# Digital futures and analogue pasts? Citizenship and ethnicity in techno-utopian Kenya

## Lisa Poggiali

You cannot choose the days to be a nationalist and the days you will retreat to the comfort of ethnic cocoons. Being Kenyan is a full-time commitment. This country needs citizens who are Kenyans all the time, not those who are vernacular Kenyans most of the time. (Dr Willy Mutunga, Chief Justice of Kenya, 12 March 2012)

We aim to propel Kenya into Africa's high-tech capital and create a 'Silicon Savannah' of interconnected telecommunications hubs to power our growing economy. (Jubilee Alliance manifesto[1])

### 'The Digital Team'

'*Uko na Valentine* [Do you have a Valentine]?'[2] I asked my taxi driver, James,[3] as we circled the roundabout that separated Nairobi's Central Business District from the suburbs beyond. It was Valentine's Day – almost three weeks before the hotly contested Kenyan presidential election of 4 March 2013, the first since the devastating events of 2007–08, when at least 1,200 Kenyans had lost their lives and 660,000 were displaced amid claims of election rigging and ethnically charged land battles. Frontrunners Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga[4] were neck and neck, and the mood in East Africa's largest city was palpably tense. I was trying to keep the conversation light-hearted. 'Ehhh,' James replied affirmatively, producing a 5-inch-square cardboard Valentine's Day card that had been resting on the dashboard. On the front were the smiling faces of Uhuru Kenyatta and his running mate William Ruto, or UhuRuto, as they had taken to calling themselves, both of them encircled by large red hearts. Scrawled above their faces in a lush, red script were the words 'The Digital Team'. I burst out laughing.

'*Kwa nini wanaitwa* [Why are they called] "The Digital Team"?' I asked him, wondering about the origins of the phrase.

He replied enthusiastically. 'Because they stand for new things, they like new things. They will install [CCTV] cameras in town, they will give children laptops, things like that,' he explained.

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**Lisa Poggiali**'s research uses ethnographic methodologies to interrogate the socio-political dimensions of new technologies and infrastructures in urban Africa. She is currently a lecturer in the Programme in Writing and Rhetoric at Stanford University. Email: poggiali@stanford.edu

[1]The Jubilee Alliance was a four-party coalition that backed the candidacy of Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto in the 2013 presidential election.

[2]All translations are my own.

[3]I have changed the names of individuals quoted in private interviews in the interests of confidentiality. I have used the real names of individuals quoted at public events or in publicly available documents such as blogs.

[4]Uhuru is the son of Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, and Raila is the son of Kenya's first vice president, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga.

Uhuru and Ruto – previous political enemies turned strategic allies – had been charged with 'crimes against humanity' by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for fomenting Kenya's 2007–08 post-election violence, and both the media and the public had started to inquire as to how, if elected, they would govern the country from The Hague.[5] Digital technology, they claimed, would be crucial. 'I would have no problem going to The Hague and running the affairs of Kenya,' Ruto proclaimed in his most famous statement regarding the issue. 'We are in an ICT [information and communications technology] world and I can do many things from the internet to ensure that Kenya is running even as I attend to other issues. We can chew gum and still scale the stairs at the same time,' he said, with no discernible trace of irony (Ndonga 2012).

'*Na* Raila? *Yuko na* "digital team" *pia?* [And Raila (Uhuru and Ruto's political rival)? Does he also have a "digital team"?]' I asked James, as he manoeuvred around a series of potholes.

'No,' James said emphatically, responding in English, 'he is so analogue!'

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In this article, I examine the discursive formation of this 'ICT world' in Kenya; I explore how 'new things' such as CCTV and laptops – objects associated with Kenya's increasing digitalization – became synonymous with a 'new politics' to such a degree that someone like James, a taxi driver with no direct relationship to Kenya's burgeoning technology sector and no experiential evidence that it would bring him material gain, discussed his political preferences using the language of digital versus analogue. My focus is thus not so much on how digital technologies are used, but rather on how they have become an idiom through which Kenyans discuss national politics. I draw on over two years of ethnographic research with two major populations in Kenya's emergent digital technology sector: the elite group of coders, web designers and bloggers who produced software for a local and international market, and a technologically savvy section of Nairobi's urban poor, who received computer, GPS (Global Positioning System), GIS (Geographic Information System) and digital video training through various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social enterprises.

Many studies of technocratic discourse in Africa have focused on its depoliticizing ideology (Ferguson 1990; Mitchell 2002), in which efficiency supplants civic responsibility as one of the major justifications for and goals of government. Kenya's elite technology sector, and later the Kenyan state, similarly mobilized a techno-utopian discourse that described governance as a logistical, technical operation rather than an ethical, political one. As James had pointed out, the Jubilee Alliance's campaign hinged on turning Kenya into 'Africa's high-tech capital' by distributing laptops to primary school children and installing CCTV cameras in downtown Nairobi. At the same time, however, Nairobi's growing technology

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[5]At the time of this interaction, their trials were expected to start a few weeks after the 4 March elections in 2013. At the time of writing, the charges against both had been dropped due to insufficient evidence presented by the prosecutor; the trials were plagued by what was widely reported as witness interference – numerous witnesses retracted previously made statements over the course of the trials.

sector framed digital technology as an intrinsic part of an ethical project of pan-ethnic nationalism, thereby tying Kenya's economic success to prescribed ways of belonging to the nation.

I call the 'new' mode of national belonging 'digital citizenship' (although, as I discuss below, in many respects it was not quite so 'new'), and show how digital technologies in Kenya emerged as a site through which questions of citizenship were posed – if not resolved – in a shifting and increasingly precarious political climate. While 'digital politics' became an electoral currency mobilized by different social groups, 'the digital' was not itself an empty signifier; the disparate platforms to which digitality became linked all involved appeals to nationalism and modernization. Digital technologies could communicate such messages convincingly due to their simultaneously intimate and expansive qualities. While water, electricity and transportation infrastructures all express political relations – including class positions – in the postcolony (see, for example, Larkin 2008), these goods are publicly shared and explicitly tied to state power. Digital technologies, on the other hand, experienced most powerfully through the ever popular mobile phone, express both personal proclivities and globalist ambitions, thereby linking the self to possibilities that exceed the boundaries of the community or nation. Mobiles, for example, are a cornucopia of customizable and carefully chosen ringtones, music playlists, photographs and contact lists. They are also a bridge to people and information worlds away, through free messaging services including WhatsApp and social media sites such as Facebook. Thus, compared with other infrastructural forms, digital technologies more easily create new scales of belonging, and more consistently and deeply yoke them to experiences and representations of the self.

In this article, I draw attention specifically to the ways in which developers, bloggers and state actors mobilized techno-utopian narratives about Kenya's 'Silicon Savannah', which effectively (and sometimes purposefully) replaced contentious historical debates about land and ethnicity. For proponents of these narratives, the bits and bytes of digital code smoothed the rough edges of 'tribe' into the inclusive sphere of 'community'; the perceived boundlessness and borderless quality of the internet mimetically invoked both the sublimation of ethnic boundaries and the limitless growth potential of capital. While digital citizenship may have been rhetorically rooted in an ethic of reciprocal responsibility and inclusivity, however, I highlight how it produced its own set of exclusions. I suggest that it implicitly perpetuated class inequality between Nairobi's elite technology sector and its vast population of urban poor. While 'the digital' may have aroused shared feelings of nationalism among disparate groups, these sentiments did not produce a shared experience of technology's benefits.

