

From Erasure to Empowerment: Active Cultural Resistance in Recent Indigenous Novels

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Abstract

This article analyzes the role of cultural resistance in three contemporary novels: *The Night Watchman* by Louise Erdrich, *Sharks in the Time of Saviors* by Kawai Strong Washburn, and *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue. The study explores how these authors use storytelling, memory, and indigenous traditions to resist hegemonic narratives and assert marginalized identities. Erdrich's work critiques the U.S. government's Termination policy, emphasizing Native American sovereignty, while Washburn explores the commodification of Hawaiian culture within capitalist structures. Mbue's novel portrays a fictional African village resisting ecological and cultural destruction caused by a corporate oil company. Drawing on postcolonial and indigenous studies – particularly the works of Gerald Vizenor, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Homi K. Bhabha, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o etc. – the essay examines the theoretical underpinnings of cultural resistance, highlighting the transformative power of literature in challenging systemic oppression. Central to the novels is the role of indigenous storytelling as both a method of preserving cultural heritage and a form of defiance against cultural erasure. Through these works, the essay emphasizes the importance of cultural memory, environmental justice, and the significant role of women in resisting colonial and capitalist exploitation.

Keywords: Cultural Resistance, Indigenous Literature, Environmental Justice, Narrative Resistance

We should have known the end was near. (Mbue 2021, 1)

Introduction

In the 21st century, literature has increasingly become a pivotal medium for exploring cultural resistance, especially in the contexts of postcolonial and indigenous studies. Herein, cultural resistance refers to the strategies marginalized communities use to challenge hegemonic narratives, asserting their identities and cultural values against dominant forces (Rai et al. 2023, 41–50). Through storytelling, literature offers a powerful platform to

articulate counter-hegemonic discourses and reclaim cultural heritage, making it an essential means in the fight for cultural sovereignty. This essay explores the dynamics of cultural resistance in three contemporary novels—*The Night Watchman* by Louise Erdrich (2020), *Sharks in the Time of Saviors* by Kawai Strong Washburn (2020), and *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue (2021)—published after 2020. These novels employ storytelling, memory, and indigenous traditions to destabilize dominant ideologies and envision alternative futures, highlighting the power of narrative in reclaiming space for marginalized voices. *The Night Watchman*, inspired

by Erdrich's grandfather, Patrick Gourneau, tells the story of Thomas Wazhashk, a Chippewa council member who leads his community's resistance against the U.S. government's Termination policy in the 1950s. The novel intertwines personal and collective histories, emphasizing the resilience of Indigenous communities in the face of systemic erasure. *Sharks in the Time of Saviors* by Kawai Strong Washburn blends Hawaiian mythology with contemporary struggles, following a Native Hawaiian family grappling with economic exploitation and cultural commodification. The novel critiques neoliberal ideologies while celebrating the enduring power of indigenous spirituality and storytelling. Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* portrays the fictional African village of Kosawa as it resists environmental destruction caused by an American oil company. The novel highlights the interconnectedness of ecological and cultural survival, drawing parallels to real-world struggles against neocolonial exploitation. Together, these works illustrate how literature can serve as a site of resistance, reclaiming agency for marginalized communities and challenging dominant narratives.

The concept of cultural resistance has undergone significant theoretical development, shaped by multiple scholarly contributions across postcolonial, indigenous, and cultural studies. At the heart of this discourse is Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance, which merges survival with defiance in response to cultural erasure. Vizenor's theorization highlights the agency of Indigenous communities in maintaining their cultural presence, reframing resistance as an active process of self-definition rather than mere opposition to dominant narratives (Vizenor 2008, 11). His framework is particularly relevant in literary studies, where indigenous narratives function as acts of survivance, resisting the homogenizing pressures of colonial and neocolonial discourses. Complementing Vizenor's framework, poststructuralist theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe provide an additional lens through which to examine the fluidity of cultural resistance. Their emphasis on the instability of hegemonic meanings and the ongoing potential for re-articulation within what they term the field of discursivity (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 113) illustrates how literature serves as a site of ideological contestation. Through language and narrative structures, literary texts do not merely challenge dominant ideologies but actively reshape the discursive landscape, creating new possibilities for marginalized identities to be expressed and understood. This perspective aligns with the broader postcolonial critique of essentialized cultural categories, situating literature as a dynamic field of resistance.

The theoretical grounding of this discussion also draws from foundational postcolonial and indigenous studies, particularly through the contributions of Homi K. Bhabha and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity provides an essential framework for understanding how marginalized identities navigate the spaces between cultures. His notion of the third space

(Bhabha 1994, 54) suggests that cultural resistance is not simply oppositional but rather generative, allowing for the emergence of new hybrid identities that disrupt binary colonial narratives. This theory is particularly relevant when analyzing protagonists who resist assimilation while rearticulating their identities through narrative and linguistic innovation. Furthermore, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o deepens this analysis by emphasizing the role of language in cultural resistance. His critique of linguistic imperialism and advocacy for the use of indigenous languages in literary production (Thiong'o 1986, 11, 16) highlight the ways in which language itself becomes a battleground for cultural sovereignty. The significance of language in resistance is a central theme in the works of both Washburn and Erdrich, where linguistic choices function as acts of defiance against cultural erasure. By privileging indigenous languages and storytelling traditions, these authors not only challenge colonial narratives but also reaffirm cultural continuity and resilience.

