Mapping Intersectionality: Geospatial Narratives and Digital Activism in Chioma Okereke's Water Baby

Henry Chukwudi John
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya,
Barcelona, Spain
hjohn1@uoc.edu

Diana Roig Sanz
ICREA Full Professor,
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya,
Barcelona, Spain
dsanzr@uoc.edu

Abstract

This study uses spatial and intersectional theory to analyse Chioma Okereke's *Water Baby* (2024) (Okereke, 2024), which illustrates the realities of Makoko, Lagos's neglected waterfront community. Through its young protagonist, Baby, the novel uncovers themes of gender exclusion, resilience, and visibility in a context of displacement and creativity. Employing literary analysis in conjunction with digital tools such as Voyant and StoryMapJS, the research links Okereke's story to real locations in Makoko, such as *Adogbo, Yanshiwhe and Sogunro*. A field visit in October 2025 gathered visual and spatial data that affirmed the setting of the novel while highlighting environmental and health issues not addressed in the text. Some residents expressed concerns about photography without consent, reflecting ethical dilemmas in documenting marginalised areas. The findings suggest that *Water Baby* serves as a literary counter-mapping tool that reclaims erased geographies, confronts invisibility, and preserves cultural memory, highlighting the interplay between empathy, environmental justice, and representation in Lagos's floating city.

Keywords: *Makoko, Lagos, Water Baby, Digital Humanities, Intersectionality, Spatial Justice, Literary Mapping, Environmental Humanities*

1 Introduction

Water Baby (2024) by Chioma Okereke (Okereke, 2024) tells the story of Baby, a young girl growing up in Makoko, a floating community in the Lagos Lagoon. Through her eyes, the novel explores exclusion, resilience, and the struggle for visibility in a place often missing from official records. The fascination of baby with mapping and drones becomes a metaphor for reclaiming space and voice in a neglected environment. Okereke, a Nigerian-British author, blends social critique with poetic storytelling to reimagine Makoko beyond the label of *"slum"*. Often called the *"Venice of Africa"*, Makoko is home to thousands who live and work on water, yet the Lagos State government continues to classify it as unsafe and targets it for demolition. The novel presents a more complex portrait, showing the community's creativity, culture, and survival amid political and environmental neglect. In October 2025, the researchers visited Makoko to document real sites described in the novel, including the sawmill, fish market, and waterways near the Third Mainland Bridge. The visit revealed serious environmental challenges such as polluted water, poor sanitation, and unstable structures. These realities are largely absent from Okereke's narrative but are central to understanding the community's daily life. Despite recurring government crackdowns, including the 2012 demolition that displaced about 30,000 people (Onitiju, 2023; Ogunlesi and Esiebo, 2016; Udoma-Ejorh, 2014; Ajayi et al., 2014; Oyinloye et al., 2017), Makoko remains vital to the economy of Lagos through fishing, trade, and boatbuilding. Yet its partial representation on Google Maps reflects deeper questions of visibility and exclusion that this study examines through literary analysis and digital mapping.

Baby's role in a drone-mapping project questions who controls visibility and representation. The project, led by young women, becomes a form of activism and self-definition, while the community remains cautious about outside attention that could bring government interference. Okereke's focus on mapping challenges the erasure of everyday life—canoe travel, fish smoking, and informal learning that official maps ignore. Through these depictions, she connects storytelling with spatial resistance and digital identity. Using intersectional theory and geospatial humanities, this study reads *Water Baby* as a literary counter-map that links fiction, digital activism, and cultural preservation. It draws on the work of African spatial scholars, such as (Adelusi-Adeluyi, 2020, 2024),

Figure 1: Figure 1. Red line – showing the Makoko location area. While the Yellow Line – referred to as the Makoko Community on Google Maps (accessed via Google Earth Pro, August 2025).

who examine how mapping practices have historically marginalised Lagos's indigenous communities. (Massey, 2009)'s view of space as dynamic and relational in (2009) helps explain Makoko's exclusion from official maps as a reflection of unequal power relations. Okereke's references to real neighbourhoods like Adogbo, Yanshiwhe, Migbewhe, and Sogunro show how literature can restore erased geographies to public awareness. This research maps cultural and spatial references in *Water Baby*, including school routes, canoe docks, fish markets, and communal spaces, among other locations, onto the real geography of Makoko. It argues that Okereke's narrative offers a counter-narrative to dominant urban imaginaries, turning literary geography into a form of advocacy and cultural preservation.

