too much, disproportionately significant, in everybody’s life than they should be in Africa at the moment. That’s what the data shows. The data shows that the government is involved in too many things in Africa. Even if there is that move of entrepreneurship, it is still very little.

They are involved in everything. They are inefficient. Inefficiency is different from lack of involvement. The government is inefficient but is too involved. Okay, let’s look at Nigeria, the biggest problem that people have is Health. The government is involved in health in Nigeria. The primary healthcare in Nigeria is run by the government, and it is not run efficiently. Of course, you have these private hospitals, but most people that are sick- the primary and the secondary healthcare is run by the government. At the end of the day it is the government. The biggest hospitals in Nigeria are still the government hospitals. The ones that impact on people lives the most are government hospitals and they are run inefficiently. Transport, everywhere the infrastructure, and all those things are run by the government and run inefficiently. Oil and gas, everything run by the government (Daniel, interview, 2018).

Most people that I spoke with wanted the government to play a role in creating an enabling environment for tech entrepreneurship to thrive, including tax holidays, broadband penetration, research commercialization, financial support, and better

regulations. For some entrepreneurs, the creation of smart policies around technology prevents the country from “being colonized again” (Bianca, interview, 2017).

Tech veteran and investor Oluwole critically expands on the underlying power dynamics at play in this new form of domination. Echoing arguments of dependency theorists, which posited that the asymmetrical and unequal relationship between core economies (developed countries) and peripheral economies (developing countries) made it so that the core was enriched by the resources of the periphery, keeping them in a perpetual state of poverty and dependency, he argues that countries like Nigeria are increasingly reliant on the digital infrastructure of American tech giants in the face of no national alternative (Frank 1967, Emmanuel 1972, Amin 1974). While he admits the possible danger of such a system on local technologists and communities at large, he stresses the importance of smart policymaking in protecting national economies and industries. In the meantime, however, he continues to use these digital platforms because being disconnected in this global age can have dire economic and social consequences. In the following quote, he discusses the structural form of global technology innovation:

It’s sad that Nigeria is not building its own national infrastructure. The reason why I will look for Google Wi-Fi today is because the local one has not been treated enough to become pervasive and cheap enough. I think regulation is not catching up. Policymaking is not fast enough to allow us to have services that are pervasive. Data is more important today than voice. So how do you make sure data is as good as wherever you are in Nigeria because the services are consumed. If I am in a car today travelling from here to Ibadan, I don’t care, I want that service to be on wherever I am. That’s the level technology forces you to be. So if

you have these patchy services from everybody- That's why there's a space for people to say at least in some places they can consume our services. It is a selfish act actually. They want people to consume their service, but when you go to this place, Google is advertising to you. It's monetized by advertising, so it does not mean they are free, but because they want people to consume their service.

He continued:

The danger in it is that some of the service people are building today in Yaba and co. They are building on Google or Facebook, when your service becomes available, they activate it here, a lot of them will die...The thing is that if you get smart people into policymaking because policymaking can drive this. A lot of times you can kill your market and the policy people haven't woken up. It's not about saying we must write a certain kind of code but by looking at the national economy and protecting it and saying certain things must be local and certain things cannot be done by anybody. And even if you are not building it so, what is the level of investment of Facebook in Nigeria. We can't afford a Facebook to stay in Kenya and manage Nigeria, it doesn't make sense. When Black Empowerment (BE) came on in South Africa, the companies that couldn't stay like a Microsoft- because BE says blacks must own a part of the company. So, if Microsoft were a global company, we don't set up subsidiaries that allows local ownership. BE says if you don't want to do that, bring out \$100 million and invest in local start-ups, and they brought out \$100 million to invest. That's smart regulation.

I think the ecosystem is kind of- they are minting money where they are, but

sometimes they try to get into every space. They can't even get into social media because Facebook has eaten all the space. There is no space for everybody and even in America, Amazon has killed almost all the retailers, both physical and online...If you see today, what is happening is Microsoft has taken one space, Google has taken one space, Amazon has taken one space, and Facebook has taken the other space. You can hardly compete in any of those spaces...Terrible, each of them is bigger than government. Apple has even taken its own space, even though eventually I worry that the Asians and the Chinese will take over that space...America is extracting wealth from the world. That is what it is doing. America is a monopoly. Yes. They will always look for ways to extract wealth from anybody. That's why sometimes Europe will fine Google or Facebook. That thing is like a protest, they are just saying, "You guys cannot be a monopoly in Europe." But the problem with Europe is that Europe has no Facebook, no matter how much you fine Facebook what is your alternative? There is no alternative. (Oluwole, interview, 2018).

In 1996, Manuel Castells in *The Rise of the Network Society* conceptualized the notion of the network society to describe the symmetrical and horizontal flow of information within a given network that would mark the new global informational society. Although Castells extensively investigates the new organizational logics of networking as key in overcoming global asymmetries, he fails to challenge the central tenet of the network society, which is the authority of Western sites as the source *par excellence* for technological innovation (Royston 2014, Say Chan 2013). The works of scholars like Anita Say Chan, Clapperton Mavhunga, Jenna Burrell, and Kaushik Sunder

Rajan have helped to disrupt the hegemony of Silicon Valley innovation culture by showing the ways in which technology actors in Peru challenge notions of the periphery as “passive sites of replication of future invented prior” and elsewhere through the creation of their own digital cultures.

Pluralizing digital culture is not enough, however, to undo the digital domination of the Global North. As Michael Kwet has recently stated, “The United States is reinventing colonialism in the Global South through the domination of digital technology” (2019: 3). Moreover, he argues that “this structural form of domination is exercised through the centralized ownership and control of the three core pillars of the digital ecosystem: software, hardware, and network connectivity, which vests the United States with immense political, economic, and social power. As such, GAFAM (Google/Alphabet, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft) and other corporate giants, as well as state intelligence agencies like the National Security Agency (NSA), are the new imperialists in the international community” (ibid, 4).

