

The Case for Reckless Climate Optimism

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While many of us are pretty optimistic about our own futures—we're getting married, adopting puppies and, in my case, having kids—it seems that a lot of us are deeply pessimistic about the future of the world.

A Gallup poll survey from January 2022 showed that while 85 percent of people in the U.S. were satisfied with their personal lives, only 17 percent felt the same way about the direction in which their country was headed.¹ A 2019 study in the EU showed similar results.²

When it comes to the future of the climate, it can feel like we're caught in a *pessimism trap*. This is when we are so convinced of failure that we don't even try—and in not trying, we guarantee failure. In this state, we often become singularly focused on the negative, ignoring past successes and disregarding any evidence of hopefulness. As the philosopher Jennifer M. Morton notes:

Pessimism traps can strike the collective will as well. If each of us as individuals is certain that our collective projects will fail, then we might as well not waste our time trying. And if we don't try, then we increase the likelihood that our fears about our collective futures will become true.³

But I am Nigerian, and while I may despair about many of the trends I see around me, I'm wildly optimistic about our collective future—especially when it comes to the climate.

Don't get me wrong, if anyone has a reason to be cynical about the future, it's Nigerians. I'm not going to bore you with the statistics—the crime rates, the GDP, the health outcomes. Like many countries in the Global South, we are already facing the disproportionate impacts of climate change. Yet, pessimism is just not our style.

There is a uniquely Nigerian mentality we call "suffering and smiling." Named after a 1978 album by the Afrobeat legend Fela Anikulapo Kuti, it's a kind of fiercely cheerful optimism in the face of enormous obstacles. It resembles what the philosopher Mara van der Lugt calls *hopeful pessimism*:

¹ Megan Brenan, "Satisfaction With Own Life Five Times Higher Than With U.S.," *Gallup*, January 31, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/389375/satisfaction-own-life-five-times-higher.aspx>.

² Catherine E. de Vries and Isabell Hoffmann, "The Optimism Gap: Personal Complacency versus Societal Pessimism in European Public Opinion," *Eupinions*, May 28, 2020, <https://eupinions.eu/de/text/the-optimism-gap>. Note: de Vries and Hoffmann's piece is built on a survey conducted in December 2019.

³ Jennifer M. Morton, "We Are All Caught in a Pessimism Trap But There Is a Way Out," *Psyche*, June 8, 2022, <https://psyche.co/ideas/we-are-all-caught-in-a-pessimism-trap-but-there-is-a-way-out>.

One can be deeply, darkly pessimistic, one can find oneself in the cold hard clutches of despair, and yet not be depleted of the possibility (and it could just be a possibility) that better may yet arrive.⁴

It might have something to do with our history.

My people have gone through what the white imagination would consider the apocalypse. Between the horrors of transatlantic chattel slavery and colonialism, we've endured subjugation, slaughter, and the obliteration of our ecosystems, histories, and cultural institutions. In my own family, we saw the end of British colonial rule, endured a brutal civil war, decades of crushing military rule, and the advent of a tentative but resilient democracy—all within three generations.

That's not to say these histories haven't left their mark. The wounds of our collective trauma⁵ are evident in the casual violence meted out by the powerful towards the powerless in every aspect of our daily lives, from our institutions to our families. And yet we're still here, still finding ways to access joy, laughter, and love.

As van der Lugt points out, ours "is a kind of hope that is dearly bought, that does not come lightly but is carved out of a painful vision which may just be the acknowledgment of all the suffering that life can and does hold."⁶

I cannot afford to the kind of pessimism that leads to hopelessness, despair, and collapse, because I know in my bones that no matter how dire it gets, this too shall pass. We will survive.

In this vein, I want to make the case for adopting a radical, even reckless, optimism in the face of a possible climate catastrophe. My argument is simple: as someone whose personal and collective history has seen entrenched systems of power crumble overnight, I know that the barriers to making fundamental changes in how we live and work are not as intractable as they seem.

We're living through an era of unprecedented global inequality, with democratic institutions across the world under attack by fascist ideologues within their own populations. But I think that this consolidation of entrenched oligarchic interests is the desperate writhing of a system gasping its last breath. After all, you don't scramble to hoard what you're sure you already have.

While it may seem like the exploitative and destructive systems that we're enmeshed in can't ever shift, I'm not only confident that they can, I'm certain that they will.

Why? Because we've shifted systems before. It was Ursula K. Le Guin, the grand dame of speculative fiction, who reminded us in 2014 that the hegemonic structures of our world aren't inevitable.

We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.⁷

⁴ Mara van der Lugt, "Look on the Dark Side," *Aeon*, April 26, 2022, <https://aeon.co/essays/in-these-dark-times-the-virtue-we-need-is-hopeful-pessimism>.

