Black Orpheus Dispatch: The Creative Economy Paradox

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On re-modelling history 68-*sh*, 50-*sh* years later

I

When budgets get tight, the first thing that gets cut is the arts. People look at a literary journal or a poetry prize or some experimental performance thing happening in a hall and think, “This is cute, but is it really necessary?” Every time I hear that, I wonder: do people even understand how societies stay alive? Creative projects, especially the ones in literature, performance, and visual storytelling, are the spaces where we try out new languages, find and fall in love with the world again. You cannot measure that on a spreadsheet, I know, but you can see its absence clearly in a society where virtually nothing beautiful is made for its own sake. If we don’t invest in these things, what we are saying is that we no longer care about the long game of thinking and evolving as a people.

There is a practical logic to funding creativity. When you support a creative project, you are building an ecosystem by creating platforms where writers, thinkers and doers can actually grow bodies of work, be read, be seen, be challenged, and be paid. And once that happens, everything else starts to

ripple: schools have better access to local content; communities start having their stories told from the inside, not just by some outsider with a grant and a drone camera. Literary and artistic prizes, for example, are often misunderstood. It is easy to roll eyes and say, “Oh, another award show,” or think it is just a bunch of intellectuals patting each other on the back. Are the awards about ego? Maybe. But not merely that. They tell a society what it values. When you fund a prize for fiction or photography or essay writing, what you are doing is placing a bet on certain kinds of thinking and aesthetics. You are saying, “This kind of experiment deserves attention.” And when people see that, especially young people or marginalised creators, it tells them that their own work might be worth something too. We underestimate how many potentially brilliant artists give up too early, not because they were not good, but because no one ever took them seriously. Prizes can change that. Without recognition, the creative field becomes a lonely, exhausting climb, with no visible summit. That is how you lose entire generations of potential.

Then there is the matter of events in the form of readings, festivals, open mics, exhibitions, workshops. One of the biggest lies we have inherited is that creative work is done alone, in silence, and then presented as a finished product to an audience. That is not how it works. Creatives need friction, side comments, and arguments at the bar after a panel discussion. It needs a time slot and someone else saying, “I know exactly what you mean, but can you reframe it?” or “That didn’t land for me.” That is what events give us. Without them, you get isolation and silence. And the thing about silence is that it starts to feel normal, and starts to feel like maybe nothing ever needed to be said in the first place. That is how societies begin to rot.



Photo by Shalom Kasim

Maybe the most urgent reason to invest in creative work especially now is because of the pace at which the world is changing: climate crisis, digital surveillance, mass displacement, the AI craze, etc. What prepares a society to handle all this complexity? Not engineers or economists or policy

experts (though we need them too), but artists. Creatives. Artists make sense of chaos. They slow down the panic and give us language to describe what is happening by imagining other futures that help us process what facts alone cannot convey. You can neither code your way out of existential dread nor Excel-sheet your way into a sense of purpose. That is what stories are for. That is what music is for. That is what theatre and essays and documentaries and sculpture and satire are for. So if we are going to survive the next century not just technologically, but emotionally and ethically, then investing in creative practice is an emergency plan, and the sooner policymakers and funders understand that, the less we will need to convince them with long essays like this.

There is also something to be said about dignity. Creative work is one of the few places left where people are still allowed to be complex. In most parts of modern life, especially in economies like ours, people are reduced to roles and demographics; but in art, you are allowed to be a messy, contradictory human. And for many people, especially those who live on the margins of power, art can be the only space where they are fully seen. The dignity of being fully seen, in turn, has ripple effects that give people the courage to speak and to demand better laws. People who feel seen begin to imagine themselves as part of the solution, not just as problems to be managed. Creative work gives that gift of recognition more generously than almost any other field. So when we fund journals, prizes, festivals, or random oddball projects that don't make sense on paper, what we are really doing is saying, "You are not too complicated to matter." That is what real investment looks like.

Creativity makes people stay, not just in their work or in the arts, but in their communities and in their sense of self. When we talk about brain drain, we often focus on jobs and salaries, and yes, those are important, but we don't talk enough about how people leave not just for better pay, but for better conversations. When we fail to invest in creative infrastructure, what we are doing is telling our brightest minds, "There is no place for you here." So when they leave, they don't just take their passports or their bank accounts with them; they take the culture they could have built with others. Investment in creative projects is a patriotic act. It is even economic, if you look at the long-term math, but more than that, it is emotional infrastructure that says, "We see you. We want you to stay here."

