The Dotcom and the Digital: Time and Imagination in Kenya

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In 2007, on a remote dirt road in northwestern Kenya, a small, shabby building was repaired. Located in a tiny, dusty settlement with minimal infrastructure, the repairs to this little store included a new, hand-painted sign. Above the door, foot-high colorful lettering declared "Dotcom Beauties Salon" (fig. 1). The interior remained largely empty, furnished with just a couple of plastic chairs, a mirror, and a poster advertising hairstyles.

In 2013, a new advertisement for a laundry detergent appeared on Kenyan TV. Promoting a brand called Powerboy, the notice seemingly appeared in every programming break. It featured two women: the first a housemaid in a headwrap, scrubbing away at a huge pile of washing while the word "analogue" faded in and out on the screen. She was followed on screen by a second—fashionable, modern—woman. This woman used Powerboy to effortlessly clean her clothes as the word "digital" floated in the background behind her.

At first glance, these two scenes seem to have little to do with anything that might usually be associated with the terms *dotcom* or *digital*. A poorly equipped salon with no electricity, let alone more contemporary technologies, and two women doing the laundry: both seem a long way from the glossy, futuristic imagery that *dotcom* or *digital* might be assumed to evoke. Yet despite the absence of the Internet or connection to any online community, the shop and the advertisement are two common evocations of the dotcom and the digital eras in Kenya. These terms are not simply a reference to the age of the Internet, to new technolo-

We are grateful to the many research participants who so enthusiastically shared their ideas about the dotcom and the digital with us across a decade of research in Kenya. In the interests of anonymity, their names have been changed. Interviews in Marakwet were conducted in the Marakwet language. In Nairobi, interviews were conducted in a mix of Swahili and English. The terms *dotcom* and *digital* were always used in English by all participants. Other translations are our own.

Figure 1 Dotcom Beauties Salon, Kerio Valley, Marakwet District, June 2007. Courtesy of Henrietta L. Moore.

gies, or to the speed at which knowledge can travel, though such capacities are significant. In Kenya, both dotcom and digital—in different ways and in different decades—are tools for imagining with and through time; not only ways of seeking to describe periods of change, but of locating oneself within time, to challenge the concerns of the present and to animate new forms of participation and relationality.

The background story to *dotcom* and *digital* as descriptors of particular periods of change is the remarkable rise of information and communication technologies in Kenya. Over the past two decades, the country has undergone a radical transformation, and is now a hub for tech innovation, information solutions, and digital entrepreneurship in Africa (Ndemo and Weiss 2017). Such changes are unevenly distributed, but in Nairobi particularly, teams of developers and programmers have sprung up in innovation hubs and incubators, making Kenya globally recognized for a range of solutions, from mobile money transfer platforms to interactive mapping tools for humanitarian and development scenarios (McNamara 2017;

Poggiali 2016, 2017). Kenya is also notable for its high Internet penetration rate compared to much of sub-Saharan Africa (primarily through smartphone access) and extensive social media engagement (We Are Social 2018). This has made Kenya a new focus for research in global digital media studies, particularly on digital participation, political voice, and wider relationships to sociocultural change (see, e.g., Patel 2019; Ogola 2015; Ekdale 2019). Such work has gone beyond earlier discourses about the utopian possibilities of information and communications technology (ICT) for development in Africa, to examine the frictions and restrictions surrounding new technologies, and their entanglement with existing power dynamics (Dwyer and Molony 2019). This more critical wave is rightly starting to explore how digital innovation is caught up in censorship, electoral manipulation, and authoritarian politics in Africa. Nevertheless, we suggest, there is a level at which words like *dotcom* and *digital* retain their allure, remain captivating in their possibility, and assist Kenyans in making sense of the times in which they live. Our concern here is not to revive the utopian hubris that framed earlier narratives about the potential of ICT in Africa, but rather to explore what William Mazzarella (2010: 784) has termed their "performative efficacy." Thus, our interest is not so much in direct engagement with a particular technology or digital platform as it is in the wider evocation of the dotcom and the digital in social discourse. Rather than focusing on cutting-edge technology and digital innovators, or on the social meaning of new technologies, we seek to explore *dotcom* and *digital* as terms that suffuse everyday life in Kenya, where they evoke the exhilarating potential of grappling with time, space, and power.

We explore how for all sorts of Kenyans, the terms *dotcom* and *digital* became a powerful shorthand to engage with the challenges of the present and a means to evoke major transformations that extend beyond the parameters of Internet-based technologies. To "be dotcom" was a Kenyan expression popular in the first decade of this century, when one would frequently hear people remark, "we are in dotcom now," as a way of explaining certain changes they saw around them. But by the early 2010s, *dotcom* had been superseded by *digital* as the signifier of both a new temporal frame and a personal way of being. In this article, we examine how people experience and socially produce the temporal qualities of lived experience, and what the cultural efficacy of such qualities can be (Hodges 2010: 117). Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur and what it means to be able to act both in and on time, we tease apart what it means to be dotcom and digital in Kenya, and argue that they demonstrate how experiences of time are also projects of self-making and critical intervention.

This article is based on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the

Kenyan district of Marakwet since 2005 (see Moore 2011, 2016), and in the country's capital, Nairobi, since 2013 (see Smith 2017, 2019).[1] Both fieldwork projects are more broadly about local perspectives on social and political change: how communities' experiences of larger processes—from national politics to large-scale urban planning projects—can animate new aspirations, apprehensions, and projects of self-making. In some ways, Marakwet and Nairobi are markedly different environments, the former predominantly rural and historically considered far from the center of power, the latter the largest city in East Africa and a major regional hub for trade and international development. As such, they provide comparative scope for how the dotcom and the digital move across different ethnographic terrain in Kenya. But we also found an overarching commonality: interlocutors in both areas shared a sense of anxiety about how to manage their lives during times of far-reaching change. Research in Nairobi focused on Kaloleni, a low-income, colonial-era public housing project in the east of the city, where residents are facing the possible demolition and redevelopment of their neighborhood as part of a government-led initiative to turn Nairobi into a "world-class" city (Smith 2019). The fieldwork in Marakwet forms part of a longer research project investigating gender, social, environmental, and economic transformation in a small community where formal education, access to markets, Christianity, and more intensive agricultural methods came only tardily (see Moore 1988).