The realities of digital imperialism and colonialism throw into question the Lagos tech ecosystem’s decidedly ambivalent relationship with the government. Thus, while ideologies of neoliberalism entrepreneurialism, which advocate personal economic responsibility, are widespread across the Continent following economic and political liberalization, the somewhat fragile African national economies do not lend themselves to a complete disavowal of the state (Ochonu 2018: 9, Orji 2016). Many tech actors, therefore, although very skeptical about the government’s ability to proffer effective and efficient solutions, either continue to push for structural changes within the state or look for more grassroots ways to build their own products.

Digital Media: Noisemaking and Community Building

Even as they continue to grapple with digital forms of global coloniality, afropreneurial subjects in the tech ecosystem continue to make use of new media technologies, such as information technology, mobile phones, the Internet, and digital social media platforms. Indeed, as Miriam Pahl explains “Afropolitanism grew up online” (2016:77). Similarly, Achille Mbembe (2015) locates the power of the Internet in its “capacity to make people dream.” By providing people with the ability to think outside borders and structures, digital media can be a powerful tool for subject formation, especially in the contemporary moment. Digital media platforms not only “enable new vernacular cultural logics and reshape national and diaspora identities” but they also substantially impact the offline world as the virtual and face-to-face help to construct social worlds (Shipley 2017: 255).

According to Nwachukwu Orji (2016), over fifty percent of Nigerian middle-class people have access to the Internet and primarily use it for social networking, entertainment, accessing and sharing information, and communication through instant messaging and emails. The usage of social media platforms, especially Twitter, has thus been extremely significant in creating group identity and culture within the Lagos tech ecosystem. Comprised of Nigerians abroad and at home, men and women, young and old, the Lagos tech community, however, maintains a youthful and progressive cultural identity through the open sharing of ideas and engaging discussions on various social topics beyond its core of technological innovation in Africa. Given the widely shared ideology of technology and innovation as a tool for social change among community members, albeit with different levels of engagement, technology actors inadvertently

situate themselves as change makers, thought leaders, and builders of a desirable African future. Maintaining an open forum for debate and discussion is thus a critical way to portray their cosmopolitan outlook and avant-garde identity.

For instance, in April 2019, an intense Twitter debate sparked a conversation among African tech community members about the identity of an African startup. The debate began using the hashtag #JumiaisnotanAfricanStartup after several global news outlets claimed Jumia, an e-commerce company founded by Europeans with headquarters in Europe and large operations in African markets, was the first African startup on the New York Stock Exchange. For Nigerian tech expert and investor, Victor Asemota, an African startup is an “idea that originates from Africa and founded by an Africans” (Kazeem 2019). The vice president of Andela Global, Seni Sulyman, however, states that incorporating outside Africa is sometimes a necessary requirement for local entrepreneurs who want to receive funding from abroad, as foreign investors tend to trust those founders more (ibid).

Considering the broad implications of labeling a non-African company as the first African company, this debate was necessarily pan-African in nature. Discussing and dealing with community issues are critical moments when connections are forged between individuals and in this case across nationalities. Moreover, underlying this debate is the political dimensions of community-building. As I observed, the local tech community is very vocal and willing to speak out about various issues, ranging from widespread global issues of racism, imperialism, and sexism to more local ones like political elections, corruption, terrorism, and rape culture. These online conversations have in turn fueled offline conversations and social protests, as evidenced by the

#BringBackOurGirls and #OccupyNigeria movements (Orji 2016).

Given the impact of storytelling in attracting investment capital, digital media has also become an important aspect of tech entrepreneurship across the world. Describing the relationship between storytelling and technology, Oluwole states “the new narrative is driven by the people who narrate it, the investors and then the money...the startup being a star in the whole show.” For him particularly, this is the nature of the Silicon Valley model of technology. He furthers this point:

There is a headline I heard last week, MTN is investing 200 Billion for a simple upgrade or something. Is it not tech? I mean, it is huge, but somebody raises 1 billion in tech and it seems like the world has come to an end. It is good, it energizes a certain class of them to get in, and it creates jobs, but we have to put it in context. Otherwise you would think that it is bigger than it actually is but in America, Silicon Valley has kind of pushed them to be a very dominant force...The article I was reading today they said they are the 18th largest economy, Silicon Valley. That the Bay Area is the 18th largest economy in the world, that it is bigger than Saudi Arabia and Switzerland. They have managed with all this hype so there is substance to it today. Facebook, Apple, Uber, all of them are in that zone. These are very massive companies, global companies so they have succeeded. It is possible that in 20 years’ time, the hype that is happening in Yaba becomes really huge and so if you measure the Lagos economy then they will pop up in the radar of the company as top 10 maybe but today they are not top 10. They are just part of the noise. The noise is good, but...it will eventually attract private kind of people (Oluwole, interview, 2018).

Venture capitalist investor Daniel also believes hype stories are needed because they are influential in building local ecosystems and attracting talent. And as a result, entrepreneurs can access more resources and capital to build solid businesses. Yet the noise is not all good, according to Lekan, a tech entrepreneur. Besides uncritically adopting a Silicon Valley model of technology, contemporary “noisemaking” also advances the underlying technodeterminism inherent within that model. As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, the ideological construction of Silicon Valley was premised on specific historical and cultural notions of technology and innovation that are inextricably linked to the notions of American dominance. Speaking along the same lines, tech veteran and venture capitalist Arinze cautions us to be careful in thinking that the change associated with technology will be positive (interview 2018). He cites “419” or “advance fee” fraud as an example of the negative implications of technology in Nigeria.

Similarly, Charles (2018) criticizes the pervasive influence of hype stories in the ecosystem. Labeling these stories as “balderdash” and “nonsense,” he says hype can be harmful “because it puts some pressure on people. For example, a company who has not raised money goes out to the press that we’ve raised a million dollars. Meanwhile all he has gotten is a company that can give him a million dollars looking at his tech and puts a pressure on other people who think, wow, so this person has raised [\$1 million] so it creates a false impression of things that are not there or are a false reality, rather. There is lot of talk when people are supposed to be focused on building” (Charles, interview, 2018).

