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“From This Love We’ll Demand Our Rights, and We Shall Win” A Postcolonial Ecocritical Reading of Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were*

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Abstract This article proposes a reading of *How Beautiful We We Were*, a timely novel about intergenerational justice and politics published in 2021 by Cameroonian-American author Imbolo Mbue. The first part of the article introduces the field of postcolonial ecocriticism and examines the historical and contemporary impacts of colonialism on the environment as represented in the novel. My reading then foregrounds the voices of resistance and activism of *How Beautiful We Were*’s young protagonists and their coming-of-age as postcolonial eco-citizens, and finally moves to highlight the urgency for environmental justice and decolonization in the face of ongoing global environmental challenges.

Keywords Postcolonial ecocriticism. Imbolo Mbue. Neocolonial extractivism. Coming-of-age. Postcolonial eco-citizenship.

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1 Introduction

The affective dimension of the current ecological crisis is giving rise to a new vocabulary, including terms such as 'ecogrief', 'climate anxiety', 'solastalgia', and 'pre-traumatic stress'. Emerging studies reveal that the chronic fear of environmental catastrophe is particularly affecting young people's daily life: according to a global survey published in Lancet Planetary Health in 2021, nearly 60% of young people (aged 16-25) are very or extremely worried about the direction of the planet (Hickman et al. 2021). These feelings of helplessness are amplified by a sense of intergenerational injustice that makes many young people feel abandoned. At the same time, in fictional – as in legal – representations, climate change is often framed as a tale of the children (Rogers 2020, 61), with climate change legacy bestowed upon future generations; as suggested by Valentina Adami, the centrality of children in climate change discourse is linked to the instinct of protection of our offspring (2022, 232). This tale of the children is told in varied ways in climate fiction, but most of the time the so-called "climate generation" (Ray 2020, 2) is portrayed as an innocent victim that adults are failing to protect; the representation of children as assertive leaders and protagonists, shaping their own future, is largely confined to children's and young adult literature. This article will propose a reading of *How Beautiful We Were*, published in 2021 by Cameroonian-American author Imbolo Mbue, and suggests that Mbue's most recent novel is one of the few works of climate fiction for adults to tell the story of climate change and environmental exploitation from the perspective of children and young adults: the young protagonists of the novel are not the helpless inheritors of the catastrophic future that has been created for them, but fight for their own place in the global climate action. In a moment when young people have been mobilising to force the issue of justice onto the climate agenda, and "it may be that issues relating to the difference of generations is set to replace even issues of gender as the most prominent catalyst of the age for political activism" (Clark 2020, 78), *How Beautiful We Were* is a timely novel about intergenerational justice and politics.

Set in Kosawa, a fictional West African village where the American oil company called Pexon is causing extreme environmental degradation, Mbue's novel mostly tells the story from the viewpoint of Kosawa's children, emphasising their voices of resistance and activism and their coming-of-age as eco-citizens (Dobson 2003); one of the young girls, Thula, will lead a revolution against Pexton and neocolonial extractivism. I will stress, throughout my reading, that *How Beautiful We Were* is of the utmost importance because it gives voice to different viewpoints that are often silenced in most novels representing the climate crisis (Schneider-Mayerson 2019): children's

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perspectives, feminist perspectives, and, finally, to the “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) of climate change. Mbue’s novel is also a story of corporate greed and inequality: it reveals the colonial origins of ecological devastation and its dramatic consequences for the Global South, foregrounding the entanglement between colonialism and environmental exploitation – as do other postcolonial novels such as Patricia Grace’s *Potiki* (1986), Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006) and *The Swan Book* (2013), Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2011), Uzma Aslam Khan’s *Thinner than Skin* (2012), and many more. This article will first explore the possible convergence of ecocriticism and postcolonialism and the crossover field of postcolonial ecocriticism. Mbue’s novel will then serve as a literary lens through which to examine the historical and contemporary impacts of colonialism on the environment, focusing on the consequences faced by marginalised communities. The article will conclude by exploring the novel’s socio-political implications, highlighting the urgency for environmental justice and decolonisation in the face of ongoing global environmental challenges.

