

Mapping the Unmapped: Climate Injustice, Water and Digital Visibility in Chioma Okereke's Water Baby

Haleem Reeshma M^{1,*}, Dr.Hema K²

¹Research Scholar of English, Research Department of English, Sadakathullah Appa College (Autonomous), Rahmath Nagar, Tirunelveli, India

²Assistant Professor, Research Department of English, Sadakathullah Appa College, Tirunelveli, India

*Corresponding author / தொடர்பு ஆசிரியர்: Haleem Reeshma M — reeshma.mohideen@gmail.com

Abstract

Contemporary African climate fiction increasingly represents environmental crises through the everyday experiences of communities negotiating poverty, displacement, infrastructure and unequal access to resources. Chioma Okereke's *Water Baby* (2024), set primarily in Makoko, a floating community on the Lagos Lagoon, participates in this emerging body of African climate fiction by bringing together water, climate vulnerability, digital technology and questions of belonging. Existing scholarship on the novel has examined its watery materiality, multiscale vulnerability, spatial exclusion and counter-mapping practices. This paper approaches the novel from a different perspective by examining the relationship between climate visibility and environmental justice. Drawing on Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, Cajetan Iheka's African ecocritical framework, Astrida Neimanis's posthuman feminist understanding of bodies of water, and scholarship on African environmental transformation, the paper argues that *Water Baby* presents visibility as an ambivalent form of climate politics. The drone-mapping project initially appears to offer Makoko recognition by placing an overlooked community within technological and public visibility. However, the novel complicates the assumption that being mapped necessarily produces justice. Through *Baby's* movement between Makoko and global spaces, Okereke reveals the unequal processes through which local environmental vulnerability is transformed into a globally consumable image. The paper therefore proposes that the novel shifts the question of climate justice from simply asking who suffers environmental harm to asking who has the authority to make that suffering visible, interpret it and determine its future. *Water Baby* ultimately demonstrates how African climate fiction can challenge universalised representations of climate crisis by locating planetary environmental concerns within specific histories of urban inequality, gender, technological mediation and contested belonging.

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Introduction

Climate change is frequently represented through measurable environmental events: rising temperatures, floods, droughts, storms and sea-level rise. Such representations can make planetary crises visible, but they can also conceal the unequal conditions under which environmental change is experienced. A flooded city does not affect every resident in the same manner; vulnerability depends on housing, infrastructure, economic position, political recognition and the ability to move away from danger. African environmental literature has increasingly challenged approaches that treat ecological crises as a universal human experience. Cajetan Iheka and Stephanie Newell observe that African ecocriticism has developed its own methodological directions by attending to the specific environmental histories and political conditions of African societies (1–10). Such approaches are particularly relevant to

contemporary African climate fiction, where environmental transformation is frequently inseparable from colonial histories, uneven development and struggles over land and resources.

Chioma Okereke's *Water Baby* (2024) provides an important example of this tendency. Set largely in Makoko, a floating community on the Lagos Lagoon, the novel follows nineteen-year-old Baby, whose life is shaped by the material and social conditions of her watery environment. The novel brings climate change into contact with digital technology through a drone-mapping project intended to increase the visibility of Makoko. Baby's participation in the project eventually brings her into wider public attention and takes her beyond the lagoon. Okereke herself identifies climate change, digitalisation, gentrification and resettlement as central concerns of the novel. The novel was also shortlisted for the inaugural Climate Fiction Prize, confirming its place within current climate-fiction discussions (Okereke).

Recent scholarship has already established significant critical approaches to *Water Baby*. Julia Kuznetski examines the novel through new materialism and decolonial critique, concentrating on water, environmental enmeshment, multiscalar inequalities and vulnerable bodies. Henry Chukwudi John and Diana Roig Sanz, meanwhile, approach the novel through spatial and intersectional theory and digital humanities, arguing that its representation of Makoko operates as a form of literary counter-mapping. Their work is particularly concerned with spatial visibility, cultural memory and digital activism.

Building upon but moving beyond these approaches, this paper examines climate visibility as a political problem in *Water Baby*. It argues that the novel does not simply celebrate technology for placing Makoko "on the map." Instead, it reveals a tension between being visible and being represented on one's own terms. The central hypothesis of this study is that *Water Baby* transforms technological visibility into a contested form of climate politics: while digital mapping can challenge the invisibility of an environmentally vulnerable community, the transformation of local vulnerability into images and data can also reproduce unequal relationships between those who observe, those who are observed and those who possess the power to interpret environmental crisis. The paper therefore proposes that Okereke's novel shifts climate justice from a question of exposure alone to a question of recognition, representation and authority.

