



## **Extraction and Environmental Injustices: (De)colonial Practices in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were***

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### **Abstract**

Environmental degradation, climate crises, and ecological catastrophes effect the countries of the tropics distinctly from those of the Global North, reflecting the ramifications of colonial capitalist epistemes and practices that sanction extraction, commodification, and control of tropical lands and peoples. Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), set in the fictional African village of Kosawa, bears witness to the history and presence of ecological disaster in the African tropics through issues related to extractivism, environmental injustices, and structural racism that are ongoing under the mask of capitalist progress and development. Mbue, a Cameroonian-American novelist, recounts Kosawa's decades-long struggle against the American oil company Pexton. This article focuses on the critical aspect that Mbue's discourse reveals—that there is a need to map environmental injustices with other forms of structural injustices and the prevalence of neocolonialism and its manifestations through racial, economic, and epistemic practices. The article further explicates how the ordinary people of Kosawa become subjected to “slow violence” and “testimonial injustice” and foregrounds the necessity of “epistemic disobedience” demonstrated in the novel through the madman's intervention and Thula's sustained resistance to the exploitative agendas.

**Keywords:** oil extraction, epistemology, environmental injustice, Tropical Africa, decolonial, neocolonial, slow violence, Imbolo Mbue

## Introduction: Extraction in Africa

The imposition of colonialism in Africa culminated in the undermining of the indigenous human-environment relationship, which was replaced by an ideology of capitalism. This results in the transformation of African landscapes into landscapes of extraction that reinstate “new cycles of extraction and predation,” that perpetuate “colonial structuring of economic spaces” (Mbembe, 2021, p. 43). Petro-violence and violence brought on by oil exploitation, sustains the “violent capitalocenes” that are prevalent in Africa (Mushonga & Ogude, 2022, p. 3). In this context, Imbolo Mbue’s novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) offers a powerful depiction of the exacerbating repercussions of capitalism through a story of environmental degradation wrought by oil extraction in the fictional tropical African village of Kosawa.

Revolving around the extreme toxicities that extractivism unleashes on land, ecology, and the poor, Mbue’s novel reflects on the layered ramifications of modern-day global capitalism that are directly associated with the occurrences of environmental, social, and epistemic injustices. Environmental injustice implies that specific communities or populations are victims of environmental hazards in more precarious ways than other sections of society. While in theory all individuals and communities possess the right to equal access and distribution of environmental resources (Bullard, 1996, p. 493), the spread of capitalism (beginning with colonialism, continuing through industrialization, and perpetuating in contemporary neoliberal times), has intensified environmental inequities and asymmetries. In the post-World War II era, there has been an “extraordinary surge in global economic activity” in varied forms “to sustain a growing (and increasingly urbanized) global population,” creating an enormous need to extract minerals, metals, and oil from the regions that earlier had either been colonized or controlled by the Western powers (Klare, 2012, pp. 23–24). The emergence of a neoliberal political economy accentuated this extractivism, endorsing de-regulations of environmental and trade laws under the façade of globally integrated developmental goals (Faber & McCarthy, 2003; Malin, 2015; McMichael, 2017). As per the developmental paradigms enacted by the neoliberal economy, countries across the tropical regions of the world have been encouraged to adapt to industrialization, urbanization, and export-led growth, which have replaced traditional modes of livelihood (Obeng-Odoom, 2021). Subsequently, vast regions – from Africa, to Asia, to Latin America (Frame, 2023, p. 2) – were converted into sites of relentless resource production and extraction, reinforcing the structural imbalances between the temperate Global North and the tropical Global South. In other words, the tropics became “a source of raw materials and a sink for waste products for industrialized countries,” and the

subsequent “unequal material-ecological exchanges” (Oulu, 2016, p. 447) have constricted the productivity of developing countries while amplifying the output of the developed.

Mbue’s narrative *How Beautiful We Were* assumes significance in the context of these modes of neoliberal capitalist encroachment and governance that insidiously favour a select few countries and social groups, while forcing others to endure the tragedies of ecological and economic dispossession (Andrews, 2015). Spanning several decades and chronicling a generational tale, Mbue demonstrates how the rural land and poor people of an independent African nation have been engulfed in foreign capitalist control. The American oil company, Pexton, has been involved in rampant oil extraction in the village of Kosawa with blatant denial of the levels of pollution and toxicity generated through their actions. The story illustrates how “capital investment in Africa has been overwhelmingly in mineral resource extraction—particularly in oil” (Ferguson, 2005, p. 378) which exacerbates political discord, and socioeconomic and environmental disparities. The poor of Kosawa are adversely affected by the ever-increasing contamination and waste but are left with no option but to carry the burden of “ecological imperialism” (Frame, 2023, p. 11) propagated by the global and multinational capitalist system. While the rural poor of Africa fall prey to ecological degradation, the economically well-off people in the less-polluted urban spaces live comparatively better lives (Pellow, 2019).

This article develops its argument by focusing on this critical aspect that Mbue’s discourse reveals—that there is a need to map the concerns of environmental injustices with other forms of structural injustices, and the prevalence of neocolonialism and its manifestations in racial, economic, and epistemic practices. The novel depicts how it is not just the extractivist capitalist system that peripheralizes the poor Africans and commodifies their natural wealth, but their national government is compliant in the coercive mission of the American oil company. The state authorities function as aids to the neocolonialist masters, thereby enhancing “historical dependencies” and “mechanisms of disempowerment” (Malin et al., 2019. p. 112) by denouncing their people, land, and environment.

