Petrocapitalism, displacement, and (im)mobilities in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*

Katarzyna Więckowska

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In this article, I analyse the movement of human and nonhuman bodies in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021). I argue that the depiction of the environmental and social damage caused by oil extraction in the novel resists the dominant discourse of the Anthropocene by refusing to universalise the threats produced by ecological crisis, embedding environmental vulnerability within histories of colonial violence and forced displacement and particularising the bodies that bear the cost of disasters. My reading of toxicity, the flow of capital, and networks of power demonstrates how agency is shaped by mobility, immobility, and attachment to place and points to the possibilities of resistance and change outlined in the book. *How Beautiful We Were* deploys multiple narrators and adopts an innovative way of telling the community's story to convey the multigenerational and ongoing nature of postcolonial trauma. I argue that the use of petro-magic-realism and we-narrative makes the novel an example of collective climate witnessing and provides a means to combat environmental forgetting. Although the shift from forced immobility to forced mobility depicted in Mbue's book may point to dark times ahead, I propose to interpret the focus on children as allowing for imagining the future as a time of positive transformation. **Keywords:** (im)mobility, petrocapitalism, displacement, slow violence, climate witnessing, trauma.

Introduction

In his 2011 book about the slow violence of environmental catastrophes, its damaging effects on communities, and the various types of displacement—"temporal, geographical, rhetorical, and technological"—that it initiates, Rob Nixon proposes the notion of "displacement without moving" to enable the discussion of not only "the movement of people from their places of belonging" but also "the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (7, 19). Displacement without moving, or stationary displacement, reflects the paradoxical state of "being simultaneously immobilized and moved out of one's living knowledge as one's place loses its life-sustaining features" (19). The destruction of the land dissolves the existing communities and makes them "imaginatively displaced", while the lack of recognition of their experience within the larger national narrative undermines their agency and turns their members into "spectral uninhabitants" of "unimagined communities" (153). Nixon connects such "disappearance" of communities to resource theft, environmental crisis, and modern projects of national development and describes it as part of "actively administered invisibility" (168) that "imaginatively evacuates" particular people from national memory and future and changes their lands into "spaces of amnesia" (151, 153).

In this article, I offer a reading of regimes of (im)mobility in Imbolo Mbue's 2021 novel *How Beautiful We Were*, which depicts the environmental damage caused by oil extraction and the neocolonial practices of petrocapitalism in "the dual crisis of ecology and capital" that Matthew Omelsky calls the African Anthropocene (49). By portraying a community whose members become spectral and who are invisiblised through the lack of recognition by international, national, and local authorities, *How Beautiful We Were* records displacement without moving and the rise of "the environmentalism of the poor", described by Ramachandra Gucha and Joan Martinez-Alier as oppositional actions and behaviours of communities for whom the environment is a source of livelihood (12). In the first part of the article, I focus on displacement, petroviolence, and unimagined communities and

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explore the networks and flows of bodies and toxic substances. The second part deals with mobility justice, (im)mobility, and agency with reference to the control of the movement of humans, resources, and capital that determines the social and power relations depicted in the novel. I place the endeavors to control space and movement in the context of postcolonial trauma and climate witnessing. I conclude the article by analysing the form and narrative structure of the novel as expressing its future orientation and attempting to restore agency to communities in movement.

Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* portrays the experiences of displacement without moving, forced imaginative evacuation, and actively administered invisibility intricately linked to the growth of industrial societies and global capitalism and the ensuing climate crisis in the period known as the Anthropocene. The term "Anthropocene" was proposed in 2000 by chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer to designate the geological epoch succeeding the Holocene and to emphasise "the growing impacts of human activities" and "the central role of mankind in geology and ecology" from the Industrial Revolution in the latter part of the 18th century onwards (17).[1] The Anthropocene is marked by population growth, excessive resource use, and environmental deterioration, including pollution, ocean acidification, deforestation, urbanisation, biodiversity loss, and species extinction. Will Steffen, Crutzen, and John McNeill link the start of the Anthropocene with the enormous increase in the use of fossil fuels and warn that the pervasive influence of human activities, particularly in the period of the Great Acceleration after 1945, "is pushing the Earth into planetary *terra incognita*" (614). While the term Anthropocene usefully emphasises anthropogenic impacts on the planet and the global sense of uncertainty regarding the future, it also erases differences between people by subsuming all humans under the category of species in a universalising gesture which, as Marco Caracciolo argues, "reflects a set of global historical forces that originated in Western modernity" (10). Jason W. Moore and Justin McBrien draw attention to the role of economic systems in the planetary influence of human activities. Moore proposes the name "Capitalocene" to describe the period beginning in the 16th century and defines capitalism as "a way of organizing nature as a whole" (7). McBrien highlights extinction as the defining feature of the Necrocene period, the "fundamental biogeological moment" of the Capitalocene when capital "necrotizes the entire planet [...], unfolding a slow violence" that ultimately leads to "the disappearance of species, languages, cultures, and peoples" (116). In a critical intervention, Kathryn Yusoff situates the beginning of the Anthropocene in colonisation (62) and questions the race politics of the period by pointing to the erasure of histories and fates of those who were crucial to carrying through the Industrial Revolution. Stressing the continuing legacy of colonial systems and modes of thinking, she writes: "The Anthropocene is a project initiated and executed through anti-Blackness and inhuman subjective modes, from 1492 to the present" (62). Similarly, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd see "the problem of colonialism as responsible for contemporary environmental crisis" (763) and place the start of the Anthropocene in the colonisation of the Americas: refusing to universalise the concept, they argue that it is more accurate to describe the "humanity" of the Anthropocene as "petrochemical companies and those invested in and profiting from petrocapitalism and colonialism" (765). Davis and Todd claim that, to combat climate change, it is necessary to decolonise the Anthropocene, including the relations between humans and the more-than-human world, through embracing Indigenous knowledge and modes of self-governance (775).[2] The recognition of the importance of making kin and decolonising Earthly relationships distinguishes Donna Haraway's description of the Chthulucene, in which she decenters the human element by emphasising more-than-human entanglements and processes of "living-with and dying-with each other potently" (2).

The concept of the Anthropocene and the critical discussions that followed its introduction demonstrate the significance of human and nonhuman (im)mobilities to current ways of thinking and living and connect climate change with displacements accompanying colonisation, globalisation, and petrocapitalism. Andrew Baldwin posits that "the relation between climate change and human mobility is amongst the most fundamental of our time" (516) and Arun Saldanha stresses the crisis of mobility that accompanies the Anthropocene, which he describes as "a capitalist ecology of distributions and migrations in crisis" (151). Focusing on mobility in the discussion of climate change reveals continuing dependencies and inequalities that contribute to the current crisis and provides the means to construct livable futures because, as Davis and Todd claim, "the resiliency of people across the world for collective continuance is dependent upon this freedom of movement which is systematically denied by the state forms of governance we currently have in place" (775). Accordingly, in this article, I focus on the regulation of movement in *How Beautiful We Were* and approach the novel as questioning the universalism of Anthropocenic discourse that "legitimates and justifies the racialised inequalities that are bound up in social geologies" (Yusoff 22). I also argue that the novel highlights the need to pay attention to "transgenerational haunting for the injustices of the past" (Demos 10) in discussions of environmental damage and the future.

Displacement, petroviolence, and toxicity

How Beautiful We Were describes the changes to the lives of the inhabitants of Kosawa, a fictional African village close to a big river, brought about by the activities of Pexton, an American oil company that moves into the region after oil is discovered. The novel depicts the environmental damage caused by oil extraction and the community's attempts to stop it by adopting a range of strategies: appealing to the authorities, informing the international public about the government's and oil company's pernicious activities, attempting to implement democratic processes in the country, and raising armed resistance against the company and corrupt officials. The discovery of oil brings violence to the region that is ubiquitous and invisible and dispersed across time and space (Nixon 2–3). The violence has delayed effects and gradually makes the place uninhabitable and deprives the community of their livelihood: all life disappears from the big river covered with oil and toxic waste, "the smell of Kosawa [becomes] the smell of crude", the noise from the oil field is constant, and the air turns heavy (*How Beautiful We Were* 32). At the end of the book, the process of environmental degradation culminates with the forced removal of the inhabitants and the digging of a new oil well in the now deserted village, which is too toxic to accommodate living beings.