Recent scholarship has further expanded the scope of cultural resistance within literary studies, particularly through the lens of media, language, and indigenous epistemologies. Stuart Hall's foundational work on cultural studies elucidates how marginalized communities utilize cultural practices as a means of countering hegemonic power structures. Hall's analysis of media and representation underscores the role of cultural texts in resisting ideological domination (Hall 2001, 7). His work has been instrumental in contemporary explorations of digital platforms, where historically silenced voices find new avenues for articulation and resistance. Similarly, Linda Tuhiwai Smith's scholarship foregrounds the critical role of indigenous knowledge systems and storytelling in decolonial resistance. Smith argues that reclaiming indigenous narratives is not only a political act but also a methodological imperative, as it challenges the epistemic foundations of colonial discourse (Smith 2012, 61). Her work underscores the intersection of ecological and cultural concerns, emphasizing that indigenous resistance is often intertwined with environmental struggles—an idea that deeply corresponds to the themes explored in the literary texts under study.

In addition to these theoretical perspectives, the essay integrates insights from recent interdisciplinary studies. For example, Sadhana Naithani examines the role of storytelling in resistance movements, emphasizing its potential to disrupt colonial narratives (Naithani 2010, 1–10). The convergence of literature, ecology, and cultural resistance is another significant dimension of this analysis. Stacy Alaimo introduces the concept of trans-corporeality, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and environmental systems (Alaimo 2010, 61–84). Similarly, Jason Moore critiques the ecological consequences of capitalist expansion, providing a theoretical backdrop for analyzing Washburn's narrative (Moore 2015, 169–175). Recent research further enriches this analysis by shedding light on the dynamic strategies employed by Native American writers to reclaim cultural identity

and resist colonial narratives. In this regard, Kelsey's research provides an in-depth exploration of Indigenous storytelling as a powerful means of community resistance and cultural survival. Significantly, Kelsey highlights how Native American authors use fiction to challenge dominant cultural paradigms, fostering a sense of sovereignty and resilience. The analysis illuminates the narrative techniques authors like Louise Erdrich use to intertwine personal and collective histories, emphasizing the role of storytelling in preserving Indigenous identity and heritage (Kelsey 2009, 198–199). Moreover, Sheila Hassell Hughes investigates the interplay of language and power within Erdrich's works. Hughes highlights how Erdrich's storytelling subverts traditional rhetoric, creating spaces where marginalized voices assert their agency and redefine relationships of power (Hassell Hughes 2021, 50). Together, these scholarly contributions underscore the significance of narrative as both a literary and a cultural tool in Indigenous resistance.

The selected novels engage deeply with contemporary issues such as environmental justice, economic exploitation, and cultural commodification. By situating the analysis within this rich theoretical and critical context, the research aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on cultural resistance in contemporary literature. The selected novels not only reflect the enduring relevance of resistance strategies but also illuminate the transformative power of storytelling in challenging systemic oppression and imagining alternative futures. As Leanne Simpson aptly states, "We experience stories as theories and locate our theoretical roots in a storied world. We know we are not alone. We are drawn into stories" (Simpson 2017, 44). Through the lens of cultural resistance, this research seeks to uncover the multifaceted ways in which literature reclaims agency, disrupts hegemonic discourses, and rearticulates marginalized identities in the face of global challenges.

Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman*: Reclaiming Sovereignty

Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* dramatizes the resistance of Native American communities to the U.S. government's Termination policy of the 1950s, a policy designed to dissolve tribal sovereignty and assimilate Native Americans into mainstream American society. The novel, inspired by the life of Erdrich's grandfather, Patrick Gourneau, who served as the tribal chairman of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, provides a poignant exploration of the political, communal, and personal dimensions of resistance. By interweaving historical and fictional elements, Erdrich presents a significant narrative that foregrounds sovereignty, resilience, and identity as central themes in the struggle against colonial policies (Eppeley et al. 2023, 206–216). The novel not only serves as a historical account of the Termination era but also as a literary intervention that challenges the erasure of Indigenous voices and histories. Erdrich's narrative is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of

Native communities, offering a counter-history that resists the dominant narratives of progress and assimilation propagated by the federal government.

