Identities form specifically.

I come from a place that exists somewhere between a pot of Jollof rice in the busiest kitchen in West Africa and a living room full of revolving main characters. I delight in discussion because I am forged from my family's most consistent ritual: gathering too many people in a confined space and arguing about nothing – each person giving their opinion on each person's opinion. I was born to people with conflicting recollections of events where they were both present. I grew up surrounded by family forever complaining that someone else is not telling the story right, either in accuracy or with the requisite flair. In our home, history isn't written by the winner but by whoever speaks first.

My mother is a people person, a crowd-pleaser. She is never more comfortable than when she is uncomfortable, cocooned by unfolding events out of her control, where the solution is always a family meeting. From her I inherited my love for living in highly dense populations, ensconced in noise and all-round activity; a deep joy at being boxed in by a jukebox of experiences and an extensive bus network. My mother always stays for one more song. I always stay for one more song.

My father is an extrovert on his own terms, extremely at ease in his own skin, with an urgent need to just be. His current pace is a counterweight to motion. If he could design a perfect day, it would involve a morning nap.

From him I take a tranquil disposition: things are probably never as bad or as good as they seem at first. At our fastest, we are slow walkers; at our slowest, as my sister once noted, we may as well be strolling backwards.

I am half Yoruba and half Igbo. They say Yorubas just want to have a good time and Igbos just want to have a good life, which means I am programmed, anytime anywhere, to never automatically turn down an invite without, at the very least, asking some follow-up questions. I have three older sisters, which means 23 per cent of my life has been spent mourning the points I wish I had brought up in a long-finished argument.

I come from a confusingly sublime matrix of who is actually a blood relative, and a deep appreciation of heat, both in taste and touch, and the healing powers of pepper soup. I was raised with a strong belief that it is an aunty's duty to mind your business and that it is impossible to have too many cousins – two concepts I'm triggered to defend. I am from a home with an open-door policy. I am from a belief that to visit our home is to eat at our home, because food is the ultimate love language; food forgives sins and dispenses grace.

I was raised to get up early for church and stay up late for election nights. I am from a family that has never willingly gone on a beach holiday, and values intuition over organisation; a home where decisions are based on emotion rather than practicality. A strict childhood diet of arriving at events and airports too early has made me allergic to arriving at events and airports too early. Bedtimes were set, as was the understanding that children should be heard.

I am descended from a long line of bad poker faces, a clan genetically unable to hide the frustrations or joys etched in our hearts, however temporary. I am from silence being the ultimate punishment, and

appreciating the eternal value of a dance floor bursting with people you love as the greatest man-made invention. I am from a philosophy that questions why you would ever order something new off a menu when you know exactly what you want; why order something new when you understand precisely who you are?

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We are all the sum of a specific set of known knowns and more subtle influences that clash, combine and occasionally curdle. They are the intangibles that drive our most honest intentions and shape the essence of our personalities – something that is often too intricate, too elastic and too personal to ever give full voice to accurately, however hard we try.

Instead, in all our interactions, we leave tiny breadcrumbs as clues to the inner sanctum of our complex identities. It's an unwitting, uneven collaboration between the big things: the genetics we inherit from our parents, and the life decisions we take after careful calculations; the subconscious things – degrees of eye contact, automated anxieties; and the millions of things that thrive in the middle, whether it's checking the weather before stepping outside, the perfect storage place for condiments, a commitment to coordinating socks.

Small patches of persona stitched together until they form someone real.

Not everyone is allowed a complex identity. Throughout history, individuals and entire communities have been systematically stripped of their personhood and idiosyncrasies, often to make them easier to demean, denigrate and subjugate – and, in some cases, eradicate. Being able to define yourself openly and fully is a privilege; it is a grace many take for granted. The ability to walk into a meeting or an interview, or to

interact with a police officer, and be given the respect and opportunity to present yourself without pre-judgement, can be life-defining, life-affirming and life-saving.

To strip an individual of that privilege is destructive enough. But when you apply this reductive treatment to an entire community, country or race, you create a poisonously false narrative that permeates for generations, until the fiction becomes fact, which in turn becomes an infected shared wisdom steadily passed down – in schools, at family dinner tables, in words pressed into books, and in the images that populate our popular culture.

Few entities have been forced through this field of distorted reality as many times as Africa – a continent of fifty-four countries, more than two thousand languages, and 1.4 billion people. A region that is treated and spoken of as if it were a single country, devoid of nuance and cursed to be forever plagued by deprivation.

