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Corporeality of Communication: Letters Enacting Embodied Labor, Sacrifice, and Transatlantic Mediation in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*

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Abstract

This critical reflection investigates the profound material and existential dimensions of communication in a postcolonial narrative. It contends that written correspondence particularly as evinced in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), transcends its textual function to become a palpably physical and emotionally charged medium. This study posits that such epistolary exchanges are axiomatically inscribed with human effort, significant personal cost, and the arduous task of bridging vast distances and asymmetrical power relations. While existing studies acknowledge the failures of communication in those contexts, it frequently overlook the significant, corporeal investments inherent in such precarious communicative acts. Therefore, the research problem is that the tangible conditions dictating letter transmission shape the ontological and affective experiences of subaltern communities suffering from global capitalist exploitation. This leads to the following question: How do letters, as physical artifacts and laborious endeavors, enact transatlantic mediation and sculpt the emotional topographies of characters in *How Beautiful We Were*? The purpose of the current work is to examine those intricate material and emotional dynamics, thereby enlightening the resilience forged through such precarious communicative praxis. This work adopts a postcolonial materialist critique, a methodological tool critically relevance to dissect the embodied efforts and socio-economic imprints upon communication. This hermeneutic lens foregrounds the letter as a tangible object, disclosing its embeddedness within exploitative global networks and its capacity to register corporeal suffering and defiant hope, transcending purely discursive analyses. This exegesis is interested in two axes: "Materiality of the Message: Letters as Embodied Labor and Micro-Infrastructures of Hope" and "Epistolary Geographies: Transatlantic Mediation and the Affective Topographies of Distant Communication".

Keywords: Corporeality, Epistolary, Mediation, Postcolonial, Resilience

1. Introduction

The very matrix of human signification is predicated upon an intricate interplay between utterance and inscription, a semiotic ballet that necessarily crosses both phenomenal and noumenal realms.

At its ontological core, communication, irrespective of its medium, is an embodied phenomenon and existential exigency requiring a material expenditure of human endeavor. The transmission of ideations, narratives, or pleas across spatio-temporal disjunctions fundamentally alters the being of both sender and receiver, forging an ephemeral yet potent poetics of presence in absence. This study posits that the very act of conveying meaning, particularly through tangible artifacts, implies a profound corporeal inscription, where the physical act of creation and traversal indelibly marks the message itself. This transforms it into a palpable repository of human aspiration and sacrifice.

This philosophical premise finds its compelling instantiation within Mbue's novel, *How Beautiful We Were* (2021). The narrative, a chronicle of a community's protracted struggle against rapacious extractivist capital and its concomitant environmental despoliation, foregrounds communication as a critical theatre where the stark material conditions of postcolonial existence intersect with the indomitable spirit of resistance. Mbue's intricate portrayal of letter-writing and its reception offers a unique lens that helps to apprehend the profound corporeal dimensions underpinning Kosawa's tenacious quest for justice and survival.

Extant critical studies have commendably illuminated diverse facets of Mbue's compelling narrative. They have thoroughly look into the novel's searing indictment of petro-capitalism and its devastating ecological ramifications (Nixon, 2011; Puar, 2017). Critics have also explored its compelling depiction of communal agency, intergenerational trauma, and the complex ethics of witness in the face of insurmountable odds (Caruth, 1996; Ahmed, 2004; Mbembe, 2017). In addition, the broader discourse on postcolonial literature frequently engages with themes of subaltern voice and the challenges of telling the truth to power in globalized contexts (Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994). Likewise, broader studies on media ecology (Peters, 1999) or the aesthetics of African literature (Newell, 2006) offer tangential insights.

