Novel Climate - Episode 3 Transcript

Meghan: When most people think of climate fiction, we tend to picture the end of the world.

[music]

Dead landscapes. Fighting over resources. Constant migration. Characters wearily walking along a dirt road.

This particular type of post-apocalypse story has become a sort of ready-made form that countless variations fit into. And its roots... go way back.

[media clip] *Fear not, Noah. I have come to warn you because you have been a good man. You and your family will survive the flood.*

Meghan: As with the Judeo-Christian story of Noah's Ark, these stories tend to center on a small group of survivors. Those who've emerged from the rubble to figure out what's next….But who exactly is left over, and why, and *how* they go about fighting for survival in their version of the post-apocalyptic landscape — this says a lot about our culture, and the road we imagine *ourselves* to be on. Not to mention whether, or how, we might consider changing direction.

[theme music] This is Novel Climate, a podcast about literature, the environment, and people. I'm Meghan Modafferi. I'm a graduate student interested in the stories we tell about climate change. Each episode looks at a specific novel or other literary work that I think tells us something new about environmental issues in literature, and, the rest of the world.

And this time we're talking about Octavia E. Butler and her postapocalyptic novel, *Dawn*, which is the first in her Xenogenesis series. And we're talking about a lot of other things, too. So, I'll start with some context on Butler, her recent resurgence in popularity, and the concept of Afrofuturism. Essentially: how we might think about race and the future as working together in this novel.

And then I want to take a kind of bizarre detour into the connections between climate change and nuclear war. Because the novel, *Daw*n: it takes place in a post-nuclear-war world. But also because, when we imagine these two very different existential threats — severe climate change on one hand and nuclear holocaust on the other — there are some key overlaps and some really important differences to parse... that affect how we might plan for those futures, or how we might respond.

And with all that in mind, we'll get into *Dawn* more specifically, thinking about how the novel stages a sort of thought experiment that — although it takes place in outer space — pushes us to rethink how we live here on Earth.

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So, Octavia Butler is commonly thought of as the first Black woman science fiction writer. She was the first Black woman both to receive the Hugo award and the Nebula award for science fiction writing. And she's the first science fiction writer of any race or gender to win the MacArthur genius grant. And...

[media clip] *As the Perseverance team celebrates the rover's first successful drive on the surface of Mars, I am honored and excited to announce that Perserverance's landing site is now called Octavia E. Butler landing.*

Meghan: As you just heard, she recently became the second science fiction author to have a Mars landing site named after her. The first was Ray Bradbury with the Curiosity rover.

Natalie: When Butler got into science fiction, she loved the stories, but she said she never saw herself in them. She said they were stories about 30 year old drinking, smoking white men and she was none of those things, So when she wrote her stories she said, I wrote myself in.

Meghan: That was Natalie Russell.

Natalie: I'm the assistant curator of literary collections at the Huntington Library Art Museum and Botanical Gardens. And I work, primarily, these days, with the Octavia Butler papers, I was the person lucky enough to process the collection, when it came in and I curated an exhibit on her in 2017.

Meghan: So these papers she's talking about are Octavia Butlers' archives — they're pages and pages of handwritten notes, correspondence, manuscripts, drawings — that she left as a bequest to the Huntington.

Natalie: She would often write mantras and notes to herself: I will be a best selling writer, I will write bestselling novels, I will have my own home. She set out these goal: all my books will be at the top of the bestseller list, the top of the charts, I will have a million dollars in the bank. And she'd write them out on pieces of paper — and none of her books ever hit a bestseller list, while she was alive. *Parable of the Sower* just hit the *New York Times* bestseller list for the first time, 27 years after it was published.

Meghan: Butler's work has seen a massive resurgence in popularity since the 2016 election, in part because the president in her Earthseed series, which includes Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents, uses the slogan *Make America Great Again*.

[media clip] *And we will make America great again.*

Meghan: Though these novels do speak clearly to many issues of the contemporary moment, and to the rhetoric of former President Donald Trump, the character and the slogan were actually inspired by Ronald Reagan.