Anthropologists have documented how technologies such as the mobile phone are material and symbolic facilitators between the 'self' and abstract concepts such as 'modernity', 'globalization' and 'mobility' (McIntosh 2010; Horst and Miller 2006; de Bruijn *et al.* 2009; Smith 2006; Archambault 2013); the focus, in these narratives, is on the power of technologies to create transregional and transnational connections. Indeed, part of the story I tell here recounts these material and affective connections produced in and through Kenya. Elite technologists, many of whom lived at least part-time abroad in places such as South Africa, the United States and the United Kingdom, discursively connected digital technology with a global, pan-African citizenship. They figured Kenya in

this discourse as a global leader in all matters technological; they thus construed the project of reshaping the 'nation' as consistent with pan-African globalism.

While Kenya's coders, bloggers and software gurus reached beyond the borders of the Kenyan nation in order to fashion a techno-utopian discourse, I concentrate in this piece on the ways in which technologists mobilized this discourse to *consolidate* people and place. Such attention allows us to see how supposedly 'global' forms such as digital technology emerge from and take root in particular places; they are animated by local histories and their power is enlivened by local debates. Thus, I chart the process through which technologies such as the mobile phone and GPS unit were transformed into objects through which disparate groups of Kenyans began to articulate a 'new' national belonging. As a young woman from a Nairobi informal settlement I call Muhimu said of digital mapping technologies, they 'unite all the tribes, creating an enlightened area of job opportunities to [*sic*] the youths of Muhimu as a whole'. She, like many other technologically inclined residents of the informal settlements, pointed out the degree to which economic opportunity was linked to ethnic division, while nevertheless refusing to express that division through her own identity. 'I am Kenyan,' she stated unequivocally, when asked about her ethnicity. While techno-utopian discourse and its nationalizing rhetoric may have captured the attention of a diverse cross-section of Nairobians, however, I argue that digital citizenship should be read as one moment in Kenya's longer dialectical history, in which pan-ethnicity and ethno-regional alliances have each contained the seeds of the other, rather than a complete departure from the past. If 'digital citizenship' emerged as an ideal way of identifying with and belonging to the nation, it nevertheless expressed and perpetuated class asymmetries.

## New technologies, old nationalisms

In one of the most famous studies of the connection between technology and nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1991) discusses the latter as a cultural formation made possible by the development of print capitalism. Anderson suggests that a mass-mediated technology such as the newspaper, for example, 'made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways' (*ibid.*: 36), setting the stage for the emergence of 'the nation' as a new cultural and political space. This development was both constituted by and constitutive of major changes in conceptions of cosmology and temporality. The newspaper, for example, produced an imagined bond between readers through both calendrical coincidence – the date displayed at the top – and the development of a shared market for mass production and mass consumption. 'It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion,' Anderson said (1991: 35–6) of newspaper reading.

'It felt good to be the one to connect this part of the world,' Mwangi, a web designer, told me. He was speaking of how he had kept nameless, faceless Kenyans in the diaspora abreast of events on the ground during Kenya's 2007

post-election violence; he had sent SMSs from his mobile phone to the digital mapping platform *Ushahidi*, which displayed citizen-generated information about the violence cartographically, which other Kenyans at home and abroad accessed via the internet. According to Anderson, newspaper consumption formed an affiliation between the particularity of the individual, the mundane quality of daily life, and the grandiose imaginings of a nation of people, all reading the same thing at more or less the same time. Forms of print capitalism such as the newspaper and the novel, he contends, 'provided the technical means for "re-presenting" the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation' (Anderson 1991: 25). In twenty-first-century Kenya, digital technologies such as the mobile phone and the map seemingly began to perform the same function, in the process challenging ethnic forms of belonging with which Kenyans also identified. 'It's about connecting different people in the Kenya community,' stated technologist Jessica Colaco about the iHub, an expansive office/event space/coffee bar with a Google aesthetic that was dubbed by local media as 'the unofficial headquarters of Kenya's tech movement' (Kinyanjui 2011). Yet just as Anderson's theory of an imagined nation is predicated on a monolingualist language ideology that conceals multilingualist (alternative) visions of national belonging (cf. Gal 2011; Silverstein 2000; Wogan 2001), so too do digital technologies perpetuate a particular picture of nationalism that excludes ethnic belonging, a point to which I return below.

The national imaginaries produced through digital technologies were distinct from analogue or electronic media forms like the newspaper or television (cf. McLuhan 1964) in two ways. First, digitality is rooted in material interactions between technology users (Castells 1996): the technical function of interactivity allows citizens to participate directly in the process of crafting the 'imagined community' of the nation. Forging a new network or linking up to an already existing one affords a greater sense of possible belonging than passive activities such as reading or watching. Second, digital technologies invoke a different temporality than newspapers do, in part because of the way in which their symbolic and functional significance coalesces. Anthropologist Brian Larkin (2013: 333) writes of infrastructures that they are 'intimately caught up with the sense of shaping modern society and realizing the future' because of their emergence alongside the Enlightenment-era ideals of progress and the unimpeded movement of people, ideas and commodities. Digital technologies invoke a sense of future possibility to an even greater degree; while infrastructures are the anchored, immovable ground on which circulation can occur, digital technologies are both conduits to motion and objects that move, indexing the speed of futurity at the same time as they stitch together communities. A digitally mediated 'imagined community' is thus a vision of *future* belonging.

Since Kenya gained independence in 1963, its history has been characterized by a deep tension between aspirational discourses of pan-ethnic national unity and expressions of ethnic consolidation as a route to politico-economic power. 'The "national" [in Kenya] is notable by its ephemeral nature,' comment political economists Mwangi wa Githinji and Frank Holmquist (2011: 15). The scope of print media in the country (as well as radio and television) reflected this struggle, as media houses' criticism of the state increased at moments when oppositional politics flourished, and was virtually non-existent during the heyday of state repression in the 1980s (Eribo and Jong-Ebot 1997). If anything, the mainstream

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press was often used to solidify nationalist rhetoric during moments of deep ethno-political division. Indeed, when allied to an authoritarian state, newspapers in Kenya arguably helped to suppress expressions of pan-ethnic nationalism.[6] Print was not the only media form to encapsulate and perpetuate Kenya's dialectical history. The radio, too, long served as a means for powerful political figures to claim or consolidate power (see, for example, Vokes 2007) and to debate the terms of political discourse and the character of citizenship (see, for example, Brisset-Foucault 2013). Today, mobile phones have joined the fray, as politicians sent SMSs that stoked the 2007–08 violence, and Kenyan citizens distributed rumours to make sense of the post-election chaos (see, for example, Osborn 2008). This was a battle waged via text message over the future of the nation.

Githinji and Holmquist (2011) lament that Kenya has historically lacked an electorate that 'belonged' to the nation, that was able to '"voice the nation" in demands for legislation and other state practices'. This absence of a national political space, they contend, derives from colonialist political architecture. The British colonial state created districts based on ethnicity,[7] and, until 1960, political parties were confined to the district level. When parties were allowed to expand in 1960, the national political landscape thus reflected the affiliation of ethnically and regionally based parties (Githinji and Holmquist 2011; Cheeseman 2008). As anthropologist Angelique Haugerud notes:

> Kenyan state authorities who invoke ethnic identities today play on labels and boundaries institutionalized under British colonial rule … [which] came to define arenas of competition for state resources. [Thus,] [t]o speak of particular districts or regions today is to convey messages about ethnic categories and dominance as well. (1995: 40) (see also Smith 2008; Wrong 2010; Kanogo 1987; Berman 1992; Cooper 1997; Haugerud 1989)

While, as Haugerud (1995) points out, not all land conflicts are centred around ethnicity,[8] references to land and ethnicity in Kenya often go hand in hand. Historically rooted ethno-regional political divisions, coupled with a strong ethnic bias in the top political and administrative appointments in the Kenyatta regime[9] (Kanyinga 2006), have prevented pan-ethnic national longings from solidifying. This does not mean, however, that they were never expressed.