Although the place remains unnamed in the book, there are many similarities between the unidentified big river near which the inhabitants of Kosawa live and the Niger Delta, allegedly the most seriously oil-damaged territory in the world (Steiner).[3] The mode of operation of the oil company in the book follows the Nigerian "blood oil" model, described by the conservation biologist Richard Steiner as producing as much oil as quickly and as cheaply as possible at the cost of the safety of the local community and environment. As he writes, the "blood oil" disaster is a mixture of "environmental devastation, a violent militancy [...], human rights abuses, corporate greed and exploitation, epidemic corruption, massive oil theft, sabotage, repression". In Mbue's book, the degradation of the environment displaces the inhabitants of Kosawa without moving, forcing them to live in a place that has lost its life-sustaining features for years and abandon it once it becomes uninhabitable. Although members of the community make repeated attempts to defend their right to the land, they fail because of ubiquitous corruption, global indifference, and the dependence of the country's president on Pexton. The government has given Kosawa to the American oil company, leaving the inhabitants without any legal or political protection. In turn, members of the community rebel, even though they are aware that "we could do nothing to them [Pexton] but they could do anything to us, because they owned us" (*How Beautiful* 11). Like the spaces of amnesia described by Nixon, the village becomes "ghosted" and sacrificed in the name of progress and development; the authorities' refusal to recognise its inhabitants' rights as citizens of the country makes them virtually invisible.[4] Representatives of the community are punished for seeking protection or help from the government: Malabo, the protagonist Thula's father, and his companions never return from their expedition to Bézam, the capital city, which they undertake to inform the authorities of the ecological devastation of their village. Thula's uncle, Bongo, and three other men are executed for taking representatives of Pexton hostage in a futile attempt to draw the government's attention to their problems. Finally, Thula's age-mates, who resort to kidnapping and killing the company's employees to fight for their village, are shot by His Excellency's soldiers and their bodies are transported to a nearby town, where they are laid "at the entrance to the big market so that passersby could take pictures in their minds, spread the story far and wide" (352). The community's efforts to have their precarity recognised by citizens of America end in failure because, although the Movement for the Restoration of the Dignity of Subjugated Peoples helps them file a lawsuit against Pexton in the United States, their case is rejected. While recognising the Kosawa inhabitants' claim as valid, the American judge orders them to take their case to a court in their own country because "America has to respect other countries' boundaries" (343). Juxtaposed against the lack of territorial restrictions in the flow of capital and oil, the court's decision reveals the arbitrariness and artificiality of national divisions and shows that the existence of the border itself produces and perpetuates violence (Jones 11). In practice, the verdict denies retribution to the community due to the corrupted justice system in their country, where "[t]he people who owned those courts were the same people who had given [their] land to Pexton" (*How Beautiful* 343).