Beyond the above theoretical engagements, other critical studies have directly addressed Mbue's novel, demonstrating its rich capacity for multifaceted interpretation. Recent scholarship, exemplified by Mwaga *et al.* (2024), delves into the dramatization of agency and ecological consciousness in Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, often in dialogue with other contemporary African narratives. Concurrently, Qasim *et al.* (2024) offer a rigorous examination of coloniality and environmental devastation, critically analyzing the intricate mechanisms of exploitation depicted within Mbue's creative art. Further building on this, Dhaba Dechasa *et al.* (2024) undertake a postcolonial ecocritical analysis, aiming to unmask the inherent myths surrounding development in Mbue's fictionalized world. While those contributions incisively scrutinize the novel's socio-ecological critiques and various modes of resistance, they largely preclude a granular analysis of the corporeality of communication, particularly the embodied labor and affective geographies of letter-writing as a unique form of performative resistance. In other words, despite this rich and variegated tapestry of critical engagement, a rigorous hermeneutic focused explicitly on the materiality, embodied labor, and sacrificial economy underpinning the specific epistolary exchanges in *How Beautiful We Were* remains a notably underexplored lacuna.

The current research postulates that the inherent tangibility of written communications, alongside the arduous efforts and significant personal costs expended in their creation and transmission, shape the ontological and affective experiences of subaltern communities. This leads to the ensuing interrogation: How do letters, as physical artifacts imbued with embodied labor and sacrifice, enact transatlantic mediation and sculpt the emotional and psychological landscapes of characters in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*? To answer the preceding question, this work proposes to scrutinize those intricate material, spatial, and emotional dynamics, thereby enlightening the resilience and alternative modes of connectivity forged through such precarious communicative praxis.

To that end, this study adopts a postcolonial materialist critique as a methodological tool. This theoretical disposition is critically relevant for its capacity to move beyond purely textual or discursive analyses, foregrounding the letter as a material object intimately enmeshed within specific socio-economic and political economies. Such a framework is instrumental in showing how the physical constraints and demands associated with communication in marginalized contexts critically influence agency, resistance, and the construction of narrative. By deciphering the materiality of the message, this methodological approach carries out an unparalleled insight into the lived experience of information exchange; it helps to position it not as a symbolic act but as a profoundly embodied engagement with asymmetrical power structures.

To conduct the present critical reflection, two lines of research will be examined: "Materiality of the Message: Letters as Embodied Labor and Micro-Infrastructures of Hope" and "Epistolary Geographies: Transatlantic Mediation and the Affective Topographies of Distant Communication". The former scrutinizes the physical costs, human exertion, and concomitant resilience embedded in the tangible acts of producing and circulating written correspondence. The latter shows how those letters, navigate vast spatial divides, mediating transnational relationships, and thereby sculpting the emotional and psychological terrains of characters who grapple with remote connections.

2. Letters as Embodied Labor and Micro-Infrastructures of Hope

The communicative space of Mbue's novel is shaped by the materiality of its messages; it elevates letters from mere vehicles of textual content to tangible embodiments of arduous labor and crucial micro-infrastructures of hope.

This stage unpacks how written correspondence, in a *milieu* defined by acute deprivation and systemic marginalization, transcends its informational function, registering instead as a profound corporeal undertaking. The labor of producing and transmitting letters inscribes them with human effort and enduring aspiration. Through her first letter to her people in Kosawa, Thula discloses her new experience and duties in the American society:

> I must go back to my room now. The schoolwork here is harder than we had in Lokunja, but it's good for me. In a class I'm taking we're studying one of my uncle's books that I loved, the one called The Wretch of the Earth. I' reading my old copy and finally understanding it, thanks to all the lectures and class discussions. What this man has to say about what people in our situation ought to do, I'm in awe of it – my friends and I spend hours dissecting his ideas. I hope all Kosawa children will one day read this book; it's a whole new way of thinking. Tomorrow a friend is taking me to a meeting. It's in a part of the city called the Village, but my friends say that this Village is nothing like Kosawa. I'm fine with that – to be in a place named for the sort of place I'm from is enough. (Mbue, 2021, 204)

The act of letter-writing within Kosawa's socio-economic strictures is far from a trivial exercise; it is an endeavor steeped in embodied labor. Unlike contexts where communication is facilitated by ubiquitous digital networks or efficient postal systems, every written word in Mbue's narrative represents a conscious, physical exertion. For instance, the very acquisition of writing implements, paper, ink, a functional pen, constitutes a significant hurdle that demands scarce financial resources or the ingenuity of procurement.