Thus, we analyze Mbue’s novel as a vital commentary on the politics of extractivism across tropical Africa, and how this is correlated with what Rob Nixon (2011) espouses as “slow violence” on the poor. In focusing on Kosawa’s jeopardized ecological system and the degenerating lives of the village people, this article supports the novel’s critique against the environmental injustices that constitute the reality of Africa today. The article argues that the poor people of Kosawa, as victims of ecological imperialism and “slow violence,” are also subjected to “testimonial injustices” (Fricker, 2007), as their participation in environmental welfare and their demands to ameliorate environmental contamination are denigrated by both the

representatives of the American oil company and their own government, thus demonstrating institutionalized racism and violence. As countermeasures, the article highlights the immanent necessity to indulge in “epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo, 2009, 2011a) of the imperialist designs of neoliberal capitalism and embrace a decolonial thinking—that valorizes indigeneity, ecology, and planetary well-being from a holistic point of view. In turn such “disobedience” and the slow dismantling of the monopoly of neocolonialism and its ingrained inequalities can only be achieved through shared hermeneutical solidarity, decolonial thinking, and practices championing the primacy of nature, ecology, and the impoverished.

In short, this article engages in a decolonial reading of Mbue’s novel, and attests to her epistemic responsibility in uncovering the violence of environmental oppression in the African tropics. The following analysis is a conversation between Mbue’s narrative fiction and decolonial theory.

### ***How Beautiful We Were in the Tropics***

Imbolo Mbue’s *How Beautiful We Were* is a tragic tale of the numerous ways the people of the African village of Kosawa try to fathom, draw awareness to, and fight back against, the exploitation of the American oil company, Pexton, which is supported by village elites and the state government. The story expands across four generations, with most of the action taking place from the 1980s-2000s.

The narrative is told from the perspective of various family members of the protagonist, Thula Nangi – her mother Saleh, grandmother Yaya, uncle Bongo, and brother Juba. Each of these chapters is interspersed with a chapter from “The Children,” which refers to Thula and her friends, and spans the years as they grow up. The novel opens as the end draws near – for ecological desecration is out of control and death is immanent. The rest of the book then tells the story of how this finalé came about. Kosawa’s land and people have been exploited for centuries, first under the regime of colonial rubber plantations, and more recently under the systems of neocolonial oil extraction. The story is one that is known across the tropics.

During the era of exploration and colonialism, the tropical regions were perceived as territories of natural resources (which included indigenous people) that were ripe for exploitation. The extensive extractive industries comprising mining and logging were interconnected with the practices of human exploitation and the cultivation of plantation landscapes. According to this colonialist epistemology, the act of ‘cultivating’ the tropics was a crucial component of a larger effort to cultivate ‘civilization’, which resulted in the destruction of these regions – their lands, environments, peoples and their belief systems (Lundberg et al., 2022, p. 2). The

tropics, considered to be inhabited by "savage" indigenous and non-white populations (Mbembe, 2003), have been perceived as "extractive landscapes" (Chao 2022) or waste-dumping spaces that can be "forged through various forms of physical and structural violence" (Camargo & Ojeda, 2017, p. 62). These forms of environmental injustice continue in current times through extraction and industrialization, which are often vindicated as humanitarian imperatives to promote the "otherwise impoverished peripheries" (Voskoboynik & Andreucci, 2021, p. 788). In so doing, the politics of 'othering' the tropics, is being reinforced, in turn "normalizing and depoliticizing" the appropriation of resources and wealth in the countries of the Global South (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022, p. 4). Feasible solutions to environmental harm and injustices get deferred in the face of what Chakraborty (2022) notes as the "mismatch between the oneness of the planet (IPCC's assumption) and the not-oneness of humans" (p. 231).

Unless these structural discrepancies are bridged, environmental justice and equity can never be guaranteed. The removal of colonial influences from discussions surrounding environmental injustice necessitates moving away from fixed and hierarchical disciplinary boundaries, both literal and metaphorical. The imperial-capitalist logic and its extractive ethos are fundamentally rooted in discipline, which establishes the "human" as the dominant force and the non-human as a means of production. Therefore, the concerns pertaining to environmental and consequential epistemic injustice require a fundamental transformation. It is imperative to approach the tropics from a decolonial perspective, but this can only begin with a delinking of colonial-capitalist epistemologies, and a recognition of other epistemologies.

In the opening scene of *How Beautiful We Were*, it is only when the village madman, Konga (who sees what others cannot see) makes a sudden rebellious move, that the villagers are propelled to take a stand and the story is set in action. The madman is significant, for it is he who is epistemologically free.