Communities in both places are actively trying to make sense of larger conversations about actual and potential political, economic, and material transformations, and share a concern that any benefits may remain largely out of reach. One of the forms these efforts take, we propose, is a spatiotemporal engagement with the nature of change as it plays out over time. *Dotcom* and *digital* as they emerged in Kenya are associated with particular historical conjunctures, but we suggest that, rather than descriptive terms, they are more precisely understood as mechanisms for registering the demands of the present, including the potentialities of transformation that undergird contemporary life. The terms offer a way not just

1. This article draws on several long-term ethnographic fieldwork projects in Kenya that the authors have undertaken both independently and collaboratively since 2007. ICT and Kenya's technology sector have never been a main focus of our respective research—and indeed, our interest here is in the implications for time and the self rather than in technology per se. Our attention was first drawn to notions of the dotcom during fieldwork in Marakwet in 2007, when during interviews about other topics, participants repeatedly used the term to formulate ideas about social change. Since that first spark we have encountered the dotcom, and later the digital, across various ethnographic and thematic terrains in Kenya, and we seek to bring these encounters together here. The material used in this article is drawn from ethnography, interviews, and focus group discussions, conducted by the authors in person, as well as from popular songs, news stories, and media campaigns in Kenya.

to label time or understand change, but rather to engage in a form of imaginative encounter that enhances capacities for thought and action; to project oneself into history and to create novel forms of engagement; to relate to others, objects, and worlds (see Moore 2011: 3–8).

Time, Narrative, and Periodization

Time has a puzzling presence in human experience. Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1985) suggests it is composed of three elements: cosmic time (the time of the world), lived time (the time of our own lives), and historical time (public time/actions/events). The relationships among these elements have a dialectical character, which unfolds in the interplay between being able to act and being attached to a larger world order (Ricoeur 1980: 177). As such, all that occurs happens "in" time: not only our own experiences but our capacity to intervene in, reflect on, and tell stories about the world (172). Ricoeur is only one of many scholars to talk of multiple temporalities, and of the conundrum of how lived time and its experiences, pulsations, and propensities connect to the world of events as it appears to unfold before us. This is, of course, the question at the heart of any consideration of the relation between the individual and society or the collective. The power of the digital, Vincent Mosco (2005) has pointed out, is not just its potential for economic or technological revolution, but the way it acts as a new vector for telling stories about ourselves and about the world; a form of transcendent mythmaking he calls the "digital sublime." Speed, transcending distance, and overcoming inequality are features of so many discourses (local and expert) on globalization and technology, and their interconnections work as animating myths that enable individuals, in culturally and historically articulated forms, to imagine worlds beyond their everyday (Mosco 2005: 3–4). This imaginative work allows for reflection on what exactly might be the connection between an embodied life and a larger world of ramifying interconnections (Moore 2011: chapter 1).

For Ricoeur, narrative is vital, since personal identity is consequent on a narrative identity; reality consists of a boundless flux of events onto which meaningful order must be projected. However, self-narratives are always culturally and historically mediated, and it is collective narratives that shape the horizon of individual interpretations. Life is about telling stories, and personal stories intersect and are entangled with collective stories: "Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode" (Ricoeur 1984: 32). This is what Ricoeur (1980: 173) describes as "reckoning with time"; it is because we have the need for plot—to make intelligible sense out of a succession of events—that we

measure and mark time, not the other way around. Emplotment is not just a matter of imposing a narrative on the world, but of bringing together the order and disorder of experience to make sense of past experiences and to reconstruct our identities in the present (Ricoeur 1980: 178–79; 1988). The result is that we tend to create more order in our narratives than we have actually experienced in living our lives. Lives do not necessarily form coherent linear narratives; narratives may be partial and they change.

The hermeneutic tradition provides a rich intellectual seam for understanding the relation of experience to time because of its emphasis on the human perception and/or interpretation of being in time (Hirsch and Stewart 2005: 263). Interpretations have world-constituting effects that are often made sense of through cultural narratives that provide people with models for giving shape and form to their experiences and aspirations. However, the dialogic relation between experience and aspiration is subject to perpetual reinterpretation. As we explore below with relation to the dotcom and the digital, such reinterpretations are themselves influenced by wider forms of political economy and distributions of power, including those processes commonly referred to as globalization. Yet the specific forms of engagement that different individuals and communities may have with larger formations, both temporal and spatial, create specific sets of differences. Periodization is a very common feature of the human experience of time, permitting the sense that we live in a certain kind of time, and that certain times have certain qualities. As Matt Hodges (2010: 116) has shown in his ethnography of a French fishing village, the periodization of time into epochs is as much a cultural practice of everyday life as it is a metalevel mode of ordering historical time: "The ways in which we symbolize and experience epoch in everyday practice . . . do not necessarily refer to the grand epochs of concern to historians." Categorizing and naming historical periods is a common way of making sense of seemingly inexorable change through an emphasis on difference, of which historiographical periodization has become the hegemonic mode. But that is not to say it is the only mode; techniques of periodization can manifest in diverse ways. The forms of epoch that we tend to associate with historiographically defined periods constitute just one manner of marking time (Rabinow 2009), one that has been heavily influenced by eschatology (Kermode 1967).