The meticulous formation of characters, often by individuals with limited formal literacy or under suboptimal lighting conditions, highlights the focused concentration and manual dexterity involved. This intense physical engagement with the act of writing underscores its profound materiality. Thula's letters dispatched from America, while seemingly mundane to an external observer, carry the accumulated weight of her own daily struggles abroad to acquire stationery, find quiet moments for reflection, and physically commit her thoughts to paper. This active process of inscription aligns directly with N. Katherine Hayles's arguments in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) regarding the materiality of information. Hayles contends that the medium's physical properties critically shape its content and reception, challenging the notion of information as a disembodied flow. For Hayles, information is always embodied, existing within and dependent upon a physical substrate.

In this context, the tangibility of the paper, the ink, and the unique handwriting of the Kosawan letters offers a powerful counterpoint to the disembodied nature of corporate pronouncements from Pexton. Pexton's authority manifests through abstract legal documents, impersonal press releases, and distant, unfeeling *communiqués;* forms of communication that deliberately obscure the human cost of their operations. Those corporate texts are designed to be detached, replicable, and devoid of the messy, physical realities of suffering. They represent information striving for disembodiment, aiming to float free from accountability and lived experience.

Conversely, each letter from Kosawa, or from Thula in America, is an artifact of embodied labor. The smudges, the uneven lines, the very texture of the paper, all bear witness to the physical effort, the specific environmental conditions, and the personal commitment of the writer. Thula's second letter, reporting on her meeting with American people and other citizens from varied horizons, is not just a report; it is a physical testament to her journey, her perseverance, and her continued connection to her people. The ink she used, the paper she found, the time she carved out; those material details infuse the message with an authenticity and a corporeality that disembodied corporate jargon can never achieve. Hayles's framework helps to see those letters not merely as conveyors of words, but as physical extensions of the bodies that produced them, bearing the very imprint of their struggle. This makes the exchange a deeply human act, a tangible assertion of presence against forces that seek to render the villagers, and their suffering, abstract and invisible. In her second letter to her people, Thula reports on the results of her meeting with American people and other citizens from varied horizons:

> Remember that meeting I told you I was going to attend in my last letter? The one in the place called Village? My friend was right, nothing about the place reminded me of Kosawa, but I cannot tell you how much the meeting energized me. The moment I left there began writing this letter in my head, eager to tell you everything I'd witnessed. The people at this meeting were there to talk about what we could do about corporation like Pexton. These people were not like the ones at the Restoration Movement, talking about how we can peacefully bring about change with dialogue, negotiation, common ground, more dialogue. No, these people were angry. One man stood up and spoke of a place many days' travel by car from New York, this place has pipelines too. The pipelines are not spilling like ours, but the people there do not want them crossing their land, they say pipelines are calamity waiting to happen. (Mbue, 2021, 207)

Obviously, the transmission of those messages imbricates them with sacrifice and the exertion of physical bodies. Kosawa lacks any semblance of modern postal infrastructure. Consequently, letters become reliant on informal, precarious networks. Young boys, like the eager messengers, embark on arduous journeys, often on foot, across challenging terrains, through forests, over rivers, and into distant towns, to deliver those vital missives. Their journeys are not exclusively transactional; they are arduous pilgrimages fraught with physical exertion and exposure to the elements, and potential dangers.

Significantly, the arrival of a letter, therefore, is seldom a mundane event; it is a momentous occasion, charged with the acknowledgment of the messenger's expended energy and traversed distance. This unremunerated, often perilous, labor translates into a significant sacrifice of time, physical well-being, and even safety for the community members involved. Such corporeal expenditures elevate the letter's status, imbuing it with a profound value that extends far beyond the sum of its words. It is a tangible offering, a segment of lived reality exchanged for the slim promise of connection or intervention. The textual clues below show the enthusiasm that Kosawa's young people show when they receive Thula's letter:

> What gladness her letter brought us. We could see, even on paper, that America was changing her. She was using more words, allowing us into what was going on behind her eyes. Perhaps being surrounded by friends who were like her in ways we weren't had set her free to talk about things she couldn't in Kosawa. Perhaps living alone had created in her a longing to talk more. Whatever the case, she could no longer be the inscrutable Thula we knew if