2 “From Dirty to Deadly”: The Entanglement of Colonialism and Environmental Exploitation

As scholarly fields concerned with the ways in which literature and cultural criticism can have an impact on social reality, ecocritical and postcolonial studies have much in common. The emergence of these two fields was characterised by a necessity to connect the humanities to the material world and to counter flawed or naïve views of social and political realities. Pablo Mukherjee has stated that the alliance between environmental and postcolonial studies should be rather obvious, as

> any field purporting to theorise the global conditions of colonialism and imperialism (let us call it postcolonial studies) cannot but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration with political or cultural categories such as state, society, conflict, literature, theatre, visual arts. Equally, any field purporting to attach interpretative importance to environment (let us call it eco/environmental studies) must be able to trace the social, historical and material co-ordinates of categories such as forests, rivers, bio-regions and species. (2006, 144)

Only recently, however, has a possible convergence between ecocriticism and postcolonialism been addressed by a number of works, including *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*,

co-authored by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2006), and *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, co-edited by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley (2011). Huggan and Tiffin find a starting point for these alliances in Alfred Crosby's work on ecological imperialism (1973; 1886), in which the British environmental historian argues that a major aspect of European imperialism has been the introduction of animals, plants, and diseases that have starved the local flora and fauna out of existence, causing a catastrophic environmental impact. Among the forms of ecological imperialism, Huggan and Tiffin include biocolonisation (namely the control of genetic and agricultural resources) environmental racism (the exposure of marginalised minority ethnic groups to environmental injustices), and Val Plumwood's broad understanding of "hegemonic centrism", stressing that in the very ideology of colonisation Eurocentrism and Anthropocentrism are inseparable. While acknowledging the value of contributions such as those by Huggan and Tiffin and the manifest influence of Crosby's work on ecological imperialism, Ross and Hunt identify the term 'justice' as that which "provides a space for theoretical work bridging and merging ecocriticism and postcolonialism" (2010, 3). In their view, postcolonial green – or postcolonial ecocriticism – develops from the recent emphasis of ecocriticism on environmental justice and the inextricable links between social issues and environmental degradation.[1] To sum up, what really brings together ecocriticism and postcolonialism is the ethical and political concern at the centre of their enquiries; to use Buell's words, their being "deeply polemical" (2005, 97). Similarly, the crossover field of postcolonial ecocriticism involves an "aesthetics committed to politics" (Cilano, DeLoughrey 2007, 84), where commitment is expressed not only through a physical struggle but also through forms of epistemic decolonisation. Along the lines of Huggan and Tiffin,

1 Banerjee further claims that the work of Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa stands as a blueprint and precursor for environmental justice ecocriticism and postcolonial ecocriticism, in its exposure of the ecological genocide perpetrated by the Nigerian government and Shell and Chevron oil companies. It is also worth noticing that Rob Nixon has suggested a connection between the (initial) hegemony of Anglo-American perspectives in the field of ecocriticism and the failure of the same Western ecocriticism to intervene in Saro-Wiwa's execution: as reported by DeLoughrey and Handley, "while this ecocritical turn in literary studies has produced an innovative body of scholarship, including an international conference association and multiple journals, 11 scholars have lamented that the dominant discourse of the field continues to be marked by an Anglo-American and a national framework rather than engaging broader contexts. In fact, in commenting on this celebratory *New York Times* article, Rob Nixon points out that all of the two dozen or so 'green' authors cited are American. He finds this to be a peculiar emphasis since it was written precisely at the moment when the international community was mobilising to prevent Ken Saro-Wiwa and his Nigerian colleagues from being sentenced to death for their resistance to what the Ogoni leader called 'ecological genocide' perpetuated by oil companies in the Niger Delta" (2011, 9-10).

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this article conceives postcolonial ecocriticism “as a particular *way of reading*, rather than a specific corpus of literary and other cultural texts” (2010, 13), and proposes an analysis of *How Beautiful We Were* that particularly emphasises the novel’s representation of environmental racism, hegemonic centrism, environmental justice, and epistemic decolonisation.