This isn't a government-only job. Public funding is crucial, but we also need private individuals, companies, philanthropists, and even everyday citizens to think more expansively about what "support" means. You don't have to be a millionaire to fund the arts. Buy the book. Subscribe to the journal. Donate to the prize fund. Show up to the open mic. Share the zine. Offer your house for a workshop. Recommend a local artist to your employer. These small acts of belief matter. They make the difference between a journal shutting down and a journal becoming a launching pad. We love to romanticise genius, but genius is almost always a community project. It happens when someone is allowed to take their time, and that permission comes from structures of support, both big and small. If we want a rich, layered creative culture, we all have to put something in the pot. Not just once, but again and again, especially for the emerging voices that are still trying to figure out what it is they are here to say. The recent MoU between the Nigerian government and Chocolate City, for example, is both a welcome development and a reminder of how long overdue real investment in the creative sector has always been. On the surface, it is a promising gesture that is aimed at infrastructure, distribution, talent development, and intellectual property reform. On paper, it reads like the kind of blueprint people like us (creatives, editors, writers, curators, culture workers) have been dreaming about. But scratch that surface just a little, and it becomes clear that this is a litmus test for whether we finally understand creativity as an economic engine. What this MoU is saying: if we can do this for Afrobeats, why not for literature? Why not for film criticism? Why not for experimental theatre, or art residencies in Akwa Ibom, or community radio dramas in Taraba? If we are serious about scaling, then we must scale *everything*, not just the loud ones. If we want a truly successful cultural sector, we can't let our vision stop at Afrobeats. We need to make room for

Afropens, Afrofilms, Afrothoughts. We need to put equal energy behind the essayist and the beatmaker. Let the Chocolate City deal be the start.

II

I hate numbers, but let's do a little of that. I will borrow a bit from economic theory to help us say, with data, what we already know from experience. Let's start with Amartya Sen's **Capability Approach**.



Drum at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.
[*Photo by Shalom Kasim*]

Traditional economic models measure development through indicators like Gross Domestic Product (GDP), per capita income, inflation rates, and other macroeconomic factors. These metrics are

useful, but they often fall short of capturing the true quality of human life. For example, Nigeria's GDP was approximately USD 362 billion in 2023. That is an impressive number in some sense, but what does it say about the opportunities available for a young woman in Lagos to become a filmmaker or a poet? Does it tell us anything about the lack of spaces for creative expression or the challenges faced by young people hoping to build a future in the arts?

What does economic growth do for individual freedom?

Can people live the lives they have reason to value?

Sen introduces two crucial concepts to rethink human wellbeing. **Functionings**, which refer to the "beings and doings" of a person, which include tangible outcomes like being healthy, educated, or well-nourished, and intangible achievements like writing a poem, performing in a play, or managing a creative project. In short, functionings are the various things people can do or be in life. **Capabilities**, on the other hand, refer to the set of functionings that a person has the real opportunity to achieve. It encompasses both what a person is currently doing and what they could do if they had the resources and freedom.

In Sen's framework, a person's **capability set** is essentially the collection of functionings they can choose to pursue. If we were to think of a person's capability set in terms of the arts, for example, it might include the ability to write a novel, the opportunity to edit a literary journal, the freedom to create a play/direct a film, or the possibility to perform in a music festival or showcase a visual art exhibit. The wider the range of these functionings, the more "free" an individual is to live the life they value. This redefines what it means to be developed. **Development**, according to Sen, is simply having the freedom to choose the life one values.

When applied to the creative industries, this framework asks us to consider the economic and social opportunities available to individuals working in those fields. For example, if we invest in infrastructure for creative projects like literary journals, music festivals, or performance venues, we are expanding the capability space for thousands of young Nigerians. To make the case clearer: imagine the cost of running a small literary journal in Nigeria is about seven million naira per year, which could include two million naira for editorial staff and operations, 500,000 naira for web hosting and platform maintenance, 2.5 million naira for paying contributors, one million naira for promotions, outreach, and building a public presence, and one million Naira for administrative and overhead costs. In total, running a small, sustainable literary journal might cost about seven million naira annually, which is around $4,300. Let's say this journal provides a platform for 50 new writers and contributors each year. If just half of them get published and recognised, it might jumpstart their careers, get them into important networks, or lead to additional creative collaborations that unlock new possibilities for them.

Now, consider this in terms of the broader economic impact. Reports suggest that Nigeria's music industry alone generates around $2 billion annually, and this is only the formal sector. The ripple effects across job creation, skills development, and social capital are enormous. By investing in creative infrastructure, we can tap into a similarly large potential across various artistic fields by supporting smaller creative initiatives like journals, community art projects, or cultural festivals. The return on investment is substantial in terms of both direct income generation and broader societal wellbeing. Let's say, for instance, that every unemployed youth in Nigeria has a potential economic burden of $1,000 to $2,000 annually, in terms of lost productivity and social costs. If we create a viable platform for 100 young artists or writers through a journal or event, and even half of them manage to find sustainable careers, that is an economic return of about $100,000 to $200,000, which is far higher than the initial investment of $4,300 to run the journal. These investments expand the set of choices available to individuals and allow them to live lives they have reason to

value.