Generation Dotcom

The appearance of the Dotcom Beauties Salon on the unmade road running through the Kerio Valley in Marakwet indexed a point of interconnection with

a new epochal imaginary. Across Kenya in the early 2000s, *dotcom* became shorthand for a whole set of micro and macro changes that were perceived to be transforming the nature of Kenyan society at a rapid—and, for some, alarming—rate. The "dotcom generation" quickly came to signify a youthful generation who sought new educational and employment opportunities, tried to take advantage of new technologies, aspired to an idea of elegance and sophistication, and had high expectations that mobile phones and nascent access to email and the Internet would enable them to achieve their desires. In the rural village of Sibou, where the Marakwet fieldwork is based, these new aspirations took on a particular set of material and imaginative indicators, including clothing, mobility, access to markets, and leaving behind an idea of "traditional" life. MaKosgei, a Sibou woman in her forties, made this clear during discussions about what being "modern" meant to her:

> People have left behind the old things. Now we are in dotcom generation. It's about new things like computers, elections, mobile phones, wearing trousers, moving from rural areas to the towns—a new way of doing things. Also, dotcom is about being independent from parents, making your own money to support your family. (Interview with MaKosgei, Sibou, April 2007)

In MaKosgei's remarks, there is a clear sense of new horizons, of a new set of possibilities and aspirations. To be dotcom is about being able—or at least trying—to access these new choices, new discourses and practices of self-fashioning that break with "the old things" of the past. Her inventory of items that she regards as characterizing the dotcom generation includes not only computers and mobile phones, but also elections and trousers. This may at first seem an odd combination, but her list is indicative of a set of novelties that were experienced almost simultaneously in Marakwet. Following the single-party, kleptocratic presidency of Daniel arap Moi, Kenya began a slow return to multiparty democracy from the late 1990s onward (see Branch, Cheeseman, and Gardner 2010). In 2002, Moi was finally displaced and Mwai Kibaki elected as president, promising a new era of transparency, accountability, and communication—a change that coincided, in many parts of the world, with the globalization of Internet technologies and normalization of email as a mode of communication. This was also the time that the mobile phone began to find wide reach in African markets: from one in fifty people being mobile users in 2000 to one in three by 2008 (Bruijn, Nyamnjoh, and Brinkman 2009). In Kenya, the mobile phone transformed communication for people in remote rural areas such as Marakwet, and was swiftly followed by

mobile banking, such as M-Pesa, which ushered in new forms of saving (Kusimba, Yang, and Chawla 2016). Wearing trousers and moving to town were more gradual introductions, entangled with the expansion of education opportunities in the Kerio Valley, enhanced access to new labor markets, and the exposure to the fashions and styles of town life. Town also became associated with computers and access to email, through the proliferation of Internet cafes—or "cybers," as they are more usually known in Kenya. Thus, town life not only presented new opportunities in itself, but also expedited global connections—actual or fantasized— to a wider world.

MaKosgei was far from alone in observing how contemporary life offered different aspirations for the younger generation. Her neighbor and contemporary, Dorcas, offered a similar set of signifiers:

> It means new things—like wearing trousers, computers, getting more education—now there is free primary education. People are changing, moving to urban areas, and bringing these changes back to the valley. These changes are good, people can have many things they couldn't have before. (Interview with Dorcas, Sibou, April 2007)

But MaKosgei's and Dorcas's observations should not be understood to indicate that before the dotcom generation, the Marakwet world was somehow static or fixed in time. As Josephine, an older Sibou woman in her sixties, observed,

> New things come with every generation. Like long ago there was no maize, only sorghum and millet. Then maize came. Just like now with dotcom, new things are coming like mobile phones. (Interview with Josephine, Sibou, April 2007)

Josephine's words show how for many in Marakwet, periodization is enacted through the association of particular sets of changes with specific generations. This generation-based epoch-making is a way of marking difference across time, one in which elections and trousers take on not only the same temporal signifiers but come to indicate the mores of a whole generation. This sense of generational change is not new in Marakwet, where periodization has long been marked by a repeated sequence of eight age-sets that reprise over many generations (Moore 1988). All young men and women are initiated into an age-set, and thus into adulthood, with each age-set constituting a particular epoch or period of time. The time of the Nyongi age-set, for example, is understood to both echo the character of Nyongi's previous iteration (approximately a century ago) and simultaneously to be fashioned by those who are initiated as Nyongi today. Alongside theirreprised

name, each age-set is associated with nicknaming practices that reflect the technologies and challenges of their moment of instantiation, so that they speak both to collective continuities and to the experience of being in a particular time. When iron machetes first were introduced to Marakwet, the initiating age-set was called Panga (after *panga*, Swahili for machete), and when the Turkwel hydroelectric power station lines first were run through the landscape, the generation was nicknamed Turkwel. Age-sets were the backbone of traditional governance and were said to "run the country."

The character of Marakwet age-sets was thus something formed through a particular understanding of connection with others, but also of responsibility for understanding the character of the present. This was reinforced by each age- set's responsibility for the ritual well-being of the time they inhabited, and many Marakwet rituals have as their purpose a "reading" or understanding of what certain forms, technologies, and signs entail and reveal about the present and how it should be managed (Moore 1988). Therefore, while the iterative nature of time in Marakwet is in some sense cyclical, it is far from predetermined, because its purpose is to understand, and to shape, the character of the present. Thus, when Josephine and others associated *dotcom* with a particular generation, this was not just a labeling of a period or epoch. The association of change with particular generations emphasizes participation and practices of self-fashioning, rather than inexorable, overarching change that is simply passively received by local people. In the early 2000s, *dotcom* was understood in Marakwet not just as a way to make sense of change, but to indicate how people sought to project themselves into historical time, to be caught up in its swirl. The young men and women of the dotcom generation were understood to be themselves fashioning what it means to "be dotcom," in ways that were both locally specific and that transcended the confines of Marakwet.

