

You're listening to *Imaginary Worlds*, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

One of my favorite science fiction writers is Nnedi Okorafor. She's Nigerian American, and most of her books take place in Nigeria.

In 2019, she coined a term called Africanfuturism, all one word. She wanted to distinguish her work from Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism is typically about the black experience and the diaspora. African futurism is said in Africa, and those stories deal with issues which are specific to the continent.

The term took off immediately, which makes sense because she was not the only person writing Africanfuturism. Established writers could easily fit into that category, and the term could be an inspiration for up and coming writers.

Nnedi Okorafor and other writers have emphasized that this is a broad term, which is meant to cover a wide range of stories about African futures. But as I kept reading her work and other Africanfuturist stories, I noticed a pattern. Climate change comes up a lot in these stories, and the way that the characters adapt to climate change is different in Africanfuturism than a lot of science fiction stories written in the West. And there are reasons for that.

Like for me, and I think probably a lot of people in the west, climate change can feel like an act of imagination. When I read an article where a scientist says, this could be our future, it's terrifying, but it feels like science fiction because it's not my everyday reality unless there's a strange weather phenomenon going on that particular day or that particular week.

But the ecosystems in Africa are at the forefront of climate change. It's not something that people can easily put out of their minds.

And I wanted to look at the intersection of these two genres, Africanfuturism and cli-fi -- which is short for climate change science fiction. How does cli fi play out differently in African stories? And at first I was thinking about technology or disaster preparation, but as I delved deeper and I talked about the African writers, I realized how we imagine the future isn't just connected to the present. It's deeply rooted in the past, our values and our culture.

**BABEL AD**

**Before we get to climate change, I want to explore a little bit further what defines Africanfuturism.**

**As I kept reading Africanfuturist stories, I noticed that a lot of them take place in West Africa – especially Nigeria -- even more specifically in Lagos, the largest city in Nigeria. And then I realized a huge number of these writers are Nigerian.**

**Wole Talabi is a Nigerian science fiction writer, and even he was surprised by how many Nigerians are working in this genre.**

WOLE: I've also looked at the general statistics because I used to help manage a database for the African Speculative Fiction Society of published African speculative fiction, broadly fantasy horror, science fiction, everything. By far the largest amount of speculative fiction writing comes from Nigeria and South Africa. That also has to do with a bit of a legacy of colonial history.

**Nigeria was a British colony. English is the most commonly spoken language there. It's also the most populous country in Africa with about 230 million people. There are also around 2 million Nigerians living in the diaspora. In fact, everyone you'll hear in this episode is a Nigerian living in another Anglophone country. Wole is in Australia. And the writer Chinelo Onwualu is living in Canada.**

CHINELO: I think there's a joke that says if you go to a place on Earth and there isn't a Nigerian there, know that that place is not habitable for human life. <laugh> And it's true because we are always looking for the next thing. And I think, I think that makes futurism just kind of a natural space for us. We're always thinking of something, we're always coming up with something and even if we can't put it in the now, what if we put it in the, in the what's to come?

**In 2014, Chinelo co-founded a magazine of African speculative fiction called Omenana. She says the magazine was created partly out of a sense of frustration over the expectations that were placed on them by Western publishers.**

CHINELO: So there was an industry expectation that writing from Africa had to look a certain way, had to cover certain issues and topics. It was all about dealing with government corruption, changing societal expectations in the face of, you know, coming out of the colonial era. And we were finding that a lot of what we were writing was a lot more speculative than that, and we just didn't see a space where we could have our own voices represented.

**They also were tired of having to fill their stories with exposition for non-African readers.**

CHINELO: So we were looking for stories where people just didn't have to explain themselves, where we all understood the context that we were writing in, and then we could get to the business of just being cool and speculative.