Amitav Ghosh links oil extraction with quelling any democratic aspirations (149), and Michael Watts describes petroviolence as creating "a [...] culture of terror and a space of death" through the collaboration of the state and transnational capital (9). Mbue's novel depicts the suppression of democratic procedures in a country ruled by a corrupt leader who is dependent on oil companies. It also presents the global refusal to recognise as grievable (Butler) the lives of victims of the resource extraction industry. The inhabitants of Kosawa are left helpless by international bodies, whereas Pexton is presented as having the necropolitical power to dictate "who is able to live and who must die" and to designate specific types of bodies as dispensable (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* 66, 68). To voice their protest, members of the community use "weapons of the weak", including individual resistance, mass demonstrations, lawsuits, and taking oil officials as temporary "hostages" (Swyngedouw 151–3). They also follow Thula as the initiator and leader of the struggle for democratic rule in the country, endorsing her belief that "[n]o one has the right to make us prisoners on our land" (*How Beautiful* 213). As a leader, Thula uses the knowledge gained during her education in the United States, thanks to a scholarship from the Restoration Movement, and the awareness of global justice movements. Her activism has been inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, Franz Fanon, and Karl Marx, and her leadership is an important reminder that "women in Africa have occupied important roles, including as rulers, since the precolonial era" (Iheka 135). [5] As a teacher and speaker at rallies across the country, Thula uses her freedom to move to make others "perceive the reality of their oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (Freire 30). The driving force for their struggle and transformation is the land, which is presented in the book as a source of nurturance and dignity, as "the most meaningful" and "most essential value" (Fanon 44).

How Beautiful We Were manifests the close link between land and people by highlighting the movement of toxic elements between human bodies, water, and soil. The deaths of children in Kosawa are the first sign that warns the community that their land is becoming uninhabitable and amplifies the sense of displacement without moving. By linking the degradation of their habitat with the children's death, the novel depicts human and nonhuman bodies as entangled and transcorporeal and points to the inherent porosity of borders, including those between the local and the global or personal and political. Stacy Alaimo describes transcorporeality as "the transit between body and environment" that "is exceedingly local", yet "tracing a toxic substance from production to consumption often reveals global networks of social injustice, lax regulations, and environmental degradation" (15). Alaimo argues that acknowledging the permeability of bodies makes it impossible to separate them from the surrounding reality or to extricate the material self "from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial" (20). The bodies of the inhabitants of Kosawa are absorbed in networks that have local material effects but are determined by flows of transnational capital, corrupted political systems, and cultural traditions that bind them to their land in ties of responsibility and reciprocal care. Cajetan Iheka describes oil as a network form because of its "transnational and transoceanic portability, its slipperiness and ability to bridge and widen the gulf between the sites of its drilling and the privileged environments of its use" (107). The movement of oil starts with the land and delimits the spread of toxicity unequally distributed among places and people in a way which, to echo Caracciolo's critique of the Anthropocene, reflects and reinforces "a set of historical forces that originated in Western modernity" (10) and colonialism.

By highlighting the environmental damage to the land and human bodies, Mbue's novel uncovers the hidden networks that regulate the motions of toxicity and are complicit in producing unimagined communities that become displaced without moving. The transcorporeal bond between humans and land and the ongoing environmental degradation leads to the emergence of solastalgia, which Glenn Albrecht describes as "a place-based emotion" that appears when "the place becomes literally toxic, and […] one's sense of place becomes negative" (37). Solastalgia is "the lived experience of negative environmental change" and "the homesickness you have when you are still at home", caused by witnessing the disappearance of one's place of living (200). The inhabitants of Kosawa are transformed without moving as they experience the gradual disintegration of their home and the loss of their identity derived from their connection to the place and community. The word "emotion", as Albrecht reminds us, is linked to movement through "its origins in the Latin *movēre*, 'to move,' and *ēmovēre*, 'to agitate, disturb'", so that emotions can be understood as simply "that which moves us" (1). *How Beautiful We Were* presents the Anthropocene as the "age of solastalgia", pointing to the future of lasting "chronic distress" and "the loss of loved 'homes' and places at all scales" (Albrecht 10–1). Albrecht writes about the current predominance of Earth-destroying emotions (1), and the novel illustrates this by depicting the "victories" of Pexton and His Majesty's government and the disappearance of Kosawa and the community. While the book seems to suggest that negative emotions will predominate in the future, its emphasis on transcorporeality and unceasing movement of substances, bodies, and feelings points to the possibility of change and the potential of forming nurturing and life-affirming emotions.