[media clip] *Only one man has the proven experience we need: Ronald Reagan for president. Let's make America great again.*

Meghan: And this shows, I think, how important it is to also look at the past when imagining possible futures. Which is something Butler is well known for doing: showing how the past reinvents itself in the present and the future.

[music]

Butler is often called the mother of Afrofuturism. And this is defined a lot of different ways but what I'm focusing on here is the idea that Black people in the diaspora, because of the dehumanizing affects of slavery and various forms of anti-black racism that continued afterwards, can be thought of as living, and as having lived for generations, in the future. In a future that they were imagining in order to survive, and therefore, working to create. Here's Professor Justin Lewis Mann, a scholar of African-American studies and literature at Northwestern University with a little more on that.

Justin: The dehumanizing process of enslavement, the various kinds of anti-blackness that exist in the world produce this kind of second order process where black people move beyond the conditions of the present. And so Afrofuturism is positing that in various kinds of stories — fiction, music, often — that the aesthetics and poetics and narrative qualities of that art and literature produce a kind of transcendent futurity.

Meghan: What he's saying is that Afrofuturism suggests that Black folks have sort of always been living into the future, creating the future, envisioning the future, even — and *especially* as — their humanity was denied, their future seemed impossible. But they were always making it possible.

Neil Drumming, a producer at *This American Life*, said in an episode on the topic that Afrofuturism gives him the feeling that "despite whatever trials or travails you've come through, that you will exist in the future." I'll put a link to that episode in the show notes if you want to learn more about Afrofuturism more broadly.

[music]

Natalie: She was asked, why aren't there more black science fiction writers? And she said, there aren't because there aren't. What we don't see, we assume we can't be. What a destructive assumption.

[music]

Meghan: So, okay, here comes the rabbit hole that I fell into when researching context around this novel. I was trying to parse how fiction thinks about post-nuclear apocalypse vs. climate change apocalypse vs. zombie apocalypse, et cetera. And I found this guy Joe Masco.

Joe: My name is Joe Masco and I am a professor of anthropology and science studies at the University of Chicago.

Meghan: And Joe told me something interesting, which was that during Hurricane Katrina, both former president Bush and former governor of Mississippi Haley Barbour, plus a bunch of other people, compared the wreckage from the hurricane to the fallout from a nuclear bomb.

And this gets at the idea that when we picture a disaster, our cultural image of the highest possible crisis, it's framed by the nuclear bomb. The bomb is like a template that natural or not-so-natural disasters, climate events, they are in some ways being measured against.

And the connections go deeper than that, actually. He told me that the science that helps us understand climate change today — it developed in tandem with and kind of *because of* the nuclear bomb.

Joe: After World War II and the formal launch of the nuclear age and a kind of arms race with the Soviet Union that involved a great deal, for the first roughly two decades of the nuclear age, of atmospheric nuclear testing in which to develop new weapon systems, there were a couple hundred very large-scale violent events that are usually designated as nuclear tests that took place across mostly the U.S. Southwest and out in the Marshall Islands. A few up in Alaska. That basically forced those folks that were interested in developing military technologies to also be deeply concerned about the environment. And to study the effects of the bomb on every kind of ecosystem.

And so you had a kind of parallel world of science: one a weapon science world, developing American military support superiority and very much thinking about the bomb as a key technology in managing global affairs and a confrontation with the Soviet Union. And you had linked to that and funded largely by it, the emergent set of global environmental sciences that start to study nuclear effects in the ocean, in the atmosphere, on land, tracking how the radioactive particles that were put in the atmosphere by nuclear testing traveled through ecosystems and food chains. And much of what we now understand to be the basic logics of ecology come from this moment in the '50s where scientists of all kinds were able to map with a new kind of precision, by tracking these radioactive particles, how the world is actually put together.

