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Petro-Violence, Witnessing, and Ecological Ethics: A Semiotic Reading of Habila's *Oil on Water* and Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*

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Abstract
This study presents a semiotic reading of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, examining how both novels encode petro-violence, the burden of witnessing, and ecological resistance through systems of signs. Building on Peirce's triadic model (icon, index, symbol), Barthes' theory of myth, and Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotics, the analysis demonstrates that oil functions simultaneously as index, icon, and symbol, while resistant acts; the theft of a car key, the empty grave, the oath on an umbilical-cord bundle, and the clenched fist, operate as semiotic ruptures that destabilise dominant narratives of extraction. The paper argues that witnessing in both novels is not a transparent transmission of trauma but a fractured and partial process marked by the limits of conventional testimony. The fog that obscures the delta, the child narrators' "not knowing," and the empty grave that withholds a body are not representational failures but structural expressions of slow violence's invisibility. Finally, *Oil on Water* and *How Beautiful We Were* refuse both heroic journalism and redemptive liberation, providing instead a poetics of fragments; unfinished narratives, exiled storytelling, and missing bodies, that insist on the ethical necessity of speaking despite the impossibility of complete witness.
Keywords: petro-violence; ecological ethics; *Oil on Water*; *How Beautiful We Were*

Introduction

Since the mid-twentieth century, oil extraction across the African continent has generated a distinctive form of violence. This violence is not only military; though soldiers, paramilitaries, and state repression are integral to it, nor exclusively environmental, though water, soil, and air have been systematically poisoned. Rather, what energy humanities scholars term petro-violence names the entanglement of extraction, accumulation, and harm across multiple registers: the destruction of subsistence economies, the militarisation of civilian spaces, the gendered commodification of bodies, and the slow erosion of political possibility (Watts, 2004; LeMenager, 2014). Petro-violence is often rendered invisible as violence because it unfolds incrementally, without a single spectacular event. It is what Nixon (2011) calls "slow violence"—a catastrophe that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (p. 2).

Literary narrative has become a crucial site for rendering such violence visible and for interrogating the sign systems through which it is naturalised. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water (2010)* and Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) stage, in distinct narrative registers, the semiotic struggles at the heart of extraction. Habila's novel follows Rufus, a young journalist, who journeys into the creeks with a veteran reporter in search of the kidnapped wife of a British oil worker. What begins as a conventional reportage narrative gradually dissolves into a meditation on the instability of objective witnessing. Mbue's novel, narrated collectively through the voices of the children of Kosawa, traces three generations of resistance against the American oil corporation Pexton. From early pipeline spills to state-backed massacres and eventual armed uprising, the novel frames environmental devastation as an inherited crime, its memory encoded in bodies, rituals, and communal speech.

Although the novels differ in narrative structure; Habila's anchored in fragmented first-person reportage, Mbue's in polyphonic collective narration, both are centrally concerned with the semiotic regimes through which petro-violence is both sustained and contested. Corporate and state actors deploy euphemistic language such as "development," "connection," and "opportunity" to mask extraction's material brutality. State violence further inscribes meaning through ritualised brutality, as in the use of petrol as a tool of humiliation and terror. Conversely, images such as poisoned wells, dead fish, and empty graves operate as resistant signs that expose the ideological labour of extraction. Resistance itself is articulated semiotically through rupture: stolen objects, ritual oaths, drawings of massacre, bodily inscriptions of trauma, and acts of narrative refusal.