2 Related Works

Cities can be read through literature, as seen in digital humanities projects like ImagineRio, Compostela Geoliteraria, LITtech-Lagos 1.0 - StoryMapJS, and LitLong Edinburgh (Grover et al., 2019). Most of these focus on cities with established archives, leaving informal or unmapped spaces underexplored. As (Piatti, 2009) note, the overlap between imagined and real geographies invites new readings. In *Water Baby*, Makoko represents this intersection, both real and symbolic,

visible yet often erased. Lagos has long been central to Nigerian literature, portrayed as a city of contradictions and layered identities (Dairo, 2021; Dunton, 2008). Few studies, however, examine its waterfront communities through the lenses of intersectionality, cultural memory, or spatial exclusion. Okereke's Water Baby fills this gap by presenting Makoko through Baby's life in the stilted settlements of Adogbo, Yanshiwhe, Migbewhe, and Sogunro neighbourhoods, often missing from maps. The novel redefines Makoko as a space of memory and belonging rather than a "slum", highlighting its creativity and resilience. Adelusi-Adeluyi's Imagine Lagos (2020) overlays 19th-century maps on the modern city to recover forgotten spaces. Similarly, Okereke's novel symbolically remaps Lagos, turning Baby's documentation of roads and waterways into an act of spatial recovery. The text functions as a cultural archive, portraying Makoko as organised and self-sustaining rather than lawless (Okereke, 2024, p.15). Community projects such as Mapping Makoko (Ottaviani et al., 2020) share this goal of recording local geography. While not interactive, they echo the novel's vision of using mapping as a form of preservation. Baby's fascination with drones and Navigation mirrors the community's effort to be seen and remembered.

3 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope (Bakhtin, 1990), Bertrand Westphal's geocriticism (Westphal, 2011), and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) to explore how *Water Baby* depicts Makoko as a living space shaped by power, identity, and resilience. These perspectives highlight how social and environmental inequalities intersect within the community's daily life. Bakhtin's chronotope explains how time and space shape story and character. In *Water Baby*, Baby's growth mirrors changes in her environment from flood-prone wooden homes to formal climate meetings, revealing Makoko's adaptability and endurance. Westphal's geocriticism views literature as an active engagement with place. In Okereke's novel, Makoko takes on agency. When Baby says, *"Makoko is simply home"* (Okereke, 2024, p.3), she reframes it as a place of belonging rather than poverty. This aligns with Bushell's view that fiction creates *"cognitive maps"* linking people and environment (Bushell et al., 2022). Crenshaw's intersectionality explains how Baby's experience is shaped by gender, class, and geography. Her comment that "the government doesn't count us" (Okereke, 2024, p.23, 218) shows how space reinforces invisibility and exclusion. *Water Baby* acts as cultural memory, preserving Makoko's work, voices, and landscape. As (Reuschel and Hurni, 2011) revealed, fictional spaces can hold collective experience. Okereke's novel becomes both story and archive, affirming Makoko as a community of culture and survival.

4 Worldwide Similarities: Makoko in Perspective

According to (Onitiju, 2023), Venice is seen as a global city of legacy, attracting attention for its waterways and flood control measures like the *MOSE barrier*. In contrast, Makoko also utilises similar stilt architecture and tidal adjustments but is labelled a slum. Okereke highlights this disparity through Baby's voice, stating, *"Some call us the Venice of Africa, but without the charm or the postcards"* (Okereke, 2024, p.32). This critique illustrates how global narratives romanticise some cities while ignoring or erasing others from maps. In *Water Baby*, Makoko is not framed as a local outlier but as part of a broader global pattern of water-based urban communities shaped by environmental conditions and systemic neglect. This is subtly

evoked when Baby reflects on a new cityscape: "I was surprised by the graffiti on the railway tracks as we left the station, but soon the tapestry changed, giving us a brief glimpse of a large body of water, which Okereke explained. *"An even paler blue sky with clouds like balls of cotton wool, so a lake. It was so blue against... It was different from our own smoke-filled skies back at home. On the hills behind the lake, houses appeared to stand on each other's shoulders, a little bit like Makoko from a distance, except with white facades instead of our tin huts"* (Okereke, 2024, p.269-270). Through this contrast, Okereke draws attention to how framing and aesthetics influence perception, as Makoko shares physical features with admired cities yet remains excluded from recognition and preservation.

Figure 2: Edward Burtynsky, Makòko 2, Lagos, Nigeria, 2016 © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco

Makoko in *Water Baby* represents a trend of water-based urban communities rather than an isolated example. It reflects issues of political neglect, cultural resilience, and environmental factors, similar to floating communities like the Mekong Delta in Vietnam and canals in Amsterdam. These parallels place Makoko within a broader global discussion on preservation, spatial inequality, and water.