### **Environmental Injustice and Epistemic Attention Deficit**

Mega-extraction projects are, due to their characteristics, often accountable for the perpetuation of environmental injustices. When the local communities are deprived of their natural resources and the extraction company supersedes or diminishes non-capitalist systems of production, this explicit inequity results in the marginalized people being unable to sustain themselves without capitalism. Simultaneously, these communities are denied participation in the political and economic decisions that result in their environmental degradation and displacement (Hallowes & Munnick, 2016, p. 10). In Mbue's novel, the prolonged occupation of the Pexton oil company in Kosawa destroys the local ecological system and relegates the indigenous people of the village to the status of marginalized anomalies. Pexton establishes a territorial



and epistemological monopoly in Kosawa by appropriating land, trampling the people's rights on it, and condemning their traditional knowledge of nature's sanctity. It is as if, by constructing long stretches of oil pipelines that pass over the rivers, farms, and forests, Pexton warps the village's ecosystems, converting them to mercantile sites for their "operations of capital" — representing an assemblage of extractivism and corporate power (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019). Ignoring the well-being of the ordinary Kosawa people, Pexton's expansionist and extractivist oil projects thwart everyday existence in Kosawa, as their harsh industrialization deterritorializes the place by harnessing a "multilevel ecological assault" (Mann, 2007, p. 44) and annihilates even the minimum chance of a healthy habitat. Thula, the central protagonist, recounts how the increasing construction of oil wells, pipelines, leakages, and excessive waste, fills the air and water bodies with unprecedented perniciousness. The air remains permanently heavy with soot, and the water supply infected with poisonous elements, making it "dirty to deadly" (Mbue, 2021, p. 32) to drink, even though they must, as ordinary Kosawans have no alternative water source. The availability of a healthy and secure atmosphere for living is considered essential in ensuring an overall satisfactory lived environment, and a decrease in this quality due to industrial activities can have detrimental effects on the inhabitants (Scott et al., 2002, p. 51). Yet, everyday survival for Kosawa people becomes wretched and traumatic with the smell of crude oil making the air unbreathable, the piercing noises from the oil fields disturbing their daily activities, oozing oil from pipeline breakages damaging their farmlands, and most devastatingly, the soaring toxicities from flare stacks hurling chemical hazards on the wind, and proving fatal for the newborn babies. Fevers, coughing, and infant mortality have become so ubiquitous that the "fact that two children had died in one month" (Mbue, 2021, p. 33) is no longer shocking. Many times, oil spills burn the forests, the fires ravaging the families living there and forcing them to flee their homes and relocate to decrepit places.

However, while oil industrialization continued to plagued Kosawa's ecosystems and the poor over years and decades, the irony is that neither the American overseers who supervise the extraction work, nor the government leaders who have granted them land and drilling rights in Kosawa, are affected by the environmental perils. This illustrates how the whole notion of environmental injustice is typically relegated to, and discussed in terms of, those who have been excluded from the positive impacts of development and/or who bear the repercussions and externalities (Hallowes & Butler, 2002). The Pexton overseers living in the hilltop mansions never experience the screaming flares or the irritating black smoke: as a young Thula innocently muses, "for reasons we couldn't understand, the smoke always blew in our direction" (Mbue, 2021, p. 33). This stark disparity demonstrates the interwoven relationship between environmental injustices and the perpetuation of racial capitalism, resulting in the prevalence of "environmental racism," which describes the

strategies employed by dominant environmental/extractive organizations practiced in areas populated by people of colour (Mitchell, 1993, p. 176). Environmental racism is grounded in the perpetuation of racial injustice in the decision-making process regarding environmental policy and the inequitable implementation of environmental regulations. There is a systemic practice of installing toxic waste facilities in communities of colour, which is officially sanctioned and results in the presence of hazardous substances in these areas, thereby posing a severe risk to their inhabitants (Popović, 1996, p. 277). The functioning of global capitalism has always thrived on devaluing blacks and non-whites (Robinson, 2000), and discriminatory environmental policies have played a decisive role in corroborating “culturally and socially constructed differences” (Lowe, 2015, pp. 149–150). Environmental racism becomes analogous to environmental injustices in showing that, though “every structure and practice is [not] overtly racist” in “meta-economic” neoliberal capitalist times, the discrepancies in the political and economic processes persist (Pulido, 2016, p. 7). So, the poor people of colour, like those of the village of Kosawa, experience the brutalities of environmental catastrophes more distinctly than the African elites who live in urban places like Bezaam. The ordinary Kosawans are perceived as mere disposable elements, the ‘surplus’ in the state structures, whose lives do not matter in the meta-web of profit and productivity (Harvey, 1989, p. 303; Marquez, 2018). Hence, neither the state, nor the dominant power groups, are concerned about the social inequality that stems from exploiting or segregating these poor people and compelling them to live near sources of pollution. This brutal reality testifies to the environmental racism that still hovers as a “critically important component of the broader system of oppression” (Kaufman & Hajat, 2021, p. 1).

As a result of such an embedded repressive model of racial capitalism, the ordinary Kosawa people are deprived of distributive, procedural, recognition justice, and restorative justice, which conform to the conceptualization of environmental justice (Schlosberg, 2013). Distributive injustice denotes an imbalanced distribution of environmental responsibilities, benefits, and burdens; procedural injustice implies unequal opportunities to participate in policy formation and decision-making processes; recognition injustice implies the exclusion and unacceptance of diverse worldviews on environmental concerns; and restorative injustice refers to the socio-ecological steps necessary to recuperate the excluded and alleviate the damages wrought upon the ecosystems by extractive industries (Walker, 2009). The poor Kosawa people are subjected to extreme distributive and procedural injustices in which they are forced to endure the vicious pitfalls of hyper-extractivism and are denied a significant role in either voicing their sufferings or probing for feasible solutions. The Pexton company stays heedless of the frequent oil explosions, waste, and breakages, and on request for replacement or repair, the logic that is conveniently supplied is “why should Pexton replace it when the cost of its negligence [is not to be] borne” by the poor fellows of Kosawa (Mbue, 2021, p. 28).