> she hoped to survive the life of an outsider. No matter the cost, the time had come for her to let in the world if she hoped to return home with what she sought. (Mbue, 2021, 204-205)

Clearly, these letters, products of such labor and sacrifice, paradoxically function as micro-infrastructures of hope in a world largely devoid of institutional support or formal channels for justice. In the face of overwhelming corporate power and governmental indifference, those informal communication networks become crucial lifelines for Kosawa. Each letter sent, particularly those detailing grievances or appealing for external assistance, is a testament to an enduring belief in the possibility of redress, even when empirical evidence suggests otherwise. They represent a community's tenacious refusal to be silenced, their active construction of an alternative communicative pathway that bypasses the formal, often corrupt, and officialdom. This concept of the letter aligns profoundly with Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* (1977), where social conditions are internalized and manifested through embodied practices. However, rather than merely reflecting individual dispositions, the habitus in this context illuminates how the shared social conditions of oppression in Kosawa foster a collective, deeply ingrained practice of resistance.

The act of writing and sending letters thus becomes a culturally ingrained practice of defiance, a collective habitus of resistance. It is through their shared experiences of environmental devastation and state neglect that the Kosawan villagers collectively develop a disposition to communicate, to articulate their suffering, and to demand justice through epistolary means. This is not simply a series of isolated individual acts but a communal embodiment of a refusal to accept their silenced fate. The very repetition of these arduous communicative efforts, despite frequent failures, reinforces this collective habitus, transforming what might seem like individual acts of desperation into a socially embedded strategy of enduring protest. Their habitus is shaped by the constant struggle, leading to a predisposition for solidarity and for maintaining a communicative lifeline.

Thus, the letters are not only products of communication; they also are active agents in constructing and maintaining a fragile yet potent communal spirit, acting as vital nodes in an emergent, organic network of solidarity and aspiration. They become the tangible manifestations of a shared habitus that binds the community in its struggle, allowing for the persistence of hope and the continuous articulation of their collective narrative against the forces that seek to erase them. Through her letters, Thula expresses her deep loyalty towards her people:

> My welcome in this place has been good, and while I won't stay here a day longer than I need to, I'm glad I'm here now. Every day I learn new things. I don't know how, but I'm convinced this knowledge I'm acquiring will do something for our people. I'll always be one of us. (Mbue, 2021, 204)

Noticeably, the material existence of those letters, however humble, whether crumpled, smudged, or folded, signifies a persistent act of self-assertion, an affirmation of agency in the face of attempted erasure. Their presence in the world, however fleeting, signals a tenacious hold on the belief that their story matters and that their pleas might eventually reach empathetic ears. Each written word becomes a physical trace of their presence, an undeniable testament to their suffering and their unwavering desire for a different future. This process transmutes the physical limitations into a source of unique communicative power, where the struggle to communicate imbues the message with an irreducible authenticity.

Having thus thoroughly explored the tangible efforts and profound sacrifices underpinning the materiality of communication in Kosawa, and how these epistolary acts forge vital micro-infrastructures of hope, the subsequent analysis will pivot to examine the intricate ways in which those letters function as transatlantic mediators, shaping the affective topographies of distant relationships.

3. Transatlantic Mediation and Affective Topographies of Distant Communication

This analytical stage interrogates the epistolary geographies constructed within *How Beautiful We Were*. It elucidated how letters function as highly charged agents of transatlantic mediation and, consequently, sculpt the intricate affective topographies of distant communication.

The novel's narrative substantiates that these written exchanges are far more than informational conduits; they are existential bridges, frequently precarious, that attempt to span immense spatial, cultural, and power-laden divides. To navigate this complex terrain with precision, it is crucial to clarify a number of conceptual terms. Epistolary geographies refer not merely to the literal routes letters travel, but to the symbolic and relational spaces, they forge between geographically disparate individuals and communities. These geographies are maps of connection and disconnection that chart how letters attempt to bring distant worlds into dialogue, thereby delineating new relational landscapes that exist beyond physical proximity. Transatlantic mediation, in this context, specifically denotes the role of those letters as vital channels that attempt to bridge the vast physical and socio-cultural distances between Kosawa, a marginalized African community, and external centers of power and potential assistance, primarily located across the Atlantic in the United States and Europe. This mediation is often fraught, as it involves negotiating vastly different worldviews and power dynamics.