Formal planning often overlooks informal communities, leading to common threats of demolition (Ogunlesi and Esiebo, 2016; Onitiju, 2023) . A mother in "*Water Baby*" expresses frustration, stating, *"They send bulldozers like rain... clearing our homes and calling it development"* (p. 28). This highlights a global trend where urban futures are selectively envisioned. Success in water communities often stems from their inclusion in cultural heritage frameworks and state support, as seen in Venice and Amsterdam, which are portrayed as

Figure 3: Inner water streets of the Glass Island of Murano, Venice, Italy. Credit: Onitiju (2023)

5 Gender, Power, and Resistance in Makoko

In *Water Baby*, Chioma Okereke portrays Makoko as both a physical and social space where gender, power, and memory intersect. Through Baby's voice, the novel exposes how inequality and spatial exclusion shape everyday life. Her exclusion from fishing and later from drone-mapping projects reflects patriarchal control over space rather than a lack of skill. The analysis showed that these terms are often surrounded by ideas of power, freedom, and visibility. Mapping in the novel becomes an act of resistance, an attempt to make Makoko seen in both literal and symbolic ways. Baby's reflection, *"I should have been one of them if only Papa had allowed me to attend the workshops and learn how to use drones"* (p. 32), captures how access to technology mirrors access to power. Her father's explanation that women are *"unlucky"* on the lagoon (p. 21) reinforces how social myths restrict women's mobility. Yet Baby challenges these boundaries when she learns to fly drones herself, declaring, *"It really is a map of our world*

that I am seeing. We are authentic. We are now present" (p. 109). Her mapping becomes both spatial and existential, a way to claim recognition for her community. Okereke situates these acts within real places like *Adogbo, Apollo, and Yanshiwhe, showing Makoko* as a structured and living environment rather than a single *"slum"*. Each sub-community has its own leadership, trade, and memory. Canoe docks, smokehouses, and makeshift schools serve as spaces of work, learning, and survival. The Makoko floating school, for instance, symbolises hope and shared purpose: *"The floating school had brought us more than just teaching; it had given us hope"* (p. 14). Through these spaces, *Water Baby* turns mapping into both a political and narrative act. Gender, labour, and power are inscribed in Makoko's geography, while resistance emerges through storytelling and digital mapping. Okereke's novel restores Makoko's voice and complexity, reframing it not as an informal settlement but as a community of presence, creativity, and knowledge.

6 Research Methodology

This study combines literary analysis with digital and spatial mapping to explore how Chioma

Okereke's *Water Baby* (2024) portrays Makoko through space, displacement, and resilience. In October 2025, the researchers visited Makoko to document the places described in the novel. The visit provided photos and location data linking Okereke's fiction to real sites such as the sawmill area, waterways, fish market, and canoe routes leading toward the Third Mainland Bridge. The novel (purchased as an ebook) was converted to text and analysed in *Voyant Tools* to identify patterns in words such as *'photos', 'map', and 'drone'*. *StoryMapJS* and *Google My Maps* were then used to plot key sub-communities, including Adogbo, Yanshiwhe, Migbewhe, Sogunro, and Apollo, combining excerpts from the novel with geographic coordinates and field notes.

7 Field Observation and Digital Validation: Mapping Makoko's Living Geographies

A field visit to Makoko was undertaken as part of the study's empirical process to verify the spatial, cultural, and environmental realities represented in Chioma Okereke's *Water Baby*. The site visit and photographic documentation provided visual and geospatial data linking Okereke's fiction to real sites such as the sawmill area, waterways, fish market, and canoe routes.

7.1 Context and Field Process

The journey started at Apollo Street, the main entrance to Makoko, and continued by canoe from the fish market through narrow waterways to the sawmill district near the Third Mainland Bridge. Using Google Maps and Sheets, locations were geotagged between *6.492°N–6.496°N and 3.386°E–3.395°E*, reflecting Okereke's descriptions, especially on pages 15–23. Figure 4 (Apollo Street Gate) marks the entry to Makoko, signalling the shift from mapped Lagos to its informal waterfront. The inscription *"Makoko Community: One Love, One Mind"* emphasises unity and grassroots identity, showcasing the novel's themes of self-definition and resilience.

7.2 Observations and Comparative Notes

6 (Makoko Lagoon and Canoe Network) depicts the same stilted homes and canoe routes that Okereke describes Okereke as ''*wooden corridors between the houses where the water is our road and the paddle our compass*" (p. 33). While the photograph reflects the text's imagery of mobility, the field experience revealed a more precarious reality—polluted water, floating waste, and smoke affecting visibility. The trip was cut short due to unsafe conditions.