On another occasion, after repeated complaints, the Pexton supervisors took the river water for testing the pollution level, and weeks later confirmed “the water was fine, but for the sake of caution, it would be best if they boiled it for thirty minutes before giving it to their children” (Mbue, 2021, p. 35). However, quite contrarily, the village leaders who serve as the mouthpieces of Pexton are provided with water purifiers and sometimes with bottled water too. Their children, when they fall sick, are given appropriate medical coverage and treated by good doctors. The Pexton overseers and the village leaders acquire the benefits of Kosawa’s natural resources and exercise their authority over the poor masses, stripping them of their right to the basic amenities of life—clean water to drink and air to breathe. This exhibits the fact that environmental racism occurs when “any policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages individuals, groups or communities based on race or colour” (Bullard, 2008, p. 98). The ordinary Kosawa people’s lives and deaths are of no substantial value to the Pexton company agents, which demonstrates how the drive for extraction reiterates the machinery “enmeshed in forms of contemporary racialized capitalism and empire” (Watts, 2021, p. 212).

Even when the ordinary Kosawa people make a concerted effort to articulate their harrowing experiences and are afraid of ecocatastrophe due to the enormous amount of pollution caused by ceaseless oil extractions, their worries and perspectives remain unheard. Malabo, Thula’s father, along with some other elders of Kosawa, try to establish with Woja Beki, the local leader, the urgency of addressing the environmental deterioration, failing which Kosawa would be posed with ghastly consequences. However, the company registers the grievances and performs lip service to redress them by organizing a pseudo-inspection and, after that, assuring that “the spills were of no harm, the air was fine, [and] Pexton was abiding by the law” (Mbue, 2021, p. 33). While newborns die and others suffer from unknown diseases, these are not counted as tragedies or signs of impending ecological danger. Bongo, Thula’s uncle, feels perplexed contemplating that the right to clean water and air is fundamental to the children of Kosawa like that of any other place on earth, and how their demand for these can be turned down so reluctantly. The misfortune endured by the poor Kosawa people culminated in their being exposed to environmental toxicity as well as being deprived of the right to advocate for a life of wellness. The disregard for the ordinary Kosawa people can be characterized as an instance of “epistemic attention deficit” that occurs when an individual is denied the “right kind of epistemic attention” (Smith & Archer, 2020, p. 779), thus suppressing the recognition of his or her critical or fundamental position. Epistemic attention deficit refers to an unfair circumstance in which individuals receive less cognitive consideration than they are deserving of. Smith and Archer argue that “epistemic attention deficits are harms in and of themselves because they deprive people of an essential component of epistemic agency. Moreover, epistemic attention deficits reduce an agent’s ability to participate in valuable epistemic



practices" (2020, p. 777). In Mbue's novel, there is an implicit epistemic hierarchy at work, in which the Pexton company considers itself superior and denigrates the episteme of the Kosawa people.

The white-dominated mega-corporate Pexton company does not attend to the concerns and problems of the ordinary Kosawa people because these masses, being poor and racially marginalized, would never be able to oppose their profit-making mechanisms and should never be permitted to participate in decisions on environmental amelioration (Mohai et al., 2009). Kosawa is nothing more than its "enclaved mineral-rich patches" for the Pexton company, which derives a sense of superiority from being a "specialized corporation" certified by the state government, the "nominal holders of sovereignty" (Fergusson, 2006, p. 204). Thus, in making the ordinary Kosawa people subject to "epistemic attention deficits," the Pexton company or their representatives find no harm in committing recognition injustice—and thus Kosawa peoples' apprehensions, knowledge, and fears are deliberately discarded from the discursive sphere. This becomes illustrative of how environmental racism coalesces with environmental injustices to worsen the condition of the subjugated. The ordinary Kosawa people have been disregarded of their authority to speak on their village's welfare and have also been discarded of their share of the ecological wealth of their land. To the inquisitive Thula during her childhood days, her father ruminates that Pexton is a "different sort of gardener; the oil is their flower" (Mbue, 2021, p. 29), which they relentlessly transport to America while declaring that the natives of Kosawa have no say in the extraction processes or their dreadful consequences.

