

Bridging the Gap: How can African Diaspora Networks, Like the African Business Association in Bradford, Drive Entrepreneurship and Economic Development in Africa?

Berisford Lewis¹

{B.lewis@yorksj.ac.uk}¹

York St John University, York, UK¹

Abstract. This paper examines the African Business Association (ABA) as a diaspora-led intermediary organisation connecting African and African-Caribbean entrepreneurs in the UK with economic opportunities across Africa. Using an autoethnographic narrative inquiry approach, the study analyses selected ABA initiatives undertaken between 2023 and 2025 through insider observations, organisational documents, and storytelling outputs. Grounded in Black feminist epistemology and theories of transnational Black consciousness, it shows that storytelling works as a tool for entrepreneurial learning, institutional navigation, and cross-border collaboration. A proposal of a dual-approach framework that combines awareness of colonial legacies with future-oriented economic action, positioning diaspora organisations as spaces of resistance and reconstruction. Although ABA operates within structural challenges such as limited access to finance, fragmented policy support, and institutional mistrust, it demonstrates how diaspora organisations utilise experiential knowledge, cultural capital, and collective networks to strengthen entrepreneurial infrastructure. The study contributes to diaspora entrepreneurship scholarship by highlighting the role of meso-level diaspora institutions, demonstrating the value of autoethnographic narrative inquiry in entrepreneurship research, and examining the relationship between historical consciousness and entrepreneurial agency within Black diaspora communities.

Keywords: African Diaspora; Entrepreneurship; Economic Development; Storytelling; Transnational Brokerage; Black Feminist Epistemology

1 Introduction

African diaspora entrepreneurs represent a significant yet persistently undervalued force within global economic systems. Operating across the UK, continental Africa, and transnational spaces in between, these entrepreneurs navigate complex institutional

landscapes shaped simultaneously by structural inequality and emerging opportunity. In the UK, African and African-Caribbean entrepreneurs continue to face well-documented barriers including restricted access to finance, underrepresentation within decision-making institutions, and limited integration into mainstream entrepreneurial ecosystems (Lloyds Banking Group, 2022; Channel 4 & Clear Channel, 2023; Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, 2024). These challenges reflect enduring racialised and postcolonial economic structures that systematically marginalise Black entrepreneurial activity.

Yet to frame African diaspora entrepreneurship solely through deficit narratives would be to obscure the considerable assets, resources, and opportunities that diaspora communities actively mobilise. African diaspora entrepreneurs possess unique transnational positioning, enabling them to bridge markets, cultures, and institutional contexts that remain opaque to others. They command cultural capital, linguistic fluency, and kinship networks that span continents. They carry experiential knowledge of navigating hostile institutional environments, cultivating what Collins (2000) terms an "outsider-within" standpoint that provides both critical awareness and strategic adaptability. Moreover, diaspora entrepreneurs increasingly operate within supportive policy environments that recognise their potential contribution to both host-country economies and development on the African continent (AUC/OECD, 2018; UNECA, 2020).

2 Literature review

2.1 African Diaspora Entrepreneurship: Constraints and Capabilities

Over the past decade, scholarship on African diaspora entrepreneurship has expanded considerably, reflecting both the growing economic significance of diaspora communities and increased policy attention to their development potential. The African diaspora is now recognised not only as a source of financial remittances estimated at over \$95 billion annually to the continent (World Bank, 2022) but as a strategic actor capable of facilitating transnational flows of skills, knowledge, technological innovation, and market access (Ratha et al., 2011; Gnimassoun & Anyanwu, 2019; Thondhlana et al., 2021).

Entrepreneurship scholarship has increasingly analysed diaspora economic activity through the lens of transnationalism, which emphasises how entrepreneurs operate simultaneously within multiple institutional, cultural, and economic contexts (Siar, 2013; Williams, 2018). African diaspora entrepreneurs are often embedded in host-country markets while maintaining strong social, cultural, and economic ties to their countries of origin. This dual embeddedness positions them as intermediaries capable of translating practices, norms, and opportunities across borders, reducing information asymmetries and facilitating trust in otherwise fragmented markets (Nyame-Asiamah et al., 2020).

However, this transnational positioning exists within profoundly unequal global structures. In the UK, research consistently documents racialised inequalities in access to finance, with Black entrepreneurs receiving significantly lower loan approval rates and smaller investment amounts compared to white counterparts (Lloyds Banking Group, 2022). African and African-Caribbean entrepreneurs report systematic exclusion from professional networks, mentorship opportunities, and business support programmes (Channel 4 & Clear Channel, 2023; Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, 2024). These constraints mirror challenges documented across the African continent, including limited access to capital, weak institutional environments, regulatory complexity, and infrastructural deficits (Negash, 2012; Ogbo & Nwachukwu, 2012; Muriithi, 2017).

Critical development scholars argue that these barriers cannot be understood outside the historical and political economy of colonialism and its afterlives (Avong & Garba, 2021). The enduring effects of extractive economic systems, externally imposed development models, and epistemic marginalisation continue to shape entrepreneurial ecosystems in Africa and the diaspora. Pan-African thinkers such as Walter Rodney, Frantz Fanon, and Claudia Jones foregrounded the relationship between economic underdevelopment and political domination, framing entrepreneurship not merely as market activity but as a site of resistance, agency, and reconstruction (Muchie, et al., 2013).

Yet contemporary scholarship increasingly challenges deficit-only framings of African entrepreneurship. Recent literature emphasises opportunity structures emerging from regional integration initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area, digital transformation, youth-led innovation ecosystems, and growing South-South economic cooperation (AUC/OECD, 2018; UNECA, 2020; Rushambwa, 2022; Elumelu, ND). Within this perspective, diaspora actors are viewed as institutional entrepreneurs capable of mobilising alternative resources, narratives, and governance practices to challenge exclusionary systems.