Digital and *dotcom* are therefore not simple labels, a way of indicating the important developments of a particular historical moment, such as the Dutch *Golden Age*. They are particular ways of signaling a relation with self and with others. They encompass a series of means for connecting up with a range of social, economic, and political logics that exceed their designation. They are examples of what Moore (2011) has termed the "ethical imagination," the way in which projects of self-making are linked to larger processes of innovation and change, and where new encounters with others (including nonhumans) provoke the reimagination of self-other relations and ways of being in the world. New forms of sociality and new forms of knowledge intersect to produce new material infrastructures that potentially alter ways of being and acting in the world. The ethical imagina-

tion as a mode of engaging with time and space—trying to answer the question of what the relation is between the individual and the collective—is significant for understanding the character of the dotcom and the digital. While the promised benefits of cutting-edge technology, global connectivity, and integration to the "global village" may remain elusive for many nonelite Kenyans, the imaginative work provoked by such promises nevertheless produces real social, political, economic, and material effects. In our research we found that many Kenyans, rather than passively waiting for change to come, are actively engaged in queries about the nature and possibility of change, and about how to be a part of it. The dotcom and the digital are a means to project oneself—through different mechanisms and means—into history, and to take up a place within it. In their everyday lives, people enact a range of strategies, fantasies, and speculations through which they seek to grasp hold of possible futures and make them their own (Moore 2011: 7–18). But equally, at a collective level, there are constraints and anxieties, concerns that the new era might be ushering in questionable ethical encounters that make becoming dotcom an uncertain, and even undesirable, achievement.

Anxious Times

As well as being aspirational, the dotcom generation was perceived to be vulnerable to the temptations and anxieties that modernity and technology could wreak. As a young Marakwet woman named Carolina put it, "dotcom can be danger- ous, by the way." The double-edged character of the dotcom was emphasized by many in Sibou, who asserted that the new era presented as many challenges as it did opportunities, particularly for women. This was particularly expressed dur- ing interviews with older residents, such as MaChesir, a woman in her late fifties:

> These days, when girls speak with their friends, they do not fear their parents. They talk on the road, do not fear—this would have been shameful before. Also they are moving to town; they are free to move and live their life. This generation say they are in dotcom generation. They have more sex. This generation is bad; the wives are moving from place to place. . . . These days girls admire many things, like mobile phones and clothes. (Interview with MaChesir, Sibou, April 2007)

MaChesir explicitly associates *dotcom* with a time not only of new opportunity but of temptation. As her words imply, the arrival of the mobile phone in Africa has strengthened kinship networks and social bonds through improved communication, but it has also intensified anxieties around parenting, authority, gender relations, and infidelity (see Archambault 2017). In this way, dotcom represented

a rather ambiguous promise, one filled with expectation but also tinged with fears of loss. Dotcom enabled people to link the immediate changes they saw around them with a wider world—both national and transnational—and to reflect on their place in both. Older people worried about the lack of respect for tradition and local authority, fearing that young people would become unmanageable and unable to lead responsible lives. For younger people, while they may have aspired to "be a dotcom," they nevertheless were anxious about their capacity to achieve it and make it their own.

To be dotcom was to participate in a time of less restriction, an era in which Marakwet practices and traditions no longer exerted the same regulatory effects as in the past. Elsewhere, in relation to changing attitudes to female initiation and circumcision, Moore (2011: 30–54) has shown how the notion of culture in Marakwet has been transformed from a set of lived practices and knowledges to an objective idea of which it is possible to select certain elements. In Sibou, it has become commonplace to hear people, mostly in the younger generations, say that they can choose which bits of culture to keep and which to reject as antithetical to an understanding of living a "modern" life. This treatment of culture as an object is central to the new ways of thinking and doing that constitute an idea of being dotcom. Such an understanding was concisely expressed by Carolina, who said simply, "Development and tradition cannot stay together." Being dotcom was therefore not only about new objects of desire, but about what should be left behind, a point made clear in an interview with Lydia, a college-educated woman who had returned to the Kerio Valley:

> Dotcom means "new" [stated in English], dropping the things of the old generation. It means dropping "culture" [in English]. Before, people were wearing skins, but they are now wearing clothes; now people even wear trousers. Also, they are leaving circumcision behind as well. Even they are having church weddings instead of traditional [ones]. (Interview with Lydia, Sibou, April 2007)

On the one hand, leaving "culture" behind could be exhilarating and full of hope; on the other, it was fraught with uncertainty. Such—deeply gendered—ambivalence is apparent in the popular 2001 song "Dot Com Lady," sung by Abednego Sangalo, which encapsulated not only the aspirational qualities of the dotcom era but also a whole set of anxieties and speculations about how intimate betrayals, economic challenges, and other obstacles might relate to a broader context of globaliza- tion, inequality, and migration (Lukalo 2006). In "Dot Com Lady," a man leaves Kenya to seek opportunities abroad, while his wife stays in Nairobi. He sends

remittances back home, but his wife—the dotcom lady of the title—constantly asks for more. When he finally returns to the city, he discovers that she has been having an affair and is pregnant with a child that is not his. The song ends, "Come down girl, the dottie-com girl Now you see what money has done to us girl . . . *pesa, pesa sio kila kitu* [money money isn't everything]" (our translation). The song integrates intimate anxieties about shifting gender relationships and the nature of reciprocity with fears of economic hardship and how to access the good life in postcolonial Kenya. Fibian Kavulani Lukalo (2006: 110) suggests that the notion of a "dotcom lady" evokes "a gendered cultural narrative linked to the expansion in technology, education and opportunities for girls in Kenya." This opening up of opportunity not only made young women's desires and actions visible in new ways but provoked considerable anxiety among parents, husbands, and elders about the empowering, but also potentially destructive, nature of social change. The capacity to act on time, to fashion the dotcom epoch, was thus far from smooth; nor was it universal, but subject to all kinds of critiques, interventions, and apprehensions.

Across Time and Space

In anthropological writing in recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in questions relating to the anthropology of the future and of anticipation (e.g., Appadurai 2013; Guyer 2007; Moore 2011; Piot 2010). In this work, notions of hope, aspiration, anticipation, and imagination are key to efforts to understand not only potential futures as specific cultural forms or horizons but also the emotions and the fantasies that accompany these futures (Appadurai 2013: 286–87). As Arjun Appadurai (2013: 292) argues, this is not just about how cultures produce visions of the future and the forms of representation relevant to them but about a wider inquiry into specific images of the good life and how to arrive there. In the context of Kenya, however, we would argue that the purchase of *dotcom* and *digital* not only relates to the promise inherent in visions of the future, however fragmentary and disparate they may be; the terms also allow for inquiry into the relationship between the individual and the collective, and between knowledge and agency, and as such they are spaces of critical thought and political action.