### **Institutional Opacity and Testimonial Injustice**

The environmental injustice of the Kosawa people takes place in such a systemic and sustained manner that it becomes difficult to contest or confront its insidiousness. Pexton comes to Kosawa, flaunting itself as a benevolent organization and showcasing the benefits of oil industrialization for the village's betterment. Before this, Kosawa village was lush with numerous trees and a bountiful ecosystem; and the people, with their traditional livelihood of farming and hunting, possessed a profound interconnection with nature. This denotes the symbolic connotations of the title, "How Beautiful We Were". It also exemplifies how "nature is seen in traditional African thought as holistic and as an interconnected continuum of humans and all natural objects which exist in harmony" (Ikuenobe, 2014, p. 2). The representatives of Pexton take the local village head and the state leaders into their confidence (with recompense); and assure the poor villagers that they have arrived to "bring something called 'civilization'" and "prosperity" to Kosawa (Mbue, 2021, p. 73). Pexton portrays itself as the agent who will regenerate Kosawa's cultural stagnation through an economic revival. Additionally, the representatives assure

everyone that they are in Kosawa for only a short period, and will leave as soon as their task of industrialization is over. Pexton's encroachment in Kosawa, and their self-declared mission of development, testify to the teleological metanarratives of progress and advancement that uphold idealized visions of a glorified future to naturalize the commercial agendas of capitalism (Wilk, 2007). In this regard, it is instructive to note that resource extraction or exploitation projects are often championed as development projects with promises of ample opportunities for financial and social mobilization (Ayelazuno, 2014). While the ordinary Kosawa people remain bewildered listening to such grand stories of cultural transformation, as they had "never witnessed or considered [such] a possibility," the men from Pexton repeatedly attest that soon the villagers would "sing songs of gratitude to the Spirit every morning for having put oil under [their] land" (Mbue, 2021, p. 72). This quote illustrates how capitalism and its agents ascribe to a mythical discourse of developmentalism that entangles the processes of cognitive, social, and ecological production, which seeks to obliterate the existing epistemic agency of the poor (McGee & Greiner, 2020), and unleashes what Nixon (2011) terms, "slow violence."

In furnishing a conceptual understanding of the lethality of environmental degradations, Nixon notes that environmental violence is not always spectacular or highly visible but is a "delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). This "slow violence" occurs through gradual climate alterations, the spread of toxic elements, deforestation, and other related environmental deteriorations, proving detrimental to the weak and marginalized. The decades-long impact of environmental malignancies on the ordinary Kosawa people exemplifies that this unspectacular violence, can nevertheless operate as a "major threat multiplier" that becomes an exponential factor in "proliferating conflicts in situations where the conditions for sustaining life become increasingly but gradually degraded" (Nixon, 2011, p. 3). In the novel, Malabo, Thula's father, recognizes the viciousness of the environmental degenerations that have started taking a toll on Kosawa's population and tries to convey his worries and anticipations to the Pexton overseers and the local leadership. When sidelined by them, Malabo decides to meet the state authorities in the capital city of Bezam, whom he believes (with appropriate communication and information) will surely take measures against Pexton's drives for maximum extraction with its extreme waste production to protect the village. With five other village men, Malabo starts out for Bezam. Along the way, he learns of the government's corrupt role in legitimating corporations for mining and extractive activities across the country – even at the expense of evicting or killing the native people. This illustrates that "although resource extraction occurs all over the planet, it also has specific local dynamics that need to be accounted for" (Peša, 2023, 126).

Contrary to Malabo's hopes, the government in Bezam turns out to be a draconian institution. Instead of listening to the poor citizens like Malabo, soldiers are ordered to kill them. Malabo does not return from Bezam, and days later when Thula's uncle Bongo goes in search of his brother he is harassed and imprisoned by the government leaders. Through these acts, the government exposes itself as an advocate of the capitalist organization and sanctions the extractive enterprises that treat "African environments as devoid of people or constituted by disposable people" (Iheka, 2018, p. 13). In brushing aside the concerns of the Kosawa people, and affiliating with corporate enterprises, the government indulges in "a continuation of a neocolonial trajectory" in contemptible ways, disenfranchising citizens and magnifying "violent capitocenes" (Mushonga & Ogude, 2022, p. 6). These ruthless governmental activities demonstrate a transition from the former system of resource exploitation in Africa through intimidating means, to exploitation with the consent of the government, indicating, in the words of McKay (2017), how extraction is promoted and sanctioned by the state.

The "slow violence" in places like Kosawa thus happens twofold: in the first place, by the cumulative effect of resource extraction, capital accumulation, and ecological displacements; and secondly, by the violence of the political infrastructures (Mwangi, 2007). The government's coercive attitudes toward the poor people of Kosawa and their neglect of the ecological decay demonstrate a condition of "institutional opacity"—a condition that happens when an institution becomes opaque to the agents or the participants, and unable to recognize, practice, or channel an ethical position (Carel & Kidd, 2021, pp. 474–481). In this condition, the institution becomes cognitively and discursively opaque or resistant, thus obstructing the epistemic agency of its users or subjects. In this case, as Carel and Kidd note, "opacity causes epistemic frustration that can translate into tangible—and indeed severe—forms of suffering" (2021, p. 483). An opaque institution, like the government in the capital Bezam, refrains from acknowledging the testimonies of the ordinary Kosawa people due to "institutional epistemic vices" such as epistemic laziness, arrogance, and closed-mindedness (Medina, 2013). Under such epistemic dispositions, the government becomes a mode of reinforcing the "testimonial injustices", compelling the ordinary Kosawa people to become socially and epistemically vulnerable. Testimonial injustices occur when the hearer is prejudiced or negatively influenced and discards the right of the speaker as a knower (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). This type of injustice detrimentally undermines the speaker's ability to access and participate in the collective epistemic practices of knowledge sharing and production. When the ordinary Kosawa people continue to relate their narratives of environmental injustice, the opaque government refuses to consider their severe deprivation, the ecological degradation, and the violations of human rights. The testimony of the Kosawa people concerning the environment serves the government exclusively as a source of knowledge regarding the cultural and ideological views of the community. Fricker