(Im)mobilities, agency, and witnessing

Mimi Sheller defines mobility injustice as a movement of resources that works to empower some places and disempower others. She illustrates this by giving the example of the extraction and export of resources from a poor country by a multinational corporation with little profit but much environmental damage to the country and its citizens (13). Such a situation is described in Mbue's novel, where the extraction of natural resources "goes hand in hand with brutal attempts to immobilize and spatially fix whole categories of people or, paradoxically, to free them as a way of forcing them to scatter over broad areas" (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* 86). *How Beautiful We Were* begins with forced immobility when the community members are displaced without moving; it ends with their forced mobility when they are ordered to leave Kosawa and disperse across the country and abroad. Within this general framework, the novel depicts a series of small- and large-scale mobilities of journeys to school, work, family, other villages and towns, and trips abroad that testify to the complex ways in which humans negotiate forms of movement and relations of power and complicate the opposition between mobility and immobility.[6] Despite the environmental degradation of Kosawa, its inhabitants do not want to leave and decide to fight the company and government to save the place and their homes. In their case, immobility can be seen as voluntary rather than forced and as a decision that requires agency: as Kerilyn Schewel argues, "staying also reflects and requires agency; it is a conscious choice that is renegotiated and repeated throughout the life course" (330). Although some consider relocating to protect their children, most inhabitants choose to stay, including Thula, who returns home after completing her studies in the United States. Most of them "do not wish to migrate and are unable to do so" and represent the category of "acquiescent immobility" (Schewel 336). The determination not to move is vividly presented through Bongo's dream to protect his home by turning himself into "a wall that stretches from the sky to the inner core of the earth, allowing no pipelines to pass through, no poison to flow into our water" (*How Beautiful* 83). The image of the transcorporeal body morphing into a protective wall locates agency in the refusal to move and points to voluntary immobility as a potential strategy of resistance. Still, Bongo's dream only temporarily empowers him to stand up for his community—his act of resistance and the decision to imprison and immobilise representatives of Pexton lead to his death. In the end, the community's resolution to remain cannot be sustained because of the threat of state violence against those who refuse to go, but also because the place transforms into an unknown and hostile entity, where things reveal their power and "curious ability [...] to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett 6).

Climate change-related movements "involve a wide range of mobilities and immobilities" that are politically motivated, involve disturbance to everyday mobilities and development of adaptive behaviors, and interact with nonhuman mobilities of shifting ecosystems (Boas *et al.* 3367, 3374). The movements of the inhabitants of Kosawa intersect with and are determined by those of animal species, plant life, toxic substances, and fluids like water, whose poisonous effects necessitate the import of safely bottled liquids. The difference between clean and contaminated water and air seems to set the border between the village and Gardens, the company headquarters, where the employees live with their families. The inhabitants of Kosawa believe that Gardens is not polluted because Pexton protects its people until they notice that children and women have disappeared from the place; only the workers are left, suffering from the same diseases that have plagued the community. Changes in the movements of water, oil, and air reshape both places indiscriminately and determine the mobilities of humans and nonhumans, demonstrating that "the mobility of one group can be structurally implicated in the (im)mobility of another" (Saldanha 153) and that the groups may not be only human. In the novel, petroleum is the key nonhuman agent that determines human and more-than-human (im)mobilities and power relations.