⁵ Rachel Larson, "Collective Trauma," *Choosing Therapy*, last modified August 30, 2022, <https://www.choosingtherapy.com/collective-trauma>.

⁶ van der Lugt, "Look on the Dark Side."

⁷ Ursula K. Le Guin, "Speech in Acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters," November 19, 2014, <https://www.ursulaklequin.com/nbf-medal>.

We've been indoctrinated with an understanding of history that the anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow call a "stagist narrative." In their book *The Dawn of Everything*,⁸ they argue that our view of history has been reduced to one story with two essential interpretations: one encapsulated by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the other by the English political theorist Thomas Hobbes.

The story goes like this: Early humans lived in small foraging groups that were essentially egalitarian and democratic. But this social order disappeared with the dawn of agriculture, which required hierarchies of gender and class to manage the labour of producing food. With more food came more settlement and sharper, more rigid hierarchies. Rousseau saw this rise towards "civilization" as a loss of our collective human innocence, while Hobbes believed that it was a necessary check on our natural instinct towards domination and cynical self-interest.

But as Wengrow and Graeber point out, that story isn't true at all. For instance, there's clear evidence—both anthropological and archeological—that before the advent of farming, human societies weren't confined to small, egalitarian bands. It was more "a carnival parade of political forms."⁹ Nor did the advent of farming make private property, rank, or hierarchy inevitable:

A surprising number of the world's earliest cities were organized on robustly egalitarian lines, with no need for authoritarian rulers, ambitious warrior-politicians, or even bossy administrators.¹⁰

For much of human history, people have preferred flat social structures with diffuse forms of power over strict pecking orders. That's not to say our distant past was some kind of lost golden age, as Rousseau understood it; rather, the systems we employ to organise ourselves have always been more experimental and robust than we've been led to believe.

One of the most pernicious aspects of the standard world-historical narratives is precisely that they dry everything up, reduce people to cardboard stereotypes, simplify the issues [...] in ways that themselves undermine, possibly even destroy, our sense of human possibility.¹¹

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I moved to Canada in 2017 and had my child in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. It's only in the last few months that I've been comfortable taking them to meet other kids in our local park.

Before my first outing, I was prepared to defend my child from the other "pandemic babies," kids who'd spent their first years trapped in their homes, so lacking in basic social skills that they'd probably be feral, à la the Hobbesian fable of *The Lord of the Flies*. Instead, what I've found is something I've come to call the "kindness of the playground." These kids are empathetic, they're sweet, they're thoughtful.

There was the four-year-old who wordlessly adopted my kid and showed them how to go down the slide for the first time. And the 16-month-old who happily shared her half of the tire swing. There was the

⁸ David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

⁹ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 4.

¹⁰ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 4.

¹¹ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 21.

three-year-old who saw my child looking longingly at his bag of gummy snacks and, without prompting, offered them one. And who can forget the amazing 20-month-old who let my kid join them as they drew shapeless images in chalk on the sidewalk, trading colours back and forth.

My own childhood experience of the playground was of a dog-eat-dog competitiveness that meant that only the biggest and toughest kids got to play on the swings because they could shove everyone else off. Differences were mercilessly mocked and derided. Weaknesses were exploited. Playgrounds across the world, in Nigeria, Libya, and Poland, were where I first learned that I wore coke bottle glasses, that I was too skinny, that I talked funny. That I was Black—and *that* was the worst thing of all.

In contrast, any discrimination my child has faced has come from other parents and caregivers: those who avoid eye contact, who don't return their smiles or waves, who place themselves between my child and theirs, then steer their charges away.

But they're not our future.

It might be foolish, but I'm putting my faith in my child and their counterparts—the ones we're tentatively calling Generation Alpha. All over the world, my friends who are parents are doing the same. We're doing this by instilling in our children a radical, deep-rooted kindness that they are already applying to themselves and to one another. We're teaching them a softness that will allow them to make structural changes to the world and its systems that we can't even imagine yet.

Of course, that doesn't absolve us of our own responsibilities. In 2014, I conducted the primary research for a documentary on climate change in Nigeria. I travelled across the country profiling communities affected by drought, flooding, and erosion. In each case, climatic changes in weather patterns combine with destructive systems of consumption and production to create a powder keg of negative outcomes, just waiting for the wrong spark to cause an explosion.

In my home state of Anambra, decades of poor building practices and unregulated dredging along the banks of the River Niger meant that the increased rainfall caused by climate change led to disastrous flooding. Whole communities were often washed away overnight.