For too long, 'Africa' has been treated as a buzzword for poverty, strife, corruption, civil wars, and large expanses of arid red soil where nothing but misery grows. Or it is presented as one big safari park, where lions and tigers roam freely around our homes and Africans spend their days grouped in warrior tribes, barely clothed, spears palmed, hunting game, and jumping up and down with ritualistic rhythm to pass the time before another aid package gets delivered. Poverty or safari, with nothing in between.

No matter how hard I try to explain that I was raised in a sprawling metropolis with all the twists and tricks of a sprawling metropolis, too many can only imagine what they've been programmed to believe. They cannot picture my mum's primary school, with happy, well-nourished children bursting through the gates every morning, because various international charities have them convinced that to be young in Africa is to be surrounded by flies and fuelled with nothing but contaminated

drinking water; that to be African is a daily exercise in barely escaping the clutches of a rotating cast of free-roaming warlords in dirty fatigues, hanging off the back of 4x4 Jeeps that whizz along dirt jungle paths.

In reality, Africa is a rich mosaic of experience, of diverse communities and histories, and not a singular monolith of predetermined destinies. We sound different, laugh differently, craft the mundane in uniquely mundane ways, and our moral compasses do not always point in the same direction.

This book is a portrait of modern Africa that pushes back against harmful stereotypes to tell a more comprehensive story – based on all the humanity that has been brushed aside to accommodate a single vision of blood, strife, and majestic shots of rolling savannahs and large yellow sunsets. It will unspool the inaccurate story of a continent, dragging this bludgeoned narrative towards reality.

Real challenges exist on the continent. To ignore them would be just as grave a distortion. Many do live in destitution; some governments have failed their citizens; and in parts, the gap between the wealthy and the forgotten continues to grow. But when you infuse this story with context, you see the bigger picture and understand why what has happened has happened. When you remember the cards the region was dealt as a result of colonialism, and the way European empires divvied up the fruitful and fertile land, tore apart 10 per cent of all ethnic groups – forcing grossly different cultures to form singular nations against their will – and stole 90 per cent of the continent's material cultural legacy; when you remember all this is recent history, and that my parents are older than the country they were born in; when you discover the high prevalence of dictatorships is a multifaceted tale of colonial powers deliberately playing tribal groups off against each other, with Western nations propping up their favourite strongman, and it's not that we are naturally bloodthirsty and ungovernable; when you taste

Jollof rice for the first time, or see the work that activists and generations of reformers have put in since the independence era, you begin to understand that Africa is a region that is fundamentally rooted in human stories – which, like everywhere else, can be anything and everything, from a celebration of greatness to an act of barbaric cruelty. The continent constantly surprises, because every country is just trying to make the best of – to put it mildly – an awkward situation.

Each chapter of this book will bring the context that is often missing in discussions about Africa to the fore. You will discover how each country was formed by people with poor maps and even poorer morals. I will analyse the harmful ways Africa is depicted through cheap stereotypes in popular culture, and in the imagery used by charitable campaigns to elicit quick-fix solutions that often do more harm than good, by pushing negative typecasting. You will understand the story of democracy across the continent through seven dictatorships; the ongoing battle to have the artefacts and treasures that were stolen during the colonial period returned; and the impact food culture from across the continent has had on rituals throughout the world. Identity also requires a healthy rivalry, and you will discover the fabled Jollof rice wars and the strange, incongruent beauty of the Africa Cup of Nations. In the final section, I explore the present, and how locally led, on-the-ground activists, movements and emerging creative and business cultures are shaping the future of the continent, speaking to how communities are actually built – efforts that represent more than just dusty savannahs, civil wars, and a people without a voice of their own waiting for someone to speak for us, for others to swoop in and save.

But first, before we dive into the history of the continent, I want to take you to Lagos, my familial hometown, to show the present-day realities. Though this book is no travel guide of places to stay and sights to see, it is important to understand the varied specificity of the region. It's

vital to immediately ground yourself in an environment; see, smell and envision yourself in the everyday, not hovering a mile above ground or surveying through a pair of binoculars. And no place is more distinct than the continent's most populous city: the blackest place in the world, sewn together by little more than optimism and vibes.

There is a fundamental misunderstanding as to what is happening in this great expanse of land. This book aims to fill that void, while showcasing a deep and enduring love of the region – as a concept, as a reality and as a promise. And should you come away with just one thing, then I want you to know, for certain, deep down in your innermost core, that the continent is a coalition of over a billion individual identities that structure specifically.

That Africa is not a country.

Part One

Lagos

Lagos is full.