The "petro-magic" of oil promises "wealth without work", which is undermined by the novel's use of petro-magic-realism as the means to puncture "the illusions associated with oil" and to "reimagine" the literary and politically "unimagined" communities and populations (Wenzel, "Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited: Unimagining and Reimagining the Niger Delta" 212–4).[7] Drawing on Stephen Slemon's warning against turning magical realism into "a monumentalizing category" and "a single locus upon which the massive problem of difference in literary expression can be managed into recognizable meaning in one swift pass" (4089), Jennifer Wenzel argues for re-imagining the complex histories of the Niger Delta in modes that move beyond staple representations of the "resource curse" ("Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited" 213). Similarly to magical realism, which can be seen as "the mode of a conflicted consciousness" that discloses the antagonism between various views of culture and history (Wilson 222), petro-magic-realism "combines magical transmogrifications and fantastic landscapes with the monstrous-but-mundane violence of oil extraction, the state violence that supports it, and the environmental harm it causes", thereby reimagining, re-politicising, and re-historicising "the resource curse" (Wenzel, "Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited" 217). *How Beautiful We Were* portrays the violence of oil extraction by stressing the degree to which it has permeated the everyday life of the community and their acceptance of the damage it causes. This is evident in the children's comments and their matter-of-fact remarks on the deaths of their age-mates (see *How Beautiful* 33, 72). The book depicts landscapes that are "recognizably fantastic" but also "recognizably devastated" (Wenzel, "Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited" 219). It shows the devastation of land progressing alongside the erosion of culture, communal practices, and belief systems that may subvert and oppose the corporate logic of extraction through their insistence on compassion, reciprocity, and care as the basis of the community's organisation. This is conveyed by the story of the beginning of Kosawa with a blood pact between three human brothers and a leopard, whom they freed from a trap so that she could return to her children, and who reciprocated by giving them the territory for their village (*How Beautiful* 30). Juxtaposing the petro-magical promise of quick progress against the slow violence of environmental damage, the book presents the inhabitants of Kosawa as actively engaged in remaking their homes and routes, though within the limits imposed by the larger national and global power structures.

Mbue's novel shows how the flow of water, oil, and pollution combined with people's movements and practices turn Kosawa into a homeplace, thus demonstrating that mobility and place are "mutually constitutive", and that place is formed by "the intersection of mobilities, at different rhythms, scales, and intensities" (Ticktin and Youatt 7–8). The varying intensities of mobilities within and outside the community include Thula's attempts to transform the country into a different place by organising meetings and rallies in villages, towns, and districts to prepare the citizens for Liberation Day, the beginning of the revolution when men and women would "march in protest on a single day, in every town, in every village, all across the nation, fists clenched up and chanting, until the walls of the regime fell down flat" (*How Beautiful* 296). Thula's activism recognises the importance of the co-constitutive relationship of mobility and place, and although the protests fail to bring down the regime, they carve new mobile places and itineraries of resistance and restore to the participants (temporary) freedom of movement. Freeing mobility from corporate and state restrictions evokes the experience of regaining the right to move against the forced migrations and containment imposed by slavery and colonialism; it reaches back to what Achille Mbembe describes as "African precolonial understandings of [human and nonhuman] movement in space" and the perception of borders as "always porous and permeable" ("The idea of a borderless world").[8] Mbembe's idea of a borderless world links "the freedom of self-determination with the aspiration to move freely" (Ticktin and Youatt 10). The protagonists of Mbue's novel struggle to regain their rights to move and stay, and although some of them seem to succeed, their attempts are curbed by the environmental degradation in the Anthropocene and its (unrecognised) implementation of past mobility regimes. *How Beautiful We Were* presents ecological crisis as becoming one more type of violence within the "collective, ongoing, everyday forms of traumatizing violence" (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds* 4) that Stef Craps describes as distinguishing postcolonial trauma: rather than the individualised trauma caused by a terrifying event (Craps, *Postcolonial* 31), postcolonial trauma encompasses experiences of multigeneration violence and responds to "multiplicities of violence, suffering, and abuse that ensue from various forms of colonialism" (Iheka 110).

