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Hopeful Resistance and Solidarity from Below in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*

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ENG **Abstract:** By examining the discourse of hope and resistance in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), which narrates the emergence of a solidarity movement and protest in a fictional West African country, this article engages with the theory of political solidarity within the framework of contemporary African necropolitics (Mbembe 2003; 2019). The protagonists' acts of resistance against their government, which exposes them to death at the hands of Western neocolonialism, illustrate the capacity of the African oppressed majority to work together in a spirit of hope for an improvement in their living conditions, namely through building solidarity networks as a strategy of subversion and survival. In this sense, while various forms of solidarity surface throughout the novel, I argue that Robin Zheng's (2023) notion of "solidarity from below" as a form of power available to the otherwise powerless is the one that prevails. More specifically, the tragic ending of the story allows to critically reflect on Zheng's debate on the limitations of group emotional cohesion in achieving sociopolitical transformation. Along these lines, I identify *How Beautiful We Were* as a literary call for renewed forms of African political solidarity that must be forged and maintained by the oppressed masses not merely through hope but, fundamentally, through radical love.
Keywords: Imbolo Mbue; *How Beautiful We Were*; solidarity from below; hope; radical love

ES Resistencia esperanzada y solidaridad desde abajo en *How Beautiful We Were* de Imbolo Mbue

Resumen: Mediante un estudio del discurso de esperanza y resistencia en la novela *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) de Imbolo Mbue, la cual narra el surgimiento de un movimiento solidario y de protesta en un país ficticio de África occidental, este artículo aborda la teoría de la solidaridad política en el marco de la necropolítica africana contemporánea (Mbembe 2003; 2019). Los actos de resistencia de las y los protagonistas contra su gobierno, que los expone a la muerte a manos del neocolonialismo occidental, muestran la capacidad de la mayoría oprimida africana para trabajar juntos en un espíritu de esperanza para mejorar sus condiciones de vida, concretamente mediante la construcción de redes de solidaridad como una estrategia de subversión y supervivencia. En este sentido, aunque en la novela pueden distinguirse diferentes formas de solidaridad, este artículo propone que la que prevalece es la noción de Robin Zheng (2023) de "solidaridad desde abajo" como una forma de poder para los grupos subyugados. Más específicamente, el final trágico de la historia permite reflexionar sobre el debate de Zheng sobre las limitaciones de la cohesión emocional grupal para lograr la transformación sociopolítica. Identifico así *How Beautiful We Were* como un llamamiento literario a formas renovadas de solidaridad política africana, las cuales deben ser forjadas y mantenidas por las masas oprimidas a través de no solo la esperanza, sino, fundamentalmente, a través del amor radical.
Palabras clave: Imbolo Mbue; *How Beautiful We Were*; solidaridad desde abajo; esperanza; amor radical

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1. Introduction

How Beautiful We Were (2021) is the second novel by Cameroonian author Imbolo Mbue. It recounts the story of Thula, a girl who grows up in the fictional West African village of Kosawa, where children continue to die from drinking poisoned water caused by American oil company Pexton. During her childhood in the 1980s, the village begins to mobilise to expel Pexton from their land. They seek governmental assistance and international aid, and finally manage to reach the attention of an American NGO that gives visibility to their situation, assists them in claiming their rights and provides Thula with the opportunity to move to the USA for her education. After years of activism in the USA, Thula returns home with the aim of liberating Kosawa and eventually becomes the leader of a national solidarity movement.

Much like her first and award-winning novel, *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), which tells the story of a Cameroonian family trying to make it in New York City, *How Beautiful We Were* is influenced by Mbue's personal experiences.[1] This time, however, rather than from her life as a Black African immigrant in the USA, Mbue gets inspiration from her childhood in Limbe, a city in southwestern Cameroon where the national oil refinery SONARA was inaugurated in 1981.[2] In an interview for *The New York Times*, Mbue says that during the 1980s and 1990s, while living in Limbe, she witnessed "the degradation of the environment for the sake of profit [...] that oil brought wealth but not to the people" (Mhute 2021). *How Beautiful We Were* clearly alludes to this context of environmental exploitation and social inequalities, which is why the majority of the few studies of the novel to date examine the text through an ecocritical lens.[3]

From another angle, Yogita Goyal identifies *How Beautiful We Were* as a precursor to "a post-Afropolitan literary landscape" due to its "[refusal of] Afropolitan exaltations of rootless mobility" and "[its return] to essential postcolonial questions about revolution and collectivity, indigenous rights and local resistance to global capital" (2021, 783). However, in my view, although Goyal effectively captures the main topics of Mbue's second novel, her reflection lacks rigour (Suárez-Rodríguez 2024, 143).[4] This is primarily because, "despite [the] prevailing '[A]fropolitan literary boom'" (Gehrmann, in Ede 2023, 14) during the 2010s, not all recent African literary works are "in the Afropolitan mode" (Ede, in Ede 2023, 15) but, in fact, "only a few of such works are" (Ede 2023, 15). In this respect, and for the purpose of introducing the focus of this article, I should like to bring up Masumi Hashimoto Odari and Ciarunji Chesaina's remark that contemporary African writing continues to address African national issues, as evidenced by the recurring depictions of "oppressive leadership" and the subsequent "burdens of exploitation, discrimination and dehumanization" blighting the lives of "the masses" (2019, 131). Even so, Odari and Chesaina further point out, contemporary African authors, like earlier generations, generally make it clear that "the oppressed are not passive beings with no hope about tomorrow" (131).