The Termination policy, framed as a progressive initiative, is unmasked in the novel as a deeply flawed mechanism of systemic erasure. Through the protagonist, Thomas Wazhashk, Erdrich critiques the federal government's rhetoric of assimilation and exposes its inherent contradictions: "in the newspapers, the author of the proposal had constructed a cloud of lofty words around this bill—emancipation, freedom, equality, success—that disguised its truth: termination. Termination. Missing only the prefix. The ex." (Erdrich 2020, 82). This critique underscores the enduring significance of treaty rights and the moral failures of Termination. The novel juxtaposes federal policies with the lived realities of Native communities, which are often marked by systemic poverty, cultural disenfranchisement, and collective trauma. In other words, it can be emphasized that the historical impact of colonial policies on Indigenous communities, particularly regarding intergenerational trauma, stems from systemic oppression and marginalization (Heid et al. 2022, 115). Erdrich's portrayal of the Turtle Mountain Band's struggle against Termination is not merely a critique of a specific policy but a broader indictment of the colonial logic that underpins U.S. federal Indian policy. By highlighting the gap – or the faultline – between the government's rhetoric of progress and the material conditions of Native communities, Erdrich exposes the paternalism and hypocrisy inherent in the Termination agenda.

Alan Sinfield's concept of faultlines is particularly evident in Erdrich's exploration of the ideological fissures within the dominant discourse (Sinfield 1992, 47). The Termination policy, while couched in the language of progress, is undermined by the socioeconomic conditions it perpetuates. These faultlines are illuminated through Thomas' observations on the disparity between federal promises and lived realities, creating space for counter-narratives to emerge. For instance, the systemic disenfranchisement faced by the Turtle Mountain Band starkly contrasts with the U.S. government's assurances of assimilation as a path to opportunity. Herein, the ideological dissonance exposes the paternalism inherent in the policy and reveals its primary aim as cultural erasure rather than empowerment (Ryan et al. 1982, 427). Erdrich's narrative strategy of juxtaposing federal rhetoric with the lived experiences of Native communities serves to destabilize the dominant discourse and create space for alternative narratives. These counter-narratives, rooted in the perspectives and voices of Indigenous characters, challenge the legitimacy of federal policies and assert the sovereignty and agency of Native peoples. Through this approach, Erdrich not only critiques the Termination policy but also reclaims the narrative authority that has historically been denied to Indigenous communities.

Erdrich's use of storytelling functions as both a method of resistance and a re-articulation of cultural values. The

novel blends personal anecdotes, communal histories, and traditional Ojibwe narratives to construct a counter-discourse that resists the erasure of Native identity. As Vizenor states, “survivance stories may begin within an indigenous narrative tradition, but they do not stop at cultural barriers proclaimed by the guardians of narrative authenticity,” emphasizing the dynamic presence of Indigenous cultures as a form of resistance (Vizenor 2008, 211). For example, Pixie Paranteau’s reflection on the traditional story of Nanabozho, the Ojibwe trickster figure, highlights the enduring relevance of oral traditions. By embedding these narratives within the broader resistance to Termination, Erdrich illustrates how storytelling not only preserves cultural identity but also serves as a roadmap for collective resilience. The novel’s emphasis on storytelling as a form of resistance is particularly significant in the context of Indigenous literatures, where oral traditions have long been a means of preserving cultural knowledge and resisting colonial erasure: “Lastly, if you should ever doubt that a series of dry words in a government document can shatter spirits and demolish lives, let this book erase that doubt. Conversely, if you should be of the conviction that we are powerless to change those dry words, let this book give you heart” (Erdrich 2020, 372). Through its incorporation of traditional stories and communal histories, *The Night Watchman* asserts the vitality and relevance of Indigenous cultures in the face of ongoing colonial pressures.

The critique of assimilation extends to institutional mechanisms such as boarding schools, which sought to sever Native children from their heritage: “watching the night sky, he was Thomas who had learned about the stars in boarding school. He was also Wazhashk who had learned about the stars from his grandfather, the original Wazhashk” (Erdrich 2020, 24). The interrogation of cultural dislocation echoes Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who emphasizes the role of language and culture in resisting colonial domination. Similarly, boarding schools in the novel are depicted as means of cultural genocide, designed to strip Native children of their identity and alienate them from their communities (Feir et al. 2016, 450). Erdrich’s portrayal of the boarding school system is a powerful indictment of the colonial project, highlighting the devastating effects of cultural erasure on individuals and communities. Through Patrice’s story, the novel emphasizes the resilience of Native women who navigate and resist the intersecting oppressions of gender, race, and class. Patrice’s determination to find her sister and protect her family is emblematic of the broader struggle for survival and self-determination that characterizes Indigenous resistance. Significantly, Native women often draw strength from their cultural heritage and community ties, which serve as protective factors against the adversities they face (Fetter et al. 2023, 490–491).