**Wole also has an African audience in mind – in part to show the possibilities of Africanfuturism.**

WOLE: People don't realize how much influence TV, movies, just media in general have had on popular imagination to the extent that so many people even on the African continent struggle to imagine different anymore. I would say it's been centuries of colonial brainwashing, constantly telling you that your traditional ways and ideas and philosophies are primitive, underdeveloped, useless, unscientific, coupled with, "here's our vision of the future." It sinks into your brain that this is the way of science and technology and some of us, at least myself, have been trying to kind of go back and say, well, what were the core philosophies and ideas and ideals in a lot of our traditional societies if they had been allowed to evolve naturally, what would they look like now? And that's kind of one thing I try to do with science, with my science fiction.

**Suyi Davies Okungbowa is a Nigerian writer living in Canada. He says a lot of writers like himself are very aware that they're in a privileged position to be able to think beyond the day-to-day and spend their time dreaming of the future.**

SUYI: And so I, in a way, there is a duty, I think to then invest in this futuristic thinking if it can actually do whatever work it needs to do, sound the alarm bells, uh, influence policy, <laugh> influence thinking, uh, sprout, even new imaginations, whatever work it does, I think that's the duty of the work. And that's kind of like where I put my investment as a person, as an artist, I'm thinking this needs to exist so possibilities can exist.

**In 2019, when Nnedi Okorafor was defining the term Africanfuturism, she said that she was inspired by her many trips to Nigeria where she was really intrigued by how easily people could incorporate modern technology into older traditional ways of life. She wanted to make sure that was reflected in her science fiction. Suyi feels the same way.**

SUYI: People still in rural communities, they go to a farm with the hoe, and they till the land in ridges pretty much as we have been doing for eons and eons. And at the same time, they're tilling the farm with one hand with the hoe and the other they have, you

know, WhatsApp on and or like a phone and they're chatting with someone on Snapchat or scrolling through TikTok. So, so she is right in the sense that a future where that doesn't exist feels strange to me at least. And I would see how it would be strange to anyone who actually exists on the continent because that is the reality of things. And, and even when I was thinking about like my stories, right, the way the people in this space are thinking would differ, right? Those who have resources or access to those resources would still, some of, some would rely on older technology because that's all they can afford, which is what the hoe represents, right, in farming. The hoe is technology. It's just much, much older form <laugh>

**That mix of technologies to develop – or exploit -- the natural resources has come to a head with the oil industry in Nigeria. In fact, Wole thinks the oil industry is one of the reasons why the environment comes up so often in these stories.**

WOLE: I mean we can't really escape our history. Nigeria is a large oil producing country. They have huge petroleum reserves and for decades oil companies have been operating in an, in a region called the Niger Delta. And it's kind of been terrible, let me put it that way.

**He's not only talking about the environment. The relationship between the oil companies and the government has been plagued with corruption and abuse.**

WOLE: So I think every Nigerian is well aware of that. I think almost every Nigerian science fiction writer who probably has a story relating to the oil industry in some form talking about it, I have one for sure. Like we, we all think about it.

**The coastline is a big factor in Suyi's upcoming book, Lost Ark Dreaming. It's a sci-fi thriller set in a future where sea level rise is consuming Lagos. The story is about a series of towers which are built on a privately constructed island.**

**The premise was inspired by real life. When Suyi was working in Lagos, he noticed a version of these towers being proposed off the shoreline.**

SUYI: And that just sparked the idea of what do these become, you know, in the future where that is definitely going to happen, a future of like possible submergence, a future of these coastlines not existing in the next 20, 30 years, in the future where the city itself is disappearing because of the land itself is like receding? And where do they exist in the cultural imagination of environmental futures?

**Sea level rise is frightening enough but Suyi wanted to explore another theme. The Atlantic Ocean is not a neutral space for West Africans.**

SUYI: And I was thinking of what histories the Atlantic Ocean has seen. So we're talking everything from transatlantic slavery to um, like the, the history of communities that have existed on the water in Lagos that have been many times removed for some of this hyper capitalist projects as well.

