



# **Neocolonial Violence and Ecological Trauma in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021)**

**2023 Brock University English Graduate Student Colloquium**

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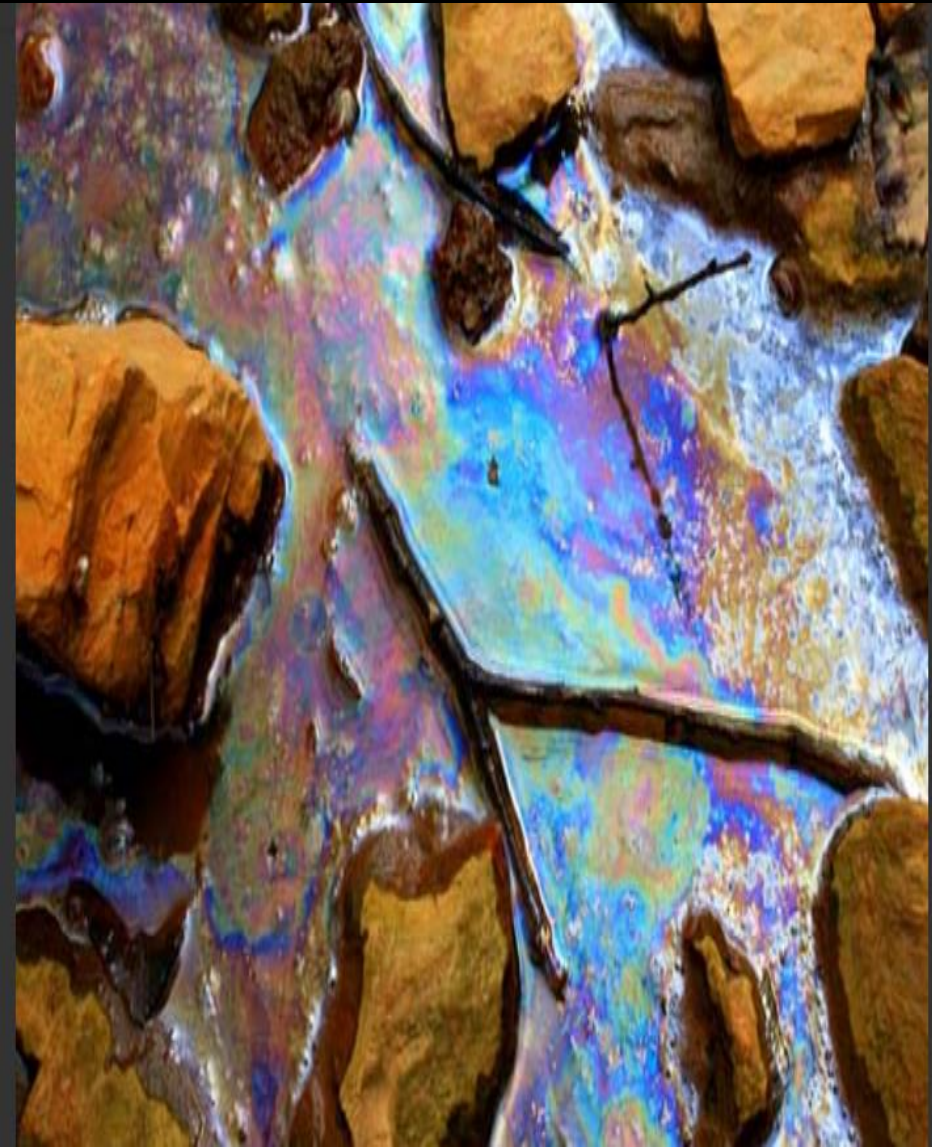
Supervisor: Dr. Susan Spearey

**Second Reader: Dr. Robert Alexander**

**Date: 25 April 2023**

**Venue: Dr. Charles A. Sankey Chamber**

**Time: 11:00 AM – 2:00 PM**



- ❖ **“For a colonised people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread, and above all, dignity” (Frantz Fanon qtd. in DeLoughrey and Handley 3).**

- ❖ **“Land is not just land alone, we breathe into it, [and] it is touched by our modes and memories” (Huggan and Tiffen 115).**