Erdrich’s narrative intricately weaves the interconnected struggles of women within systemic oppressions, particularly through the character of Patrice. Her resilience against economic and social pressures

exemplifies the multifaceted nature of resistance among Indigenous women. As Erdrich writes, “There were times when Patrice felt like she was stretched across a frame, like a skin tent. She tried to forget that she could easily blow away. Or how easily her father could wreck them all. This feeling of being the only barrier between her family and disaster wasn’t new, but they had come so far since she started work” (Erdrich 2020, 27). This portrayal challenges traditional narratives that often marginalize women’s contributions to the resistance movement, emphasizing their vital roles in familial and community survival (Murphy-Oikonen et al. 2021, 1237–1258). The novel not only critiques the political dimensions of policies like Termination but also highlights the intersectionality of gender and familial bonds in Indigenous resistance. Characters such as Wood Mountain and Vera further illustrate how women navigate and resist the oppressive forces of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism (Ramírez et al. 2023, 937–964). By centering women’s experiences, Erdrich celebrates their agency and creativity, reinforcing the notion that Indigenous women’s narratives are central to understanding the broader struggle against systemic oppression. The interconnected struggles faced by characters like Patrice highlight the multifaceted nature of resistance, intertwining themes of gender, family, and cultural survival (Akter et al. 2018, 343–353). The narrative reclamation not only critiques the historical injustices of colonialism but also celebrates the strength and creativity inherent in Indigenous cultures, positioning the novel as both a historical account and a literary intervention.

In addition to its focus on cultural resistance, Louise Erdrich’s *The Night Watchman* addresses the profound interconnectedness of sovereignty and environmental stewardship. The novel underscores the Turtle Mountain community’s reliance on the land and their unwavering determination to protect it from exploitation. Accordingly, as Simpson also believes, land is not just territory; it is a relationship (Simpson 2017, 45). By emphasizing the relational view of land, Erdrich reveals how ecological and cultural survival is inextricably linked for Indigenous communities. Thomas Wazhashk’s leadership embodies this ethos, as he tirelessly advocates for policies that honor both cultural and ecological sustainability. His actions reflect a holistic approach to sovereignty that integrates environmental protection into the fight for self-determination. As Erdrich describes, “This was the time of year he and Rose had first met. Now Thomas stood on the slab of concrete beyond the circle of the outdoor flood lamp. Looked up into the cloudless sky and cold overlay of stars. Watching the night sky, he was Thomas who had learned about the stars in boarding school. He was also Wazhashk who had learned about the stars from his grandfather, the original Wazhashk” (Erdrich 2020, 24). This moment captures the way Thomas sees the world through both a colonial and Indigenous lens, embodying a philosophy of stewardship passed down through generations. Moreover, the centrality of land to Indigenous identity and sovereignty is both a cultural imperative and

a political act of resistance. In Indigenous epistemologies, land transcends physical geography, embodying ancestral memory, spiritual interconnectedness, and communal belonging: “I can talk English, dig potatoes, take money into my hand, buy a car, but even if my skin was white it wouldn’t make me white. And I don’t want to give up our scrap of home. I love my home.” (Erdrich 2020, 178). Louise Erdrich’s *The Night Watchman* illustrates this through Thomas Wazhushk’s defense of his “scrap of home,” a stance that mirrors real-world struggles against termination policies aimed at severing Indigenous ties to territory. By framing land retention as a defense of knowledge systems, Erdrich’s narrative exposes the intersection of environmental exploitation and cultural erasure, positioning land sovereignty as inseparable from cultural and epistemic survival.

Erdrich’s portrayal of female characters further enriches the narrative of resistance by emphasizing their resilience and agency. Patrice Paranteau exemplifies this complexity as she navigates the intersecting challenges of poverty, sexism, and cultural assimilation. Her determined efforts to locate her missing sister, Vera, and her unwavering commitment to supporting her family highlight the critical role of women in sustaining and advancing communal resistance. Moreover, it can be stated that Erdrich’s fiction often centers on women as custodians of memory and agents of change (Hassel Hughes 2021, 57). By situating women at the forefront of resistance, Erdrich challenges patriarchal narratives and highlights the intersectional nature of Indigenous struggles for sovereignty: “What did you all do in the beginning? To keep the land? It was sign or die. How did you keep the last of it? First they gave us this scrap, then they tried to push us off this scrap. Then they took away most of the scrap. Now, what you are saying is they want to push us off the edge of the scrap” (Erdrich 2020, 104). The novel’s depiction of gender dynamics accords with broader feminist critiques of colonialism, signifying the intersections of Indigenous feminism, land rights, and environmental activism and emphasizing the critical role of women in these interconnected struggles (Goeman 2020, 45-60).