**Here's the actress Nneka Okoye reading from Suyi's book, Lost Ark Dreaming**

*"Making home in the heights is the future of luxury," he says, as he takes me on a tour ahead of the grand opening of his newest project, the smallest of five towers he has named the Diekara Atlantic Community."*

*"The price is right," Diekara says, when I raise the public's concerns about the prohibitive cost of securing a spot on his towers. "No product is ever meant for everybody — we have a target market."*

*He talks me through construction. As a journalist and not an engineer, I only follow the phrases of interest and impact. Underwater electricity-generating turbines, for instance. Flood-proof levels, up to a third of each tower's height above sea level.*

*I ask him why Diekara Industries is so invested in preparing for a submerged future. Does he think his island will be swallowed soon?*

*"Swallowed?" He laughs. "Listen, this is a project built to last generations, centuries. So, yes, we need to prepare for all possible futures, including one of submergence. But that's not for us here, no. It's for you all over there."*

*We're standing at one of the expansive windows of the concourse. I follow his arm, pointing at the rugged cityscape of Lagos that stares back at us. This high up, the economic stratification is quite evident to any keen eye. Rusted-zinc slums already half-submerged by rising floods stand next to glittering skyscrapers that sport paved elevated by rising floods stand next to glittering skyscrapers that sport paved elevated roadways, sidestepping the rapidly rising waters like a disgusted foot.*

*"Nobody wants to live in that impending chaos," Diekara says. "So they will fight to come up here when that is no more. They will stand in that same spot you're standing and say, thanks to Diekara, we escaped."*

**Wole wrote a story called Ganger, which explores similar themes. It's part of his new collection of stories called Convergence Problems. Ganger takes place in a futuristic Nigeria where people in a domed city to protect themselves because the air has been ruined.**

WOLE: Tech people, geoengineers tried to fix the climate by developing this technology that could strip out CO<sub>2</sub> from the air and then direct it somewhere else. And what has happened in the background of the story is that that technology has gone horribly wrong, and the solution has now become an even bigger problem and that has made the environment completely unlivable.

**The inspiration for this story came from real life. Alongside being a fiction writer, Wole is an engineer.**

WOLE: I wanted to use what happens in that novella to kind of talk about something I encounter in my day job as well, something I do, which is this idea of CO<sub>2</sub> storage as a geoengineering solution to climate change where we can basically take out CO<sub>2</sub> from the environment and shove it underground. My philosophy of it is that it's a temporary measure while we figure out a better way, but it in itself it is not the solution. And I kind of feel pursuing a purely technical approach to just say, oh we'll just come up with a new technology to fix the problems we created with our old technology is just repeating the cycle.

**The main character is a teenage girl. In this scene, she's gone outside the domed city with her medical droid, LG-114. But she stayed outside too long.**

*Laide turned around sharply and ran back the way she'd come, tearing past leaves and tassels and silks and stems as she bounded with great big steps of the droid's frame, throwing soil up into the CO<sub>2</sub>-T saturated air. She wanted to take it all in as she had before the sunrise, but she was now too worried to enjoy the feeling of flying through the field. She had to get back.*

*She tore past the curtain of stalks and back onto one of the radiating tracks leading back to the clearing that surrounded the dome. There was a giant harvester machine ahead of her. She followed it, the feet of LG-114's frame digging into the loamy red and brown soil with every powerful step. The dome loomed ahead; its smooth surface of gun turrets more imposing than ever in the cold clarity of daylight.*

*What if Mama Peju woke up to eat already and panicked when she didn't see LG-114?  
What if the guns turn on me?*

*Laide forced herself to slow down as she approached the dome, bringing LG-114 to a brisk walking pace close of the edge of the field. Calm down. She was trying not to panic but it was hard to keep her composure despite the uncertainty.*

*The gate of the sanitization chamber at the base of the dome opened ahead of them like a lazy mouth. Laide thought she saw the guns angle slightly down toward them, but she was sure it was just her imagination.*

*Don't panic.*

*Laide thought herself calm and kept moving behind the harvester with the convoy until she'd cleared the gate. There was the hiss of venting and a flood of red lights. Her mind was overcome by the sensation of her skin crawling, as she imagined the nanobots poring over every nanometer of LG-114's frame again, hunting for the viral CO2-T nanoparticles she brought with her.*