Post-independence pan-ethnic discourse surfaced in the late 1980s, as a consequence of the severe political repression of the Moi regime. It strengthened

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[6]When I speak about the press and national politics here, I am speaking about general trends in print media's rhetoric at different periods of Kenyan history; an in-depth historical study of this media in Kenya would undoubtedly reveal diverse content and instances of conflict and tension between different newspapers.

[7]Before colonialism, these ethnic identities were mostly loosely formed groupings based on linguistic similarities and geographical proximity; the British solidified them into legal categories demarcated by political boundaries. Just because ethnic identities became politicized through the colonial encounter, however, it did not mean that the identities themselves lost their power in structuring Kenyans' cosmologies and lifeworlds.

[8]One such example is the eviction of squatter populations in multi-ethnic slums, which became particularly prevalent under the regime of Daniel arap Moi in the 1990s (Klopp 2008) and continued throughout the first two years of Mwai Kibaki's term.

[9]This extended into the Moi regime as well.

further after the end of the Cold War, when global calls for democracy and transparency provided a language through which discourses opposing Moi-era policies could consolidate. The plethora of NGOs that formed in this period created institutional avenues for the expression of this unity (Githinji and Holmquist 2011: 22). But by acquiescing to multiparty rule in 1991, Moi fractured the political opposition by forcing candidates to compete against one another (*ibid.*: 13). The new political parties that emerged in this period thus failed to articulate a national vision 'apart from momentary coalitions of ethnic leaders' (*ibid.*: 14).

In 2002, presidential candidate Mwai Kibaki transformed pan-ethnicity into a campaign slogan. He created a multiparty[10] alliance called the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), which invoked South Africa's racialized concept of a 'rainbow nation', in order to draw a wide base of support.[11] Campaigning as a reformist, one of his main objectives was to 'nurture a sense of nationhood and resistance to division based on ethnicity, social class, race or any other consideration' (Centre for Multiparty Democracy Kenya 2011). Targeting youth through popular culture, Kibaki co-opted Luo hip hop duo Gidigidi Majimaji's hit song 'Unbwogable' as his campaign song. The song takes the Dholuo verb *bwogo*, meaning 'to beat, to scare, to suppress', and combines it with the English 'un' and 'able' to convey the idea of being 'unbeatable' or 'un-suppressible' (Njogu 2005: 197; Nyairo and Ogude 2005). As a Gikuyu politician, this popular Luo hip hop tune may have seemed an odd choice for a campaign song. In it, Gidigidi Majimaji sing directly to Luo youth, inspiring them to fight against the institutionalized forms of exclusion effected by a historically Gikuyu-dominated political system, and follow in the footsteps of other successful 'unbwogable' Luos such as the Nairobi-based football club Gor Mahia and reformer politician James Orengo. Arguably, the song was not an ironic choice, but rather a symbolic one, in light of the fact that popular Luo politician Raila Odinga had joined Kibaki-led NARC in a politically expedient attempt to defeat President Moi's pick for his successor. The NARC campaign – with Kibaki at the helm – showcased a rhetorical commitment to pan-ethnic nationalism, rather than exclusionary ethnic politics, and appealed to youth, signalling a shift in Kenya's political culture (Cheeseman 2008). This period's 'new politics' candidate, Kibaki, won a landslide victory over challenger Uhuru Kenyatta[12] (Centre for Multiparty Democracy Kenya 2011).

The pan-ethnic rhetoric called up through digital technology in the wake of Kenya's 2007–08 post-election violence is thus part of an older political narrative; 'new' digital politics were really not so new. These early formulations of pan-ethnic nationalism, however, had originated primarily with members of civil society: that is, with politically progressive lawyers, students and other activists, who attempted to engage with the state in order to shape political policy or end political repression. In other words, they linked questions about nationalism to questions about politics. By contrast, calls for pan-ethnic unity conveyed

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[10]They included the National Alliance Party of Kenya (NAK) and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) (Centre for Multiparty Democracy Kenya 2011).

[11]NARC consisted not only of formerly adversarial political parties, but also of civil society activists and church leaders. Its success can be attributed to its wide base of support.

[12]Uhuru ran on the Kenya African National Union (KANU) ticket.

through digital technology attempted to congeal a vision of the nation *outside* the formal political arena. If you want to help Kenya, Mwangi, a Kenyan web designer, told me, 'do it yourself, don't be involved with the government'. As I show below, digital technology enthusiasts conjured 'politics' as an ally of ethnic citizenship, and both politics and ethnicity as barriers to digital citizenship. Ethnic citizenship, according to these technology proponents, was, as James succinctly expressed, 'so analogue!'

## Ethnicity, ethics, and the spatiality of belonging

The disputed presidential election of 2007 threw large sections of the country into turmoil, as politicians instigated and financially supported violence between ethnic groups that had experienced historical conflicts over land and resources (Cheeseman 2008; Mueller 2008; Githongo 2008). At the height of this violence, the Kenyan state initiated a media blackout. 'I remember I couldn't access my blog,' Ory Okolloh told me. There was also 'interference with bulk SMS', she recounted, 'where they tried to block certain messages'. Okolloh was one of the Kenyan bloggers, developers and technology enthusiasts living in the diaspora who had grown frustrated by the lack of information available during the crisis; she and three others created an online platform called *Ushahidi* ('testimony' in Kiswahili) to encourage Kenyans to send text messages and online updates about events they had witnessed. Once uploaded, the instances were plotted on a digital map, which could be accessed by other Kenyans on the internet, primarily via their mobile phones. The map revealed the depth of the crisis on a map of the Kenyan nation.

As Nancy Omolo,[13] a technologist involved with *Ushahidi* from the beginning, relayed to me from the lush garden of a large technology company in Johannesburg, the Kenyan government tried to conceal the numbers of people who died at the outset of the violence. '*Ushahidi*,' she said, 'was initially about documenting and humanizing those numbers … Those deaths were not just statistics, but people with stories and histories. We wanted Kenyans to remember them as people, not numbers.' In supplanting statistics with the sanctity of human life, and documenting *Kenyan* lives as opposed to *Kikuyu*, *Kalenjin* or *Luo* (ethnic) ones, the platform made an ethical intervention into a story that had been framed in national and international media as a crisis of ethnicity (see, for example, Mwaura 2008; Gettleman 2007; Githongo 2008). The digital maps became a way to assert a Kenyan, rather than an ethnically marked, notion of citizenship. As four Kenyans from four different ethnic groups,[14] the creators of *Ushahidi* embodied the pan-ethnic ideology embedded in the map. At the same time, by encouraging citizens to evade the state-initiated media blackout, and by opposing politicians' ethnically divisive tactics, the maps became a way for

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[13]This name has been changed.
[14]One was a white Kenyan. White Kenyans are not considered to be a different 'ethnicity' in the country, but rather a different 'race', and are a highly insular social group. The idea that a white Kenyan would voluntarily work with black Kenyans thus reflects an unusual degree of co-operation across what are perceived to be fairly fixed identity categories.

citizens to circumvent the state and assert a vision of national healing in which information (as long as it was not related to ethnicity) equalled redemption. Here, 'politics' was associated with the election and the ethnic tensions that it reactivated, and was opposed to *Ushahidi*'s objective: to promote peace and national unity through a citizen-created digital map.

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'The new guard of techies doesn't care about tribe or race.' Mwangi and I were sharing a coffee in a newly built mall in Nairobi West, a middle-class section of Nairobi. Mwangi's sentiment – that Kenya's technology sector eschewed ethnically and racially divisive categories – was repeated by many Nairobi technologists.[15] Kenyan developer and *Ushahidi* co-founder David Kobia's website iHaveNoTribe.com was exemplary of this 'new' expression of pan-ethnic nationalism, which implicitly critiqued 'old' allegiances to ethnic groups. Started in early 2008 as an online space where Kenyans could share positive messages of national unity, its tagline was 'iHaveNoTribe … i am Kenyan'. Posting instructions included just two statements: 'All posts will be reviewed before they appear on the site' and 'Political messages will not be accepted.'