This dual reality of constraint and capability forms the empirical foundation for understanding diaspora entrepreneurship. Yet the literature remains limited in three critical respects. First, it focuses disproportionately on individual entrepreneurs or macro-level remittance flows, with insufficient attention to meso-level organisations that structure, sustain, and institutionalise diaspora engagement (Mudungwe, 2017; Williams, 2018). Second, it rarely examines how diaspora organisations operationalise the relationship between historical consciousness of colonial injustice and future-oriented entrepreneurial action. Third, it under-theorises the role of narrative and storytelling as organisational mechanisms through which knowledge transfer, identity formation, and collective mobilisation occur.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Black Feminist Epistemology and The Black Atlantic

This study addresses these gaps by grounding analysis in two interconnected theoretical traditions, Black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000) and theories of transnational Black consciousness (Gilroy, 1993). Together, these frameworks provide conceptual tools for understanding how diaspora organisations navigate the tension between historical awareness and future-oriented action, between structural constraint and entrepreneurial agency.

Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) articulates an epistemological framework centred on the knowledge production practices of Black women who occupy "outsider-within" social locations. Collins argues that Black women's historical position simultaneously within and external to dominant institutional structures grants them a unique standpoint from which to critique power while also navigating its operations. This outsider-within location generates distinct epistemological resources; experiential knowledge grounded in lived reality rather than abstract theory; dialogical practices that privilege conversation and narrative over written texts; an ethic of care and personal accountability in knowledge production; and dialectical thinking that refuses binary oppositions in favour of both-and complexity.

Applied to diaspora entrepreneurship, Black feminist epistemology illuminates several critical dynamics. First, it positions African and African-Caribbean entrepreneurs as possessing epistemic advantage precisely because of their marginality. Their exclusion from mainstream financial institutions, business networks, and policy-making processes generates critical consciousness of how these systems operate, whom they serve, and where vulnerabilities exist. Second, it foregrounds experiential knowledge and storytelling as legitimate and valuable forms of knowing, challenging dominant entrepreneurship research that privileges quantitative metrics, formal business plans, and standardised measures of success. Third, it emphasises collective rather than individualistic approaches to knowledge and economic activity, resonating with African communitarian traditions and diaspora mutual aid practices.

Most significantly for this study, Collins' framework validates dialectical thinking—the capacity to hold seemingly contradictory realities in productive tension. Diaspora entrepreneurs must simultaneously critique the structural injustices that constrain their economic participation while pragmatically navigating those same structures to build viable enterprises. They must remember histories of exploitation and exclusion while constructing futures oriented toward prosperity and integration. Black feminist epistemology suggests this is not contradiction but adaptive complexity, a sophisticated form of consciousness that enables survival and advancement within hostile environments.

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) complements Collins' epistemological framework by theorising the transnational dimensions of Black consciousness and cultural production. Gilroy argues that Black identity in the modern world is

fundamentally shaped by the experience of forced migration, slavery, colonialism, and ongoing displacement. Rather than viewing Black culture as rooted in fixed geographical locations, Gilroy emphasises "routes" over "roots", the circulations, exchanges, and hybrid formations that emerge from transnational movement.

The Black Atlantic framework offers several insights for understanding diaspora entrepreneurship. First, it positions diaspora identity not as diluted or inauthentic but as a distinct formation with its own coherence and creativity. Second, Gilroy's emphasis on double consciousness highlights how Black subjects develop sophisticated capacities for seeing themselves through multiple perspectives simultaneously, their own self-understanding, the perspective of the dominant white gaze, and the viewpoints of various Black communities across the diaspora. Third, Gilroy (1993: p.19) theorises the relationship between memory and futurity within Black diaspora consciousness, arguing that Black Atlantic cultures are characterised by "the desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" while simultaneously maintaining a sense of embeddedness in the local and connection to African origins.

Together, Collins (2000) and Gilroy (1993) provide theoretical resources for articulating what this paper terms a dual approach to diaspora entrepreneurship, the simultaneous integration of historical consciousness regarding colonial legacies, racial capitalism, and structural inequality with future-oriented economic action aimed at wealth creation, market participation, and institutional transformation. This dual approach operates at multiple levels, epistemologically, it combines critique with pragmatism; temporally, it honours memory of past injustices while constructing alternative futures; spatially, it maintains connection to African origins while building economic capacity in diaspora locations. Critically, this dual approach is not a reconciliation of opposites but a dialectical engagement with contradiction, treating tensions as productive sites of creativity, adaptation, and resistance.

A growing body of scholarship recognises that diaspora contributions to development extend far beyond financial remittances to encompass knowledge transfer (Negash, 2012; Siar, 2013). Recent scholarship highlights the importance of narrative and experiential forms of knowledge in entrepreneurial learning, particularly among marginalised groups (Frei & Morriss, 2024). Storytelling functions as a pedagogical mechanism that translates abstract business concepts into culturally resonant, actionable insights. This is especially relevant within African and African-Caribbean contexts, where oral traditions have historically served as key modes of knowledge production and transmission (Anene and Njoku, 2018). Despite this, storytelling remains under-theorised in mainstream entrepreneurship and development research, where positivist and quantitative approaches continue to dominate.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the African Business Association as a case of diaspora-led institutional entrepreneurship that mobilises storytelling to facilitate knowledge exchange, institutional navigation, and cross-border collaboration.

Theoretically, it articulates a dual approach framework grounded in Black feminist epistemology and Black Atlantic consciousness. Methodologically, it employs autoethnographic narrative inquiry to generate insights into organisational dynamics that conventional research approaches obscure.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design: Autoethnographic Narrative Inquiry

This study adopts an autoethnographic narrative inquiry approach to examine the African Business Association (ABA) as a diaspora-led intermediary organisation. As Ellis et al., (2011) and Adams et al., (2015) observed autoethnography is a qualitative research method that treats the researcher's own experience as primary data, connecting personal biography to broader cultural, political, and social meanings. Narrative inquiry treats stories as legitimate sources of knowledge through which individuals and organisations make sense of their social worlds (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008).