For Bianca and other entrepreneurs I interviewed, the actual work entailed

involved in building a global business is often subsumed within the phenomenon of noisemaking in Nigeria and larger global discourse on entrepreneurship. Elucidating the sacrifices of tech entrepreneurship, she states, “Be ready to be broke, be ready to not be able to do the things that your friends that have jobs can do, be ready to earn less than what you would if you were working abroad or even working here but at some point, it will pay off” (Bianca, interview 2017). She also underscores the significance of having purpose in the entrepreneurship expressing this, “You have to understand that there is a journey, a purpose, and there is a process to it and you are there for a reason, and you are there so other people can be inspired, you are there so you can build a foundation to create jobs for other people and create livelihoods for them and stability for them. Whereas you might not have stability, but they will, I mean, all of that it takes a big sacrifice, but it also takes like a growth process within yourself that takes you to a different place than if you have a job and constant stability” (ibid). This journey, she admits, is not for everyone; it is one to be realistic about.

The Importance of Local Context in Entrepreneurial Practice

Despite the desire and need to project a global identity, many tech actors I spoke with stressed the importance of local knowledge in building successful companies. As Bianca notes, “You enter a market and you feel like, yeah, this is going to work because there are 170 million people here. How many of them have the disposable income to actually buy a lot of the things that you are selling?” (interview 2017). While the numbers often “look good on paper,” the tough local market makes successfully executing the innovative idea improbable. This reality was shown when Konga, a prominent ecommerce startup who had initially raised significant amounts of funding, was sold in

early 2018 to Zinox, a local technology company (Kazeem 2018). For many players in the tech ecosystem, Konga's sale made it clear that what works in Silicon Valley does not necessarily work here, as well as the fact that "money doesn't solve all your problems" (Bianca, 2017). In fact, money sometimes causes problems, according to Bianca who states:

There were a lot of startups that came and we were like wow, look at what they are doing. Then they got funding and died. And they died because they got funding. If they had bootstrapped [self-funded], they would have been fine because when you bootstrap you spend differently and you make much wiser decisions because you don't think there is more where that came from, and you make sure that you have cash flow. One of the things my boss when I was doing NYSC used to say was that you need to find bread and butter money before you can eat bread and jam. So you need that consistent money that comes all the time, right? So we have basically built a lot of subscription services where you pay us every month and we do whatever services we are doing for you. I think a lot of businesses overlook that, they are looking for that big money, that big project, and not actually thinking, "How can I make sure that my engine keeps running?" (ibid).

Startup Financing Cycle

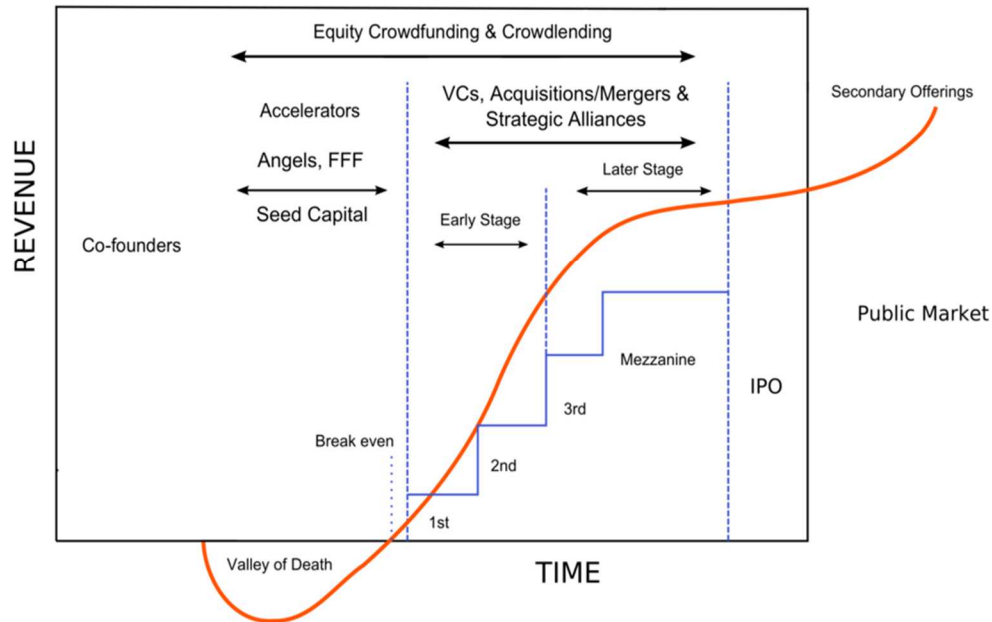


Figure 5: Startup Financial Cycle. Source: <https://startupxplore.com/en/blog/types-startup-investing/>

Although the increased international and local investment coming in now would warrant this commentary, initially fundraising was exceptionally hard in the Lagos ecosystem. Traditionally speaking, international investors are wary of investing in African financial markets because they are known to be very volatile and risky. Furthermore, investing in startups anywhere is already a risk because their failure rates are so high. Indeed, venture capital and private equity financing firms have only recently opened in Nigeria, within the past twenty years or so (Oluwole, interview, 2018). The recent success stories of local startups like Andela, Paystack, and Flutterwave have attracted both international and local investors, who must patiently learn to play the long game because markets are not mature enough to see returns for another five to ten years (Charles, interview, 2018). For Oluwole, the increase in international capital has not been as beneficial for local investors who find their capital “being dwarfed by money

coming from outside because of the exchange rate” (interview 2018). That being said, venture capitalist Ahmed notes the tech ecosystem is at least making a positive impact on “traditional investor-investee relationship, which has not been founder friendly in most parts of Africa” (interview 2018).