Climate Vulnerability and Slow Violence

Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence provides an important starting point for reading Makoko. Nixon describes slow violence as environmental harm that is gradual, dispersed and frequently difficult to represent because it does not conform to the spectacular temporality of disaster (Nixon). This framework is particularly relevant to *Water Baby* because the novel does not construct an environmental crisis exclusively through one catastrophic event. Instead, vulnerability is embedded in the ordinary conditions of life in Makoko: limited infrastructure, insecure housing, dependence upon water-based mobility, economic precarity and the community's marginal position within the larger city.

The significance of Makoko therefore lies in the relationship between environmental exposure and social recognition. The community is not vulnerable merely because it is surrounded by water. Its vulnerability is intensified by the absence or inadequacy of systems that would provide security and public recognition. Kuznetski similarly identifies Makoko as a floating and historically neglected settlement in which environmental vulnerability is produced through intersecting spatial and social scales.

This distinction is important because a purely environmental reading might treat water as the primary source of danger. Okereke's novel instead suggests that the problem lies in the interaction between environmental conditions and political structures. Water can support livelihoods, transportation and community life while simultaneously exposing residents to

environmental risk. Consequently, the novel resists the simple opposition between human society and hostile nature. The lagoon is neither merely a picturesque setting nor an external threat. Human lives are materially organised around it.

Such an approach corresponds with African ecocriticism's movement away from exclusively anthropocentric models of environmental analysis. Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa* calls attention to ecological agency while also examining the political structures through which ecological violence is produced. African environmental criticism therefore becomes particularly useful when ecological conditions are read alongside histories of exploitation, marginalisation and unequal power rather than treated as isolated "natural" problems.

In *Water Baby*, climate vulnerability consequently becomes an issue of unequal exposure. Makoko's residents inhabit an environment in which environmental insecurity is closely connected to their socioeconomic position. The novel thereby demonstrates what climate justice approaches have repeatedly emphasised: environmental crisis cannot be separated from questions of inequality.

From Being Unmapped to Being Visible

The drone-mapping project constitutes one of the novel's most significant intersections between climate politics and technology. Baby's involvement in the project gives her an opportunity to document the community while also opening a path beyond the restrictions imposed upon her. At first glance, mapping appears to provide a straightforward solution to invisibility. If Makoko has been neglected or insufficiently represented within dominant urban imaginaries, then technological mapping appears to offer recognition.

The novel, however, makes this process more complicated.

Mapping is never simply the act of recording a neutral geographical reality. To map a space is also to select what is worth recording, how it should be represented and for whom the resulting knowledge is produced. John and Roig Sanz read *Water Baby* as a form of counter-mapping because it restores attention to locations and communities that dominant urban representations have overlooked. Their study demonstrates how the novel connects fictional geography with actual places in Makoko and interprets this process as a reclamation of spatial visibility.

The present argument extends this insight by asking what happens after visibility is achieved.

The novel suggests that visibility can be both empowering and unstable. The drone does not merely look at Makoko; it transforms the community into an image that can circulate beyond Makoko. Baby's image subsequently travels through global media networks, changing the scale at which her life is perceived. A local environmental reality becomes a globally consumable representation.

This movement from the local to the global is central to the novel's climate politics. A community that was previously difficult to see becomes highly visible, but its new visibility does not automatically give its inhabitants control over the meaning of that visibility. The technological image can attract attention while simultaneously simplifying the complex realities of the people represented.

The problem, therefore, is not technology itself. Okereke does not construct drones or digital media as inherently destructive. Instead, she exposes their ambivalence. Technology can document neglected spaces, connect communities and produce new possibilities for individual agency. At the same time, the same technologies can transform vulnerable lives into images consumed by audiences far removed from the material conditions represented.

This tension is especially important in climate fiction because contemporary climate politics increasingly depends upon visualisation. Maps, satellite images, photographs, videos and data visualisations allow distant audiences to see environmental crisis. Yet seeing a crisis is not identical to addressing the political conditions that produce vulnerability.

Climate Visibility and the Problem of Representation

The novel's treatment of Baby's sudden visibility allows Okereke to explore a further dimension of climate politics: who speaks for an environmentally vulnerable community?

Baby initially participates in mapping because she wants possibilities beyond the limitations imposed upon her. Her movement into technological space is therefore connected with gender and personal agency. She is not simply an object being mapped; she becomes an active participant in the production of geographical knowledge. This distinction prevents the novel from reducing Makoko's residents to passive victims.

Nevertheless, the circulation of Baby's image introduces a new asymmetry. Once her image travels beyond Makoko, the community begins to acquire meaning for audiences who do not share its everyday realities. The representation of vulnerability can consequently become detached from the lived experience of vulnerability.

This is where the novel departs from a simple "technology empowers marginalised communities" narrative. The question becomes whether representation produces meaningful recognition or merely produces visibility.

The distinction matters. **Visibility asks whether a community can be seen; recognition asks whether its claims, knowledge and political presence are taken seriously.** *Water Baby* places these two conditions into tension.