The focus of this article is an examination of the discourse of hope and resistance in *How Beautiful We Were*, specifically throughout the narration of Kosawa's uprising against their precarious situation and the emergence of the national solidarity movement led by Thula. In this way, the analysis engages with the theory of political solidarity, introduced in the next section, within the framework of contemporary African necropolitics (Mbembe 2003; 2019). My starting premise is that the acts of resistance carried out by the protagonists against their government, which exposes them to death at the hands of Western neocolonial capitalist exploitation, illustrate the capacity of the African oppressed majority to work together in a spirit of hope for an improvement in their living conditions, namely through building solidarity networks as a strategy of subversion and survival. In this sense, I will first focus on setting the context for Kosawa's hopeful spirit of resistance, paying particular attention to the representation of an African necropolitical landscape. This contextualisation will also explore the portrayal of an African traditional communal way of living that confronts the misuse of solidarity by some members of the community. Against this backdrop, priority will be given to the study of Kosawa's transition from waiting in the hope of their salvation to taking their future into their own hands. Although different forms of political solidarity surface throughout the narrative and are also subject to analysis, I will argue that Robin Zheng's (2023) "solidarity from below" as a form of power available to the otherwise powerless predominates, even if Thula's solidarity movement eventually escalates into further violence and death. Indeed, the tragic ending of the story will allow me to critically reflect on Zheng's contention that effective transformative action requires the

1 For further details on Mbue and her first novel, see the author's official website: https://www.imbolombue.com/.

2 Further information on SONARA can be found on the company's website: https://sonara-cm.cm/en/home/. Moreover, in their "Understanding Change, Complexities, and Governability Challenges in Small-scale Fisheries: A Case Study of Limbe, Cameroon, Central Africa" (2023), Richard A. Nyiawung, Nathan J. Bennett and Philip A. Loring offer valuable critical reflections on the challenges experienced by the community of Limbe since the establishment of SONARA.

3 Some of the most relevant studies are Biama, Oketch and Kimathi 2022; Ehanire 2022; Gasztold 2022; Junejo and Shaikh 2022; and Karmakar and Chetty 2023.

4 I provide a more comprehensive reflection on this issue, considering 21st-century Afrodiasporic writing broadly, rather than focusing solely on Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were,* in my book chapter "La nueva novela afrodiaspórica: Hacia una solidaridad de coalición" (2024).

oppressed "[not simply to rely] on *advocacy* or *mobilizing*, but [to] focus on *organizing*" (906; original emphasis), which deemphasises the importance given to group emotional cohesion in earlier theories of political solidarity. Along these lines, the conclusions will revolve around the possibility of reading *How Beautiful We Were* as a literary call for renewed forms of African political solidarity.

2. Solidarity and its Manifestations in Contemporary Postcolonial Africa

Despite the historical interest in the notion of solidarity among social scientists and philosophers, resulting in a broad body of literature that sets forth different typologies, there is still some consensus that the term remains conceptually unclear (e.g., Ross, Li and Call-Cummings 2022; Zheng 2023; Prieto López 2024). In her monograph *Black Women Centre Stage: Diasporic Solidarity in Contemporary Black British Theatre*, which provides an updated, comprehensive and critical review of the scholarship on solidarity, Paola Prieto López identifies the recent "rise of social movements in the name of solidarity", such as the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements, as a major reason for the renewed interest in the notion of solidarity (2024, 28). For her part, Robin Zheng attributes this increasing attention to the COVID pandemic (2023, 893). Notwithstanding this difference, the studies of both scholars, among others, suggest that the theory of solidarity is trying to advance in the understanding of this value by drawing primarily on the theories of political solidarity.

Although solidarity has been "variously conceived of as a feeling, sentiment, or disposition; a type of action; a relationship; or a scheme of social arrangements" (Zheng 2023, 893), much of the discussion on the nature of solidarity, explain both Zheng (893) and Prieto López (2024, 28), revolves around its conceptualisation as "unity". Moreover, the debate on what solidarity means has focused on "its political dimension and its potential to achieve global justice", what Kurt Bayertz distinguishes as "solidarity and liberation" in his well-known typology of solidarity (Prieto López 2024, 55).[5] Bayertz's principle of solidarity as liberation, Prieto López continues explaining, later developed into what scholars such as Sally Scholz call "political solidarity" (32). Scholz defines this type of solidarity as "a moral relation of a social movement that unites individuals because of their shared commitment to a cause or goal" (2008, 72), namely "to challenge injustice, oppression, tyranny, or social vulnerability" (79). Similarly, David Featherstone conceives solidarity as "a relation forged through political struggle which seeks to challenge forms of oppression'', but he emphasises that this is "a practice that can be forged 'from below'" (2012, 5), or in other words by members of marginalised and oppressed groups. Moreover, Featherstone's theory challenges the traditional understanding of solidarity "as being about likeness", which, he contends, "[does not only obscure] the importance of solidarities in constructing relations between places, activists [and] diverse social groups", but also contributes to "the cementation of existing identities and power relations" (5).

Prieto López (2024, 32) and Zheng (2023, 898) also agree that criticism of the understanding of solidarity as a social form and the phenomenon of group solidarity abound. Audre Lorde, bell hooks and Chandra Mohanty, among other Latina and Black feminist scholars, "have called out the presumed solidarity of 'sisterhood' amongst feminists for obscuring the oppressive racial, class, and heterosexual hierarchies that subordinate some women to others" (Zheng 2023, 898). Prieto López also underlines Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández's view that "understanding solidarity in relationship to social cohesion or as a source of collective action for groups in competition with each other has the effect of reissuing the colonizing logics of European social sciences" (in Prieto López 2024, 32). Nevertheless, one of the main reasons why there is still a need for a more nuanced approach to solidarity is precisely that, "in much of the literature[,] solidarity as a concept is both static and taken for granted"; that is, it is defined as "something that occurs in contexts of power differentials" and that only those in a position of privilege or power ""have" in the form of supporting disadvantaged groups" (Ross, Li and Call-Cummings 2022, 3-4). Not only in research literature but also in political discourses and mass media, solidarity is usually presented in these terms.