Mwangi's pro-digital, pan-ethnic and anti-state sentiments were formed through a particular life experience common to many in Kenya's elite technology sector. He was born and raised in Meru, a town in the verdant hills of central Kenya, where his father was a primary school teacher and his mother a homemaker. Growing up, his parents wanted him to be a doctor. 'They [thought] that's where the money is,' he told me. 'Before IT [information technology],' Mwangi explained, 'teaching, nursing, lawyers, [and] doctors were the "in" things. Back in the day, they were the main [professions] everyone was targeting.' But Mwangi happened to have a cousin, Joe, who owned an internet café in town. He was curious about the internet, and asked Joe for help in learning more about it. Joe laughed at him, telling him to figure it out for himself. 'I tried it back in my room,' Mwangi told me. 'I installed the operating system and started playing around with it, and that's how the whole thing began.'

Eventually obtaining a government scholarship to attend university in Nairobi, Mwangi continued his self-education at the university's internet café, where students' internet use was subsidized. Although his degree was in computer science, he found the coursework uninspiring, as it was associated primarily with algorithms that he 'could not relate to directly', and he began to look deeper into web development. Through hours of browsing in his free time, he eventually found online forums for other 'techies' who introduced him to UNIX and the Free Software Movement. 'I thought that these guys are doing something really cool the way they're with long hair and the beards,' he relayed, eyes twinkling. 'All the geekiness.' As a middle-class Kenyan with a supportive family, Mwangi had hours to spend by himself online, and the resources to obtain a dependable, long-standing internet connection.

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[15]This is not to say that some Kenyans did not speak of ethnic transcendence but nevertheless perform and/or express their ethnic identities through everyday socio-cultural activities. The younger generation of Kenyan techies, however, rarely discussed such activities in ethnic terms (at least in my presence).

The do-it-yourself ethos he recounts was honed through hours of tinkering on the internet alone, where he built up a base of knowledge that could not be learned in the halls of Kenya's educational institutions, a more traditional stepping stone to economic success. Mwangi's feelings about technology and ethnic transcendence were bound up with his family history and the class position that made his technological education possible.

If Kenyan politics were historically based on internally cohesive ethnic allegiances, the expression of Kenyan-ness evoked by Mwangi was explicitly at odds with the social rules, regulations and financial lubrications necessary to obtain admittance to the political class, or even its closely allied civil society. 'We're from a British colony,' Nancy Amolo, a prominent Kenyan technologist, explained to me. '[We're] very conservative. Besides tech, there's not any other professional space that allows your creativity or individuality to thrive.' 'As a techie,' she continued, 'you can be hip and actually make some money and enjoy your day-to-day life.' Amolo and Mwangi echoed a sentiment expressed by many in Nairobi's technology sector, that technology presented the possibility of financial stability outside the Kenyan 'establishment'. They often proudly discussed the importance of their work existing 'outside the box'. Such statements might at first blush suggest that, as Kenyans entered the tech world, they experienced a *retreat* from desires for social belonging and connection. 'In the internet there are no boundaries,' Mwangi recounted to me; the image of him alone, tinkering on his computer, calls to mind an atomized population of 'individuals' connecting to an amorphous, ever-expanding globe. However, while technologists such as Mwangi hoped to distance themselves from political belonging associated with the Kenyan state, at the same time they expressed pride that their technological work could bring the Kenyan nation together.

Mwangi had sent an SMS to the *Ushahidi* platform in the aftermath of the 2007 election. He portrayed the experience as so gratifying that he donated his newly refined technical proficiency to *Ushahidi* a few years later as a volunteer web designer. '[It] made me feel connected to the world,' Mwangi said, discussing the kind of reciprocal emotions fostered by engaging with the digital mapping platform. 'The good thing is, I did something and I got a response,' he continued, relaying the practice whereby *Ushahidi*'s volunteers responded to SMSs with a message of gratitude. 'For me that was important, because I felt connected to something.' Here, the interactivity made possible by digital technology allowed him to forge connections beyond the space of an imagined nation. The nameless and faceless responder stood in for the abstract world that witnessed Mwangi's own act of witnessing, and affirmed his deed of goodwill. The way in which Mwangi discussed his attachment to an abstract 'world' was, at the same time, intimately related to his self-conception as a Kenyan. 'Those people outside in the diaspora,' he continued, referring to the large numbers of Kenyans living outside the country, 'they were hungry for this information [about the post-election violence]. I got emails saying thank you, keep us updated on what is happening. It felt good to be the one to connect this part of the world.' In his retelling, Mwangi was able to join Kenyans across geographic boundaries, and in the process both link himself to an outside world and solidify his relationship to the nation. He espoused views that were critical of state politics and tribalism, and he was able to sustain a middle-class life while not embracing the traditional cultural cues or social relationships that such a life has historically afforded in

Kenya. Mwangi was the ideal 'digital citizen'. His story suggests that, while geospatial technologies such as *Ushahidi* evoked a sense of boundlessness and individuality, they also fostered strong feelings of social connection and national cohesion. Kenyan technologists' active disinterest in ethnic politics translated into an active interest in pan-ethnic unity. The technology sector expressed this 'new politics' most vividly in its frequent use of the term 'community'.

## Mobile persons, mobile capital, rooted places

'Much of the iHub's success comes from a community that works together. In that spirit of "harambee" [self-help] that is so much a part of our Kenyan life,' wrote Erik Hersman (2011), co-founder of *Ushahidi* and founder of the iHub. Since its doors opened in March 2010, the iHub quickly grew into a major site for Kenya's young elite technologists. They gathered to work on coding and design projects, networked with other techies and investors, socialized with locals and foreigners who frequently visited the space, and learned about new projects, skills and opportunities at the numerous tech-related events the space hosted. The word 'community' was invoked at every iHub event I attended during the six months in which I regularly visited the space. 'At the heart of all that happens at the iHub is the community,' said Erik Hersman (2011) in a blog post that detailed the iHub's accomplishments. '*Ushahidi* is based on three tenets,' Hersman explained to a crowd of over seventy technology enthusiasts who had gathered at the iHub to evaluate the impact of *Ushahidi* in Kenya. 'The first is community, you guys … *Ushahidi* would not be where it is if it wasn't for community.' While the hackneyed presence of 'community' in the iHub's discourse was key to understanding its ethos of belonging, just as relevant was the discursive absence of the terms 'tribe' or 'ethnicity'. Indeed, the iHub's mission to transcend categories of identity through technology was furthered by this discursive equivocation, in which 'community' and 'capital' replaced 'tribe' in the space's self-description.

Referring to themselves as 'techpreneurs', most of the coders and web designers at the iHub combined a social ethic with capitalist aspirations. 'I've been involved with the front lines of technology use in [Africa] during political change and unrest, as well as for business,' commented Hersman in a TED interview (Eng 2013). The four co-founders of *Ushahidi*, who also worked with the iHub, were all Kenyan, but they all lived at least half of the time outside the country. They recruited a large transnational volunteer base (some of whom eventually became employees) to work on the software platform. Foreign interest in Kenya's technology sector increased once *Ushahidi* began to deploy in crisis situations outside Kenya, such as when it was used by Al Jazeera to monitor destruction during the 2008–09 Gaza War, or to identify victims of the 2010 Haitian earthquake. Based on a two-month sample I took in late 2012, almost 40 per cent of people working at the iHub were foreigners, most from Euro-America. The iHub managed to secure funds from Google, Nokia, Microsoft and Intel, and regularly hosted technology events that featured these companies. The iHub's transnational 'face' began to mimic the material and symbolic boundlessness of the technology itself, raising questions about the kind of 'community' Kenya's technology sector was fostering.