This methodological choice is theoretically grounded. First, it aligns with Black feminist epistemology's validation of experiential knowledge and insider standpoints as sources of epistemic authority (Collins, 2000). Rather than treating proximity to the research subject as bias to be minimised, autoethnographic approaches recognise that intimate knowledge, relational embeddedness, and personal investment can generate insights unavailable to detached observers. Second, it resonates with decolonial methodological traditions that challenge Western research paradigms privileging objectivity, extractive data collection, and researcher-subject hierarchies (Smith, 2012; Chilisa, 2012). Third, it responds to the empirical reality that no one outside ABA's leadership possesses the depth of knowledge regarding the organisation's evolution, strategic decision-making, and internal debates necessary for this analysis.

3.2 Researcher Positionality

I occupy a dual role as both researcher and organisational insider, having served as Director of International Affairs and Membership within ABA during the study period (2023-2025). Building on the work of Aldred (2005) I argue that certain organisational and cultural stories require insider voices for legitimate telling. The story of ABA as a diaspora organisation navigating racism, institutional exclusion, and transnational economic engagement requires a storyteller positioned within these experiences. I bring to this research not only observational data but lived knowledge of what it means to be an African-descendant in Britain, to encounter racialised barriers in entrepreneurial contexts, and to maintain connection to continental Africa while building economic capacity in the diaspora.

Shah (2025) observes that insider positioning carries risks of over-identification, uncritical celebration, and analytical blind spots but it can also improve contextual insight but introduces risks of over-identification and hence the need for ongoing

reflexivity and critical distance. To address these concerns, I employ several reflexive practices: maintaining a reflexive research journal documenting evolving interpretations and analytical assumptions; triangulating interpretations against organisational documents and informal conversations with other ABA members during networking and training events; deliberately cultivating analytical distance during the interpretation phase; and remaining transparent about my dual role and the tensions inherent in studying an organisation I help lead.

3.3 Case Selection and Data Sources

ABA represents what Yin (2018) terms a "critical case" a single case with particular theoretical significance warranting intensive study. ABA represents a newly emerging form of diaspora organisation that explicitly bridges entrepreneurial support in the UK with economic development engagement on the African continent. The case is analysed as an embedded single case, examining multiple initiatives delivered between 2023 to 2025, organised around three analytical dimensions: knowledge transfer and entrepreneurial learning, access to finance and institutional navigation, and cross-border collaboration and diasporic brokerage. According to Grenier (2023) the embedded case study design enables in-depth exploration of complex phenomena within real-world contexts by allowing multiple units of analysis within a single bounded case, providing rich contextual insight and conceptual refinement in ways that are analytically rigorous and theoretically productive.

Data collection occurred through four interrelated qualitative sources. First, participant observation as a director in ABA's activities across business workshops, conferences, trade exhibitions, legal advisory sessions, and cultural events, recorded through field notes and reflective memos. Second, organisational documents including event programmes, promotional materials, strategic planning documents, social media content, and correspondence with partners. Third, narrative outputs from recorded podcasts (African in the Diaspora Podcast), story-sharing sessions during events, and public statements by ABA leadership. Fourth, dialogical encounters through ongoing informal conversations with ABA members, collaborating entrepreneurs, mentors, and institutional partners.

3.4 Data Analysis

I analysed data using thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), which preserves the integrity of individual stories while identifying shared patterns and organisational logics. Analysis proceeded in three iterative stages: narrative familiarisation through repeated reading of field notes and reviewing documents to identify key storylines and emergent themes; thematic mapping through coding narratives according to both deductive themes aligned with the three analytical dimensions and inductive themes emerging from the data; and cross-case synthesis comparing narratives and events across time and initiative type to identify patterns.

This autoethnographic narrative inquiry approach makes several methodological contributions. First, it demonstrates how insider researchers can produce rigorous, contextually grounded knowledge when transparency and reflexivity are maintained. Second, it illustrates the analytical value of treating storytelling simultaneously as data, method, and organisational practice. Third, it challenges epistemic hierarchies that marginalise experiential knowledge and oral traditions in favour of quantitative metrics. However, the approach also carries limitations. Findings are not statistically generalisable but aim for analytical transferability, insights that may resonate with similar diaspora-led organisations operating in comparable contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4 Results

This section presents findings organised around three analytically derived dimensions: knowledge transfer and entrepreneurial learning, access to finance and institutional navigation, and cross-border collaboration and diasporic brokerage. Across these dimensions, storytelling emerged as a recurring organisational mechanism through which entrepreneurial confidence, collective learning, and institutional capacity were cultivated.

4.1 Knowledge Transfer and Entrepreneurial Learning

Across the data, storytelling consistently functioned as a primary mechanism for entrepreneurial learning. The June 2023 workshop "Funding Business: Through Bank Loans, Grants and Funding" exemplifies this dynamic. The workshop's explicit purpose was to provide technical information about funding mechanisms, loan applications, grant eligibility criteria, financial projections. However, participant engagement revealed that information transfer alone was insufficient. Entrepreneurs needed not just knowledge of procedures but confidence that they could navigate systems historically closed to them.

The workshop format integrated technical presentations with peer storytelling sessions where established entrepreneurs shared narratives of their funding journeys, including rejections, misunderstandings of criteria, and eventual successes. These stories performed critical pedagogical work. First, they normalised struggle and rejection as collective rather than individual experiences, countering internalised narratives of inadequacy. One participant reflected: "Hearing someone who looks like me, from a similar background, talk about being rejected three times before getting funding, it made me realise rejection isn't personal failure. It's part of the process." This reframing transformed rejection from evidence of unworthiness to expected obstacle requiring persistence. In other words, entrepreneurs need to embrace a different mindset and ways of thinking to operate effectively in a diverse ever-changing business world.

Second, stories translated abstract procedural knowledge into culturally resonant, actionable insights. Rather than simply explaining that business plans require financial

projections, storytellers described their own confusion navigating Excel spreadsheets, seeking help from community members with accounting knowledge, and learning through trial and error. This narrative embedding made technical knowledge accessible, demonstrating that entrepreneurial competence is learned rather than innate, collective rather than individual.

Third, storytelling built entrepreneurial self-efficacy, the belief that one possesses capacity to succeed despite obstacles. Stories of entrepreneurs who began with limited capital, faced discrimination, yet built viable enterprises provided what Bandura (1997) terms "vicarious experience" participants saw others like themselves succeeding and inferred their own capability.