In *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism,* Lilie Chouliaraki distinguishes two main forms of solidarity in today's media environment: salvation and revolution, both of which, she points out, are in fact rooted in "[similar] universal norms of morality" (2013, 11). Chouliaraki describes solidarity as salvation as driven by "altruistic benevolence" (11) and "reflected in a long tradition of humanitarian practice that today constitutes the operational infrastructure of aid in the Global South" (10). In contrast, solidarity as revolution seeks "social justice" (11) and is "associated with a social critique of the conditions of suffering and [a desire] to change the social relations of economic exploitation that made suffering possible in the first place" (10). Hence, while both forms of solidarity allude to "the benevolent humanism of the 'culture of sympathy'" (10), the former is "apolitical, grounding humanitarianism on the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence", whereas the latter radicalises this sympathy, questioning the capitalist foundations of "bourgeois benevolence" and "seeking to replace it with a new world order" (11).

A particularly important remark Chouliaraki makes about revolutionary solidarity is that this type of political solidarity takes different forms of "political struggle for social justice within and beyond the West". In the West, Chouliaraki explains, it "was institutionalized largely through the establishment of Marxist political parties", whereas in the Global South it emerged through anti-colonial movements (11) that, therefore, challenged

5 In *Solidarity* (1999), Bayertz proposes four different uses of the term "solidarity" in relation to morality, society, liberation and the welfare state. He thus distinguishes between "human solidarity", "social solidarity", "political solidarity" and "civic solidarity" respectively, pointing to "both the premises [and] limitations of these four uses of the term" (Gaztambide-Fernández 2012, 47). As noted by Prieto López, this taxonomy was later developed by other scholars, but Bayertz's classification holds today, with just some minor adaptations (2024, 29).

the idea that "the imperial metropolis [is] the locale of both social cohesion as well as political struggle" (Gaztambide-Fernández 2012, 49). Nonetheless, in both scenarios, Chouliaraki notes, solidarity of revolution "[has] reproduced the structures it promised to change" (2013, 12), as evidenced by "the ways in which the new regimes of the decolonized South perpetuate structures of western domination, whilst safeguarding the 'grotesque' power of the local sovereigns" (13). The African postcolonial state, for instance, "has largely reproduced its colonial predecessor" (Willems and Obadare 2014, 10), with political power closely tied to the capacity for enacting human death (Mbembe 2003; 2019).

In fact, solidarity has long been seen as an inherent characteristic of African societies (Montes Nogales, Prieto López and Suárez-Rodríguez 2024, 12), which is still firmly rooted in family life, clan and lineage loyalties, and neighbourly relations often forged through alliances consolidated over centuries and sustained by mutual aid (13). The African philosophy of *ubuntu*, which "hypothesizes that community strength emanates solely from community support [...] and [...] commitment", has historically guided African communities (Fagunwa 2019, 4). However, for decades, modernity has burst into African societies, and traditional "systems of solidarity [...] now coexist with often-brutal market relations" (Mbembe 2021, 191). In this respect, there are those like Samuel Zadi (2018) and Temitope Fagunwa (2019) who denounce that "the traditional value of 'African solidarity'", and more generally *ubuntu*, has been distorted by "the influence of capitalism" and, at present, is usually "ironically used as a means to meet one's individualistic needs" (Zadi 2018, 1). Moreover, as regards the various manifestations of African solidarity, Achille Mbembe reminds us of the pan-African movement (2021, 209), which "originated in African diasporas in the late nineteenth century" and "spread to Africa in the middle of the twentieth century" (Kasanda 2016, 179).[6] In his reflections on "the steady erosion" of "the aged-long communal value system" of *ubuntu* (Fagunwa 2019, 3), Fagunwa focuses, however, on the historical trajectory of pan-Africanism into what he identifies as, on the one hand, "a 'dansiki-wearing' competition by a layer of cultural nationalists" and,[7] on the other, "a 'Black capitalism' bourgeois agenda" (1). Addressing these issues and the negative sociopolitical impacts of neocolonialism and neoliberal policies on the continent, he contends that the ethos of *ubuntu* "must be revisited and be channeled into galvanizing the [...] African masses" (15). For Fagunwa, "[w]hilst the conventional approach to [*ubuntu*] presupposes atonement and unity of all, regardless of classes" (15), the contemporary African scenario demands the oppressed majority to form a solidarity alliance against the abuse of power of their governments.

Fagunwa's views recall Zheng's emphasis on "the collective ability of otherwise powerless people to organize themselves for transformative social change", which underlines the fact that solidarity can be "a form of *collective* power" for the oppressed (2023, 894; original emphasis). Zheng asserts that this is "an aspect of solidarity widely recognized in popular uses of the term, but which has hitherto been neglected in the philosophical literature" (894). Hence, in an attempt to fill this gap, she takes inspiration in Amy Allen's (1999) notion of "power-with" and draws on the aforementioned theories of political solidarity, studies of racial solidarity and feminist approaches to solidarity focused on collective political struggle and coalition politics, thereby reconceptualising "solidarity from below" as "an instrumental good" (Zheng 2023, 911). While Bayertz, Scholz and Featherstone, among others, stress the importance of emotional cohesion in forging political solidarity, with Scholz explicitly focusing on hope (2008, 79), Zheng, as already noted, demoralises this form of solidarity by emphasising the fundamental role of organising, rather than of mobilising through the construction of moral and emotional bonds, to achieve effective and durable solidarity movements (2023, 906).