Official businesses do not typically thrive in regions of political conflict and violence, and the technology sector's use of 'community' as a rallying cry was arguably directed as much at potential corporate investors as it was at Kenyans. 'We're realizing that this is true,' explained Hersman (2009) to an American audience at a TED talk in California, 'if it works in Africa, then it will work anywhere.' As a frontier market, Hersman intimated, with numerous socio-political and infrastructural challenges, Africa was both a financially smart and a safe place to invest. Financially smart because the technologies, according to Hersman, could be easily and successfully transported to other places; safe because it was a stable 'community' of people working together to ensure the success of all.

<center>***</center>

In early February 2013, about a month before Kenya's elections, a group of government officials, including then Police Spokesman Charles Owino, had gathered for a press conference at the swanky Stanley Hotel in downtown Nairobi. The event marked a momentous occasion in the marriage of digital technology and peace politics; Safaricom, Kenya's largest mobile phone company, had agreed to donate a record-breaking 50 million text messages to the NGO Sisi Ni Amani,[16] which sent SMS blasts to residents of Nairobi's most ethnically divided slums to encourage peace. Taking the podium, Owino spoke enthusiastically about his vision of a thriving Kenya that could attract substantial foreign investment. This flow of money would not come, he said, if Kenyans continued 'enslaving [them]selves with ethnicity'. He praised Sisi Ni Amani for helping Kenyans to remain peaceful, so they could also become economically prosperous. Such a comment bespoke the ideological entanglement of digital technology, ethnic politics and national economic success in Kenya. It also indicated the extent to which the state and the technology sector were beginning to share similar language vis-à-vis technology, governance and ethics. Owino mimicked Hersman's suggestion that creating a climate conducive to foreign investment was one way to push the country out of the dark days of political violence and towards an epochal politico-economic 'rise'.

Anthropologist Janet McIntosh (2010) has pointed to the association between digital technologies in Kenya and a 'mobile persona'. Kenya has a 78 per cent mobile phone penetration rate: that is, in a country of roughly 41 million, 30 million are mobile phone subscribers (Communications Commission of Kenya 2013). A recent World Bank-commissioned study found that 32 per cent of 'bottom of the pyramid' users (i.e. users whose income is less than or equal to US$2.50 per day) share their phone with a friend or relative (iHub Research and Research Solutions Africa 2012), suggesting that the official mobile penetration figure is conservative.[17] According to the Communications Commission of Kenya (2013), 99 per cent of the 16.2 million Kenyans who regularly access the internet do so through their mobile phones. Indeed, if print capitalism had been the predominant technology for simultaneously disseminating information and

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[16]*Sisi Ni Amani* means 'We Are Peace' in Kiswahili.
[17]This is the case even if one accounts for the fact that many Kenyans with financial resources own multiple phones or use multiple SIM cards in one phone.

consolidating national sentiment from the eighteenth century (Anderson 1991), the mobile phone became the primary means of doing so in early twenty-first-century Kenya. McIntosh (2010: 344) notes that the relationship between the mobile phone and mobility is not merely symbolic but also iconic, as 'mobile phones not only enable connectivity over distances but they also allow people themselves to be literally mobile while they talk. It is not a coincidence,' she concludes, 'that the medium of the mobile phone is the stage on which [a] mobile persona is played out …'

At the iHub, the mobile, boundless persona associated with the mobile phone evoked a transnational connection that was tied to economic opportunity, as well as an intra-national connection across the boundaries of ethnicity. In this techno-utopian space, it seemed possible that Kenyans could become wealthy *in Kenya* without the help of the state or ethnic alliances. When Hersman invoked the 'spirit of "harambee" [self-help] that is so much a part of our Kenyan life' at an iHub event peppered with foreigners, he brought transnationalism into contact with a historically salient Kenyan cultural-political practice. As previously noted, *harambee* means 'self-help' in Kiswahili; it is associated with grass-roots initiatives in rural areas, in which members of the community collectively construct social service infrastructure (Barkan and Holmquist 1986). While *harambee* initiatives are dependent upon clientelist hierarchies, the practice 'is also deeply autonomous. Most projects function independently at the grassroots level and are not linked to either the state, or external leaders or resources' (Barkan and Holmquist 1986: 31). Joining the notion of deep community engagement with autonomy, *harambee* evokes both the do-it-yourself, entrepreneurial disposition of techies and the social and affective connections produced through technological engagement.

By bringing together a discourse of *harambee* with one of a Kenyan 'community' of techpreneurs, developers at the iHub articulated an idealistic politics of ethnic transcendence, economic ascendance, and cultural rootedness. 'Crowdmapping the world, yet rooted in Kenya,' proclaimed Juliana Rotich, another of *Ushahidi*'s founders, to a crowded roomful of Kenyans and expatriates gathered at the iHub to learn how to use *Ushahidi* to monitor Kenya's 2010 constitutional referendum. The metaphor of 'roots' conjured a naturalized connection to technological innovation. Indeed, developers and web designers frequently attributed the popularity of ICT in Kenya to qualities imagined to exist in the nation's people and landscape. 'It's the very nature of Kenyans,' explained developer Moses Gichuhi, repeating a phrase I often heard when I inquired as to why Kenya had become such a hotbed of technological activity. '[They] seem to embrace technology quite fast.'

'Kenya is our backyard,' Hersman explained at the *Ushahidi* evaluation mentioned above.

> Our team is all over the world … but Kenya is our home … Africans can build world class software and we should expect nothing less of ourselves … The deployments coming from Africa are some of the biggest in the world … the great thing to know and to realize is that, guys, it started here. In this country we have more experts per capita than anywhere else in the world.

Kenyan technologists made clear their ambitions to support software made at home, rather than leave the country in search of money and success. Jessica

Colaco, Director of Partnerships at iHub and a TED Global Fellow in 2009, wrote on her website that 'her endeavor is to put Kenya and Africa on the map for technology achievements and spur innovation within the country and continent!' This message of Kenyan pride resonated with a growing audience of Kenyan techies. As Mwangi told me, 'Guys were used to using [software] applications from [other parts] of the world. But with *Ushahidi*, it was something people could identify with. [They said], "[T]his thing is from Kenya. Let's use it!"'

These technologists did not invoke the neodevelopmentalist language of the 'digital divide', with its assumption that 'less privileged cultural enclaves with little or no access to digital resources … are simply waiting, endlessly, to catch up to the privileged West' (Ginsburg 2008: 290; see also Mazzarella 2010). Indeed, technologists did not focus on Kenyans' access or lack thereof to technologies; rather, they emphasized their commitment to nurturing a culture of technology at home; they infused coding with a language of national responsibility. 'You're making voices who haven't been able to be heard before heard,' Hersman said to a room full of Kenyans and foreigners who had worked on and with the *Ushahidi* platform. 'And instead of having a bunch of top-down information from the government, from media groups, or from large international NGOs like the UN, it's also information coming from the ground. It's the *wananchi* [citizens]. And that's what's important.' In the iHub's rhetoric, an image of a technology 'community' that straddled geographic and geo-political locales blended with that of a specifically *Kenyan* 'community', in which citizens – the *wananchi*, as Hersman said – were articulated as a collective (rather than ethnically bifurcated) voice 'from below'. His comments, like those of Mwangi above, also suggested a distrust of governance via the government, the media, and other quasi-governing bodies such as the UN. According to Hersman, deploying software that had been produced by Kenyans and for Kenyans – outside these traditional political channels – was an ethical act. But who were the *wananchi* whose voices Hersman claimed were being heard?