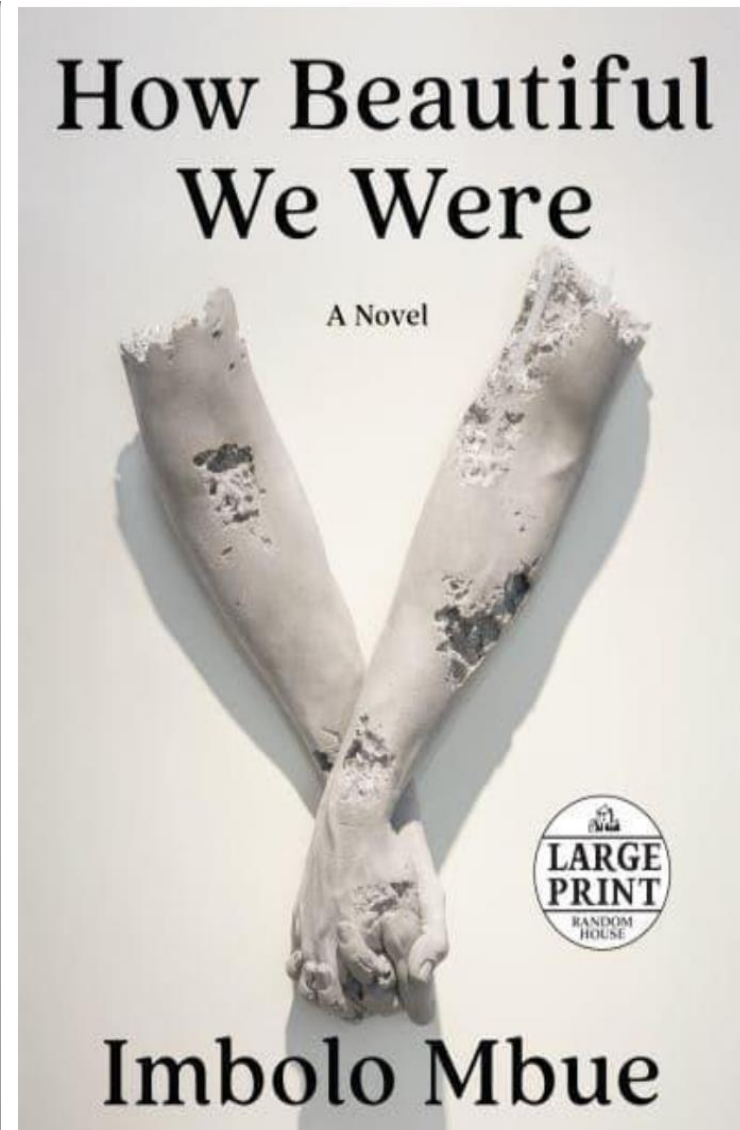




- ❖ **“Violence on the land is violence on our bodies [...]. What happens to the water happens to its relatives” (Michelle Murphy 497).**