This paper provides a semiotic reading of *Oil on Water* and *How Beautiful We Were,* advancing two interrelated arguments. First, petro-violence in both texts functions as a multimodal sign system, encoded through language (euphemism, silence, multilingualism), ritual (oath-taking, humiliation practices), spatial organisation (creeks, shrines, detention spaces), and the body (scarification, illness, pregnancy, death). Drawing on Peirce's triadic model of signification, Barthes' notion of myth as naturalised ideology, and Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotics, the analysis demonstrates how dominant regimes of meaning are constructed and how they are destabilised through counter-signs of resistance. Second, witnessing in both novels emerges as an ethical and semiotic burden: the transformation of embodied and collective trauma into communicable form. This process is marked by fragmentation, failure, and risk, particularly the

dangers of narrative appropriation, aestheticisation of suffering, and intergenerational transmission of trauma. Rather than resolving into a coherent testimony, both novels foreground the partiality of ecological witnessing.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach combining close textual analysis with semiotic and eco-humanities frameworks. The primary data consist of selected narrative passages, recurring motifs, ritual practices, bodily inscriptions, and material objects in Habila's *Oil on Water* and Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*. The analysis proceeds through a three-stage semiotic method: (1) identification of recurrent sign clusters such as oil, water, fire, graves, keys, umbilical cords, animal imagery, and ritual acts; (2) classification of these signs according to Peirce's triadic categories of icon, index, and symbol; and (3) interpretation of their ideological and ecological functions through Barthesian myth theory and social semiotic frameworks. This procedure enables a systematic examination of how petro-violence, witnessing, and ecological resistance are represented and contested across the two novels.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrated semiotic framework that builds on Peircean triadic semiotics, Barthesian myth theory, and social semiotics, complemented by eco-humanities and ecolinguistic approaches to discourse and environmental meaning-making. These perspectives collectively provide the conceptual tools for analysing how petro-violence, witnessing, and ecological ethics are encoded, naturalised, and contested in literary representation. Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic model offers a foundational account of signification through the triadic relation between representamen, object, and interpretant. Within this model, signs operate as icons (based on resemblance), indices (based on causal or existential connection), or symbols (based on convention). This distinction is crucial for environmental literary analysis, where material traces of extraction; such as spills, scars, or poisoned ecologies, function indexically, while ideological constructions of "development" or "progress" operate symbolically. Iconic processes, by contrast, emerge through representational resemblance in imagery, metaphor, and embodied narrative description. The Peircean framework thus enables an understanding of meaning as dynamic, relational, and context-dependent.

Building on the foregoing, Roland Barthes' theory of myth provides a second-order model of signification in which historically contingent meanings are transformed into naturalised ideological "truths." Myth functions by depoliticising speech: it converts socially produced relations of power into seemingly neutral or self-evident meanings. In the context of environmental discourse, this mechanism is visible in the euphemistic language of extraction, where terms such as "development," "opportunity," or "remediation" obscure material conditions of dispossession and ecological harm. Myth analysis therefore allows for the critical exposure of how language stabilises asymmetrical power relations by disguising their historical and political origins. Social semiotics, particularly in the work of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, shifts attention from fixed sign structures to the social production of meaning across multiple modes. Meaning is understood as multimodal, produced through the interaction of language, spatial arrangement, gesture, material objects, and embodied action. Even in literary texts, representation extends beyond verbal description to include spatialised relations, bodily conduct, and material symbolism. This framework is particularly useful for analysing how objects (such

as oil containers, keys, or ritual items), bodily gestures, and spatial configurations operate as semiotic resources that carry ideological significance beyond linguistic expression. Umberto Eco's notion of semiotic rupture further refines this perspective by identifying moments in which dominant sign systems are disrupted, exposing their constructedness. Rupture occurs when expected meanings fail, when silence replaces speech, or when unconventional signs interrupt normative interpretive codes. Such moments are particularly significant in contexts of domination and resistance, where the destabilisation of meaning becomes a form of critique and counter-discourse.

This study also engages Arran Stibbe's ecolinguistic concept of "stories we live by," which refers to the underlying narratives, metaphors, and evaluative frameworks that shape human-environment relations. These stories—such as growth, progress, and anthropocentrism—structure perception and legitimise particular ecological behaviours while marginalising others. From this perspective, ecological crisis is not only material but also semiotic, sustained by narratives that render destructive practices intelligible and acceptable. Finally, the framework is situated within the extended eco-humanities, which emphasise the cultural and representational dimensions of environmental crisis. This interdisciplinary field insists that ecological degradation is inseparable from systems of meaning, narrative, and interpretation. Accordingly, literary texts are not treated as passive reflections of environmental conditions but as active sites where ecological meanings are produced, contested, and transformed. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives conceptualise petro-violence as a semiotically mediated phenomenon and witnessing as an ethically charged interpretive act. They provide the analytical foundation for reading how literary texts register, reorganise, and resist the sign systems of extraction and environmental harm.

