Making futures? Technology start-ups in Singapore
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SUMMARY

This dissertation explores the cultural significance of *future* by examining the daily practices of early-stage technology start-ups in Singapore in the years 2010 to 2016. It examines how to study future ethnographically by researching *start-up futurities* - different types of futures that were related to and necessary for the practice of building technology start-up companies. While anthropology is known for studying culture and tradition - things typically associated with the past, futurities or differing types of how future is conceived, are as culturally charged as any other temporality.

Neoliberal imaginaries cast technology start-ups as drivers of growth and innovation, with celebrity entrepreneurs claiming the power to 'invent the future' and 'make a dent in the universe'. Singapore, often viewed both as a global innovation hub and as the "Other" of Silicon Valley, provides an interesting ground to explore how entrepreneurial imaginaries of the future are produced, circulated, contested, and negotiated by the various actors involved in fostering the new, digital economy.

This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Singapore between 2010 and 2016, supplemented with shorter trips to the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Burma. Fieldwork in Singapore centred on a start-up incubator program, 'The Accelerator,' and combined participant observation, semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs, investors, mentors, managers, and participation in events such as Start-up Weekends, hackathons, and networking sessions. The study also engaged digital sources, including start-up media, government policy documents, and writings by interlocutors themselves.

The analysis reveals six interrelated domains where start-up futurities took shape and were contested, each addressed in a separate chapter: global and regional imaginaries, national agendas, social organisation, start-up companies, and the individual, both as subjectivity and embodied experience. Across these domains, the chapters reveal the labor required to sustain start-up futurities as attainable, the limits entrepreneurs encountered, and specific insights for studying futurities ethnographically.

Chapter One examines the imaginary geography of technology entrepreneurship that positioned Singapore between Silicon Valley and Asia. Silicon Valley served as the template that set the future, while Asia was cast as catching up. Entrepreneurs in Singapore were both attracted to this vision and confronted with its contradictions: promises of scale amid Western economic decline attracted people and capital, yet the narrative reproduced neo-colonial and techno-orientalist tropes that denied temporal coevalness.

The chapter shows how claims about the future are also claims about power.

Chapter Two situates technology entrepreneurship within Singapore's political agenda and history, showing how the state framed the 'knowledge economy' as the nation's inevitable future and bolstered its claim to foresight and control. Ethnographic focus on projects like one-north and Blk 71 illustrates how infrastructure was used to engineer futurities, even as anxieties over overcrowding and inequality revealed the limits of this vision. The chapter argues that tightly managed futurities masked alternative futures and underscores the need to study future-making historically, locally, and materially.

Chapter Three highlights the role of shared futures in organising start-up sociality through the concept of the 'ecosystem.' Events such as start-up weekends and networking sessions generated enthusiasm, provided a social context for commodifying ideas about social change, and disciplined entrepreneurs into a venture-capital-driven approach. Framed in the language of sharing, passion, and openness, it masked the inequalities and hierarchies shaping entrepreneurial life and naturalised the extraction of unpaid labour and affective investment. The chapter argues that the ecosystem functioned as an ideal that facilitated the expansion and reproduction of capital.

Chapter Four explores how start-up entrepreneurs created and negotiated value as they transformed ideas into businesses. It shows how value was understood across personal, social, and economic registers, yet was increasingly disciplined by investors' expectations for scalability. Entrepreneurs were trained to embrace radical malleability—pivoting products and reframing futures in pursuit of "potential value."

This speculative orientation meant that ideas, even deeply personal or socially meaningful ones, had to be abandoned if they did not promise economic scalability. Open futurities energised entrepreneurial optimism, while empty futurities—focused narrowly on financial potential—often eroded this vitality.

Chapter Five examines how start-up futurities shape entrepreneurial subjectivity, casting entrepreneurs as "projects in the making." Oriented toward imagined futures, they learned to commodify experiences and identities into speculative value, cultivating flexibility, optimism, and the ability to reframe failure as opportunity. Yet these open futurities also demanded strict self-discipline, constant performance of certainty, and relentless time and affective management. The chapter shows that start-up futurities are lived through entrepreneurial selves—fueling ambition and aspirations but sustained by often hidden social, state, and corporate resources.

Chapter Six turns from subjectivity to embodiment, highlighting how futurities were lived and contested through gendered and racialised bodies. While entrepreneurs were expected to perform as flexible, future-oriented subjects, aspects of identity such as gender and race proved less malleable. Asian bodies and minds were often framed

as deficient and needing transformation to meet entrepreneurial norms implicitly modelled on Western white masculinity. Tracing struggles over bodily discipline, gendered expectations, and racialised performances, the chapter shows how futurities materialise in lived bodily contexts, reproducing global hierarchies and structural inequalities.

This dissertation contributes to the anthropology of temporality and capitalism by showing how start-up futurities—culturally specific ways of imagining the future—were lived, contested, and materialised in Singapore. Start-up futurities promised empowerment, innovation, and growth, but in practice, they depended on hard labour, hidden resources, and practices that reproduced the very inequalities they claimed to overcome. A central paradox runs through the chapters: futurities appeared open and available to all, yet were difficult to attain.

The analysis traces these dynamics across different scales: global imaginaries of "Asia as opportunity," national urban projects, social ecosystems, start-up companies, and entrepreneurial selves. At each scale, start-up futurities demanded radical malleability of ideas, places, subjects, and bodies. Yet they proved fragile. Infrastructures had enduring limits, the Accelerator struggled to cover basic costs, and gendered and racialised bodies could not be endlessly reshaped. The pursuit of start-up futurities generated both optimism and suffering, as seemingly limitless possibilities collided with material realities and structural inequalities that entrepreneurs often internalised as personal failure.

In Singapore's case, start-up futurities were crucial in sustaining the optimism necessary for entrepreneurial risk-taking while also serving as instruments of state planning and capitalist valuation. Far from being inevitable or universal, start-up futurities described here were contingent outcomes of overlapping state agendas, global discourses, and individual aspirations. Therefore, the dissertation argues for studying futurities not as universal or epochal, but as multiple, contested, and culturally and historically situated.