The novel’s critique of environmental and gender issues reflects Indigenous epistemologies and the Anthropocene, emphasizing the importance of relational ethics in addressing ecological crises. As it is evident in Patrice’s quiet moment with the sacred fire: “The sacred fire had been burning ever since her father had been found. She walked out to the fire holding a tin mug of her mother’s tea. She offered a few drops to the fire” (Erdrich 2020, 268). Significantly, Indigenous philosophies offer frameworks that challenge extractive economies and promote sustainability through community rights over natural resources (Whyte 2018, 127-128). *The Night Watchman* portrays the significant role of Indigenous women in environmental justice, illustrating how their leadership fosters resilience against colonial narratives and supports ecological stewardship (Doenmez et al. 2022, 6). The intersection of sovereignty, environmental advocacy, and

feminist agency creates a counter-discourse that not only resists colonial frameworks but also reclaims Indigenous identities and histories (Robertson 2023, 62-63). The multifaceted storytelling in *The Night Watchman* serves as a powerful medium for articulating these complex relationships. Through its blend of personal anecdotes, communal histories, and traditional Ojibwe narratives, the novel highlights the transformative potential of Indigenous resistance in contemporary contexts. For example, the recurring motif of the night sky—where Thomas Wazhashk reflects on the stars he learned about both in boarding school and from his grandfather – symbolizes the tension between colonial assimilation and Indigenous knowledge systems. This duality signifies the novel’s broader critique of cultural dislocation while affirming the enduring strength of Indigenous traditions. By weaving together these themes, Erdrich not only critiques the environmental and gendered impacts of colonialism but also envisions alternative futures grounded in relational ethics and Indigenous sovereignty.

Cultural Resistance, Mythology, and Economic Exploitation in Washburn’s *Sharks in the Time of Saviors*

Washburn’s *Sharks in the Time of Saviors* masterfully examines the intersection of mythology, family dynamics, and economic exploitation in contemporary Hawaii, offering a poignant critique of the systemic pressures that threaten indigenous Hawaiian identity. The Flores family’s experiences symbolize the tension between the preservation of cultural heritage and the capitalist structures that commodify it. Beyond its portrayal of a single family, the novel functions as an allegory for the disintegration and reclamation of cultural identity, highlighting the resilience of indigenous communities in the face of systemic erasure.

The protagonist, Nainoa, becomes the embodiment of this struggle, channeling ancestral powers linked to Hawaiian mythology to navigate the challenges of modernity. His healing abilities symbolize a re-territorialization of indigenous spirituality, a concept drawn from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theoretical framework. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) define *re-territorialization* as the process of reclaiming or redefining spaces, identities, or practices that have been disrupted or appropriated by external forces, such as colonialism or capitalism (311–312). Nainoa’s gift, deeply rooted in cultural and spiritual traditions, resists the capitalist logic that seeks to monetize identity and nature. His mother’s lament, “take you, my son. You are not a god, but there is something that moves through you that may be one. Does it revive what came before, or build something new? I can’t say” (Washburn 2020, 159), encapsulates the disconnection imposed by colonial and capitalist systems. Moreover, the tension between ancestral heritage and contemporary exploitation critiques capitalism’s encroachment on cultural and spiritual domains as an erasure of local narratives and

relational ontologies. The novel portrays money as a force that disrupts traditional values, as reflected in the following quotation: “Take money... my grandmother’s grandmother’s grandmother, Kānaka Maoli that she was, had no use for paper printed with the silhouette of some faraway haole man... But ships from far ports carried a new god in their bellies... And money was the name of that god, and it was the sort of god that preyed on you, made demands and laid its hands on you with such force as to make the Old Testament piss its pants” (Washburn 2020, 158). Here, Washburn critiques the way capitalist forces have supplanted indigenous epistemologies, turning money into a dominant deity that disrupts spiritual balance.

Washburn further explores the emotional and cultural dimensions of this tension through Nainoa’s struggle to reconcile his powers with his family’s expectations. His healing acts as a vessel for cultural reclamation, reconnecting his community to their land and heritage. This dynamic mirrors the theories of Jason Moore, who critiques capitalist systems for severing communities from their ecological lifelines (Moore 2015, 158). Washburn’s integration of Hawaiian mythology functions as a counter-discourse to colonialist and capitalist ideologies, offering an alternative epistemological framework. The shark deity that protects Nainoa exemplifies the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world, challenging anthropocentric views that commodify nature as a resource. This is powerfully illustrated in the moment when Nainoa is saved by sharks (Washburn 2020, 20-21). Rather than presenting sharks as mere predators, Washburn positions them as spiritual guardians, reinforcing an indigenous worldview that sees nature as an active and relational force. Moreover, the novel’s use of oral tradition is particularly significant in reinforcing cultural memory as a means of resistance. The stories of the shark deity and other ancestral figures are intricately woven into the Flores family’s experiences, illustrating the power of storytelling to challenge colonial hegemonies. As Nainoa experiences his spiritual connection to the sharks, he recalls, “I reach a hand out, the circle closes just enough that I can touch each one as they pass... everything blending into the other, it all flows into me and I flow into it” (Washburn 2020, 156), demonstrating the novel’s emphasis on the interconnectedness of identity, land, and mythology—elements that are central to indigenous Hawaiian epistemologies.