The evolution of ABA's learning infrastructure illustrates how episodic storytelling can become institutionalised knowledge transfer. The 2024 launch of the Yorkshire Entrepreneurial Incubation Hub and the African in the Diaspora Podcast marked a shift from event-based workshops to sustained learning platforms. The Incubation Hub provides ongoing mentorship, business development support, and peer networking. The podcast archives entrepreneurial stories, making them accessible beyond immediate participants.

Analysis of podcast interviews reveals a narrative structure consistently present across entrepreneurial journeys, initial aspiration shaped by personal or community needs; encounter with institutional barriers; adaptive response drawing on available resources; incremental success despite continued constraints; and commitment to supporting other diaspora entrepreneurs. This narrative arc performs ideological work, constructing entrepreneurship not as individual wealth accumulation but as collective advancement and community responsibility, a framing resonant with both African communitarian values and Black radical traditions of mutual aid (Siddiqui, 2024; Van Breda, 2019).

4.2 Access to Finance and Institutional Navigation

Access to finance emerged as the most persistent concern across all phases of ABA's development. Narratives repeatedly foregrounded experiences of exclusion from mainstream financial institutions, uncertainty regarding eligibility criteria, encounters with discriminatory treatment, and reliance on informal community support. These findings mirror documented structural barriers (Lloyds Banking Group, 2022; Channel 4 & Clear Channel, 2023) while also revealing the emotional and psychological dimensions of financial exclusion.

Entrepreneurs described finance rejection not merely as resource constraint but as racialised invalidation of their business ideas, capabilities, and worth. One entrepreneur shared: "When the bank said no, I felt like they were saying I'm not good enough, my idea isn't good enough, people like me don't belong in business." This affective dimension reveals how mainstream institutional exclusion operates not only through resource denial but through symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1992) that undermines entrepreneurial identity and confidence.

ABA's interventions did not directly resolve funding constraints; no diaspora organisation can substitute for systemic policy change and increased capital access. However, ABA activities altered how entrepreneurs interpreted and navigated financial systems. The 2023 funding workshop, subsequent networking events connecting entrepreneurs with community lenders and micro-finance organisations, and ongoing mentorship support reframed financial access as a strategic process requiring specific knowledge, networks, and persistence rather than as an insurmountable barrier or personal failure.

Follow-up conversations indicated increased willingness to engage with banks and grant schemes even where outcomes remained uncertain. Entrepreneurs reported submitting multiple applications rather than internalising initial rejection as final verdict. They described strategically tailoring applications to funding criteria, seeking feedback on rejections, and building relationships with loan officers over time. This shift from passive exclusion to active navigation reflects what Sarasvathy (2008) terms "effectuation" entrepreneurial action based on available means rather than predetermined goals.

Critically, narratives also revealed how entrepreneurs developed alternative financing strategies when mainstream institutions remained closed. Rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs), common across African and Caribbean communities, enabled capital accumulation outside formal banking. Community investment networks pooled resources to fund diaspora members' enterprises (Sepulveda, 2021) where family remittances substituted for commercial loans. While these informal mechanisms reflect resourcefulness and collective solidarity, they also illustrate the double burden diaspora entrepreneurs face, they must be more creative, more networked, and more resilient than their white counterparts simply to access equivalent starting capital.

The 2025 introduction of ASK: A Lawyer further illustrates how ABA responded to the intersection of legal complexity and financial access. Entrepreneurs increasingly recognised that investment readiness required not only business plans and financial projections but proper legal structuring, company registration, intellectual property protection, contract understanding, compliance with regulatory requirements. However, legal services remained prohibitively expensive for early-stage entrepreneurs, and mainstream legal advisors often lacked cultural competence to understand diaspora business contexts.

ASK: A Lawyer provided pro bono and low-cost legal consultations specifically for African and African-Caribbean entrepreneurs. Critically, these consultations were framed not as charity but as investment in community economic development and as correction for systemic barriers. Legal advisors participating in the initiative included both diaspora lawyers committed to community service and non-Black allies committed to equity. Sessions covered business formation, contract review, employment law, and intellectual property. Hayibor, (2024) identify these as some of the major challenges facing African entrepreneurs in Glasgow.

Participant narratives emphasised that the value of these sessions extended beyond information provision. Entrepreneurs described feeling "understood" in ways mainstream legal consultations did not provide. One participant explained: "When I went to a regular solicitor, I felt they were judging my business idea, like it wasn't serious enough. Here, they got what I was trying to do, why it mattered to the community." This cultural resonance speaks to Collins' (2000) concept of the outsider-within, where diaspora entrepreneurs and diaspora lawyers share experiential knowledge that facilitates trust unavailable in interactions with outsiders.

4.3 Cross-Border Collaboration and Diasporic Brokerage

A third major finding concerns ABA's evolving role as a diasporic broker facilitating cross-border engagement between UK-based entrepreneurs and economic opportunities on the African continent. This brokerage function developed gradually, reflecting organisational maturation from domestic focus to transnational orientation.

In 2023, early ABA activities positioned Africa primarily as symbolic and aspirational space rather than immediate site of commercial engagement. Entrepreneurs expressed connection to African heritage, concern for continental development, and desire to contribute to African economies. However, practical barriers including limited information about African markets, uncertainty about regulatory environments, concerns about corruption, and lack of institutional connections kept Africa distant. Narratives from this period reveal what might be termed "aspirational transnationalism" strong identification with Africa combined with limited concrete engagement.

The 2024 participation in the Commonwealth Trade and Investment Conference and the Annual Conference on "Integrating SMEs into Global Business Trends" marked a turning point. These forums provided structured platforms where diaspora entrepreneurs engaged directly with African trade officials, investment promotion agencies, embassy representatives, and continental entrepreneurs. Critically, ABA positioned itself not merely as participant but as institutional broker facilitating introductions, translating expectations, and building relational trust.

Field notes from the Commonwealth Conference document how diaspora entrepreneurs' questions shifted from general interest (What opportunities exist in Nigeria?) to specific inquiries (What are the regulatory requirements for food imports into Lagos? Who handles customs clearance?). This shift from abstract curiosity to concrete planning reflects what Gilroy (1993) describes as movement along "routes" rather than fixation on "roots", diaspora engagement oriented toward future economic activity rather than nostalgic connection to origins.