## Kenya as 'one thing without many tribes'

A news crew from Al Jazeera gathered in the corner of a dark room that served as the headquarters of the NGO Muhimu Mapping Project,[18] which trained residents of the informal settlement in GPS, GIS and video technologies to create digital maps of their neighbourhood, which I will call Muhimu. This settlement was considered 'illegal' in the eyes of the state, and it had never been officially mapped. Muhimu Mapping Project's goal was to formalize the settlement cartographically. They hoped that doing so would bring local and international attention to Nairobi's 'invisible' population, and precipitate state engagement. Al Jazeera was setting up its microphone to interview Sarah, co-manager of the NGO. Global media outlets, she said, had become increasingly interested in the organization in recent weeks. In another corner of the room, affiliated volunteers were setting up plastic chairs in neat rows for an upcoming video training session

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[18]This name is a pseudonym.

taught by a Canadian film student with a passion for Fellini. A gust of wind kicked up dust from the dirt floor, coating the Al Jazeera crew's video equipment with a fine white film. One of the mappers entered the room from outside, holding a GPS unit, and wiped the sweat from his brow against a tattered T-shirt. For him, the breeze brought relief from the scorching heat of the January day.

'I would think gathering data about ethnicity would be useful,' I said to Sarah, as we waited for the camera crew's signal that they were ready to start filming. I was referring to the fact that the informal settlement in which the project was located had seen some of Nairobi's most devastating post-election violence in early 2008. A survey I conducted weeks later with over sixty residents affiliated with Muhimu Mapping Project revealed that many of them were still reeling from its effects. Over 70 per cent of respondents expressed that they regularly thought about the post-election violence over three years after it had occurred. 'When I think about the past,' seventeen-year-old Elizabeth wrote, 'I think about how people were raped and killed during the post-election violence.' Others discussed witnessing evictions 'because of the clashes between the different communities', as one twenty-eight-year-old male mapper put it, invoking the ethnic divisions along which violence was meted out. A thirty-seven-year-old resident was more explicit, recalling seeing 'the owner of land evict his tenants because they were from another tribe'. Ethnic differences that residents described as causing violence in the past also impacted on how they navigated their present. They discussed how ethnicity impacted on their ability to find employment, for example. 'The cause of my problems is tribalism,' said a seventeen-year-old Luo female: 'You can be well educated and you fail to get [a job] if you are not connected.' A twenty-two-year-old Muslim male concurred: 'My biggest problem is a lack of [a] job because tribalism is high,' he explained, conveying the ways in which jobs at the local level, as in high political positions, are frequently doled out along ethnic lines (Wrong 2010).

Sarah and her co-manager, Miroslav, were well aware of the ethnic divisions that bifurcated Muhimu, and they were sensitive to avoid stirring the feelings of exclusion and disenfranchisement that many residents felt. Miroslav explained to me that, before starting the training work, he travelled with Njoroge, Muhimu Mapping Project's community coordinator, all over the 182-acre neighbourhood, identifying potential venues to hold introductory meetings. It was important to them to make it viable for residents from all corners of the settlement to be involved in the project, he told me. Doing so would ensure ethnic diversity in the project (since many areas were ethnically homogeneous) and prevent residents who lacked money for public transportation from having to walk long distances to attend meetings and training. Despite carefully planning to include an ethnically diverse population of mappers in the project, Sarah and Miroslav purposely elided the issue when it came to the actual mapping work. 'Our company policy has been … we just don't do it,' she said, referring to digitally mapping ethnicity. The project instead focused on mapping neighbourhood infrastructure, such as public toilets, water points and sewage problems, as well as schools, hospitals, local businesses and security issues. Having the information on ethnicity could be helpful, she conceded to me, 'but it could also be harmful'. Rather than transcending ethnicity – the rhetorical aim of Kenyan bloggers and politicians – Sarah and Miroslav attempted to ignore it. For one thing, they knew that funders would be unlikely to support work that brought ethnicity to the forefront – the politics of 'tribe' were

considered to be pre-modern issues of the past that would have no place in the eco-
nomically prosperous liberal democracy such funders were purportedly helping to
bring about. Further, Sarah and Miroslav knew that many of Muhimu's residents
had experienced or witnessed violence motivated at least in part by ethnic tension.
Cultivating the appearance of non-involvement was thus also a strategy to prevent
violence from emerging out of the project. Therefore, while their policy was not ideo-
logically motivated to the same degree as the rhetoric of bloggers and politicians, it
arguably had the same depoliticizing effect.

'Tribalism is playing a big role in the use of public resources,' Mark Oweru, one
of the core team of mappers, explained to me over a dish of piping hot fried beef in
an Eritrean café on the outskirts of Muhimu. 'It plays a very big role. Even in
terms of employment. Even in terms of getting opportunities *za hizi kwa vijana*
[from these things for youth]. *Lazima ujue mtu* [you need to know someone] or
you won't get it.' Other residents voiced similar concerns about the extent to
which what they called tribalism structured their everyday access to neighbourhood
services and forms of employment. Such views contrasted sharply with project
managers' purposeful silence on the issue. Co-managers framed Muhimu as one
'community' – similar to the way in which the developers in the techno-utopian
iHub space invoked the Kenyan 'community' of technologists – as opposed to a
region rife with ethnic conflict. Muhimu Mapping Project's invocation of 'commu-
nity' prevented them from addressing the difficulties residents had in obtaining
jobs or accessing services. As in the rhetoric of the iHub, idealistic notions of unity
and harmony clashed with the reality of ethnically related tension. Yet while most
at the iHub, like Mwangi, had had exposure to the post-election violence as
(often distant) witnesses, those in Muhimu had experienced its gruesome effects
first-hand. For these residents, who had been forced from their homes, watched
friends and family members die, and, in the aftermath, had been regularly over-
charged for tomatoes and potatoes at local kiosks, ethnic unity was not an abstract
concept: it had profound material repercussions.

A few days after my first interview with Sarah, a group of ten mappers were
huddled around a single laptop. They had just uploaded the last data for the
base map of Muhimu, which comprised the road names and major institutional
structures. They chatted excitedly about using the locations they had plotted to
find their personal houses. Scrolling back and forth between their homes and a
bird's-eye view of the globe, Patrick, one of the mappers, said to me: '[Digital
mapping] makes me feel good that people I don't know can see me. I mean,
Norway, the US, Canada, Italy … they'll all know what's going on in
Muhimu.' Settlement residents' exclusion from the 'map of the nation' had been
reinforced by state actors, who largely ignored their needs outside election times.
By connecting them directly to places outside Kenya, places where people –
exemplified by Sarah and Miroslav – wanted to make them visible, GIS technolo-
gies provided an escape route from an image of the nation to which they did not
belong. But like the iHub technologists who maintained the significance of the
software's 'rootedness' in Kenya, Muhimu residents did not completely eschew
belonging to the nation in favour of an external 'globe'. Rather, they articulated
a desire to change the shape of the nation, so that they, like the technologists at
the iHub, could forge national belonging *through* transnational connections
enabled by digital technology. A twenty-six-year-old Luo male summed up the
comments of his Kamba, Luhya and Somali neighbours: 'When I dream about

the future, I think about how Kenya as a country can be one thing without many tribes.'