The implications for government policy are profound. Rather than just looking at GDP figures and thinking of growth in purely financial terms, we must begin to measure and value the freedom that comes with investments in creativity. When the government partners with organisations like Chocolate City to develop infrastructure for the arts, the ultimate goal should be to maximise capabilities and to ensure that young Nigerians have the opportunities to realise their full creative potential.

III

The next theory is Richard Florida's **Creative Class Theory** which is centered around the idea that creativity is the key driver of economic development in modern economies. His work, especially in the book, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), shifts focus from traditional economic factors like industry or manufacturing to human creativity and intellectual capital as the primary engines of growth. His Creative Class theory comprises individuals whose work involves creativity, innovation, and problem-solving. These individuals contribute to economic growth by generating new ideas, technologies, and businesses, and in turn, by revitalising cities and communities. Florida breaks this class into three main subcategories: **Super-Creative Core**, which includes people who work directly in fields that require a high level of creative thinking. Think of artists, musicians, writers, designers, software engineers, and researchers. These are the people creating the cutting-edge ideas that shape the future. Then there is the second category, which he calls the **Creative Professionals,** who are individuals who may not directly engage in artistic or purely creative endeavours, but their work requires a great deal of innovation and problem-solving. This group includes architects, engineers, scientists, and people in law, management, and finance who apply creativity in their professional fields. The last category is the **Technicians and Skilled Workers** who provide support to the creative professionals and super-creative core. They might be involved in technical roles, such as IT specialists or audio engineers.

The key thesis of Florida's theory is that the most dynamic and economically successful regions are those that can attract and retain a large number of individuals from the Creative Class.

When we apply Florida's theory to the Nigerian creative sector, there are plenty of implications for how we understand development, particularly in a country where the creative industries, ranging from literature to fashion, are quickly emerging as global powerhouses. The country has seen rapid growth in the creative sector, particularly in the music industry and Nollywood, which have become some of the largest contributors to the economy. Florida's theory provides a lens through which we can assess how investments in creative infrastructure, whether through literary journals, performance spaces, or creative events, can nurture and grow the Creative Class in Nigeria. To illustrate this, consider that Nigeria's entertainment industry (including music, film, and fashion) generated an estimated $1,4 billion in 2023, an increase on the $1,1 billion in 2020. If Nigeria continues to invest in infrastructure, such as building creative hubs, offering grants for artistic endeavours, and establishing platforms for emerging writers, musicians, and filmmakers, it will be able to cultivate a fertile ground for the Creative Class to succeed.

Florida emphasises that to attract and retain the Creative Class, cities or regions must be places that support creativity in all its forms. This involves several factors, with one of the strongest being **technological infrastructure**. The modern creative economy heavily depends on digital tools, whether it's for graphic design, film editing, music production, or writing. Creative professionals need access to reliable internet, software tools, and digital platforms to share their work with global audiences. If the Nigerian government, in partnership with private enterprises, invests in robust technological infrastructure, it will be laying the groundwork for a brilliant digital creative

ecosystem that can rival the best in the world. The next factor is the **Cultural Infrastructure**, which refers to the physical spaces in which creative work is crucial. The development of live performance venues, art galleries, co-working spaces, and literary festivals are all part of it. **Diversity and Inclusivity** are the next factors, where Florida argues that the Creative Class thrives in environments that are diverse and open to new ideas. A diverse community isn't just about having a mix of people from different racial, ethnic, or gender categories. It is about creating an environment where different forms of creativity can intermingle and flourish. Festivals, creative workshops, and prizes (such as those for emerging authors or artists) serve as bridges for the needed cross-cultural dialogue. The last factor is **Human Capital Development.** Creative industries thrive when there is a high level of education, especially in areas like the arts, literature, and music. Creative hubs that focus on providing affordable and accessible training for writers, filmmakers, and other creatives are crucial in preparing the next generation of creative leaders.

Florida's theory goes beyond cultural enrichment to talk about economic development. The creative economy often has a high economic multiplier effect, meaning that investment in creative industries doesn't just benefit creatives directly. It leads to the growth of other sectors – like tourism, technology, education, and hospitality. For instance, when we invest in an event like Lagos Fashion Week, it is not just the designers who benefit. Hotels, restaurants, transportation companies, and even small-scale vendors selling accessories or food will experience a boost in business. In terms of numbers, a study by the Mass Cultural Council suggests that each new job in the creative industries leads to 2.5 new jobs in other sectors.