In addition, affective topographies describe the complex, shifting emotional landscapes that are generated and shaped by those distant communications. Just as a physical topography has contours and elevations, an affective topography charts the peaks of hope, the valleys of despair, the plateaus of anxiety, and the shifting currents of disillusionment and longing that manifest when communication occurs across significant geographical, cultural, and power divides. In *How Beautiful We Were*, these conceptual frameworks illuminate how the very act of sending and awaiting letters creates a profound emotional architecture, making the remote struggle of Kosawa palpable across continents.

Letters from Thula, dispatched from the United States, serve as the quintessential transatlantic conduits. This attempted to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable chasm between Kosawa's ecological devastation and the distant metropoles of global capitalism. Those missives carry fragments of news, abstract promises of intervention, and the heavy burden of collective hope across vast oceanic distances. Thula's early correspondence, infused with the idealism of academic pursuits and the belief in the efficacy of external legal frameworks, momentarily instills a fragile optimism in Kosawa. In other words, Thula's letters are full of hope and she urges her people to remain involved:

> I'd long thought that our problem was that we were weak, lack of knowledge our greatest incapacity. My father, my uncle, all those who stood up for Kosawa and lost their lives, I thought they failed because they were unschooled in the ways of the world. I promised myself after the massacre that I would acquire knowledge and turn it into a machete that would destroy all those who treat us like we vermin. I baldly wanted to grow up so that I could protect Kosawa and ensure that children of the future never suffer like we did. Knowledge, I believed would give Kosawa power. (Mbue, 2021, 208)

The physical journey of those letters, from the bustling, technologically advanced American cities to the remote, infrastructure-deficient African village, underscores the profound incongruity between the two worlds they attempt to connect. Such mediation, however, is invariably asymmetrical, revealing a stark geopolitical hierarchy where information flows are dictated by access, power, and privilege.

The act of epistolary exchange within this transnational matrix is inherently imbued with fraught power dynamics and profound disjunction. The formal, often evasive or dismissive, letters received from Pexton or the unresponsive silence from governmental bodies stand in stark contrast to the emotionally charged, urgent pleas emanating from Kosawa. This communicative asymmetry vividly illustrates the difficulty, if not impossibility, of the subaltern voice effectively penetrating and being comprehended by dominant, hegemonic structures. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously posited in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), the mechanisms of power often preclude marginalized subjects from articulating their experiences in a way that is intelligibly received by the centers of authority. This seminal theoretical intervention is profoundly pertinent to the epistolary struggles in *How Beautiful We Were*. Spivak's argument extends beyond mere audibility; it questions the very possibility of the subaltern's voice being authentically represented or even conceived within the dominant discursive and political frameworks. The act of speaking, for the subaltern, is not a simple utterance but is already pre-figured and potentially foreclosed by the hegemonic structures of knowledge and power that determine what constitutes legitimate speech, and who is recognized as a speaking subject.

In Mbue's novel, the Kosawan villagers embody that subaltern predicament with visceral clarity. Their numerous letters, detailing their grievances, their suffering, and their pleas for justice, are desperate attempts to speak to a power structure. Pexton and the distant Bézam's government that consistently demonstrates its hermeneutic opacity to their lived reality. The mechanisms of preclusion operate on multiple levels. Firstly, there is a linguistic and discursive asymmetry: the villagers' communication, rooted in an emotional, embodied narrative of suffering and a moral appeal for justice, exists in a different register than the detached, legalistic, and bureaucratic discourse favored by the corporate and governmental entities. Their urgent, corporealized pleas are simply not in the language that the powerful are equipped or willing to understand, let alone valorize. The emotional weight of a child's death, articulated through a parent's raw grief, lacks the quantifiable metrics or legalistic precision that the centers of authority deem valid.