Literature and Sources

This study is situated at the intersection of three interconnected scholarly fields: the critical literature on petro-violence and environmental justice in African extractive economies; semiotic and ecolinguistic approaches to meaning-making and environmental representation; and scholarship on witnessing, testimony, and slow violence. While these fields have generated important insights into environmental degradation, representation, and resistance, they have rarely been brought into sustained dialogue. Consequently, the semiotic dimensions of petro-violence and ecological witnessing in African fiction remain insufficiently explored. Scholarship on petro-violence has established oil extraction as a complex phenomenon involving environmental degradation, political exclusion, militarisation, and social suffering. Rather than viewing conflict in oil-producing regions as merely ethnic or criminal, existing studies emphasise the role of transnational capital, state power, and resource governance in producing violence and dispossession. Watts's (1999) influential formulation of petro-violence remains foundational in this regard. He describes oil as "a filthy, foul smelling liquid that squirts obligingly up into the air and falls back to earth as a rustling shower of money" (p. 8), highlighting the paradoxical relationship between resource wealth and social devastation. For Watts, petro-violence emerges through a "slick alliance" between transnational capital, the postcolonial state, and international security structures (1999, p. 4). Subsequent studies have extended this framework by demonstrating how extraction also shapes gendered experiences of violence and vulnerability. Turcotte (2011), for example, argues that "gender and sexuality are

central to representations of petroleum violence" (p. 1) and that petro-violence and gender violence are deeply intertwined through histories of nation-building and resource exploitation.

Studies on Niger Delta environmental literature have similarly demonstrated how literary texts document ecological devastation, preserve communal memory, and challenge neo-colonial extraction. Research on writers such as Ken Saro-Wiwa, Ben Okri, Tanure Ojaide, and others has highlighted the cultural and political dimensions of environmental crisis, while Reddick (2019) examines how contrasting representations of palm oil and crude oil expose resource conflict and environmental degradation. While these studies have significantly advanced understanding of petro-violence as a material, political, and ecological phenomenon, they devote comparatively less attention to the semiotic mechanisms through which extraction is represented, normalised, contested, and remembered. Consequently, the organisation of petro-violence as a system of signs remains underexplored, particularly in narrative fiction such as *Oil on Water* and *How Beautiful We Were.*

Semiotic and ecolinguistic scholarship provides important tools for addressing this limitation. Existing studies demonstrate that signs generate meaning through processes of resemblance, convention, and causal association (Peirce, 1955), while ideological systems transform historically contingent meanings into apparently natural truths (Barthes, 1972; Eco, 1976). Barthes's claim that myth operates as "a second-order semiological system" that "transforms history into nature" (1972, p. 114) is particularly useful for understanding how environmentally destructive practices may be represented as natural, inevitable, or beneficial. Similarly, Eco (1976) emphasises that ideology is embedded within systems of communication and signification, shaping the interpretation of social reality. Ecolinguistic scholarship further demonstrates that environmental crises are sustained not only through material practices but also through systems of meaning. Halliday (2001) argues that linguistic choices play an important role in shaping ecological consciousness, while Stibbe (2015) develops the concept of "stories we live by," defined as "cognitive structures that shape how we think, speak and act" (p. 6). According to Stibbe, ecolinguistic analysis should identify stories that encourage ecological wellbeing as well as those that legitimise exploitation and environmental harm. Together, these perspectives reveal that environmental crises are inseparable from the narratives through which humans understand and relate to the natural world.