*When the lights turned green and the exit opened, she wanted to sigh with relief, but she couldn't.*

## **SURF SHARK AD**

**Earlier on, we heard from the writer Chinelo Onwualu. She's given a lot of thought to the crossover of Africanfuturisms and cli-fi, and she came to a realization.**

CHINELO: I had an interesting discussion with the author Tobi Ogundiran, in which we were talking about what is it that Africans fear? And it was premised from the, uh, understanding that when you look at what the West fears, it fears that the things it has done to others will be done to, to it. Something like we will be enslaved and our, you know, physical autonomy and freedom will be curtailed by something outside of ourselves, you know. But what do Africans fear? He had a great answer because it was the fact that you will, you have, um, profaned the sacred spaces. You have abandoned the sacred ways and you are being punished. That really got me thinking that like what I think so many, so many of us are reaching for when we sometimes write these futurisms are ways in which we have rediscovered, envisioned, that equilibrium that we used to live in, you know, that we've lost because those sacred spaces were destroyed in, you know, acts of colonial, uh, genocide and the cultural and cultural ecocide. Right? And so some of us are rediscovering how to bring these things back. If we look to our past, we will find some of the answers that we need for our future.

**She says a great example is a story called The Leafy Man. It's by a Ugandan writer named Dilman Dila. In the story, a bioengineering company has created a genetically modified mosquito that doesn't carry malaria. They even gave it a nickname Miss Doe. The government decided to try Miss Doe in one village to see if they could replace the regular mosquito population. But Miss Doe ended up mutating into a monstrous swarm that devours people.**

**The main character is a survivor from the village. He uses traditional knowledge to protect him. Even though Miss Doe has mutated, the mosquitos are still repelled by the smell of citrus. So, he covers himself with orange leaves. Here's the actress Nneka Okoye reading from The Leafy Man.**

*The chopper touched down. He could barely see it through the smoke. The engine shut down. The buzz of Miss Doe was faint, but still eerie coming from the sky.*

*As he started toward the helicopter, four men came running out of the mist. They wore protective white clothing that covered every inch of their bodies. Each had a small tank on the back, and a spray muzzle in one hand. Emblazoned on their breasts were four letters, in bright green, PGCC. Japia's legs turned to water. These men worked for PGCC, the people who brought this apocalypse to his village. It was not a rescue.*

*He turned and fled.*

*"Hey!" one man shouted. "Don't run!"*

*"What's that?" the radio said.*

*"The leafy man ran," Japia heard the reply coming out of the radio, and from behind him.*

*"Why?"*

*"I don't know. He just saw us and ran."*

*Japia was weak from hunger, but he was faster than the four men, who were burdened by the heavy tanks on their backs. He knew it was foolish to run. They probably meant him no harm, they might have come to rescue him, but he could not trust them. Not after what they had done to his village.*



CHINELO: What I liked about that particular story was the fact that it was being told from the perspective of someone that you usually would not hear from. Even in Africanfuturism, it's often written by people who have a Western education. So have a particular class background that we're coming from. And so we, without thinking of it, without necessarily realizing it, we tend to privilege, you know, um, middle class or upper middle class voices, people who have the experiences that we have. So it was very interesting to read that because it was such an inversion of who are the usual voices you hear from even in, you know, Africanfuturism, but particularly in cli-fi, a colorful side character in the story of the NGO person on their way to doing the great work, the guy who opened the gates and smiles, you know, gives you the big smile and the "hello, sir," but a story told from his perspective looks very, very different.

**There's another way African cli-fi is different from Western cli-fi. In a lot of Africanfuturisms, climate change is more in the background of the story. But that doesn't mean it's unimportant.**

CHINELO: When we are talking about cli-fi a lot of the writers that I've encountered are not approaching it as the sort of subgenre of a subgenre. It's kind of built into how many of us understand our future. We are seeing the effects of climate change in ways that are much more immediate.