However, the data also reveal persistent challenges in actualising cross-border collaboration. African government representatives often treated diaspora entrepreneurs with ambivalence, simultaneously desiring diaspora investment while viewing diaspora actors as outsiders insufficiently committed to continental development. UK-based entrepreneurs described frustration with bureaucratic complexity, opaque regulatory

processes, and difficulty establishing trust with continental partners. The very transnational positioning that grants diaspora entrepreneurs certain advantages also generates suspicion about their commitment and understanding of contemporary continental realities.

ABA's brokerage function involved navigating these suspicions. By 2025, ABA had established formal partnerships with several African embassies in the UK and investment promotion agencies. These relationships positioned ABA as a legitimate intermediary capable of vetting diaspora entrepreneurs, facilitating due diligence, and providing cultural translation in both directions explaining UK business practices to African partners and African regulatory contexts to UK entrepreneurs.

Storytelling played a critical role in this brokerage work. The African in the Diaspora Podcast featured entrepreneurs who had successfully navigated cross-border trade, sharing practical knowledge about shipping logistics, customs procedures, partnership formation, and regulatory compliance. These stories functioned as "institutional road maps" narratives that reveal hidden knowledge about how systems actually work rather than how they are formally supposed to work. While such knowledge might be excluded from formal business education, it proved essential for successful transnational engagement.

Cultural events also supported brokerage functions in less obvious ways. ABA organised exhibitions celebrating African fashion, food, music, and art. These events reinforced diaspora identity, creating spaces where economic activity was inseparable from cultural belonging. They attracted diverse participants including non-African allies, policy makers, and potential investors, providing networking opportunities that transcended purely commercial transactions. Most significantly, cultural events performed symbolic work, asserting that African diaspora entrepreneurship is not simply imitating Western business models but expressing distinct cultural values, aesthetics, and ways of organising economic life.

By 2025, ABA's activities reflected an expanded brokerage function spanning multiple domains: connecting entrepreneurs to continental markets; linking African government agencies to diaspora talent and investment; facilitating knowledge exchange between diaspora entrepreneurs and continental innovators; and positioning Bradford as a node within transnational African entrepreneurial networks. This evolution illustrates how diaspora organisations can develop from informal community support networks into institutional actors with recognised legitimacy and capacity to shape cross-border economic flows.

4.4 Cross-Case Synthesis: Storytelling as Organisational Infrastructure

Synthesising across the three analytical dimensions, a clear pattern emerges regarding storytelling's organisational function. In ABA's early phase (2023), storytelling primarily served to validate individual experience and build collective identity. Entrepreneurs who had felt isolated in their struggles discovered through narrative

exchange that their experiences were shared. This validation performed crucial emotional and psychological work, countering internalised narratives of inadequacy and building confidence to persist.

As ABA matured (2024), storytelling evolved into a mechanism for knowledge codification and circulation. The Incubation Hub and Podcast systematically collected, curated, and disseminated entrepreneurial narratives, transforming ephemeral conversational knowledge into accessible organisational infrastructure. Stories became pedagogical resources that could be revisited, analysed, and applied across contexts.

By 2025, storytelling had become a form of institutional brokerage. Stories functioned to translate between different institutional contexts, to build trust across suspicious divides, and to make visible hidden knowledge that formal education excludes. This progression from validation to codification to brokerage illustrates how narrative practices can underpin organisational development, transforming grassroots movements into institutional actors.

5 Discussion

This study examined how the African Business Association functions as a diaspora-led intermediary organisation bridging African and African-Caribbean entrepreneurs in the UK with economic opportunities on the African continent. The findings illuminate three key contributions: empirical insights into diaspora organisational practices, theoretical articulation of a dual approach framework, and methodological validation of storytelling as rigorous research practice.

5.1 Storytelling as Dialectical Organisational Practice

The findings demonstrate that storytelling within ABA functions not as ancillary communication but as core organisational mechanism through which knowledge transfer, institutional navigation, and cross-border brokerage are enacted. This extends existing scholarship on experiential learning and diaspora knowledge transfer (Collins, 2000; Negash, 2012; Siar, 2013; Van Manen, 2016) by showing how storytelling operates dialectically, addressing both the psychological dimensions of entrepreneurship (confidence, identity, belonging) and the material dimensions (procedural knowledge, institutional access, resource mobilisation).

Collins' (2000) Black feminist epistemology provides theoretical resources for understanding this dialectical function. Collins argues that marginalised groups develop distinct epistemological practices including dialogue, narrative, and experiential knowledge that challenge abstract, decontextualised ways of knowing. Within ABA, storytelling embeds technical business knowledge within lived experience, making information culturally resonant and actionable. Entrepreneurs learn not just what to do but how others like them navigated similar challenges, what emotional responses they experienced, and what meaning they made of their struggles.

This narrative-embedded learning challenges dominant entrepreneurship pedagogy focused on business plans, financial projections, and market analysis. While ABA activities include these technical elements, they situate them within stories that address the whole person, entrepreneur as cultural subject, as racialised body encountering discrimination, as community member with obligations beyond profit maximisation. This holistic approach reflects what Collins terms an "ethic of care" knowledge production practices that honour personal accountability and relational connection.

Importantly, storytelling within ABA also performs ideological work, constructing particular understandings of what entrepreneurship means and what purposes it serves. Across the narratives analysed, entrepreneurship is consistently framed not primarily as individual wealth accumulation but as collective advancement, community responsibility, and response to structural exclusion. This framing resonates with both African communitarian traditions and Black radical politics of economic self-determination, positioning entrepreneurs not as self-interested market actors but as agents of community economic development and resistance to racial capitalism.