Social semiotic scholarship similarly emphasises the social production of meaning. Hodge and Kress (1988) argue that signs are socially motivated and ideologically structured rather than naturally fixed, while Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) demonstrate that meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources, including language, image, gesture, bodily appearance, and spatial organisation. Fairclough (1995) likewise highlights the role of discourse in producing and contesting relations of power. Several studies have applied these insights to African literary and cultural texts. Research by Aniemeka (2017), Chemis, Sang, and Kipkorir (2020), and Eke and Ambrose (2025) demonstrates the usefulness of semiotic analysis for interpreting cultural symbols, rituals, and ideological structures. However, these studies rarely engage environmental violence or extractive economies as semiotic formations. Their primary concern remains identity, ritual, culture, or social crisis rather than ecological degradation and petro-capitalism. As a result, the semiotic dimensions of environmental harm, resistance, and ecological witnessing remain insufficiently developed within existing scholarship.

Research on slow violence and witnessing introduces a further dimension to these discussions. Existing scholarship has drawn attention to the difficulties of representing environmental harm that unfolds gradually across time and space rather than through spectacular events. Nixon (2011) famously defines slow violence as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (p. 2). Because such violence often lacks visibility, scholars have emphasised the importance of narrative forms capable of rendering environmental suffering perceptible. Studies of testimony and witnessing further demonstrate that environmental suffering frequently exceeds conventional forms of representation. LeMenager (2014) observes that "testimony and poetry are alike in their resistance to translation" and that "what we do with testimony is enter into a contract with it, taking it on faith rather than as information that might be conveyed for itself" (p. 17). Similarly, Turcotte (2011) argues that dominant discourses often reduce petro-communities to simplified categories of victimhood or criminality, noting that "the language of 'gangs' silently bridges the seemingly vast distance between the United States and Nigeria" (p. 30). Together, these studies illuminate the ethical and representational challenges associated with environmental catastrophe. However, they rarely examine the specific sign systems through which ecological trauma is encoded, mediated, disrupted, and interpreted. The semiotic dimensions of witnessing therefore remain insufficiently theorised.

Taken together, the existing scholarship provides valuable insights into petro-violence, semiotics, ecolinguistics, and ecological witnessing. Yet these fields largely remain in parallel conversation. Studies of petro-violence focus primarily on the material and political consequences of extraction; semiotic scholarship seldom addresses environmental violence; and witnessing studies rarely examine the sign systems through which ecological trauma is represented. Consequently, a sustained comparative semiotic reading of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* remains absent. This study addresses that gap by examining how both novels can be read as encoding petro-violence through signs, symbols, rituals, objects, and narrative structures, and how these semiotic processes shape the possibilities and limits of ecological witnessing.

Analysis

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* open with scenes that immediately establish oil as an invasive, toxic sign. In Habila's novel, the narrator Rufus confesses the unreliability of memory:

> I am walking down a well-lit path, with incidents neatly labeled and dated, but when I reach halfway memory lets go of my hand, and a fog rises and covers the faces and places, and I am left clawing about in the dark, lost. (Habila, 2010, p. 11)

The fog is both literal (the mist that shrouds the creeks) and metaphorical—a sign of the opacity that attends all testimony about petro-violence. In Mbue's novel, the collective child narrator begins with a similar admission of failed knowledge:

> We should have known the end was near. How could we not have known? When the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green, we should have known our land would soon be dead. Then again, how could we have known when they didn't want us to know?" (Mbue, 2021, p. 9)

Both openings perform what Peirce would call an indexical relation to slow violence: the fog and the "not knowing" point directly to the systematic obscuration of extraction's true costs. The fog indexes the corporate and state apparatuses that conceal environmental damage, while the rhetorical question—"how could we have known when they didn't want us to know?"—indexes the deliberate production of ignorance as a technology of domination.