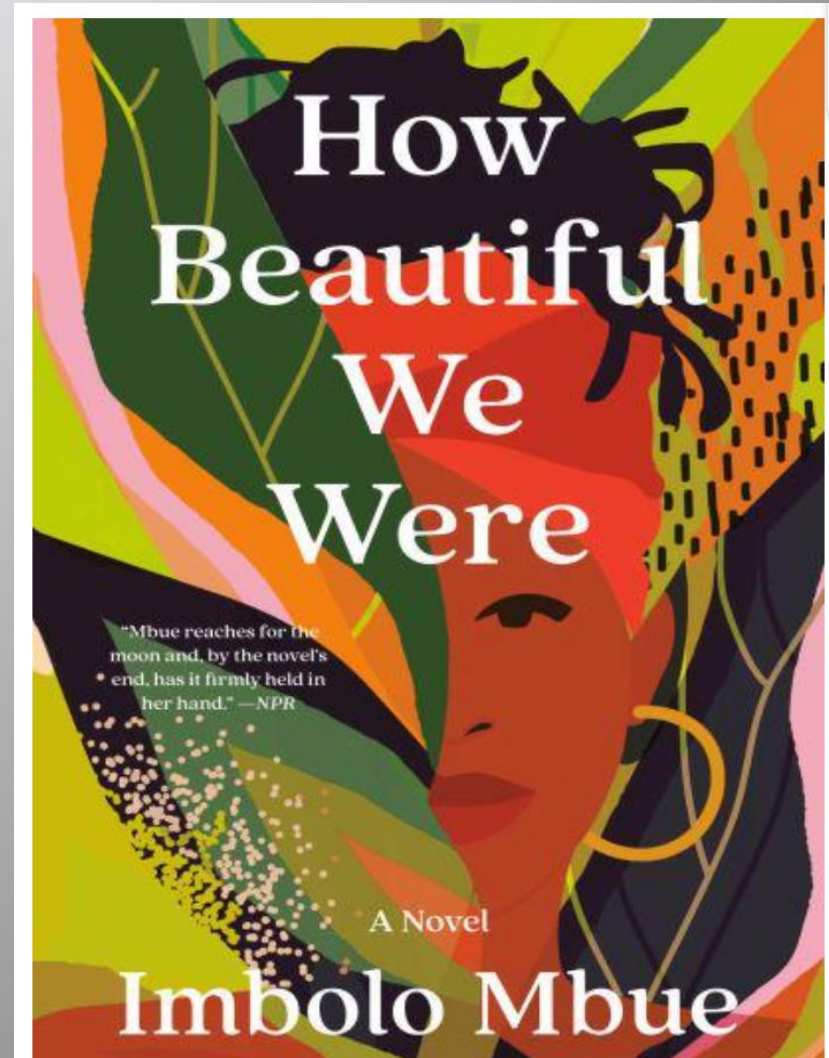
# Focalizing the Text

Published in 2021, Imbolo Mubue's *How Beautiful We Were* succinctly explores the **enduring and escalating presence of colonial structures and their catastrophic damage to the environment** and economic development in the postcolonial community of Kosawa. Pexton, a capitalist and extractivist multinational oil company, establishes its oil drilling base in Kosawa on the artful pretext of bringing development and prosperity to the native people. Pexton's extractivist activities lead to **slow violence** and **ecological trauma** in the Indigenous community. These **eco-systemic changes** engender an Indigenous resistance movement for **environmental justice**, after Pexton's repeated and failed promises of cleaning up the land and financial reparations.



# Research Questions

- ❖ In Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, how do different living beings shape one another in each knowledge system?
- ❖ What strategies of resistance are available to the people of Kosawa in the face of the escalating ecological trauma instigated by Pexton's corporate violence?
- ❖ In what ways do we understand the excruciating pain of other Indigenous communities in the postcolonial worlds of the novel?
- ❖ How does Mbue's text advocate a desire-based thinking for building an alternative world to the legacies of colonialism and capitalism?



# Literature Review

In “Environmental Neocolonialism and the Quest for Social Justice”, Brygida Gasztold argues that the novel’s memories of colonial extractivism emphasize both the importance of resource allocation around resource extraction and their impact on the future of Indigenous communities (195).



# Literature Review Cont'd



Biama et. al. in “A Voice of Resistance and Activism” argue that Mbue uses different resistance approaches to fight against environmental degradation to “foster ecological restoration by advocating for resistance and activism” against ecocide, which, according to them, positions the novelist as one of the voices for the African communities plagued by ecological problems (314).