Concrete sculptures at the Ọ̀ṣun Grove.
[*Photo by Shalom Kasim*]

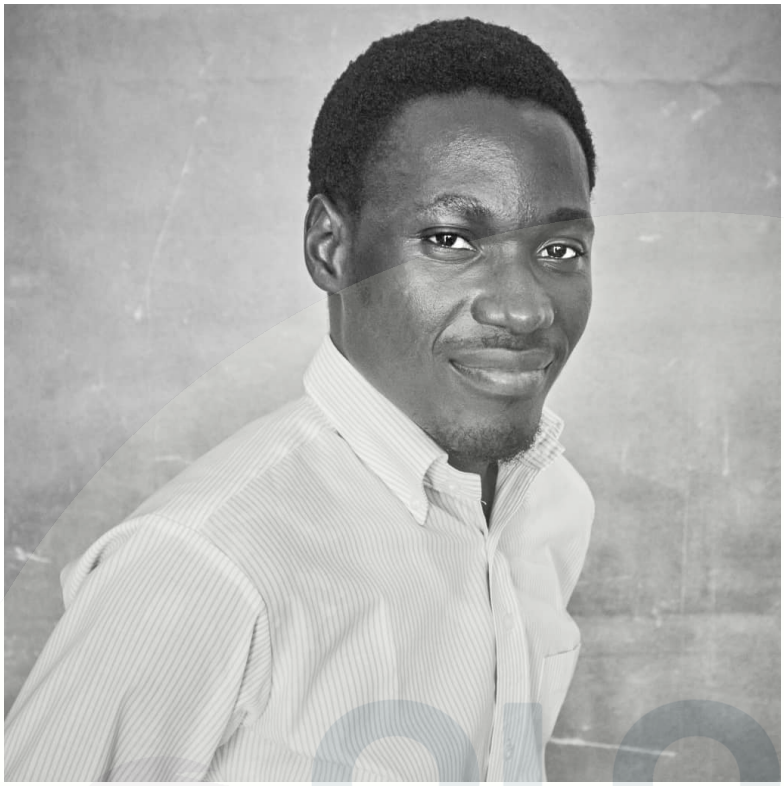
One of the most strategic investments that can be made into the Creative Class is the creation of awards, prizes, and recognitions that specifically target creatives. These recognitions, such as literary prizes, music awards, and fashion design competitions, generate visibility for the winners and give them the momentum to push forward. They also have a broader effect of raising the status of the creative industries in society, increasing both prestige and financial investment. For instance, the Nigeria Prize for Literature, with a cash award of $100,000 both rewards the winner and simultaneously elevates Nigerian literature on the global stage, attracting foreign publishers, investors, and readers. This is the kind of recognition we need for positioning Nigeria's creative sector as an attractive investment destination. When government and private sector actors commit resources to these creative prizes, they signal to the wider community that the creative economy is valuable and that investment in culture yields substantial returns.

IV

The last theory I will touch on is the **Triple Helix Model**, developed by Henry Etzkowitz and Loet Leydesdorff in the 1990s. The model' approach is through understanding the dynamics between universities, industry, and government in driving innovation and economic development. It is grounded in the notion that the interaction between these three entities, traditionally seen as separate spheres, can nurture collaborative innovation and lead to the creation of knowledge economies. The Triple Helix emphasises that innovation arises through the synergy created when universities, private industry, and public policy work together. Rather than functioning in isolation, these institutions increasingly collaborate, often creating hybrid organisations such as university-industry partnerships, public-private partnerships (PPP), and innovation hubs. The key to the Triple Helix is the co-evolutionary process that occurs as each of these entities adapts and responds to the needs and activities of the others. The model suggests that as universities engage with industry, they begin to tailor their research outputs to meet market demands, while industry gains access to cutting-edge research and technological advances. Meanwhile, the government, by investing in infrastructure and policy frameworks, helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. In the broader context of national economies, the Triple Helix Model implies that innovation is not just the product of isolated efforts by individuals or firms, but rather the outcome of an interconnected and dynamic system in which knowledge creation, commercialisation, and policy development co-evolve. This synergy can be particularly impactful for the creative economy, where investment in infrastructure, talent development, and global market access can have a profound effect on the ability of countries to become leading players in the global cultural market.

V

So, after all this *shàlàyé*, what is the real gist? It is simple: if we are serious about building a future that is full of imagination and meaning, then we have to stop treating creative projects like side hustles or nice-to-haves.



I'll see you soon.

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Kasim is the Managing Editor of *Mud Season Review* and lives in Jos Plateau, Nigeria. He is a fellow in our **Black Orpheus Exploration Project,** chosen in collaboration with Archivi.ng. This is the fourth of his monthly dispatches; you can find the earlier ones here (*February*), here (*March*), and here (April). The names of other selected fellows from our application were announced in February. You can read more about the project here.