As highlighted by Egyptian-Canadian novelist and journalist Omar El-Akkad in his review of the novel for *The New York Times*, the opening pages of *How Beautiful We Were* express “a kind of moral claustrophobia” (2021). From its very first lines, the powerful “we” who appears to be the young inhabitants of Kosawa, the fictional West African village where the novel is set**,** emphasises the long-term ecological and social repercussions of colonial extractive practices:

> WE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN THE END WAS NEAR. HOW COULD WE NOT HAVE KNOWN? When the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green, we should have known our land would soon be dead. Then again, how could we have known when they didn’t want us to know? (Mbue 2021, 3)

‘They’ are the representatives of the fictional American oil company called Pexton, symbolising the exploitative forces of international corporations.[2] Due to its central focus on oil, *How Beautiful We Were* is set up as a “petrofiction”, a term that originated in Amitav Ghosh’s 1992 review essay of *Trench*, a novel published in 1991 by Abdelrahman Munif, best known for the oil novel *City of Salt* (1984). In his review, Ghosh laments the absence of oil from the realm of literary writing, particularly the novel, despite its omnipresence in U.S. everyday life. There is as yet no “Great American Oil Novel”, he argued in 1992: the main reason is not a lack of environmental consciousness, but rather the inconceivability and slipperiness of the idea of oil. Since Ghosh’s coinage, the term has gained popularity among scholars of ecocriticism, indicating both literary texts with oil production as a subject matter, and novels in which the theme is tackled obliquely. In *Living Oil* (2014), the first monograph on petrofiction in American Studies, Stephanie LeMenager argues that oil is a subtext for all modern novels, if we consider that it enables the very

2 As pointed out by Brian Richardson in *Unnatural Voices*, ‘we’ narrators are a powerful trope in many postcolonial novels, where ‘we’ is a collective identity that stands in contrast to the imperial authority, ‘them’ (2006). In the context of climate change fiction, the ‘we’ narrator creates a supraindividual level (Bekhta 2017) useful for illustrating species agency; at the same time, being this narrator situated in a small village of the Global South, it calls into question the totality of the ‘we’ of species agency. According to Stephanie LeMenager, indeed, the ‘we’ of climate fiction is most of the time a European American subject (2017).

existence of modernity. Borrowing from the process of ultradeep drilling – that is, drilling in waters deeper than 1500 metres, a process implying an unprecedented potential for catastrophic destruction – she claims that oil is “psychologically ultradeep, the affects and emotions lodged in gasoline fuel, cars, and in the thousands of everyday items made from petroleum feedstock, from lip balms to tampon applicators, dental polymers, and aspirin tablets” (LeMenager 2014, 13). What follows is that novels can be about oil even if they do not explicitly address the subject. Since modernity is saturated by oil – LeMenager talks about “petromodernity” (71), Szeman about “petroculture” (2012, 148) – the possibility of a rupture with oil consumption is even difficult to imagine.

In *How Beautiful We Were*, Pexton’s activities result in severe environmental degradation, polluting the village’s water, air, and food, leading to the loss of fertile farmland, and jeopardising the survival of the community. Ironically, the oil fields and their surrounding dwelling for the company’s laborers are known as the “Gardens”, “though there’s not a single flower there” (Mbue 2021, 29). As explained by the father of one of the young protagonists of the novel, “Garden is a different sort of garden, Pexton is a different sort of gardener; the oil is their flower” (29). Pexton’s pipelines, he goes on, end in a faraway town from where the oil is sent to a place called America where people need it for their cars. As if the contamination and disruption of ecosystems were not enough, the air and water of Kosawa progressed “from dirty to deadly” (32), causing the death of several village children from “diseases with neither names nor cures” (5).