**That's how she approaches writing about climate change in her work.**

CHINELO: What often happens with me is trying to marry this outside thing with this inside thing. And so the outside thing might be climate change and population changes, but the inside thing is what happens in a family when something terrible happens and we all cope really, really badly with it.

**Chinelo wrote a story called Letters to my Mother. It's about people in a world that's been reshaped by climate wars. In this scene, an archivist finds a letter from the climate wars, which is her distant past but our future. It's a heartfelt letter addressed to somebody's mother, but the archivist doesn't know anything about the person who wrote it.**

*Some objects from the old world, the ones that still carried the anguish of those who had made use of them, were too dangerous for my people to touch. These were usually items from the drowned cities. I'd never heard of something from the archives bearing such effect.*

*We had been taught that the founders of the Homesteads were enlightened ones who had evolved beyond the vagaries of the egoistic self. After the climate wars, they had seen the dark fate awaiting humanity and took the bold steps necessary to avoid the extinction of our species. But the longing and grief of that short letter was unlike anything I had ever felt. Could such raw emotion truly have belonged to a founder?*

*I avoided touching the book after that. I returned it the next morning wrapped in cloth and hurried from the records room as if it was also to blame for what had happened. Returning to the forest, I thought I had left the book behind. I was wrong, for something in it remained in me.*

**Chinelo didn't want these characters to fit the stereotype of lone survivors battling each other for resources.**

CHINELO: When I see the issues of climate change tackled in the West, it's often with a sense that this is going to bring doom upon us. We are going to lose all these comforts that we're used to, and suddenly the first world, quote unquote, will look like the third world. And you do see the sense of like, we have to hold onto everything that we can because, God forbid, we lose, you know, um, 24 hour access to power. God forbid we might have to start like fetching water from a central water source, which are both facets of everyday life in many other parts of the world. Whereas I think that when you have been through the apocalypse, when you have the apocalypse as part of your past, it can inner you almost to some of that doom and gloom because you know you survived the worst, you will survive again.

**Suyi agrees. They know how to survive an apocalypse.**

SUYI: And this is specifically thinking about the African continent, not even just in general, but like the specific places that I am from, I'm thinking of how people would typically react to things like this. And there tends to be a stronger community driven approach. And so even in interpretations of the future or uh, projections of whatever iteration of dystopia manifest itself, there tends to be an imagination, therefore also from a communal standpoint in terms of like, how do we, you know, tackle this as a group? How do we tackle this as, you know, a collective unit as opposed to, you know, what is my specific role as a person? Or how can I save these people? And I would say I tend to see that sort of, uh, collective voice in the telling of the story in itself as well, and so even on a craft level, right? The, the manner of narration, the, the manner of voice, the manner of approach tends to sort of come from a collective place rather than an individualist sole survivor, sole savior messianic type.

## MAGIC SPOON AD

**Now I've been looking at cli-fi that has rays of hope in ominous skies, but Wole says there are still plenty of depressing dystopias in Africanfuturism.**

WOLE: And I think that that comes from an, that comes from another place as well, which is also not a place to be ignored. I think that comes from living with the direct impact of climate change right now and of largely kind of being powerless to do much about it.

**The entire continent of Africa contributes a small fraction of global carbon emissions, but they're bearing the brunt of climate change. The cause of these problems has been mostly out of their hands, but the solutions are not. That's why Wole sees a lot of DIY technology, and Solarpunk in these stories.**

WOLE: Or what I would even call, I hate, I don't want to invent a new thing, but maybe even culture punk in the sense that the idea that considering the environment as a person, an entity, or even a spirit, which is something that comes from a lot of traditional African just practice of community, tends to show up in a lot of Africanfuturist work.

**Wole edited a collection called Africanfuturism: An Anthology. And one of the stories in the book is called Lekki Lekki. It's by a Senegalese writer named Mame Bougouma Diene.**

WOLE: In which basically humans convert themselves into a kind of biological information matrix and merge with nature. So it's this idea that we are part of nature, not apart from it. It's an idea. I personally really like, just for the kind of radical, radical reframing that it, it performs in your mind once you start from that position. The environment is not a victim of your actions. It is a person or a spirit to be respected and you just haven't been doing that.