distinguishes this as an “extreme” form of testimonial injustice, which is characterized by “radical communicative dysfunction” (Fricker, 2007, p. 140). The government’s despising of the poor Kosawans and suppression of their voices evince its epistemic affiliation to the colonialist and capitalist mindset, which obfuscates their ability to accept these poor people’s testimonies and experiences of “slow violence”. The authorities reiterate the vices of the white colonizers and colonial settlers—to exploit and dehumanize the ones who are socio-economically and epistemically vulnerable. Thula’s grandmother, Yaya, mournfully recollects that long ago, when “rubber was needed in Europe,” the Kosawa people were “beaten and starved and made to work” in the rubber plantations—highlighting how “colonial ecological violence” as a process, disrupts “indigenous eco-social relations” (Bacon, 2018, p. 59). Those who witnessed the horrors of rubber plantation workers could do nothing but “remain standing” as the Europeans established themselves as powerful and epistemically superior to the villagers (Mbue, 2021, p. 223). The Europeans declined the African worldview of indigenous sociality and spirituality, pressuring them to “integrate into [their] lives the principles” of the European order (Mbue, 2021, p. 224). To ensure their continuing authority, upon leaving the country, the Europeans chose the Bezam people as the ones who could “intelligently” foster the civilizational values and thus be the rightful owners of the “young country” (Mbue, 2021, p. 224). This placed the Bezam people above the Kosawa and continued the dualistic colonial world view, as well providing a way to create a hierarchical division between African tribes. This polarization illustrates how Europe employed an imperial or ‘global linear’ way of thinking to divide and control the planet, thereby forming a hierarchical structure. As Mignolo (2011b) notes:

The racialization of the planet compounded the racialization of people. Global linear thinking partitioned the world according to European needs and, by the same token, reinforced the distinction between Western and non-Western civilizations and cultures. (p. 174)

Fricker argues that an institutional ethos is the “collective motivational dispositions and evaluative attitudes within the institutional body, of which the various good or bad ends orientate the institution’s activities” (Fricker, 2020, p. 91). This concept elucidates the correlation between the activities of an institution and its multiple motivations, objectives, and principles—the principles that the institution upholds, such as fairness or social parity. Ironically referred to as “His Excellency” in the novel, the racial and hierarchical government in Bezam fails to uphold its institutional ethos, follows in the footsteps of the white European colonialists, and later colludes with Pexton’s mercantile obsessions. Without discussion or agreement with the ordinary people of Kosawa, the government grants Pexton ownership of Kosawa land. It is only years later that a few men accidentally learn from the village leader

that “men with the tales of prosperity came to see [them] because Pexton wanted them to do it for the sake of propriety, and because a man in the government, a man familiar with our customs, had suggested it” (Mbue, 2021, p. 229). Hence, the government, with its epistemic vices, emerges as a repressive institution that complies with capitalist ethics by decimating Kosawa people’s experientialities of “slow violence” and environmental injustice, through obstructing their ability and credibility to voice them. The institutionalized blindness of the government to register the decay and dehumanization wrought by rampant mining and pollution, makes them culpable not only of oppressing their citizens, but also suppressing the indigenous epistemologies that have valued the sacredness of land its relation humans, ecology, and spirits. Malabo and Bongo try to speak about how the unabating oil industrialization has been impoverishing land, creating livelihood insecurities, pushing people towards poverty, magnifying the resource scarcity for the poor, and forcing mass migrations—that together are endangering Kosawa’s existence. The denial of Kosawa’s epistemic agency is representative of the eradication of the African indigenous testimonies and values—which have been the foundation of collective social resilience in African communities (Ford et al., 2020). Here, the novel makes an essential intervention by highlighting that most places in Africa continue to reel under colonially inherited ways of thinking and resource appropriation that converge to reproduce ecological and epistemological injustices and oppression (Greco, 2020), thereby extending the gaps in the political economy between the temperate Global North and tropical countries of the Global South.

### **Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Turn**

It is pertinent to note that testimonial injustice typically leads to hermeneutical injustice. Fricker contends that this kind of injustice occurs “when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). It can be inferred that the structural discrimination that manifests through testimonial injustices has an impact on the collective pool of knowledge, leading to an inadequate representation of the lived experiences of marginalized individuals and groups, consequently hindering their capacity to articulate their experiences. The denial of the oppression, brutality, racism, and environmental injustice inflicted on the ordinary Kosawa people by the Pexton company and the government, constitutes a manifestation of hermeneutical injustice. Simultaneously, this inequity confers an unfair benefit to the Pexton company and the government, enabling them to have their capitalist endeavours encapsulated in the aggregated corpus of knowledge and to proceed with the extraction and profiteering. This elucidates how “the powerful have an unfair advantage in structuring collective social understandings” (Fricker, 2007, p. 147). Over time, the ordinary people of Kosawa realize that hermeneutical harm should not be neglected or dismissed, because the ability to interpret and make oneself



understood is a fundamental human capacity, given that meaning-making and meaning-sharing are important aspects of their lives.