The semiotics of oil itself operates across both novels as what Barthes would call a myth—a second-order sign that naturalises the contingent. In *Oil on Water*, the landscape of extraction is rendered through a catalogue of decaying signs. Rufus and Zaq pass through abandoned villages where the only remaining structures are oil-drilling paraphernalia:

> A square concrete platform dominated the village center like some sacrificial altar. Abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia were strewn around the platform; some appeared to be sprouting out of widening cracks in the concrete, alongside thick clumps of grass. High up in the rusty rigging wasps flew in and out of their nests. A weather-beaten signboard near the platform said OIL WELL NO. 2. 1999. 15,000 METERS. The houses began not too far away from the derelict platform. (Habila, 2010, p. 15)

The platform becomes a "sacrificial altar," naming the religious dimension of petro-violence where communities are offered up to global capital. The abandoned houses, dead chickens, empty cooking pots, and water pots "on whose surface mosquito larvae thickly flourished" (p. 15) function as indexical signs of ecological collapse. The signboard ("OIL WELL NO. 2. 1999. 15,000 METERS") operates as a symbol of technocratic rationality that reduces lived space to measurable abstraction. Yet this symbolic order is already decaying—the board is "weather-beaten." The passage stages a semiotic struggle between the oil industry's discourse of progress and the counter-signs of abandonment, rot, and ecological return. In Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) terms, the material environment itself becomes multimodal text.

In *How Beautiful We Were,* the first oil spill is narrated through a child's sensory and emotional shock:

> I watched as the thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning small animals in its path. It just kept spreading and I wondered if it would stop, when it would stop, how far it would spread. Then there was the smell. I can't describe it but it was strong—so strong it made my head hurt and turned my stomach. I bent over, and retched so hard I became dizzy. It felt like everything had turned to black and was spinning around me. There was so much oil, and we could do nothing with it—viscous oil that would not dry out, black oil that was knee-deep. (Mbue, 2021, p. 12)

The repetition of uncertainty ("I wondered if it would stop") indexes the uncontrollable agency of oil as material force. The spill operates simultaneously as index (pipeline rupture), icon (viscous death), and symbol (global extraction economy). The inability to describe smell signals a breakdown of linguistic mediation in the face of environmental catastrophe. The oil being "knee-deep" literalises submersion as lived reality. The shift into Pidgin; "You no go commot for there? You dey look like say na beta tin'! Come on, leave dat place!" (p. 12), marks a semiotic code-switch from contemplative narration to urgent survival speech. This aligns with Eke and Ambrose's (2025) observation that Niger Delta Pidgin often functions as a register of immediacy and grassroots resistance.

The semiotics of resistance often emerges through what Eco (1976) calls semiotic rupture. In How Beautiful We Were, Konga, the village madman, interrupts a corporate meeting:

> Never had we seen the Leader so stunned as when he turned to Woja Beki and asked what Konga wanted—why was a madman disrupting the end of his meeting? Never had we seen Woja Beki as devoid of words as when he turned to face Konga. Before us all stood a never-before-seen version of our village madman. As if all authority on earth belonged to him, Konga barked at the Pexton men, told them to sit down, hadn't they heard him, were their ears so full of wax that sound couldn't penetrate it? The meeting wasn't over, it was just beginning. (Mbue, 2021, p. 17)

Konga, socially constructed as a non-sign, becomes the most powerful signifier in the scene. His theft of the car key is iconic (physical reversal of control), indexical (blocking corporate exit), and symbolic (reconfiguration of power). His speech interrupts ritualised corporate order, producing a rupture in expected semiotic hierarchy. Lusaka's later threat; "If Pexton doesn't stop killing our children, I'll kill these three of its children with my bare hands" (p. 30), reverses the grammar of petro-violence by turning corporate presence into vulnerability.