The exploration of economic migration and cultural dislocation further enriches the novel’s critique of systemic pressures. The Flores family’s move from rural Hawaii to the mainland mirrors broader patterns of displacement experienced by indigenous communities under globalization: “we have never been the same as we were when we left this place on those engines to go out across the water to O’ahu with its concrete and its people all of them too many” (Washburn 2020, 323), signifying that the fractured identities persist amidst efforts to sustain cultural continuity (Gilroy 1993, 165). Cultural memory

plays a crucial role in these communities’ resistance strategies, allowing them to maintain their identities and traditions despite external pressures. For instance, urban Indigenous populations utilize historical memory in various aspects of life, including work and spirituality, to assert their cultural identity and resist assimilation (Feldmann & Guzzo 2023, 325-344). Accordingly, cultural continuity is vital for fostering resilience against the challenges posed by capitalist structures, as it draws upon traditional knowledge and practices (Teufel-Shone et al. 2016, 274-281).

Washburn’s *Sharks in the Time of Saviors* portrays the multifaceted struggles of the Flores family, offering a poignant examination of intergenerational trauma as it intertwines with the broader history of colonialism and cultural erosion in Hawaii. The trauma, as it is witnessed, shaped by systemic inequities and cultural dislocation, is a collective experience that influences both personal identity and familial relationships. As Nainoa’s mother reflects, “The kingdom of Hawai’i had long been broken—the breathing rain forests and singing green reefs crushed under the haole fists of beach resorts and skyscrapers” (Washburn 2020, 9). The narrative highlights how historical injustices continue to manifest in contemporary indigenous communities. As Brave Heart and DeBruyn have emphasized that historical trauma leaves unresolved grief, perpetuating cycles of loss across generations (Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998, 69). Within the Flores family, this is evident in the tensions surrounding Nainoa’s spiritual gifts, which carry the weight of his family’s expectations and the community’s cultural heritage. His mother recalls, “You shouldn’t—the man started. He raised his palms, still shaking. “You didn’t stop nothing, see? It’s still coming” (Washburn 2020, 41), suggesting that past wounds remain unresolved. The tension underscores the dual pressure placed on indigenous youth to preserve tradition while adapting to modernity: Nainoa himself struggles with his role, he reflects, “I’m trying to figure that out. I think I’m supposed to fix it. That’s what all this is for” (Washburn 2020, 36).

Another significant theme in the novel is the role of women in sustaining cultural resilience. Malia, Nainoa’s mother, exemplifies the strength and adaptability of Hawaiian matriarchs, serving as both a nurturer and a custodian of cultural memory. As she reflects, “If a god is a thing that has absolute power over us, then in this world there are many. There are gods that we choose and gods that we can’t avoid; there are gods that we pray to and gods that prey on us” (Washburn 2020, 158). This perspective stresses how indigenous women navigate the burdens of colonial displacement while preserving family values and traditions. Malia’s reflections on survival highlight the deep emotional toll of historical injustices, yet also affirm the enduring strength of cultural bonds. She laments, “Sometimes I believe none of this would have happened if we’d stayed on the Big Island, where the gods are still alive” (Washburn 2020, 62). This portrayal mirrors Collins’ intersectional critique which emphasizes the

resilience of marginalized women in resisting oppression (Collins 2000, 267). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that Burman also explores how indigenous women act as cultural custodians, especially in the face of environmental displacement, reinforcing the transformative power of matriarchal leadership in maintaining collective identity (Burman 2011, 80). Similarly, Washburn demonstrates the importance of indigenous feminist frameworks in addressing both the erasure of native traditions and the creation of futures rooted in sovereignty and self-determination.

The novel also explores the profound relationship between environmental justice and cultural survival, framing the Flores family's connection to the land and sea as a vital element of their identity. Nainoa's spiritual powers, deeply rooted in his bond with the ocean, symbolize a reconnection with nature that defies the exploitative logic of capitalist resource extraction: "Kalo feeding from the waste of fish feeding from the plants, and on and on: a cycle... It's everything at once, the whole system feeding itself without intervention" (Washburn 2020, 312), illustrating the indigenous ecological philosophy which stands in stark contrast to capitalist-driven environmental destruction. The novel reflects economic precarity when Malia acknowledges their declining financial stability, stating, "Our dinners got simpler, never mind the food pyramid" (Washburn 2020, 15). The economic hardship faced by the Flores family parallels the broader reality of environmental degradation, where traditional food systems are disrupted, and indigenous people are left dependent on external economic structures that often prioritize profit over sustainability. Additionally, the novel emphasizes the importance of storytelling in fostering a deeper connection to nature. Stories act as means of resistance and reclamation, preserving indigenous epistemologies that counter the erasure of traditional environmental relationships. Nainoa's connection to the sea is not merely physical but deeply spiritual and ancestral: "There's something here... I can feel it. Something big" (Washburn 2020, 154). This echoes indigenous beliefs that land and water are not just geographical features but living entities with memory and agency. Through its exploration of environmental justice, cultural survival, and the resilience of indigenous epistemologies, the novel underscores the interconnectedness of land, identity, and resistance in the face of capitalist exploitation. Ultimately, it calls for a reimagining of humanity's relationship with nature, rooted in reciprocity and reverence, as a path toward healing and sustainability.

Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*: Resistance through Community Memory

Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* masterfully examines the intertwined struggles of environmental justice and cultural survival through the fictional African village of Kosawa's resistance against environmental destruction caused by an American oil company. At its heart, the novel portrays the devastating effects of

ecological degradation on marginalized communities, as well as the resilience and determination required to preserve land, identity, and generational memory in the face of systemic oppression. The narrative frames resistance as both a physical and cultural battle, wherein storytelling and communal solidarity emerge as essential strategies for reclaiming agency and countering the forces of exploitation.

The villagers' resistance to the oil company accentuates the profound connection between environmental justice and cultural identity. The exploitation of Kosawa's land threatens more than just the community's immediate livelihood; it represents an existential challenge to their way of life, deeply rooted in the land and its histories. As the villagers make clear, "They wanted the entire valley. They wanted whatever oil was below the ground on which our children played. They wanted to search for oil beneath our huts. They wanted whatever oil sat idly under the kitchens in which our wives cooked. We would die before we let them have it" (Mbue 2021, 269). This declaration encapsulates the stakes of their struggle – not merely economic or material but fundamentally tied to their cultural survival. Characters like Thula, a pivotal leader in the struggle, demonstrate the transformative power of storytelling as a mechanism of resistance. The villagers recognize that narratives shape their movement, affirming their connection to the land: "They shared stories about Kosawa's lost days of splendor. They sang: Sons of the leopard, daughters of the leopard, beware all who dare wrong us, never will our roar be silenced" (Mbue 2021, 322-323). These stories function as an anchor for identity and a tool for intergenerational resilience, ensuring that the cultural memory of Kosawa persists despite the oil company's attempts to erase it.

Mbue's portrayal of ecological destruction highlights the often invisible, long-term consequences of environmental degradation on vulnerable populations (Nixon 2011, 9). In Kosawa, the slow violence manifests through polluted water, declining health, and failed crops, which collectively erode the community's well-being over time. By centering the villagers' lived experiences, Mbue disrupts dominant narratives that frame industrial development as progress, instead exposing its destructive impact on resource-dependent communities. Furthermore, Thula's role as a storyteller and activist parallels studies on narrative sovereignty, particularly in indigenous and African postcolonial contexts. As Smith has emphasized how storytelling is not only a means of preserving cultural memory but also an act of resistance against colonial erasure (Smith 2012, 65). Thula's leadership reflects this dynamic, as her ability to interweave historical narratives with contemporary activism galvanizes her community's fight.

Storytelling plays a crucial role in the novel's depiction of resistance. Thula's leadership is defined by her ability to document and share the community's struggle, ensuring that the voices of Kosawa endure against the hegemonic narratives propagated by the oil company. She reflects

on her role, stating, “She believed it was possible, far-fetched as it seemed. She was aware that it might take more than one revolution, or more than one century, to change our country, but that was no deterrent to her, only a motivation to continue the work the past generation had started” (Mbue 2021, 303). This statement encapsulates the novel’s central theme of memory as resistance, where storytelling becomes a means of both preserving the past and empowering future generations to continue the fight for justice, signifying that oral traditions serve as potent tools for resisting colonial and capitalist domination (Naithani 2010, 10). In the case of Kosawa, Thula’s narrative leadership not only preserves the historical truths of the community but also reshapes them into a force for collective action. She weaves ancestral narratives into the fabric of the villagers’ activism, reaffirming their cultural sovereignty in the face of corporate exploitation. As Thula prepares her community for the long battle ahead, she asserts: “No one has the right to take from us that which the Spirit gave our ancestors. Across America today are pockets of people who were made prisoners on their land (Mbue 2021, 220). The communal gatherings depicted in the novel – where stories are shared, strategies are devised, and collective strength is renewed – exemplify what Homi Bhabha describes as the “third space,” a site of resistance where marginalized communities forge new identities and meanings. In Kosawa, these gatherings challenge the oil company’s attempts to fragment the community, demonstrating the unifying power of shared narratives. Thula’s insistence on preserving the spirit of the land and community through storytelling aligns with Bhabha’s framework, as she fosters solidarity and creates a platform for resistance: “We stood up and lifted our stools. We signaled to our wives that it was time to leave” (Imbu 2021, 269).