The passivity of the Pexton company to their concerns, and the state leadership's aversion towards acknowledging environmental hazards, have made the Kosawa people feel baffled, helpless, and outcast over many years. Every eight weeks, the Pexton representatives meet with the villagers and corroborate that the village water and soil are safe with no traces of harmful elements, and hence, the villagers have nothing to worry about. This is how Eurocentric epistemology continues to foster the notion of universal knowledge and truth, while concealing its own geopolitical and capitalist agenda. But, with increasing health disorders and cases of children falling sick, with more babies dying, and finally with Malabo's and Bongo's disappearances, the villagers can sense that Pexton and the government are misleading them. With their unflinching motives of acquiring maximum profit from the land of Kosawa, Pexton and the government are neither concerned about the environmental toxicities nor about the erosion of lives. This realization prompts their act of epistemic disobedience, which creates a "delink from the illusion of the zero point epistemology" (Mignolo, 2009, p. 160) of the Pexton company and the government. The ordinary Kosawa people, who have for years been denied agency, start developing a sense of identity vis-à-vis their experiential understanding of sustained subjugation.

So, in one of the meetings with Pexton, Konga, the village madman, stages a rebellious move. Konga hides the car keys of the Pexton representatives, following which, the village men show the courage to seize the representatives and take them as captives. Konga's action embodies a striving to assert Kosawa's epistemic agency that has been ignored, "impeded," and "smothered" (Dotson, 2011) by the oil company and the governing institutions. Konga's defiance can essentially be read as an act of what Mignolo terms "epistemic disobedience"—a form of disobedience that challenges the hegemonic ideologies and structures and the discourses associated with them. This act of disobedience entails an interrogation of hegemonic knowledge systems as well as an intervention of localized or context-dependent knowledge forms. This form of disobedience critically interrogates existing regulatory frameworks and the power-based legitimacy upon which these systems are based, thereby challenging the Eurocentric assumptions that are deeply entrenched in social structures and institutions. In this context, Mignolo's dictum "I think where I am" serves as a counterpoint to René Descartes' anthropocentric and Eurocentric axiom "I think, therefore I am" and communicates the fundamental notion of decentering self, and decentralising truth (Mignolo 2012, p. 91).

Konga's stealing of the car keys is a symbolic gesture of "epistemic disobedience"—through which he ushers his fellow community members to question Pexton's

epistemology of developmentalism. Kosawa could never be redeemed of the ecological malaises, if the community just “inhaled, waited, exhaled” (Mbue, 2021, p. 5), and believed in what Pexton makes them believe. Konga’s act of resistance is thus to stir the community and inculcate in them the imperative to conceive of their liberation from Pexton vis-à-vis indigenous hermeneutics. However, the village uprising, motivated by Konga’s transgressive action, proves to be futile as the government soldiers arrive in force to rescue the Pexton representatives, and in the process massacre innocent villagers. The sole positive consequence of this rebellion is that one of the prisoners divulges to the inhabitants’ information regarding his nephew Austin, a journalist by profession, who may be of some help to the villagers’ cause.

The ensuing meeting with Austin, and his reports on Kosawa’s protracted sufferings under Pexton’s capitalistic monopoly and the governmental dictatorship, reach a larger audience. Including, a socially driven activist group named the Restoration Movement, who arrive in Kosawa to help. The representatives of the Restoration Movement commit to confronting Pexton’s malfeasance and suing the company for punitive action. As an immediate help, the people of the Restoration Movement give adequate monetary aid to the villagers “to help carry on”, and assure the people that they will pursue Pexton legally to pay appropriate compensation for their wrongful activities in Kosawa (Mbue, 2021, p. 138). Further, they promise to oblige Pexton to clean up the land and gradually recuperate it to the unpolluted and fertile state that once existed. The Restoration Movement’s intervention is principled on salvation and the improvement the primary conditions of living in Kosawa, such as providing bottled drinking water, nutritious food, and, most importantly, facilitating education for the children. The members of the Restoration Movement endorse the idea that once the Kosawa children become knowledgeable, “no government or corporation would be able to do to [them] the things they’ve been doing” (Mbue, 2021, p. 132). For Konga, however, the Restoration people’s words of wisdom and benevolence sound hollow, for they can neither mitigate Pexton’s overriding control, nor bring permanent justice to Kosawa. This is because the Restoration Movement’s notion of social emancipation and campaign for environmental justice are influenced by, and imbricated with, the colonial and Global North’s frame of thinking. Konga blatantly asserts to his fellow villagers that:

Someday, when you’re old, you will see that the ones who came to kill us and the ones who’ll run to save us are the same. No matter their pretenses, they all arrive here believing that they have the power to take from us or give to us whatever will satisfy their endless wants. (Mbue, 2021, p. 102)

Konga’s understanding marks the genesis of epistemic disobedience that will later be enacted by Thula in her protest against Pexton’s oppressive capitalist logic and

politics of extraction. Thula, having studied hard at the school, wins a scholarship with the Restoration people's help and goes to study in America. After her training in Western academia, readings on socialist revolutions and freedom movements worldwide, and interactions with oppressed people of different backgrounds in America, she eventually realizes that long-deferred justice for her countrymen can be harnessed only when they develop a hermeneutical agency of their own.