In their examination of 21st-century protests across Africa and the Middle East, Wendy Willems and Ebenezer Obadare argue that these regions have "demonstrated the seductiveness of outwardly raid, large-scale revolutionary process of social change", yet they also exhibit a "profound absence of formal organisation" and "effective forms of resistance" (2014, 8). They also point out that this scenario has stimulated debates worldwide on their possibilities to achieve sociopolitical transformation (8). Fagunwa's advocacy for a recovery and transformation of *ubuntu* as a social value that "has the basic ingredients of solidarity and cooperation in its composition" (2019, 6) represents a relevant example of these debates. My proposal, which I elaborate in the following sections, is that Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* can also be read as part of this ongoing discussion.

3. Setting the Context for Kosawa's Hopeful Spirit of Resistance

How Beautiful We Were opens with a first-person collective narrator, who corresponds to the voice of Thula's age-mates when they are still children in the 1980s, articulating an apocalyptic description of Kosawa's long-lasting situation of environmental insecurity:

> We should have known the end was near. [...] When the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green, we should have known our land would soon be dead. [...] When we began to wobble and stagger, tumbling and snapping like feeble little branches, they told us it would soon be over, that we would all be well in no time. [...] They told us we had to trust them. (Mbue 2021, 3)

[6] For a comprehensive exploration of pan-Africanism, scholars such as Albert Kasanda (2016) and Arno Sonderegger (2020) provide detailed and critical discussions. This article moves away from the theories of pan-Africanism as its primary focus centers on a form of African solidarity forged at a more localised level rather than on a global scale.

[7] A dansiki is a dress typical of the Yoruba culture (Olapido 2016). Fagunwa seems to be alluding to an essentialist nationalism based on a common cultural bond, which has been associated with the pan-Africanist movement.

The simile established between the people of Kosawa and the environment they inhabit, specifically the branches of the trees in the village, implies that just as their land is dying, so are they. Although we soon learn that the pronoun "they" in the quote above refers to Pexton, the first lines of the novel thus bring to mind Mbembe's (2003, 40) notion of the "living dead", which in his theory of necropolitics refers to community members who are liable to death at the hands of the state. Arguably, Kosawa's entrapment in a necropolitical system becomes apparent when the narrator says: "our government had given us to Pexton" (Mbue 2021, 11). Similarly, in one of her letters to her age-mates from the USA a few years later, Thula writes: "Pexton isn't acting alone. They only have power over us because our government gave them power over us [...] gave them our land. [...] Which means that our ultimate enemy is [...] our government" (277). As Brygida Gasztold explains, for years Kosawa has faced "the threat of extractive neocolonialism in the form of a multinational corporation", while also suffering from the abuse of power of "the local corrupt elites that are conspiring with the foreign investors" (2022, 196). Although, at least at the beginning of the story, the people of Kosawa are not being killed directly by the state's forces, the living conditions that their own government has allowed Pexton to impose upon them does expose them to death, which clearly evokes Mbembe's (2003, 27) idea of the state's sovereign right to let die.

To be more specific, the status of the living dead in Kosawa seems mainly the result of the adoption of necropolitical forms of government by a local authoritarian ruling elite that perpetuates colonial violence under the influence of the very narratives that validated colonialism in the first place, namely the grand historical and apparently solidaristic narrative of salvation: "when Pexton first arrived, [...] the government men accompanying the oil explorers told our grandparents [...] that drilling for oil would bring something called 'civilization' to our village [...] a wonderful thing called 'prosperity'" (Mbue 2021, 72-73). As Thula's age-mates recount, Pexton established itself in Kosawa with promises of socioeconomic development and the support of the national government, which explores how Africa has given this kind of consent to the West because they have been prescribed to believe that foreign interests align with their own. Hence, through hegemony, they become complicit in their own subordination despite a long experience of oppression. This is highlighted in the chapter "Yaya", whose narrative voice speaks from the present of Kosawa but takes us back to their colonial past by presenting Thula's grandmother's saddened reflections on "centuries of destruction and exploitation from foreigners—first through the trans-Atlantic slave trade to rubber plantations to oil fields" (Biama, Oketch and Kimathi 2022, 314). Yaya's historical account of Kosawa's past reveals the persistence of colonial structures in the village and the whole country, resulting in decades of suffering under such conditions. Yet, she also emphasises that, in spite of everything, "Kosawa remained standing" (Mbue 2021, 223); that is, she underlines their capacity for resilience over generations of oppression, exploitation and survival, which, as shown later, is a major theme of the novel.

As time went by since Pexton's arrival in Kosawa, their promises of advancement, and more specifically of material wealth such as brick houses, turned into the equally empty promises to address their resulting emergency situation. As suggested in the novel's opening paragraph, presented earlier in this section, Pexton tries to install hope in Kosawa for a more secure future. However, deaths continue to increase, along with the people's frustration, rage and fear, which becomes clear as Thula's age-mates continue to speak their thoughts: "We should have spat in their faces, heaped upon them names most befitting [...]. We hated them and [...] their meetings, but we attended all of them. [...] We were dying. We were helpless. We were afraid. Those meetings were our only chance at salvation" (3). Kosawa's complex emotional landscape includes their desperate hope that Pexton will finally bring a solution at one of these meetings.

The first chapter focuses precisely on one of these encounters in which Pexton promises Kosawa that their land will be restored, and most particularly on Konga's act of rebellion near the meeting's closure, which triggers Kosawa's transition from passive victims waiting for empathetic assistance to hopeful actors of resistance. The children recount how, "[a]s if all authority on earth belonged to him", Konga, the village madman, "barked at the Pexton men, told them to sit down", claiming "he had the right to speak to anyone any way he liked" (12). Madness, as noted by Prince Kwame Adika alluding to Flora Veit-Wild's work on this issue in African writing, has traditionally been portrayed "as a mode of survival and a subversive response to the stark realities of postcolonial African lived experiences" (2021, 37). Indeed, Konga exemplifies the trope of the madman in African writing, not only due to his subversive character, as he dares to publicly insult the authority, but also because, as Jacques Chévrier observed of this figure, he occupies the role of "soothsayer and augur to his contemporaries" (in Baker 2018, 125). By stealing the car keys of the Pexton officials and refusing to give them back with a defiant attitude, Konga incites the village to take their fate into their own hands by holding the men hostage to exert pressure on the company: "Gentlemen, you'll be spending the night with us in Kosawa" (Mbue 2021, 14), says the madman. Initially consumed by fear of potential consequences, the village eventually comes to this realisation: "We defy them tonight and we stand a chance of being free again [...]. Konga has shown us we stand every chance" (21-22).