Secondly, structural and institutional barriers act as formidable filters. Even though the letters physically reach their intended recipients, the very architecture of power ensures they are either ignored, dismissed, or re-categorized in ways that strip them of their original intent and force. They become, as Spivak might suggest, *data points or irritants*, rather than genuine expressions of a legitimate political subject. The novel, *How Beautiful We Were* tragically illustrates this through the persistent non-response to the letters, or the perfunctory, dismissive replies that betray a profound aural void on the part of the powerful. This is not simply a failure to communicate; it is a failure to recognize the humanity of the interlocutor, an act of epistemic violence where the subaltern's truth is rendered unintelligible or irrelevant by a dominant knowledge system that already holds all the answers it deems necessary.

Furthermore, the inherent power imbalance means that even when the subaltern attempts to narrate their suffering, their narrative is always at risk of being co-opted, misrepresented, or silenced by the very act of its reception by the dominant power. The corporate press releases or governmental statements about development or unfortunate incidents actively counter-narrate the villagers' lived experiences, effectively re-writing their story to fit a hegemonic agenda that maintains the *status quo*. Thus, the letters are flung into an unresponsive void, highlighting the tragic irony of their immense physical and emotional labor in the face of a system designed to systematically disempower their voice.

Yet, while Spivak's argument highlights this profound challenge, Mbue's novel also subtly portrays the resilience in the very act of attempting to speak. The letters, in spite of often being unheard by their intended recipients, become a form of counter-archiving for the Kosawan community itself. They function as tangible records of their suffering, their protest, and their enduring spirit. Even though the subaltern is systemically unheard by the colonizer or oppressor, the act of writing and sending becomes an internal reaffirmation of their reality, a refusal to be utterly silenced, and a communal practice of resistance that strengthens their own narrative, even though it remains marginalized from global power centers.

This ongoing effort to communicate, despite its frequent failure to achieve its direct aims, is a testament to the indefatigable human spirit that resists erasure and continues to assert its presence, echoing a complex engagement with Spivak's theory where the performance of speaking retains its significance even in the absence of a willing listener. In other words, the letters

from Kosawa, despite their raw authenticity and the visceral details of suffering, frequently fail to engender the desired intervention. This renders them testimonies to a deep communicative chasm, a chasm reinforced by the indifferent silence of the powerful. This failure is not a plot device; it is a profound philosophical statement on the limitations of formal discourse in confronting systemic injustice. In one of her letters, Thula reveals one aspect of that injustice:

> Austin said he told the Sweet One he would do whatever he could while I was here, but his newspaper job had him traveling all over the country; rarely was he in his apartment, in an area called Brooklyn. (…) I asked him if he'd left our country of his own volition or if he'd been forced to flee. He told me his uncle's death and the massacre still haunted him, but he would have remained in our country given the chance – he loved its people. The decision to leave or stay, though, wasn't his Two weeks after pictures of the massacre appeared in his newspaper in America, soldiers arrived at his door to escort him to the airport. (Mbue, 2021, 210)

Further, the presence or absence of those communications sculpts the affective topographies of the characters. This charts emotional landscapes defined by anticipation, anxiety, and eventual disillusionment. The collective waiting for news from Thula, the fervent interpretation of every arriving word, and the agonizing dread wrought by prolonged silences become palpable emotional experiences that register profoundly on the characters' psyches and bodies. Through the ensuing excerpt, Thula advises her people using violence in their struggle:

> The ancestors of these trampled people in America fought hard and they lost, but what's most important is that they fought. Much as the story of their defeat saddens me, it heartens me also, because I realize that, like them, we're not weak, a ferocious creature gave us its blood. The government and Pexton have left us with no choice but to do what we must in order to be heard. They speak to us in the language of destruction –let's speak to them too, since it's what they understand. Do it, knowing you have my blessings. I only ask that you harm no humans; we'll never become killers like them, because the blood of noble men flows in our veins. I'll send you what money I can to help, and I'll pray the Spirit to watch over you. (Mbue, 2021, 210-214)

This sustained emotional labor, a key component of the corporeality of communication, transmutes geographical distance into a landscape of palpable affect. For characters like the Children, the letters from Thula are a precarious lifeline, embodying hope for the future, yet their cessation or the increasingly grim content becomes a source of acute existential despair. This emotional flux underscores the insidious nature of "slow violence," a concept meticulously articulated by Rob Nixon (2011) in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Nixon defines slow violence as a violence that unfolds gradually and often imperceptibly, dispersed across time and space, typically affecting the poor and marginalized disproportionately and thus escaping the immediate frame of dramatic representation or public outcry. It is a violence of delayed destruction, often non-spectacular and attritional, making it difficult to witness, document, and respond to effectively.