Muhimu's residents also spoke negatively of 'politics', which they associated with ethnic violence and patronage. Yet – in marked contrast to those at the iHub – settlement residents regularly spoke about the negative effects of tribalism. Neither did they contribute to *Ushahidi*'s map, despite the fact that their neighbourhood figured centrally in the post-election violence. Of the few residents who had heard of *Ushahidi* prior to their work with Muhimu Mapping Project, none owned a smartphone or a personal computer, necessary technologies to view the map. While there were internet cafés in Muhimu, most residents spent their money in them checking emails or browsing Facebook, often in search of connections they thought could benefit them socially or economically. If technologists at the iHub suggested that national unity could be produced by replacing ethnic discourse with a techno-utopian vision, residents of Muhimu articulated the idea that fulfilling their techno-utopian dreams depended not on *ignoring* ethnicity but rather on recognizing it as a salient force in their lives. Following this, Muhimu residents' lack of participation in *Ushahidi*'s mapping project, I suggest, does not reflect an anti-national sensibility – as their hopeful comments about national unity make clear – but rather exposes the class divisions at the heart of the technology sector's notion of digital citizenship. For them, pan-ethnic nationalism was a *product* of the increased economic opportunities that they imagined could be produced by engaging with digital technology. Because of the ways in which ethnic difference produced negative consequences when mobilized over competition for resources and jobs, they presumed – logically – that once they were in a better economic position, ethnicity would matter less. Thus, because of how deeply taboo ethnicity was in the technology sector's discourse, and because of how intertwined experiences of class and ethnicity were in Kenya, the notion of digital citizenship effectively prevented a frank discussion of class. The effects of this silence became abundantly clear when the Kenyan state co-opted the techno-utopian rhetoric into formal political discourse, and the technology sector began to tentatively form alliances with the Kenyan state (see also Callus 2016), effectively further preventing Nairobi's vast population of urban poor from becoming 'digital citizens' themselves.[19]

## The state talks back

'The mission of Uhuru Generation is to free this nation from tribalism and corruption,' proclaimed then Justice Minister Eugene Wamalwa at a rally of Uhuru Kenyatta supporters organized by The National Alliance (TNA). 'In the coming election, we will see analogue politicians going home and replaced by digital politicians. Poverty has afflicted Kenyans, the gap between the rich and

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[19]I am not suggesting that Nairobi's urban poor were the *only* population excluded by Kenya's techno-utopian discourse. See, for example, Mahoney (2009) on how, since independence, the Kenyan coast has had an ambivalent relationship with nationalist discourses emanating from the nation's capital, and has often expressed suspicion, rather than enthusiasm, for digital technologies such as the mobile phone.

the poor widens everyday' (Toili 2012). Wamalwa's pan-ethnic message was not consistent across all audiences, however. At a speech given at the Maragoli Cultural Festival – the largest festival in the Luhya-speaking region – he proclaimed support for Musalia Mudavadi's 2017 presidential bid. He spoke of Mudavadi's Luhya roots, and said that the two of them had initiated plans to bring all Luhyas together under one political party; Wamalwa claimed that he would 'drop his bid for the sake of the Luhya community' (Nalianya 2012). This is just one instance of politicians publicly proclaiming pan-ethnic sentiments when addressing an ethnically mixed audience, and then drumming up support by mobilizing ethnic claims when among their ethnic base. If the 'digital' had become symbolically associated with the transcendence of ethnicity for the good of the nation, and if ethno-regional patronage was one of the causes of class inequality, as I documented above, then Wamalwa's suggestion that 'the gap between the rich and poor' could be solved only by 'digital' politicians ensured that the issue of ethno-regional patronage would remain unaddressed. The Jubilee coalition's 'new politics' may have been associated with 'new things' and a new, united nation, but it implicitly ignored the historical injustices that prevented that unity from materializing.

Like Wamalwa, Uhuru and Ruto were eager to unite opposing sections of the country in order to win the presidential election; one of their strategies for doing so was linking the technology sector's nationalist discourse with political discourse, and thus wresting it from the exclusive domain of the technology sector. 'We created a party that would be based, not on ethnicity or personality, but on ideas,' wrote Uhuru Kenyatta in his presidential coalition's manifesto (Jubilee Coalition 2013). Primary among these ideas was digital technology in governance: 'We aim to propel Kenya into Africa's high-tech capital and create a "Silicon Savannah" of interconnected telecommunications hubs to power our growing economy,' read the Jubilee Coalition's manifesto. HumanIPO, a news site covering technology in Africa, noted that 'Kenyatta won power on the back of a tech-focused manifesto', citing the one laptop per child programme, his claims to expand Kenya's fibre optic networks, and his plans to create a National Digital Register, which would capture biometric information about all citizens.

Like the iHub and Muhimu Mapping Project, Uhuru believed that Kenya's techno-utopian dreams could best come to fruition in an environment that ignored ethnic tension and the related politics of land, as his comments eschewing 'ethnicity' showed.[20] Such topics were dangerously 'political'. For Uhuru, this argument was not merely ideological; promoting ethnic transcendence through digital technology was a calculated move to deflect attention from his own complicated history with ethno-regional politics. Being the son of Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, he was a major beneficiary of his father's vast landholdings, which were often acquired by questionable means in the transition to Kenyan independence in the early 1960s. Stories abound of Jomo visiting new areas of Kenya after assuming the presidency, circling his finger to indicate an expansive

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[20]Mazzarella (2010: 789) describes how India's ICT boom was driven by a similar argument. 'In thus "emerging",' he notes, 'India was also throwing off the lingering burden of colonization: "For India, the rise of Information Technology is an opportunity to overcome historical disabilities and once again become the master of its own national destiny" (Vittal and Mahalingam 2001: 110).'

stretch of agriculturally rich earth, and proclaiming, 'Here!' As an article in the Kenyan newspaper *The Daily Nation* notes (Gaitho 2013), it was difficult for Uhuru to shake this family history; land became his Achilles' heel in the campaign.

Uhuru's major opponent for the presidential bid, Raila Odinga, attempted to make his challenger's chequered history with land acquisition a campaign issue, by publicly claiming that Uhuru owned land the size of Nyanza Province (approximately 4,870 square miles); Uhuru's reference to Nyanza, a Luo stronghold, was provocative in its own right. Instead of addressing Raila's claims head-on, however, Uhuru attempted to reframe the debate entirely. Raila, he argued, was holding the country back by bringing up an issue (land) 'that ha[d] poisoned relations between communities [i.e. ethnic groups], prompting suspicion and creating disputes'.[21] Uhuru implied, in other words, that by bringing to light the relation between class, land and ethnicity, Raila was fanning the ethnic fires and preventing Kenyans from uniting as a nation; he was being an 'analogue' politician, as Kenyatta ally Wamalwa had said, not the 'digital' one that Kenya purportedly needed.[22] While digital technology may have initially become notable in Kenya as a check on an irresponsible and/or incompetent government, then, a certain commensurability began to emerge between the discourses of the 'apolitical' Kenyan technology sector and Kenyan politicians.

Of course, not all Kenyans trusted Uhuru's version of events, and support – or disdain – tended to fall along predictable ethnic lines. Nairobi residents who supported UhuRuto believed that they would bring Kenya firmly into the 'digital age', which would invigorate the country economically and decrease its dependence on untrustworthy outsiders (symbolized by the ICC). By hinging his campaign on digital promises, such as laptops for primary school children, and CCTV cameras to quell urban insecurity, Uhuru replicated the idea that governance was best administered through technology. The fact that this vision had already been vocalized by the entrepreneurial technology sector, albeit through an initial critique of the state, worked in Uhuru's favour; as an aspiring politician from a political family, Uhuru could claim to have left 'politics' behind. For Kenyans who supported one of UhuRuto's rivals, some accused them of using 'The Digital Team' rhetoric as a way to solidify votes and evade the ICC. Nevertheless, UhuRuto's central rhetorical claims about the positive qualities of the digital went largely unquestioned, and political rivals often criticized UhuRuto using the digital/analogue binary. After the election, for example, CORD (Coalition for Reforms and Democracy) politician and Mombasa County Senator Hassan Omar criticized the Jubilee administration for explicitly deceiving Kenyan citizens. 'The government is digital outside and analogue inside,' he declared brazenly (Otieno 2014). Other critics of Uhuru and Ruto's governance tactics used similar language. 'The "digital" regime is turning out to be fully "analogue",' stated Makau Mutua, a prominent human rights lawyer.