Not only does Konga incite a rebellious spirit into Kosawa, but his words that "everything is going to change" lead the village to adopt a hopeful attitude of protest (24), as can be easily appreciated when the children say: "We were all hopeful that night [...]. We wanted to hold on to that night for as long as we could, savor this optimism [...], the faint promise of triumph [...] anticipating our new lives as conquerors" (24-25). As I have noted elsewhere (Suárez-Rodríguez 2024, 151) and will explore more extensively later in this article, the narrative thus recalls Arjun Appadurai's notion of the "capacity to aspire" of marginalised and oppressed groups in contemporary postcolonial settings, which, he explains, results from "the habit

of imagining *possibilities*, rather than giving in to the *probabilities* of externally imposed change” (2013, 213; original emphasis).[8] Kosawa decides to stop trusting Pexton and starts to believe in their capacity to achieve a reversal in their situation, envisioning their victory and brighter lives ahead.

4. Kosawa’s Communal Mode of Living and the Misuse of Solidarity

Kosawa’s new hopeful and optimistic spirit after their decision to hold the Pexton men hostage as a strategy of resistance and survival is also described by Thula in the second chapter:

> Across Kosawa, mothers have prepared special meals [...], as if the simple day deserved celebration. [...] Some dishes are made possible by the benevolence of relatives with fertile lands who live in other villages [...] and [...] occasionally visit and offer us foods they still have in abundance. So delicious are the meals that we think little of sickness and death [...] enjoying a hopefulness we’d feared we’d lost. (Mbue 2021: 54-55).

These lines also shed light on the African traditional communal dynamics of mutual support, which in this instance extends beyond the borders of Kosawa as it is based on family alliances. In fact, as noted earlier, *How Beautiful We Were* includes several references to the African traditional communal way of living, with solidarity as a core value. For example, the children mention that the village takes care of Konga by feeding him: “Konga had been sleeping under the sky for twenty years. With his parents gone and having left behind no siblings to feed him, our mothers took turns bringing him food and water under the mango tree” (16). The narrative thus explores a crucial aspect of the African traditional communal mode of living: “the duty to assist members of the community who are in need” (Zadi 2018: 2). Zadi identifies other significant aspects, such as “the prevalence granted to the community over the individual” (2), which in the narrative is noticeable in the description of Thula’s father’s efforts to liberate Kosawa years before Konga’s rebellion. After his son dies and then comes back to live, the man decides to travel to Bezam, the capital, in search of governmental assistance for the village: “Of all the sick children, the Spirit chose to spare ours. [...] Don’t you think we ought to play a bigger role in ending all this, considering how much we’ve been favored?” (Mbue 2021: 152), he tells his wife. Thula’s father thus decides to act, he says, “for the sake of our descendants” (89). His sense of duty is not only to reciprocate the Spirit but also to act towards his community’s wellbeing, even at the risk of his own safety and, by extension, his family’s happiness, given the risks of confronting the government’s interests. Yaya reflects on this when she remembers how Thula’s mother had begged her husband not to travel to Bezam but finally agreed: “He must have reminded her that everyone needed to make sacrifices for the sake of their families and villages and countries, to keep them together, to move them forward, to prevent them from falling apart from within” (251). The narrative specifically alludes to the African communal value system of *ubuntu*, which implies, among other things, caring for all community members. Vimbai Gukwe Chivaura’s definition of *ubuntu* as “conscious spiritual action imbued with the values of moral and ethical purpose outlined in the teachings of African ancestors” (in Zimunya, Gwara and Mlambo 2015: 8) is particularly valuable here, for *How Beautiful We Were* portrays *ubuntu* largely through the representation of African spiritual and inherited worldviews. This is exemplified by Thula’s father’s aforementioned reference to the Spirit, who guides Kosawa’s decisions and actions throughout the narrative.

In this context, the novel also calls our attention to the issue raised by Zadi that albeit “people still profess African solidarity as a cardinal value” (2018: 4), traditional African solidarity has been “perverted by the influence of capitalism” (1). In particular, the narrative depicts this situation through the character of Woja Beki and, more precisely, the children’s critical observations on this man:

> We knew [Woja Beki] was one of them [...] that though he was our leader, descended from the same ancestors as us, we no longer meant anything to him. Pexton had bought his cooperation and he had, in turn, sold our future to them. [...] Pexton was fattening his wives and giving his sons jobs in the capital and handing him envelopes of cash. Our fathers and grandfathers had confronted him, [...] but he had beseeched them to trust him, telling them he had a plan: everything he was doing was to help us reclaim our land. (Mbue 2021: 5)

Woja Beki, the village head, is rendered as one of those members of the postcolonial African community who, to use Zadi’s words, “pretend to be implementing solidarity” while, in fact, their only interest is in “meet[ing] their own selfish needs” (2018: 2). Although the man, as deduced from the final words in the longer quote above, alludes to the communal values of prioritising “the community over the individual” and contributing to the “community’s welfare” (2), he actually represents what Zadi identifies as the recent “misuse” of African solidarity (1). This is not only because “he and his family cared about protecting themselves only” (Mbue 201: 77), but mainly since they are benefiting from the exploitation of their own community while pretending their relationship with Pexton serves communal interests. Of particular relevance to this study is Kosawa’s acute awareness of this betrayal, which becomes even clearer when Thula’s age-mates say: “our mothers were realizing, as we all were, that no one was coming to save us and we had to save ourselves by whatever means

[8] In his study of how the marginalised urban poor in Mumbai mobilise to improve their quality of life, what he identifies as a “cosmopolitanism from below”, Appadurai calls for the recognition of the “capacity to aspire” of this and similar communities in the Global South (2013, 289). He contends that a disadvantaged and precarious situation does not necessarily imply that people lose hope or stop working towards better futures (198).

presented itself, including spying on and keeping under arrest people with whom we once shared meals and hugs" (77), thus implicitly alluding to Woja Beki and his family.