Although entrepreneurship is essentially about capturing value from opportunities, the importance of making an impact on the local ecosystem was expressed by several interviewees who cited the desire to “do something of value and actively give back” as the reason for becoming entrepreneurs. Explaining why he willingly left a successful job in the United States to start a tech company, Laolu mentioned feeling a “responsibility to build something” based on the privileges, such as the good education and family upbringing, that he had been given. Changing the African Continent for the better is therefore an indispensable part of this new entrepreneurial subjectivity. As veteran technologist and investor Dele proclaimed: “So help me God till the day I die, I will be making sure that sustainability of this ecosystem is a reality. “Because I am a Lagosian first, Nigerian second, and African third, and I want my grandchildren and great-grandchildren to have a geography they can be proud of, and I know I am not alone in that quest. So we will build our continent, we will start from Lagos and we will build the Continent, whether they like it or not, and I don’t care who the ‘they’ are and that’s what this is all about. It is about having the same quality of life in Lagos and on the Continent as you can have everywhere else in the world. That’s what this is all about, so access to good education, access to good health, transportation, food, accommodation, etc. Regardless of where you come from on the continent. That is what we are talking about at the end of the day. That is what this is all about for me” (Dele, interview 2018).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that entrepreneurial practices of Lagos tech actors purposely draw from a discursively entangled assemblage of class, culture, and capital to fashion subjectivities toward the future they want to see for themselves, their nation and their Continent. In so doing, it goes beyond Western economic definitions of entrepreneurship *as the process of creating a new business or organization for profit* and instead emphasizes the practice-driven and context-specific nature of African entrepreneurship. And although theorizations on neoliberal governmentality in Africa have helped to illuminate new transformations in state power, this work has not been as productive in thinking about technologies of self-making in Africa (Foucault 1988). Techniques of self-making are extremely context-specific, as Carla Freeman (2014) has demonstrated in her study of the entrepreneurial middle-class in Barbados, who utilize local logics of the Caribbean reputation-respectability model along with global neoliberal repertoires to create a new mode of entrepreneurial subjectivity. Local understandings and practices of entrepreneurialism therefore cannot simply be subsumed under neoliberal discourses of economy, enterprise, flexibility, and power.

Especially historically, enterprise and entrepreneurialism in African cultures were not the sole preserve of the self-employed, but rather an entrepreneurial spirit found across almost all occupations (Stasik 2015, Ochonu 2018). Indeed, as Moses Ochonu has noted, “Entrepreneurs were not shaped by the narrow permutations of combining forces of production—capital, labor, and knowledge—to produce profit. Entrepreneurs occupied multiple positions and professions in society; entrepreneurship was only one of several

elements that defined them (ibid, 320). Consequently, it is important to interrogate contemporary research on African entrepreneurship, which attempts to subsume African entrepreneurial practices under neoliberalism.

Thus, while emergent entrepreneurial subjectivities in Africa can be linked to the advent of economic and political liberalization of the past 20 years, the existence of ahistorical and cultural context of entrepreneurship shows that neoliberalism did not produce the African enterprising self. For example, Kristin Peterson's *Speculative Markets: Drug Circuits and Derivative life in Nigeria* (2014), has shown that theories of market liberalism were entrenched among the Yoruba and Igbo before the implementation of neoliberalism in the structural adjustment era. It can therefore be argued that the contemporary rise of middle-class entrepreneurship signals the convergence of African and neoliberal logics of entrepreneurship more than anything else and the rise of a new mode of entrepreneurialism marked by technology, mobility, and identity.

Afropreneurialism then is ultimately a technique of self-making in which contemporary Africans deploy entrepreneurial thinking and actions to identify and solve local challenges for profit and impact to assert their coeval membership in a globalizing world. These subjectivities are constituted along the lines of education, a defining marker for entrepreneurial and process success; consumption patterns, critical sites of agency where individual subjectivities and group identities are displayed; new entrepreneurial practices, an embrace of the meritocratic and youthful culture of Silicon Valley to distance themselves from traditional conceptions of the corrupt African Big Man, relationship to state, a rejection of the postcolonial African state's failures and

inefficiencies; digital media, a tool to display their cosmopolitan identity and attract investment capital; and local impact, a desire to “do something of value” and change the African Continent for the better. The practices of afropreneurial subjectivities vary, based on gender, although women have as much pressure on them as men do to create successful businesses.

African women in tech must enact their own distinct set of afropreneurial practices to negotiate the complexity of a gendered social context that continues to marginalize women in relation to men. Despite the doubly androcentric environment of technology entrepreneurship, African women in tech have developed innovative products and made substantial efforts in exposing sexism in the Lagos startup ecosystem. In addition, these adjustments have greatly benefited from the fluid dynamism of afropreneurial subjectivities and the emergent identity of the tech ecosystem. Consequently, more than writing lines of code and designing products, the individuals I spoke with are making selves that are completely modern yet distinctly African. In doing so, they negotiate position and themselves within larger discourse of technological innovation and entrepreneurship to realize the future they want to see.

CONCLUSION

“You have been told that the might of your country is in its wonderful invention, in its circuits and weaponry. This is the mastery of things. But Wakanda was great before it had things, and its secrets are older than any vaulted metal.”

—Ramonda, to Shuri, on the spirit plane

(from Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet, Volume 1, 2016)

While in the process of conducting research for this dissertation, the Marvel film *Black Panther* (2018) became a global blockbuster. In this film, Prince T’Challa returns home after the death of his father, King T’Chaka, to become the next king of Wakanda, an African nation that was never colonized. Although it masks itself as a developing country, Wakanda is actually the most technologically advanced country in the world due to its mineral deposits of vibranium, the world’s most durable metal. Rich in technology and culture, Wakanda is a utopian and afrofuturistic reimagining of what Africa could have been and what Africa could still be. Although the utopian picture of an African/black future displayed in *Black Panther* was very much welcomed by the global African diasporic community, this African diasporic response was not without controversy.

Black Panther spurred various debates on identity among the African Diaspora. On Twitter, for example, there were “diaspora wars” between Africans and African-Americans on notions of African authenticity (Chutel and Mohdin 2018). In particular, several Africans argued that the wearing of African attire by African-Americans was a form of cultural appropriations since African-Americans were perceived to lack the requisite cultural knowledge about their aesthetic choices. African-Americans, on the

other hand, argued that Africans were classist, cultural elitists who looked down on African-Americans. Interestingly enough, these debates largely mirrored the film's central conflict between T'Challa, the newly crowned king of Wakanda, and his estranged cousin, Erik Stevens, also known as Killmonger, who grew up as an orphan in the United States after being abandoned by the Wakandan king in Oakland, California. Killmonger, however, is not ignorant of his African roots as he joins forces with notorious arms dealer, Ulysses Klaue, to steal vibranium from Wakanda. Although Killmonger initially works with Klaue in his mercenary activities, he later kills him to achieve his primary aim of usurping the Wakandan throne to lead a global black revolution. Though his royal blood certainly gives him the right to claim the throne, most of Wakanda contests his ascent to the throne through violence. This conflict between these two cousins is what drives most of the film's plot and what connects with much of the African diaspora discourse on identity and liberation.