The Pexton oil company’s presence, moreover, exacerbates the power imbalances between the local population and the external forces of exploitation, leaving the community impoverished, marginalised, and powerless. Even though Pexton’s representatives insisted that their drilling for oil would have brought civilisation and prosperity to the village, every time the inhabitants of Kosawa went to the Gardens to apply for jobs, all the jobs had already been taken by men brought in from other villages around the capital city of Bézam. No one, however, seems to care about the well-being of Kosawa’s villagers, as stated by one of the representatives of Pexton: “No one in Bézam cares about villagers like you, okay? Absolutely no one in the government. No one at Pexton. No one whatsoever” (94). The exceptionality of their subjugation is understated by the widespread suffering of most villages and towns all over the country, according to Pexton: Kosawa may have its water poisoned, but “the village over there has soldiers raping their daughters. That other village has some other corporation cutting down their trees” (96). Interviewed by Jane Ciabattari, Mbue has pointed out that severe environmental degradation caused by colonial extractive practices and unchecked capitalism is happening all over the world:

> Kosawa might be in Africa but I drew inspiration from environmental crises in several continents, including the Lago Agrio oil field in Ecuador, the BP/Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, DuPont’s cover-up in Parkersburg, West Virginia, and certainly the situation in the Niger Delta. (Ciabattari 2021)

Kosawa might also be Limbe, the city where Mbue grew up in Cameroon, as both places are located in countries ruled by dictators who channel the oil wealth away from the people. Although Limbe did not suffer environmental degradation and long-term ecological imbalances, Mbue has stated that as a child she was well aware of the politics of oil, and that people who live on the land rarely benefit from its oil. Hence, more interested in the characters than she was in the setting, she wanted to write a story about “what happens when a group of people decides to push back against a powerful corporation” (Venugopal 2021, online). Linking Kosawa’s situation to several environmental crises in Africa and other continents, however, does not make the suffering of this local community just another silenced story of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011). When Kosawa’s story reaches The Movement for the Restoration of the Dignity of Subjugated Peoples, an American NGO that will assist the villagers in their fight against Pexton, people from the Movement acknowledge the “magnitude of [Kosawa’s] subjugation”, stating that they had never seen a case like that even though “fighting for people like [them] was what they did” (Mbue 2021, 137).

The strong link between the global ecological and climate crisis and modernity’s history of imperialism and colonisation is made explicit in the chapter narrated by Yaya, Thula’s grandmother. With a clear reference to the story of missionary work in colonial Africa, Taya lucidly remembers the day when two Europeans and their interpreter first arrived in Kosawa to tell the villagers about their Spirit who “would bring [them] out of the darkness [they] didn’t know [they] were living in” (Mbue 2021, 219). Generations before she was born, she adds, Kosawa had been initially spared from the Atlantic slave trade when snatchers arrived from the coast looking for humans to sell. Its legacies, however, are still a lived reality for most villagers, including children: “today I hear children joke about it as they play; they say, Do this, or stop doing that, otherwise the snatchers will come for you” (221). After the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, moreover, Kosawa was among the villages having to “volunteer men”, “guns pointed”, to work in rubber plantations; as Yaya recalls, “for the sake of rubber, a generation of our young men was wiped away” (223).

The day they finally learned that the Masters had decided to return to Europe was a day of rejoicing (“we would have no more masters”, 224), but then came Pexton, whose men were a “smiling group” (227) with no guns. Coming from America, they stated that they had

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no relationship with Kosawa's former European masters. As they forget to tell the villagers that Pexton's production water and toxic waste might travel through the soil from their site and shorten the lives of Kosawa's children, however, the link between the former and the contemporary master – in other words, between colonialism, neoextractivism, and environmental racism – is made explicit.

3 Marginalised Voices of Resistance and Activism

Besides giving centre stage to the representation of climate justice, and therefore avoiding the portrayal of climatic destabilisation primarily as a problem for the "monolithic and flattened 'we' of homo sapiens" (Schneider-Mayerson 2019, 2), *How Beautiful We Were* represents different viewpoints that are often silenced in mainstream climate fiction. As suggested by Neimanis et al., colonised, marginalised, or vulnerable groups are not only materially more vulnerable to the climate crisis, but their "agency and future imaginaries are also placed under erasure discursively" (2015, 77).