A similar rupture occurs in *Oil on Water* when Rufus and Zaq dig up an empty grave:

> It was a shallow grave, too shallow to cover a body, I saw that right away. In my mind I had already braced myself for the smell of rotting flesh, the sight of a worm-infested corpse, but all we found was a stone. A huge round boulder sitting insensate, incognizant, like a corpse. Whoever made the false grave had a sense of humor, it seemed. (Habila, 2010, p. 109)

The empty grave destabilises forensic logic. The expected index of death (the body) is replaced by a stone, producing semiotic collapse. The boulder becomes an anti-sign—present but uninformative, material but unreadable. Zaq's reaction and the failure of interpretation mark the limits of journalistic epistemology under conditions of slow violence (Nixon, 2011). The semiotics of the body intensifies this logic. In *Oil on Water*, the Major's petrol ritual becomes a grotesque inversion of sacramental meaning:

> I witnessed the brutal anointing in silence, smelled the reek of petrol hanging in the air, pungent, and I wondered how the men could stand it…The Doctor told me: "One day he's going to light that match. Even his men know it. Just a matter of time." (Habila, 2010, p. 49)

Petrol becomes both index of violence and symbolic distortion of ritual anointing. In *How Beautiful We Were,* Thula's body becomes a site of intergenerational inscription, while the anthem; "Sons of the leopard, daughters of the leopard…" (p. 31), operates as symbolic condensation of ecological identity and resistance. Her clenched fist at the Liberation Day rally transforms bodily gesture into iconic resistance, while also indexing gas flaring as environmental memory.

Language functions as a key semiotic battleground. Pidgin speech encodes both solidarity and coercion: "Bibi, na wa for you o…" (Mbue, 2021, p. 16) and "I hear. I no join dis una women group again sef…" (p. 16). The foregoing exchanges show how ideology is embedded in everyday linguistic exchange. Similarly, in *Oil on Water*, Tamuno's Pidgin speech encodes vulnerability and aspiration, while Michael writing his name in sand becomes a fragile index of literacy and erasure.

Spatial semiotics further reinforces inequality. In Mbue's novel, corporate elevation versus village ground seating encodes power asymmetry. In Habila, the shrine destruction marks erasure of cosmological order, while Naman's statement—"Everything that was made must one day cease to be" (p. 123)—signals exhausted epistemology. The umbilical-cord bundle in *How Beautiful We Were* functions as a performative symbol: "we passed the umbilical-cord bundles to the next person in our families after we'd said our oath…" (Mbue, 2021, p. 129). This object transforms into a speech-act artifact binding collective memory and resistance. In *Oil on Water*, the camera and notebook serve as compromised semiotic tools: they produce icons of suffering but also risk aestheticising violence. Zaq's death and burial in the empty grave completes a semiotic inversion where the witness becomes the sign. Both novels close on incomplete semiotic resolutions. In Mbue, exile narration preserves memory against erasure. In Habila, Rufus's inability to produce the "perfect" story foregrounds the impossibility of total representation. However, both texts insist that narration itself is a form of resistance: fragile, partial, but necessary.

Conclusion

This semiotic reading of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* has demonstrated that petro‑violence in contemporary African fiction is not merely represented but encoded through systems of signs that naturalise, obscure, or contest extraction's true costs. Both novels deploy a shared semiotic grammar: oil as index and myth, the poisoned body as a site of inscription, ritual spaces as theatres of power, and acts of rupture; the stolen car key, the empty grave, the clenched fist, the oath sworn on an umbilical‑cord bundle, as counter‑signs that interrupt dominant narratives. The fog that opens Habila's novel and the "not knowing" that opens Mbue's are not merely stylistic devices; they are semiotic admissions of slow violence's fundamental invisibility. What the journalist cannot photograph, what the child narrator cannot fully remember, what the empty grave withholds – these absences are not failures of representation but structural features of petro‑violence itself. The burden of witness, both novels insist, is not to produce a transparent record but to mark the limits of what can be said, and to speak anyway. In the end, *Oil on Water* and *How Beautiful We Were* refuse both the heroic journalism of the exposé and the easy redemption of the liberation narrative. Instead, they provide a poetics of fragments: the unfinished headline, the story told from exile, the missing body that becomes a symbol of sacrifice. These are not signs of weakness but of ethical necessity. To read them semiotically is to recognise that environmental justice in the extractive zone is not only a struggle over land, water, and oil – it is a struggle over meaning itself.

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