Meghan: So at the same moment that we're developing nuclear weapons and testing them and needing to measure the widespread effects of those weapons in terms of environmental effects, human health, even changes over time in the human genome….we are by that very same process getting a deeper understanding of the Earth that leads to understanding climate change

much better. We're seeing how earth systems operate on a truly planetary level, how nowhere is really remote when atomic particles move around through the air, and the water, and the food chain.

Joe: So we have this very strange kind of historical achievement of a technology that was very early on recognized as kind of world-ending technology in the in the form of nuclear warfare producing this understanding, slowly, of another kind of danger that is emerging at the same time — through greenhouse gas emissions, through toxic exposures of various kinds.

And through that, we have a kind of competition going for many decades about which kind of danger is the most urgent one — which is the one that the state should care about the most? And in my reading of it, one of the really kind of pernicious things that developed was a form of nationalism that was so grounded in nuclear power and nuclear nationalism, as I call it, that the broader emergence of a long-term change to the global climate, through greenhouse gas emissions and other forms of toxic flows, never rose to quite the same level as a security danger as the potential nuclear danger did.

Meghan: The story of a nuclear war — it fits into understandable plotlines. Action, reaction, high intrigue, spectacular moments of impact. On the other hand, the gradual accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere…. Not quite so cinematic.

And Joe actually sees the cultural normalization of the idea that nuclear danger might always be lurking — as connected to failures to respond to currently existing, more measurable dangers related to gradual environmental decline.

Joe: Just to give a quick sketch of it, the U.S. is putting hundreds of billions of dollars into a thing they call national security every year — at least a trillion dollars if you add it up across all the different agencies. Has somewhere between 800 and 1,000 military bases around the world, all of which are imagining that they're responding to some kind of potential crisis and are ready to be mobilized. It also has the state of the art nuclear arsenal. And, since 2001, has been involved in a global War on Terror. So these are really unprecedented kind of commitments of resources and they all have this promissory note at the center that the world can be created that will be perfectly secure, that will be safe, that will be without surprise, and certainly without imminent forms of danger.

So do we live in that world after 70 years of this problem set? No, I think that we are actually in a state where the vast kind of expenditure on a thing called national security is pursuing a goal that can't be reached through those mechanisms.

Meghan: In other words, if the question is, "what will make us safe?," the knee-jerk cultural answer seems to be "national security." Meaning military strategy, border protecting, resource accumulation. That sort of thing.

But what security really means — it depends on what the actual threat is. The ways of thinking that got us into this might not be the best ones to get us out.

Joe: So if you go to the 1960s, for example, in moments where there's heightened nuclear testing, you know, one of the invitations from the U.S. state was to imagine that all citizens should be able to move their life underground. That basically the above ground environment could become so dangerous that life couldn't happen there. And so this is a really extraordinary kind of demand, as citizens, that in the name of their own defense, they should not only authorize but participate in a world that might not allow them to breathe. Might not allow them to be on land or to maintain existing food supplies.

Meghan: What does it mean to take at face value this idea that *in the name of security*, we might need to sacrifice the planet? We might need to sacrifice our ability to breathe on the planet, to grow food and access water from it. To consider that, without realizing it, we may have culturally deemed that an acceptable trade. In exchange for something called security.

[music]

So, normally, this is where I'd start zooming in on specific scenes in *Dawn*. There's this method of reading called close-reading which focuses on analyzing really specific pieces of writing, sometimes just a couple of words at a time, and really diving deep on those few words.

But sci-fi is interesting because a lot of times it's about world building; it's about the big picture principles that make the imagined world work or fit together. And it's about following the logic from there. So *if* there was a nuclear war and *if* only a few humans survived because they were rescued by an alien species and taken to another planet, and *if* a black woman was tasked with awakening those humans after 250 years asleep… then, what might happen next?

Justin: Yeah, so, the novel begins with this woman waking up.

Meghan: That's Justin again, the African-American studies and English scholar. And, as with every episode, I'll warn you here that spoilers are coming. But I think and hope that this discussion will *add* to your experience of the novel if and when you read it, rather than taking something away.