At any moment, Nigeria's unofficial capital is certain to burst, revealing it's been hiding a smaller, more functional metropolis this whole time. By population, it's London, New York and Uruguay combined, with room to spare for any Latvian curious to sample the world's most perfectly seasoned chaos. It's three times Johannesburg and Nairobi, double Cairo, and could fit everybody in Namibia twenty times over. Ghana is a great nation – but no one would notice if you swapped Ghana's entire population size for the Lagos metropolitan area.

Lagos is the punchline to a joke that could start: 'Twenty-one million people unburdened by self-doubt walk into a bar . . .' The point is: there are a lot of people in Lagos. None of them are shy.

Lagos is loud and plagued by joy. It sounds like impatience and overfamiliarity. It moves like a culture built on faith and certainty being the same thing. It's stitched to the same vague tones of a dream, where imagination seems to outpace movement, and progress is grounded in intention, if not reality. You're hearing a never-ending scream of car horns, reminding you that, at their core, Nigerians love nothing more than to warn you of their presence. Here in Lagos it's understandable, though – everyone is either driving too fast to be preoccupied with your safety, or fixed in the bumper-to-bumper traffic that scars every inch of the city; threading through the region's two main hubs, the Mainland and Lagos Island; crawling past districts soaked in wealth and culture,

and neighbourhoods where families are literally living in swamps. Traffic, in fact, is the city's official sport – an unavoidable discipline for everyone, from waiters to the CEOs of multinational banks. One of the hundreds of government officials that litter Lagos Island could try swapping the city's upmarket restaurants and shopping centres for a trip to Rwanda's Kigali or Abidjan in the Ivory Coast, to discover how road travel does not have to be the enemy of joy.

For everyone who is not an elected official in Lagos, thinking small is a sin, as is arriving anywhere on time. You will come to reason that, if everyone is running late, then everyone is actually early. Many of your habits will change. You will become possessed of a passion for using your outside voice at all times, regardless of location and in spite of circumstance – to welcome, to explain, to pray, to haggle, to wish someone well, to wish someone great harm. Live in Lagos and you will learn to speak the local dialect – 'Please hurry up; I don't have time' – sooner than you wish. You will learn to feign offence when someone tries to hustle you, because you understand that the game is the game, and in the end the house always wins.

Lagos smells like fresh fruit and diesel. On the weekends, you're never more than half a mile from an MC begging for silence from a crowd dressed in Technicolor fabrics that were intricately tailored to scream: 'Do you know who I am?' Never answer that question, or in time you will discover Lagosians understand the devastating effects of bottling up a grievance. Plan it right, and you can hit three wedding receptions on any given Saturday. Time it to perfection, and you'll hear Davido sing 'If I tell you say I love you, oh . . .' no fewer than eight times.

Everything in Lagos is negotiable. It's just up to you to draw the line. Exhibit A: Upon realising that they had lost our beloved family dog, our vet tried offering us someone else's dog as a replacement, confident that we might grow to love this substitute. The fact that it very much did not

belong to us was a minor detail, as was whatever arrangement they would later try to make with the family on the other side of this pact. We politely declined the offer and forcefully encouraged the vet to keep looking, until, eventually, they tracked down our good boy.

Lagos is highs of 40 degrees and lows of persistent power cuts. Its vistas are framed by large palm trees and an almost 100 per cent Black demographic. Every day, the piercing sun sprays across the city's natural grey filter, through a swarm of bright yellow buses, past the tall buildings and high walls that divide Lagos into tiny economic destinies, and sticks to what science believes to be the happiest people on earth. If the sun catches right on a relatively calm weekend morning – though 'relative calm' is a warped concept in Lagos – you can take a slow drive nowhere in particular, just to taste the city without letting it consume you – an easy mistake to make.

I have never seen an elephant in Lagos, or a leopard, but I have seen a fight break out at a party over the uneven distribution of souvenirs. You will not spot any of the Big Five game animals here – a safari tour of Lagos would be an adventure to spot the shrewdest car mechanics on the planet, multistorey housing blocks, and large bountiful markets that will sell it or make it or find it, if only you can describe it. Wind down and hear strangers converse as if they were family, because in a city where you need the favour of others to survive, you never know where you can acquire those favours.

The only guaranteed equality in Lagos is Suya – small strips of grilled meat at once turbulently spicy and graciously sweet, sliced on the side of the road, served with a side of onions and thick slabs of the northern Nigerian dialect Hausa, then wrapped in sheaths of newspaper and best consumed immediately after unwrapping, still hot, still coated in thick, burnt-charged smoke. Suya kisses every corner of Lagos life, because it's cheap and unreasonably delicious. It's broken up traffic

jams and has made more palatable thousand-strong weddings that make you question the abstract of family. It's served at kids' birthday parties and used to give bougie hotels a semblance of authenticity.