The multigenerational and ongoing nature of postcolonial trauma is captured in the novel by the choice of multiple narrators and by a collective and plural way of storytelling that uses the group as the speaker. *How Beautiful We Were* features several narrators, all members of the Nangi family: Thula, her uncle Bongo, her mother Sachel, her grandmother Yaya, and her younger brother Juba. Every other chapter adopts the perspective of "The Children", Thula's age-mates. The use of multiple narrators enables the presentation of various perspectives and timescales and differing attitudes to corporate actions. The events in the novel cover the period of intensive oil extraction and militarised government interventions from 1980 to 2020; elderly characters like Yaya reminisce about the region's past experiences of slavery and forced labor, which stresses the continuity of the violence. Children as narrators present a unique situation where the group is the speaker, which makes it possible to observe the formation of the community and the mechanisms and relations within the group. Natalya Bekhta calls this narrative situation the we-narrative, where the narrator is "capable of acting collectively, creating collective (common) knowledge, and expressing shared mental states" (182). The homodiegetic we-narrator "communicates information about group membership and thus performs a general discursive function of creating a sense of belonging and difference" (53), illustrating the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion within and outside the group as well as expressing the group's ethos (113). Initially, the first-person plural encompasses all Thula's age-mates, but the size of the group gradually diminishes as some die, some move to another place, and others leave disturbed by the growing radicalism of the group's actions against Pexton. By the novel's end, there are only five we-narrators left, but they continue to be supported and sheltered by the rest of the community. The use of the we-narrative allows for setting the community apart from other groups and positioning it against the corporation and the government while at the same time portraying it as an internally diversified and dynamic set of individuals whose ethos also undergoes transformation. The narrative situation complicates the simple division into "us" and "them", allowing readers to witness conflicts within the group and learn about the motifs of those who continue to fight or decide to leave. Significantly, we-narrators not only inform readers about the values, beliefs, and goals of the group but the "we" is performative, "creating something that did not exist before" (Bekhta 61). Forming and belonging to the community grants agency to the displaced and immobilised, giving them the power to act as well as bear witness and testify to the ecological degradation of their life environment.

Writing about the current environmental crisis, Shela Sheikh argues that it requires a new mode of human and nonhuman witnessing that is directed towards the future and that is not a singular act but "an ongoing process that entails the simultaneous registration (witnessing) of experiences and representation (bearing witness) to a public" (147). It is a situation in which "the witness can no longer be a solitary figure; rather, the witness must instead be *but one* within a collectivity" (148). The group narrator of *How Beautiful We Were* provides an example of such collective witnessing and of how to (imaginatively) capture the slow and "ongoing violence that is likely [to] spill over into the future" (154). Considering the future-oriented practices of witnessing and violence, it is significant that the chapters narrated in the first-person plural are titled "The Children" and that the dedication opening the novel reads: "For my beautiful, beautiful children." The inclusion of child narrators highlights the need to care for the future: it makes it possible to question the existing social rules and modes of behaviour, inquire into their formation, and examine their impact on future generations. Such narrators bring to the fore issues of intergenerational climate justice and the obligation to consider the future effects of current actions and decisions. Bektha proposes "approaching we-narration as an especially apt technique for exemplifying the social nature of knowledge [...] and for laying bare some of its ideological implications" (134). Mbue's novel allows readers to observe the changing beliefs of we-narrators as they grow up and learn about social rules and power hierarchies, in the process uncovering their arbitrariness and bias. The novel stresses the children's simple naivety by depicting their repeated appeals to common humanity based on compassion; during a meeting with Pexton representatives, for example, the young hope that "the men would look into our eyes and feel something for us. We were children, like their children, and we wanted them to recognize that" (*How Beautiful* 5). This emphasis on innocence may be seen as either a call for cultivating the emotions that Albrecht calls Earth-creating and building a society based on reciprocal care or as an indictment of adults for "all the ways the world has failed to protect its children" (*How Beautiful* 251). The biblical epigraph with which the novel begins seems to promise a better future, indicating that "[t]he people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned", but the fate of the Kosawa community, their final dispersal, and the environmental degradation of their living place point to a much darker time ahead.