Such a distinction also strengthens the African ecocritical dimension of the novel. African environmental criticism has increasingly questioned frameworks that position Africa simply as a site of environmental suffering. Iheka's work on African environmental literature and ecomedia stresses the importance of African epistemologies and alternative ways of imagining environmental futures rather than representing Africa exclusively through degradation or crisis.

Okereke's Makoko similarly resists the reduction of the community to an environmental problem. The settlement contains work, family relationships, aspirations, memories and forms of social organisation. Water is therefore not only evidence of vulnerability; it is also part of the community's identity and everyday life.

This is why the novel's climate politics cannot be reduced to disaster representation. Its environmental imagination is simultaneously concerned with belonging. The question is not simply whether Makoko is environmentally safe but whether its inhabitants have the right to determine what happens to their community.

Bodies, Water and Unequal Exposure

Astrida Neimanis's concept of "bodies of water" provides another productive way to understand the novel. Rather than treating bodies and environments as completely separate entities, posthuman feminist approaches emphasise material interconnection between human bodies and watery environments (Neimanis).

This framework allows Baby's relationship with Makoko to be understood beyond the symbolic level. Her life is materially organised by water. Her mobility, work and social relationships are connected to the lagoon. The environment therefore enters the formation of her identity rather than functioning merely as a backdrop against which the plot unfolds.

The gender dimension of this environmental relationship is also important. Baby's desire for independence develops within a community where familial and gender expectations

influence the possibilities available to her. Her involvement in drone mapping creates an alternative relationship to space: instead of simply moving through Makoko, she begins to observe, record and interpret it.

Her technological engagement consequently changes her position from being someone shaped by space to someone who can participate in representing space.

Yet Okereke does not suggest that technology completely liberates Baby from environmental or social constraints. Her mobility between Makoko and global spaces exposes another form of inequality. The ability to move physically and digitally across scales is itself unevenly distributed.

This is significant for climate politics because mobility is increasingly central to discussions of environmental vulnerability. Some populations can relocate, travel and adapt through economic resources, while others remain attached to places that are environmentally precarious. *Water Baby* brings this uneven mobility into the personal story of a young woman whose desire to leave Makoko exists alongside a continuing emotional and material relationship with it.

From Local Lagoon to Global Climate Discourse

The novel's movement beyond Makoko further demonstrates how the climate crisis changes meaning as it travels across geographical scales. Baby's experience eventually enters global spaces associated with climate discussion. This movement creates an important contrast.

In Makoko, environmental vulnerability is lived through everyday practices. At the global level, climate change becomes a topic of conferences, media representation and international attention.

The contrast reveals a problem within contemporary climate discourse: the communities most directly exposed to environmental change are not necessarily the communities controlling the language through which that change is discussed.

Okereke therefore places a local African community inside a global climate narrative without allowing the local experience to disappear completely into universal climate language.

This is consistent with recent developments in African ecocriticism, which increasingly examine environmental transformation through questions of colonial history, place, technology and political economy. The 2026 introduction to new directions in African ecocriticism similarly identifies decoloniality, ecological agency and African-specific environmental frameworks as important directions for the field.

Water Baby participates in this development by refusing to treat climate change as an abstract planetary crisis detached from urban inequality. Its climate politics begins with a particular place and particular bodies.

The novel consequently asks a larger question: **what happens when a local environmental reality becomes part of a global climate narrative?**

The answer is neither wholly positive nor wholly negative. Visibility can generate recognition and opportunity. It can also produce simplification, commodification and unequal control over representation. The significance of *Water Baby* lies precisely in this unresolved tension.

Conclusion

Chioma Okereke's *Water Baby* demonstrates how contemporary African climate fiction can move beyond familiar narratives of environmental catastrophe by examining the politics through which climate vulnerability becomes visible. Makoko is not represented simply as a

community threatened by water. It is a socially and environmentally complex space in which water, infrastructure, technology, gender, mobility and belonging intersect.

The novel therefore complicates the assumption that mapping is inherently emancipatory. It also complicates the assumption that technological representation necessarily produces political recognition. Baby's movement between Makoko and the wider world demonstrates that climate knowledge is never entirely neutral; it is shaped by relationships of access, authority and representation.

Ultimately, *Water Baby* relocates climate politics from the abstract scale of planetary crisis to the intimate scale of everyday life. Its most significant question is not simply who experiences environmental vulnerability but **who is permitted to define, represent and respond to that vulnerability**. In this sense, Okereke's novel contributes to a distinctly African climate-fiction discourse in which environmental justice is inseparable from recognition, spatial belonging and the right of marginalised communities to participate in narrating their own futures. Climate visibility, the novel suggests, is only the beginning of justice; the more difficult task is transforming visibility into meaningful recognition and political agency.

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