6 (Route toward Third Mainland Bridge and Sawmill District) illustrates the route across the lagoon to the industrial wood-cutting area. The journey was halted due to unsafe conditions, including large logs, oil slicks, and sawmill scaffolds that threatened canoe movement. Health risks were evident as strong fumes, waste disposal, and water contamination increased near the bridge.

The image shows how often the word 'mapping' appears in *Water Baby* and the contexts around it. It reveals how Okereke links everyday life in Makoko like fishing, photography, and community projects, to themes of space, belonging, and visibility. This helps show that the novel uses language as a form of mapping and resistance.

This graph shows the frequency of the words *'map', 'picture', and 'drone'* in *Water Baby*. Peaks indicate chapters where visuality and mapping are emphasised, particularly in the middle when Baby and her friends use cameras and drones in Makoko.

8 Discussion of Findings and Remarks

This study explored Chioma Okereke's *Water Baby* through the lens of gender, space, and environmental justice, showing how the novel reimagines Makoko as a living landscape shaped by resilience rather than neglect. Okereke portrays Makoko not as a slum but as an active space of memory and survival. Through images of smokehouses, canoe docks, and floating schools in areas like Adogbo, Apollo, and Yanshiwhe, she captures everyday life as an act of resistance. This aligns with spatial theorists who view space as socially constructed and politically charged. Baby, the protagonist, represents gendered exclusion and reclaiming of space. Her journey from restriction to agency, especially through drone mapping, reflects how women navigate and resist intersecting social and spatial barriers. Water Baby thus operates as a literary map that records marginalisation and resilience. Although technical limits prevented full GIS mapping, the study shows that literature can document and counter geographic erasure where official maps fall silent. Overall, *Water Baby* demonstrates how fiction can reclaim overlooked communities, offering a narrative form of mapping that preserves cultural

Figure 4: Showing the entrance to Makoko Community. Credit: Authors
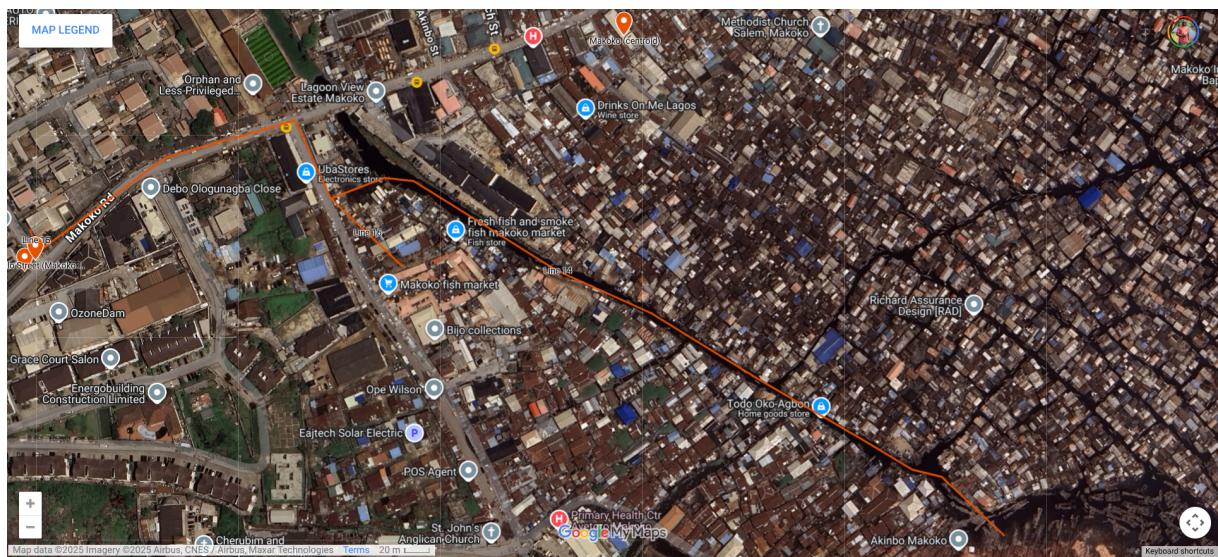
Figure 5: Google Map showing the red line depicting the start-to-end point of the researchers – Credit: Authors