The engagement of the ethical imagination—the imaginative engagement of the self with others—with new social imaginaries opens up the potential for the extension of agency across space and time. Technologies enhance this capac- ity for extension massively, and many scholars have shown how technology can expand scales of engagement and belonging, working as material and symbolic

ways to link the self with notions of modernity, mobility, or nationhood. Perhaps most famously, Benedict Anderson (1991) demonstrated how the emergence of newspapers offered new possibilities for cultivating "imagined communities" and ideas of the nation. Anthropologists of technology and infrastructure in Africa have observed how innovations such as mobile phones, cinema, and digital maps can both create new links to potentially knowable worlds and refract more local politics and anxieties (Archambault 2017; Poggiali 2017; Larkin 2008). In contemporary Kenya, this is reinforced by local and national discourses of Kenya as a site of digital innovation and entrepreneurship (Ecosystem Accelerator 2018). In Kenya, as in other African countries, digital technologies are being woven into forms of governance and development at the international, national, sectoral, city, and community level (Ndemo and Weiss 2017). The image of Kenya as a future global leader in these fields is a key part of contemporary political discourse, influencing bilateral and multilateral aid flows and underlying visions of Nairobi as "Silicon Savannah" (Pilling 2018; Van den Broeck 2017). The emergence of the dotcom and the digital as particular moments evokes this promise of exten- sion across space and time, locating it as simultaneously Kenyan in character and with capacity for global reach. But their expansive and heterogenous character also shows how this extension is not simply material, produced through the actual usage of such technologies—sending an email, working remotely—but is part of the imaginative work of self-making: an encounter not so much with a technologi- cal object but with the promise and possibility it evokes.

The dotcom and the digital are understood as distinct periods in Kenya, marked by different attitudes, styles, and aspirations. However, the content, experience, formulation, and comprehension of the dotcom and the digital, and the epochs they represent, are very variable across sections of Kenyan society. For example, those with direct involvement in tech businesses or digital innovation, who have broader relations of interconnection with other global and continental businesses and networks, understand one set of people, objects, technologies, financing, and science to be constitutive, while residents in Marakwet have identified different assemblages (see Ndemo and Weiss 2017; Poggiali 2016, 2017). Something of these differences was captured by Shem Ochuodho in a 2001 debate in the Kenyan Parliament: "I dare say, with a light touch, that there are some people who talk of 'dot.com' here and when I ask them what their email addresses are, they do not even have them. Some of them want to look for information and when you tell them to check the website, they ask you where that website is, yet they call themselves the 'dot.com generation'" (Hansard 2001: 2408). With the shift from *dotcom* to *digital* in the 2010s, such questions as to the content, character, and

proper embodiment of the epoch were no easier to resolve. At stake were not just new promises for imagining across space and time, but ethical dilemmas about the prospect of a digital presidency.

Are You Ready for Digital?

By the second decade of the current century, a notion of being dotcom was being displaced by a desire to be digital, setting in train a new series of questions about the character of being in time. The idea of "digital" as the era of the contemporary in Kenya (as opposed to something confined to developments in the ICT sector) started in the run-up to the 2013 presidential elections. In 2012, Uhuru Kenyatta (currently president) and William Ruto (currently deputy president) formed a surprising political coalition, known as the Jubilee Alliance. At the time they were both facing trial at the International Criminal Court (ICC), charged with "crimes against humanity" for their roles in fomenting the brutal violence that followed the disputed national election of 2007, in which more than 1,200 Kenyans lost their lives and hundreds of thousands were displaced (Mueller 2014).[2] In 2007, Uhuru and Ruto had been political rivals, but in 2012 they forged a strategic "alliance of the accused" that aimed to benefit from their indictments, which the men represented as a neocolonial attack on Kenya's sovereignty and themselves as a modern, youthful alternative to the old political guard (see Lynch 2014).

At the time of their electoral campaign, Uhuru and Ruto faced questions over how they could possibly govern Kenya, not only as potential international criminals but if they had to be physically present in The Hague for the ICC hearings. In what became a famous statement on the issue, Ruto promised he could "run Kenya from The Hague" (Ndonga 2012). With new digital technologies such as Skype that improved videoconferencing and international communications, Uhuru and Ruto argued, it was no longer necessary to be physically present in the country in order to rule; they were in effect capable of being in two places at once. Jubilee's election manifesto promised technological solutions to chronic issues in Kenya, from closed-circuit television cameras to combat insecurity in downtown Nairobi to the "one laptop per child" program that pledged to revolutionize education (Kimutai 2013). Idioms of technology and innovation featured heavily on the Jubilee campaign trail, and the candidates were successful in co-opting the transfor-

2. Space precludes a more detailed discussion of Kenya's disputed elections, the rise of the Jubilee Alliance, and the strategic importance of the ICC indictments. For more on the 2007 elections and postelection violence, see Kagwanja and Southall 2013 and Branch and Cheeseman 2008. On the ICC and the 2013 elections and aftermath, see Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis 2014.

mative language of digital community, innovation, and citizenship espoused by Kenya's elite "techpreneurs" (Poggiali 2017: 269–70). This was in stark contrast to what they depicted as the old-school, "analogue" politics of Raila Odinga, the seventy-something opposition leader and political veteran. But significantly, Jubilee's digital identity was acquired not only through their claimed proficiency with new technologies but through their clothing, bodily postures, and attitudes. With the slogan "the digital team," Jubilee branded itself as smart, energetic, up-to-date, and young, appealing to a new generation of Kenyans (Lynch 2014: 108). Uhuru and Ruto eschewed suit jackets in favor of matching red ties and bright white shirts with rolled-up sleeves, a style suggesting their readiness for action that quickly became their signature look (Mbugua 2013). This was complemented by relatively casual, open body language and a relaxed rapport with the public. In a country that tends to favor formality, both in clothing and behavior, this embodied ease became a sign of their contemporaneity and "digital" identity.