In Mbue's novel, moreover, half of the chapters are narrated by the collective voice of Kosawa's children. Through their voices we soon learn that children bear a disproportionate brunt of the loss of natural environment, as they experience firsthand pollution and the ensuing health issues: the disease, they state at the beginning of the novel, "preferred the bodies of children" (Mbue 2021, 8). In the first chapters of the novel, such vulnerability seems to be a sign of passive victimisation, as Kosawa's children are represented as a "group needing protection" (Rogers 2020, 82). Since extractivism, exploitation and death are the only experiences that exist in their world, they cannot imagine that there are other possible ways of being a young person:

> Without our parent's stories about their childhoods in a clean Kosawa, their days spent swimming in rivers that ran clear, how would my friends and I have known that the sporadic smokiness that enveloped the village and left our eyes watery and noses runny wasn't an ordinary occurrence in the lives of other children our age? (Mbue 2021, 28)

In their initial lack of politicisation and empowerment, moreover, they are unable to understand how Pexton's representatives could be happy "when [they] were dying" (72). Soon enough, it becomes impossible even for the youngest ones to close their eyes to the oppressive forces that exploit their community and environment: their coming of age, therefore, is characterised by an increasing awareness of the injustices faced by their people, up to the moment when they become the advocates for environmental justice and catalysts

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for change ("we were now the ones whose words and deeds would determine the future of the next generation" [256]). Mbue's portrayals are therefore in marked contrast to the prevalent representation of children as "innocent victims in a hostile landscape" (83) that characterises most climate fiction.

Their awakening is especially helped by Thula, the only member of the 'we' who is given a name. It is not by chance that Mbue gives centre stage to a little girl who grows up to become the leader of a movement for environmental justice and decolonisation. Mbue has stressed that the audacious character of Thula is inspired by the celebrated dissidents and revolutionaries of the author's childhood such as Thomas Sankara, Nelson Mandela, Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogboni Nine of Nigeria, and Patrice Lumumba (Barenbaum 2021; Ciabattari 2021). The main difference between these figures and Thula, she states in her interview with Barenbaum, is that "they were men and she isn't" (2021), as all the revolutionaries she heard about in her childhood were men; women's only duty, in contrast, was to be mothers, wives, or followers. But women have been at the forefront of several movements, such as the Underground Railroad, Black Lives Matter, and the Women's March, not to mention their role in past and contemporary environmental movements – a role that predates the emergence of ecofeminism as an institutionalised, theoretical field in 1974, when Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term. The Women's Rights Movement, moreover, is listed by Mbue among the other civil rights movements that inspired her novel, such as the Anti-Apartheid Movement and Occupy Wall Street. This is why, adds Mbue, she was "fascinated by Thula – she knew she had what it takes to lead a fight for justice" (Barenbaum 2021).

Thula's awakening as an eco-citizen and an advocate for environmental justice parallels her growing feminist awareness. As such, *How Beautiful We Were* can be read through an ecofeminist lens, as it links the exploitation of natural resources to the control over women's bodies and gives the category of gender centre stage in ways postcolonial literature and postcolonial ecocriticism are not always committed to. Val Plumwood's extensive critique of "mutually reinforcing dualisms" (1993, 42) is once again particularly relevant: according to the Australian philosopher, oppositions such as civilised/savage, white/black, and human/animal are gendered, as the lower spheres are always associated with women. Thula's perspective is that of Val Plumwood and other ecofeminists that in more recent years have entangled gender, 'race', class and nature (e.g. MacGregor 2010; Slicer 2015; Adams, Gruen 2015; Gaard 2015), as she links her fight for environmental justice and decolonisation with that against patriarchy.

This feminist – and ecofeminist – perspective, however, is not developed right from the beginning, as the first chapters on the novel leave us with the impression that the agency of Kosawa's women is

subjected to the authority of the village's men. They perform the duties of wives and mothers, but their role in the village's brave – and at the same time disastrous – fight against Pexton seems to be rather sidelined and marginalised: "why is it that women feel they have to apologise for their men's failings – when was the last time a woman was the source of her village's suffering?" (Mbue 2021, 44).