Through her many letters over the years to her friends back in the village, Thula shares that she had always thought "lack of knowledge" had been the cause of their "greatest incapacity", but now she learns that she has been mistaken because "something far more complex is going on all over the world" (Mbue, 2021, p. 208). Thula garners an understanding that the real enemy is "capitalogenic power formation" (Moore, 2017) and its appropriation by the national governments in the countries of the Global South. If the heinousness and systematicity of capitalism are to be contested, it must be done by a "decolonial epistemic turn," which, analogous to the notion of "epistemic disobedience," denotes a decolonization of the "Western canon and epistemology" (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 211), and thereby the repudiation of singular meaning construction or any universal monolithic narrative. Those in hegemony signify and inscribe on behalf of the hegemonized others, which has been happening in Kosawa for years, and that has attested to the creation of totalitarianism of American capitalist power and their fostered discourses. Thula realizes that representatives of Pexton were able to establish their supremacy because the national government gave them "power," "land," and "hanged" the Kosawa villagers whenever they expressed discontent or fury (Mbue, 2021, p. 277). To confront Pexton, the subjugated citizens need to "start a movement to bring down His Excellency's government" (Mbue, 2021, p. 277). Only such a radical response would serve to disenfranchise the colonial and capitalist legacy and restore the African indigenous worldview in which ecology has never been a profit-making source of commodities, but a place where humans and nature live in mutual reciprocation with each other (McGregor et al., 2020).

On finally returning home to Kosawa, Thula strategizes a country-wide rebellion against the corrupt and despotic government. Thula believes that her resistance can motivate others to "undermine and change oppressive normative structures and the complacent cognitive–affective functioning that sustains those structures" (Medina, 2013, p. 2). She engages with both the impoverished community and the village leaders, striving to foster a 'hermeneutic capability' that will enable them to reclaim control of their land and autonomy. In this context, she delves into Ngũgĩ's (2009) notion of parasitic "Europhonism", which he argues is necessary to deconstruct in order to decolonize the African mind and to adopt epistemologies of resistance that are in line with African values. Thula makes them realize the necessity of a decolonial turn vis-à-vis the massive debunking of "projects that have in common the

effects experienced by all the inhabitants of the globe that were at the receiving end of global designs” (Mignolo, 2011a, p. 45). This can be materialized by developing a shared hermeneutical solidarity attendant on indigenous epistemologies of collective well-being that cherish ecology, nature, and human and non-human entities as a comprehensible and interdependent whole, in contrast to the European linear and binary paradigms that have been responsible for producing “distorted forms of knowledge” to perpetuate the “coloniality of world power” (Quijano, 2007, p. 177). Time and again, Thula elucidates that “monetary compensation” is just a trivial matter because the deeper fight is for the land, lost lives, and a safe environment that needs to be returned to the people. Declaring the foundation of the revolution “Liberation Day” (Mbue, 2021, p. 300), Thula tries to instill in the people of Kosawa and its sibling-villages, a renewed agency of meaning-making for themselves by overturning the promises of modernization that the foreign corporations and the national government have been upholding for decades. Thula's act of disobedience and resistance serves as a reminder that human actions are inherently intertwined with, and responsive to, local issues, necessitating the development of local strategies to address them.

With passion and zeal, Thula claims that “I’m confident that, once the word starts spreading, people will start realizing that they don’t have to accept anything [because] they have choices” and “need to open their eyes to their power” (Mbue, 2021, pp. 277–78). This power is the regeneration of collective epistemic resources that the existing system has marginalized because of its inability or indifference in “attending [to] the epistemic interests of particular knowers” (Pohlhaus, 2020, p. 235). Her goal in inspiring the villagers is to facilitate their hermeneutical capability—to enable them to think, develop, and materialize their epistemic agencies to embrace and continuously channel decolonial practices. Thula’s death at the hands of the government soldiers who rush to quash the revolution offers a tragic ending. However, it is not without significance. It warns us that decoloniality is only plausible through a strong and shared indigenous hermeneutical solidarity, in solidarity with others—as it can never be an individual task, or a singular event, or from one perspective.

### **Conclusion: Epistemic Responsibility**

Mbue’s novel, *How Beautiful We Were*, is an essential commentary on what contemporary eco-activists and socialist thinkers are voicing—“the accelerating exhaustion of nature by an indifferent capitalism” (Agathangelou, 2021, p. 885), with its most extreme manifestations in Africa and other previously colonized countries across the tropics. Through the delineation of Kosawa’s environmental crisis owing to unabashed extraction and the rampant export of oil, the novel uncovers the tropical regions’ bleak realities of resource exploitation and the Global North’s

capitalist politics of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2005), embedded in colonial histories of objectification and commoditization. Herein lies the discursive significance of Mbue’s work and her ideological positioning as an informed writer on how social disenfranchisement, environmental racism, and epistemic silencing, are inextricably associated with the larger cartographies of colonial modernity and capitalist progress. Mbue’s novel rightly displays her sense of “epistemic responsibility” that contemporary writers, public intellectuals, and social thinkers should follow and practice. To combat the persistent evils of environmental and social injustices in the tropics, it is essential to develop a discursive framework of decolonial epistemological approaches.



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### **Acknowledgements**

The authors received financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article from the National Research Foundation of South Africa and from the University of the Western Cape's UCDG program. The authors are very thankful to the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions, and to the Editor-in-Chief for her kind support and assistance throughout the whole publication process.

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