Suya is a dance of still and sudden. You could say the same for Ikeja, the neighbourhood I grew up in. At times turbulently spicy, then graciously sweet. The roads that snake through our neighbourhood were peaceful enough for me to learn to drive on, but to walk alongside them, unprotected by a mesh of metal, was to play a game you would ultimately lose.

Every country has one city that soaks up attention and attracts origin stories and myths that are repeated back in smaller hometowns, by those bragging about all they have achieved under the floodlights. You either live in it or resent it. Lagos is no different: the city commands waves of raw energy that require you to adapt or stay at home. It's a magnet for people ready to hustle, to make it or keep it. It's New York if New York actually committed to not sleeping. Thousands of people arrive each day. You can escape Lagos, temporarily, but nobody seems to leave it.

Lagos is a place for outsiders willing to immediately become insiders. You're welcome – regardless of race, ethnicity and background – just don't expect to be given a starter pack. This inwardness breeds a specific pace, but also means the city is too stubborn to realign itself for tourism. Still, it would do well to embrace the work of Marrakech or Algiers in institutionalizing the preservation of their greatest hits, for their own and others to enjoy. In the early nineteenth century, for example, free slaves from Brazil returned to Lagos, bringing back with them physical and religious aesthetics from the new world, which they used to build a Brazilian quarter in the city that features some of the most beautiful architecture in the country – much of which has been allowed to degrade, rather than being optimised for the city.

In all this, it's hard to know whether the city is a concept or an experiment – but whichever it is, Lagos remains truly humbling; big enough to dwarf any ego. Something about being in Lagos forces you to be *of Lagos*. It has a way of moulding its own intentions for your life, over and around whatever misguided ambitions you had. It's a sentiment easy to romanticise but can often be exhausting. The city's unknown physics are not poetic, but a consequence of nobody taking the time to design it with intent. So instead, Lagos is governed by confidence – an innate, unshakeable certainty that the city is home to the continent's finest; a system of deep faith born from having the world's highest ratio of people to good dancers, and a palpable belief that *God dey*.

The overall effect is this constant sense of imbalance. Lagos has everything it could ever need to be *the* great city. Lagos has no idea what it wants to be when it grows up.

Megacities are traditionally motivated by an urgency to be the next big thing invading your timelines. Accra. Kinshasa. Nairobi.

But Lagos is in no such rush, instead betting on the city's main informal economy – optimism – and that no other city in Africa will ever surpass it in size and cult of personality. Still, Lagos Island has always offered clues to the best version of the city's future. Three large concrete bridges bind Lagos Mainland to a cluster of islands collectively known as 'the Island'. Large plazas tower over high-walled mansions finished in faux-gold, because here a show of wealth and status, real or imagined, is far more lucrative than money.

From the neighbourhoods of Ikoyi, Victoria Island and Lekki, a thriving arts and nightlife scene has emerged, and this has nourished a new wave of new-media-savvy creatives who are no longer trying to mimic American artists, but proudly creating work in their own accents. Now the Island provides your fix of art galleries, club nights, and

overpriced smoothies flavoured with local spices that were never intended for crushed fruits. It's where you go for artisanal donuts and to hire boats that will speed you and your friends along the Atlantic Ocean to one of the many party beaches dotting the coast.

Ultimately, Lagos will only be able to say it's truly made it when the majority of the metropolis can dip into this pool of prosperity. When thousands of people are not living in houses perched on stilts stuck in a lagoon. Meanwhile, the city's identity remains fractured, in sharp, oddly shaped pieces – 21 million individual fragments that, when stitched into a somewhat coherent canvas, show a Lagos that is, if anything at all, remarkably full.

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Of all the truths about Lagos and the many complex cities on this complex continent forced to find their feet in no time at all, one speaks loudest to the current realities: these places are the products of an aftershock from the time Europe's most powerful countries conspired to divide and devour an entire continent.

The colonisers' plans required many steps. The first of which was to draw a map.

Part Two

By the Power Vested in Me, I Now Pronounce You a Country

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.

— Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

I.

A map is a divided thing.

To imagine a map is to picture a clean rendering of colour-coordinated division. Boundaries split seas from their source, towns from their twins, and people from their destinies. When performing at its best, a map should help locate individual entities that, ideally, exist in those locations. A generous spirit might allow a map some margin of error. But should you arrive at a desired spot and find a molehill where you needed a mountain, then what guided you there was not a map, but a fable in which you were, unsuspectingly, the main character.