What is needed aren't just new techniques and technologies, but a new relationship towards our environment. Joseph Ibuzor, the head of the Ecology Department in the Anambra State Ministry of Agriculture at the time, summed it up succinctly:

The real problem is what we think of as “development,” which is massive, fenced walls and tarred roads without tree cover. People must learn to build lightly and mainstream biodiversity.¹²

If we want to truly begin the work of healing our planet, we need unfettered ways of thinking about the world and each other that aren't bound by the rigidities of hierarchy and capitalism. This is going to require a fearless imagination. And this is where the realms of the speculative come in. Speculative fiction can decentre and inspire us. It can expand the limits of what we believe is possible—but only if we challenge our own assumptions, face our internalized biases, and push past them.

¹² Core Productions Ltd., “Nowhere to Run: Nigeria's Climate and Environmental Crisis,” 2017, <https://youtu.be/OzuRMxaCrvQ>.

Climate mitigation can't be done within my generation alone. No matter where we begin, at some point it will need to be taken up by our kids. And you know what? They are more than up to the task. But we will need to give them something to believe in. We're going to need to adopt the same heedless optimism children naturally possess and apply it to every part of this fight. Because that's what it's going to take.

I make the case for this type of optimism because working with hope is very different from working with fear. One leads upwards, opening us up to innovations and experimentation. It sees setbacks as temporary learning points on the way to ultimate success. The other leads us downwards and inwards. It causes us to clutch at our safety nets, attacking others because we believe they will come to take away what little we have. When you work in fear, you see failures as catastrophic and seek safety in the status quo. Ursula K. Le Guin summed it up in this manner:

Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom—poets, visionaries—realists of a larger reality.¹³

So enough with the dystopian narratives. These fantasies of postapocalyptic hellscape and mass escapes to other planets aren't helping. They're just scaring us. Let's not be afraid to imagine utopias, to contemplate perfection here on earth. When thinking about the future we want to live in, let's go wild and come up with societies that have solved some of the biggest problems of our time: worlds that acknowledge historical wrongs and move us from the automatic "no" of the now to something more joyous, more awesome, more radical.

Let's think like children.

Thankfully, a number of writers are already taking the first steps in this journey. *Omenana*, the magazine of African speculative fiction that I helped to co-found, published an entire issue in the summer of 2022 focused on positive and uplifting visions of democratic futures.¹⁴ On a continent where popular rule is often tenuous and short-lived, dreaming of stable systems of governance rooted in the will of the collective can be a singularly radical act.

Another example is *Multispecies Cities: Solarpunk Urban Futures*, an anthology of short stories published in 2021 by World Weaver Press.¹⁵ In it, 24 writers imagine urban ecosystems populated by humans, animals, insects, plants, and machines, all working towards communities of mutual care. Whether it's a couple on a terrible blind date helping to save stranded sea turtles or a group of misfits finding friendship and purpose through forced community service, in each story, humans have to look beyond themselves to find solidarity with creatures wholly unlike them.

Also in 2021, *Fix*, *Grist Magazine's* "climate solutions lab," held a contest to solicit short stories exploring how fiction can help create a better reality. The contest, *Imagine 2200: Climate Fiction for Future*

¹³ Le Guin, "Speech in Acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal."

¹⁴ "Issue 22: Positive Visions of Democracy," *Omenana Magazine*, July 18, 2022, <https://omenana.com/2022/07/18/omenana-issue-22-positive-visions-of-democracy>.

¹⁵ Christoph Rupprecht et al., eds., *Multispecies Cities: Solarpunk Urban Futures* (Albuquerque, NM: World Weaver Press, 2021).

Ancestors, called for stories that embodied hope, justice, and cultural authenticity while amplifying voices that continue to be affected by systems of oppression.¹⁶ The three winners and nine finalists tell stories from the perspectives of the most marginalized, including a trans girl from the Caribbean slowly becoming a coral reef and a disabled eco-detective from Bali who must choose between her people and the corporation promising to transform their lives.

These collections have imagined a wide range of visions for a future beyond the upheavals of the climate crisis, yet all are rooted in the kind of cheerfully hopeful resilience that any Nigerian would recognize.

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To conclude, I want to leave you with one of my favourite childhood memories, part of the reason why I am so wildly optimistic myself.

I'm standing on the deep balcony of our three-bedroom apartment in Lagos, waiting for the first rain of the season. I would peer through the wrought-iron burglar bars, looking across the wild tangle of greenery that grew in the empty field next to our house, drinking in the petrichor scent of impending wet.

After months of dust and desiccating heat, that first rain of the season always seemed impossible. Whipping in on a cold damp wind, gathering inexorably with the heavy storm clouds overhead, it was both unlikely and inevitable all at once.

These days, the dry season in Nigeria is longer and hotter than it used to be, and the rainy season is shorter but more intense.

But the rains always come around.

¹⁶ "Imagine 2200: Climate Fiction for Future Ancestors," Fix, *Grist Magazine*, September 14, 2021, <https://grist.org/fix/series/imagine-2200-climate-fiction>.