**In this scene, the main character has a trial run projecting her consciousness into a tree. But these characters in the distant future are not doing this as a thrill ride. Some people in the community think this is the only way to save humanity as human life becomes more and more unsustainable.**

*"You'll be scanned and fitted into a transmission pod for testing. Today and on the day of. Don't worry, it's painless. We just need to verify a few things. Many of you are married women, we need to check that you are not with child before we can try the*

*machines. We must also ensure that your own brainwaves are compatible with the biochemical network matrix. Is everybody with me?"*

*They all nodded agreement, some slower than others.*

*The pods had slid shut, and the red cushion squeezed her warmly into darkness. Not sleep, not quite sleep, fully at rest yet aware of herself.*

*She'd sunk deeper into the darkness, her head bursting through the soil into sunlight. A city gleaming in the distance where the desert stood now, a river streaming through it to a sky of deep blue abysses. In a flash she stood fifty feet above, in another a hundred, and as she grew the city shrunk, her arms impossibly long and stiff, until there was nothing but dust swirling wooly death to the horizon.*

*And all the while a murmur, soft with radiant energy calling her into its roots...*

*"Djoule! Djoule dammit wake up!"*

*"Cheikh!" she screamed throwing her arms around him, her head on his chest. "Did you hear? Did you see? Don't you see now? It's real, all of it!"*

*Cheikh pushed her back and turned around.*

*"I didn't hear anything... I'm not going..."*

**Reading that story, I kept thinking about The Singularity -- this dream of Silicon Valley tech moguls and some sci-fi writers that they could someday upload their consciousness to computers. This is a very different kind of thought experiment.**

WOLE: Africanfuturist views, especially when it comes to cli-fi, helps, you know, do what they call diversify the Anthropocene imagination of being able to think of alternatives, of realizing that sometimes alternative philosophies have existed already. I am that person that whenever I come upon an idea that makes me feel like, you know, some part of my mind has been unlocked, like I've never seen it presented in this way, I've never seen this idea, you know, established so clearly to me before I literally go like, oooh, that's so good. And it's like I, I get this almost like a high from my mind being unlocked. And I think African cli-fi, just global cli-fi in general will help us move away from a kind of fixed mindset of what the future could be.

**Although Chinelo thinks Africanfuturism could be even more original in its thinking.**

CHINELO: One of the things that, that I think those of us writing Africanfuturisms can sometimes fall prey to is the idea that the future has to look like the West. I think there are more varied understanding of what a good future looks like. Another thing that I would love to see less of or maybe is the idea that we'll keep certain traditions wholesale and not enough re-imaginings of how cultural shifts will also be reflected in the future. So I think I would love to see more Africanfuturisms where patriarchal systems that are very much traditionally entrenched and maybe even beloved are challenged a little more.

**Now, I didn't used to read a lot of cli-fi. I'm already worried a lot about this issue. When I see the description of a novel that says, "set in a future ravaged by climate change," I just can't read it because I assume it's going to make me feel complete despair.**

**What I liked about these stories is that they're presenting a future that's not hopeless but it's not painless either. In fact, Chinelo wrote an article called The Case for Reckless Climate Optimism. And she based it on what she describes as a Nigerian practice of suffering and smiling.**

CHINELO: The attitude of suffering and smiling, it comes from a phrase by the musician Fela. It's this sense of shit's going to get bad. So you just, you keep, you keep your humor about you, and you just keep at it. You still have to wake up every day, feed your kid, go to work, do the things you need to do and get through it. Even if things get really, really bad, life is going to go on -- because what's the alternative?

**When I hear people say, "life goes on," there's usually a sense of cynicism or resignation in their voices. But when it comes to climate change, "life goes on" can feel like a victory to me.**

**That's it for this week. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to Wole Talabi, Chinelo Orwualu, Suyi Davies Okungbowa and Nneka Okoye who did the readings. I have links to their work, including the other stories we talked about in the show notes.**

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