Justin: She learns that her captor-saviors are an alien species called the Oankali who are a species of gene traders that travel throughout the galaxy-universe, making these kinds of deals with sentient and sapient species all over the world, so what they do is they enhance a species, they remove some of the kind of like genetic deficiencies of that species, but in the process, they change that species and they incorporate parts of the best parts of the species that they're trading with into their own.

Meghan: And this Black woman, Lilith Ayapo, she's been chosen by the Oankali to awaken the other humans and tell them what's going on. Explain that everything on Earth has been

destroyed. That they are in another planet, in the care slash captivity — it's unclear — of this alien race, and that they will need to be trained to live on a new version of Earth that the Oankali are sort of re-populating with plant and animal life.

Justin: So she does this reluctantly — she awakens a group of survivors and very quickly, the survivors are reluctant to join with her for a number of reasons. Because she's a black woman, because she's in a relationship with an Asian-American man — or he's Canadian but part of the Asian diaspora — because she's, I think the novel uses the term "mated," with one of these Oankali, an alien, and so for all kinds of reasons, they don't deem her worthy of awakening.

Meghan: So these are the contours we're working with, the basic shape of the thought experiment. And here's what really stands out to me about this as different from many other apocalypse narratives.

This is a story where survival is not the triumph of a hero or group of heroes, but where it's much more complicated than that.

Because the Oankali: they offer a form of symbiosis through their gene alterations. They cure cancer in Lilith, for example. But they also hold the humans captive: they drug them to control their emotions, they withhold information, they make changes to their bodies without what we would call consent.

And so they illustrate a world where our autonomy is severely limited. We don't have individualistic heroes who find a way to break the mold of their captors. We have *instead* a protagonist with a really limited set of choices who chooses to work with the Oankali, and the consequences of that are significant. They change her body — make her stronger, make her more capable of healing herself — but this makes the other humans see her as something other than human. They impregnate her with a child who she loves but who is not quite human. They change her and, as represented in the child, they change the future of humanity on a DNA level.

And I think it's not too much of a stretch to think of this alongside contemporary issues of environmental change. Because a loss of what we have traditionally considered individual autonomy is exactly what a lot of scholars see as at stake.

For example, we have myriad health issues related to air pollution, related to the infrastructure of the fossil fuel industry. We have extreme storms and wildfires. We have threats to sustained food production. We even have exposure to depleted uranium, a byproduct of weapons that causes DNA changes in unborn children. So what's happening to the environment, whether from industry or from warfare or both, it's changing people's circumstances, limiting their choices.

And if we lived in a world where we truly could sequester our own water, our own air, our own food, to protect ourselves, then maybe it would be logical, to say nothing of ethics, to approach

environmental change from a perspective of national security. Keeping what we want in and keeping everything else out.

But we've learned we don't live in that world and that planetary change knows no borders. Whatever we do to the planet, even if it reaches others first, we eventually do to ourselves. So what if, like the Oankali, we are always living in partially symbiotic and partially parasitic relationship to humans — and to other species? What would it look like for us to live as if that were true?

But let's go back now to race and afrofuturism and how those play out alongside these questions of national security and climate.

Justin: We've been fed, since at least the Reagan Administration, but certainly maybe before that that security is the price we pay for freedom — there's all kinds of ways of articulating the sort of sacrifices at the individual level. Security is not an evenly distributed force. And it does a lot of harm in the world, and it can be really difficult to capture that because we think we desire it, right? We have an attachment to it.

And what I love most about Butler — and what I think other authors in the sort of Black SF arts, including Colson Whitehead and N.K. Jemison, especially. Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah does this — is to abandon the notion that security is the thing that Black people have available to them, right? That, like, and often when Black people are serving as the foot soldiers of security — are doing the dying in the wars fought in the name of a sort of greater purpose, when at the same time they're being incarcerated for petty drug crimes or have state services pulled away from them.