5.2 Institutional Navigation as Creative Adaptation

The findings regarding access to finance and institutional navigation reveal a more complex picture than simple exclusion narratives suggest. While ABA members face persistent structural barriers documented extensively in the literature (Lloyds Banking Group, 2022; Channel 4 & Clear Channel, 2023), they do not passively accept exclusion. Instead, they develop sophisticated navigation strategies, collective sense-making to demystify institutional processes, strategic persistence through multiple application attempts, alternative resource mobilisation through community networks, and cultural translation to present culturally specific business models in language mainstream institutions recognise.

This creative adaptation exemplifies what Sarasvathy (2008) terms "effectuation" entrepreneurship based on available means rather than predetermined goals. Effectuation theory argues that successful entrepreneurs work with resources at hand, turn constraints into opportunities, and build strategic partnerships to access capabilities they lack individually. Diaspora entrepreneurs epitomise effectuation: excluded from mainstream finance, they create ROSCAs; unable to afford legal services, they pool resources for community legal clinics; lacking institutional connections, they build diaspora networks that substitute for formal infrastructure.

However, while effectuation theory celebrates entrepreneurial creativity, critical analysis must also acknowledge the injustice that necessitates such creativity. Diaspora entrepreneurs should not have to be more creative, more resourceful, and more resilient than white counterparts simply to access equivalent opportunities. Their adaptation reflects both agency and constraint, both resistance and accommodation. Black feminist epistemology's dialectical thinking enables holding both realities simultaneously, celebrating diaspora entrepreneurs' ingenuity while condemning the structural racism that makes such ingenuity necessary for survival.

Moreover, the findings reveal that institutional navigation involves not only procedural knowledge but emotional and psychological capacities. Entrepreneurs must manage the affective toll of repeated rejection, maintain confidence despite discriminatory treatment, and persist when rational calculation might suggest abandoning entrepreneurial aspirations. ABA's value in this context lies not in eliminating barriers but in providing emotional support, collective sense-making, and strategic knowledge that make navigation possible. The organisation creates what might be termed resilient entrepreneurial subjectivity, the psychological and social capacity to persist despite hostile environments.

5.3 Diasporic Brokerage and Transnational Positioning

ABA's evolution toward cross-border brokerage illustrates how diaspora organisations develop capacity over time, moving from domestic support networks to transnational institutional actors. This progression challenges assumptions that diaspora engagement with African development is either automatic or impossible, suggesting instead that effective transnational engagement requires deliberate institutional development, strategic positioning, and trust-building across multiple constituencies.

Gilroy's (1993) Black Atlantic framework illuminates the complexities of this transnational positioning. Gilroy argues that diaspora identity is neither simply African nor simply British but constitutes a distinct formation shaped by circulation, exchange, and hybridity. Diaspora entrepreneurs occupy what might be termed a third space, simultaneously inside and outside both UK and African contexts. This positioning grants certain advantages but also generates suspicions about authenticity, commitment, and belonging.

ABA's brokerage work involves managing these suspicions while leveraging transnational positioning strategically. By establishing formal partnerships with African embassies, investment agencies, and business associations, ABA gains institutional legitimacy that transcends individual entrepreneurs' informal networks. By systematically collecting and disseminating knowledge about cross-border trade through podcasts and events, ABA reduces information asymmetries that inhibit diaspora-continental economic engagement. By providing cultural translation in both directions, ABA performs essential bridging work that neither UK mainstream institutions nor African government agencies adequately provide.

The cultural events organised by ABA also deserve theoretical attention. These events are often dismissed as peripheral to "real" economic activity, yet the findings suggest cultural events perform critical functions, reinforcing diaspora identity and belonging, creating networking opportunities that transcend purely commercial logic, and asserting that African entrepreneurship expresses distinct cultural values rather than simply imitating Western business models. This cultural dimension speaks to a tension within development discourse between instrumental and intrinsic approaches. Black feminist epistemology and Black Atlantic consciousness resist choosing between these framings, instead maintaining that economic activity and cultural expression are

inseparable. Entrepreneurship is not simply market activity but a form of cultural practice and capital, a way of being in the world that carries meanings extending beyond profit maximisation.

5.4 Articulating a Dual Approach Framework

The study's central theoretical contribution is articulation of a dual approach framework that integrates historical consciousness regarding colonial legacies and structural racism with future-oriented entrepreneurial action. This framework emerges from the empirical observation that ABA's organisational practices simultaneously acknowledge historical injustice while actively constructing alternative economic futures.

Theoretically, this dual approach synthesises Collins' (2000) dialectical thinking with Gilroy's (1993) analysis of memory and futurity within Black Atlantic consciousness. Collins argues that Black feminist thought maintains "both-and" complexity, refusing binary oppositions that force choice between critique and pragmatism, between identity and solidarity across difference, between acknowledging oppression and celebrating resistance. Gilroy demonstrates how Black Atlantic cultures maintain historical memory of slavery, colonialism, and ongoing racism while simultaneously creating new cultural and political formations oriented toward liberation and possibility.

Critically, the dual approach is not a reconciliation or synthesis that resolves contradiction. It is dialectical engagement with ongoing tension. Diaspora entrepreneurs never fully escape structural constraint; they negotiate it, work around it, resist it, but cannot individually eliminate it. Yet they also do not simply reproduce or accommodate structural inequality; they create alternative economic spaces, build institutions that challenge exclusion, and imagine futures different from oppressive orientations.

This framework contributes to development scholarship by refusing deficit narratives that portray African diaspora communities solely through constraint and vulnerability while also avoiding celebratory narratives that ignore structural barriers. It offers a more nuanced understanding of how marginalised groups navigate hostile environments, neither powerless victims nor triumphant heroes, but complex agents operating within profound constraint yet still exercising meaningful creativity, building community institutions, and constructing alternative visions of economic possibility.

5.5 Methodological Implications: Autoethnography and Epistemic Justice

Beyond empirical and theoretical contributions, this study makes methodological claims regarding the value of autoethnographic narrative inquiry for entrepreneurship and development research. By positioning myself as insider-researcher whose lived experience constitutes primary data, the study challenges dominant research paradigms privileging detached observation, quantitative metrics, and researcher-subject hierarchies.

This methodological choice is informed by decolonial scholarship arguing that Western research traditions have historically functioned as tools of colonial knowledge extraction (Smith, 2012; Chilisa, 2012). Autoethnographic narrative inquiry responds to these calls by treating experiential knowledge, personal narrative, and relational embeddedness as legitimate sources of rigorous scholarship.