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[21]'Uhuru confident of poll victory', *Daily Nation*, 24 February 2013.

[22]Raila's intentions were not exactly noble. He was attempting to drum up support from his own ethnic base – and others who had experienced land dispossession – while never discussing his own extraordinary wealth. Rather than articulating a policy for the redistribution of resources and class equity, in other words, he mobilized the trifecta of class/ethnicity/land in order to gain political support.

'Gone is the euphoria of the early days … The "new-look" Cabinet of "techno-crats" is invisible,' he continued (Mutua 2013). Blog posts told a similar story: 'We were sold this false promise of a digital government for what is essentially an analogue administration,' claimed Larry Madowo (2014), a well-known news anchor and Online and Technology Editor at the television station NTV. The title of his post? 'Digital government my foot!' In one of the most interesting re-appropriations of UhuRuto's discourse, the sensationalist political blog 'The Latest Kenyan News' claimed to provide 'evidence' that Raila himself had finally gone digital. 'Prime Minister Raila Odinga is proud to announce his NEW globally released App on the iPhone, Blackberry and Android platforms,' the caption said. 'This stunning App will deliver vital information on Raila, party matters and election campaign updates to the growing new generation Y voters. This is an attractive group of voters since they not only form the majority but also do not vote along tribal lines.' Instead of challenging the terms of the digital/analogue debate, this partisan blog claimed that Raila was not as 'ana-logue' as his opponents claimed, as evidenced in part by the fact that he could attract voters whose political allegiances were not tied to ethnicity.

## Conclusion: new technologies, new politics, old exclusions

'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger,' wrote Walter Benjamin (1968: 255). 'It was so that you can't forget,' Nancy Amolo told me, with regard to the initial impetus for *Ushahidi*. 'At least somewhere on the internet, even if it's only two people who read it, there will always be a record of what happened.' Reading Amolo's words through Benjamin's observations, we can say that 'what happened' was not merely the death and displacement of a large population of Kenyans, but also an extraordin-ary expression of deep social cleavages. Historical grievances had reached a boiling point, and politicians and candidates – both 'digital' and 'analogue' – had stirred the pot. For Kenyans like Mwangi, the growth of the technology sector helped to loosen the cultural boundaries that, since independence, had dic-tated employment terms and economic success. It had, at the same time, given them an opportunity to reaffirm their Kenyan roots; this was particularly signifi-cant for members of the Kenyan diaspora. In this sense, Kenyan technologists constituted a new social group. They also reanimated a discussion of pan-ethnic nationalism, an ideal that also became attractive to Kenyan business interests and the state, in large part because of the outside capital that this sector was able to attract. For Nairobi's urban poor, however, the socio-economic and cul-tural possibilities offered to the technology sector remained but a distant dream. Despite their enthusiasm for and proficiency in technological work, settle-ment residents continued to live in an environment in which ethnicity structured their employment opportunities, informed their everyday access to goods and ser-vices, and shaped their experiences with violence.

    The nation is imagined 'as a *community*', Anderson wrote (1991: 224), 'because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship'. If 'digital

citizenship' in Kenya required sublimating ethnicity and 'politics' in favour of pan-ethnic unity and the dictates of investment capital, then it did not merely enable the continuation of inequality and exploitation, as Anderson suggests of nationalism, but actively helped to reproduce them. By using digital technology as a central part of their campaign platform, politicians such as Uhuru and Ruto created an ideological smokescreen that allowed them to continue to mobilize their ethno-regional bases. That they continued to invoke the forward-thinking qualities of their 'digital government' as they also stood trial at The Hague for precipitating widespread ethnic violence in 2007–08 signals the extent to which Kenya's 'new politics' had been rendered 'old' once again. In this sense, we can see digitally mediated citizenship as one moment in Kenya's longer dialectical history, in which pan-ethnicity and ethno-regional alliances have each contained the seeds of the other, rather than a complete departure from the past.

Recent scholarship has demonstrated how ICTs have gained political import as users have incorporated them into their daily lives, amplifying political concerns through mundane social interactions (cf. Zayani 2015: 173–6; Burrell 2012). Sometimes, as in the case of the Arab Spring, fully fledged social movements have developed out of connections initiated via new media. My focus in this piece has attempted to add something new to the conversation on ICT, nationalism and citizenship by focusing on the ways in which digital technologies have been mobilized as an idiom to both challenge and perpetuate social cleavages of ethnicity and class. Thus, I have turned my attention to how a new media form has been used to re-energize older national debates.

Read in the context of Kenyan history, James' political preference for Uhuru must be understood not only as an enthusiasm for technology, the 'new' digital objects that signal the emergence of a digitally developed nation and a technocratic policy programme, but also an expression of ethno-political allegiance filtered through new language. To vote against ethnicity, if Kenyan history has served as any indication, means being willing to give up one's access – imagined or material – to the potential fruits of Kenya's technological take-off.[23] Thus, while digital technology was something solid to hold on to at a time when both the elite technology sector and the urban poor were negotiating the precarity of their post-2007–08 worlds, it also prevented a national discussion of class inequality from taking shape. As such, Nairobi's emergent technology sector and the Kenyan state became seemingly strange bedfellows in a techno-utopian dream that further solidified their own prosperity and power, and actively ignored the history of class and ethnic entanglements that had made that prosperity and power possible.

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[23]See Bratton and Kimenyi (2008: 277) on how Kenyan respondents in a survey administered before the 2007 elections 'show a high degree of mistrust of members of other ethnic groups and consider the behavior of those other groups to be influenced primarily by ethnicity. In general,' they conclude, 'voting in Kenya is therefore defensively and fundamentally an ethnic census.'

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## Abstract

In this article, I explore how digital technologies in Kenya emerged as a site through which questions of citizenship were posed – if not resolved – at a moment of national crisis. I draw attention, specifically, to the ways in which developers, bloggers and state actors mobilized techno-utopian narratives about Kenya's 'Silicon Savannah' to advocate for what I call 'digital citizenship', an ethical blueprint for how best to belong to the nation. While social scientists writing about ICT in Africa have focused primarily on Africans' novel uses of objects such as mobile phones, I contribute to this conversation by interrogating how digital technologies have been mobilized as an idiom to both challenge and perpetuate social cleavages of ethnicity and class. 'Digital citizenship', I suggest, compels us to revisit debates about (post)colonial history, ideologies that undergird digitality, and the formation of local, national and transnational scales of belonging.

## Résumé

Dans cet article, l'auteur explore l'émergence des technologies numériques au Kenya en tant qu'espace à travers lequel ont été posées, voire résolues, des questions de citoyenneté en période de crise nationale. L'auteur attire particulièrement l'attention sur la manière dont les développeurs, les blogueurs et les acteurs publics ont mobilisé des discours techno-utopiques sur la « Silicon Savannah » du Kenya pour plaider en faveur de ce que l'auteur appelle une « citoyenneté numérique », un modèle éthique du meilleur moyen d'appartenir à la nation. Alors que les spécialistes des sciences sociales traitant des TIC en Afrique se sont essentiellement concentrés sur les nouveaux usages d'objets comme le téléphone portable, l'auteur contribue à cette conversation en s'interrogeant sur la mobilisation des technologies numériques en tant qu'idiome pour remettre en cause les clivages sociaux d'ethnicité et de classe, mais aussi pour les perpétuer. L'auteur suggère que la « citoyenneté numérique » nous contraint à revisiter les débats sur l'histoire (post)coloniale, les idéologies qui sous-tendent la numéricité et la formation des échelles d'appartenance locales, nationales et transnationales.