# Research Methodology

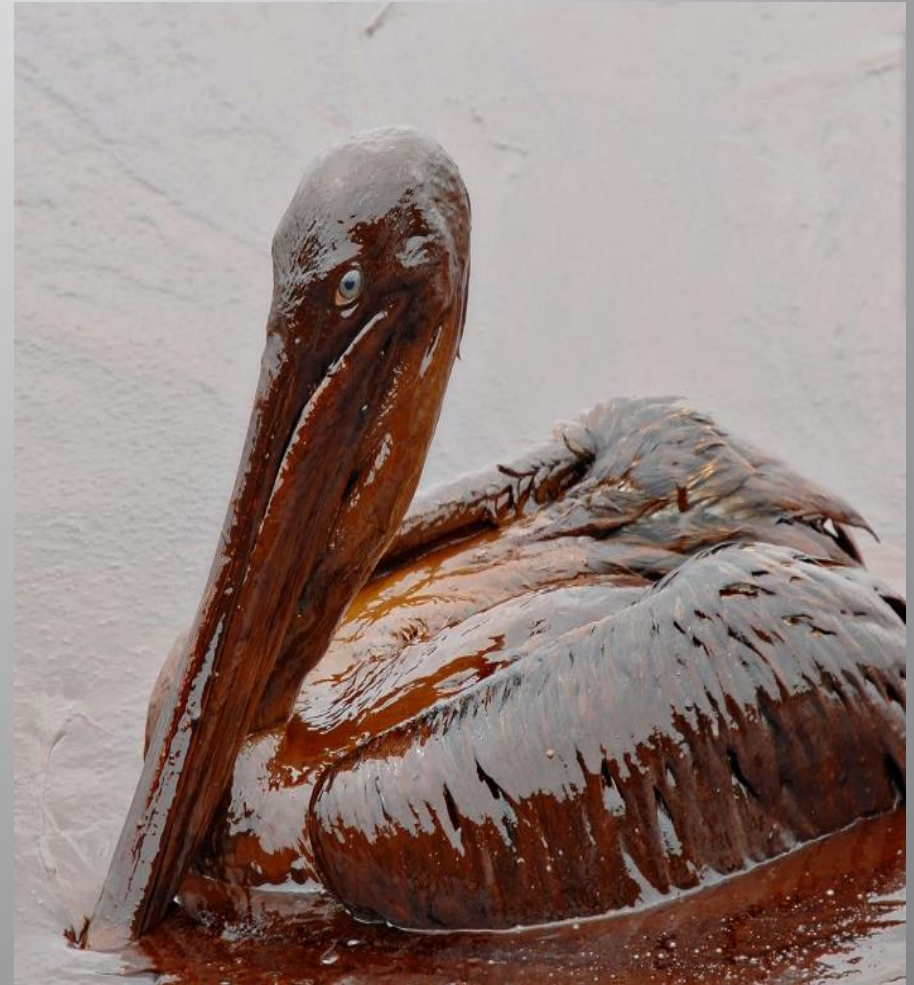
“Postcolonial ecocriticism preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness, its capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world” (Huggan and Tiffin 14). My research draws copiously from postulations of postcolonial ecocritical and decolonial trauma theorists to examine **neocolonial violence** and **ecological trauma** in the text.

# Research Methodology

Irene Visser and other critics have advocated the decolonization of trauma studies to incorporate the different cultural dimensions of trauma and the diversity of narrative expressions because of its Eurocentric approach, since trauma is “an all-inclusive phenomenon” (Cathy Caruth 4). Therefore, I lean on Caruth’s assertion that “repetition fixates the patient to his/her trauma” (282) to demonstrate how the repetition of violence in Kosawa community leads to perpetual reinvestment and fixation on traumatic experiences.

# Research Methodology

In my MRP, I apply Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence to explore how the accumulated toxins of oil spillage on land, water and bodies of children in Kosawa lead to "slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes" (2) that eventually manifest in ecocide.



# Research Methodology

I also mobilize Robert Lifton's proposition that "a ghostly relationship with the past ... results in hauntedness, stasis and entrapment" (124) to describe how the inhabitants of Kosawa are continually entrapped in the fear of dying suddenly, which makes them speculate about the abrupt end of their world because of ecological violence, and how their eternal reviviscence of horror leads to hauntedness throughout the text.