Indeed, Ryan Coogler, the African-American film director, has expressed that exploring questions of African identity was a central preoccupation of the movie. Coogler's noble exploration of black identity, however, has faced serious criticisms within academic and public discourses. For instance, academics Ainehi Edo and Bhakti Shringarpure (2018) called Coogler's imagined Africa a reproduction of anthropological tropes of African primitivism. Moreover, they state that the film reproduces postcolonial anxieties that constantly write back against Western discourses of African alterity, which is strange given that Wakanda was never colonized. And though they eventually locate these issues in the very fact that *Black Panther* emerges from an American imaginary that still relates to Africa from a position of traumatic roots and imagined homeland, they

ultimately argue that a truly utopian and Afrofuturistic vision of Africa would have involved a radical re-imagination of possibilities beyond the colonial and postcolonial.

Pursuing another line of flight, Russell Rickford (2018) has also critiqued *Black Panther* for the reproduction of problematic tropes and disavowing black radicalism. For him, *Black Panther* reproduces problematic notions that African-Americans cannot go home, which contradict historical realities of black internationalism, pan-Africanism, and repatriation. The film also reproduces pathological myths of black American degeneracy due to traumatic experiences of slavery, racism, and urban “ghetto” life. Not only that, Rickford argues that the film advances the white savior trope through the Wakandan embrace of the white American CIA agent who helps to save Wakanda from the fulfillment of Killmonger’s revolutionary agenda. And ultimately, he argues that the film discredits black radicalism through the portrayal of Killmonger as an enraged and uncultured sociopath.

While these critics express valid concerns that accurately depict the contentious politics of the African diaspora, I argue that in its primary goal of establishing connections among supposed distant relatives by stimulating conversations on what truly liberatory futures could be, the film succeeded. For as prominent American writer and journalist Jelani Cobb (2018) notes, Coogler profoundly demonstrated that amid tense diaspora politics, there is community, as suggested through the usage of diverse black actors and thematic gestures to the Black Panther Party and the #BringBackOurGirls movement among others. Black people of the diaspora truly live in a peculiar yet exciting time in which African popular culture and black political movements can travel and interact via digital media platforms. And these contemporary realities are in fact changing

the form and content of the African diaspora in compelling ways.

Nowhere is the truth more apparent than in the nearly universal reaction within the global African diaspora of pride and joy to see blackness portrayed with such dignity, excellence, and hope. In fact, I confronted this euphoric reaction firsthand while conducting field research in Lagos in July 2018 when a local tech company, Venture Garden Group, named its new office Vibranium Valley. And while this may have just been a strategic marketing ploy for the company, I could not help but draw parallels between some of the film's themes and my dissertation on the Lagos tech ecosystem. Through its techno-utopian construction of a global African modernity, *Black Panther* espoused similar ideals as the theoretical concept of afropolitanism that I had been exploring in my research. For instance, both the film and afropolitanism were heavily focused on redefining African identity and representing an Africa on the rise, and this focus was extremely similar to the notion of "building the future" that I constantly heard within the Lagos tech ecosystem.

My initial foray into the Lagos tech ecosystem stemmed from a desire to think through questions about how Africa could become its own center in the world (Mbembe and Balakrishnan 2016). To take Africa as its own center refers to the process of taking African experiences, social realities, and life forms on their own historical and cultural terms, without reverting to the sort of 'metaphysics of difference' pervasive within much of postcolonial and black nationalist discourses. In other words, centering Africa means seeing Africa as a constitutive site in the making of global modernity then and now. And I was particularly interested in exploring these questions through the lived experiences of

contemporary Africans.

For while people everywhere are hungry for hope, African people *desperately* need hope, especially after centuries of oppression, victimization, and dehumanization through slavery and colonialism. Thus, it is understandable that hope for a better tomorrow continues to play a formative role in African and African diasporic thought and politics. Hope is also necessary for the making of African subjectivities and cultural productions. This underlying notion of hope is why African diasporans loved the *Black Panther* film. And it is why people embrace Africa rising and afropolitanism discourses. And it is why tech entrepreneurs embrace risk and uncertainty in order to create innovative companies (although they want to make profit too). And it is why members of the African diaspora, old and young, continue to return home imaginatively and physically. And it is also why people leave.

In his recent speech at the UN General Assembly in September, Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo (2019) described the illicit extraction of African wealth as a rape of the Continent's resources. Though he is specifically referring to the fact that Africa loses over \$50 billion annually through illicit financial outflows, I contend that his description also refers to the extraction of intangible African wealth like hope. Day after day, scores of young Africans risk their lives using unthinkable methods to migrate overseas. Yet these individuals are not to be blamed; blame the complex combination of local and international structures that have rendered their states incapable of providing them with hope for a better future. Thus, driven by hope and eager to escape dominant afropessimistic narratives of crisis and abjection, Africans on the Continent and in the African Diaspora are essentially *bricoleurs* drawing from a range of local and global

practices in order to make their lives work by any means necessary. Inasmuch as they refuse to solely define their selves and experiences within essentialist frameworks of race and nation, African self-stylizing and migratory acts are hopeful, political acts. And although these individuals are enacting their fundamental human rights to live lives of dignity, their hopes are indispensable to the realization of African futures.

As such, searching for hope at/in Home is a central preoccupation of this project. In this dissertation, my primary aim was to examine how tech actors in Lagos fashion new subjectivities and redefine national boundaries to imaginatively create alternative futures for the African Continent through the use of technological innovation and entrepreneurship. To do this, I reconceptualized technological innovation and entrepreneurship beyond Western ideological constructions to make space for an understanding of local practices of tech entrepreneurship on their own terms. Through my study, I not only recentered Africa as source of technological innovation but also I showed how discursive practices within the tech ecosystem are best comprehended as an historical and contemporary site of entanglement between global and local processes, practices, and imaginaries. In so doing, I sought to build and expand on recent theorizations on African futures as a veritable source for not only overcoming present discourses of crisis that plague the Continent but also imagining new conceptualization of identity and new modes of life for Africa and the world at large.