Through the character of Thula, Mbue powerfully demonstrates the role of women in leading resistance movements. Thula’s leadership, which unfolds over the course of the narrative, reflects her transformation from a young, inquisitive girl into a resolute and visionary activist: “She believed it was possible, far-fetched as it seemed. She was aware that it might take more than one revolution, or more than one century, to change our country” (Imbu 2021, 303). Belief in generational change highlights her role as both a leader and symbol of enduring hope in the face of systemic violence and exploitation. As Greenblatt aptly notes, “moments of greatest oppression often coincide with acts of profound resistance” (Greenblatt 2010, 252). Significantly, Thula embodies this principle as she utilizes her authority to mobilize her community through stories that reconnect the people of Kosawa with their collective history and sense of identity. Mbue’s depiction of Thula resonates deeply with ecofeminist critiques of environmental and cultural exploitation, offering a rich and layered exploration of the gendered dimensions of ecological degradation. Research indicates that women are often among the first to notice environmental changes, as they are deeply connected to

their surroundings and responsible for family health and sustenance (Liddell & Kington 2021, 666; Shaw 2016, 48-71). This connection positions them as critical observers of environmental degradation and as frontline advocates for environmental justice, particularly in marginalized communities (O’Neil 2007, 1087-1093). These dual roles position women as both victims of ecological destruction and frontline responders to environmental injustices. Thula’s activism signifies the importance of intersectionality in resistance movements, as it addresses the interconnected systems of oppression—gender, race, and class—that marginalize her community. She not only fights for environmental justice but also challenges patriarchal expectations, as seen when the men around her question her authority: “Everywhere we went, men seemed perplexed that an unmarried woman—a girl, judging by her size—could be so bold as to tell them that their lives and their children’s future would be brighter if they joined her in her mission to free our country” (Imbue 2021, 302). Despite societal constraints, Thula refuses to conform, demonstrating how women in resistance movements must contend with both external oppression and internalized gender norms. The novel’s portrayal of Thula as both an activist and a storyteller reinforces the idea that narratives are essential tools in resisting oppression.

In addition to centering gender in the narrative, Mbue foregrounds the role of intergenerational memory in sustaining resistance, offering a profound meditation on the ways in which cultural heritage and collective identity inform struggles for justice. The stories of Kosawa’s villagers, passed down through generations, act as both a repository of collective identity and a source of resilience. These narratives, rich with historical and cultural significance, serve as a foundation for the community’s resistance, grounding their struggle in a shared sense of purpose and continuity. As the villagers recall, “Our ancestors fed the escapees, and allowed them to make a home among us; their descendants live in our midst to this day, though their blood has long since been diluted by ours” (Imbue 2021, 227), demonstrating how ancestral memories, even those shaped by fear and survival, are interwoven with the community’s ongoing fight for justice. These stories not only remind them of their history but also strengthen their resolve against forces that threaten their land.

The importance of memory is also highlighted when the villagers reflect on their past struggles with colonial powers: “The stories of the snatchers now seemed like legend, and the hunger for rubber in Europe had abated enough that our people’s blood no longer needed to be spilled for it. Still, the fear never left our mothers and fathers that some new demand would arise in Europe and their children would be taken away” (Imbue 2021, 229). The memory of exploitation shapes the resistance movement, as it draws strength from the community’s enduring connection to its history and the recognition of past injustices. The act of storytelling becomes a form of resistance, reinforcing the community’s connection to their

land and identity while countering the erasure imposed by external forces. As the villagers unite around their shared history, they challenge the external forces that seek to exploit their land and erase their identity. In Kosawa, storytelling serves as a bridge between the historical and the aspirational, linking the community's struggles to a vision of a more just and equitable future. The villagers' narratives inspire hope and solidarity, imagining a future in which their land and culture are restored. This vision directly challenges the fatalistic narratives imposed by the oil company, which portray the community as powerless and destined for exploitation. Through the interplay of memory and imagination, the novel demonstrates how storytelling can serve as a powerful means of envisioning and enacting social change.

Conclusion

The examination of Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman*, Kawai Strong Washburn's *Sharks in the Time of Saviors*, and Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* underscores the transformative potential of literature as a medium of cultural resistance. These novels, rooted in specific historical and geographical contexts, collectively articulate the resilience of marginalized communities against systemic oppression. By integrating indigenous traditions, storytelling, and ecological advocacy, these works illuminate the multifaceted strategies through which cultural identity is preserved and reimagined.

Central to their narratives is the act of storytelling, which not only preserves intergenerational memory but also acts as a form of defiance against hegemonic structures. This dynamic is evident in the depiction of indigenous myths in Washburn's narrative, the communal storytelling in Mbue's village of Kosawa, and the reclamation of oral traditions in Erdrich's exploration of Ojibwe sovereignty. Moreover, these stories emphasize the indispensable role of women as custodians of memory and agents of change, challenging patriarchal and colonial narratives. The novels' shared focus on environmental justice further underscores the inseparability of cultural and ecological survival. They critique the exploitative frameworks of capitalism and colonialism while proposing alternative, relational models of sustainability grounded in indigenous epistemologies. Accordingly, these narratives transcend their immediate contexts, offering universal insights into resistance, resilience, and the human capacity for renewal.

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