The spread of "digital" as the appropriate moniker for the times was reinforced by the "digital migration" of December 2013, the transfer from analogue television broadcasting to digital transmission (Mbuvi 2013). This initiative was accompanied by extensive public information announcements on TV, in newspaper advertising, and online. In Nairobi, huge billboards declared, "Don't remain behind during digital migration," and "Uko tayari kwa digital?" (Are you ready for digital?), statements which seemed to reinforce the notion that this was not just a new technology to plug into, but a way of approaching life more gener- ally. This was the point at which "being digital" slipped from a signature of a new political elite to a broader characterization of the times. As Kenda Mutongi (2017) has elaborated, ideas and issues in public discourse in Nairobi are often refracted through the customized artwork that adorns the city's *matatus* (shared minibuses), their idiosyncratic designs offering a comment on social or political conditions. It did not take long for the word *digital* to appear emblazoned across windshields or along the side of *matatus*, thrusting the idea of "the digital" into the daily commute of millions of Nairobians. In this way, the implications of the digital were understood as a feature of the present; a temporal experience that was literally in circulation, materializing in the everyday life of the city. In Ricoeur's terms, not just technology but time itself was being made to appear, as it became evident that a new periodization was taking shape. In this new epoch, the prospect of "being digital" animated further speculations and projects of self-making as people began to reckon with time in new ways.

Being Digital

What does it mean for something, or someone, to be digital in Kenya? As with dotcom, technological change is an important, but insufficient, facet for understanding the character of the new era. Interviews on the differences between the dotcom and the digital suggested that the growing affordability of, and access to, Internet-enabled devices such as tablets and smartphones in Kenya had opened up new ideas about speed and ease. Angela, a young Marakwet woman, described it like this:

> Digital, according to my own knowledge, is more advanced than dotcom because technology is mostly used. For example, these days we are using Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, where people communicate more easily and share information. Also, the use of laptops and iPads has contributed mostly to this digital generation and most of the things nowadays are done online compared to the dotcom generation where it was just talking about the word. (Interview with Angela, Eldoret, October 2016)

Fidalia, a young woman from Kaloleni estate in Nairobi, had a similar perspective:

> Digital is about things being fast. They're easy. You need to buy phones, [Internet] bundles, tablets. Digital is for young people. Those over forty struggle. They can't keep up with computer, smartphone. (Interview with Fidalia, Kaloleni, May 2014)

Both of these young women were clear that the digital era is more "advanced" than dotcom, which in retrospect they saw more as a project of self-projection and fantasy ("just talking about the word," as Angela described it). Echoing the sentiments of the Kenyan member of Parliament quoted above, Angela implied that though in the dotcom era people had talked about email and computers, in reality they had had minimal access to such innovations. Instead, she explained, the dotcom had been more about signifying style and attitude: "Dotcom was used by the youths especially when they were dressing. Boys were sagging their trousers; women were looking smart." This embodiment of dotcom was echoed by Fidalia, who described how "dotcom was a style, a swag.[3] It was the way you dress, a nice style, youthful, modern. You see someone and you say, 'Ah! She's a dotcom.'"

Just as *dotcom* was about more than access to email, it would be superficial to see *digital* as entirely encapsulated by use of social media and smartphones. As

3. Kenyan street slang, literally meaning "swagger" but more often used to refer to a certain attitude and bravura.

the digital style of Jubilee implied, being digital is also embodied: a way of being, dressing, and approaching the world. Being digital may be achieved through technologies such as laptops or smartphones, but it is more precisely the affordances—imagined or actual—of such objects that are significant, rather than the usage of electronic devices per se. It is the possibility for speed, connection, and a certain mode of engagement in the world that a smartphone seems to offer its user that allows for what Ricoeur (1984) might describe as a personal narrative of "being digital" to emerge. To return to the example at the beginning of this article, this is how something as mundane as laundry powder can be seen as digital. As Fidalia put it, "Digital is about things being fast. They're easy." Something digital doesn't rely on exertion or a daily grind. The Powerboy brand advertises its detergent as affording ease and speed. Here the digital is about finding faster ways of achieving results—even if that just means how long it takes to do the laundry. This was reinforced in conversation with Eric, another young resident of Kaloleni, who also recognized the digital affordances of certain materials. We were drinking tea in his parents' house and talking about what it means to live a digital life. As he passed me a paper towel, he half-jokingly remarked, "Even that paper towel is digital. It's disposable. It doesn't need washing, ironing, all that work." As the Powerboy advertisement makes clear, not just the detergent but the user is digital; this is a mutually reinforcing relationship. The modern, well-dressed woman using Powerboy laundry detergent is living a digital life because she uses Powerboy; but it is precisely because she is a contemporary digital woman that she has recognized the digital qualities of Powerboy in the first place.

Signs of the Times

These imaginative affinities between materials and ways of being digital are also expressed in other media. One common iteration is through street signage, where in recent years the word *digital* has spread like a rash across Nairobi's thou- sands of hand-painted storefronts. Just as the sign for the Dotcom Beauties Salon declared an aspirational idea of belonging to the dotcom epoch, so the new *digital* signs assert a modern and contemporary outlook; they are signs of participation in the digital era. An early example adorned a store in the crowded informal settlement of Majengo, in the east of Nairobi. In among the many corrugated iron kiosks was a little blue shack. A picture of *miraa*—a plant chewed for its stimulant properties that is very popular in East Africa—was painted on the blue wall, alongside neat lettering: "Small World Miraa. Digital Vision 2030." Neat piles of *miraa* were arranged on the counter; flies were buzzing around (fig. 2). As a