Thula's mother Sahel and her grandmother Yaya, furthermore, are often represented as weak and obedient women, who weep most of the time while facing the disappearance (and likely murder) of Malabo, their husband and son respectively. As observed by Thula, Sahel and Yaya "take turns being the weaker woman – some nights Yaya feeds Mama with my help; other nights Mama and I feed Yaya. Many nights I feed them both" (49). Malabo's younger brother Bongo, a year later, states that "it's been over a year, and Yaya and Sahel cry still. But they're women" (79), and therefore inclined to what he seems to consider excessive suffering. On the other hand, Sahel is praised by Bongo for being a "dutiful woman" who "never complains but does as a good wife must do for her family" (82). When Sahel is forced to become the head of the family after her husband's disappearance, she states that she never wanted such a burden, as no woman dreams of becoming the head of her family. At the same time, she is constantly reminded by the other men of Kosawa that, as a woman, she is "built to endure" (147). Sahel, finally, has very little control over her sexuality and her reproductive destiny, and she would like her daughter Thula to make the same choices she did with regard to marriage and motherhood:

> I worried about her weight. I worried about the fact that her bleeding hadn't started though she had reached the age for it. […] Stunning as her face was, I could tell that her thinness and flatness, coupled with her impenetrable nature, would lessen her in the eyes of wife-seeking men. […] I smile whenever I pictured her face, caught between dread and confusion, as the women whispered to her that, in the hands of the right man, the pleasure would more than make up for the pain, and that, the sweeter the pleasure that accompanied the conception, the greater the pain at the child's delivery, and wasn't that one of the most wonderful things about being a woman? (156-7)

More importantly, the best advice she can give to her daughter is to find contentment with whatever life offers her. The turning point for both Sahel and Yaya comes when Thula is offered a place in New York by the Restoration Movement to pursue her education. Although hesitant at the beginning, they accept that Thula's destiny might be different from the one they both imagined for her, and it is Yaya – the grandmother – who asks Sahel to give Thula what she is asking for.

As for Sahel, although she does not understand how going to America will help her daughter, she eventually agrees to let her go, because “knowledge is what she seeks” (168).

With regard to Thula, she shows a rebellious and feminist attitude towards life since the very beginning of her childhood, when she states that she knows nothing about how a girl can make Pexton’s men pay for their crimes, but she has the rest of her life to figure that out. As a young girl, she refuses to join her friends who spend hours “assembling babies of sticks and stalks with flowers for eyes” (81), rejecting the female role that has been set up for her, and showing, at the same time, an early environmental consciousness: as observed by her uncle Bongo, in a village where “birth happens only so death may prevail” (81), Thula’s reservation to partake in those games seems to be linked to the environmental concerns. The ethics of having children in the age of climate change is increasingly being discussed (Rieder 2016; Scranton 2018; Schneider-Mayerson, Leong 2020), with several organisations around the world setting up birthstrikes as a response to coming climate breakdown (e.g. Bailey 2019). Thula’s concerns may also be linked to feelings of anxiety and fear over the environment that are currently preventing many young people around the world from having children (Harvey 2021).

As she beautifully grows up to lead the movement for environmental justice and decolonisation that will be explored in the next paragraphs, she realises nonetheless that her gender and the roles that she is expected to act do matter. The more her popularity rises, the more people around the country ask her about her plans for her womb; she lets them speak, then tells them that she is married to her purpose, and she would be happy to take three husbands as soon as her country is finally free. Although the answers she provides reassert that ‘her body, her choice’, her male friends and revolutionary fellows from Kosawa decide to sedate her and perform a ritual on her womb, feeling that “nothing could make her respectable besides motherhood and marriage” (308). Regardless of her desire to never give up her right to control her body, they insert the semen of a young man of the village inside her, because “few, if any, would join a movement led by a woman, worse still an unmarried, childless woman” (308).

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4 A Violent Decolonisation and Acts of Love: The Collective Dimension of the Environmental Justice Movement

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, when Kosawa's story reaches the Restoration Movement and the American NGO starts helping its inhabitants in their fight against Pexton, Thula is enabled to go to the U.S. for her education in order to bring knowledge back to the village. American people, claims the Restoration Movement, would be glad to educate Kosawa's children because "fighting for people like [them] was what they did" (Mbue 2021, 137). This comes at first as a disappointment for readers, as we are left with the impression that the only possible response to environmental degradation is still anchored to 'Western' scientific knowledge, whilst the community's traditions and cultures as well as Kosawa's ancestral knowledge are erased by the colonial education curriculum that Thula will study in New York.