In *How Beautiful We Were*, Pexton's environmental degradation of Kosawa perfectly exemplifies this slow violence. It is not a sudden, cataclysmic event, but a prolonged poisoning: the gradual contamination of water sources, the insidious decay of soil, the creeping illnesses and deaths of children over decades. This lack of a dramatic, singular incident allows Pexton and the government to evade immediate accountability. It is precisely this insidious impact that the letters desperately attempt to articulate, to make its subtle yet devastating effects visible and emotionally resonant across vast geographical and socio-political distances.

The letters become the primary mechanism through which the Kosawans attempt to materialize the immaterial effects of slow violence. They painstakingly document the incremental suffering: the specific illnesses, the names of the deceased children, the increasingly barren fields, the unpotable water. These details, which individually might seem minor or unrelated to an outside observer, cumulatively build a compelling, visceral narrative of systemic destruction. The physical act of committing these lived experiences to paper is an act of counter-documentation, a direct challenge to the undramatic nature of the violence as perceived by the powerful.

Moreover, the letters are crucial for bridging the spatio-temporal gaps inherent to slow violence. The incremental suffering in remote Kosawa needs to be conveyed to distant decision-makers in American boardrooms and the capital's bureaucratic offices. The letters are the conduits that carry the accumulating evidence of suffering, attempting to transform abstract environmental harm into tangible, emotionally charged pleas. They embody the desperate effort to force a crisis narrative onto an unfolding, yet often overlooked, catastrophe. The very act of sending these messages, filled with personal testimonies and intimate details of communal grief, seeks to re-embody the abstract concept of environmental pollution, making the distant, incremental destruction palpable and urgently resonant for the hopefully receiving party.

While these letters are vital attempts to articulate slow violence and demand redress, Nixon's framework also helps to comprehend why they often fail to instigate external action. The inherent characteristics of slow violence; its lack of dramatic immediacy, its dispersed nature, and the socio-economic and political distance of its victims from centers of power, create systemic barriers to a meaningful response. Yet, within the context of the novel, the letters succeed profoundly in registering collective trauma and preserving a historical record. They become a powerful testament to a community's struggle against a form of violence designed to be invisible, ensuring that even if their pleas are unheard by the powerful, their story of suffering and resistance is etched into the very fabric of their communal memory and transmitted through the fragile, yet enduring, materiality of their messages.

Obviously, those epistolary endeavors function as a site of (failed) translation and paradoxical re-inscription. The letters from Kosawa strive to translate their unique, localized suffering, the poisoned river, the dying children, the shattered communal life, into a universalizable language of human rights and justice palatable to Western audiences. This translation is frequently

incomplete, hampered by cultural disparities, linguistic nuances, and the inherent reluctance of global powers to fully apprehend uncomfortable truths. Yet, even in this translational struggle, and despite the repeated failures to elicit direct intervention, the very existence of those letters, their material journey, and their persistence in demanding recognition, ensures a form of re-inscription.

Shortly, those letters contribute to an alternative archive, a counter-history forged in the crucible of suffering and documented through embodied communicative acts. That process, while not immediately successful in achieving justice, fundamentally alters the discursive landscape and imprints Kosawa's narrative onto the global consciousness, however subtly, and asserting its ontological presence against forces that seek its obliteration.

4. Conclusion

This study embarked upon a critical investigation into the material and existential dimensions of communication, specifically through the lens of letters, as enacted in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*. The main objective was to demonstrate how these seemingly inert artifacts, far from being simple conduits of text, function as profoundly embodied phenomena, integral to the very fabric of Kosawa's struggle against corporate environmental devastation. This aimed to account for the intricate interplay between the physical act of communication and the ontological and affective landscapes of a marginalized community.