The study also demonstrates that insider positioning, often treated as methodological limitation requiring mitigation, can provide epistemic advantages. My role as ABA director granted access to organisational dynamics, strategic deliberations, and tacit knowledge unavailable to external researchers. It enabled trust-based relationships facilitating honest conversation about challenges, failures, and uncertainties that participants might not share with outsiders.

This methodological approach contributes to ongoing debates about what counts as rigorous research and whose knowledge is valued within academic institutions. It demonstrates that scholarship grounded in lived experience, committed to community accountability, and attentive to power dynamics can generate insights of both analytical value and practical relevance. It models what Harding (1993) terms "strong objectivity" objectivity achieved not through detachment but through reflexive acknowledgment of standpoint, making visible rather than obscuring the social location from which knowledge is produced.

6 Conclusion

This paper has examined the African Business Association as a diaspora-led intermediary organisation operating at the intersection of entrepreneurship, knowledge exchange, and cross-border engagement. Through autoethnographic narrative inquiry grounded in Black feminist epistemology and Black Atlantic consciousness theory, the study demonstrates how storytelling functions as a strategic organisational mechanism enabling entrepreneurial learning, institutional navigation, and diasporic brokerage.

The findings reveal that diaspora organisations like ABA address not only the material constraints facing African and African-Caribbean entrepreneurs, access to finance, legal complexity, institutional exclusion but also the psychological, emotional, and cultural dimensions of entrepreneurial experience. By creating spaces where entrepreneurs share struggles, exchange knowledge, and construct collective identities, ABA builds what might be termed resilient entrepreneurial subjectivity, the capacity to persist despite hostile environments, to maintain cultural authenticity while navigating mainstream institutions, and to connect individual economic activity to broader projects of community advancement and social justice.

Theoretically, the study articulates a dual approach framework that integrates historical consciousness of colonial legacies and structural racism with future-oriented entrepreneurial action. This framework, grounded in the dialectical thinking of Black feminist epistemology and the transnational consciousness theorised within Black

Atlantic studies, refuses binary oppositions that force choice between critique and pragmatism, between remembering injustice and building futures, between cultural identity and economic integration. Instead, it positions these tensions as productive sites of creativity, adaptation, and resistance, enabling diaspora entrepreneurs and organisations to navigate profound constraint while still exercising meaningful agency.

Methodologically, the study validates autoethnographic narrative inquiry as rigorous research practice capable of generating contextually grounded, analytically valuable insights into entrepreneurship and development processes often obscured by conventional methodologies. By treating storytelling simultaneously as data, method, and organisational practice, the research demonstrates how narrative approaches can address epistemic injustices within academic knowledge production while yielding practical insights relevant to diaspora communities and development practitioners.

The study's limitations point toward future research directions. As a single-case study, findings are not statistically generalisable but offer analytical insights transferable to similar diaspora contexts. Future research might examine how diaspora organisations in different geographical locations or sectors operationalise the dual approach framework, how storytelling functions evolve as organisations mature beyond early developmental stages, or how policy interventions might better support meso-level diaspora institutions. Comparative studies examining multiple diaspora organisations across different national contexts would strengthen understanding of the mechanisms through which diaspora networks drive entrepreneurship and economic development.

Ultimately, this research contributes to reimagining diaspora entrepreneurship not as isolated individual activity, but as collective institutional practice embedded in histories of resistance, animated by visions of justice, and sustained through narrative traditions that honour lived experience as legitimate knowledge. In doing so, it offers both analytical framework and practical insights for supporting diaspora organisations as vital actors in transnational economic development and as sites where alternative economic futures are imagined and constructed.

References

- [1] Adams, T. E., Holman Jones, S., & Ellis, C. (2015). *Autoethnography*. Oxford University Press.
- [2] Achieng, R. (2014) Can We Speak of African Agency?: APRM and Africa's Agenda 2063. *African Sociological Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 49-64.
- [3] Akhtar, S. (2025) Bradford to welcome Ugandan High Commissioner to foster stronger partnerships for a prosperous future. <https://www.asianstandard.co.uk/bradford-to-welcome-ugandan-high-commissioner-to-foster-stronger-partnerships-for-a-prosperous-future/> (Accessed 05/05/25).

- [4] Aldred, J. (2005) *Respect: Understanding Caribbean British Christianity*. Epworth Press.
- [5] African Development Bank (AfDB). (2021). The Role of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Africa's Economic Development. AfDB Report.
- [6] African Business Association, Yorkshire <https://abfb.co.uk/> (Accessed 05/05/25).
- [7] Agenda 2063 (2015): *The Africa We Want*. African Union Commission.
- [8] Anene, C. P., & Njoku, C. U. (2018). *Communal oral historians as reservoirs and curators of indigenous historical scholarship*. *Tansian University Journal of Arts, Management and Social Sciences*, 5(1), pp.2449-0334.
- [9] AUC/OECD (2018), Africa's Development Dynamics 2018: Growth, Jobs and Inequalities, AUC, Addis Ababa/OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264302501-en>.
- [10] Avong, A and Garba, D. (2012) African and Regional Integration: The Challenge. *UZU Journal* Vol. 8, N0.2, pp.91-112.
- [11] Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. W.H. Freeman.
- [12] Bourdieu, P. (1992). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. University of Chicago Press.
- [13] Channel 4 and Clear Channel (2023) "Black-owned businesses are disadvantaged compared to white-owned businesses"? <https://www.channel4.com/press/news/channel-4-and-clear-channel-study-reveals-black-owned-businesses-are-disadvantaged-0#:~:text=A%20Channel%20and%20Clear%20Channel%20study%20has,and%20running%20their%20businesses%20than%20their%20white%20counterparts> (Accessed 10/05/25).
- [14] Chilisa, B. (2012) *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. Sage.
- [15] Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. Jossey-Bass.
- [16] Collins, P. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- [17] Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011) Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research*, Vol. 36, No. 4, pp. 273-290.
- [18] Elumelu, T. (ND). *Africapitalism: The Path to Economic Prosperity and Social Wealth*.
- [19] Frei, F and Morriss, A. (2024) Story-telling That Drives Bold Change: How To Craft narrative That Matters. *Harvard Business Review* (November–December) (pp.62-71).