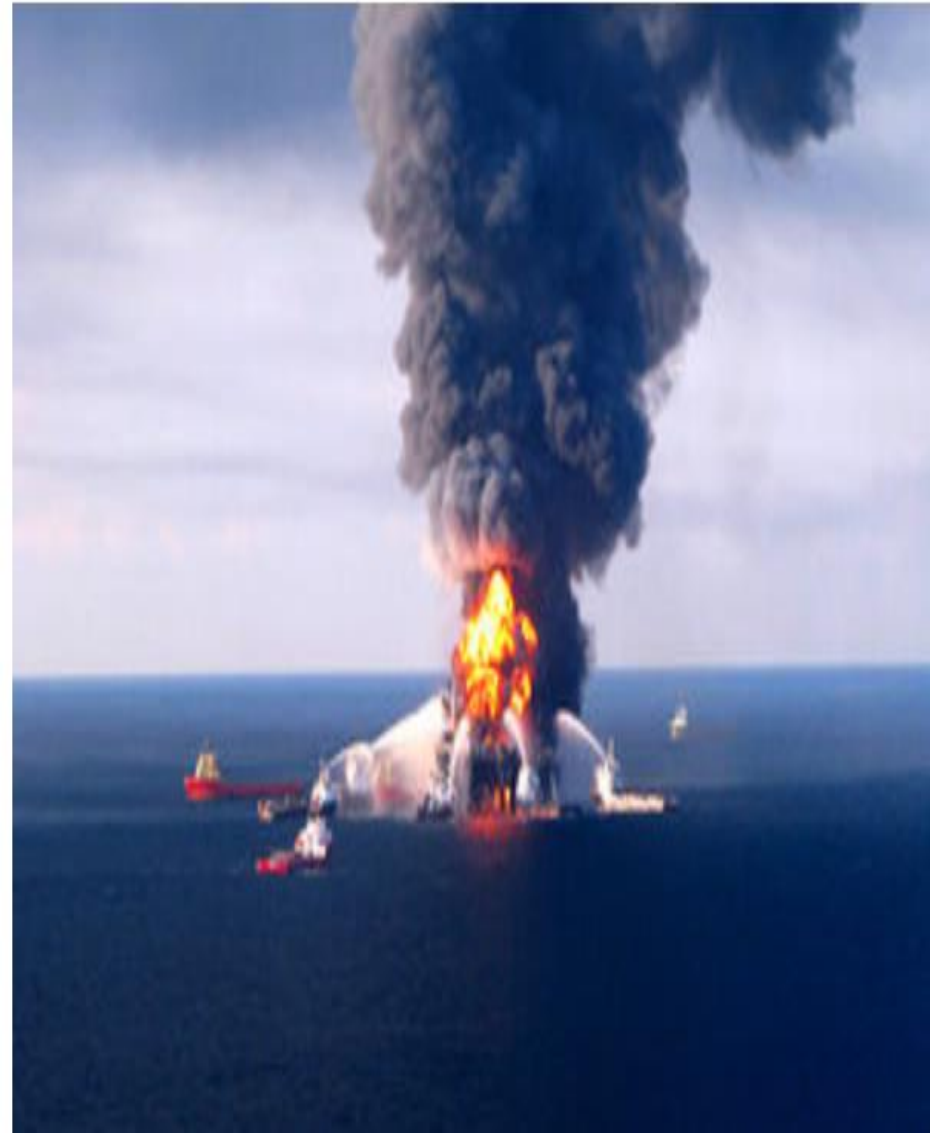
# Research Methodology

I employ Caruth's claim that "history, like trauma, is never one's own... [but] is precisely the way we were implicated by each other's traumas" (24) to investigate how the trauma of Kosawa's flora and fauna resonates with the condition of the members of the textual community.

# Research Methodology

I build on Eve Tuck's assertion that "it is crucial to recognize that our communities hold the power to begin shifting the discourse away from damage and toward desire and complexity" (422) to interrogate how Mbue's novel takes us along the path of desire-based thinking, towards a different way of organising a world that respects the lives of every living being in our environment.

# Moving Forward



My proposed research seeks to draw attention to the long history of systemic violence induced by certain cultures on postcolonial communities; and, therefore, proposes a rethinking of hyper-capitalism and the commodification of other living beings within our ecosystem.

# Moving Forward

Through textual criticism, my study presents a desire-based approach to organising the world through ecological consciousness and the collective protection of our environment, since human subsistence is entangled with the nonhuman *other* in the ecosystem.





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