5. Kosawa's Strategies of Resistance: Solidarity as Salvation

An ethos of togetherness and collaboration, specifically a collective attitude of resistance marked by hope, is apparent from the very beginning of the narrative. In Appadurai's (2013) terms, as part of their imagining possibilities to finally put an end to their precarious situation, the people of Kosawa, in particular Thula's uncle Bongo and two other villagers called Lusaka and Tunis, travel to Bezam in search of an American journalist, Austin, hoping that he will bring international visibility to their story (Mbue 2021, 100). At this point, their strategy to hold the Pexton officials hostage seems therefore productive, since this is precisely how they learn of the existence of Austin, who eventually builds transnational solidarity with Kosawa by capturing the attention of an American NGO called the Restoration Movement: "people who share no blood with us arrived, determined to save us" (131), says Thula's mother, Sahel. However, Kosawa's continued dependence on the sympathy of others problematises the identification of a capacity to aspire, as they are still portrayed as waiting for "the *probabilities* of externally imposed change" (Appadurai 2013, 213; original emphasis).

Despite their new realisation, mentioned earlier, that no one was coming to save them, Kosawa shifts from hoping that their government will assist them and Pexton will listen to their demands to relying on the Restoration Movement. Hence, one might argue that, similar to much literature on solidarity, the beginning of the novel predominantly presents this value as "something that [only] dominant groups 'have' in the form of supporting disadvantaged groups" (Ross, Li and Call-Cummings 2022, 3-4). To be more precise, the frequent use of the word "save" throughout the description of the Restoration Movement's arrival in Kosawa evokes the humanitarian solidarity Chouliaraki calls "solidarity as salvation" (Suárez-Rodríguez 2024: 152). Chouliaraki explains that this form of solidarity has been criticised for "perpetuating the very suffering it sets out to comfort" (2013, 11), due to its usual "inappropriate compromises with corrupt regimes in order to remain operational in specific world regions" (12). Although *How Beautiful We Were* does not go as far in its critical portrayal of humanitarian aid, making it clear that the Restoration Movement provides Kosawa with renewed hope that their situation will change (Mbue 2021, 184), some villagers eventually develop a critical attitude towards the NGO. Despite "mak[ing] Pexton pay for the toxic waste on the river, and the dirt in the air, and the poison in the well water" (139), the company continues working in their land and children continue to die. That is, the strategies of the NGO to achieve Kosawa's liberation and social justice are portrayed as insufficient.

Rebecca Kwee notes that while the Restoration Movement "brings advocacy and aid to the Kosawa people", it does so "in a nuanced manner", because "their 'white savior' tendencies and superficial approach to restoration (cash for lives lost) do not hold the answer to the true liberation and empowerment of the people Kosawa" (2021). For her part, Chloé ten Brink observes that the Restoration Movement creates "a pattern of dependence", as evidenced by Thula's mother's words that "no amount of money could undo what Pexton had done to us, but we took it anyway, because, much as we hated them, we needed their money to help us carry on after all we'd lost" (Mbue, in Brink 2022). In this respect, it is also important to consider Konga's criticism of Kosawa's decision to rely on the assistance of the Restoration Movement instead of they themselves working together for their liberation: "we are the only ones who can free ourselves [...] we're fully capable of freeing ourselves. [...] They came from America and destroyed us, and now you want [...] them to come save us?" (Mbue 2021, 102). Once again, Konga tries to make the villagers aware and confident of their collective capacity for resistance and resilience, and more specifically of the real potential of this capacity. However, weak as they feel after the government's bloody massacre in response to their attempts to change their living conditions (134), at this point the people of Kosawa cannot help thinking that relying on the NGO is their only option, which reflects an internalised belief in their dependency on the West even to turn back on their forms of oppression. This is apparent in the extent to which they value the opportunity granted by the Restoration Movement to acquire knowledge.

The Restoration Movement provides Kosawa with "a school bus that Pexton had purchased as a gift", and most particularly as a strategy to clear their image, so that the older children of the village can attend classes in Lokunja (156). In this regard, Sahel says: "that the children now had a chance to acquire knowledge [...] might save us from future suffering" (156). Similarly, after Thula is later offered the chance to study in the USA, her mother states: "Our people were dying for lack of knowledge, [...] and if a child of ours could go to America and bring knowledge back to us, someday no government or corporation would be able to do to us the things they've been doing to us" (130). From Sahel's words, we can only infer that the knowledge she refers to is about the oppressive mechanisms of the West, even though, as already seen, they have been suffering from their abuse of power for decades. However, it seems unlikely that the children will acquire this knowledge and capacity for critical thinking about their oppressors at a school "where the district officials send their children" (154) and which is ruled by the government, complicit as it is with the West.