Since 2011 and especially after 2016, popular constructions of the Lagos startup ecosystem have been predominantly focused on either relating transformations in the local technology space to global startup culture as derived from Silicon Valley or placing the ecosystem within the ongoing “afropolitan imagineering” projects embarked upon by

the city of Lagos (Ogunyankin 2019). Both of these narratives are problematic because they reduce the complex transformations within the local ecosystem to mere imitations of the Western technoscience and/or neoliberal acts of self-making. This dissertation instead argues that discursive practices within the Lagos tech ecosystem are critical sites for investigating the import of *building African futures* in a globalizing world.

Although many of my research subjects and other interlocutors within the ecosystem will agree, “hype is not strategy” because Lagos is far from being “the next Silicon Valley,” the important work of prominent theorist Michel Foucault and Collin Gordon (1980) informs us that discourses are powerful tools that condition the grammar and language through which we speak and how we speak them. As a result, they produce regimes of truth that structure our realms of possibility (what can and cannot be done or said). Cultural theorist Stuart Hall, following this critical insight, has also shows us the relationship between discourses and particular representations of things such that “in order to become subjects we must be 'subjected' to discourses which speak us, and without which we cannot speak” (1996, Hall and Meeks 2007). Bringing it back home to Nigeria, prolific writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) has also warned us about the “dangers of a single story” in reducing the richness and fullness of our lives and communities. These poignant insights, hype and the stories we tell and hear about ourselves matter, especially for an emergent ecosystem with aspirations to make grand impacts. The popular narrative I heard and observed during my research not only obscures much of what is presently taking place on the ground but also occludes much of the historical and social realities that made the tech ecosystem possible.

Chapter Summary and Findings

My study addressed these common misconceptions of technological entrepreneurship as recent manifestation by contextualizing and historicizing local practices. In Chapter One, for instance, I examined the urban social history of Lagos in relation to the political economy of Nigeria to ground current practices of tech entrepreneurship within the historical and social context of Lagos. Entrepreneurship was constitutive in the making of Lagos as a set of historical processes rooted in the local trading culture and colonial economy. This entrepreneurial thrust of Lagos only intensified with the discursive combination of aspirational modernity and social crisis during the postindependence period, which in turn produced the social context of uncertainty that necessitates entrepreneurial actions. Entrepreneurial practices in Lagos are thus informed by history, culture, and a need to survive.

In addition to providing much needed context for entrepreneurial ecosystem, Chapter Two analyzed the historical development of technology entrepreneurship in Lagos. This analysis was primarily an effort to decenter the usage of Silicon Valley as an ideological model for reading the local tech ecosystem. It was also to unsettle dominant ahistorical narratives of Africa's digital technology revolution as a sole product of the contemporary period.

By situating the Lagos tech ecosystem within broader historical genealogies of technology and entrepreneurship, I demonstrated that technological entrepreneurship in Nigeria has always been a product of sociotechnical historical transformations. In particular, I showed how technological innovation in the specific sense of high

technology emerged at the site of political struggle between imperial capitalists and economic nationalists. The entanglement of capitalism and politics in shaping the ecosystem can also be seen in the wake of structural adjustment during the 1990s banking boom and the economic and political liberalization during the early 2000s telecommunications boom.

Specifically in regard to the structural adjustment program, the economic decline both benefited the ecosystem because it intensified the entrepreneurial ethos of the city and backfired on the ecosystem as the entry of Indian software companies decimated the local software industry. The formation of the tech ecosystem was therefore a consequence of several successful and unsuccessful attempts to incorporate the Nigerian political economy into the world capitalist system. As such, attributing contemporary tech entrepreneurship to the introduction of Internet connectivity and the mobile phone is flawed and, even more significantly, reproduces Eurocentric narratives of Africa as a place without history until the White Savior brought technology.

Similarly, in Chapter Three, I sought to unsettle conventional notions of technological innovation as masculinized, developmentalist, and ultimately westernized. The technological determinism, Eurocentrism, and sexism found in much of global startup culture and technological discourse in general is not only based on a mythical construction of Western technoscientific dominance but it also reproduces many of the same inequalities individuals in non-western contexts are working against. Consequently, I focus on technological innovation in non-western contexts to show how Africans and Africans diasporans contest, negotiate, and rework the philosophical underpinnings of Western technological productions.

After all, a conceptual examination of technology and innovation has revealed that these terms should not be limited to material objects like the latest mobile phones but rather they should encompass innovative techniques, processes, and practices. Drawing on Reginald Royston's (2014) contention that theorizations of technology should focus on *innovative practices* instead of material objects and Toluwalogo Odumosu's (2017) notion of *constitutive appropriation* as an act of use that produces knowledge, cultural practices, and the reconfiguration of technology itself, I analyzed diaspora as a key site of innovation—the creative act of introducing a new technique or object, externally or internally derived, to produce new opportunities for individual users and society. Innovation of diaspora in this sense relates to the experience of alienation and the various attempts to mediate the temporal and spatial gap between diasporans and their homelands. Although historically African migrants have innovated various cultural productions to overcome this physical, emotional, and social distance, the contemporary rise of information technology has produced novel techniques and practices, leading to the creation of digital diaspora and nations as networks. Consequently, these new forms of digital sociality enable diasporic subjects to innovatively articulate new global identities across and beyond the borders of the nation and the world.

Another important point addressed in Chapter Four is the role of return migration in the practices of technology entrepreneurship and innovation in Lagos. Given that return remains relatively undertheorized or poorly theorized, I redefined return in the context of diaspora to demonstrate the importance of return outside the narrow frame found in migration and development literature. For the African diaspora, return has been a physical and symbolic tool to reaffirm identity, counter widespread notions of an

American Dream, and simply provide hope. Even more specifically, I demonstrated that the historic and contemporary motivations of return migration in Nigeria were rooted in affective notions of longing, belonging, identity, and religious ideology and economics. Returnees are at the forefront of driving sociocultural and politico-economic changes in Nigeria through the use of ideas, practices, and technologies obtained from their sojourns abroad. Thus, returnees embody the innovation of diaspora.