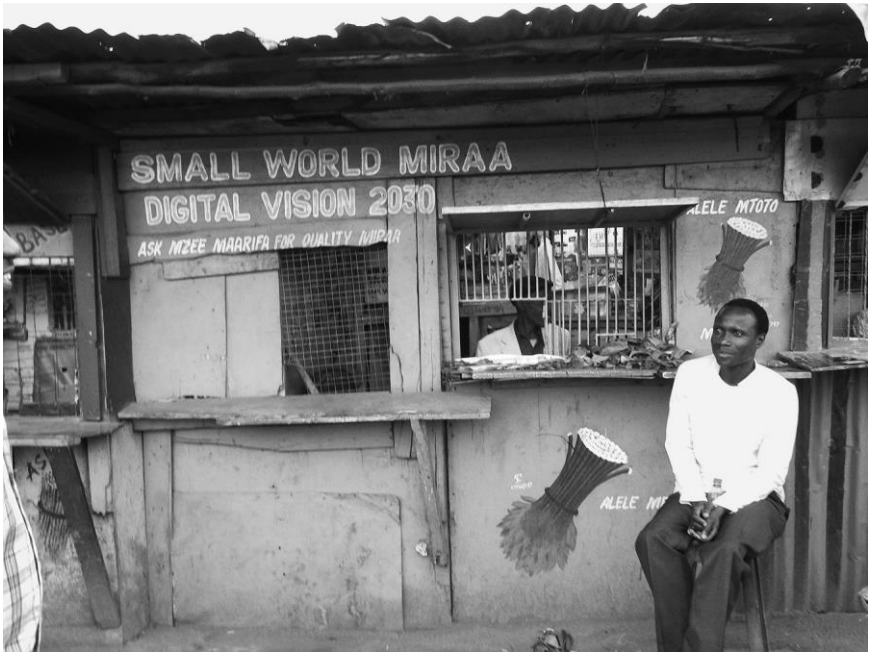

Figure 2 Small World Miraa. Digital Vision 2030 kiosk in Majengo, Nairobi, 2014. Courtesy of Constance Smith.

slum, Majengo has no formal planning; its infrastructures and systems are makeshift and incremental, making use of recycled materials and ad hoc connections. "Vision 2030" refers to the Kenyan government's blueprint for national development, a technology- and infrastructure-led strategy that seeks to turn Nairobi into a "world-class" metropolis (see Smith 2019). In the sense of being high-tech or globally connected, there seemed to be little that was "world-class" or "digital" about this shop. The owner did have a smartphone, on which he spoke almost continually, and an M-Pesa account. However, his customers preferred to make their small payments (equivalent to one or two dollars) in cash to avoid the surcharges that mobile payments incurred, and they visited the shop on foot, walking through the dusty alleyways. The little corrugated iron-and-wood kiosk seemed a long way from the "digital age."

Nevertheless, the use of the word *digital* on shop signs is one way in which Kenya's digital epoch is asserted and made to appear in everyday life. To use the word *digital* is a linguistic act where the speaker (or sign writer) not only asserts

their association with the digital but makes an intervention, emplotting their action into a larger temporal order and reciprocally contributing to a sense of belong- ing to a particular time (Ricoeur 1980: 177). In this sense, being digital can be a means of interpreting the character of the present, while also making it one's own time. This is produced not only through signs but in everyday speech acts, in which one frequently hears people remark, "Saa hii, tuko digital" (We are in digi- tal now). In Swahili, *-ko-* is an infix to describe physical placement, but it can also imply a state of being. "Uko sawa?" means "Are you OK?" but its literal meaning is "Are you in a place of OK-ness?" In this sense, then, "tuko digital" gives a sense of being in digital: spatiotemporally inside it, but also bodily a part of it. As such, being digital is something lived, something that Kenyans are, or feel they should be; a way of reckoning with time from within.

To be digital thus refers to a desired affinity with both a way of being and a temporal frame. The shop sign declares that the shop, and thus the owner, is within time, intervening in a historical moment. It is at once aspirational and self-realizing. Being digital is not confined to political leaders, nor does it require access to the latest technologies or electronic goods. It instead connotes something at once more humble and more far-reaching. It is both epochal and an indicator of a personal subjectivity. By asserting himself as part of Kenya's digital epoch, the shopkeeper contributes to Kenyans' sense of the digital as a participatory temporality: an epoch defined by those who live it, acting in the present and bringing the character of its forms into new understandings of the relation between self and other.

Analogue

That is not to say, however, that being digital is always as easy as just painting a sign. It requires a certain labor, a management of the self that is not always easy to achieve. Fidalia made this clear during our interview, when she described how being digital is not automatic. She explained that it is hard to be digital when you live in a poor neighborhood of Nairobi, even for young people like her. "We are digital but even for us it's expensive. We don't have those opportunities So I'm not fully digital. I'm at one end." Her friend Rhoda agreed: "We don't really qualify to be digital, but we are trying. We don't want to be analogue." Even as they try to claim the digital, to make this time theirs, there is a form of gatekeeping—or perhaps we should call it timekeeping—which excludes, confining them to an "analogue" frame.

Life in Kaloleni, where the Nairobi-based research took place, was frequently

described by residents using digital's opposite: analogue. Built in the British colonial period as a model urban neighborhood for African families, Kaloleni is today run-down and dilapidated. It remains a public housing project, but no longer receives services from the city authorities, a situation Washington Olima (2013: 295) has described as the city's "sheer abdication of responsibilities." Resi- dents are increasingly left to fend for themselves, taking on the management and maintenance of their homes as best they can (see Smith 2019). The estate is now economically poor and, after decades of neglect, its infrastructure is in need of repair. Previously paved roads have disintegrated, reduced to muddy tracks; street-lights are broken and lean at awkward angles. Though the houses were built with plumbing, water no longer runs in the pipes. Even as they try to claim the digital for themselves, it is easy to see how residents might feel excluded from its promise of a new era.

It is here that the digital can become a mode for critical thought and reflection, as made clear by Dolly's appraisal of life in Kaloleni. A woman in her sixties, Dolly was born in Kaloleni and still lives in the house she grew up in. Though neat and tidy, her home is now very worn, showing the abrasions of decades of family life: the furniture sags; the walls are marked by generations of grubby fingers. Outside the house, the lack of municipal services is all too clear. Dolly expressed her frustration at life in Kaloleni, the failures of its governance, and waiting for things that never come:

> We are left behind. We used to have water; [today] there's no water. The roads—you see how they are. We used to have footpaths; they are no longer there. These houses are just like [a] museum anyway. But people are still living in them! (Interview with Dolly, Kaloleni, January 2014)

In her assessment, a museum is not a positive comparison: the implication is that the houses are stuck in the past while the city moves on around them. Dolly con-cluded, "They say we are in digital now. Ha! Back here, we are analogue."