It soon becomes clear, however, that Thula is able to find her own way through American education, and even before moving to New York she begins to develop her own decolonial curriculum. Her mother Shael's words when she comes across Thula's books says it all:

> I cannot read, but I still remember my letters from school. I can recognize words like "of" and "the". One of the books was called P-E-D-A-G-O-G-Y *"of the"* O-P-P-R-E-S-S-E-D. Another was *"The"* W-R-E-T-C-H-E-D *"of the"* E-A-R-T-H. The one she most liked to read was a thin one called *"The"* C-O-M-M-U-N-I-S-T M-A-N-I-F-E-S-T-O. (164)

Frantz Fanon comes back when she moves to New York, and, rereading *The Wretched of the Earth* she is impressed by "what this man has to do about what people in our situation ought to do" (204). In a letter to her Kosawa friends, she writes that she and her American friends spend hours dissecting Fanon's ideas, and she strongly believes that the knowledge she is acquiring will do something crucial for her people. The knowledge she talks about, quite surprisingly, does not come from the American education but rather from the meetings she has in a part of the city called the Village (Greenwich Village), where she learns that even people in "great countries" who have an "abundance of knowledge" (208) are exploited and powerless as in Kosawa. At these meetings, people talk about what is to be done with corporations like Pexton; as opposed to the Restoration Movement, however, "these people were angry" (207) and did not talk about peaceful dialogue and negotiation. Thula mentions people from places in the U.S. where there are pipelines too, not spilling like the ones in Kosawa but crossing sacred land, though no-one but the inhabitants of this land are concerned about such sanctity;

as in Kosawa, she adds, governments and corporations are friends. She mentions places where children have to drink poisoned water, and places where the land is disappearing into the sea. As readers we are able to fill in several names – from the Standing Rock Reservation to Flint – and to entangle, together with Thula, Kosawa's local story with the global repercussions of climate change and with other postcolonial communities around the world.

Most importantly, through the help of these communities, she is able to expose the effects of the 'Western' colonial extractive mindset and to entwine the fight for environmental justice with that for decolonisation. As she grows up as a decolonial eco-citizen and acknowledges that the enemy is not Pexton but their government, her fight goes through different phases that range from the Fanonian violent decolonisation ("what we need isn't patience. What we need to do is fight" [276]),[3] to peaceful acts of love replacing acts of destruction ("Is our fight against Pexton driven by pain, or by love? Could it be driven by love? Should it?" [285]; "I see us marching to Pexton, singing, dancing in front of soldiers. […] From this love we'll demand our rights, and we shall win. If we die, let it be that we died for peace". [287]). What does not change throughout her awakening is the collective dimension of her fight, that joins forces with people who are "as ready for change as we are" (277) or with people who have already changed their countries by marching, but also with men and women doing revolutions "without committing acts of destruction or shedding blood" (289).

How Beautiful We Were does not provide a reassuring happy ending: in the last chapters of the novel, we get to know that twelve years after Thula's return from the U.S. the village has remained poisoned and the land "too contaminated for human presence" (355). According to her and her Kosawa friends, as well as her younger brother Juba (the narrator of the second last chapter), Thula has "failed" (343) and the past and the future of their country will be "identical" (335). Thula's fight and words and their collective global dimension, however, resonate till the very last pages, and I suggest that the very central presence of children – and, especially, of young girls – as agents of change and resistance against the oppressive forces that exploit their community and environment offers a sense of hope and possibility. Their presence also suggests the potential for a deep transformation of this wretched earth in the context of contemporary global environmental challenges. It is not by chance, indeed, that when late in the novel Thula starts teaching at University and then becomes the head of her department, she suspends her party activities in order

3 As Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth* "decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon" (1961, 27).

to focus on her students, "who remained one of her best chances at realizing her vision" (323). Hope, in other words, lies in the younger generation as well as in the solidarity with other global movements for environmental justice and decolonisation; "if not for them", asks Thula, "what would we do with all our anger?" (209).

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