Yet I also argued in Chapter Five that Lagos tech actors could not be subsumed under the hegemonic ideology of free-market liberalism even though neoliberalism permeates social life at this current juncture. In particular, I challenged the imposition of neoliberal discourses in reading African entrepreneurial practices. Although African entrepreneurs might in fact borrow from cultures outside their local context, their practices are undeniably rooted in historically situated processes of class and culture. Moses Ochonu's *Entrepreneurship in Africa: A Historical Approach* (2018) also attests to the fact that entrepreneurialism was not the sole preserve of the self-employed in Africa. Rather, the entrepreneurial spirit was found across almost all occupations. Considering the relationship between neoliberalism and the emergence of the new African middle class, I found a historical interrogation of middle-class formation in Africa to be particularly useful and necessary. Situating emergent entrepreneurial practices within these historical processes reveals the incomplete and partial character of neoliberalism and the extent to which its form and content must be locally translated to have any relevance.

The complex discursive formation of African entrepreneurial practices was also revealed in my examination of afropolitanism. Often perceived to be rooted in

Westernized conceptions of middle classness and neoliberalism, afropolitanism is also firmly located within African and African diasporic intellectual discourses. With its local roots and global outlook, I considered afropolitanism to be a necessary intervention in moving the current discussions on Africa forward. For even beyond the need for new representations of African life forms on a global scale, the African Continent needs new names. Admittedly though, the liberatory potentialities of afropolitanism as a relevant discourse for black subjectivities and experiences will be best realized through a creative combination and grounding of the emergent theory with the dialogic spaces of transnational black feminism and African diaspora ideologies. Investigating African entrepreneurial practices thus necessitates an understanding of the contemporary conjuncture as a discursively entangled assemblage of gender, class, culture, and capital in order to comprehend new modes of being entrepreneurial and doing entrepreneurship in all its nuanced complexity. The entrepreneurial African subject is thus formed at the intersection of technology and mobility.

In Chapter Six, I ultimately argued that Lagos tech actors fashion and enact *afropreneurial* subjectivities to articulate their desires for Africa's future. Afropreneurialism then is ultimately a technique of self-making in which contemporary Africans deploy entrepreneurial thinking and actions to identify and solve local challenges for profit and impact and to assert their coeval membership in a globalizing world. These subjectivities are constituted along the lines of education, consumption patterns, new entrepreneurial practices, digital media, and local impact. The practices of afropreneurial subjectivities vary based on gender, although women have as much pressure on them to create successful businesses as men do. African women in tech must

enact their own distinct set of afropreneurial practices to negotiate the complexity of a gendered social context that continues to marginalize women in relation to men.

Consequently, more than writing lines of code and designing products, the individuals I spoke with are making selves that are completely modern yet distinctly African. In doing so, they negotiate position and themselves within larger discourse of technological innovation and entrepreneurship to realize the future they want to see. Accordingly, the contemporary entrepreneurial African self represents a critical site where vast experimentation on the African present and future can occur.

Broader Implications of My Research

Contemporary theorizations of African life forms move beyond cut-and-paste models. Grand social theories have all but failed to understand Africa. They fail because Africa is fundamentally difficult to understand, but because centuries of approaching Africa from without have impoverished Euro-American knowledge productions, leaving them with rarefied concepts of kinship, religion, crisis, and modernization. Today, these categories have lost their analytical purchase from either being stretched too thin or contaminated by inherent logics of racialism and ethnocentrism. Neoliberalism currently functions as one of these categories, as it is now commonly used to explain all social life and identity formations under global capitalism. And though I admit that we cannot simply sweep it under the rug as it wreaks havoc on our lives and environments, still, we cannot be held theoretically captive to it. Truth be told, contemporary Africans couldn't care less about whether their actions fall within the boundaries of our theoretical paradigms. Thus, to formulate relevant and novel theories about contemporary Africa, it is imperative that we scholars follow the people, leaving our old familiar tools behind.

This dissertation makes such an intervention within African and African Diaspora scholarship. Historically, African diaspora scholarship has been stuck within a grand search for the constitutive element of diasporic formations à la roots or routes that have restricted the African Continent to a nebulous terrain in-between social imaginary and ontological mythos. Given the fact that all roots inevitably come from somewhere, Africa must be seen as a dynamic coauthor in the making of the diaspora and the world at large.

Accordingly, my study contributes to diaspora theorizations on Africa as a coeval partner with its diaspora through its ethnographic examination of contemporary tech startup entrepreneurs. Many tech entrepreneurs are return migrants or transnational members of the African diaspora. Though they constantly move between time and space, these individuals choose to return for affective, economic, political, personal, and familial reasons. Given this fact, tech entrepreneurs-returnees help to bridge the gap between the African and diaspora dichotomy. Furthermore, this is not a one-sided relationship driven by the diaspora; instead I argued that this conception ignores the historic and contemporary ways that Africa actively shapes the diaspora and world at large. I also pushed for a reconceptualization of the entire African diaspora as innovation to show the relationship between the two formations as co-constitutive. Understanding the historical and contemporary basis for return has become even more salient within the contemporary period. More than ever before, members of the global African diaspora are embarking on returns to the homeland through various symbolic and physical routes. Due to technoscientific advancements, return now occurs through cyberspaces and virtual realities of digital media as well biotechnological and medical instruments of genetic testing. In addition, the practice of physical return has grown within the last few decades,

encouraging the development of heritage tourism and digital travel platforms like Travel Noire, among others.

Even more recently in September 2018, the President of Ghana, Nana Akufo-Addo, launched a government initiative for Africans in diaspora called the “Year of Return 2019” to encourage unity between members of the African Diasporas and Continental Africans as well as to promote diaspora investment and resettlement (Tetteh 2018). Through his symbolic “Year of Return 2019 initiative,” President Addo is leading the African Continent toward more productive conversations on “African Diaspora citizenship,” especially since the diaspora’s engagement with African Continent now extends well beyond mere romanticism. Thus, it would seem that more African governments and supranational bodies should pursue proactive policymaking in preparation for diasporans looking for a Wakanda that they might return to.

Similarly, this dissertation also contributes to African studies scholarship especially on newly emergent ways and forms of life. Critically engaging with contemporary Africa life is an important exercise in theorizing new African possibilities as a center while also resisting the “metaphysics of difference” that plagues much of African studies. Africanist scholarship has historically been preoccupied with notions of difference and victimhood that have resulted in the troubling cultural essentialisms of nationalism and nativism in the field of African Studies.