The journey through this reflection unfolded across two main, yet intricately interwoven, articulations. The first, "Materiality of the Message: Letters as Embodied Labor and Micro-Infrastructures of Hope," established that the creation and transmission of letters within Kosawa's deprived context are invariably steeped in arduous embodied labor and considerable sacrifice. It charted the physical exertion involved in their composition, the precarious journeys of messengers, and the significant allocation of scarce resources for their very existence. This exegesis showed how those letters, despite their individual fragility, collectively form vital micro-infrastructures of hope, functioning as palpable repositories of communal resilience and defiant aspiration. They become, in essence, a lived semiotics of resistance, where the tangible form of the message itself speaks volumes about a community's refusal to be silenced.

The second articulation, "Epistolary Geographies: Transatlantic Mediation and the Affective Topographies of Distant Communication," expanded this materialist understanding to the transnational sphere. It exposed how letters serve as precarious transatlantic mediators, attempting to bridge vast spatial, cultural, and power-laden divides between Kosawa and external spheres, particularly the United States. This point unpicked the inherent asymmetries of such mediation, where the urgent, corporealized pleas from Kosawa often confronted the detached indifference or bureaucratic evasiveness of dominant structures. Crucially, this axis foregrounded how the presence or, more often, the absence or failure, of these distant communications sculpts the affective topographies of the characters. That dynamic landscape of hope, anxiety, disillusionment, and sustained longing underscores the emotional labor inherent in maintaining connections across geographical and power divides. It makes the epistolary space a site of intense emotional experience and, often, unfulfilled expectation.

The cumulative findings of this critical reflection unequivocally demonstrate that letters in Mbue's novel are not inert textual artifacts but dynamic agents within a postcolonial communicative praxis. They epitomize an active, often desperate, attempt to assert agency and narrate a lived reality that is undermined by external forces. The study establishes that the physical act of writing and transmitting those letters transforms them into a counter-archive, a tangible registry of suffering, protest, and enduring spirit that challenges official narratives and erasures. This rigorous engagement with the corporeality of communication enriches the understanding of how marginalized communities, through the physical performance of communication, construct narratives of survival and re-inscribe their presence onto a global consciousness that often seeks to render them invisible.

The postcolonial materialist critique adopted herein proved eminently contributive for this analytical endeavor. By foregrounding the material conditions and embodied practices of communication, this methodology facilitated a nuanced deconstruction of power relations embedded within communicative acts. It helped move beyond purely textual or thematic interpretations. It demonstrated how socio-economic deprivation directly shapes the aesthetics and efficacy of communication, positioning the letter as a crucial site of ontological struggle. The strength of this approach lies in its capacity to delve into the often-overlooked physical burdens and resourcefulness required for epistolary acts in contexts of scarcity, linking them directly to broader themes of agency and resistance.

However, a number of limitations warrant consideration. Certainly, this work provided an in-depth analysis of letters as a primary mode of communication, but a broader engagement with other forms of oral or symbolic communication present in the novel could offer further layers of interpretative richness. This study's rigorous focus on materiality might have inadvertently constrained a more expansive reading of the novel's profound symbolic, spiritual, or purely emotional registers that transcend the physical act of inscription. Furthermore, the focus on a single exemplary text, while allowing for profound depth, necessarily delimits broader comparative claims across varied postcolonial contexts.

Those acknowledged limitations simultaneously open fertile ground for new scholarly perspectives. Future research could extend this materialist framework to decipher the digital semiotics of resistance in contemporary African literature, exploring how emerging online communication platforms either replicate or subvert the corporeal and economic challenges identified in epistolary exchanges. Such an adaptation of the materialist lens would be crucial, investigating whether digital access truly

alleviates the burdens of communication or merely transmutes them into new forms of technological and infrastructural dependency.

Moreover, a comparative study contrasting the affective topographies of intergenerational communication in postcolonial narratives across diverse geographies; Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia, could further illuminate universalities and specificities in the embodied experience of conveying memory and hope. Such inquiries could continue to unravel the complex interplay between the medium, the message, and the enduring human spirit in a world perpetually shaped by contested narratives and uneven flows of information.

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