Figure 6: Waterways route showing the red line depicting the start-to-end point of the researchers – Credit: Authors
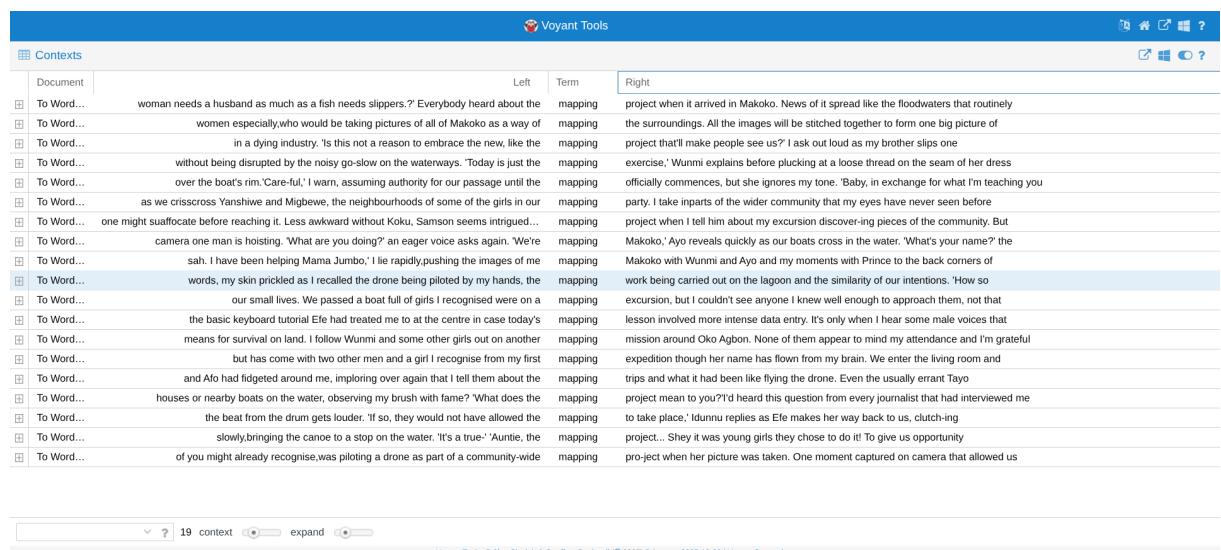
Figure 7: Voyant Tools showing how terms like 'map' and 'mapping' show up in the story. Credit: Authors
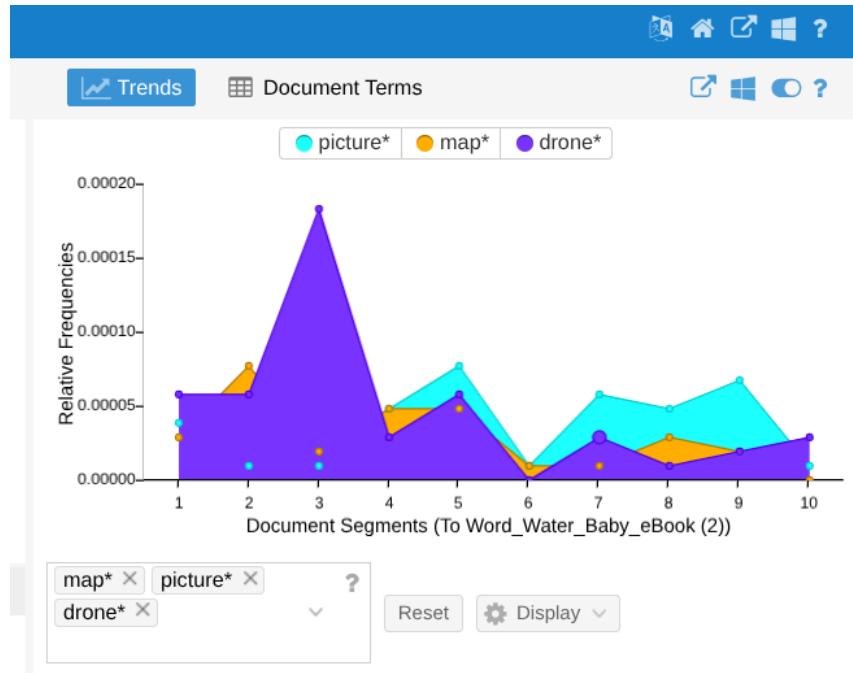
Figure 8: shows the frequency of words like 'map', 'drone', and 'picture' that show up in the novel. Credit: Authors

memory and challenges dominant views of urban life in Lagos.

9 Research Limitations

Some residents were open to discussion, while others declined being photographed or recorded, reflecting mistrust of outsiders and the ethical challenges of documenting marginalised spaces. Field observations showed poor sanitation, waste pollution, and unstable housing conditions that extend beyond Okereke's portrayal in *Water Baby*. The study also found that several Makoko locations mentioned in the novel were missing or misrepresented on digital maps, highlighting the community's ongoing invisibility.

10 Acknowledgment

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12 Appendix

Computation of the map coordinates and notes on a Google Sheet. CSV - Credit: Author