- [20] Gnimassoun, B and Anyanwu, J. (2019) *The Diaspora and economic Development in Africa*. Working Paper series N0. 308. The African Development Bank Group.
- [21] Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce (2024) "Ten challenges faced by Black entrepreneurs and how to overcome them" (Accessed 08/05/25).
- [22] Grenier, A. (2023) The qualitative embedded case study method: Exploring and refining gerontological concepts via qualitative research with older people. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 65, p.101138. doi:10.1016/j.jaging.2023.101138.
- [23] Harding, S. (1993). Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is "Strong Objectivity"? In: Alcoff, L. and Potter, E. (Eds.), *Feminist Epistemologies* (pp. 49-82). Routledge.
- [24] Hayibor, V (2024) An Analysis of the Legal Challenges Faced by African Immigrant Women Entrepreneurs. PhD Thesis: University of Glasgow.
- [25] Helen, D. et al., (2013) When can research from one setting be useful in another? Understanding perceptions of the applicability and transferability of research. *Health Promotion International*, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 418-430.
- [26] Judge, R. and De Plaen, R. (2011) 'Courting the Diaspora': Emerging Roles if Diaspora Groups in the International Development Agency. International NGO Training and Research Centre. Policy Briefing paper 27.
- [27] Kim, J. (2016) Understanding Narrative Inquiry: The Crafting and Analysis of Stories as Research. Sage Publications.
- [28] Lewis, A., McKee, D. and Scherer, R. (2025) Impacting the Management Classroom: Empowering Students for a New Generation of Societal Impact. *Management Teaching Review*, Vol. 10(3) pp. 220–224.
- [29] Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage.
- [30] Lloyds Banking Group (2022). "Bank of family and friends: Black entrepreneurs are more likely to rely on their community to grow their businesses" <https://www.lloydsbankinggroup.com/assets/pdfs/media/press-releases/2022-press-releases/lloyds-bank/2022.09.28-black-entrepreneurs-community.pdf> (Accessed 10/05/25).
- [31] Van Manen, M. (2016) Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for An Action Sensitive Psychology (2nd edition). Routledge.
- [32] Muchie, M., Lukhele-Olorunju, P and Akpor, O. (2013) *The African Union Ten Years After: Solving African Problems with Pan-Africanism and the African Renaissance*. Africa Institute of South Africa.
- [33] Mudungwe, P. (2017) *Leveraging the African Diaspora for Development*. The African Diaspora Policy Centre.

- [34] Muriithi, S. (2017) African Small and Medium Enterprises (SMES) Contributions, Challenges and Solutions. *European Journal of Research and Reflection in Management Sciences* Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 2056-5992.
- [35] Nyame-Asiamah, F. et al., (2020) Diaspora Entrepreneurs' Push and Pull Institutional Factors for Investing in Africa: Insights from African Returnees from the United Kingdom. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, Vol, 152, pp.1-46.
- [36] Negash, A. (2012) What is Role of the African Diaspora in Ensuring the Renaissance of the Continent? Founder & Executive Director, African Diaspora Network.
- [37] Ogbo, A and Nwachukwu, A. (2012) The Role of Entrepreneurship in Economic Development: the Nigerian Perspective, *European Journal of Business and Management*, Vol 4, No.8, pp.95-105.
- [38] Ratha, D. (2011) Leveraging Migration for Africa Remittances, Skills, and Investments. The World Bank.
- [39] Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Sage Publications.
- [40] Rushambwa, T. (2022) Digital Transformation and Social Change: Issues in Technology Governance and Social Participation, a Qualitative Analysis. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4231668> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4231668>
- [41] Sarasvathy, S. D. (2008). *Effectuation: Elements of Entrepreneurial Expertise*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- [42] Sepulveda, L. (2021) *Minoritised Ethnic Community and Social Enterprises*. Power to Change Trust.
- [43] Shah, A. (2025) 'Why are you here': Rethinking reflexivity in conflict research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 31(10), pp.1-17.
- [44] Siar, S. (2013) Engaging the Highly Skilled Diaspora in Home Country Development through Knowledge Exchange: Concept and Prospects, PIDS Discussion Paper Series, No. 2013-18, *Philippine Institute for Development Studies* (PIDS), Makati City.
- [45] Siddiqui, S. (2024) 'Unfinished activism's' From Black self- help to mutual aid organising today (pp.164-184). In: East, S; Redhead, G.; and Williams, T. (2024) (Editors) *Anti-racism in Britain: Traditions, Histories and Trajectories, c. 1880-present*. Manchester University Press.
- [46] Smith, L. T. (2012) *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.
- [47] Thondhlana, R, Madziva, R, and Garwe, E. (2021) What Can African Diaspora Contribute to Innovation and Knowledge Creation? The Case of Zimbabwean Innovators. *Journal of the British Academy*, Vol, 9, Issue 1, pp.101-125.

- [48] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) 2020. Innovative Finance for Private Sector Development in Africa Development in Africa (Accessed 19/03/25).
- [49] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). (2020). Africa's Agenda 2063: The Path Towards a Future of Prosperity. UN Economic Report, 1-50.
- [50] Van Breda, A. D. (2019) Developing the notion of Ubuntu as African theory for social work practice. *Social Work (Stellenbosch)*, 55(4), pp.439-450.
- [51] Vhumbunu, C and Rudigi, J. (2020) Facilitating Integrating Through Free Movement of People in Africa: Progress, Challenges and Prospects. *Journal of African Union Studies*, Vol. 9, Issue 2, pp. 1-15.
- [52] Williams, N. (2018) Mobilising Diaspora to promote Homeland Investment: The Progress of Policy in Post-conflict Economies. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, Vol. 36, No,7, pp.1256-1279.
- [53] World Bank. (2022). *Migration and Development Brief 37: Remittances Brave Global Headwinds*. World Bank.
- [54] Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.