The use of we-narrative and homodiegetic narrators in *How Beautiful We Were* restores agency to the group that has been pushed into the space of amnesia and helps reimagine the community that has become spectral. Yet, the novel finishes with the we-narrators having died and other members of the community surviving but having dispersed, no longer emplaced but globally scattered. The children of the children narrators are free to move, but their mobility is restricted by the prohibition against entering ecologically devastated places like Kosawa and the community dissolves when its members become disconnected from the place that made them into a group. I propose to read the pessimistic ending of the novel and its nostalgic view of the past by referring to what Craps describes as the problem of society's environmental memory loss, where each generation, not knowing what a place looked like before, accepts the current state as the norm, losing the ability to recognise the extent of the environmental damage that has occurred ("Lost Words and Lost Worlds: Combatting Environmental Generational Amnesia" 38). Craps argues that literary and cultural works have the potential to counteract the generational amnesia (41). The we-narrative and multiple perspectives of *How Beautiful We Were* turn the book into an act of collective witnessing and a record of the movement of oil, people, emotions, and memories that may help intervene in the global processes of environmental forgetting and make the future "a site of infinite potential rather than foreclosure" (Baldwin 526).

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that place, forced (im)mobility, and displacement play the key role in the critique of existing mobility regimes and petroviolence in Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*. I have demonstrated that the focus on children in the novel expresses the desire for a better future, whose arrival is prevented by the environmental degradation of their homeplace and the colonial violence that lives on in the traumatising effects of globalisation and oil extraction, the restrictions of mobility imposed on humans and nonhumans, and the unequal distribution of toxicity. I have situated the discussion of Mbue's book within the various conceptualisations of the Anthropocene to point to the (im)mobility of ideas in critical discourse and highlight the importance of the book's decolonising depiction of how the Earth-changing activities of some humans obliterate the ongoing crises of others. *How Beautiful We Were* offers a record of the displacement of a community gradually deprived of rights and space through acts of actively administered invisibility that reach back to the colonial mechanisms of the past. The inhabitants of Kosawa are physically displaced and emotionally "transported without moving" as they watch their place of living become toxic and their community dissolve with the disappearance of their homes. By focusing on the role the village plays for the community, the book shows that mobility and place are mutually constitutive and depicts the role nonhuman entities play in delineating spaces as (un)livable. The mode of petro-magic-realism unmasks the slow violence that devastates the land and uncovers the destructive ways of living that hide behind the false petro-magical promise of instant success. Significantly, by focusing on community dynamics, the novel creates the space for collectively witnessing and testifying to petroviolence and climate change, thereby restoring agency to the group and enabling movement into the future.

Notes

1. In March 2024, the International Union of Geological Sciences rejected the proposal to adopt the Anthropocene as Earth's new epoch. Still, it recommended that environmental scholars, social scientists, and the public use the term as it is "an invaluable descriptor in human-environment interactions" (Witze). In this article, I use the term to refer to the period of human activity leading to unprecedented environmental damage and a critical concept that has provoked a discussion that can unsettle the colonial and anthropocentric legacies of modernity.
2. Numerous Indigenous scholars demonstrate that Indigenous peoples have been long exposed to the processes described as specific to the Anthropocene, such as biodiversity loss or relocation. Kyle Whyte, for example, describes settler colonialism "as a form of human expansion that continues to inflict anthropogenic environmental change on indigenous peoples—most recently under the guise of climate destabilization" (207).
3. In a podcast about writing *How Beautiful We Were*, Mbue has pointed to her country of origin, Cameroon, and Nigeria as the key sources of inspiration. She also mentions the influence of the story of the struggle of the Ogoni people against Shell in the Niger Delta, the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, and reports about ecological catastrophes and resistance to oil companies in other parts of the world, including Standing Rock, Ecuador, and the BP oil spill in America (Mbue and Venugopal).
4. The situation can also be described as an effect of borderisation and the creation of spaces which Mbembe calls death-worlds: "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*" (*Necropolitics* 92).
5. The novel lists Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), and Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (1848) as inspiring Thula's actions.
6. I draw here on Schewel's argument that immobility is a process that is as complex and dynamic as mobility and that agency is frequently (and wrongly) conflated with human action and movement (329–30).
7. Interestingly, Wenzel describes magical realist texts as similar to oil because "both are commodity exports of the global south in high demand in the northern hemisphere" ("Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature" 456), thereby pointing to the reification of literary forms and their role in imaginatively immobilizing populations.
8. Mbembe writes that "you cannot think of people, without thinking of nonhumans" ("Borderless world").

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