On another note, it is also worth considering Sahel's remark that the fact that Thula "would have more understanding [...] meant that we could all have more understanding too—what could be more important than that?" (130), which alludes once more to a spirit of communal unity and cooperation, typical of *ubuntu* consciousness. However, my focus here is on the reference throughout this part of the narrative to the idea of "knowledge is power", the mantra of Western civilisation under colonialism (Chatterjee [1986] 1993, 57). This slogan represented a "veiled agenda of establishing supremacy" through which the West "purposefully destroyed the indigenous knowledge system or described [it] as un-scientific, irrational and primitive", precisely to "sustain their rules on the name of the civilizing mission" (Kumar 2019, 920). The chapter "Yaya"

alludes to this context through the description of Kosawa's past encounter with Christianity: "Europeans had traveled here to understand what kind of people we were, why we behaved the way we did, how they could help us so we could live better lives" (Mbue 2021, 217). Later in the chapter, Yaya adds: "They came to tell us about their Spirit. They said their Spirit would bring us out of the darkness we didn't know we were living in" (219). Thula's grandmother explains that the result was, however, that their world began to "distance itself from the one in which [she]'d grown up", that their "ways" slowly "vanished" (224). Even if, as already noted, Kosawa's traditional indigenous lifeways are present throughout the whole narrative, with recurring references to their ancestral spiritual wisdom as the primary guide in their daily lives, the aforementioned exaltation of gaining a different kind of knowledge, one that is most probably based only on Western cultural values, suggests a hierarchy between Western and African indigenous knowledge, specifically as regards Kosawa's possibility of finding a solution to their situation of injustice. In a nutshell, despite Kosawa does not reject their culture and traditional ways of knowing and doing, but rather fiercely relies on their spiritual worldviews and principles, at this point in the narrative, these are not presented as a useful means for envisioning their path toward liberation.

6. Thula's Efforts towards Building Solidarity from Below

Thula's age-mates are the first to break with Kosawa's passive reliance and dependence on the Restoration Movement: "we didn't want to wait for kindly Americans" (Mbue 2021, 200). As adults at this point in the story, they begin to carry out violent acts against Pexton, and so the solidarity of salvation of the American NGO is juxtaposed with their revolution, though both are rendered inefficient in achieving Kosawa's liberation. The narrative highlights the inefficiency of violence against violence with Sonni's words, the new village head, that "nothing had changed despite the pipelines [they]'d damaged, the fires [they]'d set, the tanks [they]'d destroyed", except that "the government [got] tougher on lawbreakers" (255). For her part, Thula, now in the USA, writes letters to her age-mates "asking [them] to stop, saying that [...] the plan was never to kill" but to "let them know that we mattered and we were angry" (258).

During her time in the USA, Thula remains believing that her diasporic experience will provide the necessary knowledge to liberate Kosawa: "I'm convinced this knowledge I'm acquiring will do something for our people" (204). She reads about social movements around the world, attends activist meetings and, eventually, participates in protests around the USA. Gradually, these experiences help her envision what she thinks will be the most effective way to finally put an end to Kosawa's situation of injustice, namely through mobilising people from all around the country, as expressed in one of her letters to her age-mates:

> I believe we can do it. We may be the only village breathing air poisoned by Pexton, but [...] [t]he entire country is suffering under the yoke of His Excellency. Millions want him gone. That's an opportunity right there. We can join forces [...]. Rose them to get out on the streets and demand a new country. [...] We'll start in Kosawa and the sibling-villages and travel as far across the country as we can. I'm confident that, once word starts spreading, people will start realizing that they don't have to accept anything, they have choices, they can do something about their government. That'll be the most crucial element for the movement, because only the people can [...] free themselves. We need to open their eyes to their power. (Mbue 2021, 277-278)

Like Konga, Thula emphasises the importance of making the masses aware and confident of their capacity to change their lives and pursue a better future if they work collaboratively. Frantz Fanon once argued that "African unity can only be achieved through a bottom-up, people-driven process, and under the leadership of the people, that is to say in opposition to the interests of the bourgeoisie" (in Fawunga 2019, 15). Thula echoes this sentiment on a smaller scale, proposing a coalition of the oppressed majority in her country, which also recalls Maria Lugones's idea, along with insights from other decolonial feminist scholars, motivated by a radical love, that the starting point of decolonisation is "coalitional because the fractured locus is in common" (2010, 753). As Thula notes, albeit in different ways, the whole country is suffering from their government's abuse of power, and this might surely be the fundamental starting point for their alliance. Particularly noteworthy is the last sentence in the longer quote above, where she explicitly refers to the power of the allegedly powerless when united, which explores Zheng's conception of solidarity, already explained, as "a form of *collective* power" for the oppressed (2023, 894; original emphasis). Thula, like Zheng, underscores "the collective ability of otherwise powerless people to organize themselves for transformative social change" (894), thus presenting solidarity as "an instrumental good" (911).

In a later letter to her age-mates, Thula further explains her envisioned protest movement, insisting that their aim must be to "[free] Kosawa without causing pain to anyone; without any word, thought, or action that destroys another" (Mbue 2021, 286). Most remarkably, from the perspective of the theory of political solidarity, she sees their coalition and mobilisation as resulting from their strong emotions after decades of suffering, including their anger and fury, but necessarily prioritising a feeling of love to achieve their goal:

> I see it clearly as I write this, what we must do. I see us marching to Pexton, singing, dancing in front of soldiers. We may cry, or get angrier, but our fury will be from a place of love for ourselves, for our birthplace. From this love we'll demand our rights, and we shall win. (287)

Thula's words evoke not only the hope that people will unite to protest against Kosawa's situation and other injustices in the country, but also, and in particular, the idea of radical love as a catalyst and strategy for social transformation and justice. This notion of love, developed by Latina and Black feminist scholars such as

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and bell hooks (1994; 2000), has been recently valorised by Devin G. Atallah in his exploration of decolonial solidarity through the lens of radical love and rebellion. Atallah reflects on the possibility that these concepts can be applied in community psychology praxis to challenge and transform colonial structures and divisions, and argues that decolonial solidarity is grounded in "decolonial love".