In the Powerboy advertisement, the notion of analogue is equated to the labor of doing laundry by hand. Analogue, in the advertisement's assessment, is manual: it requires hard work; it holds you back. The residents of Kaloleni make a more subtle distinction: that being digital is subject to certain constraints, that a place or a person can be prevented from being digital however much they may want it. The inability to fully inhabit the digital is also noted by Jan Van den Broeck (2017) in relation to the residents of a small settlement adjacent to the site of Konza Techno City, Nairobi's proposed satellite technology city, nicknamed Silicon Savannah. Here being analogue is explicitly associated with a perceived inability to make the

digital intelligible, not just because of exclusion and lack of resources but because of an inability to act on the digital, to inhabit it sufficiently to make it reveal itself. To be digital, then, can require a level of economic and political capital, without which Kenyans are not able—or not allowed—to participate in digital time. They are left behind in an analogue hiatus, unable to adequately act on time, excluded from digital's temporal flow.

Conclusion

One of the roles of periodization or epochs is to render the present obvious, to bring it into focus and force it to reveal the nature of what lies behind the forms of its instantiation. This can take narrative forms, and Ricoeur is certainly correct to suggest that time has to be made to appear, because neither periodizations nor their characteristics are self-evident. But in large part, the anticipatory qualities of the dotcom and the digital in Kenya are not ideational or narrative in form. Or rather, if they are, they only take that form for certain parts of Kenyan society and not for others. By their everyday usage in different Kenyan locales, the dotcom and the digital are not only used as a means to transform forms of governance, communication, or economics but are also mobilized by nonelite Kenyans to upset exclusive or elite visions of the kind of place Kenya should be, as well as to reflect on issues of exclusion and social inequality.

Rather than a vision of a future or a set of possible futures, the dotcom and the digital might be more accurately seen not as a series of answers as to the character of the time but as a series of challenges or questions. We suggest that the dotcom and the digital are not cultural forms in the sense that Appadurai intends, but rather tools for interrogating the role of power, subject positions, authorities (institutions), modes of being (new bodies), social changes (education, migration, government technologies), and political struggles (winners/losers). They open up a space for thought in which practices can be disclosed, modified, or replaced. Dotcom and digital suggest a desire for the present to reveal its character, a method for opening up critical thought and political reflection, a form of knowledge and attachment to the world that creates space for new forms of sociality, new ways of seeing, doing, feeling, and being. These do not add up to a vision or a narrative, but rather to something akin to a practical genealogy, a practical inquiry as to how the dotcom and the digital (knowledge, practice, potentialities, objects, relations) operate as historical formations, constituting both their subjects (who are also analysts) and their objects (the dotcom and the digital themselves), while breathing new life into old objects and assimilating new ones.

The dotcom and the digital are constructions of temporality that are qualitatively distinct. Fundamentally Kenyan yet global in their reach, they are temporally located engagements with times of far-reaching change. As we have shown, *dotcom* and *digital* are not just terms, ideas, or narratives, but also material practices, technological objects, and bodily procedures—discourses, as Michel Foucault would have it (1972: 27, 100–109). Certainly, there are multiple knowledges and practices with which they have come to be associated, as well as diverse ways of being knowledgeable subjects and knowable objects in relation to the dotcom and the digital. Both are heterogeneous assemblages: no one would be able to specify a complete list of all the elements of the dotcom or the digital, but the trick is to be able to identify the digital, for example, when you encounter it, as well as to engage in various imaginative and material practices that bring it into being.

In this way, the dotcom and the digital are particular forms of the ethical imagination that tie individual projects, understandings, experiences, and aspirations to the lives of others and collectivities in specific times and locales. As instances of periodization, they make of history a form of politics: interrogating institutions, forms, infrastructures, technologies, regulations, and objects as to their significance and consequence. In their association with generational change, they are a reminder that each generation has to encounter the new and decide on its import, on the impact it may have on how life can be lived alongside others. This form of being in time is not the outcome of the anxieties of modernity or of city life. Such uncertainties, with their underpinning inequalities and forms of immiseration, may be becoming more acute, but the dotcom and the digital cannot properly be read as simply a product or consequence of the uncertain times of modernity or the social construction of technology. In all their heterogeneity, the dotcom and the digital are, we suggest, moral propositions as well as methodological tools that Kenyans themselves use as diagnostics to challenge the present and its character.

What the dotcom and the digital achieve is to reveal the contingency of contemporary ideas, practices, and values. Rather than explaining or validating a present state of affairs, they act as forms of critical intervention that potentially unsettle, whether that be history, time, agency, or power. They introduce what Foucault (1991: 88) has termed "discontinuities" into the character of being in time, reconfiguring the relations between self and others, between individuals and collectivities, between being Kenyan and being global. They open up the field of action in the present, an example of the interplay between being able to act and being attached to a larger world order that shapes temporal experience (Ricoeur 1980: 177). As such, they are modes of intervening in history from within history.

This practical genealogy does not result in any clear truth about the dotcom

or the digital or necessarily result in any clearer specification of their contours or contents. What makes them distinctive (and distinct from one another) is not that they describe particular epochs nor represent particular narratives or cultural forms, but that they create specific systems of relations between these elements. As MaKosgei's linking of trousers and elections implied, it's not the elements that are key, but the relations between them, the particular form they take in relation to the ethical imagination. These arrangements do not necessarily have a single narrative or intellectual coherence, but rather a strategic coherence that is itself a form of interrogation. The dotcom and the digital work to diagnose who Kenyans are and what sort of times they are living in, while also being attentive to what is in the making and how one might expand one's field of agency.

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