Despite this fact, most African scholars are hesitant and sometimes antagonistic to the “posts”—poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism— which are “premised on a critique of notions (history, nation and consciousness) that were still central to subjects and citizens faced with the crisis engendered by the collapse of modern

institutions” (Gikandi 2003: 125). Taking this debate further, Paul Zeleza has argued that “the multiplication of identities, memories, and resistances surely must not be used to forget the larger contexts, the hierarchies of power between the colonizer and the colonized, Europe, and Africa, the unequal impact the empire had and left behind for the metropolises and the colonies, the fact that imperial power was upheld by physical force not simply by ideas and images, that it was underpinned by material structures not simply ideological constructs, by political economy not simply by discursive economy” (2006: 124).

Yet while it is true that the nation-state is a crucial site for identity formation in the contemporary, this dissertation sought to enrich the theoretical discourse on African self-writing projects like afropolitanism through historical and ethnographic analysis. A grounded analysis of afropolitanism revealed a critical relationship to diasporic discourses of negritude and pan-Africanism. Although afropolitanism is an African identity that refuses to be essentialized on the mere basis of geography, race, color, and ethnicity, its critical focus on mobility and humanism strongly resonates with black diaspora discourses of negritude and pan-Africanism which sought to combat white supremacist ideologies and usher in a global humanism predicated on dignity and freedom (Sterling 2015: 129, Goyal 2014). The concept of afropolitanism, however, offers an escape route from the androcentric nature of black self-theorizing enterprises through its dialogical connections to transnational black feminism. Thus, in order to fully capture the new diverse and ways of being African in the twenty-first century, I sought to refine the term’s analytical purchase through a creative combination of African diaspora and transnational black feminism theories to push for a deeper contemplation of emergent

possibilities in the field of African Studies.

In addition to the gendered and diasporic dimensions of new African subject formation, discursive practices are also critical sites in which the complexity of contemporary African class politics can be delineated. The contemporary rise of technology entrepreneurship represents a shift away from the middle class' historical relationship with the public sector to a new one with the private sector, as most tech entrepreneurs want to distance themselves from the inefficiencies and corruption of African governments. And although popular parlance within Nigeria often states that "everyman is his own government," my study has actually shown that citizens do not want to be their own governments but instead want governments that work! Meanwhile, tech entrepreneurs have chosen to take matters into their own hands through private sector and social enterprises. This distrust of the public, however, has not resulted in a large-scale abandonment of the state; middle-class entrepreneurs continue to campaign politically and organize for better governance, economic security, and diverse social issues.

Some examples of middle-class political activism in Nigeria are the *Occupy Nigeria* protest and #BringBackOurGirls campaigns, and more recently in the tech ecosystem, the #stoprobbingus and #endsars campaign to stop police brutality in Nigeria. Notwithstanding the weakness of these political campaigns, they pose a decisive challenge to simplistic view of discursive practices as mainly concerned with issues of representation and identity politics. Accordingly, I contend that critical ethnographic and historical research on these practices of self-making can reveal much more complexity than meets the eye, and as such, they warrant proper investigation by African scholars if

we want to remain at theoretical forefront of contemporary Africa.

In addition, this dissertation also contributed to the field of Science and Technology Studies. Historically, theorizing technology and innovation in Africa has been an extremely fraught exercise due to discourses of Eurocentrism, modernism, and technological determinism that underpin much of the literature on technological innovation. The work of social constructivist (SCOT) theorists and actor-network (ANT) theorists, however, has deconstructed the underlying myths of technological determinism and Modernity found in Western technoscience. And though it is now evident that technologies are life forms that make us even as we make them, African technological practices and cultures have yet to be taken seriously within mainstream STS literature (Winner 1986, Mavhunga 2017). Although scholars have powerfully critiqued the imperial and colonial foundations of technology discourses, this work is equally problematic because its victimhood narratives still preserve the West as the center of technological innovation. In order to unsettle the unequal power dynamics still present in technoscientific knowledge productions, this dissertation demonstrated that Africans have always been innovators of technology through the creation of their own technologies and the appropriation of foreign technology. Using the notion of *diaspora as innovation*, I argued for a conception of innovation as a constitutive element of diasporic formations to allow for a conception of technological innovation that fully embraces different technological practices, histories, and cultures (Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003, Eglash 2004).

Some Areas for Future Investigation

Indeed, it was this complex challenge that initially pushed me to explore the Lagos startup ecosystem. Although I had originally intended to explore notions of Africa

rising among returnee entrepreneurs in Lagos, my project ended up taking another course after I became intrigued with the underlying meta-discourse of African futures that underpinned the aspirational visions of the Continent. And even as I conducted my field research, I stumbled upon even more fascinating lines of flight for in-depth investigation. For instance, even though I explored gender and class in my study, my specific methodological approach of “studying up and sideways” did not enable me to spend as much time as I would have liked with female actors and non-traditional workers involved in the tech ecosystem. Future projects or extensions will include a deeper investigation into these groups to ensure that we squarely attend to questions of socioeconomic and gender inequality.

In addition to more investigations of questions of gender and class, I noticed what could have been entirely different projects during my study. I saw future research opportunities within the local context such as exploring relationships between new forms of tech entrepreneurship and the informal economy. Comparative work between startup ecosystems in Africa, including Kenya, Ivory Coast, South Africa, and Ghana, offers another critical opportunity to reflect anew on the significant impact that technological innovations has on the societal landscape in Africa. For example, whereas local founders dominate the Nigerian tech ecosystem, white expatriate founders primarily run Kenya’s tech ecosystem (Awosanya 2019). I also noticed opportunities for comparative work on South-to-South links (Africa to China and India) especially since Africa has become a strategic site for the United States to counter the rise of China (Moore 2019, Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). Considering the multifaceted nature of Lagos, it is no wonder that the city’s tech ecosystem provides such a fertile ground for thinking about contemporary

African life. The possibilities truly are endless. This dissertation has therefore barely scratched the surface of current and future transformations contained in the emergent tech ecosystem.

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