You know, what's really important to me about how we think about security and especially how Butler is sort of tracing security to its likely ends is that we can't let go of the fact that this thing we think we want is actually the cause of our undoing.

Meghan: In the novel, humans are described as having a genetic contradiction that's the cause of our undoing. Two competing drives.

Justin: One is abiding intelligence. We're told we're one of the most intelligent species in the universe. And the other is an investment in hierarchy. And so the novel is pitting the notion of hierarchy of, especially of race, but also — and always — of race and gender, right, and sexuality. These sort of hierarchies of identity that lead to the denigration or dehumanization of people as competing with our intelligence, our ability and capacity to escape the planet, to enter into orbit, to build satellites, and, you know, communicate at the speed of light, those things are attributed by the novel and, I would say, by the author, as things that make us exceptional.

And so the Oankali lurk as kind of this as a metaphor, sure, for how — for all kinds of things, right, this is a ship so it's evoking enslavement. There's a genetic thing happening so it's evoking eugenics, and there's all kinds of ways that it sort of parable-izes the history of black life

in the new world. But it's also a really important push towards something. It's an — I, you know, I would use the term "world making." It's a world making novel that invites the reader to move with Lilith. You know, for Lilith, I think, [she] engages in this labor as a sort of invitation to a new political or social reality.

Meghan: Some of the characters in the novel, they want to find a way to put things back the way they were before. They don't want their way of life to change or their sense of who they are in the world to become entangled with these alien creatures. And their response is to fight and to kill and to isolate.

But Lilith, she knows everything has already changed and we are already entangled. And everything she does in the novel starts from that premise. And it's hard and ugly and painful but also communal and creative.

Justin: And so one of the most sort of exciting lines for me as choosing conversation with Joseph, her partner before he's killed, and they're talking about what the Oankali have done to them what what how their genes have been manipulated and just asks what will we be I wonder and there's no answer to that question. Except something different right something new.

Natalie: I don't think she is ever unrealistic in the sense that she's saying, *I fixed all the problems: this is how we do it*. I think she's inviting us to consider other ways of being. And to consider other ways of thinking.

Meghan: So, putting all of these ideas together, here's what I take away… and what I'm still mulling over.

First, that our ideas of security are inherited from the nuclear age, but that they may not be relevant in the face of global climate change. Because if the answer to military threats is shoring up borders — and we try to form climate solutions based on that same template — they'll always be short-sighted. We can't keep the clean air in and the pollution out no matter how many fortresses we build. But if, instead, we accept the inevitability of our global connectedness, our inability to truly isolate, that might lead us to new kinds of solutions.

Second, that security is distributed unequally based on social hierarchies. In the U.S., for example, Black people don't have access to security at the same level as white folks. The idea is that as citizens we all implicitly agree to sacrifice some level of personal freedom in exchange for state-provided security. But that Black Americans, for a variety of reasons, end up sacrificing more freedom and gaining less security.

And when we put these two ideas together with Butler's text, there's an Afrofuturistic idea embodied in Lilith. It's that many of us with some degree of cultural power *do* feel protected by national security and therefore can't easily see beyond it — even when challenges like climate change force us to develop new solutions and new definitions of safety.

...But people like Lilith, like Butler, black women — precisely *because* state-provided security hasn't served them — they may have greater vision to see beyond it. To better imagine the alternate futures we need.

[music]

This has been Novel Climate, episode 3. There is so much more to be said about *Dawn* and this series and Octavia Butler's work overall. This was really just scratching the surface from a particular perspective. So, I hope you'll read *Dawn* and the whole Lilith's Brood series.

And, if you want to learn more about Octavia Butler, check out the podcast Octavia's Parables by Adrienne Maree Brown and Toshi Reagon. And there's also a great episode on Butler from the NPR podcast Throughline.

Big thanks to our guests Dr. Justin Lewis Mann, Dr. Joe Masco, and Natalie Russell. I'm Meghan Modafferi.