Interview

"The future is often the past in a different font": An interview with Osahon Ize-Iyamu

Osahon Ize-Iyamu & Ewa Macura-Nnamdi

Ewa Macura-Nnamdi interviewed Ize-Iyamu over email in February 2025.

EMN: This special issue is devoted to African fictions of environmental crisis and displacement. As editors, we have been especially interested in how African culture imagines human and other-than-human forms of displacement in the face of environmental crises. How do you see their connection?
OII: I think African culture and displacement have a direct connection. For many African cultures that were subjected to colonial rule, displacement is a topic that's familiar because it's the consequence of our present reality. Thinking about displacement in the context of climate change is not difficult to envision, as it's already been our past. To give an example: colonialism evidently led to the erasure of certain aspects of cultural understanding, so consequently, many individuals' views on culture and tradition in the present day are viewed through a lens that has been affected by colonial conditions. Because we live in a post-colonial society, we will always suffer a displacement from who we once were. If we consider this reality, then it's easy to estimate that a future climate dystopia will lead to another displacement—we will evolve and significantly change from who we once were, and we will lose what we could have become if we lived in better conditions. This is what I think. The future is often the past in a different font.

EMN: While registering micro-scale displacements, your story, "More Sea Than Tar", seems more interested in staying put, getting stuck in toxic environments. What are you trying to say with this move?
OII: I think the story highlights the fact that environmental degradation has forced us to live and work in toxic environments. On a day-to-day basis, many people are forced to live in polluted megacities for the sake of work. Toxicity is often our current reality, and it feels important to portray a dystopia that doesn't move away from that reality.

EMN: Despite the pessimistic scenario the story depicts, it also seems to strike an optimistic chord in that it implements the idea cogently expressed by a scholar, Srinivas Aravamudan, who said in reference to the concepts of the Anthropocene that "endings are also mutations". As readers, we are told explicitly that the world into which Uti, the narrator and protagonist, ventures with his father and brother is a mutated world, born of the amalgamation of organic and non-organic matter. It is not the end of the world but a world unlike ours. Disgusting and filthy as it is, it is also alive and novel. What function does mutation play in this and other stories and, more generally, in thinking about the future?
OII: Mutation is a fascinating concept: it is a distortion of our norm, but it also builds on something that already exists. The function of mutation in this story is to highlight the ways in which rot and waste in Nigeria have entirely consumed people's reality. People try to make positive uses of this mutation: they make cars based on

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trash juice; they use trash to build boats. As we think about a better future, we have to acknowledge that we are already living in mutation. The question is how we can transform our mutilated resources into a world that can heal us?

EMN: Is there any literary trend/genre you would like to identify your texts with? We assume that scholars will tend to align your work with Afrofuturism or Africanfuturism. But you may see things differently. How do you position yourself on the literary scene?
OII: I try not to think too much about literary trends and genres, even though I know they can be quite useful for many. A lot of my work is Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism, but a lot of it is also based on Afrosurrealism (which is perfectly defined by Gautam Bhatia, as a genre that blurs the boundaries between the real and the unreal, that bends reality, fractures time, and allows the living and the dead to exist side-by-side. It's all a matter of perspective, and I align with all).

EMN: Whom would you name as your literary influences?
OII: Chinua Achebe, Nnedi Okorafor, Eloghosa Osunde, and so many more to name.

EMN: Why do you think writing about the future is important?
OII: It's important because it allows us to visualize all possible outcomes of our current reality. As an African writer, I think it's even more important to write stories about the future, as African futures are still infrequently portrayed in other forms of media. When African readers are able to see themselves in advanced societies, they can envision alternate realities and even hopeful futures.

EMN: How is your work received in Nigeria?
OII: To my knowledge, I think it's been received quite well. Speculative short fiction is a genre that's recently begun to garner attention from readers in the country, so I look forward to more readers' thoughts and engagement as they come across my work.

EMN: "More Sea Than Tar" and "What Floats in a Flotsam River" clearly align themselves with other recent narratives thematizing water, such as Ben Okri's "Three Parables about Water" and "The Secret Source", Imbolo Mbue's How Beautiful We Were, and Wanuri Kahiu's short film Puzmi. Your stories weave their narratives around water, too. The former depicts water as a disgusting cesspool, contaminated beyond recognition. The latter, in a similar vein, represents the eponymous river as a reservoir of "muck and filth". Yet, paradoxically, both also represent water as generous and hospitable. Perhaps infinitely so. Would you elaborate on your literary interest in water?
OII: My fascination with water comes from my experience with water bodies. While where I grew up, Benin City, does not have such a large body of water as Lagos, for example, I do remember seeing waste and water co-existing in everything from rivers to gutters. It made me realise at a young age that humanity's relationship with water is deeply flawed. Water is our source of nourishment, but our sources of water, where we draw this nourishment from, are often the most waste-filled places. The paradox is something I've always felt the need to capture.

EMN: Both these stories also forefront toxicity, to the extent that one can have the impression it is a character in its own right. Why have you found it significant to credit toxicity with so much narrative power and prominence?
OII: We live in a world that is deeply toxic, and I think that when a reality is portrayed as strongly as it exists it often feels like a thing that has its own voice. Toxicity in these stories, however, does not appear without any reason: in both, we can see the way in which the world's toxicity affects the mindsets of each individual. It is significant to highlight because it ultimately shows readers that degradation is more than just nature's problem—it intersects to affect our minds, our societies, and our state of being.

EMN: "More Sea Than Tar" does not tell us much about where the filth in the water comes from or who is responsible. Was it a deliberate decision?
OII: It wasn't a deliberate decision, but it is one I've come to appreciate as the years have passed. I think focusing on who is responsible would divert readers away from the central theme of the story, which is how individuals adapt in the face of disasters. The question of who is responsible and where the filth comes from is equally as important, but it makes the reader focus on the instigators, instead of thinking about this as a story of survival.

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EMN: Talking of a different kind of displacement. In a 2019 article in The Guardian, Chika Unigwe harshly and justly reprimanded Western media and audiences for their privileging of young Westerners and their climate activism. The face of this activism has invariably been Greta Thunberg. Unigwe censures the erasure by Western media of climate activists from the Global South. Do you see yourself as a climate activist, and do you see your work as countering the tendencies Unigwe reproaches?

OII: I believe that every writer's words have the power to bring about activism, but I also would be hesitant to call myself a climate activist, simply because I don't think that it is a title I've earned. In regard to my work, while I am grateful for the attention it has received from Western media, I do think that the Western world has a lot of work to do in spotlighting and supporting activists from other parts of the world if they are to truly counter their tendency of privilege. There are steps in the right direction, but more can be always done.

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