Atallah defines decolonial love as a "revolutionary relationality that we build together, and that we build against, the colonial 'system of compartments'" (2022, 81). For Atallah, love therefore serves as a foundational element of solidarity, emerging from the experience of "[f]acing loss and perpetual pain". This experience, he further explains, can lead to "radical grief and remembrance", and in turn to a situation in which "we can be engulfed by love so powerful and transformative that new understandings and pathways towards freedom are forged" (78). His reflections are particularly pertinent here, as he illustrates them through "powerful examples of brotherhood, motherhood, marriage, family, and friendship on the backdrop of brutal violence" (Kessi, Suffa and Seedat 2022, 8). Similarly, *How Beautiful We Were* narrates the emergence of Thula's solidarity movement by weaving the voices of relatives and friends, moving back and forth in time with the incorporation of nostalgic and painful memories. Their love for each other and their land, along with their shared anger and frustration, is precisely what leads them to adopt a collective attitude of hope and rebellion: "Now that we were getting closer to manhood, we could have left [...] for a poison-free life, but we were determined never to give up our land" (Mbue 2021, 196), say Thula's age-mates. Furthermore, with respect to Kosawa's complex emotionality as the trigger for their unity and uprising together with other oppressed communities in the country, it should be further clarified that although certain "negative" emotions like rage and frustration are the ones which usually "serve as the basis for desiring transformation and thus seeking solidarity with others", as explained by Karen Ross and colleagues paraphrasing Clare Hemmings (2022, 6), in fact, those that "create the connections necessary for acting in [real] solidarity with others" and achieving productive results are "relational affects that center on mutuality and reciprocity", such as "care and love" (13). Through Thula's voice, *How Beautiful We Were* seems to make a similar proposal (Suárez-Rodríguez 2024, 161). Most particularly, it does so through the portrayal of the tensions among the protagonists due to their different approaches to Kosawa's liberation.

While the narrative focus is largely on Thula's emphasis on protesting peacefully from a place of love, *How Beautiful We Were* also explores the issue raised by Osayuwamen Ede-Osifo that, in fact, "radical love is far from an ode to peace or nonviolence", for it "derive[s] from a tradition of resistance" and, hence, violence is one of its "greatest challenges" (2021). Despite the fact that Thula's age-mates feel enthusiastic after reading her letters, their position about the most effective way to liberate Kosawa remains different from hers, even if all of them share a feeling of love towards their community and land: "None of us believed that we could win this fight with talks of kindness and singing and dancing" (Mbue 2021, 287), they say, thus continuing to perpetuate violence in Kosawa. As suggested by the following words, through which they explain the reason why they have decided to stop relying on the Restoration Movement, hate seems to be one of the primary emotions driving their actions: "We doubted that their hatred for Pexton burned as fiercely as ours did" (200). Consequently, although Thula eventually returns home and manages to build a hopeful alliance of protest around the country with the help of her friends, her project ends tragically. On the day when the oppressed masses peacefully rise against the government in the streets of Lokunja (319), thus proving the potential of group emotional cohesion to build political solidarity, Thula is assassinated by the government and Kosawa is burned for being "too contaminated for human presence" (355). Rather than simply the result of Thula's age-mates' violent behaviour while she is trying to peacefully end Kosawa's suffering, the narrative thereby suggests that this tragic ending is due to a lack of common ground among the protagonists to achieve their ends. This explores Zheng's (2023, 906) view that mobilising is not the only factor necessary to build a solidarity movement that achieves social change, but people must focus on organising as a collective with common values and strategies.

As a final note on Thula's age-mates' misguided involvement in her project, the narrative calls our attention to their plan to impregnate Thula against her will and without her knowledge through the power of the Spirit (Mbue 2021, 308-311), for they think that she will be never taken seriously around the country in her condition as "an unmarried, childless woman" (308). Although their plan, which they eventually carry out, seeks to help Thula success in her revolutionary efforts, it signifies the violation of her fundamental rights. Thus, the narrative not only highlights a lack of consensus among the protagonists on the most effective practices to liberate Kosawa, but also suggests that unless the conflicts that are based on gender in similar African communities are resolved, they will not be able to build efficient coalitions and solidarity movements that achieve a reversal in their situations of oppression.

7. Conclusions

Considering the tragic ending of the story of Kosawa, it might seem that *How Beautiful We Were* offers little hope for change in similar situations of injustice and inequality, especially as long as their strategies of resistance and activism reinforce dependence on external actors and perpetuate the violence that led to their current living circumstances. However, this does not mean that *How Beautiful We Were* focuses its critical eye on the African oppressed majority. Instead, the novel primarily denounces the persistence of colonial structures in the African context and their impact on the population's wellbeing. In fact, the protagonists are all portrayed as genuine agents of hope and defiance, despite being trapped within a necropolitical system that exposes them to death, thus problematising hegemonic conceptions of victimhood and agency. In this way, the novel seems to seek to incite action among the most vulnerable against the abuse of power

of their governments. More specifically, this article contends that *How Beautiful We Were* calls for efforts towards developing renewed and more effective resistance strategies with decolonising and transformative sociopolitical effects. The narrative makes it clear that an ethos of hope, while essential for bringing people together in their struggle for justice, is insufficient on its own. Along the same lines, it prioritises a feeling of love over other emotions for building effective political solidarity in contemporary African contexts, thus advocating for peaceful protest movements. Additionally, it stresses the need for the African oppressed majority to forge solid solidarity alliances based on shared organisational values such as mutual support, collaboration, respect and trust. In this way, *How Beautiful We Were* does not simply echo Zheng's (2023) discussion on the necessary pillars to build solidarity from below with transformative results for the people involved and others in similar situations of oppression. It also expands on Fagunwa's (2019) call for a recovery and transformation of African traditional principles of collective care as the path towards sociopolitical improvement in contemporary postcolonial Africa. In particular, *How Beautiful We Were* highlights the vital necessity to eradicate gender inequality as a first step.

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